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Political participation in a violent society: The impact of lynching on voter turnout in the post-Reconstruction South

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ABSTRACT

How does violence against a group affect political participation? In theory, the targeted group may either become politically mobilized or may become discouraged and withdraw from political participation. To address this question, we assess the impact of lynchings on differential rates of black turnout in the post-Reconstruction American South. We first provide evidence that lynchings are not politically motivated. We then show that, even though lynchings were not politically motivated, exposure to lynching reduced local black voter turnout by roughly 2.5 percentage points. A series of specification tests suggest this relationship can be interpreted as causal.

1. Introduction

Three broad frameworks shape how economists, and social scientists in general, think about the relationship between violence and political engagement. First, much recent work in economics and political science emphasizes how exposure to violence may lead members of the minority group to mobilize politically (e.g., turning out to vote at higher rates) in an attempt to install representatives in government who will work to provide better protection (e.g., Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). Second, another body of research presents evidence that violence (to oneself or one's group members) may cause or exacerbate mistrust in the government's ability or willingness to provide protection, which may in turn lead affected individuals to turn away from the political process altogether (e.g., Blanco, 2013). Along the same lines, exposure to lawlessness and violence may generate fear that participating in the political process will also be met by violence, which may also discourage turnout.[1] Third, there is a large literature, going back decades, that explores how politicians and dominant social groups in many different social and historical settings used violence strategically to deter voter participation and undermine the democratic process (e.g., Tolnay and Beck, 1992, 1995). In this setting, violence is endogenous and, to the extent it is costly, most common in places where electoral outcomes are in doubt (Collier and Vicente, 2012). This logic suggests a more general point: it is possible that the relationship between violence and political engagement is not general, but varies across time and place, depending on the broader context.[2]

In this paper, we revisit the American South during the late 1800s and early 1900s to explore the relationship between violence and voter participation. Violence was a pervasive feature of life in the postbellum South, with whites frequently engaging in anti-black violence to punish and terrorize blacks who violated established norms regarding race. There is also a large historical literature suggesting that Southern Democrats (whose voting base was exclusively white) used violence to discourage blacks from voting and undermine the competitiveness of Republican candidates (whose voting base included both whites and blacks). The South is a useful natural setting in which explore to the relationship between violence and political activity in part because the rules governing voting in the South, particularly in relation to race, underwent sharp changes over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As we explain below, these changes foster clean identification and allow us to explore the political implications of violence across different institutional settings. In addition, while it is often difficult to define and measure violence outside of well-defined contemporary settings there is at least one dimension of the Southern proclivity to engage in anti-black violence that is well defined, documented, and measured. As explained below, there is a widely used database that records the lynching of more than 2000 blacks in the American South.

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[1] In a field experiment, for example, Collier and Vicente (2014) show how an anti-violence campaign in Nigeria decreased the perceived threat of violence and promoted voter turn-out. See also, Aidt and Franck (2015) who show how the so-called Swing Riots altered electoral outcomes in early nineteenth-century Britain.

[2] For recent and general models of political violence, see Besley and Persson (2011) and Powell (2013).

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Exploiting data on lynching and voter turnout, we compile a panel of Southern counties that extends from 1882 to 1912. In light of the literature mentioned above, we then use a difference-in-differences strategy to answer two questions. We first ask if lynching was politically motivated, and run several tests in search of evidence that whites used lynching strategically to deter black turnout. More precisely, if lynching were both costly and politically motivated, one would expect to observe the following patterns: lynching would spike during election years; lynching would increase in the weeks preceding an election, and drop off sharply in the weeks following; lynching would be more frequent in counties where black voters had substantial clout at the ballot box and where electoral outcomes were in doubt; and lynching would decline after laws were passed effectively disenfranchising African American voters. The data are inconsistent with each of these predictions, however.

Having rejected the hypothesis that lynching was being used strategically to alter electoral outcomes, we then ask if lynching nevertheless had an impact on black voter turnout. The results indicate that, while lynching was not politically motivated, black voter turnout dropped by 2.4–4 percentage points in counties in which African Americans were lynched in the months leading up to an election. For comparison, the magnitude of this local effect is similar in size to the estimated effect of poll taxes and literacy tests (Jones et al., 2012), two well-known tools used in the post-Reconstruction South to disenfranchise black voters. Our results in this paper are robust to a variety of concerns and threats to identification, including issues related to the ecological fallacy, reverse causality, time trends and unobserved time-varying shocks, changes in cotton prices, and lynching induced migration among African Americans.

Given these results, one might reasonably ask: how does one reconcile the finding that lynching was not politically motivated with the finding that it nevertheless deterred voter turnout among African Americans? Two mechanisms suggest themselves, and we explore both in the analysis that follows. The first is that lynching was a general indicator of a county's (or a region's) ability to inflict violence and punishment on blacks in a variety of settings, including but not limited to, the political. In this way, while whites lynched blacks for reasons other than politics, the capacity to lynch would have been highly correlated with the ability and willingness to inflict punishments for political acts. The second mechanism is that lynching was a form terrorism that, regardless of motivation, scared blacks from engaging in any activity that necessitated interacting with whites. This mechanism is directly related to the development literature which suggests people might withdraw from politics in response to violence. If it were the first mechanism, and lynching served as a general indicator of the capacity to inflict violence, one would expect lynching to have a persistent and lasting effect on voter turnout in the years before and after a lynching. Alternatively, if it were the second mechanism, and lynching simply represented a general threat of violence, one would expect a fleeting effect, whereby a lynching in year t would be uncorrelated with voter turnout among blacks in the years preceding and following year t. Consistent with the second mechanism, the data suggest that the effects of lynching were fleeting.

The analysis here contributes to a growing literature assessing the effects of violence and crime on political (and, more generally, community) engagement. Several recent papers find evidence that violence leads to *increased* political and community participation. Bellows and Miguel (2009) document that individuals in areas in Sierra Leone that received more exposure to civil war in the 1990s are more likely to report voting, joining local political groups, and attending community meetings after the end of the war. Blattman (2009) provides similar evidence from Uganda.[3] While not explicitly related to politics, Voors et al. (2012) provide evidence from a field experiment in Burundi which suggests that individuals exposed to violence are significantly more altruistic towards their neighbors. Bateson (2012) draws on survey evidence on crime victimization and voting from five continents. She finds that recent victims of crimes (both property and violence crimes) are significantly more likely to vote; she concludes that "rather than being seen as disenchanted, disempowered, or disengaged, crime victims should be reconceptualized as political actors—indeed, as potential activists."

Our paper is distinct in two ways. One distinction is data-orientated: recent work in economics draws primarily from survey data to measure political participation. By contrast, we assess the effect of lynching on actual voting behavior. While looking at actual turnout is not without its own set of problems, it does provide another, complementary window through which to view the effects of violence on political participation and behavior. The other distinction is contextual. While the most recent economic literature looks to the developing world, particularly modern Africa, we look at very different historical setting (the American South).

The differences with regard to context are significant on a number of levels. First, we focus on violence aimed at a specific and oppressed minority group; other recent papers in economics and political science look at populations more generally. To the extent that oppressed minority groups have a higher baseline level of fear, one might imagine violence impacting those groups differently than majority groups. It may be that oppressed minority groups have the most mistrust to start with, so we might expect the outcome to shift to the "violence reduces turnout" prediction. Second, in the American South the prevalence of lynching was a manifestation of larger failures in the justice system, while in the settings considered by other recent papers violence does not necessarily signal broader systemic failure. Consider, for example, Bateson (2012). Her survey measures whether respondents have been victims of a crime, but those respondents may expect the criminal to be prosecuted. In our setting, however, vigilantism ruled, and the victims of lynching (both actual and potential) could not have expected the perpetrators to have been charged, tried, and convicted, in a court of law. This too is presumably more likely to cause citizens to doubt the government's ability/willingness to protect them and cause withdrawal from the political system, rather than "activism."

2. Lynching in the American South: preliminary observations

Fig. 1 plots the total number of African Americans lynched in the South over time from 1882-1912.[4] The data follow an inverted U-shaped pattern. The number of lynchings rose during the 1880s and early 1890s, and peaked at 101 in 1892. After 1893, however, that trend is reversed, and the number of lynchings returns to pre-1890 levels by the mid-1900s. Mapping the location of all lynchings between 1882 and 1912, Fig. 2a provides a sense of the cross sectional variation in lynching across states in the South and border states. It shows that lynching was geographically dispersed, but that most lynchings occurred the deep South, and fewer lynchings occurring in the border states. Fig. 2b maps lynchings by county, our unit of analysis later in the paper, across the same time period.

The causes of lynching in the American South have been the object of extensive scholarly discussion and debate. Writers during the early twentieth century argued that lynching was the result of Southern backwardness, and that it would gradually die out as the South industrialized and urbanized. A related line of thought suggests lynching was an element in the system of paternalism, under which African Americans sacrificed mobility in exchange for higher wages and protection from violence (Alston and Ferrie, 1993, 1999). Brundage (1993) and others suggest that lynching was a form of ritualized violence whereby white vigilante groups punished blacks for crimes (both real and imagined) and

[3] He compares Ugandan youths who were abducted to serve as new recruits for rebel forces to non-abducted youths. Abducted youths who returned are significantly more likely to report voting in a survey, but are no more likely to report increased non-political community participation. The survey evidence suggests that the channel through which this occurs is exposure to violence; amongst abductees, those that report witnessing the most violence are the most likely to report voting.

[4] These data include 9 Southern states: Alabama; Arkansas; Florida; Georgia; Louisiana; Mississippi; North Carolina; South Carolina; and Tennessee. The data are drawn from the HAL Lynching Database, which is described in more detail in a later section.

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