The Political Economy of Propaganda: Evidence from U.S. Newspapers

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$\Rightarrow$ Theoretical work has studied this mechanism but empirical evidence remains limited

Empirical challenges

1. Observe a shifter of political actors' incentives to stoke moral outrage

2. Measures of outrage-oriented content in media

3. Disentangling strategic supply vs. demand for media content
   e.g., Gentzkow Shapiro 2010

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   - Study how US Southern Democrats responded to the success of the Populist Party in 1892

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   - Empirical strategy enabling us to study subsets of newspapers that were more (less) reliant on revenues (and hence readers' demand)

Black suffrage in the South after the Civil War

"THE FIRST VOTE."—Drawn by A. R. Waud.—[See next Page.]
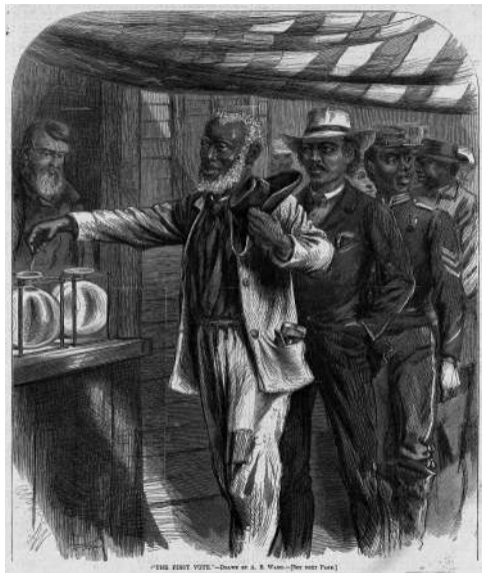
But Southern Dems regained political dominance based on a coalition of rich and poor whites and violence against Blacks

But this "Solid white South" was fragile

THE POLITICAL POOR RELATION. — AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

Falling incomes led to the formation of the Populist Party in 1892 – one of the most successful third parties in US history

Populists won large vote shares among poor whites in 1892, threatening the Democrats' dominant position in the South

Did this threat incentivize Dems to stoke racially-charged outrage in newspapers – the dominant media at the time?

NORTH CAROLINA—Wake County.

John Hubbard, being duly sworn, deposes and says: That while working the public roads some days ago, he heard several negroes in Mark's Creek Township, Wake County, talking about the Constitutional Amendment, and one of the negroes, a preacher and neighbor of H. H. Knight, by the name of Offee Price, said they, referring to the white people, may pass the Amendment, but that they would have to fight, and that the right way to do them, the whites, would be to kill them from the cradle up.

JOHN HUBBARD,

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- Largest digital archive of historical and current US newspapers

- Several hundred Southern newspapers in our period

- Dominant media at the time, highly partisan and local in their readership
  – Gentzkow et al. 2015, Hirano and Snyder 2020

Geographic coverage of newspaper database

The figure shows counties that have at least one page in our sample (years 1880 to 1910)

- Coverage represents 49% of the population in the South
- Correlation with treatment variable: $\rho = -0.05$

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- Thus, building on Wells 1892 and Glaeser 2005:
    - # co-occurrences of 'rape' or 'rapist' and 'negro' or 'colored' on same page
    - Controlling for available pages by # occurrences of 'january', 'february', ...

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$Anti - Black\ Propaganda_{i,t}$

$$= \frac{\sum_{n=1}^{N} n_{i,t} \times \mathbb{1}((\textit{rape OR rapist}) \textit{ AND } (\textit{negro OR colored}))}{\sum_{n=1}^{N} n_{i,t} \times \mathbb{1}(\textit{months})} * 100$$

- where n is the # of pages with the keywords in newspaper i and month t

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$\Rightarrow$ Interpretation: Share of newspaper pages with reports of (local and distant) rapes, amplification, op-eds, and fabrications

Examples of articles associating Black men with rape

NO RAPE COMMITTED.

But a Lady Badly Frightened by a
Worthless Negro.

Newbern, N. C., Oct. 12.—(Special.)—
No rape has been committed here,
though a negro man, Charles Harris, is
held behind bars for attempted rape,
which the warrant called for. A visit-
ing lady here was in an out house in
the yard and the negro was lounging
around and the lady catching sight of
him screamed, when the negro ran and
a crowd pursuing him forced him into
the river, where he was captured. The
crowd pursuing him and his attempt to
escape made it more sensational than it
really was.

The negro tried to prove an alibi at
the hearing, but failed. He had no
business in the yard, and has been chased
out of yards here before. It seems that
he has a crazy wandering disposition,
and was just dismissed from court last
week, being charged with larceny.

– from the *News and Observer*, 1898

Mr. Frank Clenny passed through here
to-day in search of a negro who had com-
mitted rape on his own little girl. Rape
by negroes is becoming too common a
crime in this country and something must
be done for the protection of our women
It is also high time that the white people
were thinking about the number they are
bailing out of prison, thus licensing them
to violate the laws of our country. I say
let them stay in jail or go to the mines
that they may receive the just punishment
there for crimes committed, and it will
tend, no doubt, to lessen crime. We can
at least try it.

– from the *Eufaula Daily Times*, 1893

How the measure performs

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- Measure successfully identifies articles on pages
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- 363 (85% of these) are reports – not editorials or letters
  - Reports are mainly about distant crimes committed by Black men

- The editorials overwhelmingly speak about Black men and rape crimes

Trends in anti-Black propaganda

Share of newspaper pages with anti–Black propaganda (in %)
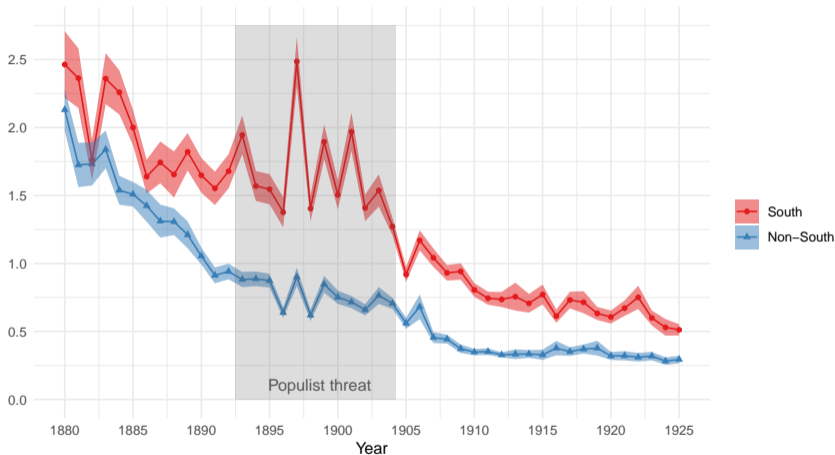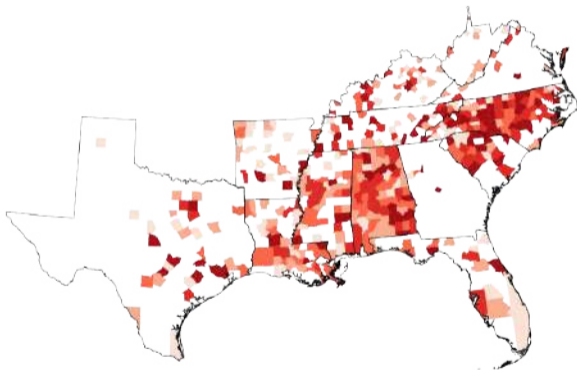
South
Non–South

Each dot shows the population-weighted average of anti-Black propaganda in given year in the South and outside

⇒ South deviates from country-wide trend in the 1890s, the period we study

Geography of anti-Black propaganda

Share of newspaper pages with anti-Black propaganda 1880–1910

[0,0.678]   (1.11,1.54]   (2.09,12.5]
(0.678,1.11]   (1.54,2.09]   NA

The map shows average anti-Black propaganda from 1880 to 1910

⇒ Differences across and within states, even between neighboring counties

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- The definition is conservative $\rightarrow$ estimates will be a lower bound
    - Elites likely perceive some threat even in non-threatened counties

- All results are robust to alternative definitions of threat

Geography of political threat in counties with newspapers
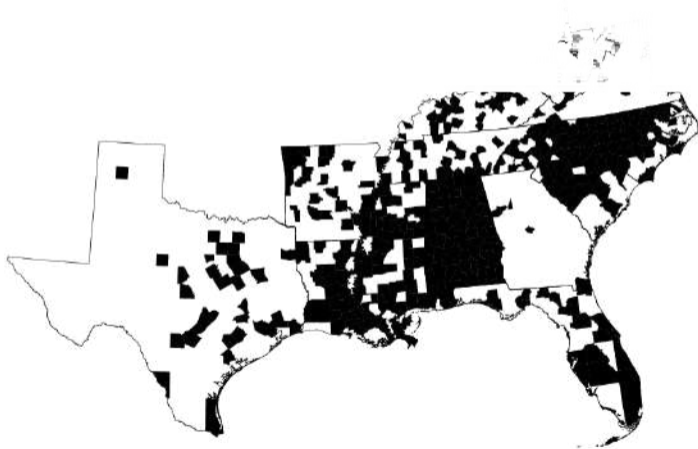
First empirical strategy: Difference-in-Differences

- We estimate a standard DiD:

$$\textit{Anti-Black Propaganda}_{i(c),t} = \alpha_i + \alpha_t$$
$$+ \beta \, \mathbb{1}(\textit{Populist threat}_c) \times \mathbb{1}(\textit{Post 1892 election}_t) + \epsilon_{i(c),t}$$

- *i c t* denote newspapers, county, year-month
- *Anti-Black Propaganda*$_{i(c),t}$ is the share of pages (in %)
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- α_i are newspaper fixed effects
- α_t are month fixed effects
- SEs clustered at the county level

DiD estimate: More anti-Black stories in threatened counties

	Anti-Black propaganda (mean = 1.81, sd = 3.72) (1)
Populist threat $\times$ Post 1892 election	0.360 (0.133)
Observations	72,497
Newspaper fixed effects	✓
Year-Month fixed effects	✓

Notes: This table shows that perceived political threat due to the rise of the Populist Party increased the frequency of anti-Black propaganda in newspapers. An observation is a newspaper-month from 1881 to 1904. Standard errors are clustered on counties and reported in parentheses.

$\Rightarrow$ 20% $\uparrow$ relative to their pre-1892 mean, or 52 additional outrage-oriented articles over sample period

Main identification concern with the DiD estimate

- Populist threat was not randomly distributed across counties
    - E.g., Populists were more successful in counties that suffered from the economic downturn in the 1880s and 1890s Eichengreen + 2019, Klein + 2020

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$\Rightarrow$ Possible that the newspapers catered to greater demand for anti-Black stories as fluctuations in local economic conditions simultaneously affected political preferences and racial animus among the readership

First pass: controlling for correlates of Populist vote share

$$Anti\text{-}Black\ Propaganda_{i(c),t} = \alpha_i + \alpha_t$$
$$+ \beta\, \mathbb{1}(\,Populist\ threat_c) \times \mathbb{1}(Post\ 1892\ election_t)$$
$$+ X_{c(i)} \times \alpha_t + X_i \times \alpha_t + \epsilon_{i(c),t}$$

- $X_{c(i)}$ are county-level measures of economic conditions that have been linked to the Populist vote share and racism before 1892
    - **Economic conditions:** Percentage change in the value of counties' agricultural portfolio from 1888 to 1892, the average indebtedness (i.e., the ratio of mortgage on farms or homes to their values), the average interest rate on mortgages, log per capita output in manufacturing and agriculture, log railway miles per square mile, average farm size, the shares of cotton and tobacco acreage to total farm acreage, and log county population
    - **Racism:** Counties' Democratic vote share in the 1888 Presidential election and the number of lynchings before 1892 and the number of lynchings before 1892
- X_i are newspaper-level measures of racist sentiment
    - Average frequencies of anti-Black stories before 1892 and their change from 1888 to 1892

DiD estimates with economic conditions and racism controls

	Anti-Black propaganda (mean = 1.81, sd = 3.72)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Populist threat $\times$ Post 1892 election	0.330	0.409	0.386
	(0.150)	(0.170)	(0.182)
Observations	67,091	67,091	44,111
R^2	0.201	0.211	0.238
Newspaper fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Year-Month fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
County economic condition controls $\times$ Year-Month fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
County racism controls $\times$ Year-Month fixed effects		✓	✓
Newspaper racism controls $\times$ Year-Month fixed effects			✓

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$\Rightarrow$ Controlling for these observable pre-determined differences across counties or newspapers leaves the estimate virtually unaffected

Second empirical strategy: Triple-Diff

- To further address the identification concern, we turn to a triple-diff:
    - Link the newspapers to newspaper directories with information on their political affiliation in Presidential elections Gentzkow + 2011, 2015

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$$Anti\text{-}Black\ Propaganda_{i(c),t} = \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \alpha_{c,t}$$
$$+ \beta\ \mathbb{1}(\ Populist\ threat_c) \times \mathbb{1}(Post\ 1892\ election_t)$$
$$\times\ \mathbb{1}(Democrat_i) + \epsilon_{i(c),t}$$

- $\alpha_{c,t}$ are county-period fixed effects absorbing, e.g., changes in local economic conditions

- $\mathbb{1}(\ Democrat_i)$: Newspaper endorses Democrats

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- Identifying variation comes from counties with at least one Dem newspaper **and** a newspaper endorsing another party or independent

Triple-diff estimate: Effect driven by Dem newspapers

	Anti-Black propaganda (mean = 1.81, sd = 3.72)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Populist threat × Post 1892 election × Democrat affiliation	0.460	0.456	0.706
	(0.176)	(0.185)	(0.377)
Populist threat × Post 1892 election × No Democrat affiliation	0.127	-0.078	
	(0.254)	(0.281)	
Observations	67,091	44,111	72,497
Newspaper fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Year-Month fixed effects	✓	✓	
County economic condition controls × Year-Month fixed effect	✓	✓	
County racism controls × Year-Month fixed effect	✓	✓	
Newspaper racism controls × Year-Month fixed effect		✓	
County-Year-Month fixed effects			✓

Notes: Columns 1 and 2 replicate the previous DiD equation but distinguish between Democrat and other newspapers. Column 3 reports the triple-difference estimates. An observation is a newspaper-month from 1881 to 1904. Standard errors are clustered on counties and reported in parentheses.

⇒ Up to 39% ↑ relative to pre-1892 mean, or 102 additional outrage-oriented articles over sample period

Do demand forces explain the effect?

- The effect could reflect newspaper owners' or editors' incentives to supply anti-Black stories or changes in readers' demand for such content (or both)

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$$+ \beta\ \mathbb{1}(\ Populist\ threat_c) \times \mathbb{1}(Post\ 1892\ election_t)$$
$$\times \mathbb{1}(Democrat_i)$$
$$+ \gamma\ \mathbb{1}(\ Populist\ threat_c) \times \mathbb{1}(Post\ 1892\ election_t)$$
$$\times \mathbb{1}(Independent_i) + \epsilon_{i(c),t}$$

- We expect $\gamma > 0$ if swings in readers' demand rather than strategic supply drove the spikes in anti-Black content

Triple-diff estimate: Evidence against demand channel

	Anti-Black propaganda (mean = 1.81, sd = 3.72)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Populist threat × Post 1892 election × Democrat affiliation	0.459	0.456	0.654
	(0.176)	(0.185)	(0.348)
Populist threat × Post 1892 election × No Democrat affiliation	0.151	-0.083	
	(0.316)	(0.343)	
Populist threat × Post 1892 election × Independent newspaper	-0.083	0.017	-0.390
	(0.371)	(0.497)	(1.183)
Observations	67,091	44,111	72,497
Newspaper fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Year-Month fixed effects	✓	✓	
County economic condition controls × Year-Month fixed effect	✓	✓	
County racism controls × Year-Month fixed effect	✓	✓	
Newspaper racism controls × Year-Month fixed effect		✓	
County-Year-Month fixed effects			✓

Notes: Columns 1 and 2 replicate the previous DiD equation but distinguish between Democrat, independent, and other newspapers. Column 3 reports the triple-difference estimates. An observation is a newspaper-month from 1881 to 1904. Standard errors are clustered on counties and reported in parentheses.

⇒ Estimates are inconsistent with the interpretation that local economic conditions and demand effects explain the result

Political Threat and Propaganda in the 20th Century: Anti-Black propaganda during the Civil Rights Movement

- We have focused on the Populist Party and the South to identify the effect on anti-Black propaganda

- But the mechanism is not specific to the Populists

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- We observe the same patterns in propaganda after WWII when the segregationist system in the South became increasingly under threat

- This threat did not come from a third party but from an intensifying internal conflict between segregationist and mainstream Democrats

Propaganda ↑ during the Civil Rights Movement

Share of newspaper pages with anti–Black propaganda (in %, residuals)
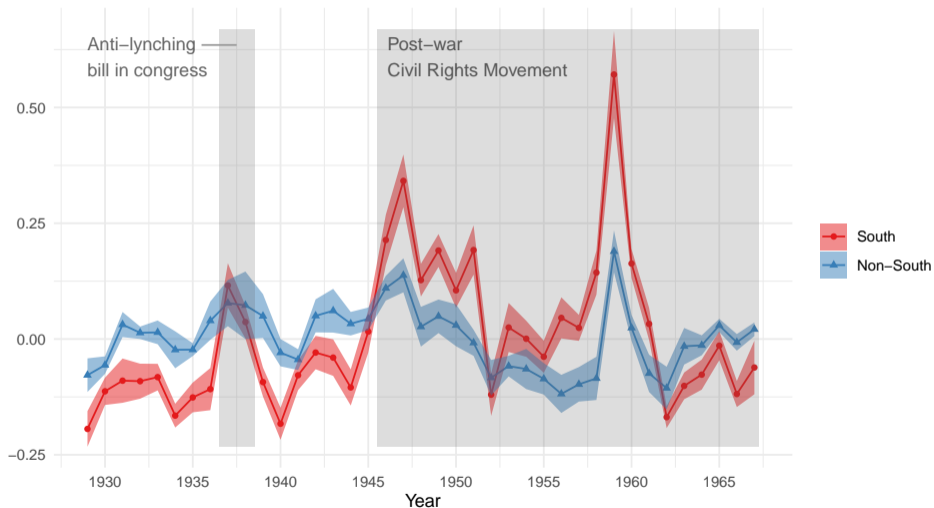
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- The evidence favors supply over demand-side interpretation

- Consistent with the hypothesis that political incentives to divide society contribute to the spread of incendiary content in media

Contributions

- Theories of demand and supply-side forces underlying social divisions
  Acemoglu + 2004, Glaeser 2005, Padro i Miguel 2007, Shayo 2009, Bonomi + 2021

  ⇒ Causal empirical evidence for a supply-side explanation

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  $\Rightarrow$ Causal empirical evidence for a supply-side explanation

- Persuasion through media and propaganda
  DellaVigna Kaplan 2007, Enikoloplov + 2011, Durante + 2019, DellaVigna + 2014, Yanagizawa-Drott 2014, Burztyn + 2019, Blouin Mukand 2019 – closest are Ang 2020, Wang 2021, Esposito + 2021

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- Economic history of race and repression of Black Americans
  DuBois 1935, Woodward 1955, Zinn 1980, Margo 1982, Foner 1997, Acharya + 2018, Cook + 2018, Logan Parman 2017, Logan 2018, Albright + 2021, Suryanarayan White 2021

  ⇒ Fine-grained measures of anti-Black content from thousands of newspapers
  ⇒ Empirical support for accounts of the politics of race and class in the US