Black Empowerment and White Mobilization: The Effects of the Voting Rights Act

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How did Southern whites respond to the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA)? Leveraging newly digitized data on county-level voter registration by race between 1956 and 1980 and exploiting predetermined variation in exposure to the federal intervention, we document that the VRA increases both Black and white political participation. Consistent with the VRA triggering white countermobilization, the surge in white registrations is concentrated in counties where African Americans represent a political threat. Countermobilization leads to a short-run increase in support for racially conservative candidates and to a slowdown in local public spending salient to Black Americans, such as public-sector employment and education.

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> It's so important to get Negroes registered in large numbers in the South. It would be this coalition of the Negro vote and the moderate white vote that will really make the new South. —Martin Luther King Jr., on the phone with President Johnson on January 15, 1965

> As a man whose roots go deeply into southern soil I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society. —President Johnson, *We Shall Overcome*, 1965

I. Introduction

In 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement and 1 week after the outrage of Selma's Bloody Sunday, President Johnson announced his decision to initiate legislation that would "strike down restrictions to voting in all elections, federal, state, and local, which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote" (Johnson 1965). On August 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) was signed into law. This federal legislation caused an immediate increase in turnout (Cascio and Washington 2014), leading to gains in Black representation and other tangible improvements for African American communities.[1]

President Johnson hoped that Black enfranchisement could "brighten the lives of every American" (Johnson 1965), and indeed many of the gains experienced by Black Americans spilled over to segments of the white society (Wright 2013). Yet President Johnson was also aware of the hostile reactions that the VRA might generate among Southern whites. Since the end of Reconstruction, African Americans in the US South had endured suppression of their constitutional rights to vote by violence, intimidation, and institutionalized disenfranchisement (Kousser 1992; Foner 2013; Anderson 2016, 2018). Attempts to eliminate racial discrimination had been systematically followed by whites' hostile reactions (Dickerson

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[1] In the US South, the VRA led to an increase in Black representation in county offices (Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023) and in spending on education and infrastructure (Cascio and Washington 2014; Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023). The VRA also improved conditions in the labor market (Aneja and Avenancio-Leon 2019) and in policing practices (Facchini, Knight, and Testa 2025) for Black Americans.

2003; Naidu 2012; Parker and Barreto 2014)—a pattern that continued also with the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s (Morris 1984). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the VRA triggered white opposition at the local level (Reed 1966), and historical accounts and case studies from specific Southern states are consistent with this idea (Alt 1994; Fresh 2018).

The notion that white mobilization was a response to the so called "Black threat" goes back to seminal work by Key (1949), which paved the way for extensive research on how racial context impacts political behavior.[2] Key noted that counties where Black Americans "constitute a substantial proportion of the population" were at the core of the political South and that whites living in areas with a low Black population "have a less direct concern over the maintenance of white rule, whereas the whites of the Black belts operate an economic and social system based on subordinate, black labor" (Key 1949, 5, 9). Consistent with these insights, the Southern counties targeted by the VRA to redress Black disenfranchisement were precisely those where the presence of African Americans was perceived as a challenge to the existing political, economic, and social order. However, despite a large body of work on Southern white behavior in the aftermath of the VRA (Davidson and Grofman 1994), the notion of Black threat remains elusive. While Key's (1949) focus was on the size of the local African American community, institutional differences (e.g., preexisting electoral rules) within the South were important to translate enfranchisement into descriptive representation and actual political power at the local level (Trebbi, Aghion, and Alesina 2008; Bullock and Gaddie 2009).[3] Data limitations have prevented the literature from systematically analyzing whether white voters responded to the surge in actual or perceived Black political threat induced by the VRA and whether such response had an impact on the overall effectiveness of the act.

In this paper, we seek to fill this gap by leveraging newly assembled county-level voter registration rates by race. We reach two main conclusions. First, while the VRA increases Black political participation across the board, whites mobilize more in counties where the Black threat is higher because African Americans are more likely to gain local representation. Second, white countermobilization has tangible consequences. Despite the unquestionable gains brought about by the VRA, counties

[2] A large literature has studied the relationship between racial threat and many sociopolitical variables, e.g., racial attitudes, voter turnout, and support for candidates and policies, reaching somewhat divergent conclusions due to data limitations and identification challenges (Enos 2016). For a recent overview of the influence of Key's work on the study of Southern politics and history, see also Maxwell and Shields (2011).

[3] Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski (2015) extended Key's (1949) original analysis by examining how the behavior of elected Congress members in the US South varied across issues and how their preferences diverged from those of legislators representing the rest of the country.

where white mobilization is higher experience a stronger increase in support for racially conservative candidates and a slower growth in local public spending likely to benefit the Black constituency.

To study the effects of the VRA on political participation by race, we assembled data spanning 10 states of the former Confederacy, over the period 1956–80. Voter registration records are collected and maintained by county offices and are not routinely collated in official publications. To the best of our knowledge, registration by county and race has never been systematically gathered for the entire US South over the period considered in this study. One way to identify the effects of the VRA on political participation would be to compare counties covered by the special provisions of the act (known as "coverage") that had different Black population shares in 1960. As shown in previous work (Cascio and Washington 2014; Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023), predetermined variation in the Black population share is related to changes in overall turnout and Black representation induced by the VRA. We thus expect similar patterns to hold for registration rates by race.

A key concern with this strategy is that the Black population share might have direct effects on the change in registration rates even in the absence of coverage. For this reason, as in Cascio and Washington (2014) and Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), we use noncovered counties in the former Confederacy to form a suitable control group. Estimating a triple difference-in-differences (DDD) specification, we compare the evolution of Black and white registration rates, before and after the VRA, between covered and noncovered counties with different 1960 Black population shares. The identifying assumption is that, absent the VRA, registration rates by race would have evolved along parallel trends in the two groups of counties. To corroborate the validity of our identification strategy, we verify that there are no pretrends either in registration rates or in other outcomes that could correlate with political participation.

We find that Black registration rates increase more in covered counties with a higher share of African Americans but that this pattern is mirrored by a substantial increase in white registration. Hence, even if the VRA lowers the Black-white gap in registration rates, within 15 years of the passage of the VRA, the reaction of white voters partly offsets the rise in Black political efficacy that the VRA intended to achieve. Our estimates imply that, absent the response of white voters, a 10 percentage point higher Black population share would have led to an additional 3.6 percentage point decline in the Black-white gap in covered, compared with noncovered, counties. Accounting for white mobilization reduces this figure to as little as 0.3 percentage points.

These findings continue to hold when using a geographic regression discontinuity (GRD) design that focuses on more similar counties spanning the border between covered and noncovered states. They are also

robust to (i) controlling for additional variables that might be correlated with coverage, such as proxies for the influence of the Civil Rights Act (CRA), Black migration, and funds received through the War on Poverty; (ii) excluding potential outliers; (iii) adjusting standard errors for spatial correlations; and (iv) replicating the analysis using only the set of counties that had similar 1964 turnout, which was used to determine coverage.

Our results confirm Key's (1949) insight that the size of the African American community plays an important role in shaping white political behavior in the US South. In the second part of the paper, we examine in more detail the notion of Black threat and document that the size of the African American constituency matters, but only when it is associated with actual or perceived gains in Black office holding. In a first exercise, we exploit differences in preexisting electoral rules, which are crucial for minority representation.[4] As shown by Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), the VRA leads to gains in Black office holding only in counties electing their governing bodies by single-member districts (SMD), as opposed to at-large or mixed systems. To study whether office holding represents a source of Black threat, we estimate a quadruple-differences design, allowing the effect of coverage to vary by SMD status. We document that white mobilization mirrors the patterns of Black representation: the differential increase in white registration is concentrated in covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share, where African Americans are more likely to gain office. We provide further evidence on the role of electoral rules in shaping perceived political threat leveraging a newly compiled list of local-level court cases that challenged at-large elections between 1965 and 1980. Estimating event studies, we document that white registration rates increase right after the court rulings and remain higher for at least 10 years since then.

Our evidence is consistent with the idea that white political participation is an attempt to counteract Black empowerment. If voting is costly, group-based models (Coate and Conlin 2004; Feddersen 2004; Feddersen and Sandroni 2006) predict that participation depends on the degree of political competition: it should increase as groups become more similar in size and decrease when one group outnumbers the other. Consistent with group-based models of political competition, we find that, while the surge in white registration is always higher in SMD counties with a higher Black population share, the growth of white registration accelerates as the two groups become more similar and declines when the number of Black Americans greatly exceeds that of whites.

[4] The effect of electoral rules on minority representation depends on the size of the group. At-large elections penalize minority groups more when the latter represent a small share of the total population, because their vote gets diluted. As the share of minority voters increases, majority-minority districts reduce their ability to gain representation, making elections at large preferable. See also Trebbi, Aghion, and Alesina (2008).

Next, we explore the role of Black office holding relying on a different source of variation: the election of the first African American into office. For white voters, this event likely represented a signal that Black political empowerment was real and could have consequences for the political balance of power at the local level. Consistent with this idea, we show that these elections were salient: in covered counties with a larger Black population share, the first Black elected official is more likely to be mentioned by local newspapers than white officials elected at the same time. We also find that, while covered counties do not experience differential changes in white political participation before the election of the first Black official, white registration rates spike right after the event and continue to increase for at least 10 years in its wake.

Taken together, our results are consistent with the idea that Black enfranchisement fuels white countermobilization. We further corroborate this interpretation using data from historical local newspapers. We document that the frequency of racially charged terms and mentions of white mobilization and backlash increase in newspapers with headquarters in covered counties with a higher Black population share soon after the VRA. More directly in support of the political threat channel, we also find that mentions of white mobilization are more likely to occur together with mentions of the race issue and of George Wallace, a key figure within the Southern white supremacist movement. Moreover, this increase in mentions is concentrated in gubernatorial election years, precisely when the Black threat is more likely to bite.

We also explore other factors that might explain the observed patterns. First, we rule out the possibility that the reenfranchisement of illiterate white voters—following the removal of literacy tests—mechanically increases white registration rates. Second, we do not observe differential changes in the occurrence of race riots or other forms of protests. This suggests that white countermobilization is not a reaction to increased insecurity, possibly instilled by race riots or local-level conflicts. Finally, we provide evidence against the possibility that our results might be partly driven by white out-migration.

Having shown the relevance of political motivations for white reactions to the VRA, we then examine the implications of white countermobilization for state and national politics as well as for policies salient for the Black electorate. First, we document a short-term spike in support for segregationist candidates. In the 1968 presidential election, in SMD counties, where white countermobilization is stronger, we observe a larger increase in the vote share of George Wallace as compared with Strom Thurmond, the segregationist 1948 presidential candidate. We document similar patterns in gubernatorial elections between 1956 and 1968, classifying candidates according to their stance on racial segregation. Second, we show that, between 1957 and 1982, SMD counties are more likely to choose local

spending policies that bring diffused benefits (e.g., capital spending) and are less likely to allocate public spending on categories that would benefit more the African American community (e.g., education and public employment). Together, our findings paint a nuanced picture of the VRA and showcase the significance of white countermobilization as posited by Key (1949). In line with findings in Cascio and Washington (2014), Aneja and Avenancio-Leon (2019), and Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), Black empowerment brought tangible gains to African American communities. However, such gains were partly offset by whites' political reactions to the VRA.

Finally, we explore which segments of the white electorate mobilized in response to the Black threat. We leverage historical survey data from Gallup that measure whites' racial attitudes and policy preferences. Similar to Kuziemko and Washington (2018), we use as proxy for whites' racial views a specific question that asks respondents whether they would vote for a Black presidential candidate. Estimating individual-level regressions that exploit state-level variation in coverage, electoral rules, and Black population shares, we provide suggestive evidence that whites who are male, live in rural areas, are older, and have lower levels of education are more likely to oppose the election of a Black candidate after the VRA. These findings are consistent with the argument that opposition to Black empowerment was stronger in the rural South (Key 1949), possibly because the economic benefits of the VRA were larger for urban and more educated whites (Wright 2013).

A growing literature on the effects of the VRA has documented that the legislation increased turnout (Cascio and Washington 2014) and Black representation in local offices (Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023) and ameliorated conditions for African Americans in many domains, such as public goods provision (Cascio and Washington 2014; Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023), labor markets (Aneja and Avenancio-Leon 2019), and policing practices (Facchini, Knight, and Testa 2025). However, despite these gains, a line of work in political science that builds on the seminal contribution of Key (1949) has documented evidence of white resistance to Black empowerment. Alt (1994) focuses on four Southern states between 1967 and 1988 and shows that white registration rates are positively correlated with Black population shares. Fresh (2018) finds an increase in both Black and white registration rates in North Carolina's covered counties but does not explicitly consider the role of the size of the African American population, which instead plays a fundamental role in Key's (1949) racial threat hypothesis.

To the best of our knowledge, by leveraging novel data on race-specific registration rates at the county level, we are the first to provide systematic evidence on the effects of the VRA on both Black and white mobilization in the entire South. We make two additional contributions to the literature.

First, we identify the role played by local African American office holding as a key source of Black political threat and a driver of white countermobilization. Second, we show that white countermobilization has tangible consequences for electoral outcomes and for local public policies. More specifically, we complement existing studies on partisan realignment triggered by civil rights legislation (Kuziemko and Washington 2018; Ang 2019), showing that Black political empowerment leads to a spike in segregationist vote in the immediate aftermath of the VRA. We also provide new evidence that countermobilization reduces the pace of improvement in policy domains salient to African Americans (Cascio and Washington 2014; Aneja and Avenancio-Leon 2019; Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023).[5]

Our results also speak to papers showing that new laws intended to benefit minority groups can trigger backlash among majority group members (Wheaton 2022; Zonszein and Grossman 2024). We complement these papers by focusing on one of the most fundamental laws in American history and leveraging newly collected voting registration data. Our findings indicate that the removal of laws that perpetuate racial exclusion might generate backlash among members of the majority group. This has important implications for the design of policies that seek to eliminate racial disparities in the political, social, and economic domains.

II. Background

The passage of the VRA marked a dramatic change in the balance of power between state and federal governments in the United States. Section 4 of the policy placed under strict federal monitoring all the jurisdictions that imposed a test or device restricting the right to vote and that displayed a turnout rate in the 1964 presidential election below 50%. As a result, 6 of the 11 states of the former Confederacy—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia—were fully covered by the VRA's special provisions, and one state—North Carolina—was partially covered.[6] Section 5 of the VRA required that any change in legislation affecting voting had to obtain preclearance by the US District Court for the District of Columbia or by the Attorney General.[7] In addition, federal examiners could be dispatched to monitor activities in the polling

[5] Our findings also speak to the broader literature on US race relations. Several papers have documented that, despite Black advances in labor market outcomes (Derenoncourt and Montialoux 2021), the income and wealth gap between Black and white Americans persists (Bayer and Charles 2018; Chetty et al. 2020; Derenoncourt et al. 2024).

[6] In North Carolina, 39 counties were covered by the special provisions of the policy, while 61 counties remained exempt. See table B2 (tables A1–C10 are available online) for a summary of coverage status by state.

[7] Preclearance was needed in order to assess whether the proposed change would have discriminated against protected minorities.

places of covered counties, which were required to eliminate literacy test provisions.[8]

The VRA was met with open defiance by the white political class. Its constitutionality was immediately challenged.[9] As its special measures stood the scrutiny of the court, numerous attempts to circumvent the policy with vote dilution practices followed (Trebbi, Aghion, and Alesina 2008). However, such tactics proved to be short-lived, as courts promptly redressed violations of the VRA, preventing a remake of the institutional disenfranchisement that took place at the end of the Reconstruction era. In particular, the enforcement of the VRA's preclearance provisions guaranteed that preexisting electoral rules more favorable to the election of minority candidates (chiefly, the SMD electoral rule present across local elections) were safeguarded in court (Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023). As the legal apparatus put in place by the VRA withstood the attacks of racially conservative whites, African Americans scored significant wins in county-level elective offices and experienced considerable gains in several other domains, from public spending to the labor market and policing.

As pointed out by Wright (2013, 208–9), "for most part, these gains have not been realized at the expense of white residents," and in many urban areas, "[B]lack representation did not threaten economic progress but fostered instead a biracial coalition for economic growth." Hence, the VRA could have led to improvements in race relations in the US South. Yet, those "shared economic gains" came into place against the backdrop of a social order deeply rooted in the Jim Crow laws, which had shaped Southern society since the end of the Reconstruction era. President Johnson himself, when announcing the introduction of the VRA, stressed how difficult it would be "to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society." Indeed, racial attitudes have been shown to drive the fall of the fortunes of the Democratic Party in the US South since the early 1960s (Kuziemko and Washington 2018).

The ruling white political class was not ready to relinquish or share power with Black Americans. In 1968, as 200 Southern Black officials gathered in Atlanta, Lawrence T. Guyot, a functionary of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, addressed them with a stark warning: "This is not the time to rejoice but to gird for new white resistance" (Valentine 1968). Among whites, fears of "Black takeover" became widespread. In 1973, as the victory of Maynard H. Jackson, the first Black mayor of Atlanta, was imminent, his white opponent's billboards proclaimed: "Atlanta's

[8] See also Cascio and Washington (2014) for more details about the VRA and its provisions.

[9] In *South Carolina v. Katzenbach, 383 US 301 (1966)*, the Supreme Court rejected South Carolina's attack to the constitutionality of the policy, ruling the VRA's preclearance mechanism constitutional.

too young to die . . . one can almost see them singing and dancing in the street in anticipation of a Black takeover" (McDonald 2003).

White supremacist organizations, such as the White Citizens' Council, quickly ramped up efforts to mobilize white voters. For instance, soon after the passage of the VRA, the Citizens' Council of Greater New Orleans (CCGNO) proclaimed its intention to register 60,000 white voters in the city of New Orleans alone to counter a Black voter registration drive.[10] White mobilization efforts intensified over time as Black candidates started to appear on the ballot box. When Black civil rights attorney Nils Douglas ran for the Louisiana state legislature, the CCGNO urged its members to cast their ballot for the white racially conservative candidate Ernest J. Hessler, Jr., writing, "The white voters of the 9th Ward are faced with the most serious challenge since Reconstruction time."[11]

White voter mobilization drives often used a mix of conservative rhetoric of law and order, morality, and individual responsibility and freedom (Brckmann 2019). During a 1965 rally in Bogalusa (Louisiana), district judge (and future member of Congress) John Rarick openly criticized the VRA, declaring that he favored "segregation not because of hate or fear" but because he was "a free man." The judge encouraged whites to "stand up for America and for individual freedom" and "discriminate against anyone we may choose."[12] As a result of voter registration drives, new white voters "in many localities outnumbered the new [Black] bloc voters."[13]

III. Data

In this section, we describe the novel data on registration rates by race and county that we collected. We provide more details in appendix B (apps. A–C are available online), where we also present the additional data sources and variables used throughout the paper.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, most US states adopted registration laws to keep track of voters and prevent electoral fraud (Keyssar 2009). Voter registration takes place either at the county or at the municipality level. In all 11 states of the former Confederacy, county offices (also known as election administrators or registrars) are in charge of maintaining voter registration records. Individual states have ample leeway on the administration of federal, state, and local elections. Furthermore, states

[10] *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), August 23, 1965.

[11] Circular letter by the CCGNO, ca. February 1966, *Leander Henry Perez Papers, 1954–1969*, box 1, folder "Hessler Campaign, CC Letter," New Orleans Public Library, Special Collections (NOPL).

[12] *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), May 8, 1965.

[13] *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), August 11, 1968.

"allow local registrars wide latitude. As a result of this discretion, registration practices of some states vary widely from county to county" (James 1987). Given that voter registration records are collected and maintained by county offices and not routinely collated in official publications, data by race at this level of granularity is difficult to obtain. To the best of our knowledge, such information has never been systematically gathered for the entire US South over the period considered in this study. One contribution of this paper is to fill this gap.

From the archive of the Southern Regional Council's Voter Education Project, based in Atlanta, we located official records on voter registrations for the states of the former Confederacy.[14] Most records originate from reports of the Secretary of State, the Board of Registrations, the Auditor of State, and the Election Commissioner. Other reports were obtained from the US Department of Justice and from surveys of local governments carried out by the Southern Regional Council. We complemented these records with information from the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR 1959, 1961). We digitized all these reports and combined them with supplementary data from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR 1992) to obtain a dataset on the number of registered voters by race spanning the period between 1956 and 1980.[15] We then built registration rates using county-level data on the voting age population by race.[16]

Figure A1 (figs. A1–A6 are available online) displays the geographic pattern of data availability at the county level. While information on registered voters is not available for all Southern counties, table 1 indicates that our sample (panel A) is broadly comparable to the entire South (panel B) across many socioeconomic characteristics. We return to the potential issue of sample selection, and how we address it, when presenting the identification strategy below. Table 1 also documents that, in 1960, Black Americans were substantially less likely to register than whites in both covered and noncovered counties. Not surprisingly, Black registration was much lower in covered counties where, on average, only 27% of voting age Black individuals were registered, compared with 45% in noncovered counties. However, by 1980, political participation among

[14] Following the 1966 federal decision to strike down the Texas poll tax as unconstitutional in *United States v. Texas, 252 F. Supp. 234 (W. D. Tex.), aff'd, 384 US 155 (1966)*, Texas eliminated information on the race of registered voters (Doty 1969). Since race-specific information is missing for all the years following the VRA, Texas is not included in our sample.

[15] We use 1980 as the end period for two reasons. First, the 1982 reauthorization of the VRA encompassed a major amendment that subsequently led to the introduction of majority-minority districts following the Supreme Court ruling in *Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 US 30 (1986)*. Second, data on race-specific voter registration become sparse after 1980.

[16] Appendix B provides a description and the corresponding sources for all variables used in the paper.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY STATISTICS

	Covered Counties				Noncovered Counties			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	A. Voter Registration Sample							
Political participation in 1960:								
Black voter registration rates (%)	27.4	22.9	.0	100.0	45.0	25.0	.0	100.0
White voter registration rates (%)	77.7	21.5	5.5	100.0	78.6	16.9	46.3	100.0
Gap in registration: Black:white (%)	−50.2	29.0	−100.0	30.1	−33.5	23.7	−95.2	44.7
Political participation in 1980:								
Black voter registration rates (%)	59.3	19.4	.0	100.0	55.9	18.5	.0	100.0
White voter registration rates (%)	75.6	15.0	8.7	100.0	71.9	11.7	45.7	100.0
Gap in registration: Black:white (%)	−16.3	15.6	−100.0	30.5	−16.0	19.2	−94.9	14.0
County characteristics:								
Black share (%), 1960	36.4	18.4	.0	83.4	19.5	15.9	.0	68.9
Population (thousands), 1960	38.1	63.7	1.9	634.9	48.0	97.4	2.9	935.0
Unskilled workers (%), 1960	74.7	7.7	42.6	93.5	72.3	9.0	45.6	86.4
Unemployment (%), 1960	5.1	1.7	1.3	11.9	5.4	1.9	1.8	11.4
Families below poverty line (%), 1960	48.0	13.9	7.8	77.8	47.1	14.0	17.6	78.0
Rural farms (%), 1960	20.8	14.3	.0	63.6	19.7	15.3	.1	66.8
Land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959	2.1	3.1	.0	28.9	1.9	4.5	.0	32.8
Pro-Black protest, 1960–64	1.3	6.5	.0	74.0	.9	3.8	.0	34.0
Anti-Black protest, 1960–64	.4	2.3	.0	37.0	.1	.7	.0	9.0
Green Book establishments, 1955	.9	3.5	.0	49.0	1.3	4.7	.0	42.0
	B. Full US South Sample							
County characteristics:								
Black share (%), 1960	32.5	20.0	.0	83.4	13.2	14.1	.0	68.9
Population (thousands), 1960	34.7	57.8	.0	634.9	40.9	101.9	.2	1243.2
Unskilled workers (%), 1960	73.9	8.7	26.6	93.5	70.7	9.6	31.9	89.8
Unemployment (%), 1960	5.0	1.9	.0	11.9	4.9	2.2	.0	15.9
Families below poverty line (%), 1960	46.2	16.2	.0	77.8	43.7	14.9	.0	78.0
Rural farms (%), 1960	20.8	15.2	.0	64.8	21.4	15.2	.1	77.3
Land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959	2.0	3.2	.0	28.9	2.8	5.7	.0	37.5
Pro-Black protest, 1960–64	1.1	5.7	.0	74.0	.5	3.2	.0	46.0
Anti-Black protest, 1960–64	.3	2.0	.0	37.0	.1	.5	.0	9.0
Green Book establishments, 1955	.8	3.1	.0	49.0	.9	3.9	.0	42.0

African Americans had increased substantially, especially in covered counties, where registration rates reached 59%. The surge in Black registration rates was more limited in noncovered counties, reaching 56% in 1980. Before the VRA, white registration rates were instead similar in covered and noncovered counties (78% and 79%, respectively). Moreover, and in contrast with patterns observed for Black Americans, between 1960 and 1980 white registration rates declined by 2 and 7 percentage points in covered and noncovered counties, respectively.[17]

Table 1 presents additional summary statistics: covered counties have a larger Black population share in 1960, compared with noncovered counties. Covered and noncovered counties are more similar in terms of unemployment rates, farms, cotton production, and poverty rates, but covered counties are smaller and have a less educated population. Covered counties also experience more episodes of anti- and pro-Black protests in the years before the VRA and have fewer Green Book establishments (relative to Black population) in 1955.

Overall, these patterns suggest that covered and noncovered counties differ along several observable characteristics. Our empirical strategy, presented in section IV.A, accounts for these differences, as well as for other potential sources of unobservable heterogeneity. To specifically tackle the concern that heterogeneity in observables might increase the sensitivity to potential bias due to unobservables, in section IV.D, we implement a GRD design that focuses on counties spanning the border between covered and noncovered states, which do not exhibit any statistically significant difference in observable characteristics.

IV. The VRA and Political Participation

A. Empirical Strategy

Our analysis exploits variation induced by a special measure introduced by the VRA—known as coverage—to protect African Americans from the infringement of their political rights. As described in section II, counties that imposed a test or device restricting the right to vote and experienced a turnout rate below 50% in the 1964 presidential election were placed under strict federal monitoring. Six of the 11 states of the former Confederacy—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia—were fully covered by the VRA's special provisions, and one state—North Carolina—was partially covered. The VRA led to an increase in overall turnout, which was more pronounced in counties with a larger

[17] The drop in white registration rates is consistent with the overall decline observed during this period, which was at least in part due to lower efforts exerted by political parties to mobilize the electorate (Fullerton and Stern 2010).

preexisting Black population share (Cascio and Washington 2014). As coverage was meant to protect Black voting rights, we expect this federal intervention to generate a more substantial increase in Black registration rates in counties with a larger share of African Americans. Likewise, if white voters reacted to Black enfranchisement, we expect their political mobilization to be stronger where Black registration rates increased more following the VRA.

One way to estimate the effect of the VRA would be to implement a difference-in-differences (DD) design and compare registration rates by race before and after the policy, between covered counties with a different 1960 Black population share. A key concern, though, is that racial attitudes and political behavior might have changed differentially across covered counties in a way that is correlated with the 1960 Black population share, even absent federal intervention. Hence, as in Cascio and Washington (2014) and Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), we augment the DD strategy with the introduction of a suitable comparison group that includes the remaining counties of the former Confederacy—with a similar history of racial discrimination—that were not covered by the VRA.[18]

We use a DDD design to test whether covered counties with a larger 1960 Black population share experienced a differential change in Black and white registration rates, from before to after the VRA, as compared with noncovered counties with the same Black population share. The identifying assumption is that, in the absence of the VRA, covered and noncovered counties with the same Black population share would have experienced similar trends in voter registration rates.

B. Event Study

We begin by examining the evolution of the relationship between registration rates and the share of African Americans over time. In figure 1, we plot coefficients obtained by regressing (the log of) race-specific registration rates on the 1960 Black population share, separately by year and treatment status. We control for state fixed effects and the vector of 1960 variables typically considered in the literature (Cascio and Washington 2014; Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023).[19]

[18] Since five counties in Florida became covered after the 1975 reauthorization of the VRA, we verify that our results are robust when we drop these counties from our sample (table C2).

[19] The control variables are poverty and unemployment rates, the share of the population living in farms, the share of land devoted to cotton production, and their interaction with coverage. Models are estimated for the calendar years corresponding to each presidential election between 1956 and 1980 and include separate indicators for covered and noncovered counties in North Carolina.

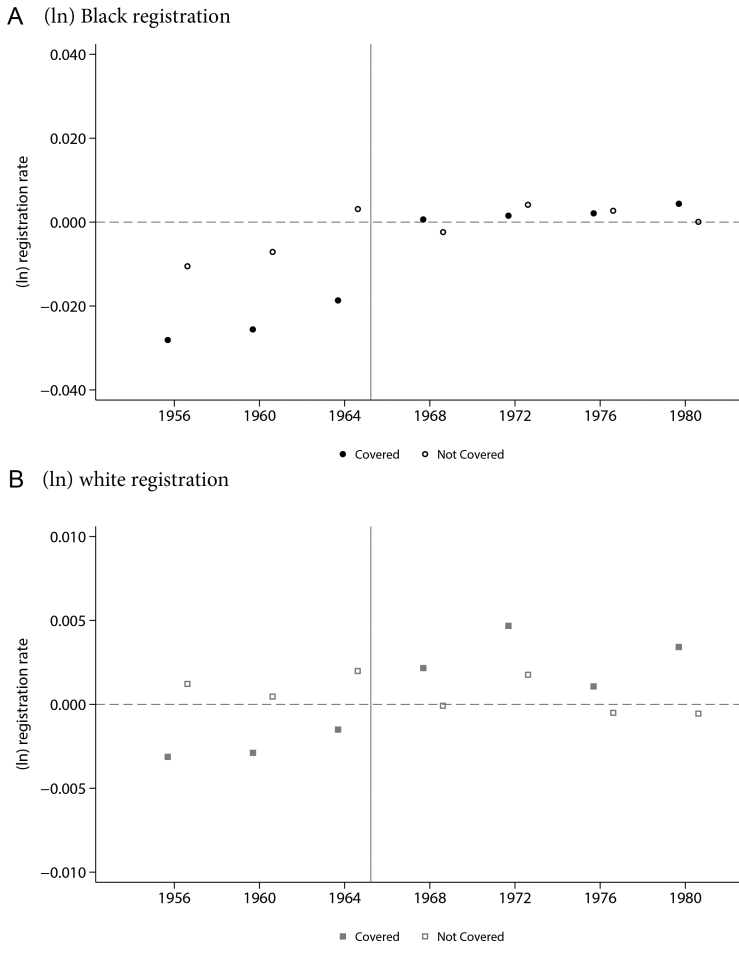

FIG. 1.—Registration rates: trends in the gradient. The figures plot the coefficient on the interaction between the VRA indicator and the 1960 Black population share, separately by year and treatment status, in models that also include county and state fixed effects and interactions between the VRA indicator and the vector of controls. Controls are unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; and land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

Our results show that, before the VRA, counties with a larger Black population share exhibit lower Black registration rates (fig. 1*A*). As expected, this relationship is more pronounced in covered counties, where discriminatory registration procedures were particularly widespread. In 1956, a 10 percentage point increase in the share of African Americans

is associated with a 28% (11%) reduction in Black registration rates in covered (noncovered) counties. This negative association starts to weaken between 1960 and 1964, but the gap between covered and noncovered counties remains virtually unchanged. A clear break emerges with the passage of the VRA, and the gap disappears already in 1968.

In the pre-VRA period, we also observe a gap in white registration rates between covered and noncovered counties (fig. 1*B*). However, its size is more modest: in 1956, a 10 percentage point increase in the Black population share is associated with a 3.1% reduction and a 1.2% rise in white registration rates in covered and noncovered counties, respectively. Also in this case, a larger Black population share is associated with higher white political participation in both covered and noncovered counties, between 1960 and 1964. After the VRA, the increase in white registration rates linked to the 1960 Black population share becomes stronger for covered counties, whereas it flattens out for noncovered ones. Already in 1968, a 10 percentage point increase in the 1960 Black population share is associated with a 2.2% increase in white registration rates in covered counties. Instead, no such relationship is evident for noncovered counties.

We analyze the statistical significance of these patterns in figure 2. Here, we plot the coefficients obtained by estimating the following event study specification:

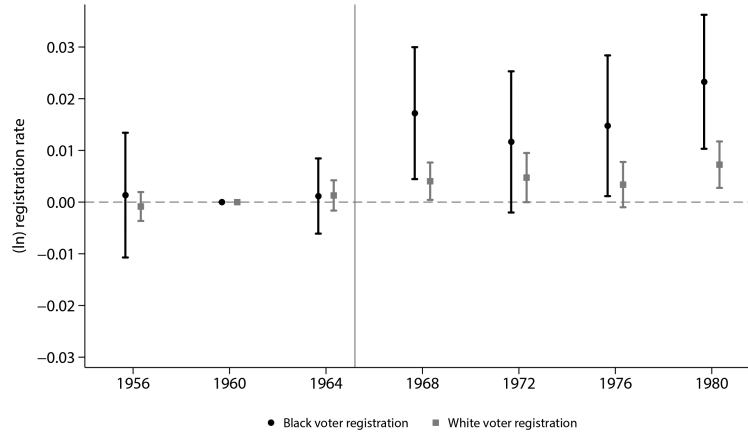

FIG. 2.—Registration rates: difference in the gradient. The figure plots the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the interaction between the VRA indicator, year dummies, and the 1960 Black population share in models that also include county and state by year fixed effects and interactions between year dummies, the VRA indicator, and the vector of controls. Controls are unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; and land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

$$y_{cst} = \sum_{n \neq 1960} \gamma_n D_n^t \text{Black}_{1960} + \sum_{n \neq 1960} \theta_n D_n^t \text{Black}_{1960} \times \text{VRA}_{cs} + \mathbf{X}_{cs}'\beta + I_{st} + I_c + \epsilon_{cst}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{cst} is the log of registration rates (of either race) in county c of state s at time t; Black_{1960} is the 1960 Black population share in the county; VRA_{cs} is an indicator equal to one for counties covered by the policy in 1965 and zero otherwise; D_n^t is an indicator taking a value of one if $n = t$; $\mathbf{X}_{cs}'$ is the vector of pre-VRA county-level controls described above, fully interacted with the VRA_{cs} indicator; and I_{st} are state-year interactions and I_c are county fixed effects.[20] Since district courts played a key role in enforcing coverage provisions of the VRA, we cluster standard errors by judicial divisions to account for potential correlation at this level.[21] Regressions are weighed by 1960 county population.

The parameter of interest is θ_n, which captures the treatment-control difference in the change in the gradient of voter registration rates on the 1960 Black population share, between year n and the base year (1960). In line with the patterns shown in figure 1, counties with larger shares of African Americans do not exhibit statistically significant differences in registration rates by coverage status before the VRA. This is reassuring, because it indicates the absence of pretrends in both outcome variables.[22]

The absence of pretrends lends support to our identifying assumption. Yet one may be worried that covered and noncovered counties with a similar 1960 Black population share may have experienced differential changes along other economic, social, and political characteristics that could have, in turn, affected registration rates after the passage of the VRA. For this reason, below, we verify that covered counties with a higher 1960 Black population share did not experience differential changes along several political, economic, and social characteristics before 1960. We discuss these and many other robustness checks in section IV.D, after presenting our main results.

After 1964, we observe a positive and statistically significant difference between treatment and control groups for both Black and white registration rates. That is, in the post-VRA period, both Black and white registration rates increase more in covered counties with a higher 1960 Black

[20] As in fig. 1, we consider the calendar years corresponding to the presidential elections between 1956 and 1980. To identify the model, we omit 1960.

[21] State district courts are organized by judicial divisions, which serve groups of counties. For more details on the mapping between counties and judicial divisions, see Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), and for the sources used, see table B3. In table C3, we assess the robustness of our results to using alternative cluster structures.

[22] In app. sec. C.6, we provide additional evidence on the lack of pretrends by implementing the test proposed in Roth (2022).

population share.[23] The jump observed immediately after the VRA is consistent with anecdotal accounts of Black mobilization and white countermobilization (see also sec. II). The event study shows that these patterns are not temporary: white registration rates keep increasing for at least 15 years after the passage of the VRA.

C. *Main Results*

Our main goal is to understand how white political participation responds to Black empowerment, which took time to materialize. Thus, to summarize our main findings and later assess their robustness, in this section we build on the graphical evidence presented above and consider a long difference model focusing on two points in time—before (1960) and after (1980) the VRA. We omit the years in between since, as detailed in appendix section B.1, while registration data for the 10 states of the former Confederacy are available at the beginning and at the end of our sample period, this information is not continuously reported in some of the intermediate years. More precisely, we estimate the following equation:

$$\Delta y_{cs} = \gamma \text{Black}_{1960} + \theta \text{Black}_{1960} \times \text{VRA}_{cs} + \mathbf{X}'_{cs}\beta + I_s + \epsilon_{cs}, \qquad (2)$$

where Δy_{cs} is the change in the log of registration rates (by race) between 1960 and 1980; I_s are state dummies, which capture state specific trends; and all other variables are as in equation (1) above.[24]

Table 2 reports our findings, separately for Black (panel A) and white (panel B) registration rates.[25] As before, the main coefficient of interest is the interaction between the 1960 Black population share and the VRA_{cs} indicator. We start with a parsimonious specification, which only includes the vector of 1960 controls used in the event study (col. 1). Next, we account for other potential drivers of voter registration rates. In columns 2 and 3, we additionally control, respectively, for education and for other preexisting forms of political mobilization (in particular, the number of pro- and anti-Black protests between 1960 and 1964).[26]

[23] The growth in registration rates is faster for Black voters than for white voters. However, note that, since the initial number of registered voters was an order of magnitude higher for white voters, the same percent change in the growth of registration rates would correspond to a higher percentage point change in the number of registered white (vs. Black) voters. We return to the implied magnitude of our estimates in the next section.

[24] As before, regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and standard errors are clustered at the judicial division level. In app. C, we show that our findings are not sensitive to the use of alternative starting and ending points to estimate the long difference regression.

[25] The number of observations varies across panels because we restrict samples to counties reporting registration rates of the relevant population. The results are robust to focusing on counties that report registration rates for both races in both years (see table A1, col. 2).

[26] Table A2 shows that the baseline results hold when estimating less stringent specifications that omit state fixed effects, the set of controls used in the event study, and their interaction with coverage.

TABLE 2
CHANGE IN (ln) REGISTRATION RATES, 1980 − 1960

	(ln) Registration Rates				
	Event Study (1)	Less than High School (2)	Pro-, Anti-Black Protest (3)	Green Books (4)	Border GRD (5)
	A. Black Registration				
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.023***	.023***	.024***	.023***	.026**
	(.006)	(.006)	(.007)	(.007)	(.011)
Black share, 1960	.007	.006	.009*	.010**	.048
	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)	(.032)
Summary statistics:					
Dependent variable	32.342	32.342	32.342	32.343	33.616
	(20.351)	(20.351)	(20.351)	(20.355)	(21.866)
Black share, 1960	28.061	28.061	28.061	28.064	25.586
	(15.053)	(15.053)	(15.053)	(15.055)	(15.046)
Adjusted R^2	.73	.74	.74	.74	.27
N	666	666	666	664	167
	B. White Registration				
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.007***	.007***	.006***	.006***	.004**
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Black share, 1960	−.001	−.002	−.002	−.002	−.000
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.003)
Summary statistics:					
Dependent variable	68.720	68.720	68.720	68.719	70.416
	(18.570)	(18.570)	(18.570)	(18.578)	(16.758)
Black share, 1960	27.621	27.621	27.621	27.649	25.586
	(15.159)	(15.159)	(15.159)	(15.145)	(15.046)
Adjusted R^2	.44	.48	.50	.50	.30
N	676	676	676	671	167

NOTE.—The table estimates the long difference model in eq. (2). The dependent variable is the 1980 − 1960 change in the log of registration rates in panels A and B. All regressions include state dummies, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. Regressions also include interactions between county controls and the coverage (VRA) dummy. Controls in col. 1 are as follows: unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; and land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959. Controls are added sequentially across columns: low-skilled (%), 1960, in col. 2; pro-Black protest, 1960–64, and anti-Black protest, 1960–64, in col. 3; and Green Book establishments, 1955, in col. 4. Column 5 replicates the long difference model in eq. (2) using the GRD design of eq. (3) and restricting the sample to contiguous counties that belong to covered and noncovered states. In col. 5, all regressions also include county pair trends, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. In cols. 1–4 (col. 5), regressions are weighed by 1960 population (by the inverse of the counties' appearance in the sample), and robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions (by judicial divisions and border segments).

* Significance at the 10% level.

** Significance at the 5% level.

*** Significance at the 1% level.

One caveat to the interpretation of our estimates is that the patterns we uncover may, at least in part, be driven by voters' mobilization in response to the antisegregation measures introduced by the CRA of 1964. To address this possibility, in column 4, we additionally control for preexisting patterns of segregation in public accommodations. Relying on recently digitized data from Cook et al. (2023), we use the 1955 number of Green Book establishments normalized by Black population. Reassuringly, our estimates remain stable. We take column 4 as our preferred specification. We discuss several additional robustness checks in section IV.D below.

Results in panel A indicate that a 10 percentage point increase in the Black population share is associated with a 23% (or 3.6 percentage point) faster increase in the growth rate of Black registration rates in covered counties compared with noncovered ones, between 1960 and 1980.[27] Panel B presents our central result: the VRA leads to a stronger growth in white registration rates in covered counties with a higher Black population share. Our estimates imply that a 10 percentage point higher 1960 Black population share leads to an additional 6% (or 3.3 percentage point) increase in white registration rates in covered counties compared with noncovered ones, between 1960 and 1980. In table A3, we quantify the net effect on the Black-white gap in registration rates. We find that a 10 percentage point higher Black population share leads to a 16% faster reduction in this gap between 1960 and 1980. In other words, absent any change in white voters' behavior, the VRA would have caused a 3.6 percentage point decline in the gap in registration rates. Yet white mobilization reduces this figure by 90%, down to 0.3 percentage points.

We interpret results in table 2 as evidence of countermobilization. This is consistent with historical and anecdotal accounts that stress how white voters opposed the VRA and actively tried to maintain the preexisting political and social order (Alt 1994; McDonald 2003).[28] We provide additional evidence for this interpretation below. Before doing so, in the next section, we assess the validity of our research design and probe the robustness of our findings.

D. Robustness Checks

Testing for pretrends in other outcomes.—While the event study in figure 2 shows the absence of pretrends in registration rates, covered and

[27] To convert the implied percent change into a percentage point change, we estimated eq. (2) using as dependent variable the change in registration rates (rather than the change in the log). See also table C3.

[28] Note that this interpretation is not in contrast with recent findings in Lacroix (2023), who documents that the VRA reduced the incidence of political violence in covered counties. In fact, as long as white countermobilization took place through voter registration and political actions, it may have coincided with a shift away from overt violence against African Americans.

noncovered counties might have experienced differential changes along economic, social, and political characteristics before the passage of the VRA. Although the suppression of civil rights had turned the US South into an enclave of authoritarian rule, pushed by the northern wing of the Democratic Party, the outer South started to become more acquiescent toward the civil rights agenda since the late 1940s (Mickey 2015; Schickler 2016). For this reason, differential changes along social, economic, and political dimensions might spuriously influence the evolution of race-specific registration rates in the post-VRA period. We address these concerns in panel A of table 3. Here, following Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), we replicate equation (2) using as dependent variables the pre-VRA changes in a number of outcomes described below.[29]

We begin by examining proxies for the degree of white supremacy: the presence of KKK Klaverns and lynchings against African Americans (cols. 1 and 2) and the share of land devoted to cotton production (col. 3), which is considered a proxy for Black labor coercion. In column 4, we focus on the presence of NAACP chapters, which captures the degree of Black political activism. Next, we turn to electoral outcomes. To measure voters' behavior in response to partisan realignment on civil rights, in column 5, we compare the vote share for Barry Goldwater, the 1964 Republican presidential candidate, who ran on an openly anti–civil rights agenda, with that of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952.[30] In column 6, we examine the 1960 − 1940 change in the GOP vote share in presidential elections.

Next, we address the possibility that institutional changes following the Supreme Court ruling that struck down the white primary—*Smith v. Allwright, 321 US 649 (1944)*—might have affected turnout as well as the competitiveness of gubernatorial races in the post-WWII period. We consider the 1960 − 1940 change in (i) turnout in presidential (col. 7) and gubernatorial (col. 8) elections and (ii) the vote share received by the lead candidate in the Democratic gubernatorial primaries (col. 9), which we use as a proxy for the competitiveness of gubernatorial races. Finally, in columns 10 and 11, we examine the 1960 − 1950 change in malapportionment of the State House and Senate, which has been linked to the disproportionate power of racially conservative rural areas (Snyder and Ansolabehere 2004; Mickey 2015).[31]

This analysis documents the lack of pretrends across variables, with the exception of the share of land devoted to the production of cotton

[29] Each variable is reported at the top of the corresponding column. See app. B and table B4 for more details.

[30] Even though the position taken by Eisenhower on civil rights issues has remained controversial, it was never openly against racial equality (Lawson 1976; Schickler 2016).

[31] Data on malapportionment are not available for earlier periods.

(col. 3).[32] The positive and statistically significant coefficient for this outcome indicates that covered counties with a larger share of African Americans remained more reliant on cotton production.[33] For this reason, in all our specifications, we account for the preexisting share of land devoted to the production of cotton.

Geographic regression discontinuity.—Despite the evidence in support of our empirical design provided thus far, one may still be concerned that differences in demographic and economic characteristics between covered and noncovered counties could exacerbate the sensitivity to potential bias due to differences in unobservables. To tackle this issue, we implement a GRD design, comparing counties straddling the border between covered and noncovered states.

Table 1 documented that, in our sample, covered and noncovered counties differ in the 1960 Black population share. However, border counties are much more similar (fig. A2*B*).[34] In figure 3, we conduct a formal balancing test for the 1960 Black population share and all other controls included in our baseline specification. The results show that the border sample is fully balanced between covered and noncovered counties in terms of pre-VRA levels (fig. 3*A*) and trends (fig. 3*B*).

Having verified that contiguous counties are comparable to each other, we combine the long difference analysis presented above with a GRD design. We estimate the following model:

$$\Delta y_{cps} = \gamma \text{Black}_{1960} + \theta \text{Black}_{1960} \times \text{VRA}_{cps} + I_{cp} + \epsilon_{cps}, \tag{3}$$

where all variables are as above, except for the fact that we now include county pair fixed effects, I_{cp}.[35]

Results, reported in column 5 of table 2, confirm that covered counties with a larger Black population share in 1960 experience faster growth in both Black (panel A) and white (panel B) registration rates. Importantly, coefficients remain quantitatively very similar to those reported in column 4. Since some preexisting institutional characteristics might vary discontinuously at the border, even the GRD design cannot completely rule out the issue of selection into treatment. To address this concern, panel B

[32] The point estimate on the change in the Republican vote share in presidential elections (col. 6) is small and statistically significant at the 10% level. In table C2, we verify that results are unchanged when including the Republican vote share in the 1960 presidential election as an additional control.

[33] This might imply a "negative selection" into treatment: in the absence of federal intervention, covered counties might have experienced a smaller increase in political participation.

[34] Figure A2*A* presents the same figure for the 10 states in our sample. Consistent with table 1, the difference in the Black population share between covered and noncovered counties is more pronounced in this case.

[35] As in Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023), regressions are weighed by the inverse of the counties' appearance in the sample, and standard errors are clustered by judicial divisions and corresponding border segments.

TABLE 3
PRE-VRA TRENDS

	KKK (1)	Lynching (2)	Cotton (3)	NAACP (4)	Goldwater (5)	Republican Party (6)	President Turnout (7)	Governor Turnout (8)	Governor Win (9)	State House (10)	State Senate (11)
	A. Voter Registration Sample										
Black share, 1960 × VRA	−.001	.001	.057***	−.000	.002	.006*	−.002	.003	−.002	.000	.001
	(.001)	(.003)	(.019)	(.001)	(.004)	(.004)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.001)	(.001)
Black share, 1960	.002***	.001	−.057***	.001	.021***	.014***	.005*	.004***	.002	−.001	−.001
	(.001)	(.003)	(.017)	(.001)	(.003)	(.003)	(.003)	(.002)	(.002)	(.001)	(.001)
Summary statistics:											
Dependent variable	.027	.164	4.398	.035	35.045	14.274	25.445	18.624	48.476	152.922	138.396
	(.059)	(.886)	(6.245)	(.109)	(16.564)	(12.878)	(14.023)	(14.812)	(19.585)	(119.706)	(82.196)
Black share, 1960	31.286	31.286	31.286	31.286	30.978	31.017	31.262	31.286	31.299	31.286	31.286
	(18.498)	(18.498)	(18.498)	(18.498)	(18.385)	(18.378)	(18.502)	(18.498)	(18.531)	(18.498)	(18.498)
Adjusted R^2	.154	−.004	.328	.071	.789	.735	.413	.807	.344	.573	.378
N	641	641	641	641	633	631	640	641	637	641	641

	B. Border Sample										
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.001	−.001	−.001	−.002	.014	.013**	−.005	−.001	−.008	.001	.003
	(.001)	(.007)	(.026)	(.003)	(.009)	(.006)	(.005)	(.010)	(.008)	(.004)	(.004)
Black share, 1960	−.000	.017	−.122***	.004	.019*	.018*	.010	.033**	−.000	.008*	.008*
	(.002)	(.017)	(.037)	(.003)	(.010)	(.009)	(.007)	(.016)	(.012)	(.004)	(.004)
Summary statistics:											
Dependent variable	.021	.253	5.365	.042	34.928	15.505	29.321	22.035	47.202	154.166	146.411
	(.049)	(.927)	(7.789)	(.165)	(14.967)	(14.061)	(18.435)	(20.202)	(19.627)	(115.777)	(102.829)
Black share, 1960	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302	24.302
	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)	(20.879)
Adjusted R^2	.399	.184	.714	−.089	.677	.626	.120	.305	.200	.166	.035
N	222	222	222	222	222	222	222	222	222	222	222

NOTE.—The table estimates the long difference model in eq. (2) using as outcome the change in the variable at the top of each column. All changes refer to 1960 − 1940, except for col. 1 (1966 − 1940), col. 3 (1959 − 1949), col. 4 (1964 − 1942), col. 5 (1964 − 1940), and cols. 10 and 11 (1960 − 1950). All regressions include state dummies, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. Controls in panel A are as follows: low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959, is not included as a control in col. 3. The sample of panel A is based on the availability of voter registration data. Robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions in panel A and by judicial divisions and border segments in panel B.

* Significance at the 10% level.

** Significance at the 5% level.

*** Significance at the 1% level.

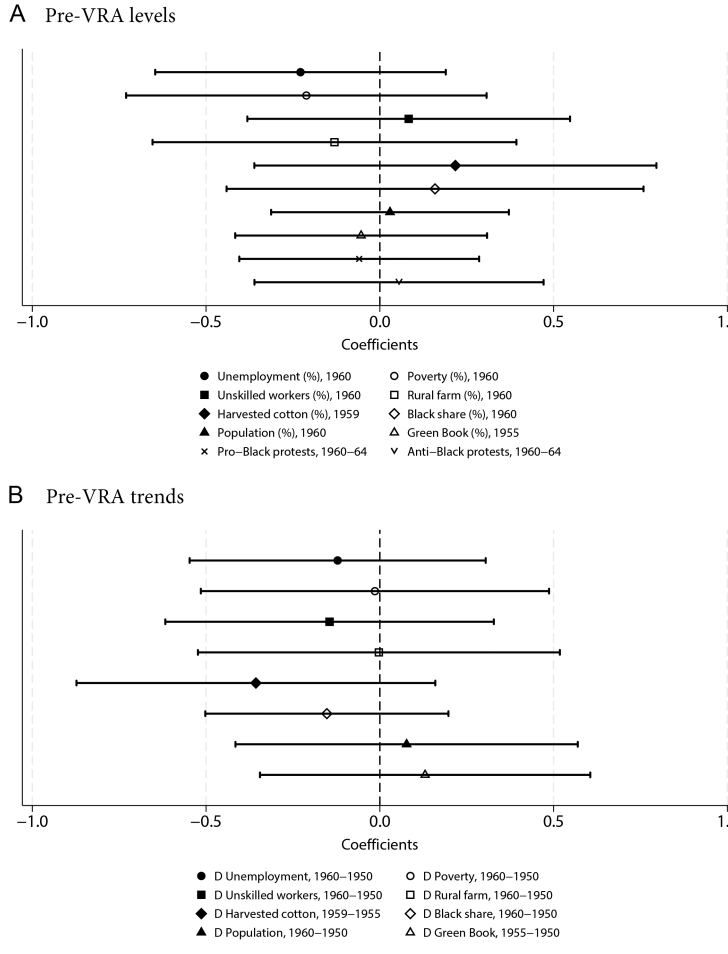

FIG. 3.—Balancing tests in the border sample: pre-VRA levels and trends. The figures plot the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the VRA indicator. Panels A and B consider levels and changes, respectively. To ease the interpretation of coefficients, all variables are standardized by subtracting their mean and dividing through their standard deviation. Regressions are weighed by the inverse of the counties' appearance in the sample, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions and border segments.

of table 3 repeats the pretrends analysis described above, focusing on the border sample. Reassuringly, there is no evidence of a statistically significant relationship between any of the variables considered and the interaction between the 1960 Black population share and the VRA indicator.[36]

[36] The only exception is the Republican vote share, for which the coefficient on the interaction is statistically significant at the 5% level. In table C2, we verify that results are

Addressing potential sample selection.—An additional concern with our analysis is sample selection. First, our dataset does not encompass all Southern counties. This might lead to selection bias, if the probability that a county is included in our sample is correlated with both coverage and the 1960 Black population share. Second, our baseline analysis includes all counties for which registration rates are available for either African Americans or whites. Therefore, the counties considered in the analysis of race-specific registration rates are not necessarily the same. Third, Southern counties varied substantially in the extent of Black disenfranchisement. For this reason, one may be worried that the estimated effects of the VRA were driven by large preexisting differences in Black political participation by coverage status.

We address these concerns in table A1. In column 1, we replicate the baseline specification using an indicator variable as the dependent variable, which equals one if a county is included in the sample and zero otherwise. Reassuringly, the coefficient on the interaction between coverage and the 1960 Black population share is close to zero and not statistically significant. In column 2, we restrict the sample to the set of counties for which both Black and white registration rates are always available. This reduces the number of observations but leaves the magnitude and the precision of results unchanged.

In columns 3 and 4, we address the concern that large preexisting differences in Black political participation by coverage status might be influencing our results. We leverage a key feature of the VRA's coverage formula, namely, that the turnout rate in the 1964 presidential election had to be below 50% (see also sec. II). We focus on counties close to this threshold, conducting an analysis that, in spirit, is similar to a regression discontinuity design. In column 3, we restrict the sample to counties with turnout rates ranging between 40% and 60% (i.e., a 10 percentage point window on either side of the coverage cutoff). In column 4, we impose a stricter bandwidth of 5 percentage points around the cutoff. Despite the considerable reduction in sample size, results are unchanged.[37]

Additional robustness checks.—In appendix C, we discuss additional robustness checks, which we briefly summarize here. First, in table C1, we show that results remain unchanged when balancing covariates between covered and noncovered counties: using a coarsened exact matching algorithm; dividing the observations into strata with similar propensity scores; and trimming the sample to the common support. Second, in table C2, we present several sensitivity checks to assess the quality of our

unchanged when including the Republican vote share in the 1960 presidential election as an additional control.

[37] Figure A3 presents the graphical analogue of this analysis, confirming results reported in cols. 3 and 4 of table A1.

data. Third, in table C3, we document that results are robust to omitting potential outliers, estimating alternative specifications and accounting for potential spatial correlation in the error term. Finally, we show that our findings are unchanged when we control for (i) alternative proxies for historical segregation (tables C4, C5); (ii) forces that might have promoted Black political activism (table C6); (iii) exposure to the War on Poverty (table C7); (iv) pre-1960 Black migration (table C8); and (v) historical measures of Black political power from the Reconstruction era (table C9).

V. Mechanisms

Our preferred interpretation for the surge in white registration documented above is that, by increasing (actual or perceived) Black political power, the VRA triggered white countermobilization. In this section, we first provide evidence consistent with this interpretation (secs. V.A–V.D). Then we show that additional mechanisms are unlikely to explain our results (sec. V.E).

A. Exploiting Variation in Electoral Rules

Historical accounts suggest that Southern whites looked at the prospect of Black office holding with fear and that concerns of a possible Black takeover became widespread soon after the VRA (McDonald 2003). If whites perceived the enfranchisement of Black Americans as a political threat, we would expect greater mobilization efforts when the prospects for Black political progress were stronger. To test this idea, we analyze the impact of one of the most visible signs of Black political empowerment: the election of Black officials at the local level.

Civil rights activists considered Black office holding as the primary route for the advancement of African American interests (Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023)[38] Even if Black progress did not necessarily take place at the expense of the white majority (Wright 2013), heightened Black political power might have reinforced racial animosity and triggered concerns among white voters that their preexisting status might be challenged. The election of Black officials could thus act as a catalyst of white political mobilization.

[38] As pointed out by Wirt (1997): "Many [B]lacks had first wanted their local representatives to be symbolic, that is to be [B]lack like themselves. In time tough they wanted representatives to provide individual or group services and to secure the public policies that would provide sufficient resources." A large literature has studied how minorities' descriptive representation can enhance their substantive representation. For an overview, see Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023).

Baseline estimates.—To shed light on the Black office holding channel, we exploit differences in preexisting electoral rules, which were crucial for the election of Black Americans in the aftermath of the VRA. We distinguish between counties belonging to states that, before the VRA, elected their county-governing bodies by SMD and those that used elections at-large or mixed systems.[39] The enforcement of the VRA's preclearance provisions in covered counties safeguarded SMD arrangements, which are more favorable to the election of minorities (Trebbi, Aghion, and Alesina 2008). Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023) find that the VRA increases Black office holding only in covered counties with a larger Black population share where local elections are governed by SMD electoral rules. In column 1 of table 4, we confirm this finding in our sample by augmenting the baseline model of equation (2) with the triple interaction between coverage, the Black population share, and an indicator of SMD elections.[40]

Next, we turn to registration rates. Column 2 shows that Black Americans in covered counties with a larger Black population share are not more likely to register in the presence of SMD elections. However, column 3 reveals that white registration rates do increase more in the presence of SMD elections. These results imply that a 10 percentage point higher Black population share is associated with a 9% (or 5.2 percentage point) faster increase in the growth rate of white registration rates in covered counties with SMD electoral rules, between 1960 and 1980. In other words, even if Black Americans do not mobilize more, the presence of electoral rules increasing their odds of winning local offices in county-governing bodies—the most powerful local office in the US South—triggers white mobilization.[41]

Robustness.—Although these patterns are consistent with white countermobilization in response to a key manifestation of Black political empowerment, the impact of the VRA could be mediated by other preexisting county characteristics. If these characteristics are correlated with electoral rules, we may be attributing the effect of the VRA to the Black office holding channel instead of alternative factors. To rule out this possibility, we examine the robustness of our results presented in table 4, columns 2 and 3, by controlling for the interaction between the VRA indicator, the 1960

[39] Southern states with SMD electoral rules are Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Of these, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia were covered by the VRA (see also table B2). SMD electoral rules split counties into electoral districts, which elect a single representative in the legislative body. In contrast, in at-large elections, the majority in the relevant jurisdiction (e.g., the county or the municipality) elects all the representatives.

[40] We fully saturate the regression by including all lower-order interaction terms.

[41] The positive effects on white mobilization hold throughout the post-VRA period, as shown in fig. A4.

TABLE 4
ELECTORAL RULES AND REGISTRATION RATES

	Elections: County-Governing Bodies (1)	(ln) Registration Rates	
		Black (2)	White (3)
Black share, 1960 × VRA × SMD	.162**	.005	.009**
	(.067)	(.012)	(.004)
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.051	.019**	.004*
	(.034)	(.009)	(.002)
Black share, 1960 × SMD	.003	−.009	.002
	(.031)	(.008)	(.002)
Black share, 1960	.062**	.014**	−.003
	(.025)	(.007)	(.002)
Summary statistics:			
Dependent variable	.000	32.343	68.719
	(.000)	(20.355)	(18.578)
Black share, 1960	27.130	28.064	27.649
	(15.179)	(15.055)	(15.145)
Adjusted R^2	.45	.74	.53
N	624	664	671

NOTE.—The table replicates the long difference model in eq. (2) augmented with the triple interaction between the 1960 Black population share, the coverage (VRA) dummy, and an indicator equal to one if the county belongs to a state with SMD electoral rules. The dependent variable is (i) the 1980 − 1964 change in the share of Black officials elected in county-governing bodies in col. 1 and (ii) the 1980 − 1960 change in Black (respectively, white) log registration rates in col. 2 (respectively, col. 3). All regressions include state dummies, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. Regressions also include interactions between county controls and the coverage (VRA) dummy. Controls are as follows: low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

* Significance at the 10% level.

** Significance at the 5% level.

Black population share, and various measures of the county's preexisting economic, social, and cultural environment.[42]

First, we consider the legacy of white supremacy, proxied for by the presence of KKK Klaverns and lynchings against African Americans.[43] Second, we investigate the potential role of Black political engagement, measured using the presence of local NAACP chapters in the county. Third, we analyze race-specific employment levels. Finally, we consider the share of Black and white individuals living in urban areas—which might affect voting behavior, both because of proximity to registration facilities and because of greater Black economic independence from the old white

[42] As before, regressions are fully saturated, and include all lower-order interaction terms.

[43] See app. B and table B4 for more details on these variables.

agrarian powers.[44] We report results in figure A5. Reassuringly, when focusing on white registration rates (fig. A5*B*), estimates on the interaction between the Black population share, the VRA indicator, and the SMD indicator are very stable and remain positive and statistically significant.[45]

Evidence from court cases.—Our analysis thus far has exploited differences in preexisting electoral rules, isolating the set of jurisdictions that, before the VRA, elected their county-governing bodies by SMD. Soon after the enactment of the VRA, following local lawsuits that challenged at-large electoral rules, many local jurisdictions modified their election structure toward SMD rules (Bernini, Facchini, and Testa 2023). If white voters mobilized to counteract electoral rules that increased the likelihood of Black American politicians being elected, we would expect white voter registration rates to rise following local lawsuits challenging at-large voting rules.

To test this mechanism, we collected data from Davidson and Grofman (1994) and the US Commission on Civil Rights (1975) and compiled the list of local court cases that, directly or indirectly, challenged at-large elections. We estimate event studies to trace out the evolution of white voter registration rates by coverage status, before and after the ruling on the first lawsuit challenging at-large voting rules. We bin observations into 2-year periods and estimate models that include county and state by year fixed effects; interactions between year dummies and our baseline controls; and the interaction of the VRA indicator with leads and lags of a dummy equal to one for the first local-level lawsuit. To reduce concerns that counties that experienced a lawsuit may differ from those that did not, we restrict attention to counties that had at least one lawsuit between 1965 and 1980. This guarantees that our analysis exploits only the timing, rather than the location, of court cases.

We present the results in figure 4. In figure 4*A*, we include all 104 court cases with a ruling between 1965 and 1980. In figure 4*B*, we restrict the sample to the 96 court cases that led to a change toward SMD. When interpreting the results, it is important to note that the timing of the rulings might not be random. Reassuringly, however, there is no evidence of pretrends. Immediately after the court rulings, white registration rates increase and continue to rise for at least 10 years. These patterns further corroborate the idea that white voters swiftly react to the political threat posed by the VRA.

[44] As explained in app. B, data on the urban population share and on employment rates by race are taken from the full count of the US Population Census, measured in 1940.

[45] Figure A5*A* also confirms the results for Black registration rates reported in table 4, col. 2: the coefficient on the triple interaction with the SMD indicator is always close to zero and never statistically significant.

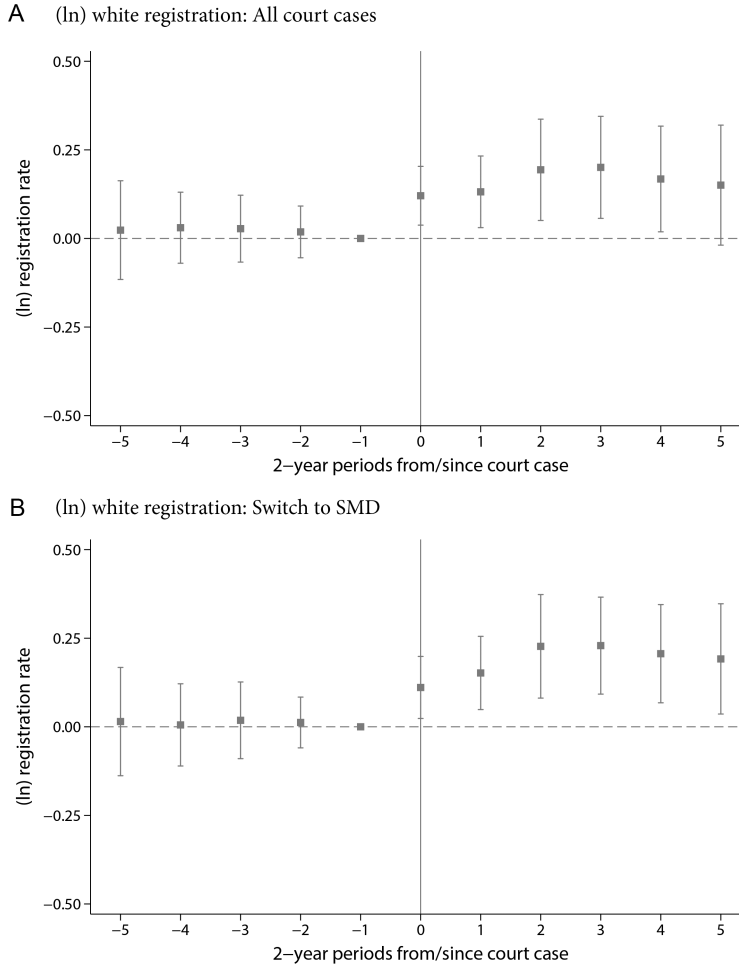

FIG. 4.—Local court cases. The figures plot the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the interaction between the VRA indicator and leads and lags for an indicator equal to one for the presence of the first court case in the county, in models that bin observations into 2-year periods, and also include county and state by year fixed effects and interactions between year dummies, the VRA indicator, and the vector of baseline controls. The period before the first court case (indicated as period −1) is used as an omitted category. Controls are low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

B. Black Political Competition

To what extent is the rise in white registration driven by concerns about actual or perceived political competition? By linking group competition to political participation, group-based voter models (Coate and Conlin 2004; Feddersen 2004; Feddersen and Sandroni 2006) provide a useful framework for answering this question in our context. In these settings, like-minded individuals participate in elections where voting decisions are made as if determined at the group level. An appealing feature of this class of models is that—besides providing a rationale for why people vote—they yield predictions about the relationship between political participation and the relative size of the groups. According to group-based voting, participation should increase as the two groups become more similar. Hence, if white mobilization is due to heightened political competition, we expect the growth of white registration to (i) peak when the relative size of the two groups becomes more similar and (ii) decline as white voters are outnumbered by African Americans.

To explore this idea, we reestimate the specification of table 4, column 3, using local binscatter regressions, where a data-driven approach is deployed to select the optimal number of bins.[46] We present results from this exercise in figure 5, where we plot the estimated coefficient on the triple interaction between coverage, the 1960 Black population share, and the SMD indicator. While white registration rates in SMD counties always increase with the share of African Americans, figure 5 provides suggestive evidence of nonlinearities. In particular, the growth in white registration rates accelerates as the Black and white population shares approach parity and then slows down once the Black population share surpasses 60%. Even though the estimated coefficients are not statistically different across ranges of the Black population share, the nonlinear patterns evident in figure 5 are consistent with the predictions of group-based voter models and suggest that white mobilization is a reaction to the increase in political competition induced by the VRA.

C. First Election of Black Officials

From the perspective of white voters, the election of the first African American into office represented a signal that Black political empowerment was real and might have altered the balance of political power at the local level. In a preliminary step, we explore the salience of these events in the local press. For all counties that elected at least one Black official in their county-governing bodies during our sample period, we

[46] The selected number of bins is optimal in minimizing the (asymptotic) integrated mean squared error.

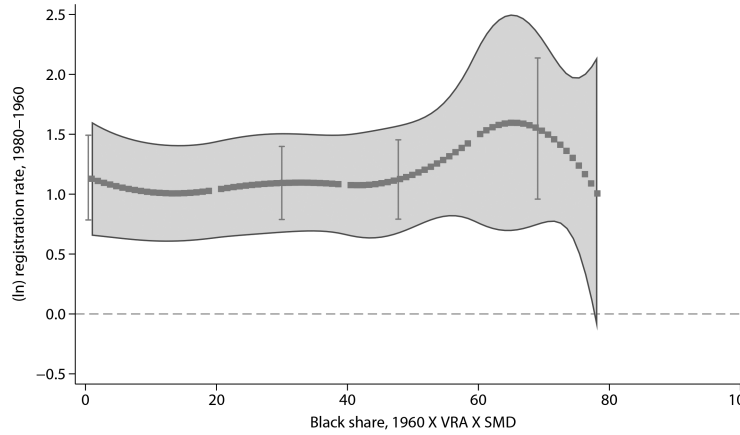

FIG. 5.—White registration and political competition. The figure plots the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the interaction between the log of the measure of potential competition and the VRA indicator, in models that also include county and state fixed effects; the VRA indicator and the 1960 Black population share; and interactions between the VRA indicator and the vector of baseline controls. The figure is constructed using the command binsreg, alongside binsregselect to select the optimal number of bins to minimize the (asymptotic) integrated mean squared error. Controls are low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

digitized the names of all (168) Black officials elected for the first time from the National Roster of Black Elected Officials.[47] From state-specific sources, described in table B2, we also retrieved and digitized the names of all the other (1,250) members of county-governing bodies elected at the same time as the first Black official. Then we derive the probability that elected Black (and white) officials are mentioned in local newspapers, compiling the list of historical newspapers available on Newspapers.com.[48]

[47] See app. sec. B.2 for more details.

[48] We map each historical newspaper to the county where its headquarter is located. Our sample includes only six Black newspapers (out of a total of 400 newspapers), and results (not reported for brevity) are robust to excluding them. The availability of Southern counties with newspapers' data varies over time, with an average of 193 counties over the period. It is important to note that, when using data on local newspapers, we include Texas, which is instead excluded from the rest of the paper. Dropping Texas reduces the sample by about 40%, leaving us with insufficient variation to estimate our models. The probability is constructed by dividing the number of Black (respectively, white) officials that have received at least one mention in local newspapers by the total number of Black (respectively, white) officials elected in the board of the county-governing body. To this end, we searched for the joint occurrence of (i) the name of the official; (ii) the county of election; and (iii) the specific title used to name the county-governing body in each state. See table B2 for the full list of titles by state.

The estimates from our preferred specification are presented in column 1 of table A4. The coefficient on the interaction between the VRA indicator and the 1960 Black population share is positive and precisely estimated, indicating that local newspapers of covered counties with a larger Black population share are more likely to mention Black officials elected for the first time. In column 2, we replicate the analysis, focusing on white officials elected in the same year as the first Black official. Here, the coefficient of interest is small and imprecisely estimated, reducing concerns that the results in column 1 were driven by local newspapers mentioning all board members more frequently, regardless of race, in covered counties with a larger Black population share. In column 3, we confirm that a Black official elected for the first time is significantly more likely to be mentioned than a white official elected at the same time.[49] Columns 4–6 of table A4 show that results are similar when using as dependent variable a dummy equal to one if the probability of being mentioned is positive, and zero otherwise.

Next, we analyze how white voters react to the election of the first Black official in county-governing bodies. If white mobilization is motivated by political threat, we expect white registration rates to increase soon after the election of the first Black official at the local level. Since the VRA was responsible for gains in Black office holding, the rise in white registration rates should be stronger when the election of the first Black official occurs in covered (vs. noncovered) counties. To test our hypothesis, we estimate event studies that trace out the evolution of white and Black registration rates by coverage status, before and after the election of the first Black official in a county after 1965.

We bin observations into 2-year periods and estimate models that include county and state by year fixed effects; interactions between year dummies and our baseline controls; and the interaction of the VRA indicator with leads and lags of a dummy variable equal to one for the election of the first Black official in the county. To address concerns that counties electing Black officials may differ from those that do not, we focus on counties that elected at least one Black official between 1965 and 1980. This ensures that our analysis leverages the timing rather than the location of the first election.[50]

We report results in figure 6, using the period before the first election as the omitted category. Reassuringly, for both Black (fig. 6*A*) and white

[49] Specifically, we reshape the data at the county-race level and include a triple interaction term with a dummy variable equal to one if the elected official is Black, along with all lower-order interaction terms. The triple interaction term reveals that the difference between the estimated coefficients for mentions of Black and white officials is statistically significant.

[50] Results (not reported for brevity) remain unchanged when including counties that never elect a Black official during our sample period.

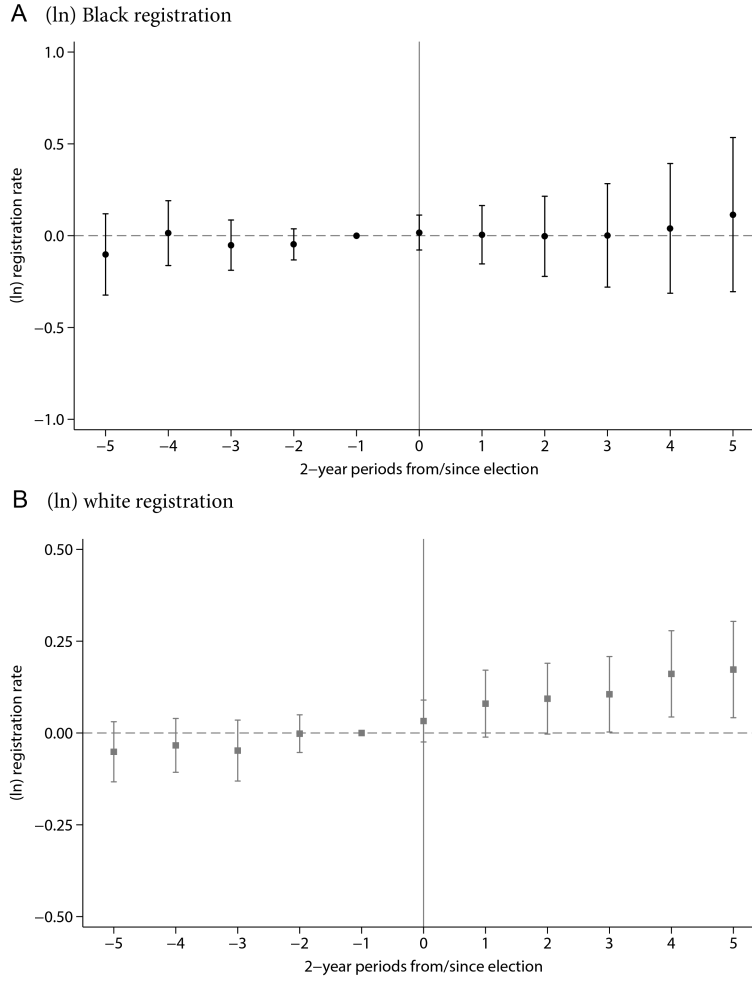

FIG. 6.—Local election of the first Black official. The figures plot the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the interaction between the VRA indicator and leads and lags for an indicator equal to one for the election of the first Black official in the county, in models that bin observations into 2-year periods, and also include county and state by year fixed effects and interactions between year dummies, the VRA indicator, and the vector of baseline controls. The period before the first election (indicated as period −1) is used as an omitted category. Controls are low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

(fig. 6*B*) registration rates, there is no evidence of differential pretrends.[51] Interestingly, Black registration does not seem to respond to the event.[52] Instead, white registration increases almost immediately after the election of a Black official and continues to rise for at least 10 years. Although there are no pretrends in white registration rates, the timing of the election of the first Black official might still be nonrandom. For this reason, we view the evidence presented in figure 6 as suggestive. Nonetheless, the patterns are consistent with the other results presented above and support the notion that white voters reacted to the actual or perceived threat of Black political empowerment promoted by the VRA.

D. Evidence from Local Newspapers

In this section, we provide additional evidence on whites' racial attitudes and the salience of the Black political threat using data from historical local newspapers from Newspapers.com mentioned in section V.C above. Since the newspapers in our sample are small and tend to circulate only locally, their slant is likely to respond to readers' demands (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010), although we cannot rule out the possibility that voters' attitudes are also influenced by newspaper rhetoric.[53] To assess racial attitudes and the prominence of the political channel, we measure the frequency of selected terms at the county level for each year, focusing on the 5 years before and the 5 years after the VRA.

The VRA might have led to a general increase in racial animosity. However, if white reactions are politically motivated, we should observe differences in the language used by newspapers in proximity to elections. We focus on gubernatorial elections, since they are highly relevant political events and governors' role as chief executive has made them central figures during the civil rights era (Black 1971).[54] We separately consider years with and without gubernatorial elections, estimating regressions of the form

[51] We further corroborate the lack of pretrends in app. sec. C.6, where we perform the test proposed in Roth (2022).

[52] This finding is similar to the result presented in col. 2 of table 4, which shows that Black registration does not increase more in covered counties with SMD elections and a larger Black population share.

[53] Due to the nature of our data, we assign the observed mentions to the county where the newspaper's headquarter is located. This method may introduce measurement error when newspapers circulate in multiple counties. However, less than 30% of the newspapers in our sample are included in the periodic Audit Bureau of Circulation reports, which typically cover larger newspapers that circulate across more than one county.

[54] Governors, like presidents, are executives. The singular nature of their office makes them more vulnerable to public scrutiny and, consequently, more likely to be held responsible for state issues. Historical evidence indeed documents that governors are held accountable by their constituency for perceived state conditions (Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin 1984; Atkeson and Partin 1995).

$$y_{cst} = \theta(\text{Post}_t \times \text{Black}_{1960} \times \text{VRA}_{cs}) + \mathbf{X}'_{cst}\beta + I_{st} + I_c + \epsilon_{cst}, \quad (4)$$

where I_c and I_{st} are county and state by year fixed effects, Post_t is a dummy equal to one for the post-1965 years, $\mathbf{X}'_{cst}$ includes all lower order interaction terms, the interaction between baseline county characteristics and the Post_t dummy, and the triple interaction between baseline characteristics, the Post_t dummy, and the VRA indicator.[55]

We present results in table 5, focusing on years with (panel A) and without (panel B) gubernatorial elections and reporting the coefficient on the triple interaction between the post-VRA dummy, the VRA indicator, and the 1960 Black population share. In column 1, the dependent variable is the frequency of the word "Negro," scaled by the frequency of the word "and" to account for differential newspapers' circulation, as in Fouka, Mazumder, and Tabellini (2022).[56] Since the term "Negro" began to carry a negative connotation in the immediate aftermath of the VRA (Martin 1991), we interpret the variable in column 1 as reflecting more than just the salience of race. In column 2, we more explicitly examine racial hostility, using as dependent variable the joint frequency of the word "Negro" and a series of stereotypically disparaging terms (again scaled by the frequency of the term "and").

Even though the coefficient in column 1 is more precisely estimated in the election year sample, it is positive in the nonelection year sample as well. The coefficients in column 2 are positive, statistically significant, and quantitatively similar. This indicates that, in general, whites' racial attitudes worsen more after the VRA in covered counties with a higher Black population share. In columns 3 and 4, we examine whether political motives are important drivers of racial attitudes by analyzing the joint frequency of the term "white" with, respectively, "backlash" and "mobilization" as dependent variables. The coefficients are again positive and statistically significant, but they are an order of magnitude larger in the election year sample.

To further corroborate the importance of the political channel, in column 5, we search for the joint occurrence of terms "Negro," "white mobilization," and "Wallace"—one of the key figures within the Southern white supremacist movement. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant—but only during gubernatorial election years. Column 6 shows that the patterns are unchanged when using the frequency of the word "Negro" (rather than "and") as the denominator. This suggests that results in column 5 do not simply capture the mechanical increase in the frequency of racially charged terms documented in columns 1 and 2.

[55] As in the rest of the analysis, regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and standard errors are clustered at the judicial division level.

[56] To ease interpretation, all dependent variables in this analysis are standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation.

TABLE 5
NEWSPAPERS IN GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS

	Newspapers					
					White Mobilization, Wallace, Negro	
	Negro (1)	Negro, Disparaging (2)	White, Backlash (3)	White, Mobilization (4)	/And (5)	/Negro (6)
	A. Years with Gubernatorial Elections					
Post × Black share, 1960 × VRA	.022*	.027**	.073*	.083*	.067***	.043***
	(.011)	(.014)	(.042)	(.044)	(.019)	(.015)
Summary statistics:						
Black share, 1960	17.997	17.997	17.997	17.997	17.997	17.997
	(12.198)	(12.198)	(12.198)	(12.198)	(12.198)	(12.198)
Adjusted R^2	.53	.36	.30	.61	.32	.44
N	599	599	599	599	599	599
	B. Years without Gubernatorial Elections					
Post × Black share, 1960 × VRA	.012	.025**	.027*	.023*	.022	.007
	(.014)	(.011)	(.016)	(.012)	(.014)	(.007)
Summary statistics:						
Black share, 1960	22.568	22.568	22.568	22.568	22.568	22.568
	(13.914)	(13.914)	(13.914)	(13.914)	(13.914)	(13.914)
Adjusted R^2	.39	.28	.64	.47	.32	.23
N	1,087	1,087	1,087	1,087	1,087	1,087
	C. Difference in Coefficients (Panel A − Panel B)					
P-value (panel A − panel B)	.456	.789	.161	.130	.023	.016

NOTE.—The table includes the interaction between the post-VRA dummy, the VRA indicator, and the 1960 Black population share in models that also include county and state by year fixed effects and interactions between the post-VRA dummy, the VRA indicator, and the vector of baseline controls. The dependent variable is the frequency of the word "Negro," scaled by "and" (col. 1); the joint frequency of the word "Negro" with four disparaging terms associated with violence and crime, scaled by the frequency of the word "and" (col. 2); the joint frequency of the words "white" and "backlash," scaled by the frequency of the word "and" (col. 3); the joint frequency of the words "white" and "mobilization," scaled by the frequency of the word "and" (col. 4); and the joint frequency of the words "white mobilization," "Wallace," and "Negro," scaled by the frequency of the words "and" (col. 5) and "Negro" (col. 6). The sample is split into years with and without gubernatorial elections between 1960 and 1970 in panels A and B, respectively. Controls are as follows: low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

* Significance at the 10% level.
** Significance at the 5% level.
*** Significance at the 1% level.

E. Alternative Channels

The evidence documented thus far supports the idea that the surge in white registration reflects countermobilization, driven by the threat—actual or perceived—posed by the political empowerment of Black voters. In this section, we examine several alternative explanations and conclude that none adequately accounts for our findings.

Literacy test and white reenfranchisement.—The increase in white political participation could be driven by the reenfranchisement of illiterate white voters following the VRA-mandated removal of literacy tests. While it is well known that these provisions were used in a discriminatory fashion to disenfranchise Black voters (Lawson 1976; Cascio and Washington 2014), it is possible that they also disproportionately affected counties with less educated residents, regardless of race. If less educated individuals (and whites, in particular) were concentrated in covered counties with a larger share of African Americans, our estimates might partially reflect the reenfranchisement of both Black and white voters.

Note that our preferred specification already includes the 1960 share of the county population that had less than a high school diploma. However, average education may hide important heterogeneity by race. Moreover, the share of individuals with less than a high school degree may be an imprecise proxy for the proportion of the (white) population disenfranchised by the literacy test. For this reason, in table 6, we replace this baseline county-level control with different measures of educational attainment that are county-race specific.[57] We report results for Black and white registration rates in panels A and B, respectively. In column 1, we use the same level of educational attainment as in our baseline analysis but allow it to be race-specific. Then, in columns 2 and 3, we consider the share of individuals who completed less than 5 years of schooling and who were illiterate, respectively. In all cases, both the sign and the significance of our main coefficients of interest remain unchanged.

Next, in column 4, we augment our preferred specification (table 2, col. 4) by interacting the Black population share and the VRA indicator with the share of Black (panel A) and white (panel B) individuals who completed less than 5 years of schooling in 1960.[58] We fully saturate the

[57] Data on education by race at the county level were digitized from the 1960 Census of Population, which reports the number of white and nonwhite individuals with different levels of education. Information exists only for counties with at least 1,000 nonwhite individuals in 1960. For this reason, the number of observations in table 6 is lower than in the baseline analysis. Results (not reported for brevity) are virtually unchanged when using 1940 data, obtained from the full count Census of Population.

[58] As noted above, data on the number of individuals who completed less than 5 years of schooling by race in 1960 are not available for all counties in our sample. In unreported analyses, we verified that results are unchanged when using shares calculated (for the entire sample) from the 1940 full count Census of Population.

TABLE 6
CHANGE IN (ln) REGISTRATION RATES, 1980 − 1960

	(ln) Registration Rates			
	Same Race			
	Less than High School (1)	Less than 5 Years (2)	No School (3)	Less than 5 Years (4)
	A. Black Registration			
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.023***	.021***	.021***	.019
	(.008)	(.008)	(.007)	(.019)
Black share, 1960	.012**	.013***	.013***	−.015
	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)	(.016)
Black share, 1960 × VRA × less 5 years				−.000
				(.000)
Summary statistics:				
Dependent variable	31.826	31.826	31.826	31.826
	(19.906)	(19.906)	(19.906)	(19.906)
Black share, 1960	28.897	28.897	28.897	28.897
	(14.563)	(14.563)	(14.563)	(14.563)
Adjusted R^2	.74	.74	.75	.75
N	602	602	602	602
	B. White Registration			
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.009**	.010***	.008***	.015***
	(.005)	(.004)	(.003)	(.006)
Black share, 1960	−.007**	−.004*	−.002	−.012***
	(.003)	(.003)	(.002)	(.005)
Black share, 1960 × VRA × less 5 years				−.001
				(.000)
Summary statistics:				
Dependent variable	68.447	68.447	68.447	68.447
	(18.484)	(18.484)	(18.484)	(18.484)
Black share, 1960	28.677	28.677	28.677	28.677
	(14.535)	(14.535)	(14.535)	(14.535)
Adjusted R^2	.50	.48	.48	.49
N	589	589	589	589

NOTE.—The table estimates the long difference model in eq. (2). The dependent variable is the 1980 − 1960 change in the log of registration rates in panels A and B. All regressions include state dummies, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. Regressions also include interactions between county controls and the coverage (VRA) dummy. Controls are as follows: unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. The education variables are computed for the population above 25 years of age (by race): col. 1 includes the share of the population with less than a high school diploma; cols. 2 and 4 the share of the population with less than 5 years of education completed; and col. 3 the share of the population without education. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

* Significance at the 10% level.

** Significance at the 5% level.

*** Significance at the 1% level.

regression by including all lower-order interaction terms, but for the sake of brevity, we only report the coefficients on the Black population share; the interaction between the Black population share and the VRA indicator; and the triple interaction. In both panels A and B, the coefficient on the triple interaction is close to zero and not statistically significant.[59] Importantly, the finding in panel B indicates that white mobilization is not stronger in counties with a higher share of less-educated whites. Together with the results in columns 1–3, this suggests that the surge in white registration rates is unlikely to be driven by the mechanical reenfranchisement of uneducated whites.

White flight.—Whites might have expressed their opposition to the VRA not only by registering more but also by moving to counties that were less affected by the policy. While this channel is not necessarily in contrast with our preferred interpretation, one may be worried that sample selection (associated with white migration) could bias our results. To address this concern, in table A5, we explore the potential migration response and the associated change in the characteristics of white individuals.

In columns 1 and 2, we replicate our preferred specification using as dependent variable the 1980 − 1960 change in the white population and in the white population share, respectively. If anything, covered counties with a higher Black population share experience an increase in the number of white residents between 1960 and 1980, even though the point estimate is not statistically significant. When considering the white population share, the coefficient is negative but very small and imprecisely estimated. Next, we consider the 1980 − 1960 change in the white unemployment rate (col. 3); the share of white families in poverty (col. 4); and the share of the white population (age 25+) with less than a high school diploma (col. 5).[60] Reassuringly, coefficients on the interaction between the VRA indicator and the Black population share are small and imprecisely estimated. These results do not support the notion that the effects of the VRA on white registration rates were mediated by the (selective) migration of potentially dissatisfied voters.

White registration as a reaction to riots and ethnic conflicts.—Even though most race riots that occurred between 1964 and 1971 took place in cities outside the US South, one may still wonder whether these events as well

[59] Similar results hold when replacing the share of individuals with less than 5 years of schooling with the share of illiterate individuals in the county. However, we prefer to use the former measure because, as of 1960, only 2% of the white population (above the age of 25) is illiterate.

[60] Data on county characteristics by race were digitized from the 1960 Census of Population. While information on white characteristics is not reported in the 1960 Census, we computed them as the difference between total characteristics and Black characteristics (the latter are reported for counties with at least 1,000 nonwhite individuals in 1960). Information on 1980 characteristics by race is also available from the Census of Population, obtained from Manson et al. (2022). See app. B for more details on these variables.

as other forms of violent and nonviolent conflict were concentrated in covered counties with a larger Black population share.[61] If this were to be the case, we may be partly capturing white voters' reactions to ethnic conflicts and the resulting sense of fear and insecurity. In figure A6, we provide evidence against this possibility by documenting that there is no differential occurrence of the race riots of the 1960s (fig. A6*A*) or other ethnic conflicts initiated by African Americans (fig. A6*B*) in covered counties with a larger Black population share.[62] Similar results hold when aggregating all race riots occurring between 1965 and 1971 or when considering the pre-post-VRA change in different types of events and demonstrations organized by African Americans (table A6).[63]

VI. White Mobilization and Black Progress

Having established that political motivation is the main driver behind white reactions to the VRA, this section examines the implications of white countermobilization for both electoral outcomes (sec. VI.A) and policies salient to the Black electorate (sec. VI.B).

A. Electoral Outcomes

Historically, the Democratic Party dominated Southern political life and represented the interests of racially conservative white voters. With the exception of presidential races, cross-party competition was virtually unknown (Caughey 2019). The VRA fundamentally altered the political landscape of the US South: while enfranchised African Americans found a new home in the Democratic Party, the GOP began to court dissatisfied racially conservative white voters (Kuziemko and Washington 2018). In this section, we study whether and how white mobilization induced by the VRA reshaped political competition across races and over time in the US South.

Short-run backlash.—We begin by focusing on the first post-VRA (1968) presidential election. In that year, former Alabama Governor George Wallace, whose explicitly segregationist platform had been rejected by the Democratic Party, entered the race as the candidate of the American Independent Party. The Republican nominee Richard Nixon ran on

[61] In the US South alone, 189 race riots have been identified (Bernini 2023).

[62] Data on race riots and ethnic conflicts come from Carter (1986) and Olzak (2015), respectively. See app. B and table B4 for more details.

[63] See app. B and the notes to table A6 for a detailed description of each dependent variable. In all cases, we construct the dependent variable by first computing the average number of events between 1980 and 1976 and between 1964 and 1960, respectively, and by then taking the difference between the two. Results are unchanged when using alternative timing conventions or when considering the cumulative number of events rather than the average.

a more moderate platform, rejecting segregation while seeking to appeal to Southern white voters by promising a slowdown in civil rights reforms (Heersink and Jenkins 2020). Wallace's success in five states of the former Confederacy represented a setback for the civil rights movement. Despite the surge in Black political participation, a third-party presidential candidate won the largest share of electoral votes in US history, becoming the leading figure of a movement that included several Southern governors openly advocating for segregation (Black 1976).

As in our baseline analysis, we estimate a long difference specification to compare George Wallace's performance with that of Strom Thurmond, who ran as the candidate of the segregationist States' Rights Democratic Party in the 1948 presidential election and won four Southern states. As previously shown, the odds of Black Americans gaining office were higher in the presence of SMD voting rules. Therefore, if the perceived threat of Black empowerment fueled white countermobilization, we expect support for segregationist candidates to be stronger in covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share.

We present results in panel A of table 7. In line with our hypothesis, column 1 shows that support for Wallace is stronger in covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share. According to our estimates, which are statistically significant at the 10% level, a 10 percentage point increase in the Black population share is associated with a 17% faster growth in support for segregationist candidates in covered counties belonging to SMD states. The higher support for the racially conservative candidate (Wallace) is mirrored by a decline in the vote share of Nixon (col. 2), who ran on a more moderate anti–civil rights agenda. Instead, while the coefficient for the vote share of Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey is negative and larger in absolute value, it is not statistically significant at conventional levels (col. 3).[64]

In column 4, we turn to gubernatorial elections. These elections were highly salient to voters and display substantial variation in the presence of racially conservative candidates across states and over time (Black 1976). Building on Black (1976), we identify racially conservative candidates running on openly segregationist platforms and compute the change in their vote shares between 1956 and 1968.[65] The coefficient of interest is positive

[64] For consistency with col. 1, the change in both Republican and Democratic vote shares is calculated over the 1948–68 period. In 1948, Democratic candidate Harry Truman defeated GOP candidate Thomas Dewey.

[65] Following Black's (1976) methodology, we have collected information on the platforms of gubernatorial candidates up to 1980. In 1956, over half of the candidates ran on a segregationist platform. By 1968, this share had decreased to approximately 30%, and by 1980, no candidates were running on openly segregationist platforms. See app. sec. B.3 for further details.

and statistically significant at the 10% level. This implies that white countermobilization increases support for racially conservative gubernatorial candidates—mirroring the findings for presidential elections.

Comparing the coefficient on the interaction between coverage and the Black population share reveals an interesting difference between presidential and gubernatorial elections. While covered counties with a larger Black population share show increased support for the pro–civil rights Democratic candidate Humphrey, they also display greater support for segregationist governors. One possible explanation for these seemingly contrasting findings is that presidential campaigns address many issues and may lead to the formation of biracial coalitions, as suggested by Wright (2013). In contrast, statewide races often focus on a single, highly salient issue, which at the time was civil rights (Black 1971), with the white majority disproportionately favoring racially conservative candidates.

Medium-run political realignment.—Next, we explore the medium-term electoral effects of white countermobilization. While the increased support for racially conservative candidates was a relatively short-term phenomenon and openly segregationist political platforms largely disappeared by the 1970s (Mendelberg 2001), the rise in white registration in covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share persists at least until 1980. It is ex ante unclear how white mobilization influenced electoral outcomes across different races in the medium term, and to our knowledge, there is little evidence on this.

It is well known that the Democratic Party's shift on civil rights led to the exodus of racially conservative white voters, a decline in party identification, and the end of the Southern enclave of authoritarian rule (Mickey 2015; Kuziemko and Washington 2018). However, the evolution of the Democratic Party's fortunes in the region is more complex. On the one hand, Southern whites identifying as Democrats began voting for Republican candidates in presidential elections even before the 1960s.[66] On the other hand, the ability of the Republican Party to win elections in the two decades after the VRA remained limited to specific offices. While the GOP was more successful in Senate and gubernatorial elections (Bullock 1988; Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2012), the Democratic Party retained control of the House until the 1990s.

In panel B of table 7, we examine how white mobilization influenced electoral outcomes across races from 1956 to 1980. We estimate the quadruple differences design, focusing on House, Senate, gubernatorial, and presidential elections, respectively. While no clear pattern emerges for House elections (col. 1), covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share experience a decline in Democratic support in both Senate (col. 2) and gubernatorial (col. 3) elections. These results align with the idea that

[66] For instance, in the 1956 election, Eisenhower carried five Southern states.

TABLE 7
ELECTORAL OUTCOMES AND LOCAL PUBLIC GOODS PROVISION

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	A. Electoral Outcomes Up to 1968				
	Wallace–Thurmond	Nixon–Dewey	Humphrey–Truman	Segregationist Governors	
Black share, 1960 × VRA × SMD	.017*	−.009*	−.014	.015*	
	(.009)	(.005)	(.009)	(.009)	
Black share, 1960 × VRA	−.006	.003	.024***	.008**	
	(.007)	(.004)	(.006)	(.004)	
Adjusted R^2	.80	.87	.69	.96	
N	869	870	804	729	
	B. Electoral Outcomes Up to 1980				
	House Democratic Vote	Senate Democratic Vote	Governor Democratic Vote	Reagan–Eisenhower	
Black share, 1960 × VRA × SMD	.001	−.007*	−.006*	−.003	
	(.010)	(.004)	(.003)	(.004)	
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.012	.005*	.004*	−.007*	
	(.010)	(.003)	(.002)	(.004)	
Adjusted R^2	.52	.93	.86	.53	
N	719	872	871	872	

	C. Spending Up to 1982				
	Employment	Spending Salaries	Spending Education	Capital Spending	Share of Capital Spending
Black share, 1960 × VRA × SMD	−.022***	−.022***	−.007*	.041**	.005***
	(.008)	(.006)	(.004)	(.021)	(.002)
Black share, 1960 × VRA	.016**	.016***	.007**	.012	−.001
	(.006)	(.004)	(.003)	(.015)	(.001)
Adjusted R^2	.88	.90	.97	.30	.31
N	809	772	856	746	817

NOTE.—The table considers the triple interaction between the 1960 Black population share, the coverage (VRA) dummy, and an indicator equal to one if the county belongs to a state with SMD electoral rules. In panel A, the dependent variable is (i) the change in the vote cast for Wallace (1968) and Thurmond (1948) in col. 1; (ii) the change in the vote cast for Nixon (1968) and Dewey (1948) in col. 2; (iii) the change in the vote cast for Humphrey (1968) and Truman (1948) in col. 3; and (iv) the change in the vote cast for racist gubernatorial candidates (1968 and 1956) in col. 4. In panel B, the dependent variable is (i) the change in the vote cast for Democratic candidates in the House of Representatives (1980 and 1956) in col. 1; (ii) the change in the vote cast for Democratic candidates in the Senate (1980 and 1956) in col. 2; (iii) the change in the vote cast for gubernatorial Democratic candidates (1980 and 1956) in col. 3; and (iv) the change in the vote cast for Reagan (1980) and Eisenhower (1956) in col. 4. In panel C, the dependent variable is (i) the change in total employment (1982 and 1957) in col. 1; (ii) the change in total spending on salaries (1982 and 1957) in col. 2; (iii) the change in educational spending (1982 and 1957) in col. 3; (iv) the change in capital spending (1982 and 1957) in col. 4; and (v) the change in the share of capital spending (1982 and 1957) in col. 5. All regressions include state dummies, the 1960 Black population share, and its interaction with the coverage (VRA) dummy. Regressions also include interactions between county controls and the coverage (VRA) dummy. Controls are as follows: low-skilled (%), 1960; unemployment rate (%), 1960; families below poverty line (%), 1960; rural farms (%), 1960; land devoted to harvested cotton (%), 1959; pro-Black protest, 1960–64; anti-Black protest, 1960–64; and Green Book establishments, 1955. Regressions are weighed by 1960 population, and robust standard errors in parentheses are adjusted for clustering by judicial divisions.

* Significance at the 10% level.

** Significance at the 5% level.

*** Significance at the 1% level.

statewide races, with their larger constituencies and more heterogeneous populations, facilitate the entry of new candidates (Bullock 1988). Turning to presidential elections (col. 4), we do not detect any change in support for Reagan compared with Eisenhower. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that presidential races were historically the only contested elections in the region.

Overall, our results present a nuanced view of the effects of white mobilization on electoral outcomes. On the one had, white mobilization increased support for racially conservative candidates shortly after the VRA, in both presidential and statewide elections. This finding suggests that, at least in the short run, white mobilization more than offset the direct effect of Black enfranchisement. Additionally, in gubernatorial elections, where the size of the constituency and the composition of the electorate made it difficult for the Democratic Party to maintain control by building biracial coalitions of voters, the effect of white countermobilization persisted over time. On the other hand, the magnitude and precision of our estimates varies across races, indicating that, by 1980, the Republican–Democratic divide along racial lines was still incomplete in state and national elections.

B. Local Public Goods Provision

Black office holding has been credited for bringing tangible benefits to Black communities through policies that promoted education, public-sector jobs, and infrastructure development (Wright 2013; Cascio and Washington 2014; Aneja and Avenancio-Leon 2019). At the same time, our analysis indicates that white countermobilization emerged precisely in areas where the election of Black local officials was more likely. Did white countermobilization affect Black progress in the domain of public policy salient for the Black electorate? To answer this question, we use data on employment and spending by county governments, focusing on salaries (the largest item in county government budgets), education, and capital spending between 1957 and 1982.[67]

In panel C of table 7, we present the main coefficients of interest from the quadruple difference specification used throughout the table. Focusing on county government employment, our findings in column 1 show that covered counties with a larger share of African Americans experience faster growth in county government employment. However, this effect is curtailed in SMD counties, where white mobilization is concentrated. We uncover similar patterns in column 2, which examines the overall county

[67] Education spending includes outlays by county governments, school districts, and municipalities due to the overlap of jurisdiction within county areas. See app. sec. B.3 for more details on variable definitions and sources.

government wage bill, and in column 3, which analyzes spending on education. For capital spending, we find that covered SMD counties with a larger Black population share experience faster growth in capital spending, both overall (col. 4) and as a share of total spending (col. 5). This result supports earlier findings by Bernini, Facchini, and Testa (2023).

This analysis indicates that white mobilization had tangible effects, altering both the size and the composition of local public spending. On the one hand, Black communities that elected more African Americans to county governments and experienced a surge in white registration rates benefited from increased spending on infrastructure. On the other hand, these same constituencies saw lower growth in local public employment and school spending. This suggests that, even though Black empowerment brought gains to African American communities, such gains were limited to the provision of public goods with diffused benefits. When Black Americans were the main recipients, however, Black empowerment coincided with *slower* growth in public spending, reflecting the negative impact of white countermobilization on Black progress.

VII. Which White Voters Countermobilized?

In this final section, we explore which segments of the white electorate were more likely to mobilize in response to the VRA, using historical survey data from Gallup. Starting from 1958, Gallup asked respondents about their racial views in the context of politics. As in Kuziemko and Washington (2018), we focus on the question: "Between now and . . . [election] . . . there will be much discussion about the qualifications of presidential candidates. If your party nominated a well-qualified man for president, would you vote for him if he happened to be a [Black American]?"[68] We consider the seven survey waves from 1958 to 1971 to capture the change in racial attitudes and political preferences that happened shortly after the VRA was passed.[69] Since Gallup includes only the state, rather than the city or county of residence, the evidence presented here should be viewed as suggestive.[70]

We estimate individual-level regressions that correlate the intention not to vote for a Black candidate with the interaction between the post-1965 dummy and the following state-level variables: coverage, the 1960 Black population share, and the SMD indicator. Regressions also include

[68] We code "no" as one and both "yes" and the rare "don't know" as zero.

[69] In later Gallup surveys, the question is asked less frequently. A similar question is posed in the General Social Survey, but the characteristics of respondents are not fully comparable to those in the Gallup polls.

[70] We omit North Carolina from the analysis because we cannot determine whether individuals reside in covered or noncovered counties. Results are unchanged if we include North Carolina in the analysis, assigning it to either covered or noncovered states.

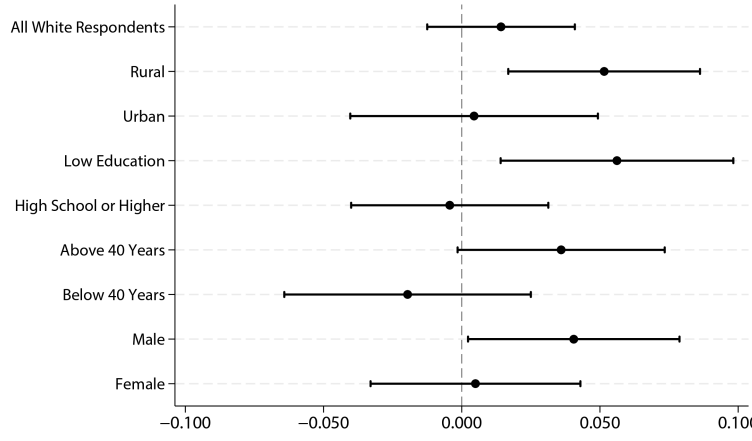

FIG. 7.—Gallup data: opposition to a Black president. The figure plots the coefficient (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on the interaction between the post-VRA dummy, the VRA indicator, the 1960 Black population share, and the SMD indicator, in models that also include state and survey year fixed effects, all lower-order interaction terms, and a vector of individual controls. As in Kuziemko and Washington (2018), we focus on the following question: "Between now and . . . [election] there will be much discussion about the qualifications of presidential candidates. If your party nominated a well-qualified man for president, would you vote for him if he happened to be a [Black American]?" We code "no" as one (a higher value means more opposition to Black political empowerment). We consider the survey waves from 1958 to 1971 (included) but omit year 1965, as the survey overlaps with the passage of the VRA. The first circle considers the full sample of Southern white respondents. In subsequent circles, we cut the sample along four broad demographic groups: rural versus urban respondents; education; age; and gender. For the vector of individual controls, we follow Kuziemko and Washington (2018) and include fixed effects for age (in 10-year intervals), gender, education categories (6), city-size categories (12), and occupation categories (13).

state and survey year fixed effects, all lower-order interaction terms, and a vector of individual controls.[71] We present results in figure 7, where we plot the coefficient, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, on the quadruple interaction term of interest. The first dot refers to the full sample of Southern white respondents. The coefficient is positive, indicating that whites living in covered states with SMD voting rules and a higher Black population share are less likely to report that they would vote for a Black candidate after the VRA. However, the point estimate is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Existing historical accounts suggest that this average effect might mask heterogeneity along individual dimensions, such as age and education

[71] We omit the survey conducted in 1965, since this year overlaps with the passage of the VRA. We follow Kuziemko and Washington (2018) and include fixed effects for age (in 10-year intervals), gender, education categories (6), city-size categories (12), and occupation categories (13).

(Schuman, Bobo, and Steeh 1985), gender (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986), and place of residence (Wright 2013). Confirming this idea, when we split the sample along these characteristics, several interesting patterns emerge. The effects become precisely estimated for respondents living in rural areas and those with no more than 8 years of schooling. In contrast, coefficients are close to zero and not statistically significant for urban residents and individuals with at least some high school. These findings align with the argument by Key (1949) that opposition to Black empowerment was stronger in the rural South and that many of the economic benefits of the VRA accrued to urban and more-educated white individuals (Wright 2013). A similar divide appears when splitting the sample by age and gender: the point estimate is positive and statistically significant for older and male respondents, while it is either negative or small (and imprecise) for younger and female whites living in the US South. These results are consistent with broader patterns identified by Schuman, Bobo, and Steeh (1985) and Shapiro and Mahajan (1986).

VIII. Conclusions

On August 6, 1965, the VRA was signed into law, dismantling the legal barriers that had disenfranchised Black Americans since 1890. Soon after, Black political participation surged, leading to tangible political and economic improvements for African American communities. While a large literature has documented that the VRA promoted Black progress across various domains, existing studies at the national or state level, as well as anecdotal accounts, suggest that it also triggered white political opposition. However, due to data limitations, there is little systematic evidence on the extent of white countermobilization at the local level. Since the VRA was designed to eliminate local barriers to Black political participation, quantifying white political reactions at the county level is crucial for evaluating its full effects.

In this paper, we assemble a novel dataset on county-level voter registration rates to examine the effects of the VRA on political participation by race. We exploit a key provision of the policy—coverage—and implement a DDD design. Our findings reveal that, as intended by the VRA, covered counties with a larger Black population share in 1960 experience faster growth in Black registration rates between 1960 and 1980. However, the VRA also triggers a steep increase in white registration rates, which we interpret as countermobilization. We provide evidence that whites' response is driven by the—actual or perceived—threat posed by heightened Black political representation. We conclude by demonstrating that white countermobilization had tangible consequences for both electoral outcomes and public goods provision at the local level, partially offsetting the goals that the VRA was designed to achieve.

Findings in this paper paint a nuanced picture of the effects of the VRA. While the policy improved conditions for Black Americans, it also triggered significant opposition among the white majority, which, in turn, influenced electoral and policy outcomes. Our results open the door to many important questions: Can governments enact legislation to improve the conditions of minority groups without generating resistance among majority group members? Specifically, for the US context, how can laws improve whites' racial attitudes toward African Americans? More generally, under what conditions do government policies affect individuals' beliefs and social norms? We leave these questions to future research.

Data Availability

Code replicating the tables and figures in this article can be found in Bernini et al. (2025) in the Harvard Dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HIY143.

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