Black Newspapers and Partisanship*

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March 19, 2025

Abstract

The late 19th century saw the emergence of the Black press, with roughly 3000 newspapers opening between 1865 and 1920. We apply natural language processing techniques to over 20 million newspaper pages to show that Black newspapers offered a unique perspective on politics. We assess the impact of these newspapers by comparing electoral outcomes in counties that receive a Black newspaper in time to cover a presidential election to those that receive their Black newspaper after the relevant election. Results from a stacked difference-in-differences design indicate that Black newspaper openings helped garner support for the Republican Party. Balance tests and event studies help validate the parallel trends assumption that underpins our research design.

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> *The negro editor, by virtue of his position, has not only become a live factor in our American body-politic as a dictator and molder of public opinion, in common with the white man, but he is the spokesman of the race, and the guardian of its best interests.*
>
> William S. Scarborough on the success of Black newspapers, as quoted from Penn (1891, p. 431)

1 Introduction

The post-Reconstruction era is often characterized by formal and informal efforts to undercut Black political participation. Formal methods of voter suppression included poll taxes, literacy tests, and other legal mechanisms (Kousser, 1974) whereas informal methods included violence/intimidation and propaganda (Key, 1949; Jones et al., 2017; Ottinger and Posch, 2024). Although each factor's relative contribution to the effective disenfranchisement of Black voters remains debated, it is generally understood that Black political participation was stifled, with important consequences for policymaking.[1]

One historical narrative that is comparatively understudied is the ability of Black people to generate countervailing effects. Penn (1891), for instance, surveyed 20 eminent Black leaders about the impact of Black newspapers.[2] The respondents, which included Frederick Douglass, John R. Lynch, John Mercer Langston, Booker T. Washington, and others, argued that Black newspapers were successful in unifying Black people and shaping public opinion on the issues that concern Black people.

This paper revisits this argument by examining the influence of Black newspapers on political participation, 1880-1925. This period corresponds with the rapid emergence of

[1] See, for instance Margo (1990, Ch. 3), Naidu (2012), and the citations within. While much of this literature focuses on local provision of education, Cascio and Washington (2014) offers compelling evidence linking voter suppression to federal policymaking. That study shows that the 1965 Voting Rights Act's removal of literacy tests affected voter registration and the distribution of resources.

[2] While there are no strict criteria for categorizing a newspaper as a Black newspaper, our research on newspaper editors featured in Penn (1891) and other sources provides strong evidence that these newspapers were edited by Black individuals. In every case where we could verify an editor's identity and successfully link them to the U.S. Census, they were recorded as Black, reinforcing the characterization of these newspapers as Black-owned and/or Black-produced.

the Black press. Between 1875 and 1900 the number of active Black newspapers increased from about 40 to over 400. The peak of activity occurred in 1920, when roughly 550 Black newspapers were in operation and about 60% of the Black population in the United States resided in a county with an active Black newspaper.[3] Existing work (e.g. Simmons, 2006) assesses the influence of prominent publications. Our empirical approach, which considers the effect of *any* Black newspaper, offers a complementary perspective by examining the impact of the typical Black newspaper.

We begin by showing that Black newspapers offered a distinct political perspective. While the share of newspaper articles focusing on politics was similar for Black and white newspapers, the articles appearing in Black newspapers were more likely to engage in normative debates and are perhaps better classified as op-eds. Non-persuasive reporting on politics in Black newspapers also placed a greater emphasis on issues related to justice and violence. Compared to white newspapers, political articles in Black newspapers were less likely to discuss foreign affairs and other policy issues. These results are based on applying natural language processing tools to the American Stories Dataset (Dell et al., 2023), which has processed and cleaned the over 20 million digitized newspaper pages in the in the Library of Congress' *Chronicling America* archive.

Next, we examine the influence of Black newspapers on political participation. We use a stacked difference-in-differences design that examines county-level outcomes from each presidential election. Our research design borrows from Beach and Hanlon (2023) in that we focus on a national event and leverage variation in newspaper openings over a narrow time frame. Counties that receive a Black newspaper in time to operate during the presidential election of interest are compared to counties that receive a Black newspaper one or two years after the election of interest. Balance tests suggest that our treated counties are slightly larger at the time of treatment, but are otherwise comparable to our control counties. Furthermore, event studies suggest that our measures of political participation were trending similarly in

[3]A deeper discussion of these trends and the underlying data appears in Section 2.

treatment and control counties. These features increase our confidence in the validity of the parallel trends assumption that underpins our research design.

We find that the opening of a Black newspaper led to an increase in support for the Republican Party, the party historically associated with the abolitionist movement. The Republican vote share in treated counties increased by 1.7 percentage points following the opening of a Black newspaper, as compared to control counties. This effect is sizable, corresponding to 5% of the sample mean. We see limited effects on turnout, which we interpret as evidence that Black newspapers were more effective at changing preferences among existing voters than they were at encouraging new voters to participate in the political process.

One important factor to consider is how the existing media landscape and market characteristics influenced the effectiveness of Black newspapers in shaping political opinions. We investigate whether the presence of pre-existing Republican newspapers influenced the effectiveness of Black newspapers. We provide evidence that Black newspapers had a stronger impact on electoral outcomes in counties without a Republican newspaper, which is consistent with Black newspapers offering a new political perspective that is aligned with the Republican Party. We also find that Black newspapers had stronger effects in counties with higher Black literacy rates, perhaps indicating that the market size of potential readers was an important element of their effectiveness.

We then move to investigate the role of formal and informal mechanisms of voter suppression. We test whether franchise-restricting legislation — such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and multiple ballot requirements — affected the impact of Black newspapers on political participation. These laws, mostly enacted during the 1890s and 1900s, were exclusive to some Southern states and aimed to restrict Black political participation. We find that Black newspapers were much less effective at increasing the Republican vote shares in the presence of such legislation. Additionally, we find that even in the absence of formal legislation, the political environment of former Confederate states, characterized by systemic barriers and strong loyalty to the Democratic Party, also reduced the impact of Black newspapers.

One competing hypothesis that we attempt to rule out is that Black newspapers opened in response to (or alongside) unobservable changes in political participation. To better understand the social and economic standing of Black people at the local-level, we use natural language processing tools to examine the content of race-related newspaper coverage. Black newspapers were more likely to mention race in articles concerning politics or civil rights. In white newspapers, race was more likely to be appear in articles covering crime, violence, or the justice system. As a final test, we apply our stacked difference-in-differences design to assess how race-related coverage changes in white newspapers following the opening of a Black newspaper. The results are somewhat imprecise, but they point to a decrease in coverage of political organization and an increase in coverage of crime and violence. These results appear inconsistent with the idea that Black newspapers were part of a broader push to increase political participation.

This paper contributes to a small but growing literature in economics that uses comprehensive directory data to study Black entrepreneurship. Cook et al. (2022, 2023), for instance, study Black business districts in the United States (1939-1955). These papers highlight the role of social and economic forces in determining the under-provision of Black-friendly businesses. Unlike restaurants and other public accommodations, newspapers can be consumed off site. This means that newspaper publishers likely faced a different set of incentives when it came to enforcing racially segregated consumption patterns. In fact, our heterogeneity results suggest that Black newspapers must have persuaded some white voters to increase their support for the Republican Party. The effects are larger in the north and in places with *smaller* Black population shares. These findings thus offer an example of a feedback mechanism where Black entrepreneurship alters the same beliefs and opinions that help determine other types of entrepreneurial activity.[4]

This paper also offers a new perspective on media slant in historical newspaper markets.

[4]While not a story about Black newspapers, a similar mechanism exists in Albright et al. (2021). One result in that paper is that Black individuals residing in areas with greater newspaper coverage of the Tulsa Race Massacre are less likely to become homeowners and entrepreneurs. Here, the shock to beliefs is an updated assessment of ones risk of being targeted by racialized violence.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) and Gentzkow et al. (2014) were among the first to conclude that newspaper slant (as measured by a newspaper's political affiliation) was largely a function of consumer demand. The historical narrative asserts that Black newspapers were instrumental in giving a voice to Black people, which leads us to conclude that our findings are likely operating through an information channel rather than a slant channel. In this sense, our paper is more similar to Wang (Forthcoming), which shows that the arrival of the telegraph increased newspaper coverage of national politics and increased voter turnout in subsequent presidential elections.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the rise of the Black press in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Section 3 uses digitized newspaper data for over 20 million pages to compare political newspaper coverage in Black and white newspapers during our period of interest. Section 4 presents our research design and main results assessing the impact of Black newspapers on political participation. Section 5 explores the heterogeneity of our results while Section 6 returns to our database of newspaper content to further rule out likely confounders such as changing racial tensions or underlying changes in political preferences. Section 7 concludes.

2 The Rise of the Black Press

Black newspapers first emerged in the U.S. during the early 19th century. Part of this timing might be explained by technological change. Due to heavy taxes and regulation, 18th century newspapers catered to wealthier readers and other special interests. Mechanized paper-making and falling taxes reduced production costs, and newspaper publishers responded by increasing advertising and expanding circulation. This increased independence, as newspapers could survive without the sponsorship of political parties (Petrova, 2011). Cheaper newspapers would have also allowed publishers to survive while catering to new or more specialized audiences.

Financial incentives, however, are not enough to explain the emergence of Black newspapers. Penn (1891) uses the experience of 17 Black newspapers and over 100 Black editors, journalists, and publishers to tell the story of the emergence of the Black press in the 19th century. A central theme is that Black newspapers required perseverance and a willingness to incur great personal sacrifices. Many Black newspapers struggled to achieve commercial success. No pre-Civil War Black newspaper, for example, survived the conflict (Bullock, 1981). Black newspapers' financial struggles were often exacerbated by white businesses' refusal to buy advertising space (Pride and Wilson, 1997).[5] As such, Black newspapers relied more heavily on subscriptions and voluntary donations.

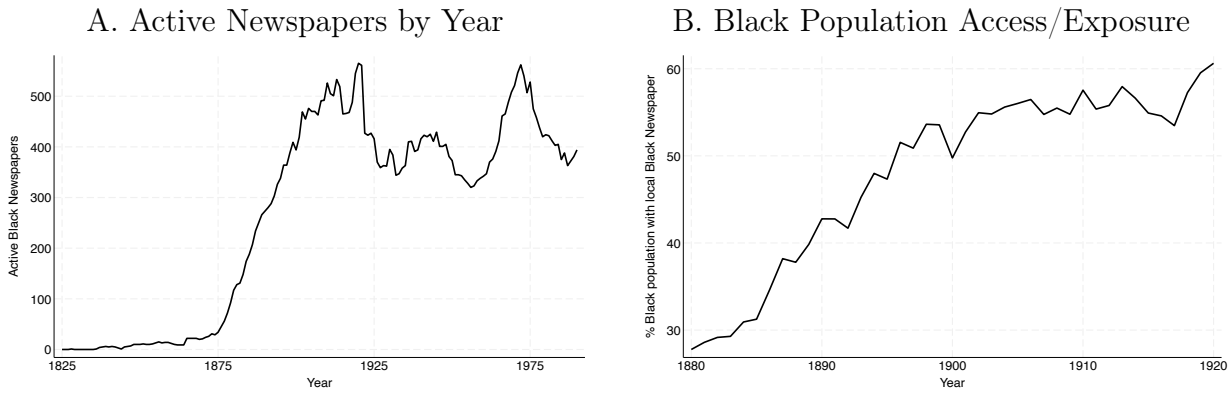
Figure 1 depicts the emergence of the Black press. The top panel plots the number of active newspapers by year. Our source of openings and closings is Henritze (1995), which were identified from over one hundred advertising directories, union lists, African American yearbooks, and historical repositories from State and local governments.[6] We define a Black newspaper as a publication edited by a Black editor and/or focused primarily on the Black experience.[7] We observe the rapid emergence between 1875 (when about 40 newspapers were in operation) to 1900 (when about 400 newspapers were in operation), as well as the slight dip in activity after 1925 and the subsequent rise around 1960. The uptick in openings after 1875 also appears for daily newspapers (see Appendix Figure A1), which suggests that these openings might have been influenced by broader economic or technological changes in the media market. The bottom panel plots the share of the U.S. Black population residing in a county with an active Black newspaper. Again, we see the peak around 1900 when about 55% of the Black population resided in a county with an active Black newspaper.

[5]This makes archival work more difficult, as copies of newspapers operating for only a few years may not have survived.

[6]Henritze (1995) builds upon Brown (1946), a sociologist at Lincoln University, which identified 467 Black newspapers that opened between 1827 and 1946.

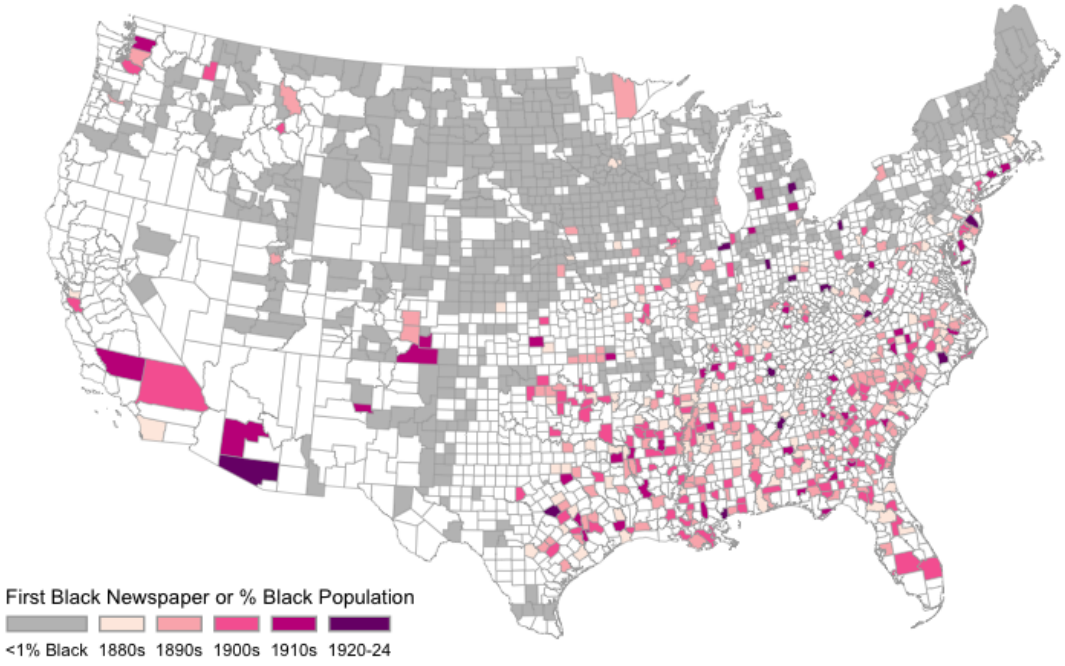
[7]As Henritze (1995) compiles information from hundreds of sources, she does not provide a single definition of a Black newspaper. In some of her sources, such as the N.W. Ayer and Son's *American Newspaper Annual and Directory* and Rowell's *American Newspaper Directory*, Black newspapers are identified as "Negro" or "Colored". We opt to provide a wider definition that includes publications compiled by all sources.

Figure 1: Documenting the Rise of the Black Press



Note: Newspaper openings and closings from Henritze (1995). Black population linearly interpolated from county-level census tabulations. County boundaries adjusted following Ferrara et al. (2024)

Figure 2: Newspaper Opening Locations During Period of Study



Note: Newspaper openings and closings from Henritze (1995). 1920 county boundary shape file from Mullen and Bratt (2018).

Figure 2 shows the timing and spatial variation of our newspaper openings. Counties are

shaded based on when they receive their first Black newspaper, with darker color gradients corresponding to later arrival dates. To better distinguish between an absence of treatment and an absence of treatment potential, we mark in light grey any county where the Black population share never exceeds 1% during our study period (1880-1925). Counties that receive a Black newspaper during our analysis period are more likely to be located in the South. This is perhaps unsurprising since during this period most Black people also resided in the South. This is not a concern for our analysis, as within a region or state we still see substantial variation in treatment timing, and in our empirical approach the control group will consist of counties that receive a Black newspaper at some later date.

3 Black Newspapers and Partisanship

Black newspapers are known for providing a public platform for political organization in the Black community. Notable abolitionists such as Fredrick Douglass and Mary Ann Shad Cary edited multiple publications prior to the abolition of slavery. Other examples include Ida B. Wells' *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, which led an international anti-lynching campaign in the 1890s, and Robert Sengstacke Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, which promoted the Great Migration from the south to the northern U.S. These publications were often open about their role in promoting Black political participation. Consider the first Black newspaper in the U.S., New York City's *Freedom's Journal*, which opened in 1827. The opening text of the inaugural issue reads as follows:

> *"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick [sic] been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, ... The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed; and to lay the case before the publick [sic]."*
>
> John Brown Russworm and Samuel Cornish, Freedom's Journal, March 16th 1827.

Historical Black newspapers were also known for their support of the Republican Party,

which was more supportive of Reconstruction and Black political participation during this period (Heersink and Jenkins, 2020). There is ample qualitative evidence indicating that the Republican Party was viewed as the protector of Black enfranchisement and civil rights: Calvin Chase's *The Washington Bee* claimed that "our safety is in God and the Republican Party", while John Mitchell's *Richmond Planet* compared Republican then-presidential candidate William McKinley to a "modern Moses" (Beatty, 1980). The unwavering support by Black papers to Republican candidates would last until the 1920s, when some Black newspapers turned to endorse the Democratic Party. In 1932, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Republican Herbert Hoover with the support of all major Black newspapers (Snorgrass, 1986).

We draw on digitized newspaper databases and machine learning methods to provide a systematic analysis of the political content appearing in Black newspapers. The Library of Congress' *Chronicling America* archive provides over 20 million digitized newspaper pages, their date of publication, the newspaper title, and a short description of the newspapers. We identify a newspaper as a Black newspaper if its title or description include the words "negro", "African", "colored", or "Afro." Dell et al. (2023) have converted these page-level scans into a searchable article-level database, known *American Stories*. We search *American Stories* and define an article as a political article if the headline mentions any of the following sub-strings: President, Congress, Democrat, Republican, and politic.[8] This approach identifies 173,252 political articles published between 1880 and 1925.

In Table 1 we ask assess the political emphasis on Black newspapers on three key dimensions. The first dimension is the share of articles in a newspaper that mention politics in the headline. Because articles can vary in length, a second dimension is the share of published words that are associated with those politics (i.e., the content appearing under those headlines). The third dimension is whether that coverage appears in prominent places (i.e., the first or second page of the issue). We assess these differences in a fixed effects

[8]This list will include many variants of these words, such as Presidents, Presidential, Congressional, Democrats, Democratic, Republicans, politics, political, politician, and politicians.

regression such that comparisons are made within county and publication year. The results suggest that Black newspapers have a greater political emphasis, measured as either a share of total articles or total words published. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Black newspapers are more likely to place their political coverage on the first or second pages.

Table 1: Political Discussions in Black and non-Black Newspapers

	% of Articles Published (1)	% of Words Published (2)	%Page 1 Placement (3)	% Page 1 or 2 Placement (4)
1[Black Newspaper]	0.004**	0.012***	0.218***	0.166***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.042)	(0.050)
Sample mean	0.018	0.031	0.222	0.380
Observations	1,079	1,079	1,079	1,079
County FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Observations are weighted by total number of articles published by the newspaper in a given year. Includes a control for an indicator equal to one for daily newspapers.

Next, we use natural language processing tools to categorize the content in those political articles. The method we settled on is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a Bayesian method from computation linguistics. It assumes that an article can belong to a mixture of topics and that each topic has its own vocabulary distribution. The user defines the number of topics; we estimate a model with 20 topics.[9] Once the topic space is defined, LDA then recovers the topic-word probability distribution based on the text of the articles.[10] Articles can belong to several topics so long as the shares sum to one. The meaning of each topic can be found by looking at words that occur with a high probability in that topic (representative words), words that occur within a topic at a higher probability than other topics (distinctive

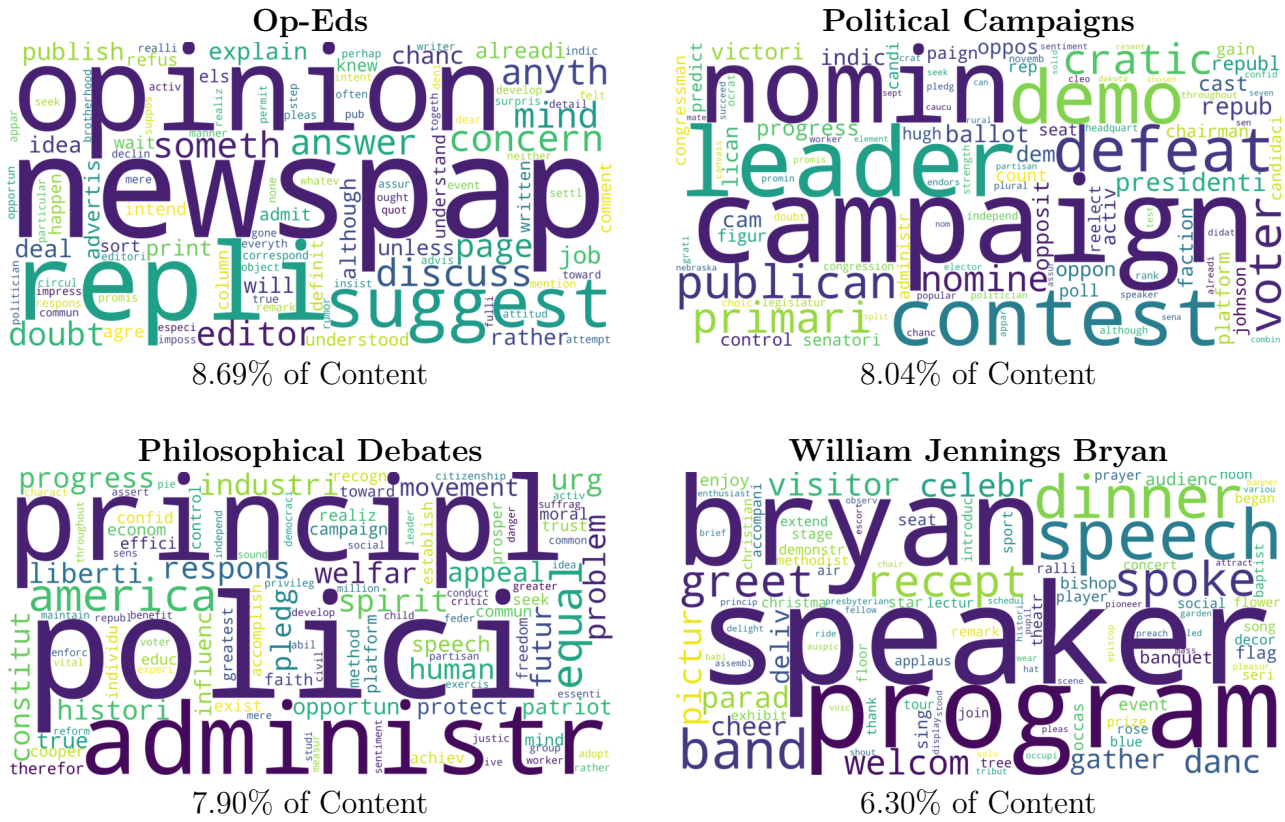
[9]Too few topics risks grouping together distinct subjects, whereas too many topics will result in separate topics that cover similar subjects.

[10]We remove stop words (e.g., the, and, a) using the Natural Language Tool Kit python package Bird et al. (2009). For the remaining words we apply the Porter-Stemming algorithm to remove suffixes.

words), or by closely reading newspaper pages that largely fall into a single topic.

The model results can be visualized as word clouds. The size of each word is proportional to the topic-word probability, so these are the representative, but not necessarily distinctive words. Figure 3 displays the word clouds for the four largest categories.[11] Our interpretation of each topic is listed above the word cloud, while the share of the articles assigned to that topic is listed below the word cloud.

Figure 3: LDA Categorization of Political Coverage



Content obtained from the *American Stories* newspaper database. Categorizations from Latent Dirichlet Allocation as applied to every newspaper article that includes a political headline. Political headlines defined as those containing the following stems: President, Congress, Democrat, Republican, and politic.

In Table 2 we use a fixed effects framework to assess whether the political content that appeared in Black newspapers was measurably different from the content that appeared in white newspapers. The outcome variable of interest is defined as the share of the political

[11]The word clouds for all 20 topics appear in Appendix Figure A3.

articles in the newspaper-by-year cell that is devoted to a specific topic. Each column corresponds to a different topic.

Table 2: Differences in Political Coverage Across Black and non-Black newspapers

	Philosophical Debates (1)	Justice System (2)	Rail/ Trade (3)	Legislative Policy (4)	Legislative Procedure (5)
Black Newspaper	0.065***	0.029***	-0.026***	-0.024***	-0.021***
	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Sample mean	0.110	0.042	0.043	0.050	0.054
	Voting (6)	Foreign Affairs (7)	Conventions (8)	Public Finance (9)	Prohibition (10)
Black Newspaper	0.017**	-0.016**	-0.011	-0.010*	-0.007
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Sample mean	0.046	0.048	0.046	0.048	0.040
N	1,079	1,079	1,079	1,079	1,079
County FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election Cycle FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Observations are weighted by total number of articles published by the newspaper in a given year.

A few themes emerge from Table 2. Black newspapers are much more likely to discuss philosophical issues, like liberty, equality, and justice. A closer look at the word cloud associated with that category also reveals appeals to the constitution and calls to recognize and protect certain rights. Black newspapers are also more likely to discuss the justice system in what seems like the unequal treatment of Black defendants. Black newspaper are less likely to discuss railway expansions, legislative policies and procedures, foreign affairs and public finance. They are also more likely to discuss voting. We take the sum of these results as evidence that Black newspapers were informing readers about unfulfilled promises and perhaps encouraging readers to vote for change.

4 Black Newspapers and Political Participation

The results in Section 3 illustrated that Black newspapers offered a distinct perspective. Keeping this in mind, we now set out to understand whether Black newspapers also affected electoral outcomes and political participation.

4.1 Empirical Approach

Our identification strategy mirrors Beach and Hanlon (2023) in that we use variation in newspaper openings over a narrow time horizon. In our application, we are interested in newspaper openings before vs. after a presidential election. Focusing on a narrow time horizon helps isolate the causal effect of the opening of a Black newspaper on political participation from unobserved variables (e.g., changes in Black literacy rates) that may influence both the establishment of a Black newspaper opens and political participation.

We use a stacked difference-in-differences estimator to identify how Black newspapers affect political participation. Our stacks are formed in the following way. First, we choose an election of interest (e.g., $e = 1880$). The treated group is composed of the set of counties that did not have an active Black newspaper in the previous election (e.g, 1876), but did have an active newspaper at the time of the relevant election. The control counties are those that did not have an active Black newspaper at the time of the relevant presidential election or the prior election but do receive an active newspaper in the year or two after the relevant election. This set of treatment and control counties forms a stack for the relevant election year, comparing counties that received a Black newspaper in time for the following election to those that received a Black newspaper just after the election. Importantly, we restrict the post-period to a single election, as both treated and control counties could have an active Black newspaper in election $e + 1$. We repeat this process for each relevant election (e.g., 1884, 1888, 1892, etc.). Once we have all of our election stacks, we estimate the following equation:

$$\mathrm{Y}_{cte} = \alpha + \beta \mathbb{1}[\text{Newspaper Opened}] + \gamma_{te} + \tau_{ce} + \varepsilon_{cte} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{cte} is the voting outcome of interest in county c and year t, as observed in stack e. The variable γ_{te} captures our stack-by-year fixed effects, while the variable τ_{ce} captures our stack-by-county fixed effects. Interacting our county and year fixed effects with our election stack indicators ensures that all treatment and control comparisons occur within each stack. The estimate of interest is β, which corresponds to the average difference in outcomes for treated counties in the treatment period. For all of our regressions, standard errors are clustered at the county level and regressions are weighted by the Black population of each county.

Table 3 validates our research design by showing that treatment timing is uncorrelated with relevant social and economic characteristics. Columns 1 and 2 show the within-stack pre-treatment means for treated and control counties, respectively, for a range of outcomes. We report within-stack statistics since, in this design, the same county can be categorized into either the treatment or the control group across stacks. Prior to treatment, counties with Black newspapers had larger population following (Gentzkow et al., 2011a), but with similar racial composition to control counties. Across other relevant characteristics (e.g., population growth, rate of change in the Republican vote and political participation, and racial violence) treated and control counties are statistically indistinguishable.

We complement this analysis with time-invariant characteristics. Prior to our analysis, treated and control counties had no differential agricultural productivity, cotton productivity, density of churches, share of the population who were either slaveowners or enslaved. We find that treated counties had a slightly higher voter registration rate for Black individuals following the Civil War (Hume and Gough, 2008; Logan, 2020), but the difference is small. Finally, using data from Southern Poverty Law Center (2024), we find no statistical difference in Confederate memorialization across treated and control counties.

Table 3: Balance Table

	Within-stack Treated Mean (1)	Within-stack Control Mean (2)	Difference (3)
Panel A: Time-Varying Characteristics			
% Republican$_{e-1}$ - % Republican$_{e-2}$	-2.048	-1.929	-0.118
			(0.733)
% Turnout$_{e-1}$ - % Turnout$_{e-2}$	-0.561	-0.676	0.115
			(0.205)
Log(Population)	10.139	10.021	0.118***
			(0.030)
% Black	54.964	55.180	-0.216
			(1.774)
% Pop. growth since previous election	10.786	11.359	-0.573
			(0.673)
% Black Literacy	26.591	25.636	0.955
			(0.820)
Black Lynchings/10k Black inhabitants	0.310	0.432	-0.122
			(0.157)
Daily Newspapers/10k inhabitants	0.588	0.659	-0.071**
			(0.034)
Panel B: Time-Invariant Characteristics			
Confederate Monuments/10k inhabitants	0.325	0.320	0.004
			(0.020)
1867-69 % Black Vote Registration	22.769	22.003	0.766*
			(0.441)
1860 Census			
Log(Cotton Output/Capita)	2.688	2.732	-0.044
			(0.105)
% Enslaved Population	41.383	40.513	0.869
			(0.991)
% Free Black Pop.	1.454	1.322	0.132
			(0.123)
% Slaveholding Population	3.725	3.666	0.059
			(0.051)
1870 Census			
Log(Agricultural Productivity)	4.041	4.047	-0.005
			(0.024)
Log(# Churches/Population)	-6.385	-6.347	-0.038
			(0.026)
Counties		496	

Notes: This table shows pre-treatment within-stack means and differences for select characteristics for treated and control counties as per the research design described in Section 4.1. Column 1 shows means for counties that had an active Black newspaper by the relevant election and Column 2 shows means for counties that would receive a Black newspaper soon after the election. For time-varying characteristics, the data is restricted to pre-treatment years. Column 3 reports the difference in means, i.e. the coefficient on $Treated$ of a simple OLS regression. Panel A is composed of time-varying characteristics, and Panel B is composed of time-invariant characteristics using information from Southern Poverty Law Center (2024); Hume and Gough (2008); Logan (2020), as well as the U.S. population and agricultural censuses of 1860 and 1870.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.2 Main Results

Table 4 displays the results from our stacked difference-in-differences design. Our four main outcomes are: share of votes to the Republican presidential candidate, Republican and non-Republican turnout,[12] and the probability that the Republican candidate wins the presidential contest in each county. Focusing on Presidential elections allows us to compare outcomes across counties and states, as presidential candidates run national campaigns with uniform platforms. We find that Black newspapers are associated with a 1.73 p.p. increase in the Republican vote share, equivalent to a 5% increase in Republican support. This change, however, is not large enough to change county-level electoral outcomes: we do not detect a statistically significant change in the probability that the Republican presidential candidate wins a county. We decompose turnout across partisan lines and find that the increase in Republican support is due to a reallocation of votes, with the Republican turnout increasing by roughly 0.3 p.p. and the non-Republican turnout decreasing by roughly 0.3 p.p. That is, the higher Republican vote share is a result of shifting preferences and not of increased political participation.

Table 4: Effects of Black Newspapers on Electoral Outcomes

	% Republican Vote	Republican Turnout	Non-Republican Turnout	Pr(Republican Victory)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	1.728**	0.331**	-0.305*	0.031
	(0.841)	(0.167)	(0.161)	(0.023)
Observations	3,316	3,316	3,316	3,316
Mean of Dep. Var.	35.27	6.44	9.16	0.30

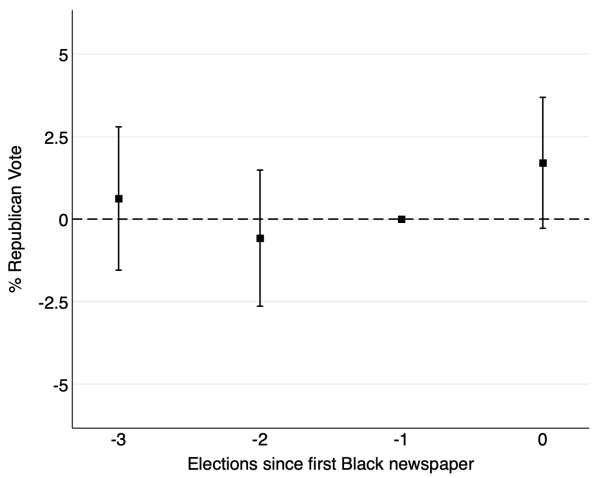
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.

We provide further evidence of the effect of Black newspapers on electoral outcomes through event studies on Figure 4. Each point estimate shows the differences in electoral

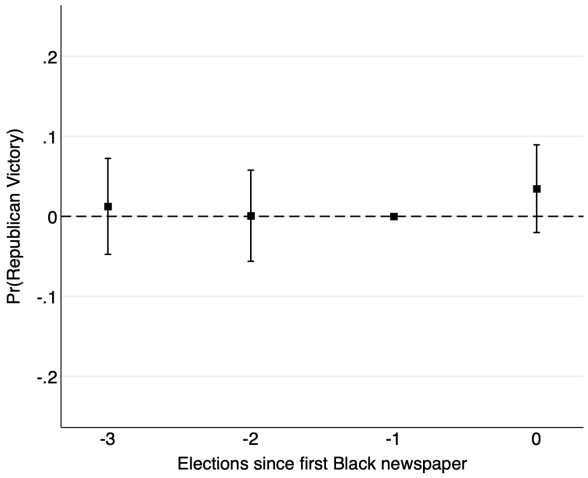
[12] That is, for county c and election year e, $\text{RepublicanTurnout}_{ce} = \frac{\text{Republican Votes}_{ce}}{\text{Population}_{ce}} \times 100$, and $\text{NonRepublicanTurnout}_{ce} = \frac{\text{Total Votes}_{ce} - \text{Republican Votes}_{ce}}{\text{Population}_{ce}} \times 100$

outcomes for counties with an active newspaper and counties that would receive a Black newspaper shortly after the election. The omitted period is the last election prior to the entry of a Black newspaper in treated counties. Figure 4a shows the dynamics for the Republican vote share. Prior to the introduction of a Black newspaper, treated and control counties trended similarly. After the introduction of a Black newspaper, however, Republican presidential candidates increase their vote share by roughly 1.75 p.p.. Figure 4b shows similar pre-trends, indistinguishable from zero, and an insignificant yet suggestive increase in the probability of a Republican candidate winning the county contest. Finally, Figures 4c and 4d show that treated and control counties were on a similar trajectory in terms of political participation but, following the introduction of a Black newspaper, Republican candidates earn proportionally more votes while non-Republicans earn fewer votes. The effects are virtually symmetrical, being opposite in sign and similar in magnitude.

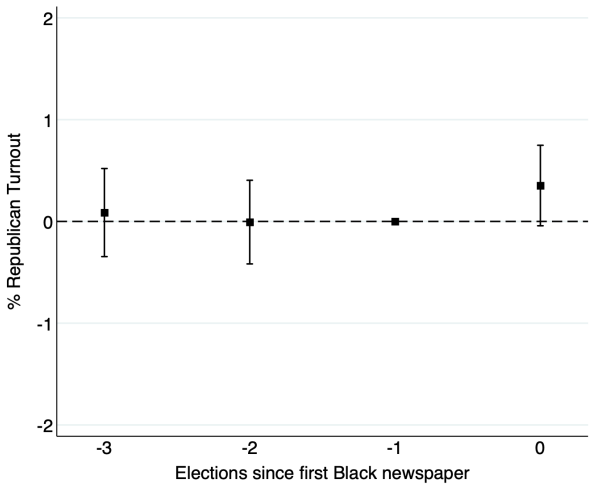
Figure 4: Effects of Black Newspapers on Electoral Outcomes



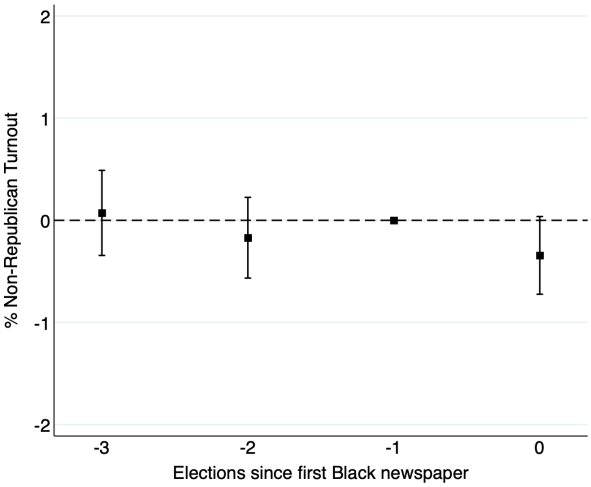
(a) % Republican Vote



(b) Pr(Republican Winner)



(c) % Republican Turnout



(d) % Non-Republican Turnout

We perform a series of tests to assess the sensitivity of our results. First, following the approach developed by Rambachan and Roth (2023), we test the robustness of our main result, the Republican vote share, to the violation of the parallel trends assumption to varying degrees. We show in Appendix Figure A2 that our "breakdown value" is around $\bar{M} = 0.2$. That is, we can reject a null effect at the 10% confidence interval as long as post-treatment violations of parallel trends are smaller than 0.2 percentage points, roughly equivalent to 10% of our treatment effect.

To account for the changing dynamics in race relations across different areas of the United States, we present our main results with the inclusion of region-by-year-by-stack fixed effects in Appendix Table A2. This strategy accounts for variation in region and time-specific factors across elections, which include, for example, the rise of racial tensions in the early 20th century, particularly in the South. Our coefficients are qualitatively equivalent to the main specification, and larger in magnitude. Interestingly, we detect a statistically significant increase in the probability of a Republican candidate winning the county.

5 Mechanisms of Political Influence

The evidence presented so far points to Black newspapers increasing local support for Republican presidential candidates, with little evidence of increased political participation. In this section, we discuss the ways in which the emergence of the Black press helped shape public opinions during our period of study.

5.1 Market Size and Structure

First, we examine whether the effectiveness of Black newspapers in mobilizing Republican support was influenced by the presence of pre-existing Republican newspapers in these counties. In counties with no existing Republican newspapers, Black newspapers may have provided a novel perspective on political issues, leading to higher Republican support. Conversely, in counties with pre-existing Republican newspapers, the market for pro-Republican information may have been saturated, making Black newspapers less impactful in shaping public opinion. We collect information on newspaper availability and partisan affiliation from Gentzkow et al. (2011b) and fully interact an indicator variable equal to one if a county has an active Republican newspaper with the coefficient on $\mathbb{1}$[Active Black Newspaper] from Equation 1. Results are shown in Panel A of Table 5. In counties with no pre-existing Republican newspaper, Black newspapers are associated with increases in Republican support

larger in magnitude than those presented in Table 4. However, Black newspapers seem to be less effective in counties with Republican newspapers: all interaction coefficients are opposite in sign to $\mathbb{1}$[Active Black Newspaper].

We then investigate whether the success of Black newspaper in increasing the vote share for Republican candidates relates to the market size of potential Black readers. We estimate a modified version of Equation 1 within our stacked design:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{cte} = \alpha + \beta_1 \mathbb{1}[\text{Newspaper Opened}]_{cte} + \beta_2 Z_{cte} \\ + \beta_3 \mathbb{1}[\text{Newspaper Opened}]_{cte} \times Z_{cte} + \gamma_{te} + \tau_{te} + \varepsilon_{cte} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Where Z_{cte} is the standardized Black share of the population of a county or the standardized Black literacy rate of a county.[13] The coefficient of interest, β_3, show the differential electoral response to an active Black newspaper for a county with a one standard deviation higher Black population share or literacy rate.

As shown in Panel B of Table 5, we do not find evidence that Black newspapers were more active in counties with higher Black population shares. Black newspapers increase the Republican vote share by 6.3 percentage points, on average, in counties with the mean Black population share. We also detect a 1.1 p.p. increase in Republican turnout, and an 11.2 p.p. increase in the probability that a Republican candidate wins the county. Interestingly, we find that the effectiveness of Black newspapers in mobilizing support for the Republican Party decreases as the Black population share grows. It is important to note, however, that during our period of study most counties with high Black population shares were in the South, where formal and informal efforts to suppress Black political participation were widespread.[14]

In addition to the size of the Black population, the potential market size for Black news-

[13] We use data from all counties to calculate Z_{cte}, regardless of their presence in the final stacked dataset. We interpolate Black population shares obtained from IPSR 2896 (Haines and ICPSR, 2005), using harmonized county boundaries from Ferrara et al. (2024)

[14] See Section 5.2 for a more detailed discussion.

Table 5: Black Newspapers, Market Size and Structure, and Political Participation

	% Republican Vote (1)	Republican Turnout (2)	Non-Republican Turnout (3)	P(Republican Victory) (4)
Panel A: Republican Newspaper Availability				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	2.861**	0.462**	-0.460**	0.050
	(1.137)	(0.226)	(0.216)	(0.031)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper] × Active Rep. Newspaper	-1.593	-0.159	0.226	-0.029
	(1.109)	(0.220)	(0.211)	(0.030)
Panel B: Black Population Share				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	6.287***	1.169***	0.129	0.112***
	(1.131)	(0.222)	(0.219)	(0.031)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper] × Std(% Black)	-2.582***	-0.484***	-0.239***	-0.047***
	(0.408)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.011)
Panel C: Black Literacy Rate				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	1.650**	0.522***	-0.161	0.080***
	(0.678)	(0.169)	(0.170)	(0.025)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper] × Std(% Black Lit.)	5.584***	2.346***	1.480***	-0.052
	(1.548)	(0.386)	(0.390)	(0.057)
Observations	3,248	3,248	3,248	3,248

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.

papers in our context also depended on the Black literacy rates, which varied significantly. Our results in Panel C of Table 5 indicate that Black newspapers increased Republican support in counties with higher literacy rate. For counties with the mean Black literacy rates, Black newspapers increased the Republican vote share by 1.65 p.p., Republican turnout by 0.5 p.p., and the probability that the Republican candidate wins the county by 0.8 p.p.. For counties with a one standard deviation higher Black literacy rate, we find that Black newspapers increased the Republican vote share by 5.2 p.p.. We do not detect a change in the probability that the Republican county wins the county, as we find that both Republican and non-Republican turnouts increase following the opening of a Black newspaper in counties with higher Black literacy rates.

5.2 Scope for Black Political Participation

We turn to investigate the formal and informal channels of restricting Black political participation during our period of study. The post-Reconstruction period was characterized by the disenfranchisement of Black voters and the rolling back of policies that had advanced

the civil rights of the Black population. Those efforts were particularly salient in the South, where legislation was put in place to restrict Black political participation as much as possible (see, for instance, Jones et al. (2012) and the citations within for a nice overview of this literature).

To investigate the interaction of these channels with the emergence of the Black press, we conduct two empirical exercises. First, we collect information on voter suppression legislation from Jones et al. (2017) and interact an indicator variable that equals one if the county has at least one piece of legislation restricting Black political participation with the coefficient on $\mathbb{1}$[Active Black Newspaper]. Examples of such legislation include state-level poll taxes, literacy requirements, and changes to the ballot box system.[15] We choose to not disentangle different types of legislation due to the lack of power. These state-level, franchise-restricting laws were exclusive to southern states.[16] Most of them were adopted between 1890 and 1910, and some were temporarily blocked by the Supreme Court.

Non-formal channels of restricting Black political activity may also have reduced the effect of Black newspapers on Republican support. Efforts to suppress Black political participation were stronger in the south, and so we interact our main coefficient with an indicator variable that equals one if the Black newspaper was active in a former Confederate state. Relative to Panel A, this interaction accounts for time-invariant characteristics of the South that could have hampered Black political activity beyond franchise-restricting laws. It also accounts for the region-wide strong support for the Democratic Party during the region, which could have led to reduced scope for Republican gains in the Region.

We present results in Table 6. Panel A discusses the results related to voting restrictions. We find that Black newspapers gathered less support for the Republican Party in the pres-

[15]During this period, multiple states changed the organization of the elections to restrict Black political participation without changing voting requirement legislation. Examples include the imposition of secret ballots, often without political party identifiers, which *de facto* operated as a literacy test. Other examples include complex multi-ballot boxes elections, in which voters had to fill multiple ballots and a single mistake would invalidate all votes.

[16]States imposing franchise-restricting legislation include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. See Table 1 of Jones et al. (2017) for further detail.

Table 6: Black Newspapers, Voting Restrictions, and Political Participation

	% Republican Vote	Republican Turnout	Non-Republican Turnout	P(Republican Victory)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Franchise-Restricting Legislation				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	2.523**	0.520***	-0.268	0.045
	(1.013)	(0.201)	(0.191)	(0.029)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper] × Restriction	-1.889*	-0.411*	-0.184	-0.032***
	(1.074)	(0.213)	(0.203)	(0.030)
Panel B: Confederacy				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	6.681***	2.178***	1.172***	0.081**
	(1.518)	(0.299)	(0.287)	(0.042)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper] × Confederacy	-5.628***	-2.096***	-1.699***	-0.058
	(1.445)	(0.284)	(0.273)	(0.040)
Observations	3,248	3,248	3,248	3,248

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.

ence of franchise-restricting legislation. In counties without such laws, Black newspapers are associated with larger Republican vote shares, higher Republican turnout, and lower non-Republican turnout (p-value=0.16). However, in counties where state laws restricted voting rights, all such Republican gains are nearly erased. We find smaller and statistically insignificant gains in the Republican vote share and Republican turnout, and a robust decrease in the non-Republican turnout.

We observe similar dynamics when the Confederacy fixed effect is included. In Panel B of Table 6 we find large and robust effects of Black newspapers on higher Republican vote shares, higher political participation through Republican and non-Republican turnout, and the probability that the Republican wins the county. Similarly to Panel A, however, Republican gains following the opening of a Black newspaper are diminished in Confederate states. We still find suggestive evidence that Black newspapers increased Republican support in the South, but the coefficients are smaller and statistically insignificant.

Overall, we find that formal and informal mechanisms of suppressing Black political participation limited the effectiveness of Black newspapers in supporting Republican presidential candidates. The presence of franchise-restricting legislation diminished the impact of Black

newspapers on Republican vote shares and turnout. The socio-political environment of the former Confederacy also diminished these effects, reflecting historical regional biases and systemic barriers. The capacity of Black newspapers to shape public opinion and influence electoral outcomes was constrained by these oppressive mechanisms.

6 Ruling out Alternative Explanations

Perhaps the most plausible threat to our interpretation of the evidence is that Black newspaper openings are part of a broader movement to increase Black political participation. While this would primarily be an error of interpretation, it would nevertheless be helpful to understand whether contemporaneous changes in the economic and social activities of Black people confound our interpretation of the empirical results.

We explore this competing hypothesis by applying the natural language processing tools introduced in Section 3 to a new set of newspaper content. We pull newspaper coverage with a high probability of referring to social and economic activities of Black people. Here we identify common race tokens from the time: negro, colored, or the n-word.[17] and we collect every word that is within 10-words of the relevant keyword.

This process yields a collection of words that are likely used when referring to either Black people or subjects and activities connected to Black people, which we clean using the following steps. First, we remove punctuation and numbers. The most common OCR errors are inserted spaces where none exists. To improve the OCR quality, our second step is to concatenate adjacent words if one of those words is not in the English dictionaries but the concatenation is. Third, we reduce words to their roots using Porter stemmer, which combines distinct words such as "house", "houses", and "housed" to the stem "hous." Fourth, to further reduce OCR errors, we drop words that appear fewer than 500 times.

We next identify distinct topics using Latent Dirichlet Allocation with 15 model topics. Figure 5 displays the word clouds with the clear interpretations. They fall into three cate-

[17]The terms African Americans and Black were not in widespread use during this period.

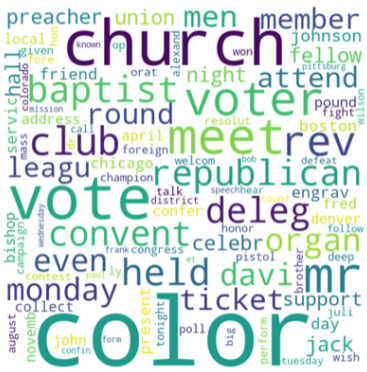
gories: political organization; crime, violence, and justice; and job ads. Topic modeling also allows disentangling other uses of the tokens. For example, there are clearly topics that refer to fashion and art for when the word "colored" refers to non-race topics. A comprehensive list of topics generated by the language model can be found in Appendix Figure A3.

Figure 5: LDA Categorization of Newspaper Coverage

Political Organization and Participation

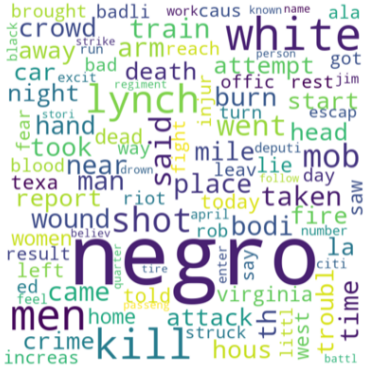






Crime, Violence, and Justice





Job Ads



Content obtained from the *Chronicling America* newspaper database. Categorizations from Latent Dirichlet Allocation.

Now that we have identified relevant topics, we construct our primary outcome variable as the share of pages that mention each topic. Since LDA is a mixture model, each bag of words receives a probability that it corresponds to each of the 15 topics. In practice, the distribution is often bimodal, with one topic receiving a high probability and the remaining topics receiving probabilities that are effectively zero. Aggregating the probabilities thus

yields an estimate for the number of pages that contain a mention of a specific topic.

We now estimate changes in newspaper coverage following the opening of a Black newspaper. Our analysis deviates from Equation 1 in the following ways. First, instead of looking at election years, we now examine newspaper content for each year in the 4 years prior to and 2 years after the Black newspaper opens. We also include newspaper fixed effects to account for time-invariant differences in circulation and format. Importantly, our treatment and control definitions are exactly the same.

Table 7 displays our main results. The results suggest a statistically insignificant decline in coverage of Black people and political organization or participation following the opening of a Black newspaper and a statistically significant increase in coverage of topics relating to violence, crime, and justice. These effects are on the order of 2-5 percent relative to the sample mean. For job ads, we see a suggestive although statistically insignificant increase.

Table 7: Changing Coverage of Black People by Topic after the Opening of a Black Newspaper

	Political Org. / Part. (1)	Violence, Crime, and Justice (2)	Job Ads (3)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	-0.225	0.563**	0.067
	(0.194)	(0.223)	(0.047)
Mean of Dep. Var	7.87	9.54	1.50
Observations	5,454	5,454	5,454

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses. Sample is restricted to content in white newspapers. All regressions include newspaper fixed effects.

These results are inconsistent with the idea that Black newspaper openings were part of a broader movement to increase Black political participation. If anything, existing efforts related to political organization appear are declining or at least becoming less newsworthy. The increase in articles relating to violence is relevant for how we interpret our results, as scholarship by Jones et al. (2017) and Williams (2022) has helped establish that racial

violence decreases political participation. Together, these results tell us that our earlier analysis is more likely to be *underestimating* the influence of Black newspapers on political participation.

7 Conclusion

We study the effects of Black newspapers on political participation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historical accounts of the Black press often state their objective in unifying the Black community and advancing its interests through the shaping of public opinion. Many of these conclusions are drawn from a relatively small and somewhat selected set of newspapers, publishers, and journalists. We study a comprehensive set of newspaper openings and in a framework that attempts to break the link between potential confounding effects (e.g., changes in the economic of social standing of Black people).

First, we analyze the content of 20 million newspaper pages to show that Black newspapers offered a distinct political perspective that centered on the unequal treatment of Black people. We proceed to show the effects of Black newspapers on county-level political participation in Presidential elections. We compare counties that receive a Black newspaper just before instead of just after a Presidential election. Results from this stacked difference-in-difference framework point to an increase the Republican vote share following the Black newspaper opening relative to otherwise similar counties. We do not observe changes in overall turnout, and so it seems like the effect is driven by shifting preferences and not by increased overall political participation. Further, we show that while formal and informal barriers to Black political participation were significant deterrents, Black newspapers were still effective in mobilizing Republican support.

These results emphasize the importance of the Black press in shaping American politics, which remains understudied in the social science scholarship. By showing that Black newspapers affected electoral outcomes in a period of heightened racial tensions and increasing

voter suppression, we provide some evidence that the Black press may have been successful in some of its main goals since its inception: unifying the Black community and shaping public opinion on issues that are important to Black people.

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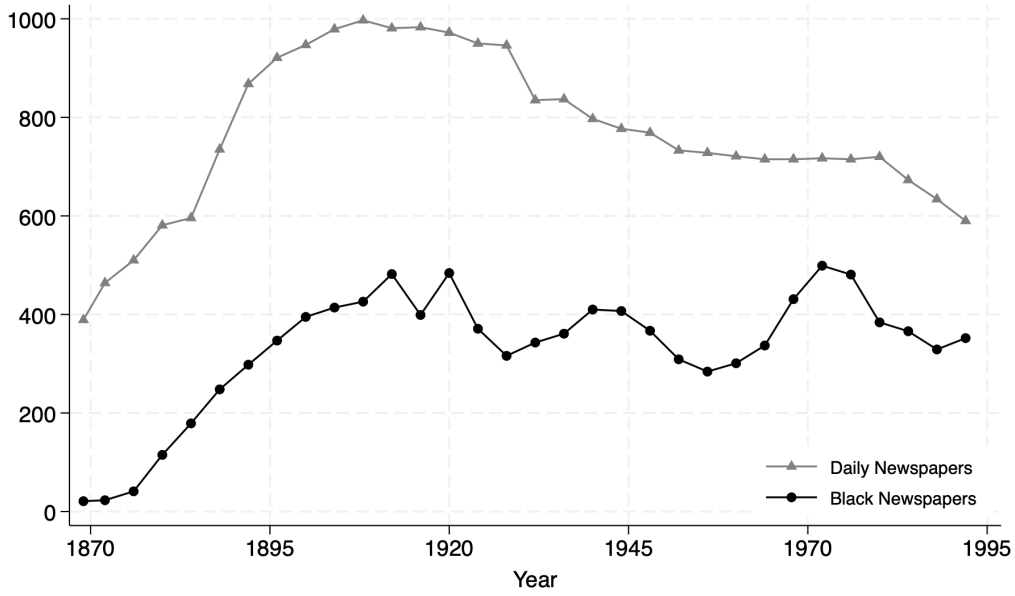
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A Appendix

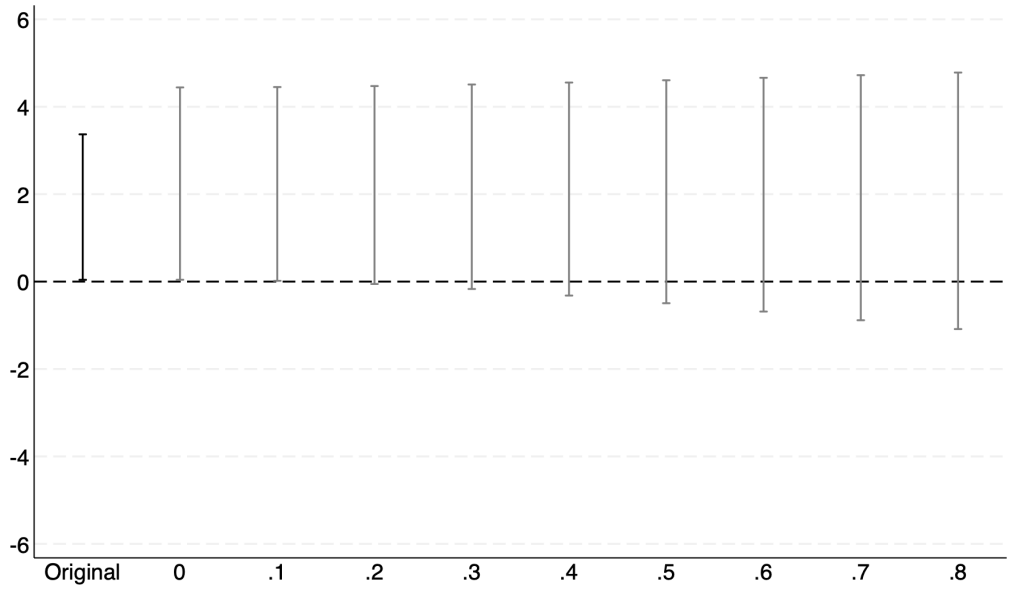
Figures

Figure A1: Time series of active daily newspapers and Black newspapers



Data for daily newspapers comes from Gentzkow et al. (2011b). Data for Black newspapers comes from Henritze (1995).

Figure A2: Coefficients from Figure 4a under different violations of parallel trends.



Coefficients and confidence intervals built following Rambachan and Roth (2023). 90% Confidence intervals are shown.

Figure A3: Full LDA Categorization of Newspaper Coverage

Political Organization and Participation

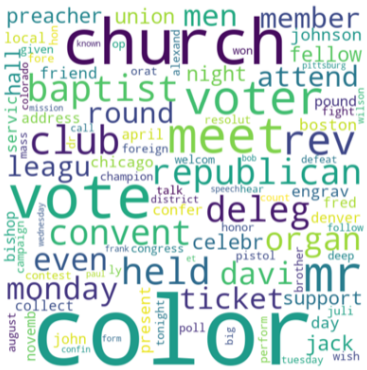
Topic 7



Topic 10



Topic 13



Crime, Violence, and Justice

Topic 9



Topic 11



Job Ads

Topic 6



Clothing and Home Decor

Topic 5



Topic 12



Unclear

Topic 15



Unclear Topics [Continued]

Topic 1



Topic 2

Topic 3

Topic 4

Topic 8

Topic 14

Content taken *Chronicling America* newspaper database. Categorizations from Latent Dirichlet Allocation.

Tables

Table A1: % of partisan phrases that are Republican

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Black Newspaper	0.031**	0.028*	0.049
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.036)
Daily Newspaper		-0.008	-0.022
		(0.012)	(0.029)
Observations	2,063	2,063	2,052
County FE			Y
Year FE			Y

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.

Table A2: Black Newspapers and Electoral Outcomes - Region × Year × Stack Fixed Effects

	% Republican Vote	Republican Turnout	Non-Republican Turnout	Pr(Republican Victory)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	2.845**	0.565**	-0.279	0.045*
	(1.241)	(0.260)	(0.238)	(0.025)
Observations	3,252	3,252	3,252	3,252
Mean of Dep. Var.	35.27	6.44	9.16	0.30

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.

Table A3: Effects of Black Newspapers on Electoral Outcomes by newspaper content availability

	% Republican Vote	Republican Turnout	Non-Republican Turnout	Pr(Republican Victory)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Counties with Any Newspaper Content				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	2.299**	0.420*	-0.101	0.007
	(1.123)	(0.239)	(0.201)	(0.030)
Observations	1,856	1,856	1,856	1,856
Mean of Dep. Var.	37.266	6.99	9.09	0.36
Panel B: Counties with Black Newspaper Content				
𝟙[Active Black Newspaper]	4.586*	1.463**	-0.642	0.090
	(2.768)	(0.643)	(0.463)	(0.079)
Observations	506	506	506	506
Mean of Dep. Var.	44.253	8.43	9.27	0.47

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors, clustered at the county-level, in parentheses.