

# When Politics Becomes Protest: Black Veterans and Political Activism in the Postwar South

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*Recent narratives of the civil rights movement document black veterans' contributions to the movement's success, often attributing their efforts to their military experience. While this attribution makes sense intuitively, alternative explanations for black veterans' mobilization are not fully explored in existing work. For instance, black veterans were often among the most active members in many of the civil rights organizations from which insurgency was launched. Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that black civic institutions, not military service per se, drove black veterans' activism. Furthermore, if military service did lead to political activism, we lack a microlevel mechanism to explain the means by which it did so. In this article, I show that military service did motivate black veterans' activism independent of their membership in black civic institutions or feelings of group solidarity and theorize a mechanism by which it did so.*

You see, to come to back here to Mississippi and try to participate in politics meant your life. . . . Because to come back here to Mississippi . . . in order to try to participate, you'd be found floating down a river. You'd be found hung up in a tree. You'd be found burned, bombed or killed.

—State Stallworth, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party<sup>1</sup>

If civil rights scholarship of the past three decades is any indication, black veterans returned from World War II and the Korean War prepared to battle the continued imposition of white supremacy in the South. “Black soldiers returning from the wars,” Morris observes, “began urging their relatives and friends not to accept domination. In many instances black soldiers disobeyed the policy of bus segregation and refused to give up their seats long before Rosa Parks” (1984, 80). Perhaps Medgar Evers and Hosea Williams are the best known among the veterans who emerged from the military to assume leadership positions within civil rights organizations during the civil rights struggle (Payne 1995; Tuck 2003; Tyson 1999). In addition to the leadership they provided, each openly challenged white supremacy. Evers, who served as part of the “Red Ball Express” during World War II in Europe, launched his challenge in 1946 by leading a cadre of veterans to

a courthouse in Mississippi to demand the right to vote; Hosea Williams, who served with the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion during World War II, led the Selma to Montgomery march (“Bloody Sunday”) that is credited with influencing President Johnson to push for voting rights legislation (Lawson 1976; Lee 2002).

Klinkner and Smith (1999) suggest that nationwide, veterans' wartime experience spurred them to seek change. Others who focus upon the efforts of veterans at the local level make the same argument: veterans' military experience furnished at least part of the impetus to rise against white supremacy (Brooks 2004; Dittmer 1994; Henry 2000; Hill 2004; O' Brien 1999; Payne 1995; Tuck 2003; Tyson 1999). The connection between military service and protest, however, is all but taken for granted in these works in that scholars fail to fully account for alternative explanations for black veterans' activism. It is well known, for instance, that institutions such as the black church and civil rights organizations provided the emotional, motivational, and organizational resources that facilitated civil rights activism and mobilization (Dawson 1994; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Harris 1999; McAdam 1999; Morris 1984; Tate 1993). Veterans were often protagonists in these organizations, leading and even founding some of them. It seems possible, then, that the civil rights

<sup>1</sup>Comment made to the media during the Democratic National Convention, 1964.

activism of black veterans may have stemmed from their association with many of the same civic institutions that motivated nonveterans to contest the status quo. Further, even if it is somehow possible to discern distinct effects accruing to military service, the mechanism by which military service inspired veteran activism remains ill-defined. While Klinkner and Smith's (1999) work provides a macrohistorical framework within which we can understand military service to have contributed to social reform, we lack a microlevel mechanism that can explain how black veterans' military service ultimately affected their actions and, by extension, racial progress.

Accordingly, this article has two objectives. First, it aims to assess whether or not military service contributed to activism above and beyond competing explanations for mobilization. To do so, I analyze black political participation in the South prior to the ratification of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As the epigraph makes clear, black political participation in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a dangerous proposition, especially in the Deep South (Lawson 1976; Matthews and Prothro 1966; Woodward 1955). Accepting the physical and economic risks associated with it was an act of resistance to white authority, and indicative of one's commitment to activism. Analysis of black political participation in the South also permits the investigation of insurgency at the individual level, which provides a contrast to literature's emphasis on the collective behavior of black activists (e.g., Dittmer 1994; McAdam 1999; Morris 1984; Payne 1995; Tuck 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Second, I attempt to identify and describe a mechanism by which military service contributed to black southerners' propensity for activism. I gain traction on the issue by drawing upon three components of black southerners' military experience as a means of explaining their militancy and subsequent activism. One source is their sense of entitlement—their belief that they had earned the right to enjoy the fruits of democracy for which they fought, providing a motivation for change. Another source was the experience of service overseas, during which black southerners were exposed to more equal treatment by civilian nationals. The third source was their military institutional experiences: surviving military service under the trying conditions of Jim Crow and discrimination gave black veterans the confidence to challenge Jim Crow on their return to the South. Taken together,

<sup>2</sup>Others have examined the relationship between military service and political participation more generally, i.e., without using it as a proxy for activism (Ellison 1992; Jennings and Markus 1976; Leal 1998; Teigen 2006).

these military experiences represented a source of resolve and determination from which only veterans were able to draw, setting the experiences apart from more traditional sources of black mobilization.<sup>3</sup>

This article builds on and extends existing work in at least three ways. First, an individual-level approach, drawing on quantitative data, allows me to rule out rival explanations for black veterans' activism.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I add a layer of analytical precision to the literature that is currently missing. Second, I provide more evidence for the hypothesized connection between protest and politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2000; Rochon 1998), a relationship often ignored in political science (but see Pierce and Carey 1971; Tate 1993). Finally, this article adds to our stock of knowledge about black political participation, which is usually explained as the result of a confluence of group-based resources, so that black civic organizations and solidarity are understood to have sparked political mobilization (Dawson 1994; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Harris 1999; Tate 1993; Walton 1985). By illustrating the effects of military service on political participation, this article introduces another source of activism, one that in practice works in conjunction with, yet remains analytically independent of, group resources.<sup>5</sup>

The article begins with a short review of barriers to political participation with which black southerners

<sup>3</sup>In general, military service through most of the twentieth century was a gendered activity in that women were largely excluded from serving, effectively depriving women of the opportunity to earn equal citizenship (Kerber 1998; Snyder 1999). Beyond that, military service, at least in the West, has come to be increasingly associated with masculinity, a rite of manhood (Elshtain 1987; Mansfield 2006). In the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the gender specificity associated with military service meant two things. First, it all but robbed at least half of the population of the ability to use military experience as a resource to combat white supremacy (but see Moore 1996). Second, as Stouffer and colleagues (1949) demonstrated, many black servicemen viewed military service as an opportunity to demonstrate their manhood, both to themselves and to whites. Upon proving their manhood, many returned and vowed to protect their families and community, using armed self-defense when needed, from the aggressive behavior of whites who sought to harm them (Hill 2004; Tyson 1999). Regardless of the ways in which military service and gender interacted, several black women, including Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer were important to the success of the movement (Payne 1995; Ransby 2003).

<sup>4</sup>Mettler (2005b) also takes quantitative approach, but her project is concerned with the effects of the GI Bill. Since only veterans were eligible, her analytical focus rests upon differences among veterans, i.e., those who took advantage of the benefit versus those who failed to do so. Mine, on the other hand, is concerned with differences between veterans and nonveterans.

<sup>5</sup>Ellison (1992) also assesses the effect of military service upon political participation. His, however, is a national focus, and one that is occupied with more contemporary attitudes and behavior.

were forced to contend. I then discuss competing explanations for the political participation of black veterans in which the group-based resource model represents the null hypothesis and the black veterans' military experience represents the alternative. Next, I argue that differences in mainstream political participation during Jim Crow, voting and nonvoting political activism, paralleled the different modes of activism identified by McAdam (1986). I contend that voting was a form of high-risk activism in that it was more visible and, therefore, *relatively* more dangerous than low-risk activism such as donating to a campaign, working for a candidate, or attending a meeting. In the end, even after accounting for possible confounds associated with group-based resources, military service continues to predict political activism.

### **Background and Theory: Barriers to Black Political Participation in the South**

The political domination of black southerners in modern times may be traced to the suffrage restrictions imposed upon black Mississippians in 1890. By 1910, all of the former Confederate states had adopted ingenious—if unconscionable—devices to dilute the black vote. In their efforts to get around the Fifteenth Amendment, white southerners managed to create barriers to the franchise that were all but insurmountable. By fixing the franchise to poll taxes, literacy and residency requirements, property ownership, and grandfather and “good character” clauses, white legislatures avoided the explicit use of race as grounds for voter disqualification. Six years later, in 1896, South Carolina instituted the white primary, a move that helped cement white supremacy for almost two generations.<sup>6</sup> In concert with other suffrage restrictions and the absence of party competition in the South dating from the 1880s, the institutionalization of the white primary summarily extinguished the political relevance of African Americans in the South (Frymer 1999; Kousser 1974; Woodward 1955).

The demise of the white primary in 1944 following the Supreme Court's decision in *Smith v. Allwright* momentarily served to boost black political participation. By 1947, black voter registration had doubled from 250,000 before the Court's ruling to 500,000—though this figure still represented only 10% of the African

American electorate who were eligible to vote (Matthews and Prothro 1966). To compensate for the elimination of the white primary, southern whites ratcheted up the enforcement of state constitutionally based suffrage restrictions established during the early 1890s (Key 1949), such as property and literacy requirements and the good character clause.<sup>7</sup> They also returned to the use of fear, threatening with both physical and economic reprisals any blacks who possessed the temerity to exercise their rights. In some cases, violence received active support from prominent politicians, including Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge and Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo.<sup>8</sup>

After the *Brown* decision, Citizens' Councils emerged to neutralize what they perceived as threats to the social status quo and the growing influence of the NAACP (Bartley 1969). Among the Citizens' Councils, economic reprisals (and the threat of them) gained favor in the mid-to-late 1950s as the preferred means of impeding black political participation and organizational membership. Those who joined the NAACP or registered to vote (or, as was most often the case, both) faced economic retribution such as losing their jobs or, if one was an entrepreneur, the denial of credit (McMillen 1994; Payne 1995; Salomon and Van Evera 1973).<sup>9</sup> In the late 1950s, the political participation of black southerners abruptly leveled off after almost ten years of growth, reaching a pre-Voting Rights plateau of 28% in 1960 (Matthews and Prothro 1963).<sup>10</sup> Setting aside the complacency

<sup>7</sup>The grandfather clause, introduced by Louisiana in 1896 and adopted by most southern states was, based upon a case originating in Oklahoma, declared illegal in 1915 (Lawson 1976).

<sup>8</sup>According to historian Carol Anderson (2003), the governor is credited with “warning” African Americans to ignore the Supreme Court's decision to outlaw the white primary; if African Americans insisted upon voting, he suggested to whites that they (blacks) were “fair game for whatever punishment white Georgians” deemed necessary. Bilbo's logic was similar in that he goaded southern white Democratic partisans into violence suggesting that “the best way to keep the nigger from voting . . . [was to] do it the night before the election . . . . If any nigger tries to organize to vote, use the tar and feathers and don't forget the matches” (Quoted in Anderson 2003, 63–64).

<sup>9</sup>Matthews and Prothro (1963) indicate that, more often than not, the targets of violence were institutions such as churches, schools, and temples. In terms of personal violence, 29 people were shot—including white sympathizers. They indicate that areas in which “old-style” racial violence (i.e., lynchings) occurred between 1900 and 1931 accounted for only 7% of the “new-style” of racial violence. They conclude, however, that the absence of violence doesn't mean the disappearance of the threat. On the contrary, they argue that the absence of violence was indicative of white strength.

<sup>10</sup>From 1940 to 1947, the registration rate for black southerners increased from 5 to 12%, after which it accelerated to 20% by 1952, eight years after *Smith v. Allwright* outlawed the white primary (Matthews and Prothro 1966).

<sup>6</sup>The white primary, which the Democratic Party used to exclude African Americans from the political process in the South was, arguably, more effective than the sum of the other suffrage restrictions (Key 1949; Matthews and Prothro 1966).

attributable to southern “tradition,” in which some black southerners ceded the domain of politics to whites (Black and Black 1987; Litwack 1998; Matthews and Prothro 1966), a principal reason for the decelerating rate of African American political participation was the coercion to which black southerners were subjected in post-*Brown* America.

### Group-Based Resources

Given this context of physical and economic coercion, it is remarkable that southern African Americans mobilized to fight for their civil rights. The conventional approach to understanding this black political mobilization, which emphasizes the group-based resources on which black southerners drew, suggests that they were most successful in challenging white supremacy through collective action. Perhaps the best-known source of African American mobilization and activism is also the oldest social institution in the black community: the church. In the context of Jim Crow, the church was a place in which black southerners could congregate without much interference, allowing it to function as ground zero for black social and civic life (Harris 1999; Myrdal 1944). The church’s organizational infrastructure and ready-made membership base made it the logical site for launching insurgency and political mobilization in the South (McAdam 1999; Morris 1984).<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) enjoyed great success in the early stages of the movement. Religion also furnished blacks southerners with the strength to challenge Jim Crow. The belief that they were morally correct, that “God was on their side,” gave many black southerners the courage to face the wrath of white supremacists (Harris 1999).

Black secular organizations committed to racial equality also served as a source of African-American resistance in the South. Like the church, membership in black organizations provided activists with an institutionalized base of social support through which sustained challenges to Jim Crow were possible (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989). Local chapters of the NAACP supplied a pool from which the movement extracted membership and leadership (McAdam 1999). Based in the North, the NAACP worked from within the system, protesting the subordination of black southerners in the courts instead of employing the

direct-action tactics favored by students and churches. In the wake of the *Brown* decision, under the withering attack mounted by white supremacist groups and increasingly hostile state and local authorities, southern membership in the NAACP declined, dropping from 128,000 in 1955 to 80,000 in 1957 (McMillen 1994; Morris 1984; Payne 1995). Nevertheless, the organization remained committed to the fight for social justice and continued to mobilize blacks across the region. In addition to the NAACP, fraternal black organizations and women’s groups also worked to encourage African American participation and political mobilization (Dawson 1994, 2001; Heard 1952; McAdam 1999; Morris 1984; Skocpol, Liazos, and Ganz 2006; Tate 1993).

The group-based resource model also highlights how group identification may have promoted activism among black southerners. Generally, identification with the group entails feeling a psychological connection to it in which feelings of loyalty, shared interests, and an awareness of the group’s position in society are bound up. From this, a sense of solidarity is believed to emerge, a key component of the race consciousness that is ultimately needed for group mobilization and subsequent collective action (Miller et al. 1981).<sup>12</sup> In short, the more attached one is to one’s group, the more solidarity one feels with her group, the more likely she is to embrace the possibility of an improvement in the status of the group (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Tate 1993). If black Americans’ group identification and commitment to activism in the civil rights era indeed stemmed, at least in part, from an awareness of their subordinate position in southern society, black veterans should have also identified with the race. Perhaps nothing else would more alert one to one’s location in society than returning to circumstances in which one remained a second-class citizen *after* surviving a war in which one fought to preserve democratic principles. Indeed, evidence suggests that military service contributed to black southerners’ keen awareness of their position in southern society, generating a sense of solidarity in which a commitment to racial advancement had taken root (Brooks 2004; McMillen 1997; Nalty 1986).

<sup>11</sup>McClerking and McDaniels’s (2005) work, however, suggests that black churches differ in the extent to which political activism is emphasized. They also highlight a mechanism by which church membership stimulates political activism.

<sup>12</sup>Group consciousness is the next step in a process through which awareness of the group’s position in society (identification) eventually underwrites collective action to correct the perceived injustice to the group.

## The Importance of Military Experience

To suggest that the group-based resources hypothesis fails to fully account for black southerners' activism begs the question of why black veterans would be more likely than other black southerners to run the risk of physical harm and economic hardship in order to participate in the mainstream political process. One reason, I believe, is that they felt entitled to do so: they had earned the right to first-class citizenship by serving the country. Entitlement is based on a common understanding of how benefits are distributed, something that is experienced both an affectively and motivationally, requiring a sense of equity between the actor's perceived outcomes and the person's attributes or acts (Lerner 1975). As such, entitlement is invested with moral force (Major 1994). If one's perceived entitlement is not fulfilled, one's ensuing anger provides the impetus for change (Major 1994; Shaver et al. 1987). To the extent that military service and citizenship have, for some time, been partners in Western and, therefore, American political culture (Burk 1995; Cohen 1984; Janowitz 1983; Snyder 1999), it had become customary to expect military service to result in more equal treatment, especially for blacks. Indeed, black elites have often drawn on this political tradition, encouraging blacks to serve in the military in the hopes of securing postwar benefits (Dawson 2001; Nalty 1986). Thus, upon their return to the South, black veterans of both World War II and the Korean War believed their participation in the war effort would result in a better life for them and other black Americans (Bogart 1969; Parker 2001; Stouffer 1949). When veterans failed to receive the equal treatment to which they believed they were entitled, they felt obliged to correct the perceived injustice.

Black veterans' sense of entitlement was enhanced by their exposure to new ways of thinking about race while in the service overseas. This process was instantiated in two ways. First, as a general proposition, exposing people to new patterns of social relations and cultural norms is conducive to new ways of thinking and doing things (Inkeles 1969). Indeed, as Marx (1967) has shown, decreasing contact with southern norms and exposure to alternative ways of life increased southerners' demand for equal rights. Similarly, serving overseas bestows upon servicemen the opportunity—albeit under less-than-optimal conditions—to experience foreign cultures and societies, and in the case of southern black soldiers, they were treated with more respect and dignity in these societies than they had been accustomed to in the South. Finally, the juxtaposition of American war aims—the preservation

of democracy—with the reality of Jim Crow in the military fueled the resentment of soldiers turned veterans for many years (Brooks 2004; Dittmer 1994; Lipsitz 1988; Nalty 1986). Taken together, these aspects of the military experience heightened black servicemen's postwar expectations of equal treatment (Nalty 1986).

That veterans felt entitled to equal treatment does not necessarily mean that they became activists. But I would argue that the military, as an institution, not only enhanced black veterans' feelings of entitlement, it also helped sow the seeds for militancy by giving blacks a sense of efficacy and personal control that, relative to whites, they lacked (Kinder and Reeder 1975). As sites in which opportunities for self-realization are possible, institutions serve as ideal locations for engaging in behavior that is likely to generate confidence and a sense of agency (Gecas 1982). The military was (and is) an ideal site for generating these feelings, for at least two reasons. It is often a challenging environment in which mastering difficult, complex tasks is essential. Successfully completing these tasks, in turn, increases one's sense of efficacy (Bandura 1982). One's sense of efficacy, moreover, is tied to how one's actions are appraised in the community; that is, the subjective meaning of one's acts affects the extent to which one can gather confidence from them (Bandura 1982; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Participation in the nation's defense has historically been a source of pride in African American community, especially in the South (Morris 1984; O'Neil 1999; Reich 1996; Tyson 1999). Under these circumstances, it's no wonder that black southerners often emerged from the military with a state of enhanced confidence and agency (Brooks 2004; Hill 2004; O'Neil 1999; Tyson 1999).<sup>13</sup> While *external efficacy*, the belief in one's ability to influence governmental decisions,

<sup>13</sup>Beyond the accumulation of confidence and agency attributed to participating in the common defense of the nation lay another source confidence. For African Americans, especially those from the South, military service during World War II and the Korean War furnished an opportunity to escape crippling oppression and racism. Prior the elimination of segregation the military represented one of few options for African Americans to achieve upward mobility. To be sure, segregation was a formidable barrier in the military; in some cases it devastated morale (Bogart 1969; Stouffer et al. 1949). Despite the demoralizing effects of serving in a Jim Crow military, many black southerners capitalized on the opportunity to rise out poverty and relative illiteracy. By learning new skills, and becoming a part of a larger, national (albeit segregated) organization, black servicemen were infused with a sense of self confidence few had known prior to the military (Katznelson 2005; Kohn 1981; Mettler 2005b; Modell, Goulden, and Magnusson 1989; Moskos 1976). Military service also furnished black veterans with an opportunity to improve their relative position in society (Lopreato and Poston 1977; Moskos and Butler 1996; Phillips and Gilroy 1992; Xie 1992).

certainly affects political behavior (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), it is contingent upon one's prior success working within the system (Finkle 1985). Black southerners by and large had no experience of such success. Rather, it was black veterans' sense of *internal efficacy* (i.e., self-efficacy), inculcated through military service that furnished them with the confidence to pursue social justice. Indeed, the enhancement of the feeling of self-efficacy in the face of a political system perceived as closed has been shown to increase the likelihood of activism (Bandura 1982; Madsen 1987; Pierce and Carey 1971).<sup>14</sup>

We might hypothesize, then, that black veterans possessed both the motivation to pursue change (due to their sense of unfulfilled entitlement) and the wherewithal to act on this motivation (due to the sense of internal efficacy they gained through military experience). Yet the conventional means to change society, that is, political participation, remained beyond the reach of most black southerners prior to the ratification of the Voting Rights Act (Alt 1994; Lawson 1976; Matthews and Prothro 1966). To the extent that black veterans did participate in the political process, we can construe their participation as a form of protest. Indeed, to engage in conventional political participation in the context of Jim Crow, when doing so defied southern convention, was a means of contesting white supremacy.

## Hypotheses

We are faced with two very different hypotheses regarding black veterans' participation in the civil rights movement. The group-based resources model of understanding black activism makes it seem unlikely that military service had an independent effect upon the activism of black southerners. If the black church and civil rights organizations encouraged black southerners to participate in the political process, if black veterans were often actively involved in these organizations and indeed even led some of them, and if black veterans' military service gave them ample incentive to perceive the illegitimacy of Jim Crow and therefore to make them strong group identifiers, these factors alone would have been sufficient to motivate veterans' participation in the civil rights struggle.

<sup>14</sup>The self-efficacy to which I refer is closer to internal efficacy, a concept that indexes one's perceived political competence. See Madsen (1987) and Finkle (1985) on discussions about the relationship between internal and external efficacy, the latter of which highlights the perceived responsiveness of the political system.

*H1: Group-based resources represented the principal source of activism among black southerners. Once they are taken into account, it is unlikely that military experience will have an independent effect upon activism.*

Whereas the group-based resources approach leads to the conclusion that veterans' activism is unlikely to be the independent consequence of their military experiences, focusing on the military experience leads me to propose that black veterans' military experience provided black southerners with a unique source of activism, one that prepared them to weather the obstacles associated with participation in the political process in the South. Thus, I propose that *in addition to group-based resources*, military service also increased black southerners' propensity for political activism.

*H2: Black veterans' military experience provided black southerners with a unique source of activism, one that prepared them to weather the obstacles associated with participation in the political process in the South. Thus, military service, in addition to group-based resources, increased black southerners' propensity for political activism.*

This discussion implies a similarity of conditions in which black southerners sought to contest white supremacy through the ballot. However, any realistic discussion of political participation prior to the defeat of Jim Crow must account for geographic context. In general, wherever blacks outnumbered whites in the South, the prospect of black political power and economic competition inspired fear among whites, often prompting them to resort to violence and intimidation as a means of social control (Blalock 1967). Consequently, the concentration of black southerners in a given area affected the ability of blacks to vote, dampening participation in counties in which black southerners approached or exceeded the majority (Bunche 1973; Key 1949; Lawson 1976; Matthews and Prothro 1966). Rural residency also curbed participation among black southerners, because rural residents were more threatened by violence, more economically dependent on whites, less involved with activist churches, and had less extensive social networks (Key 1949; Matthews and Prothro 1966; McAdam 1999; Morris 1984). Therefore, in counties where the black population was either equal to or greater than the white population, as well as in rural areas, we should expect black participation to have been depressed. If military experience is to have any traction, it should be greatest in these areas, relative strongholds of white supremacy where political activism of any kind was discouraged.

*H3: Military experience, with its ability to prepare veterans to overcome challenges and confront threats, should have been more useful in areas in which blacks were more threatened. The effect of military service should, therefore, be more apparent in areas in which black southerners were in the majority.*

*H4: Similarly, military experience should help overcome impediments to activism associated with residing in the rural south. To the extent that economic dependence on whites and relatively limited involvement in activist churches hindered political activism, military service should have spurred political participation in these areas.*

## Data and Methods

I use two data sources to investigate these propositions. I first draw upon interviews I conducted in 2003 and 2004 with black veterans who fought in World War II or the Korean War (and in some cases both) to test my hypothesis about the mechanism by which military service promoted veteran activism. Due to the advanced age and mortality rate associated with veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War, it was difficult to secure a representative sample. To compensate, I employed a snowball sample in which I sought out the local chapters of the Buffalo Soldiers, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> (Horse) Calvary Association, a fraternal organization of black veterans.<sup>15</sup> I randomly selected three members from the Houston, TX chapter and another three from a chapter in New Orleans, LA.<sup>16</sup> I attempted to reduce one source of selection bias associated with drawing from members of a political organization by asking these members to provide the names of other veterans who had served between 1941 and 1953 who had no formal affiliation with the organization.<sup>17</sup> This arrangement produced a total of 25 completed interviews. For the sake of

<sup>15</sup>The Buffalo Soldiers are based upon two of the four permanent African American regiments resulting from the Military Reorganization Act of 1866. Members are generally African American veterans of the army.

<sup>16</sup>Texas and Louisiana were selected because the former represents a border state; the latter represents the Deep South.

<sup>17</sup>Another possible source of bias centers on one's ability to recall events, some of which occurred 50 years ago. Age and the long period of time between their military service, the civil rights movement, and the interviews for which they sat may distort recollection. However, the emotional trauma involved with fighting or serving during war time, combined with the return to Jim Crow, ensures the relative accuracy of their recollections (Reisberg and Heuer 1992; Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000).

brevity, however, I draw on only a portion of them here. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 150 minutes. The veterans ranged in age from 69 to 90, with a mean of approximately 79 years of age at the time of the interview. (See the web appendix (Parker 2008) for more details.)

Though it is possible that despite my efforts, the interviews may display selection bias, particularly since some of the interviewees were members of what might be considered a political organization, my use of the Negro Political Participation Study allows me to generalize to the population and will, I hope, dampen any lingering concerns associated with bias. I use the study to test hypotheses related to mainstream political activism. Conducted in the spring of 1961, the study sampled 618 black southerners residing in the 11 former confederate states. The face-to-face interviews, in which participants were asked a number of questions about their political involvement, as well as their sociodemographic profile, yielded an 87% response rate. Since the substantive focus of this article is a comparison between veterans and non-veterans and women never constituted more than 1% of the armed services during the World War II or the Korean War, women are omitted from the analysis.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the number of observations is reduced to 246, of which approximately one-third ( $N = 81$ ) are veterans. These data provide an ideal opportunity to assess the impact of veteran status on myriad political phenomena and their correlates prior to the ratification of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.<sup>19</sup>

## Preliminary findings: Exploring the Contours of Military Experience

Understanding why many black veterans felt all but compelled to challenge white supremacy requires turning first to the interviews. I found that black veterans almost always tethered their claims for better treatment after war to their military service. Likewise, their military experiences fueled their militant dispositions, and serving overseas increased their resolve. Mr. Thomas, who served in the army air corps in Great Britain during the Second World War, is a case in point. He recalls the English treating him and

<sup>18</sup>However, see Moore's (1996) work on the black women who served during World War II.

<sup>19</sup>The Negro Political Participation Study, led by Donald Matthews and James Prothro, and archived at ICPSR, remains the single largest data source for the study of southern political life.

other blacks simply as foreigners—not *black* GIs: “When you are in a foreign country and you mingle and mix with foreign people,” he says, “they treat you just like another foreigner.” He remembers saying to himself: “It’s regrettable that I have to be three to four thousand miles away from home to experience what freedom really feels like.” Europeans do not see color, according to Thomas; instead, “they just see another American in a uniform.” The discrimination of white GIs against black GIs confused some of the Europeans with whom Thomas came into contact. The Britons in his social circle used to ask, “What’s the matter? Why do they say these things about you? Why do they identify you as people with tails and all those kind of things?” It bothered him when his English buddies brought these remarks to his attention. Even so, for Thomas, the military policy of segregation and the discrimination it bred were even more infuriating than the insensitivity of white servicemen. Thomas believed that the armed services could have served as a model for race relations in America. He felt that if blacks were going to serve, “at least it would mean that blacks and whites would be in the same organizations [and that] they’d have the same barracks in the same company, and all that sort of thing.” Had that happened, Thomas believes, it “would have had a [positive] impact on the attitude of blacks returning to America.” Because the army insisted upon maintaining its policy of segregation, it all but guaranteed that black soldiers would remain embittered about it as they mustered out of the army. With a hint of lingering disappointment, Thomas flatly states, “When the practice of segregation is not only practiced, but reinforced in the services, [the black soldier] comes back with anything but a positive attitude.”

Thomas’ anger is firmly rooted in the way in which he was treated both by the military as an institution and by the whites with whom he served. The relatively egalitarian treatment he received from English nationals, juxtaposed with that of the American military establishment, it seems, heightened his awareness of the illegitimacy of American racism. Colonel Carter’s grievances, on the other hand, were driven more by unfulfilled postwar expectations. A career soldier who served in the second world war as well as Korea, his sense of entitlement was irretrievably tied to his military service. Carter believed that, as citizen-soldiers, veterans were entitled to just treatment. “We have to look at it from the point of view that we are serving as citizens,” he says, “and as citizens, you expect to be treated accordingly. Don’t give me a damn thing. If I don’t deserve it, don’t give it to me.

But if I deserve it, don’t take it away from me.” Carter’s statement referred to veterans earning the equal treatment and respect to which they were entitled. Focusing on veterans’ sacrifice in particular, he muses that: “As far as veterans were concerned, people felt as though ‘I went to war for my country; now it’s time for my country to do for me.’ They were right,” he concluded.

Mr. Thornton, a veteran of the Korean War, recalls that white southerners chose not to openly challenge black GIs in uniform while riding the bus, but they remained uncomfortable with the manner in which black soldiers ignored southern convention. He remembers one incident while traveling in Louisiana when he decided to ignore social custom and remained seated in the “white” section of the bus. “I guess I was about the third seat back,” Thornton remembers, “and I was sitting next to the window, and . . . I could see the bus driver looking at me through the mirror. The bus driver looked like he wanted to come and ask me to move. That’s the impression I got, but I had something for him, and I was not going to move.” Thornton indicated that prior to spending time in the military, he would have simply moved or never sat in the restricted section in the first place, but “I guess the fact that I had gone and served,” he says, “I felt that I was entitled to sit where I wanted to. I felt that I had the right to do it, and this is one of the things that we went to the military for.”

Other veterans took a more confrontational approach. Mr. Carey, a veteran of the Korean War, recalls an incident while he was home on medical leave after sustaining an injury to his leg during combat. Having stopped at a gas station not far from home, he hobbled up to the “white” water fountain and took a sip from it. “That was a no-no,” he says, “but I drank anyway.” An old white man, he says, was present; he had just finished filling his truck. “He called me a nig—the magic name—and said I shouldn’t be drinking from the white folks’ fountain,” Carey remembers. As the man left in his truck, Carey gave chase: “I was on crutches,” he remembers, “and I tried to get him as he pulled away from me. My full intention was to kill him.” Carey attributes his reaction to the incident to his military service. “I would not have had that reaction had I not left home to go into the military. I probably would have submitted to the culture. . . . I probably would not have drunk from the fountain.” He went on to explain the racial expectations of the South and how his military service allowed him to resist these expectations: “The culture was [that] blacks were



second-hand citizens. But having been in the military, I wasn't taking any of that." Why had he behaved in such a confrontational way? "In the military," he told me with pride, "you're trained to fight, and you're trained to die if you have to. That's the best I can explain it."

In challenging white authority, black veterans drew on the confidence gained from their military accomplishments. Mr. Baines, a veteran of the Korean War, says of his service, "It made me feel that the jobs that I accomplished in the military . . . the training that I received and the awards that I received . . . I proved that I'm the equal to any other man." Likewise, Mr. Baskin's ability to assist other soldiers and his rise through the ranks during the second world war became the principal sources of his pride and confidence: "I felt that I accomplished something and I felt that I helped a lot of people when I was in the service. . . . I felt that I was in a good position to do some things, and in many cases I did. . . . I was able to get promoted, and I rose through the ranks fairly rapidly, and so I felt very fortunate." As a result, he says, "I have a much higher opinion of myself and my lifestyle," he says, "than I did prior to that [serving]." Military service provided others with greater maturity. Mr. Pete says of his time in the army: "I mean, number one, I was more matured after I left the service. See, when I went in, I was green and crazed, and I didn't know anything. Never had been away from home, and I was just glad, you know, to go in and get that experience. I had a chance to grow up . . . . I had a chance to travel and get some experience." Upon departing the military after the Korean War, he drew on the seasoning he received to inform the rest of his life. "I mean it helped me go to through life better out here and to pursue better things out here in civilian life," Pete put it. In sum, he says, "It [military service] gave me more confidence. It made a man out of me."

The interviews provide insight into why black veterans may have wished to challenge white supremacy. Each of the veterans, in some way, mentions their military experience as a source of change after they left the service: they were no longer willing to abide the status quo. Their military service, they believed, entitled them to better, more equal treatment. This is consistent with Stouffer and colleagues' (1949, Chap. 10) findings in that black servicemen felt that they had a moral claim to improved postwar treatment, based upon their contribution to the war effort. However, the question remains: How far were they willing to go to challenge white supremacy? Were they willing to risk physical harm and eco-

conomic coercion? The interviews suggest that they were, but this data is limited, insofar as it is not representative. We now turn to data from the Negro Political Participation Study to further investigate black veterans' political participation in the South prior to 1965.

## Predicting Activism through Political Participation

Conventionally, participation in the political process is conceived of as including both voting and nonvoting behavior.<sup>20</sup> Though nonvoting political activity, such as donating money and time to a candidate, talking to others about voting, or attending a political meeting, is related to voting insofar as both are part of the same process, the relationship between the two is at best moderate, in part because nonvoting political activism requires more initiative and energy than voting (Harris, Sinclair-Chapman, and McKenzie 2006; Milbrath 1965; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).<sup>21</sup> This was not the case for black southerners during Jim Crow, however. If anything, the relationship was reversed: voting was more difficult than nonvoting political activism. Dozens of black southerners, many of whom were veterans, were killed for attempting simply to register to vote. Moreover, economic reprisals were also often visited upon black southerners who were on the voter rolls (Bunche 1973; McMillen 1989, 1994; Payne 1995). For this reason, nonvoting political activism, at least for black southerners, was less daunting than voting: it was less dangerous because it was less visible. This is not to suggest that nonvoting political activism was safe. Indeed, it was not. Yet making a trip to the courthouse to register and, later, to cast a ballot was more dangerous than nonvoting activity, because, as Leon Litwack (1998), eminent scholar of the South, says: "voting was a sign of assertiveness that few whites would tolerate" (365).<sup>22</sup>

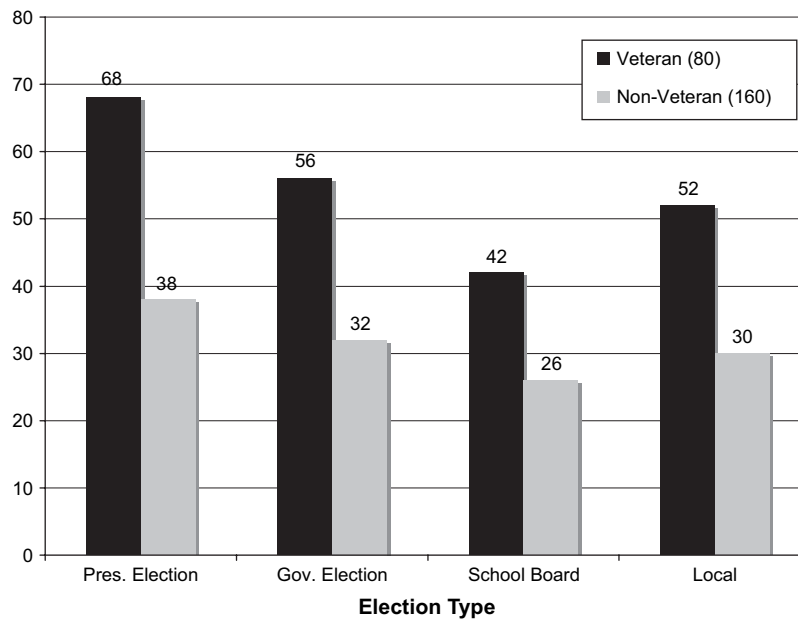
We can conceive of this difference in terms of McAdam's (1986) distinction between low-risk

<sup>20</sup>I emphasize conventional political participation to highlight the distinction between relatively conventional political activism and the more unconventional activism characterized by protest.

<sup>21</sup>Factor analysis confirms the distinction between voting and political activism. The first factor yields an eigenvalue of 4; the second factor produced an eigenvalue of 1.4. The correlation between voting and political activism = .37.

<sup>22</sup>See Parker (2009) for a more detailed explanation of the difference between voting and political activism in the context of the South for blacks.

FIGURE 1 High-Risk Activism (Voting), by Veteran Status and Election Type



activism and high-risk activism, in which “risk refers to the anticipated dangers—whether legal, social, physical, or financial . . . of engaging in a particular type of activity” (67). For black southerners, voting in presidential, gubernatorial, school board, or local elections was a form of high-risk activism. Other forms of political activism, such as donating to candidates, working for candidates, attending political or campaign meetings, or talking to people to influence their votes, can be conceived of as *relatively* low-risk activities—though the latter two (e.g., attending political meetings and talking to people) are notably more visible than the former two. Accordingly, if veterans were truly more difficult to deter from exercising their constitutional rights than nonveterans, as the interviews suggest they might have been, we should expect the largest intergroup differences to have emerged at the polls, with black veterans being more likely than nonveterans to have engaged in this more visible act of resistance.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 1 displays differences in voting behavior between veterans and nonveterans as reported for the

Negro Political Participation Study. Even the most casual glance at the results reveals stark differences between veterans and nonveterans. For instance, during presidential contests, 68% of the veterans, versus 38% of nonveterans, reported voting.<sup>24</sup> This difference was maintained in state and local elections, though it diminished in magnitude. In southern gubernatorial contests, 56% of veterans went to the polls versus 32% of nonveterans. Sixteen and 32 percentage points separated the groups during school board and municipal elections. Moreover, the disparities between veterans and nonveterans were greatest during the more visible campaigns: presidential and gubernatorial elections. Not surprisingly, presidential and gubernatorial elections drew the largest turnout, something that agrees with Walton’s (1985) work, followed by local and school board elections, respectively.

Turning now to low-risk activism, we observe a reduction in intergroup differences. As Figure 2 indicates, the largest gaps between the two groups emerge in the most visible modes of participation: talking to others about voting and attending political meetings. These modes of nonvoting political activism produce 21 and 23-point differences between the groups, with veterans’ activism outstripping nonveterans’ efforts. For less visible forms of political participation, however, the differences shrink dramatically to 2 and 7 percentage points, respectively. The preliminary results for high- and low-risk activism are similar, then, in that the largest

<sup>23</sup>Repression is not always an effective deterrent. When political participation is connected with the movement, white on black violence sometimes backfires, fueling more insurgency (Andrews 2004).

<sup>24</sup>For the current and following figure, percentages are rounded up or down. The Ns also vary according to the item. The cases (Ns) on which the percentages are based, for the current figure, range from 34 to 54 observations for veterans and 42 to 59 for nonveterans.

FIGURE 2 Non-Voting Political Activism, by Activity and Veteran Status

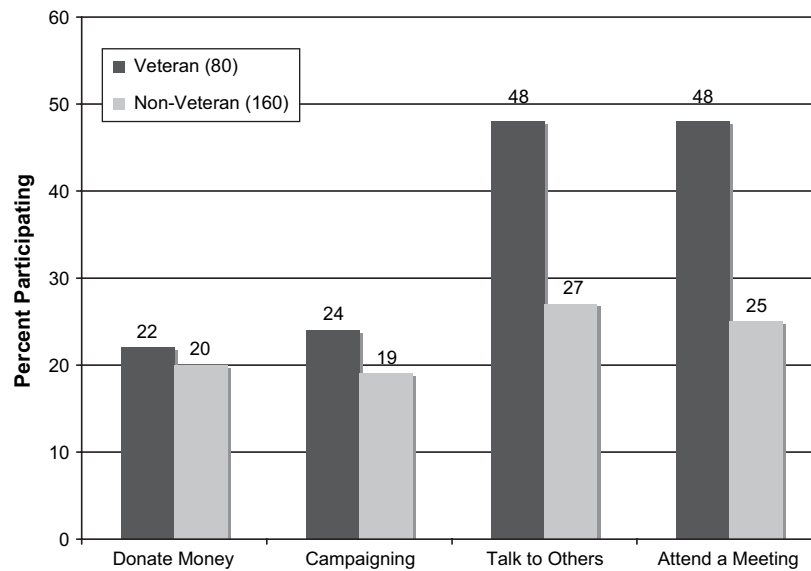
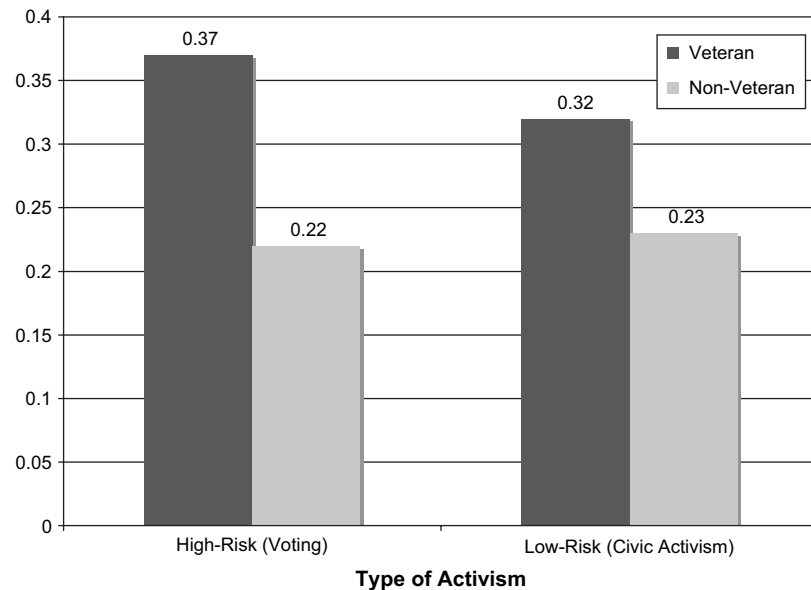


FIGURE 3 Political Participation Adjusted for Education, by Veteran Status



gaps between levels of veteran and nonveteran participation coincide with the most visible political acts.

To gain more theoretical traction on these findings, I constructed two indices, one each for high- and low-risk activism. The indices represent the summed and averaged responses of respondents for the items in Figures 1 and 2, where a score of 0 on voting, for instance, represents someone who failed to vote at least once in any of the elections. A score of 1, on the other hand, represents someone who has

voted at least once in all elections, from local to presidential contests.<sup>25</sup> I also factored in the potentially confounding effect of education, perhaps the most important predictor of political participation (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Figure 3 represents an assessment of mean group differences for each mode of activism, adjusted for years of formal schooling. As the results indicate, the intergroup

<sup>25</sup>The coefficient for reliability, alpha, is .95 for voting behavior, and .68 for political activism.

differences persist. Indeed, veterans participated in the political process more than did nonveterans, and the difference was more pronounced for high-risk than for low-risk activism.

Thus far, I have explored the relationship between military service and participation in the political process using relatively simple analytical tools. In order to have confidence that veteran/nonveteran differences are not spurious, and that military experience increased the likelihood of activism, however, I must account for membership in black civic organizations, identification with the race, and religiosity, which the group-based resources model suggests may be the true explanation for veteran activism. I must also account for the possibility that threats of physical and economic coercion affected the likelihood of black southerners' participating in the political process.

The Negro Political Participation Study provides an array of items that permit me to model the effect of military service upon political participation. For the dependent variables, high- and low-risk activism, I use the same composite indices as before. For organizational membership, I draw upon a question that asks about the number of "race relations organizations" to which the respondent belongs. I use frequency of church attendance as a proxy for church membership and religiosity. To tap group membership, I use two questions: "Would you say that you feel pretty close to other Negro southerners in general, or that you don't feel much closer to them than you do to other people?" and "How much interest would you say you have in how Negro southerners as a whole are getting along in this country?" (See the appendix for coding and question wording for all of the above.)

**Sociodemographic controls.** In most cases, one's appetite for politics increases with age (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972). Among white southerners, this conventional wisdom held true. For black southerners, however, participation *decreased* with age (Matthews and Prothro 1966). Income and formal schooling also affect political participation: more affluent and more educated southerners were more likely to vote (Matthews and Prothro 1966). Education is a particularly important variable in comparisons between black veterans and nonveterans, since the former, on average, tended to have more education upon induction, receive more education while in the service, and benefit from the educational provisions of the GI Bill upon departing the military (Katznelson 2005; Macgregor 1981; Mettler 2005a; Stouffer et al. 1949).

**Model specification.** I estimate two models to capture the effect of military experience on political activism. In the first specification (Model 1), I test the hypothesis that military experience retains its ability to inform activism even as I account for the effects of group-based resources. The following equation captures the average effect of military service on political activism:

$$Y(\text{political activism}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{military service}) \\ + \beta_{2-3}(\text{context}) \\ + \beta_{4-6}(\text{group resources}) \\ + \beta_{7-9}(\text{control}) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where:  $y$  = likelihood of political participation;  
 $\beta_1$  = whether or not one served in the military;  
 $\beta_{2-3}$  = blacks > 50% of the county's population, rural vs. urban residence;  
 $\beta_{4-6}$  = how often one attended church, member of a black organization, racial identification;  
 $\beta_{7-9}$  = age, years of formal school, income;

In the second specification (Model 2), I test hypotheses 3 and 4 in which I explore whether or not the effect of military experience varies with context. Does it, in other words, motivate black southerners to undertake activism in the more dangerous areas in the South, areas in which blacks were in the majority and rural areas? Thus, to the prior equation, I add:

$$\beta_{10}(\text{military service} \times \text{black} > 50\%) + \beta_{11} \\ \times (\text{military service} \times \text{rural residence}) + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

where:  $\beta_{10}$  = the effect of military service moderated by percentage of blacks in the population;  
 $\beta_{11}$  = the effect of military service moderated by living in the rural vs. urban south;

Once product terms are specified, the interpretation of some of the coefficients change. For instance, the interpretation of dummy variables  $\beta_{1-3}$  no longer represent the *average* effect of military service, percentage of black residents in a given county, and residence in the rural south, respectively. In the second equation, military service reflects the effect of military service in areas in which whites were in the majority and in urban areas. Likewise, now  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  represent the effect of the percentage of blacks in the county and the effect of living in the rural south, respectively, among *nonveterans*. The product terms ( $\beta_{10}$  and  $\beta_{11}$ ), then, capture the *additional* effect of military service for  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$ , i.e., beyond the effects associated with

nonveterans, the baseline group. If the coefficient is significant for the product terms, it suggests tangible differences between veterans and nonveterans; otherwise, military experience has no bearing.

### Voting

Table 1 reports the results for high-risk activism. The results support the claim that military experience increased black southerners' commitment to activism. After accounting for all of the factors that help explain black activism, including group-based resources, the effect of military service on high-risk participation remains unmediated and significant, suggesting that military experience furnished black southerners with a source of insurgency beyond more conventional explanations. In model 1, for instance, we see that veterans were approximately 14% more likely to vote than nonveterans. As hypothesized, black civic organizations also promoted high-risk activism: belonging to a church and secular organizations increased the likelihood of an individual's voting. Context was also important, depressing high-risk activism in areas where black southerners were the majority, and in rural versus urban areas of the South. Among demographic variables, increasing income encouraged high-risk activism, but there is no effect for increasing education or age. One explanation for the latter result is that members of black organizations tend to have more education, flattening the effect of formal schooling in the model.

In model 2 product terms are introduced to test hypotheses three and four, ones designed to test whether the effects of military experience vary according to context. Here, the results are mixed. Military experience conforms to expectations insofar as the interaction effect between military experience and counties in which black southerners were in the majority ( $\text{Service} \times \text{Black} > 50\%$ ), is positive and significant, indicating that veterans were approximately 21% more likely than nonveterans to engage in high-risk activism in localities in which black southerners were more susceptible to white terror. While my third hy-

<sup>26</sup>In addition to examining veteran/nonveteran differences, I also compared veterans' behavior across context. That is, did veterans who, for instance, lived in the urban South and in white-majority areas, differ in their political activism from veterans who lived in the rural and black-belt south? For voting (high-risk activism), veterans in black-majority areas were more active than their counterparts in counties in which whites were in the majority:  $F(1, 219) = 9.31, p < .002$ ; urban/rural differences failed to affect veterans' propensity for high-risk activism:  $F(1, 219) = .39, p < .530$ , suggesting that veterans behaved the same in urban and rural areas.

TABLE 1 OLS Determinants of High-Risk Activism (Voting)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Service	.106 (.045)	.141*	.059 (.079)	.079
<b>Context</b>				
Black $\geq$ 50%	-.224 (.043)	-.300*	-.283 (.054)	-.379*
Rural = 1	-.075 (.041)	-.105*	-.093 (.050)	-.129*
<b>Group Resources</b>				
Church	.151 (.067)	.130*	.152 (.067)	.130*
Black Org.	.320 (.081)	.231*	.299 (.081)	.216*
Racial Identification	.101 (.083)	.070	.117 (.083)	.080
<b>Controls</b>				
Age	.027 (.063)	.026	.021 (.062)	.021
Education	.117 (.083)	.094	.106 (.082)	.086
Income	.149 (.088)	.104*	.154 (.087)	.107*
<b>Interactions</b>				
Service $\times$ Black $\geq$ 50 %			.195 (.092)	.214*
Service $\times$ Rural			.112 (.090)	.128
Intercept		.085 (.095)		.108 (.098)
Cases		231		231
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>		.282		.329

Note: Cell entries represent both unstandardized (b) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression coefficients. All tests are one-tailed tests where \* =  $p < .05$ . All variables coded 0–1.

pothesis finds support, the fourth fails to do so. The interaction between military experience and rural residency ( $\text{Service} \times \text{Rural}$ ) is in the hypothesized direction, i.e., positive, indicating that it increased the likelihood of activism, yet it remains insignificant, suggesting veterans participated no more than nonveterans in the rural south.<sup>26</sup> The results for nonveterans work in the opposite direction. For them, both contextual factors—the unmoderated effects of counties in which black southerners were in the majority, and rural residency, reduced high-risk activism among this group by approximately 38 and 13%, respectively. There are no substantive changes from the first model for group-based resources or the

control variables: religiosity and black organizational membership continued to inform activism, as did increasing income.

### Nonvoting Political Activism

I now turn to relatively low-risk activism, where we expect to find smaller, yet still tangible effects accruing to military experience. Table 2 supports my contention that military experience among black southerners increased the likelihood by approximately 7% that veterans would undertake political activism over and above the baseline group, nonveterans, even as group-based resources are taken into account. Among conventional explanations for nonvoting political activism, membership in both the church and secular organizations remain important predictors of low-risk participation, while solidarity failed to spark it (nonvoting political activism) among black southerners. Likewise, the contextual variables and sociodemographic variables behaved as they did in Table 1, with higher income consistently increasing political participation, and a high concentration of blacks in the population depressing it.

As we move to examine the results from the second model, the one in which the contextual effects of military experience are examined, the results are a bit mixed. Again, the product terms carry the same interpretation here as they did in model for high-risk activism. Beginning with the coefficient for “service,” it seems that military experience spurred nonvoting political activism for black southerners in areas in which it should have made no difference: where whites were in the majority and where black southerners lived in the city. In these areas, military experience increased the likelihood of nonvoting political activism by approximately 28 percentage points. With the exception of racial identification, the effects for the variables that represent group-based resources continue to promote nonvoting political activism. Among nonveterans, living in a county in which blacks were in the majority depressed activism; living in the rural south had no bearing on it. Of the two product terms, only one suggests that military service encouraged nonvoting political activism: the interaction between military service and rural residence. Here, military experience increased the likelihood of political mobilization by approximately 22 percentage points, confirming my claim that many veterans in the rural south were committed to political mobilization beyond the ballot. To the extent that the coefficient for the interaction term intended to capture the effect of military service in black majority areas isn’t significant, it suggests that black

TABLE 2 OLS Determinants of Low-Risk Activism (Nonvoting Political Activism)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Service	.071 (.043)	.105*	.185 (.076)	.281*
<b>Context</b>				
Black $\geq$ 50%	-.114 (.041)	-.175*	-.084 (.051)	-.129*
Rural = 1	.005 (.041)	.008	-.052 (.047)	-.083
<b>Group Resources</b>				
Church	.173 (.063)	.171*	.175 (.063)	.160*
Black Org.	.176 (.077)	.146*	.175 (.077)	.159*
Racial Identification	.031 (.080)	.024	.031 (.075)	.024
<b>Controls</b>				
Age	.022 (.060)	.025	.013 (.060)	.015
Education	.084 (.079)	.078	.092 (.079)	.086
Income	.150 (.083)	.120*	.155 (.082)	.123*
<b>Interactions</b>				
Service $\times$ Black $\geq$ 50 %			-.031 (.086)	-.039
Service $\times$ Rural			.171 (.085)	.225*
Intercept	.106 (.091)		.061 (.094)	
Cases	237		237	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.159		.147	

Note: Cell entries represent both unstandardized (b) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression coefficients. All tests are one-tailed tests where \* =  $p < .05$ . All variables coded 0–1.

veterans were no different than black nonveterans in their propensity to participate in low-risk political activism in these counties.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the results support the proposition that military service increased the likelihood of political activism, particularly in areas of the South that

<sup>27</sup>Here, as it did with voting, racial density affected black veterans’ propensity for activism  $F(1, 225) = 3.87, p < .050$  where veterans in urban and white-majority areas were more likely to have been active than those in black-majority areas; but there were no discernable difference as it pertained to urban/rural distinctions among veterans  $F(1, 225) = .03, p < .861$ .

generally discouraged activism of any kind. In this regard, the findings confirm what we learned from the interviews: veterans were determined to undermine status quo conditions in the postwar south, even if it meant enduring physical threats and the prospect of economic ruin. There are, however, at least two differences worth noting, both of which accrue to the interaction between military service and the contextual variables. When the percent of blacks in the county moderates the effect of military experience on activism, veterans were more motivated than nonveterans to challenge white political dominance when high-risk activism, indexed by voting, was the instrument for doing so. However, when the mode of activism switched from high to relatively low-risk political activism, veterans were no different than nonveterans to engage in this type of activism. The additional benefit of military experience in the first, but not the second mode of activism is likely due to the visibility associated with voting versus nonvoting activism, especially in black-majority counties. That is, even though campaigning and talking to others about politics were visible, neither entailed a visit to a public polling place where white supremacists were more likely to threaten prospective voters as a means of deterring blacks in these areas from using the ballot. This finding is consistent with narratives in which many black veterans in the black-belt South were determined to exercise their right to vote, a determination based in large measure on their military service (Dittmer 1994; Henry 2000; Payne 1995).

The second product term, the one in which the effect of military experience was hypothesized to have been more salient in rural versus urban areas, bore fruit for nonvoting political activism (low-risk activism), but failed yield any tangible results for voting (high-risk activism). One explanation for why veterans were more likely than nonveterans to engage in political activism in the rural versus urban south may have rested on veterans' ability to mobilize in the relative absence of the networks, economic independence, and activist churches that were more prevalent in southern metropolises. Under these circumstances, perhaps it's the case that black veterans' determination to challenge the political status quo led them to participate in political activism beyond the ballot, something that generally requires more initiative and energy, if not courage, than voting in the postwar South. This finding comports with Brooks' (2004) narrative about black veterans in postwar Georgia who, through their political activism in many rural areas, helped defeat some of the politicians who preached white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Using political participation as a proxy for activism, this study's results suggest that military experience indeed served as a springboard from which many black veterans pursued equality. As the interviews made clear, serving overseas exposed black soldiers to a fresh perspective on race and gave them a sense that something was owed them, as well as the confidence to pursue the equal treatment to which they felt entitled, catalyzing their determination to participate in the political process. In this way, the interviews validate Enloe's (1980) work, in which she suggests that minorities who serve in the military are likely to challenge the status quo. Establishing a mechanism through which veterans became likely agents of change, even as alternative explanations are held constant, adds a layer of behavioral specificity to accounts in which black veterans played a part in the ensuing reform (Brooks 2004; Dittmer 1994; Hill 2004; Klinkner and Smith 1999; Morris 1984; Payne 1995). The quantitative data confirmed and generalized the findings of the interviews: many black veterans were willing to challenge southern convention, at least as it pertained to political participation.

These findings inform divergent views on the effectiveness of military service on political activism during the civil rights movement. They challenge Krebs' (2006) assertion that military service, as an experience, failed to sufficiently motivate black veterans to challenge the status quo: on the contrary, I argue, black veterans were not only motivated to interrogate white authority, but many did so. Toward this end, the results both support and build on Mettler's (2005a) work, which argues that black veterans, many of whom took advantage of the GI Bill, were in part politically active during the civil rights movement because of it. The results in this paper support her work insofar as they confirm the activism of black veterans. This paper also extends Mettler's work. She reports, for instance, that 56% of black veterans used the GI Bill, leaving 44% who failed to do so. The data on which I draw had no way of discriminating between those who used the GI Bill versus those who did not. Yet, on average, veterans—presumptively even those who failed to take advantage of the GI Bill—were more likely to assume the risks associated with activism than those who had never served.

The findings also resonate with the work of scholars who study the intersection of race, state institutions, and social justice. Whether the institution in question is the court system or bureaucracies, their

approaches have at least one thing in common: they are all top down (Frymer 2005; Haney-Lopez 1996; Higginbotham 1996; Lieberman 1998; Skrentny 1996, 2002). In each case, minority groups remain at the mercy of judges and bureaucrats, without much agency. This article suggests that the military, as a state institution, was capable of effecting change from the bottom up. For if political participation is in any way indicative of activism of a more general kind, black veterans helped to catalyze change in the South.

In closing, I must confront at least one objection that may be raised in response to this article. It might be argued that in constructing my analysis as I do, I avoid structural-level explanations for the mobilization of black veterans. Indeed, the political opportunity model indicates that black southerners took advantage of relatively favorable structural conditions to push for equality (McAdam 1999). That said, structural-level factors should affect everyone; as such, they are best described as a constant, not a variable. One may also argue that individuals who were involved with black civic institutions were in a better position than others to act upon political opportunities provided by structural-level changes. However, as I have already shown, the effect of military service remained independent of black civic institutions.

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## Appendix Study Description, Question Wording, and Coding

The quantitative data is drawn from the Negro Participation Study, 1961–62, ICPSR Study #7255. Two samples were drawn: one from black southerners, the other from white southerners. The sampling is drawn from the adult, noninstitutionalized population of the 11 former Confederate states. From the popula-

tion of black southerners, 618 adults were interviewed. Approximately 87% of the interviews were completed, all of which were conducted with black interviewers. However, for the current analyses, only males are included. Accordingly, for black southerners  $N = 246$ . The study also consists of a sample of white southerners as well as a sample of black college students. There were 694 completed interviews of whites, and 264 were completed by college students, most of whom were attending school at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Finally, the study also includes in-depth interviews of respondents in four counties.

## Dependent Variables

### Voting Behavior

The voting behavior index is the average score of respondents who were asked the following:

Number of (times) votes in presidential election?  
 Number of (times) votes in gubernatorial elections?  
 Number of (times) votes in school board elections?  
 Number of (times) votes in local elections?  
 Response options: none of them = 0; some = .33;  
 most = .67; all of them = 1. Recoded such that 0 =  
 never; 1 = at least once.

### Political Activism

Have you ever donated money to a candidate?  
 Have you ever attended a political meeting or  
 campaign?  
 Have you ever worked for a candidate?  
 Did you talk to people to influence votes?  
 Responses coded yes = 1; no = 0

## Predictors

### Church

Church attendance is measured by the following: “Would you say you go to church services regularly, often, seldom, or never?”

All items recoded on a 4-point (0–1) interval from “never attend-regularly attend.”

Regularly attend = 1.



### Urbanicity

This question was used to measure were respondents grew up:

“Were you brought up mostly on a farm, in a town, in a small city, or in a large city?”

Recorded such that 1 = large city; else = 0.

### Racial Identification

Racial Identification is indexed by the following items:

- (1) “Would you say that you feel pretty close to other Negro southerners in general, or that you don’t feel much closer to them than you do to other people?”

Recorded to a 4-point 0–1 interval from “feel pretty close-not closer than to others.”

- (2) “How much interest would you say you have in how Negro southerners as a whole are getting along in this country? Do you have a good deal of interest in it, some interest, or not much at all?” Recorded to a 3-point 0–1 interval from “not much at all-a good deal.”

Reliability:  $\alpha = .40$ ; Pro-identification = 1.

### Education

These questions determined the respondent’s highest level of education: “How many grades of school did you finish?”

Recorded 0–1 scale, with four categories in which some college/college degree = 1.

### Age

Actual age in years, compressed into four cohorts where oldest cohort = 1.

### Income

This question measured the income of the respondent:

“How much income have you and your family made altogether during the last year, 1960–1961, before taxes?”

All items recorded on a nine-point scale from \$0–\$7,500 + \$7,500+ = 1.

### Service

Service = 1; else = 0.

### Percent Black > 50%

This is measured with county-level data in which black southerners account for at least 50% of the population. Of the twenty counties in which samples were drawn, there were eight in which blacks constituted at least 50% of the population.

Coded such that 1 = counties where blacks are at least 50% of the population; else = 0.

### Organizational Membership

“How many race relations organization do you belong to?”

Actual number, rescaled to 0–1.

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