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Civil Rights Success and the Politics of Racial Violence*

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This investigation revises the two main explanations for the successes of the civil rights movement: the backlash thesis and business moderation theory. While both theories hinge on the political significance of severe anti-rights violence, neither approach adequately explains variation in the intensity of this contention. Introducing a political mobilization perspective, which draws attention to the competition between segregationist and moderate business organizations, I argue that the structure of local electoral rewards determined the likelihood of official instigation or toleration for anti-rights violence. Case studies of four civil rights campaigns are used to demonstrate that the severity of anti-rights contention depended upon the relative political capacities of these interests. Refining the backlash thesis, it is suggested that the civil rights movement triggered the dramatic clashes necessary for advancing national legislation only where key economic interests lacked the will or political influence to challenge successfully segregationist political mobilization. Recasting business moderation theory, this analysis indicates that victories at the state and local level prior to substantive federal legislation depended not only upon the political leverage of moderate business organizations, but on a corresponding weakness among segregationists.
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I d c i

Perhaps no social movement changed American racial politics and elevated the national commitment to democracy more than the civil rights movement. To explain the stunning triumphs of the movement over the defenders of Jim Crow from 1954 to 1965, two main approaches have been put forth.[1] Many argue that the dramatic clashes between nonviolent civil rights demonstrators and southern law enforcement in Birmingham and Selma were the principal impetus behind the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, respectively. To proponents of this backlash thesis, the movement's effective provocation of shocking clashes between southern police and nonviolent demonstrators heightened the national salience of the civil rights issue and caused Cold War grand strategists to worry about damage to the American image abroad.[2] The vehemence of the southern backlash, so the argument runs, ultimately compelled a reluctant federal government to take decisive action on behalf of African-American civil rights. Other studies, concentrating on civil rights successes at the state and local levels prior to the expanded federal involvement in the mid-1960s, argue that rising concern about the economic costs of white extremism caused business leaders to put aside their personal preferences for segregation in favor of some measure of accommodation.[3] According to this business moderation theory, local successes resulted from business agitation for concessions in response to fears about the actual or anticipated cost of civil rights

1. Drawing from William Gamson, success is used here to mean movement targets yielding new advantages to the challenging group. The Strategy of Social Protest (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1975), 28–37. On the validity of concentrating on new advantages, see Edwin Amenta and Michael P. Young. "Making an Impact: Conceptual and Methodological Implications of the Collective Goods Criterion," in How Social Movements Matter, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 22–41.

2. David J. Garrow, Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978); Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle For Black Equality, 1954–1980 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Doug McAdam,

protests and anti-rights violence. Oddly, although the causal arguments of the backlash thesis and the business moderation theory connect in their focus on anti-rights contention, no attempt has been made to join them together in a more complete explanation for the success of the civil rights movement. This theoretical synthesis is the purpose of this study. First, I substantially revise business moderation theory with the introduction of a political mobilization perspective that addresses the patterns of political competition between business and segregationist organizations over the local responses to civil rights agitation. Secondly, I evaluate the empirical merits of this revision in a reinterpretation of conventional accounts of key struggles of the civil rights movement. Finally, I sketch the causal chain that connects local and national politics to provide a more integrated account of civil rights successes.

P i ic a d Vi e ce

Although both theories hinge on the eruption of anti-rights violence against nonviolent protesters, neither offers a satisfactory explanation for such incidents. In accounting for favorable federal action, the backlash thesis is not so much wrong as it is incomplete because southern brutality and tolerance for the violent repression of civil rights supporters is merely assumed. Forgotten among the memories of the harassment, beatings, and murder of peaceful demonstrators are the differing responses to protest across the South. While all southern states met NAACP desegregation lawsuits and civil rights demonstrations with various forms of legalistic repression, few seemed to countenance widespread white violence or police brutality against civil rights protesters.[4] Not only is variation in the intensity of resistance overlooked, it is implicitly assumed that only a few southerners were aware that white violence might have negative repercussions or provoke federal intervention. Laurie Pritchett, the police chief of Albany, Georgia, who defeated a massive civil rights campaign, is singled out as unusually canny in responding to protest with nonviolent legal repression.[5] Yet many others responded in a similar manner and many—from the director of Mississippi's Sovereignty Commission to the notorious Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama—were well aware that violent white backlash might provoke federal intervention or attract negative publicity.[6] Why then, despite

an awareness of these risks, were certain states and localities nevertheless violent in their opposition to the civil rights movement? Soaring at the level of national politics, the backlash thesis assumes these violent eruptions and elides this puzzling southern diversity. To the extent that the backlash thesis depends on the generation of dramatic clashes against nonviolent demonstrators, a theory that explains the severity of southern anti-rights violence is necessary.

Closer to local politics, business moderation theory serves as a useful starting point. Although typically used to explain the eventual shift away from reactionary

segregation.[10] In other words, in addition to the political mobilization of business interests, the political leverage of organized segregationists shaped the degree to which local officials supported or tolerated anti-rights violence. An explanation for the success of the civil rights movement in provoking the dramatic clashes necessary for national success must therefore address the interaction between these two factors. Yet, despite ample knowledge of both interests, business moderation arguments do not develop the implications of this interaction to provide an adequate theory of local politics across a range of cases.

Of course, other factors affected official support for anti-rights violence as well. To the extent that African Americans possessed local electoral leverage, organized black voters could be expected to influence official responses to civil rights mobilization and anti-rights violence. Additional considerations such as agitation of southern liberals or federal intervention, mattered in as much as they advantaged either of these competing interests. However, these factors were generally not sufficient to stem the tide of racial backlash because southern African-Americans were largely excluded from electoral participation, liberals in the region lacked political clout, and the federal government before 1964 was far too hesitant to make a difference.[11]

Elaborating upon the disparate insights of prior studies, I argue that tacit official support for, or acceptance of, anti-rights violence is predicted in those places in which segregationists were well organized and business interests were passive or politically weak. A lack of organized business demands for the containment of racial extremism coupled with segregationist mobilization meant that resistance forces had direct representation of their views or were able to limit

matched against weak segregationist organizations. In Selma, both local economic interests and segregationists contended to define the response to civil rights activity. Jackson combines business quiescence with statewide segregationist mobilization. In a rough manner, this survey delineates the relationship between anti-rights contention and patterns of local organization among the most salient interests. While a consideration of these cases cannot be regarded as an exhaustive test of the political mobilization argument sketched above, revisiting them with attention to the interaction of business moderates and organized segregationists offers suggestive insights concerning the bases of local and national civil rights successes.

Albany, Georgia

Situated within the heart of Georgia's rural black belt, the overwhelming vote

most Albany narratives. In his analysis of the Albany Movement, Morris frequently refers to the "white power structure" (composed of segregationists to be sure), but no specific organizations representing business interests appear to have urged negotiation.[15] In early February, the local business merchants and the Chamber of Commerce had expressed dissatisfaction with the unwillingness of the city commissioners to discuss the restoration of bus service after the movement's boycott had bankrupted the line. Other than this incident, business interests seem virtually invisible during the nine months of protest, and never did they seek to change Pritchett's strategy. Even as the local merchants smarted under the boycott of downtown businesses, they were unwilling to push for concessions.[16] Contrary to what might have been presumed from a business moderation perspective, Pritchett's self-control was not due to business mobilization.[17]

What is especially noteworthy about the Albany case is the political irrelevance of organized segregationists. Although comparable localities in Alabama and Mississippi would have almost certainly been home to a chapter of the Citizens' Council (initially the White Citizens' Council) and sipo1.1(r)-ps73.2(a3-274(organbdr)-urge-486.9(due)el-264(47uptebac)(vicek4(erent)1394(f(the)zens')-277.9(du2ncil))-94(t8sip)McMng

While factions of the Klan thrived in sections of Georgia, they were more concentrated in and around Atlanta. A massive FBI investigation of the hooded order in the mid-1960s found not a single chapter of the Klan in Dougherty County (where Albany is located), very few in southeast Georgia generally, and only two within a 30-mile radius.[20] Although these Klan affiliates might have fomented trouble, they lacked the capacity to threaten Pritchett with electoral reprisals. Pritchett was able to make clear that these outsiders were not welcome in Albany. Consequently, Pritchett made certain that King was protected from harm, that unruly whites were kept in check, and that the sole Klan rally in this period held by United Klans of America occurred outside the city limits. Furthermore, without a local bastion of organized violent whites that might lash out against civil rights activists, Pritchett and others were spared the choice between tolerating the economic costs of white thuggery or the political costs of suppressing anti-rights violence.

In brief, despite the zealous commitment to segregation among Albany whites, there was a notable lack of organized political demands for harsher repression or independently initiated private repression. Even the segregationist editor of the sole local newspaper supported Pritchett's actions. Due to the unusual lack of competition between those dedicated to the brutal defense of segregation and others pushing for concessions, Albany was less likely to erupt into bloody violence.[21] Contrary to prior accounts, which concentrate almost entirely on Pritchett's disposition and tactical cleverness, I suggest that it was the peculiar absence of local segregationist and business mobilization that gave him the strategic flexibility to maintain segregation. While Pritchett's response was not an automatic outcome of this situation, his use of nonviolent legal repression depended upon the feebleness of state and local segregationist organizations.

Atlanta, Georgia

Whereas business interests seldom appear in studies of the response to civil rights mobilization in Albany, no account of Atlanta in this period passes over the influence of the city's business elite on local politics and the response to civil rights agitation. Without exaggeration, Atlanta is the classic example of the business moderation hypothesis—a "city too busy to hate." The city's leadership

20. United States House Committee on Un-American Activities, The Present-Day Ku Klux Klan Movement (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1967); also, United States House Committee on Un-American Activities, Hearings Regarding HR 15678, HR 15689, HR 15744, HR 15754, and HR 16099, Bills to Curb Terrorist Organizations: Hearings, 89th Congress, 2nd session (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 1399–1521.

21. David L. Chappell, Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 222.

had long cultivated an image of a progressive New South metropolis and the local officeholders maintained close ties to the business community. Both Mayor William Hartsfield (1942–1961) and his successor Ivan Allen, Jr. (1962–1970) emerged from the business community, the latter having been the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce president.[22] As the business moderation theory predicts, this ensemble of economic and political elites had no use for costly defiance. Bartley explains:

> The New South leadership in Atlanta was fully aware of the economic consequences of racial turmoil in Little Rock, and, well before the city desegregated in the fall of 1961, its leaders were maneuvering frantically to protect the city's progressive image from the type of publicity that racial hysteria had earned for Little Rock and New Orleans.[23]

In addition, the presence of a substantial black middle class and the incorporation of African-American voters into a dominant coalition with upper income whites weighed heavily against a reactionary defense of segregation. Hornsby maintains that after 1949 this coalition became "invincible" and "no person could expect to be elected mayor of Atlanta . . . without its support."[24]

As previously noted, organized segregationists were comparatively weak in Georgia. The Citizens' Council, which generally flourished in plantation counties, lacked a following in Atlanta, and the Georgia States' Rights Council, after a flurry of elite support in the middle 1950s, declined as state factional politics rent the organization in the 1958 gubernatorial election. At the time Atlanta shifted toward compliance with the 1954 Brown decision in 1961, the state's political leadership was already in the process of retreating from massive resistance and therefore no outside assistance was available to bolster a local segregationist faction.[25] Atlanta segregationists thus lacked sufficient political clout to thwart the business and upper income moderates. Without electoral leverage, the many Klan chapters that encircled Atlanta were vulnerable to local state repression.

Consequently, civil rights events advanced on two fronts. First, in the wake of the Greensboro sit-ins, students from local black colleges initiated a campaign to desegregate downtown stores on March 15, 1960. Some 200 students sat-in in numerous establishments and afterwards continued to picket and boycott these downtown businesses. These events triggered the beginning of protracted

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negotiations with these interests.[26] Secondly, the ongoing litigation to desegregate Atlanta's public schools approached culmination in the fall of 1961. Local political1961.

violence. After much contemplation following the defeat in Albany, the movement went to Birmingham in 1963, and then to Selma in 1965.

Selma, Alabama

"They picked Selma just like a movie producer would pick a set," declared the city mayor in retrospect.[28] Aware of the value of provocative confrontations, King and his associates chose Selma because of the high likelihood of anti-rights violence in defense of egregious inequalities. Situated in the heart of the Alabama black belt, the prospects in Selma for a hostile response to civil rights mobilization seemed promising indeed. The economic base of Dallas County, where Selma is located, was closely tied to labor-intensive agricultural production (including cotton), and rural white reliance on black tenant farmers persisted. Although nearly all were denied voting rights, African Americans made up about half of the city's 30,000 residents. Under these conditions, white mobilization to protect Jim Crow against black voter registration was hardly surprising. In contrast to the weak segregationist movement found in Georgia, both the Citizens' Council and the Klan had strongholds in Alabama.

Dallas County provided the Citizens' Council with especially robust support. In 1954, "1,200 Dallas Countians gathered" to hear the call for organization and 600 "became charter members of the Dallas County Citizens' Council"—the first such entity in the state after the Brown decision. After a single year, the local organization claimed a membership of 1,500—one-quarter of all adult white males in the county—and the mayor "immediately led his municipal machine into a firm alliance with the new segregationist organization."[29] In 1958, state senator Walter Givhan, the head of the Dallas County Council and member of the segregationist Alabama State Sovereignty Commission, assumed leadership of the state association and relocated the headquarters to Selma.[30] Although the council had been in decline since 1958 and exerted leverage in only a few counties, it seems reasonable to ass.5(au(y)-298.7(o-216.4(t80(h)21(e))19(e)0(l7.6(i)0nh'ni)14.7(e)-19(5[(or)16
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> Democratic party, and various local officials and state legislators on the other appears to have been the principal source of the unusually aggressive and unanimous commitment of the white community of Dallas County to an extremist racial position.[31]

None of the various Klan factions had a local unit in Dallas County; nevertheless the Klan had sufficient statewide membership to be a factor in electoral calculations. George Wallace, who had spurned the Klan in the 1958 gubernatorial election and lost to John Patterson, vowed that he would never again be outdone in appeals to racial hatred. In his next run for the governorship in 1962, Wallace cultivated the support of white supremacist organizations.[32] Segregationist mobilization made taking even slightly moderate positions politically untenable. Although in Georgia weakly organized segregationists allowed for Governor Vandiver to assist Pritchett in keeping order, Wallace's political support in Alabama from white supremacist organizations likely inclined him against using the state police to keep violent whites in check.

Local economic interests in the mid-1960s were divided over the best response to civil rights demands. Closely tied to the conservative political machine that had dominated city politics, the Dallas County Chamber of Commerce lacked any interest in providing leadership. However, other business interests were less satisfied with the machine's lackluster efforts to attract new business investments to the city. Joseph T. Smitherman, a local merchant and political insurgent, helped to organize "a committee of businessmen to seek new industry for the county."[33] Based on this support, Smitherman challenged and defeated the machine candidate in the mayoral election of 1964. Even before Smitherman's inauguration in October 1964, key business leaders with a "passion for industrial development" and afraid of negative publicity arranged to meet with representatives of the movement and agreed to continue to do so regularly.[34] To implement his plan to burnish the city's image, Smitherman created the position of director of public safety (with jurisdiction within the city limits though not around the county courthouse) and appointed Wilson Baker, a racial moderate, to the post. With the mobilization of supportive urban business interests, the defeat of the machine candidate, and the installation of a new head of law enforcement, an ostensibly hostile situation appears more ambiguous.

For a time, Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark resisted the impulse to respond with violence; yet, the Selma campaign will always be remembered for "Bloody

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31. Thornton, "Municipal Politics," 55.

participated in the brutal suppression of civil rights marchers. In statewide

to expose the outrageous injustices of the Magnolia State, reprisals and violence were commonplace. The list of statewide casualties included: "1000 arrests, 35 shooting incidents, 30 buildings bombed, 35 churches burned, 80 people beaten, and at least six murdered."[49] In Jackson, on several occasions over that summer, arson damaged buildings, activists were beaten and fired upon, and crosses were burned. The statewide figures for this period are likewise illustrative. A survey of the New York Times Index from 1961 (the year in which civil rights agitation in Mississippi escalated) to 1965, indicates that the Times published nearly 500 stories of anti-rights activity in the Magnolia State for that period.[50] Almost 160, or about one-third of these events, involved violence by white supremacists and law enforcement, including bombings, arson, sniper fire, beatings, and murder—the most notorious incident being the 1964 triple-murder of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in Neshoba County. Approximately another 50 stories reported acts of police and citizen intimidation of civil rights activists and supporters, such as cross-burning, threats, and verbal taunts. Together, coverage of anti-rights events in Mississippi alone (1961–1965) amounted to over one-quarter of all stories in the Index for all 11 southern states.

Although the major campaigns in Birmingham and Selma generated more concentrated media coverage and elicited more dramatic clashes between nonviolent demonstrators and law enforcement, the continuous flow of stories on violence in Mississippi no doubt reinforced the national opinion that civil rights demanded attention. Beginning with the 1963 campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, polling data in this period indicate a sharp increase in the percentage of the public identifying civil rights as the most urgent issue facing the nation. During the summer of 1964, at which time the Freedom Summer campaign was the principal movement operation, 47 percent of the public identified civil rights as the "most important problem confronting the country."[51] One commentator on the Mississippi movement observed: "The attacks on them [Freedom Summer participants] and the black families sheltering them exposed, as no amount of public debate could have, what the Southern way of life meant in Mississippi."[52]

As the costs of racial violence, civil rights litigation, local boycotts, and threatened national boycotts of Mississippi products grew clearer, state business leaders belatedly came out in favor of impartial law enforcement, compliance with federal legislation, and making the concessions necessary to improve the state's image. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law in July, the Jackson

49. Woodward, Strange Career, 186.

50. Data collected by the author.

51. George H. Gallup, The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935–1971 (New York: Random House, 1972), 1894.

52. Nicolaus Mills, Like a Holy Crusade: Mississippi, 1964—The Turning of the Civil Rights Movement in America (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1992), 23.

Chamber of Commerce issued a public statement in favor of obedience to the new law.[53] In response, Mayor Thompson went against the expressed position of the governor, the legislature, and his own prior stance, to endorse the Chamber of Commerce statement. For other economic actors, the argument against continued truculence became persuasive only after further violent disruptions during the summer had confirmed fears of declining profit and investment, and the dire effects of negative publicity. On February 3, 1965, the Mississippi Economic Council (the statewide Chamber of Commerce) came out in favor of "order and respect for the law," fair administration of voting laws, support for public education, and compliance with the newly enacted Civil Rights Act of 1964. Others followed, including the Mississippi Manufacturers Association, the Mississippi Bankers Association, and two dozen local chambers of commerce.[54] This shift toward moderation pitted rearguard defenders of the old order, aligned with the Citizens' Council and Delta plantation interests, against urban industrialists, bankers, and others espousing relatively greater willingness to countenance change.[55] This rupture signaled the beginning of a transformation in the racial politics of Mississippi.

With the outpouring of support for the preservation of public order, Governor Johnson staked out a new position. Whereas in 1963 Lt. Governor Johnson had promised the Jackson Citizens' Council to "stand firm . . . to uphold States' Rights and Racial Integrity," nearly two years later in January 1965, Johnson as governor issued a surprisingly stern warning to extremists. "If they believe they can disregard the laws of the state," he asserted in a speech, "they had better think a second time."[56] Appearing before the United States Civil Rights Commission in February 1965, Johnson affirmed that Mississippi would obey the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and appealed to the nation for patient understanding. In another speech in February, Governor Johnson declared that citizen resistance to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be confined to the courts and affirmed that "violence against any person or group will not be tolerated." Also, after the bloodshed of Freedom Summer and calls from business interests to contain anti-rights violence, steps were belatedly taken to investigate white supremacist organizations and to remove Klansmen from state law enforcement. Although anti-rights violence was not stamped out overnight and public officials were typically satisfied with the merest appearance of accommodation, state policy had shifted in favor of the suppression of violent white supremacists and away from unvarnished

53. On this shift, see Sallis and Quincy Adams, "Desegregation in Jackson, Mississippi."
54. McMillen, "Development of Civil Rights," 165.
55. Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement.
56. Speech of Lieutenant Governor Paul B. Johnson to the Jackson Citizens' Council, May 17, 1963, Johnson Family Papers, University of Southern Mississippi, Series II, Sub-Series 4: Speeches; Laurence Stern, "Miss. Governor Hits Racial Extremists," The Washington Post, January 31, 1965.

extremism.[57] While other studies credit business mobilization for this critical shift away from extremism, seemingly absent is sufficient appreciation for the political implications of the prior inaction of business.[58] Interestingly, the most astute commentary on the ramifications of the political quiescence of business moderates appears not in secondary sources but in a speech by Lt. Governor Carroll Gartin to an audience of business leaders after Freedom Summer:

> Too often business has remained quiet in hours of crisis and in the midst of controversy. They have too frequently failed to take a position; to speak out; to mold public opinion, or, as some would say to stand up and be counted lest they hurt their business or are criticized and, in their failure to speak up—in their silence—they have permitted the more irresponsible among our citizens, the extremists on any side to become the voice of our entire State—of our total population—and the public generally throughout this nation is led to believe that this small voice speaks for our whole State.[59]

of segregationists in the city and the state. Along with business dominance, the political weakness of segregationists encouraged authorities to suppress violent white supremacists and accept the desegregation of many public facilities prior to 1964. By contrast, the strength of organized segregationists in Selma and especially within the surrounding hinterland, as well as the corresponding weakness of accommodating business interests, provided the civil rights movement with a volatile setting for a major campaign. Prior accounts of the