

## **Taking over the State from Below - Populist Violence and the 1920s Ku Klux Klan**

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The rise of right wing populism is probably the most important political phenomenon of this decade. The largest political systems in the developed and the developing world are swept with anti-establishment anti-elitist politics, nativist and xenophobic rhetoric, and demands for protectionist economic measures. The inflammatory and exclusionary style of many right wing populist movements, sporadic incidents of violence against minorities and asylum seekers, and overt use of violence of some of the far right populist movements raises concern about a potential increase of physical violence accompanying the populist wave. Rhetorically targeting immigrants and minorities always has the potential of violence, however not all right wing populist movements directly use or even encourage the use of physical violence by its members. For example, far right Jobbik in Hungary was linked to paramilitary organizations targeting the Roma population but the far right English UKIP is not linked to particular incidents of violence.<sup>1</sup> Under what conditions then will populist movements be violent – employ a branch specialized in violence, encourage member violence, and be attached to multiple acts of violence? The question is at the center of this paper. Since the current wave of populism is ongoing, the paper takes advantage of a historical case of a surge of a right wing populist movement that targeted minorities and immigrants.

The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s United States varied in the use of violence across location and time, it was violent in the South and Southwest but not in the Midwest and Northeast. The 1920s Klan differed from the KKK of earlier and later periods; it was not limited to the South or to violent vigilante "night riding". The Klan of that era had branches throughout the US and drew the largest share of membership in the Midwest. It was a mass movement-- its membership is estimated at between three and six million members in the early years of the decade. It was white supremacist but

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<sup>1</sup> Though research suggests their supporters are more likely to support interethnic violence. "UKIP Shares More with the Far Right than it Admits" Guardian March 12,2012 Mathew Goodwin

bundled together other agendas that made it an emblematic populist movement – it was anti establishment and anti elitist, majoritarian, nativist and strongly opposed to immigration, and it promoted traditional patriarchal family values. Given the Klan's populist nature, and the variation in the use of violence, the movement serves as an ideal case to draw on and begin theorizing on the potential for violence of populist movements.

The paper evaluates several lines of explanation for variation in violence common in social science literature on violence and on social movements. First, I examine state capacity and the relationship between law enforcement and the movement . I find these to be the most convincing for the case of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. Where state capacity was low, the Klan used violence more liberally. This was not only the result of the absence of law enforcement, but largely of a tradition of vigilante violence that made the general population amenable to non-state violence. Even when crimes were investigated, the community did not cooperate with investigation as witnesses, and when serving as members of grand juries and juries, this was the case in the Southwest. I next examine the South's racist repressive system as a cause for Klan violence. The Klan's revival and its violence in the Deep South cannot be understood outside the context of Southern racism. Violence against the black community was an ongoing practice entrenching inequality and depriving African Americans of civil and human rights. But Klan violence in the South extended beyond the black community, the Klan 'policed' white victims at least as often as it did black victims.<sup>2</sup> In this area, law enforcement was relatively well functioning, but a tradition of vigilante violence toward the black community still facilitated Klan violence against both black and white victims as it meant both community and law enforcement viewed the Klan as a legitimate actor.

I then look into electoral competition as an explanatory factor for the Klan's violence. Previous racist violence in the South was interpreted as an attempt to put a wedge between lower class white and black populations, and prevent a populist interracial movement. However, I find this argument unconvincing for the 1920s Klan as by the 1920s such a coalition was already outside of the realm of possibilities in the South.

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<sup>2</sup> Maclean p. 163. Alexander. In the Southwest the majority of victims were white as I discuss below.

The differences in opposition to the Klan in the South and Southwest compared to the Midwest probably did play a part in attenuating the movement's violence in the latter region. In parts of the Midwest (as well as the Northeast) the targets of Klan propaganda were more empowered and organized than African Americans and the outcast whites the Klan targeted in the South and Southwest. There were concentrations of Catholics and Jews who were able to counter Klan violence with a combination of counter violence, boycotts, and a sway of public opinion. This is not to say that the Klan was weak or benign in these regions. The Klan spread propaganda targeting Catholics and Jews, boycotted their businesses, and made efforts to dismiss them from positions in the public sector and from public office. The movements also intimidated minorities by marching in the streets clad in white robes. However, the continuous violence against individuals common in the South and Southwest was absent here. In addition, the paper looks into the individual characteristics of Klan members across regions and finds there was no significant difference in who joined the Klan that can account for variation in regional violence.

As I discuss in the final section, the case of the Ku Klux Klan points at several conditions under which a populist movement is more likely to be violent. Most notably, populist violence is facilitated by the community, and the community is more likely to condone violence if law enforcement and/or trust in law enforcement institutions are low. In addition, the less empowered and organized the targets of violence are in society, the more likely is populist violence.

The case of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s is a dark and fascinating chapter in American history. This paper offers a direction into the study of the case and its relevance for current day politics and society. Obtaining systematic local data on Klan violence during this period would be challenging because of under-reporting of Klan crimes, but it is a necessary next step toward understanding the mechanisms behind the variation in Klan violence.

### **Populism and Violence**

The recent rise of populism has brought on much debate about the definition of the concept. Though no single definition has emerged, there is convergence on certain elements of populist movements. First and foremost, populists oppose establishment elites and portray them as corrupt and as failing to represent the 'true'

will of the people.<sup>3</sup> As such, they oppose political leaders, economic elites, intellectual elites, and the media. Another notable characteristic of populists is their dichotomous world view. The populist world is divided into good and evil: the pure people as opposed to the corrupt elites. One implication is that politics of compromise becomes far more difficult, as traditional elites are delegitimized and cooperation cannot be morally justified. Populist rhetoric is people centered, which means it is focused on the 'will' of the people, perceived as the will of the majority of people or the will of the 'real' people, those who are the core and legitimate part of the community. This is a majoritarian perception of the people which discounts minorities and oppositions.

Here in the definition of the people, right and left wing populists diverge. Where left wing populists have a broad definition of the people as the non-elites, right wing populists view the nation in narrow terms. They are nativist and oppose immigration and multiculturalism; they oppose granting minority rights; and they view the national in-group as those conforming to traditional values.<sup>4</sup> In terms of economic agenda, populists vary. While they criticize economic elites they do not want to abolish free markets, but rather have markets work in their favor, which may imply a variety of economic ideas and arrangements.<sup>5</sup>

The radical right populist parties that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in Europe are not directly linked to violence. Scholars often differentiate between these and neo-fascist movements based on their attitudes toward violence. Violence was an inherent part of fascist and neo-fascist movements, but most radical right movements formally oppose the use of violent means.<sup>6</sup> However, the rhetoric of radical right populists on minorities and immigrants has been suspected of inciting violence.<sup>7</sup> The recent wave of migration to Europe and the growth of radical right populist parties brought on more violent incidents such as vandalism of property, attacks of mosques, and of individuals of minority communities. Moreover, outside the Western European context, several radical right populist movements have been linked to various forms of violence. In Hungary and Slovakia, radical right parties are or held ties to anti-

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<sup>3</sup> Mudde 2004. P. 543

<sup>4</sup> Mudde 2006; Norris and Inglehart 2016

<sup>5</sup> Snyder p. 88

<sup>6</sup> Betz p. 108

<sup>7</sup> Mudde; Berlet and Lyons

Roma paramilitary organizations. Far more extreme (but not novel) are the cases of Turkey and the Philippines where governments employ populist rhetoric to justify the use of violence against sectors of the population. Thus, right wing populists are not necessarily violent or incite social violence but they can be under certain conditions I explore below.

### **The 1920s Ku Klux Klan as a Right Wing Populist Movement**

Inspired by D.W Griffith's film 'Birth of a Nation', which heroically depicted the KKK of the reconstruction era, William Joseph Simmons, a veteran of multiple fraternal organizations, "revived" the Ku Klux Klan in 1915. The Klan's revival was also linked to the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish industrialist convicted in the murder of a thirteen year old employee.<sup>8</sup> The Klan of the era then was founded on exclusionary identity and Southern pride. In the early years however, the movement was not particularly successful. It was one among many local fraternal organizations. In 1920 Simmons hired two public relations specialists, Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke, who rebranded the organization. The two bundled together several issues under the umbrella of 'One Hundred Percent Americanism'. Tyler and Clarke defined the borders of Americanism as such: It is a society of white, native born, Protestants; its members support traditional family values, and oppose those who stray from them (liberated women, abandoning husbands, disobedient youth, the unemployed, criminals), they also promoted prohibition, supported public schools over parochial schools, and opposed corruption of politicians and law enforcement.

Historical accounts explaining the Klan of that era often define it as populist,<sup>9</sup> because of the movement's strong opposition to corruption and to big businesses and growing economic concentration. The Klan was a small business middle and lower middle class movement that sought to reassert its supporters' place in social and political life. Moreover, the movement was in a sense the successor of the Populist Party of the 1890s. It shared with the Populist Party the criticism of big business capitalism, a resistance to elitist politics and economics. However, unlike the Populist Party, it was white supremacist and certainly did not view an interracial alliance as a goal or even a possibility. The populist nature of the Klan was reinforced by the

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<sup>8</sup> Chalmers p. 71; Maclean 1991

<sup>9</sup> Maclean 1994; Moore 1999

support of the 1890s populist leader, Tom Watson, who by 1920 abandoned the idea of an interracial movement in favor of the Klan's brand of populism.<sup>10</sup>

One Hundred percent Americanism was a success. Tyler and Clarke's framing and professional recruiting efforts were aided by media exposure. In 1921, the newspaper *New York World* published a series of investigative stories on the Ku Klux Klan that were later syndicated throughout the country. The articles exposed the Klan's rituals and ideology, and they detailed over a hundred acts of Klan violence. The reporting prompted a congressional investigation, but the outcome was in favor of the Klan. The combination of national exposure and Simmons' charismatic testimony in defense of the Klan in congress led to massive recruitment for the organization.

The recruitment message of the KKK was adjusted according to local needs, but the general framework of One Hundred Percent Americanism was applied everywhere. And the Klan indeed expanded everywhere. The most prominent stronghold of the Klan was the Midwest. In Indiana for example one out of every three white Protestant males was a Klan member.<sup>11</sup> The Klan had successful branches in the South, the Southwest, the West, and even the Northeast with large membership in Pennsylvania, Maine, and New York State.<sup>12</sup> The Klan's activities included marches and parades in uniforms; patrolling through minority neighborhoods; cross burning; boycotts of Jewish and Catholic businesses; direct acts of violence that ranged from flogging to feathering and tarring to lynching; alongside the movement held social events such as picnics and family friendly fares. In some places like the Deep South the Klan mixed up all these activities however, in other places violence was for the most part absent.

While the original reconstruction era Ku Klux Klan was a vigilante organization dedicated to violence and intimidation of newly liberated African Americans in order to suppress political rights and social equality, the 1920s Klan was a more broad based organization. It operated as a political force and as a large social movement albeit a racist and bigoted one. As an indication for its role in civil society, in addition to the fraternal organization, the Klan had auxiliary organizations, the

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<sup>10</sup> Maclean 1994 p. 48 Chalmers p. 71

<sup>11</sup> Jackson p. 154; Moore

<sup>12</sup> Jackson; Chalmers

Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) and youth groups such as Junior KKK.<sup>13</sup> Though the message of the Klan was similar everywhere, the repertoire of strategies of the organization changed from one area to another. Most notably, in the South and Southwest, the Klan was a violent movement. It had units tasked with acts of violence,<sup>14</sup> it encouraged acts of violence of at least some of its members, and it was associated with violent outcomes. The pattern of violence differed between the South and the Southwest. In the South approximately half of the violence was directed against African Americans and half of it against whites.<sup>15</sup> In the Southwest the majority of the targets of violence were white, in most places there were no violent incidents targeting African Americans, and the level of violence against whites was more severe than in the South. Though much of the propaganda of the Klan was directed at minorities, a lot of the violence was directed at individuals who broke the Klan's traditional moral code as elaborated in the following section.

In the Midwest (and in the Northeast) the Klan rarely perpetrated direct physical vigilante violence. This is not to say that the organization did not target minorities. The Klan organized boycotts against minority owned businesses, at times leading them to financial ruin; it attempted and succeeded in dismissing Jewish and Catholic teachers and health workers; it campaigned against minorities running for office; and it often spread false accounts on the influence of Catholics and Jews in public life.

What accounts for the variation in Klan strategies? The following section examines several lines of explanation for group violence common in social science literature. I evaluate these explanation based on historical analysis of the case of the 1920s KKK.

### **Accounting for Klan Violence**

#### **Law Enforcement and State Capacity**

The ties between low state capacity and the eruption of non-state violence have been explored in depth in social science literature. The inability of states to respond to challenges has been identified as a cause for revolution, civil war, and

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<sup>13</sup> Blee 1991

<sup>14</sup> Maclean

<sup>15</sup> Maclean 1994. P. 163

other forms of organized violence.<sup>16</sup> According to these theories, the failure of a state to perform its tasks because of weak institutions, means, and law enforcement capacity creates an opportunity for domestic and international challengers seeking to expand their powers. Applying this theoretical approach to the study of social movements, Tarrow (1994) argues that violence is the most powerful form of collective action "only in regimes in which order has broken down, or in which citizens are divided by fundamental ethnic, religious or national cleavages..."<sup>17</sup> The latter possibility, ethnic and racial cleavages as a source of violence will be discussed in the following section.

Several aspects of theories linking state capacity to violence apply to the case of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. First, the most violent Klan branches were located in areas where law enforcement was weak, inadequate, or under-developed. The Klan was most violent in the Southwest. While there are no accurate records on the number of Klan violent incidents, researchers have been able to estimate hooded violence based on contemporary newspapers, and other primary resources including court trials held in later years.<sup>18</sup> The height of violence was in 1921-1922. For example, there were 60 cases of hooded violence in the spring and summer of 1921 in Dallas County alone. Oklahoma was the most violent state; in the summer of 1922 the state was swept with Klan violence, with Tulsa County leading in violent incidents.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the Southwest, the growth of cities was rapid and was accompanied by a sharp rise in crime.<sup>20</sup> While urbanization accelerated all over the country, a process that supported the Klan's spread, in the relatively rural Southwest the growth was especially stark. Between 1910 and 1920 the United States' urban population increased by 28.8 percent, whereas in Arkansas it increased 43.3 percent, in Oklahoma, 68.5 percent and in Texas, 61.2 percent.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the surge in crime in the region added to an already lawless environment.

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<sup>16</sup> Fearon and Laitin; Skocpol; opportunity structure theory

<sup>17</sup> Tarrow p. 104

<sup>18</sup> In 1921 'New York World' published a large exposé on Klan violence documenting hooded violence in the South and Southwest. Several books trace Klan violence, Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*; Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*; Mclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*; Chalmers, 1987; Blee, *Kathleen M. Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s. With a New Preface edition. Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2008.*

<sup>19</sup> Chalmers, 1987; Alexander, 1995

<sup>20</sup> Alexander pp 29-32

<sup>21</sup> Alexander p 27

The practice of battling crime outside the legal system was common in the region which preserved its frontier character into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the practice of vigilante committees was common in most frontier areas. These were groups composed of members of the community who took upon themselves the role of punishing or removing unwanted elements from the community.<sup>22</sup> To that end vigilante committees would obtain suspects, determine their fate, and execute punishments which ranged from flogging to hanging. Vigilante committees were common in frontier areas, but while in the Midwest the practice disappeared by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in the Southwest the committees were a common practice into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Texas was the state with the most vigilante committees,<sup>23</sup> and Oklahoma was one of the closest to its frontier days, as it only joined the union as an independent state in 1907, a few years prior to the Klan's entry to the area.

The type of Klan violence in the Southwest supports a law enforcement based explanation. The most common type of violence was vigilante "law enforcement." The Klan would identify or receive complaints about certain individuals (men who abandoned their families or had extra material relations, bootleggers, corrupt politicians, and others) and they would set out to violently punish the offenders. The victims of Klan violence in these cases were mostly white. This was the movement's attempt to restore social order in a rapidly changing world. Thus, in a sense the Klan in the Southwest took on the role of a vigilante committee.

The informal institution of vigilante committees facilitated the Klan's violence in several ways. First, the reason vigilante committees existed to begin with was a shortage of reliable formal law enforcement institutions in frontier areas. It is likely that the existence of vigilante committees in the near past indicates that law enforcement institutions were still lacking in the area by the early 1920s. This implies a straight forward relationship between low state capacity and Klan violence. Where adequate policing was absent, the Klan's vigilante arm filled in an enforcement need. The Klan's brand of law enforcement was of course racist, bigoted, and followed the group's own moral code.

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<sup>22</sup> Strain of violence

<sup>23</sup> Brown, Richard Maxwell. *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*. Oxford University Press, 1975. Appendix

Second, vigilante committees of the frontier areas often operated as an extension of existing law enforcement institutions. Having limited capacity, law enforcement viewed vigilante committees as working alongside them for the mutual goal of maintaining order rather than as competing organizations. In places where vigilante committees were a recent practice, the chances for acquiescence of local law enforcement to Klan violence or even cooperation with the Klan violent arms were likely high. There is evidence for such cooperation; in the South and the Southwest, the Klan obtained its victims directly from police custody, and in many cases victims were released abruptly from police custody and then taken by the Klan.<sup>24</sup> The Klan was deeply embedded in local law enforcement. In Dallas, its members included the sheriff of Dallas County, his chief deputies, the police commissioners, the chief of police and the district attorneys. Many police officers in the Southwest joined the Klan, either because they truly saw the movement as assisting law enforcement or because they were intimidated by the Klan's growing power in their communities.<sup>25</sup>

The connection between the Klan and law enforcement was not limited to the South and Southwest. In the Midwest police officers joined the Klan as well.<sup>26</sup> However, in the Midwest there was also far greater opposition to the Klan within the justice system. In Chicago for example, several judges banned Klan members from serving as jurors in trial or in grand jury because they could not be trusted upon to act objectively.<sup>27</sup> The message that the Klan was not a legitimate actor was particularly important since the main difference between the South and Southwest and other regions was the willingness of the community to be policed by the vigilante group. The recent past of vigilante policing in the Southwest, and the long history of extralegal coercion toward African Americans in the South I discuss below, made communities in these regions amenable to the Klan's brand of coercion even if they were not Klan members themselves.

Many historical accounts report that though Klan violence was performed masked and under cover of night, it was not a secret for the community members who

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<sup>24</sup> Chalmers p. 52;

<sup>25</sup> Alexander 46-47

<sup>26</sup> Fryer and Levitt find variation in policemen membership in the Klan in the few locations in their dataset. However they find that in Bowling Green Ohio (their only Midwest location), most or all of the police force was a part of the Klan.

<sup>27</sup> Jackson p. 102

were the individuals who perpetrated the acts of violence.<sup>28</sup> And yet, even in the face of elaborate investigation (by federal law enforcement when the local system failed) it was almost impossible to find evidence and to find local grand jurists that would send indictments against Klan members. In Dallas for example in 1922 a grand jury finally addressed the problem of vigilante justice. Two store owners identified their attackers as three members of the Dallas police operating off duty. However, no indictments were returned and the policemen were only suspended for a short period.<sup>29</sup> In Tulsa Oklahoma the Klan floggings numbered in the hundreds if not thousands. However, when Oklahoma governor, Jack Walton declared martial law in Tulsa after the flogging of a Jewish man released from police custody, the citizens of Tulsa protested for the Klan and against the governor and pushed him out of office.<sup>30</sup> Another example is the case of the Mer Rouge, Louisiana murders of 1922. Four white men were kidnapped and two of them, Watt Daniel and Tom Richards, were murdered by a large Klan mob in Morehouse Parish in northeastern Louisiana. The murders were the culmination of months of Klan versus anti-Klan violence in the parish. The Morehouse grand jury, composed mostly of Klan members, conducted a hasty investigation on the disappearance of the two men and no indictments were returned. The result was an open warfare between Klan supporters and opposition. After a protest from the anti-Klan faction, the governor of Louisiana, John M. Parker, requested federal assistance in the case, and federal agents were called in to conduct a thorough investigation. Parker then became a notable enemy of the Klan, and after several attacks on his property and escalating violence, the governor declared martial law on Morehouse parish. The bodies of Tom Richards and Watt Daniel surfaced shortly after. The state made arrests and held an open hearing with over fifty witnesses. The findings were submitted to a grand jury. The grand jury listened to testimonies from 125 witnesses and yet refused to return indictments because of insufficient evidence. Still the state continued to pursue the case and the Attorney General and District Attorney served 31 Klansmen Bills of Information on charges committed before the abductions. These charges ended up appearing as political spite.

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<sup>28</sup> Maclean; Jackson; Alexander

<sup>29</sup> Jackson p. 68

<sup>30</sup> Chalmers pp. 51-53

A few Klansmen were convicted of misdemeanor and the rest of the charges were eventually dropped in 1924.<sup>31</sup>

This case represents some of the difficulties in taking measures against the Klan. At the local level, no action was taken, and when state and federal level officials intervened, the local community made it difficult to operate against the Klan. The Mer Rouge murders gained national interest. In most cases however, higher levels of state did not intervene at all and no measures were taken even though the identity of the law violators was known to their communities.

Sensing a difference in the community itself outside the South and Southwest, the Klan chose not to employ direct vigilante violence in other regions.<sup>32</sup> In Chicago, the Klan urged its members not to use violence. This was not merely a façade of objection to violence as the movement's leaders often expressed.<sup>33</sup> Klan members were warned that the Klan would denounce and try them if they were caught in acts of violence, and indeed the record of the group in the Midwest was nearly altogether absent of direct violence.<sup>34</sup>

Thus far I have mostly discussed the Southwest in comparison to the Midwest. The Deep South did not have the frontier lawlessness nature of the Southwest yet the Klan in the region was violent. Though it is tempting to explain Klan violence in the South as racial violence, it would not be entirely accurate. As I elaborate in the following section, the racist social and political system in the South was central to Klan violence, but it played a similar role to that of vigilante committees in the Southwest in that it facilitated vigilante violence against both blacks and whites.

### Racism in the South

Over ninety percent of recorded Klan violence occurred in former slave states.<sup>35</sup> The Klan in that context was a part of a long tradition of violence against the black population intended to suppress black citizenship and channel white frustrations away from problems such as deep inequality. Thus a common interpretation of the

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander, 1995. 68-75; Chalmers 1987; Du Bois, WE Burghardt. "The Shape of Fear." *The North American Review* 223, no. 831 (1926): 291-304.

<sup>32</sup> Maclean; Jackson

<sup>33</sup> Simmons in congress

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, 100

<sup>35</sup> Johnson 1922 444. The report is from 1922 but likely represents later years as well. Most of the movement's organized violence ended by 1923.

variation in Klan violence is the racially repressive structure of Southern states. This explanation however faces a significant challenge. Much of the Klan's violence was not directed toward the black population. In the Deep South, more than half of the victims were white,<sup>36</sup> and in the Southwest the vast majority of victims were white.<sup>37</sup> While a few of the white victims were "accused" of assisting the black community (e.g. lawyers representing black clients), most were violating the Klan's moral code by threatening family values, breaking the laws of prohibition, or opposing to the Klan.

The Klan's victims were black and white, but the type of violence directed at them did differ. The Klan rarely lynched white victims, whereas lynching of black victims was recorded far more often. However, the rates of lynching in the South during this period did not rise. There was a steady decline in this brutal practice from the 1890s onwards. The surge in violence brought on by the Klan was manifested in other forms of violence (flogging, feathering and tarring), and in violence toward white victims. Thus, the patterns of Klan violence were not merely a continuation of Southern racist violence, but they were influenced by these practices.

Accounting for patterns of lynching in the South between the 1880s and the 1950s, Clarke (1998) identifies a sub culture of violence in the South, "...the defining elements in a subculture of violence are high and enduring rates of personal violence that are condoned and facilitated by a widely shared ethos."<sup>38</sup> The South was the most violent region in the United States. Homicide rates were consistently higher in the South compared to the rest of the country.<sup>39</sup> Slavery first and foremost, the agreement among whites of all classes on matters of race, oppression of the black population through violence following the Civil war, "lynch law" which was a common practice, as well as the other forms of violence made the South into a place where violence was a part of the ethos of the white community.<sup>40</sup> A history of previous violence is the best indicator for future violence; in the case of the Ku Klux Klan, individual propensity for violence was not the mechanism that translated a violent history into future violence. Instead, the acceptance of law enforcement and the community, purchased through a long history of violence, facilitated future violence.

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<sup>36</sup> Maclean

<sup>37</sup> Alexander

<sup>38</sup> Clarke, 276 the general discussion of subculture of violence is based on Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967. On Southern culture of violence see also Gastil 1971; Nisbett and Cohen 1996

<sup>39</sup> Gastil 1971

<sup>40</sup> Clarke

The same patterns common in the Southwest operated in the South as well, indicating that law enforcement viewed the Klan as an extension rather than a competitive organization, and that the community ascended to the Klan's vigilante activities. As in the Southwest, Klan victims were sometimes taken directly from police custody. This practice was not unique to the Klan and was typical to lynch mobs in the region.<sup>41</sup> Another strong indication of the community's acceptance of Klan law was that individuals would turn to the Klan to resolve issues through violence. Women asked that their estranged husbands be punished, people turned in family members, neighbors, or local vagrants.<sup>42</sup> The Klan was an authority of order to the community from which it emerged.

The 1920s South was racist and it continuously suppressed black civil and human rights through legal and extra-legal coercion. The Ku Klux Klan must be viewed in that context. Researchers are divided on the question of the level of threat to the status quo of racial hierarchy the Southern white community was experiencing during this period. In the aftermath of WWI black veterans and as well as the communities they returned to were altered, and newly articulated grievances in the black community turned into dissent. Some scholars argue that this underlying dissent continued into the 1920s and was perceived as a significant threat by the white population.<sup>43</sup> Others however, believe that despite the general unrest of the period (Race riots a few years prior; Northern Migration; urbanization and economic changes for the black and white communities), the status quo of racial segregation was not threatened.<sup>44</sup> It is likely that much of the Klan's violence against the black population was a continuation of racist Southern practices intended to maintain the status quo. However, the racist system cannot account for the movement's violence against white individuals or the extremity of violence in the Southwest, even in non-slave states. Instead, tradition of violence as part of the local ethos better explains all the Klan's patterns of violence.

### **Electoral calculations**

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<sup>41</sup> See for example the abduction and lynching of Leo Frank which was one of the precursors to the 1920s KKK.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Maclean; Johnson;

<sup>44</sup> Moore; Alexander

Accounting for Ku Klux Klan racial violence during the Reconstruction era, several scholars argue that it was intended to thwart a powerful interracial populist coalition, a very real possibility at the time.<sup>45</sup> Intensifying the racial hatred and suppressing the voting rights of the black community drove voters away from the Populist Party which elites viewed as a threat to their electoral prospects and economic interests. By the 1920s however, black voting rights were long suppressed and the system of segregation was entrenched both institutionally and socially.<sup>46</sup> Southern political elite faced no threat of interracial coalition.<sup>47</sup> Thus, playing the racial card for electoral purposes made little sense during this period.

In general, the 1920s were a period of low political competition between the national parties. In many states one party or another ruled without contestation. The South was by far the least competitive region in the country with an essential Democratic Party one-party rule.<sup>48</sup> According to Wilkinson's research on ethnic riots in India, low political completion on the state and national level creates no incentives for politicians to delegate law enforcement to stop the eruption of local violence.<sup>49</sup> These politicians do not require the votes of ethnic minorities, nor do they seek to build coalitions with ethnic minority parties, and so see no benefit in interfering. In the case of the US that would imply that Southern Democrats would have no incentive to address Klan violence.

Several factors make adjusting this theory to the 1920s KKK difficult. First, in Wilkinson's theory the initial cause for the eruption of ethnic violence is the threat of interethnic coalition on the local level. As noted above, this threat was practically nonexistent in the 1920s South, and so we should not expect the eruption of violence to be based on electoral calculations. Second, the variation of violence between the South and Southwest and the Midwest was not primarily the result of law enforcement intervention, but of self-policing of the group. The movement made efforts to prevent member violence in the Midwest (and Northeast), and it did not have the same violent arms as it did in the South.<sup>50</sup> In addition when the movement became less violent in the South and Southwest toward 1923 it was the result of a

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<sup>45</sup> Alesina and Glaeser pp. 158-160; Soule 1992; Olzak 1990

<sup>46</sup> Making Whiteness

<sup>47</sup> Tom Watson and the Klan Maclean 49-50

<sup>48</sup> Besley et al 2010

<sup>49</sup> Wilkinson

<sup>50</sup> Jackson Maclean

conscious leadership decision to enter the political arena rather than the efforts of law enforcement.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, there were more state and national level attempts to stop violence in the Southwest than in the South, but the movement itself was violent in both regions regardless of electoral competition and top down law enforcement intervention. Third, the most electorally competitive region during this period was the West (not addressed in this paper), which did experience feats of Klan violence.<sup>52</sup> In Midwest where the Klan was generally not violent, political competition was also relatively low.<sup>53</sup> Thus patterns of electoral competition in the national level do not match patterns of violence. Elaborate data on local level Klan violence could help examine whether different local level electoral factors can explain the eruption of and attempts to prevent violence.

### Opposition

Though electoral competition cannot account for the variation in violence, the existence and nature of social opposition to the Klan did influence the group's decision to employ or refrain from violence. Membership in the Klan, though formally secret, was more acceptable in some locations than others. In Texas as noted above, many public officials were Klan members, and even when they were asked to quit the movement to remain in office, most did not comply. The revelation that an individual was a Klan member did not carry personal or political consequences. On the contrary, the Klan's support ushered many into office. In the Midwest on the other hand there was some variation in the acceptance of Klan members. While in Indiana there was little public opposition to the Klan,<sup>54</sup> in Chicago the Klan faced strong resistance from opponents, the most active them were organized Catholics.

Several organizations operated against the Klan during this period. The American Unity League (AUL) was formed in 1922 with the direct purpose of defeating the Klan in Chicago and the rest of the nation. The AUL officially represented all minorities but was backed by a powerful group of Catholic priests. The organization published a newspaper, *Tolerance*, that exposed names of Klan members

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<sup>51</sup> Jackson

<sup>52</sup>; On Klan violence in the west see Jackson; Chalmers

<sup>53</sup> On political competition see Besely

<sup>54</sup> Moore

obtained through spies in the organization, and included virulent anti-Klan propaganda.<sup>55</sup> The exposure of an individual as a Klan member in Chicago could have significant repercussions. Chicago's large Catholic and Jewish populations harassed and economically boycotted Klan members leading some to bankruptcy.<sup>56</sup> This was a direct result of the city's diverse demographics. In Indianapolis, the AUL attempted the method of exposure of members but to little effect. The Klan fought back through the court system, but even when a list was published, the public stood behind the Klan against the minuscule Catholic minority in the city.<sup>57</sup> The Catholic fraternal organization Knight of Columbus fought in courts against the Klan's attempts to close parochial schools. Another organization, the Knights of the Flaming Circle, was a militant opponent of the Klan, and it took up arms and physically chased the Klan out of cities and towns.<sup>58</sup>

As noted above, for the most part the Klan did not attempt violence in the Midwest and Northeast in particular the type of vigilante 'policing' common in the South and Southwest. On several occasions, there were violent clashes between Klan members and the groups opposing the Klan. Maclean notes that Klan members were not violence professionals and so the threat of violent retaliation from organized opposition served as deterrence.<sup>59</sup> This threat was only viable outside the South and Southwest in places with a significant Catholic population. The existence of an opposition probably also influenced law enforcement efforts. As Della Porta shows for German and Italian radical left from the 1960s, struggles between 'law and order' coalitions and 'civil rights' coalitions shaped the policing strategy toward social movement protest.<sup>60</sup> Though the nature and orientation of social coalitions was different in the case of the KKK, a viable opposition could pressure the police force against cooperation with the Klan. The role of a strong opposition to the Klan should therefore be taken into account when considering the movement's choice to employ violence.

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<sup>55</sup> Jackson 102-103

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* 104-105

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* 148-149

<sup>58</sup> Jackson 168; Maclean 14

<sup>59</sup> Maclean

<sup>60</sup> Della Porta p.0192

### Individual Factors

The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was a decentralized movement. The national leadership made large decisions regarding the movement's agenda, direction, and activities, but local branches were autonomous in some of their activities and in the recruitment process. Given the discrepancy in violence across regions, it is crucial to examine whether the local branches recruited different types of individuals into the Klan in the South and Southwest compared to the Midwest. If the social and economic context of Klan members in the South and Southwest points at a propensity for violence more than that of Midwestern members, that could account for the difference in use of violence between the regions.

Several studies shed light on who were the members of the Klan. Discussing the class composition of the Klan Maclean notes that Klan members were, "If not the best people [...] at least the next best... the good, solid, middle class citizens."<sup>61</sup> Using detailed records of the local Klan chapter, Maclean demonstrates that Klan members were predominantly middle class, white collar and lower-level white collar workers, many of them small business owners. For the most part unskilled laborers did not join the movement.<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Jackson finds similar composition of membership in Illinois. Using lists of members published by Klan opposition at the time, Jackson maps the occupation of Klan members.<sup>63</sup> Klan members in the cities Jackson examines (Chicago and Aurora) are predominantly white collar workers, whereas in the rural area (Winchester) many of the members were farmers. Other studies as well point at the middle class composition of the Klan in multiple regions. Notable is Fryer and Levitt's study, which utilizes a larger dataset than most comparable studies. Overall, they too find support for a middle and lower middle class composition of the Klan.<sup>64</sup>

The social context of individuals including poverty, education, and economic security has been linked to the propensity of individuals for violence.<sup>65</sup> The 1920s were a period of economic change and a sense of instability, but the social context of individual Klan members was similar across regions. Moreover, in the South,

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<sup>61</sup> Maclean, 53. The quote in Maclean is from Frost, *Challenge of the Klan* 6,7

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 54-56

<sup>63</sup> Jackson pp. 108, 119-120

<sup>64</sup> Fryer and Levitt variation but not in accordance with patterns of violence.

<sup>65</sup> Hamphrys and Weinstein;

Southwest, and Midwest the Klan was so popular in some areas, both urban and rural, that it included a variety of white Protestant individuals.

## Conclusions

Radical wing populist movements can organize violence, have ties to violent militias, and inspire violence in their supporters. However, none of these is a necessary or inherent trait of radical right populists. The 1920s Ku Klux Klan, a large broad based social movement, was both violent and non-violent in different regions of the United States. The most important mechanism that facilitated Klan violence in the South and Southwest was the willingness of the community to be policed by the vigilante group. It was the community that protected Klan members from prosecution, and even turned to the Klan to provide order. At the time, the community was more likely to support the Klan in the presence of weak law enforcement institutions, where traditions of vigilante violence were prominent and recent, or in the absence of organized opposition to the Klan. Both the mechanism of community enabling and the underlying conditions that supported it apply to current day radical right wing populist movements. Additional conditions can also generate the acquiescence of the community to vigilante violence.

State capacity and the nature of law enforcement remains a key explanation for non-state violence. Though states have become stronger and the disparity of power between them and non-state actors is immense, there are still enclaves of low state penetration even within generally strong states. In many states, the order issued by state organizations varies over territory and across classes, ethnicities, and genders.<sup>66</sup> O'Donnell (1993) notes that in the United States, law is not equal across class and race, and state institutions also have a low degree of penetration in the South and in big cities.<sup>67</sup> In areas of low state penetration territorially, and social inequality before the law, populists will be more likely to employ or promote violence. These areas include crime ridden neighborhoods and remote rural areas. In the European context, neighborhoods and suburbs with high crime rates can be a hub for violent populists. Post-Communist countries that generally have lower state penetration, in particular rural areas and periphery towns, are more likely to have violent populists than Western European countries,. This holds true even where the demographic makeup is

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<sup>66</sup> O'Donnell 1993, p. 1358

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 1359

rather homogenous as in Poland and Hungary, or where populism is (or was until recently) relatively weak as in the Czech Republic and Romania. Likewise, recent traditions of vigilante violence that stem from conflict as in former Yugoslavian countries can support community acquiescence to populist violence. In the US too those enclaves of low state penetration O'Donnell identifies can breed violent populism.

Second, the nature of opposition to radical right populists matter. Where the targets of populist propaganda are weak, unorganized, and have no voice in the political system, acts of violence are more likely. The more empowered within the systems targets are, the more likely they are to deter populist violence. Refugees and illegal immigrants are then more likely to inspire populist violence than organized immigrants.

The case of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan is interesting both as a test case for right wing populist violence, and as part of long traditions of populism, exclusion, and violence in American society. Though it has been mostly forgotten for decades, the case has been drawing both scholarly and popular attention recently.<sup>68</sup> The investigation into the case presented here would greatly benefit from detailed local data on Klan violence. Such data is not readily available because of the decentralized nature of the Klan, significant underreporting of Klan crimes, and biased reporting (for example cases of violence against white victims received more attention than violence against black victims). Hopefully, an exhaustive study focusing on the Klan's crimes in key locations can overcome these challenges.

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<sup>68</sup> Gordon, 2017; Atlantic; Journal of American History; NPR Chicago