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June 2023

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Comment on “Historical Lynchings and the Contemporary Voting Behavior of Blacks”^{*}

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Abstract

[Williams \(2022\)](#) ties the political participation of Blacks to historical lynchings that occurred in the United States. Her findings document lower Black voter registration rates in southern counties with greater number of historical lynchings. We show that this effect is driven by four outlier counties with relatively high Black lynching rates. Excluding these counties from the analysis yields a point estimate that is no longer statistically significant. Dropping the ninety-fifth percentile lynching rates and correcting the errors in voter registration rates rule out the effect size reported by [Williams \(2022\)](#), which now becomes close to zero and statistically insignificant. We also show that the main results are highly sensitive to the way lynching and voter registration rates are measured.

JEL Classifications: D72, J15, N31, N32, N41, N42, Z13.

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1 Introduction

[Williams \(2022\)](#) investigates whether there exists a link between historical lynchings that occurred in the United States between 1882 and 1930 and the contemporary voting behavior of Blacks. The paper relies on the number of lynching of Black victims in 267 southern counties from the Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project (Project HAL) and population data from the 1900 census to construct the main explanatory variable, Black lynching rate, which is the number of Black lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900.

The baseline preferred specification regresses voter registration rate, that is the average percentage of Black registered voters per Black voting-age population in the 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential elections, on the Black lynching rate, accounting for historical controls (average farm value in 1860, proportion of small farms in 1860, inequality of farmland in 1860, Proportion of free Blacks in 1860, average newspapers rate, county formation and proportion of Black illiterate men in 1910) and state fixed effects. The paper documents lower present-day voter registration rates among Blacks residing in southern counties that historically experienced a relatively larger number of historical lynchings. [Williams \(2022\)](#) also documents that the results remain robust to a number of robustness and falsification tests such as controlling for historical prevalence of slavery and few contemporary confounding factors.¹

The relationship presented between historical lynching and contemporary Black voting registration in Figures 1 and 4 of [Williams \(2022\)](#) suggests the existence of potential outliers that might be driving the findings of the paper. [Williams \(2022\)](#), however, does not account for the outliers in the Black lynching rates variable. We thus believe that the findings of this paper can potentially be a result of a spurious correlation driven by few counties with exceptional high rate of historical lynching.

This comment revisits [Williams \(2022\)](#) from two angles. First, we show that dropping the four outlier counties in the main explanatory variable, Black lynching rate, yields a point estimate that is no longer statistically significant. This is also true when the group of outliers in both the Black lynching and registration rate is removed. We also follow [Williams \(2022\)](#) and drop the ninety-fifth percentile lynching rates while restricting to U.S. counties with a voter registration rate that do not exceed 100 percent. When doing so, lynching rates not only lose statistical significance as described by [Williams \(2022\)](#), the point estimate now flips sign with a magnitude close to zero. Second, we show that the main result (“preferred specification”) is highly sensitive to the way historical lynching and Black registration rate is defined. Al-

¹Potential contemporary confounding factors were restricted to socio-economic characteristics of Blacks (education, earnings, incarceration rate) and number of polling places by county. 4

tering the definitions (i.e., using alternative specifications) make the relationship no longer robust. This includes undertaking an extensive margin analysis (at least one Black lynching event occurred in a U.S. county between 1882 and 1930 or not); an alternative intensity measure of lynchings as defined by experiencing a “high” (above median number of lynchings) exposure to Black lynching; using a specification whereby Black voter registration rates is regressed on the number of lynchings that occurred in a given U.S. county between 1882 and 1930 while controlling for the Black population in 1900, and the baseline historical controls and state fixed effects. Lastly, we adopt [Williams \(2022\)](#)’s definition for the intensity of lynchings (Black lynching rate) and examine Black voter registration (in level) while controlling for the Black voting-age population instead of considering Black voter registration rates.

In the remaining of this comment, we thoroughly discuss how we identify county outliers and discuss the results after correcting those in [Section 2](#). In [Section 3](#), we revisit Black lynching and voter registration rates’ definitions, and test the sensitivity of the results to various alternative specifications. Lastly, [Section 4](#) concludes.

2 Dropping Outliers

We plot the distribution of the main explanatory variable (Black lynching rate) as measured by [Williams \(2022\)](#), the outcome variable of interest (Black voter registration rate) as well as a scatter plot of these two variables in [Figures 1, 2](#) and [3](#). These illustrations reveal that there exists a group of outliers in both the Black lynching rate as well as the Black registration rate.

[Figure 1](#) exhibits a histogram and a kernel density plot of the Black lynching rate, that is the number of Black lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900 in a U.S. county from 1882 to 1930. While the largest mass of U.S. counties have less than 10 lynchings per 10,000 Black population, few counties have between 10 and 20, and only 4 have a Black lynching rate exceeding 20.

Similarly, [Figure 2](#) displays a histogram and a kernel density plot of the Black voter registration rate, that is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting-age population. [Figure 2](#) does confirm that voter registration rate is more than 100 percent in some counties.

Lastly, [Figure 3](#) shows a scatter plot of the Black voter registration rate and the Black lynching rate. Four U.S. counties emerge as outliers, particularly, with the Black lynching rate exceeding 20 lynchings per 10,000 Black population. These counties are distributed across two U.S. states: one in Alabama state

(Covington) and three in Georgia state (Dade, Habersham and Wayne).

We successfully reproduce the baseline estimate of the paper (reported in column (1) of Table (2), Williams (2022)) and report it in column (1) of Table 1. The baseline estimate of the relationship between Black lynching rates and registration rates among Blacks is negative and statistically significant indicating that Blacks who reside in U.S. counties that were exposed to a relatively higher number of historical lynchings are less likely to register to vote today. The baseline preferred specification includes a number of historical controls (average farm value in 1860, proportion of small farms in 1860, inequality of farmland in 1860, Proportion of free Blacks in 1860, average newspapers rate, county formation and proportion of Black illiterate men in 1910) as well as state fixed effects.

Williams (2022) does account for outliers in Black voting registration rates, and provides evidence in Appendix Table B3, that results remain robust to top-coding to 100 whenever voter registration rate is more than 100 percent in some counties as well as to dropping counties from the sample with voter registration rates that exceed 100.

The author mentions in a footnote in the paper that the results are robust to various specifications including the use of a logarithmic transformation of the lynching rate as well as the arcsin transformation. In the same footnote, the author describes that the effect is no longer statistically significant when dropping the ninety-fifth percentile of lynching rates. Williams (2022) however does not report the results of these analyses in the paper, nor in the online Appendix.

In this comment, we examine whether the baseline main result of the paper remains robust to dropping outliers in the main explanatory variable, Black lynching rate. In column (2) of Table 1, we drop the four U.S. county outliers with lynching rates exceeding 20 from the analysis. The cut-off (20 lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900) to identify outliers can be visually identified from Figures 1 and 3. More formally, we identify county outliers by calculating 3 standard deviations from the mean value of Black lynching rate, which yields the same cut-off. Dropping the four U.S. county outliers with lynching rates exceeding 20 from the analysis yields a point estimate that is no longer statistically significant and smaller in magnitude.

The analysis thus far does not correct for outliers in Black voter registration rates. In column (3) of Table 1, we use the restricted sample of U.S. counties (excluding the four county outliers) and further follow Williams (2022) by dropping U.S. counties with Black voter registration rate that exceed 100 percent. This also yields a point estimate that is no longer statistically significant and even smaller in magnitude.

Lastly, in column (4) of Table 1, we follow Williams (2022) and drop the ninety-fifth percentile lynch-

ing rates while restricting to U.S. counties with voter registration rates that do not exceed 100 percent. When doing so, lynching rates not only lose statistical significance as described by [Williams \(2022\)](#) in footnote 31, the point estimate now becomes positive and close to zero².

3 Alternative Specifications

[Williams \(2022\)](#) examines the sensitivity of the results to various specifications and shows that the negative relationship remains robust when the lynching rate uses a log or arcsin transformation. The author describes this in footnote 31 but does not report the results in the paper nor in the online Appendix. [Williams \(2022\)](#) also changes the main specification so that the outcome variable is the number of Black registered voters instead of Black registration rate and controls for the current rate of voting-age Blacks. The author reports the results from doing this analysis in Table 4, whereby she further accounts for the share of slaves in 1860 in addition to the baseline historical controls and state fixed effects.

In this section, we follow [Williams \(2022\)](#) and use voter registration rate as is (i.e., without dropping U.S. counties with registration rates exceeding 100 percent). We show that the main result of [Williams \(2022\)](#) is significantly dependent on the way Black lynching and voter registration rates are measured. Using alternative specifications reveal that results are no longer statistically significant.

The main explanatory variable as constructed originally by the author is a measure of the Black lynching rate defined as the number of Black lynchings in a U.S. County from 1882 to 1930 per 10,000 Black population in 1900. The author refrains from using the number of lynchings, claiming that Black lynching rate more accurately captures the intensity of lynchings or “threat of violence” by accounting for the number of Blacks in an area and that this has been previously used in the literature, citing [Cook \(2014\)](#); [Acharya et al. \(2016\)](#).

In this comment, we first carry out an extensive margin examination which explores whether or not a given U.S. county had any lynching event occurring any time between 1882 and 1930. The purpose is to examine whether lynching, instead of the intensity of lynchings matter for Black voter registration rates. We thus generate a binary dummy indicator which takes the value of one if a given U.S. county experienced at least one lynching event between 1882 and 1930 and zero otherwise. About 23% of the 267

²In Appendix Table [A1](#), we replicate the analysis in Table 1 using Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) data on lynchings that occurred between from 1877 to 1950. [Williams \(2022\)](#) relies on this dataset to carry out a robustness analysis in Appendix Table B4. We plot a histogram and a kernel density plot for Black lynching rates in Appendix Figure [A1](#). Six U.S. counties have lynching rates above 3 standard deviations from the mean value. County outliers are distributed across two U.S. states: four in Georgia state (Dade, Habersham, Murray and Wayne) and two in Louisiana state (Lafourche and Washington). Our findings confirm results reported in Table 1.

U.S. counties had a non-zero lynching event occurring. Results from doing this analysis are reported in column (1) of Table 2. We show that the relationship no longer holds, with positive and non-statistically significant relationship between Blacks voting registration rates today and historical lynchings.

Next, we use an alternative measure to capture the intensity of the treatment. We now generate a binary indicator that takes the value of one if a given U.S. County experienced a “high” exposure to lynchings, as defined by being above the median number of lynching events occurring across U.S. counties between 1882 and 1930, and zero otherwise. The minimum number of lynchings is 0, the maximum is 18 and the median is around 2. Counties are split equally between “high” and “low” exposure to lynchings. Results from doing this analysis are reported in column (3) of Table 2. We show that the relationship no longer holds, with negative and non-statistically significant Black lynching point estimate.

In column (3) of Table 2, we rely on the number of lynchings in a given U.S. county and control for the number of Blacks in 1900 in a given U.S. county, instead of using the number of lynching per 10,000 Black population in 1900. We document a negative yet not statistically significant point estimate for Black lynching (in level) and a decrease in magnitude by about one-fifth in comparison to Williams (2022)’s preferred estimate.

Lastly, we follow Williams (2022) and define the outcome variable as the number of Black registered voters instead of the Black registration rate and control for the current rate of voting-age Blacks. The results from non-normalizing voter registration by the Black voting-age population are reported in column (4) of Table 2. While the relationship between lynching and Black voting registration rates is negative, it is however no longer statistically significant at conventional levels.

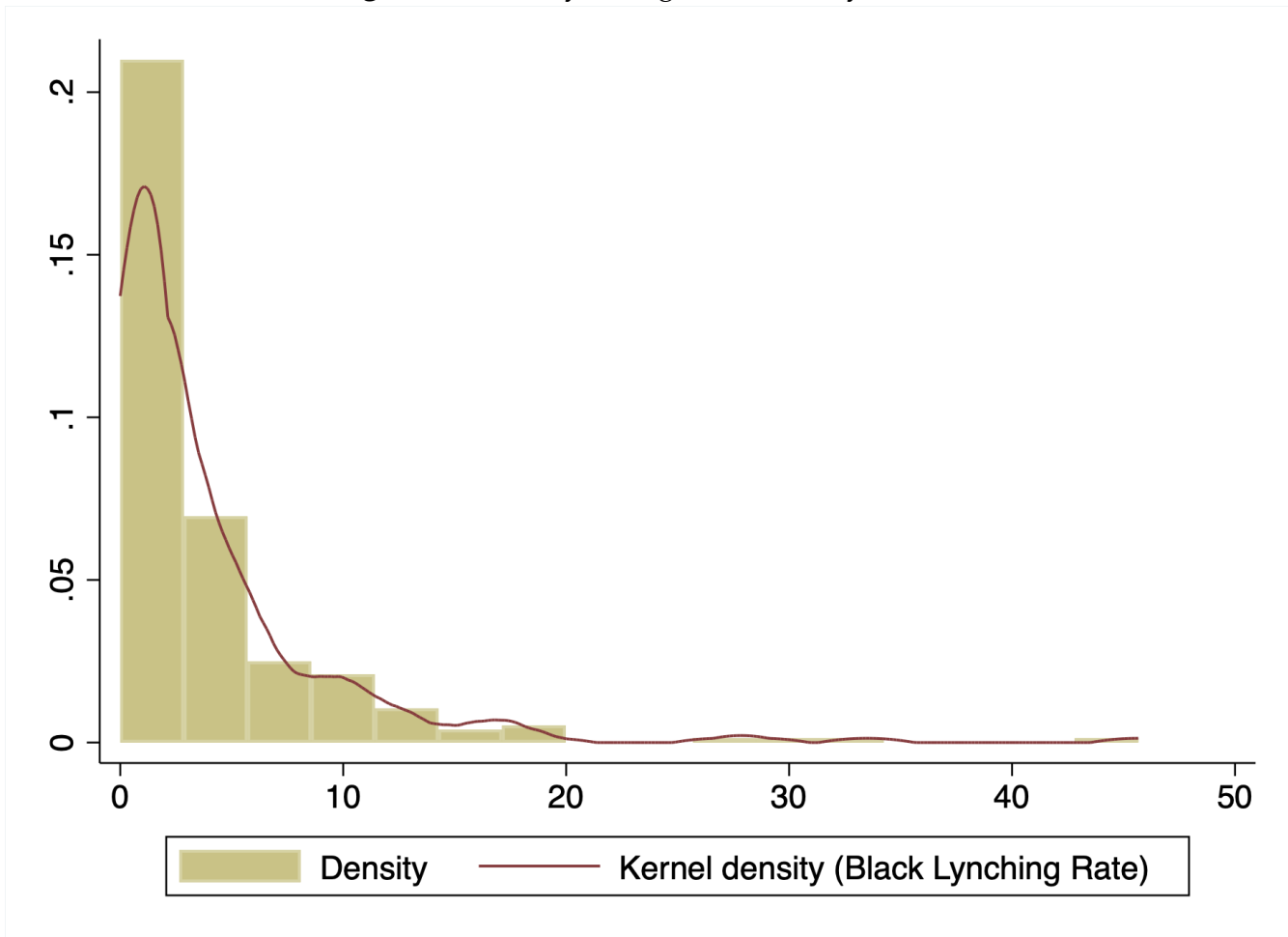
4 Conclusion

This comment shows that the effects of historical Black lynching on contemporary Black voter registration rates are mainly driven by outlier counties with high Black lynching rates. Excluding outliers from the analysis, while correcting for measurement errors in the main outcome of interest, Black voter registration rates, yields a point estimate on Black lynching rate that is close to zero and not statistically significant. This comment also documents that using alternative specifications rule out the effect of Black lynching. These are evidence that the historical Black lynching effect on Black voter registration rates turns out to be spurious.

References

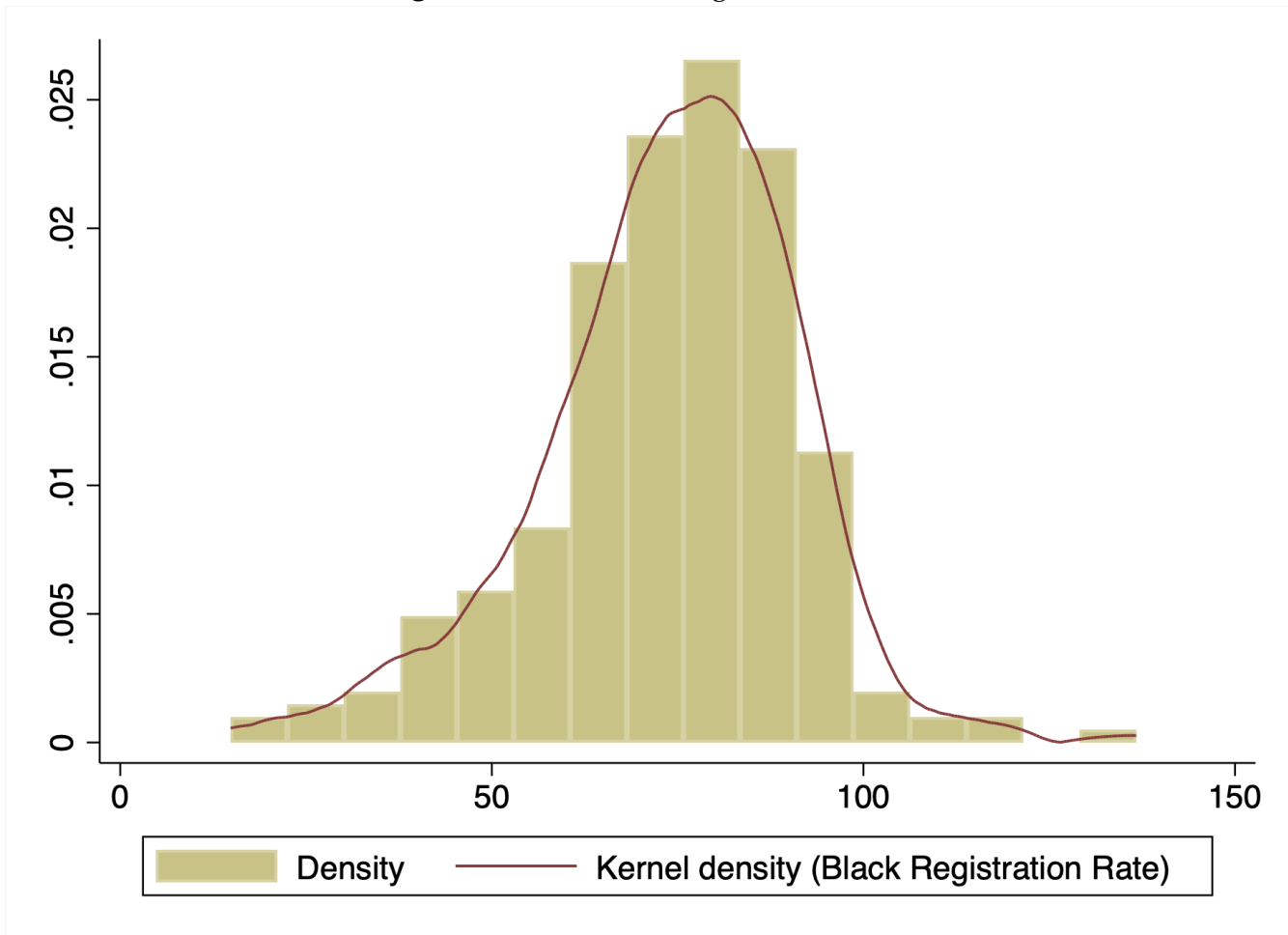
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Figure 1: Black Lynching Rate (County-Level)



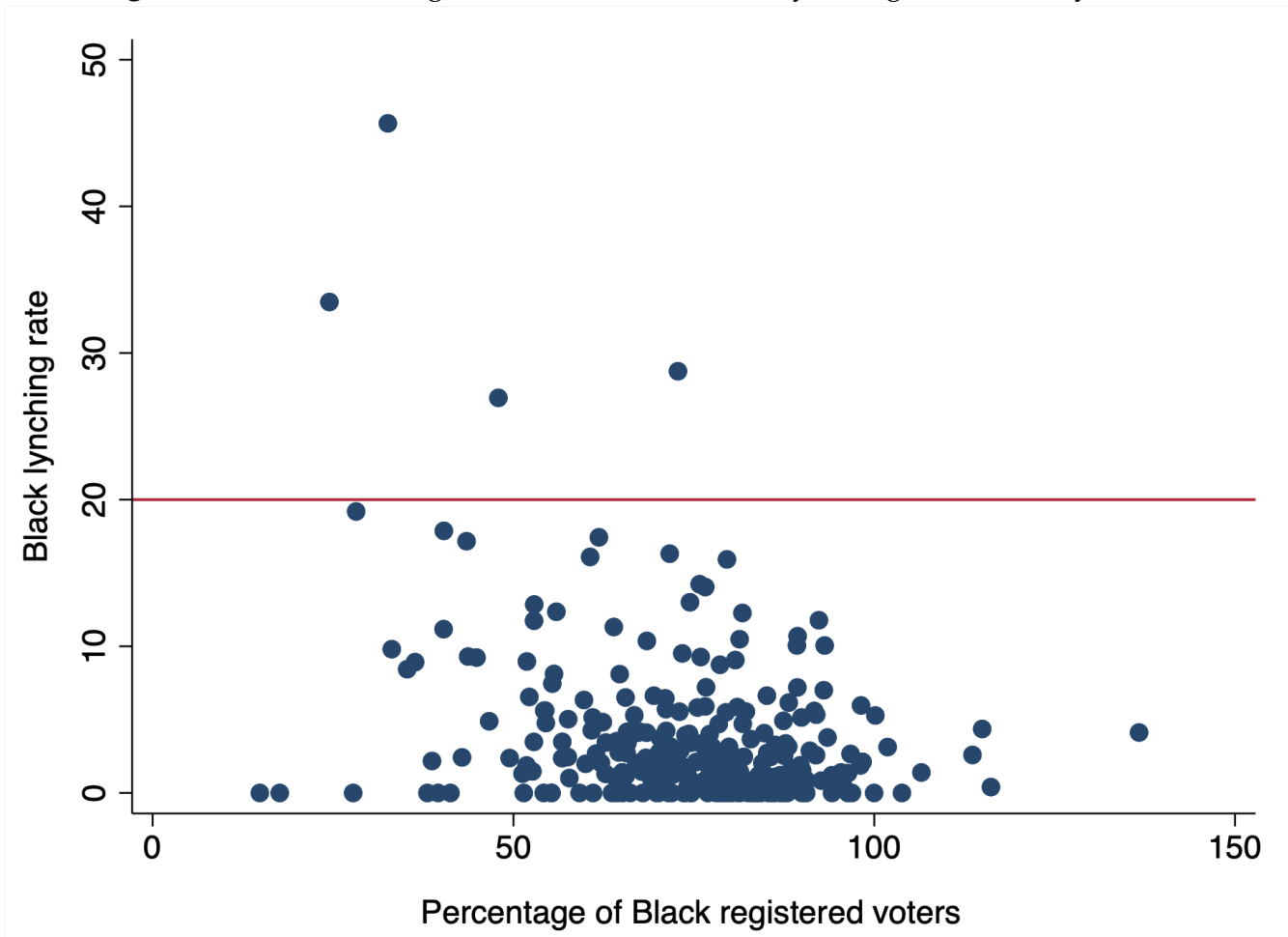
Notes: Histogram and kernel density plot: Black lynching rate which is the number of Black lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900 in a U.S. county from 1882 to 1930. Few counties have a Black lynching rate exceeding 20. Source: Authors' compilation based on Williams (2022) main dataset.

Figure 2: Black Voter Registration Rate



Notes: Histogram and kernel density plot: Black voter registration rate is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting age population. Voter registration rate is more than 100 percent in some counties. Source: Authors' compilation based on Williams (2022) main dataset.

Figure 3: Black Voter Registration Rate and Black Lynching Rate (County- Level)



Notes: Scatter plot of Black voter registration rate which is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting age population and Black lynching rate which is the number of Black lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900 in a U.S. county from 1882 to 1930. In sum, four U.S. counties, one in Alabama state (Covington) and three in Georgia state (Dade, Habersham and Wayne) have a Black lynching rate exceeding 20 per 10,000 Black population. Source: Authors' compilation based on [Williams \(2022\)](#) main dataset.

Table 1: The Association Between Lynching Rates and Political Participation Among Blacks - Excluding Outliers

	Black Voter Registration Rate			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black Lynching Rate	-0.469*** (0.144)	-0.327 (0.204)	-0.302 (0.184)	0.024 (0.243)
p-value	0.001	0.111	0.103	0.923
Historical Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of counties	267	263	255	245
R-Squared	0.548	0.526	0.555	0.556

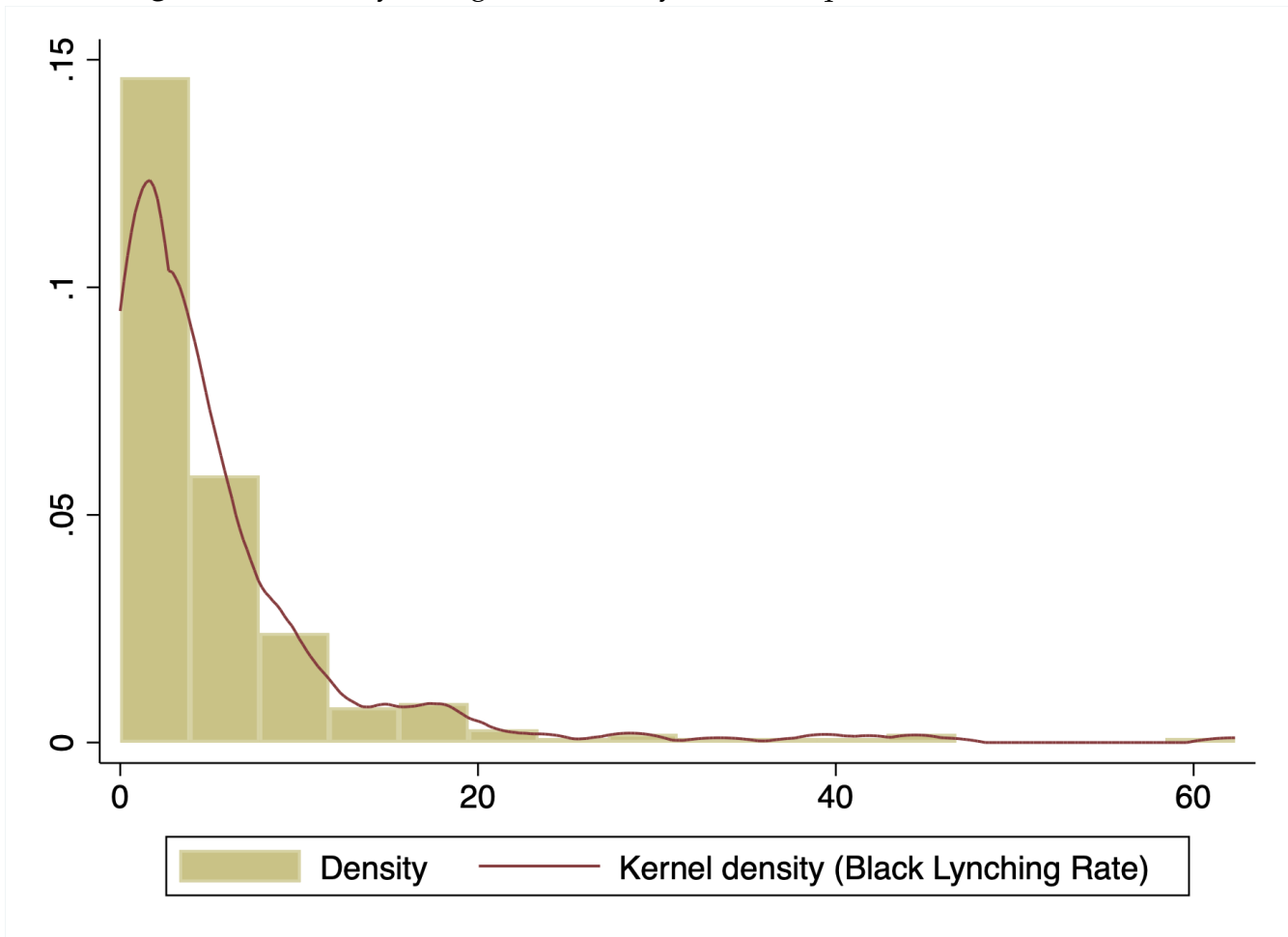
The dependent variable, Black registered voters rate, is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting age population. The Black lynching rate is the number of Black lynchings in a county from 1882 to 1930 per 10,000 Black population in 1900. Column (1) reproduces the main result in Williams (2022)’s preferred estimation (See Table 2, column 1). In column (2), we drop outliers in the explanatory variable defined as the Black lynching rate above 3 standard deviations from the mean value. In addition, in column (3), we account for measurement errors in the Black voters registration rate by dropping counties with values above 100 percent. In column (4), we drop the ninety-fifth percentile lynching rates and restrict to counties with a voter registration rate that does not exceed 100 percent. All specifications include historical controls and state fixed effects. “Historical Controls” is a set of covariates including the average farm value in 1860, the proportion of small farms in 1860, the inequality of farmland in 1860, the proportion of free Blacks in 1860, the average newspapers rate, the initial county formation year, and the proportion of Black illiterate men in 1910. Standard errors in parenthesis: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2: The Association Between Lynching Rates and Political Participation Among Blacks - Redefining Variables

	Black Voter Registration			
	Rate			Level
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black Lynching (Dummy)	1.613 (1.952)			
p-value	0.409			
Black Lynching (Median Dummy)		-0.951 (1.606)		
p-value		0.554		
Black Lynching (Level)			-0.118 (0.258)	
p-value			0.646	
Black Lynching Rate				-417.176 (294.240)
p-value				0.157
Black Population in 1900	No	No	Yes	No
Voting Age Blacks	No	No	No	Yes
Historical Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of counties	267	267	267	267
R-Squared	0.530	0.530	0.549	0.153

The dependent variable is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting age population (columns (1)–(3)). In column (2), the independent variable “Black Lynching” is a dummy indicator that takes the value of 1 if a specific county has experienced any Black lynching event between 1882 and 1930, and 0 otherwise. We re-define the “Black Lynching” dummy in column (2) as a binary indicator that takes the value of 1 if a specific county experienced a “high” exposure to Black lynchings, and 0 otherwise. A “high” exposed county has a Black lynching rate above the median value. In column (3), we adopt an alternative treatment definition where we regress the the Black voter registration rate on the number of Black lynchings between 1882 and 1930, and control for the Black population in 1900. We rely on the level of Black voter registration as the dependent variable in column (4). We report the estimated coefficient of Black lynching rate after controlling for the Black voting-age population. All specifications include historical controls and state fixed effects. “Historical Controls” is a set of covariates including the average farm value in 1860, the proportion of small farms in 1860, the inequality of farmland in 1860, the proportion of free Blacks in 1860, the average newspapers rate, the initial county formation year, and the proportion of Black illiterate men in 1910. Standard errors in parenthesis: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure A1: Black Lynching Rate (County-Level) - Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)



Notes: Histogram and kernel density plot: Black lynching rate which is the number of Black lynchings per 10,000 Black population in 1900 in a U.S. county from 1877 to 1950. Lynching data obtained from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Source: Authors' compilation based on Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) data on lynchings provided by [Williams \(2022\)](#).

Table A1: The Association Between Lynching Rates and Political Participation Among Blacks - Excluding Outliers - Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)

	Black Voter Registration Rate			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black Lynching Rate	-0.314*** (0.101)	-0.144 (0.159)	-0.106 (0.143)	0.0116 (0.183)
p-value	0.002	0.366	0.462	0.950
Historical Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of counties	267	261	253	245
R-Squared	0.546	0.524	0.553	0.546

The dependent variable, Black registered voters rate, is the (averaged) percentage of Black registered voters in the 2000, 2004, 2008, or 2012 presidential election per Black voting age population. The Black lynching rate is the number of Black lynchings in a county from 1877 to 1950 per 10,000 Black population in 1900. Lynching data is obtained from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Column (1) reproduces the result in Appendix Table B4 in [Williams \(2022\)](#) (column 1). In column (2), we drop outliers in the explanatory variable defined as the Black lynching rate above 3 standard deviations from the mean value. In addition, in column (3), we account for measurement errors in the Black voters registration rate by dropping counties with values above 100 percent. In column (4), we drop the ninety-fifth percentile lynching rates and restrict to counties with a voter registration rate that does not exceed 100 percent. All specifications include historical controls and state fixed effects. "Historical Controls" is a set of covariates including the average farm value in 1860, the proportion of small farms in 1860, the inequality of farmland in 1860, the proportion of free Blacks in 1860, the average newspapers rate, the initial county formation year, and the proportion of Black illiterate men in 1910. Standard errors in parenthesis: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$