

Ain't No Fortunate Son: The Political Calculus of Conscription

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Abstract

Do the electoral incentives of political leaders influence who is compelled to serve in the military? We argue that conscription policy is designed by political actors who care about winning elections. In wartime, politicians face the twin threats of military and electoral defeat. Therefore, they will shield swing communities, who hold considerable sway over the outcome of elections, from the costs of military service. We leverage a novel database of 9.2 million U.S. servicemembers during World War II. We find that counties that narrowly voted for President Roosevelt and Democratic members of Congress had substantially fewer conscripts in the Army during 1942, 1943, and 1945. Substantively, 139,000 fewer men – six times the number of men who landed at Normany – were drafted from swing counties than expected. Our findings imply that democratic leaders do not want to lose re-election during wartime, and in doing so sacrifice democratic norms of fairness.

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On the 13th of July 1863, New York City residents rioted against a government draft policy that permitted individuals to either pay \$300 or find a substitute to avoid serving in the U.S. Civil War. The decision to allow some individuals to opt out contrasts with other, far more draconian government policies that were intended to support the war effort; the Lincoln administration seized property, suspended habeas corpus, and arrested members of state legislatures. Yet the government was unable or unwilling to institute an equitable conscription system. Military history is replete with similar stories of democratic governments implementing similarly inequitable systems of conscription (Leonhard, 2013; Samuel, 1957).

We argue for the first time that partisan concerns inform conscription policy. Previous studies show that governments enact conscription deferments for the wealthy and educated (Baskir and Strauss, 1978; Bernstein, 1991; Martin and Weitz, 2003; Anbinder, 2006). These class-based understandings are incomplete. We theorize the existence of strong incentives for partisan manipulation. Democratic leaders will design conscription policies that enable the political success of their party, providing benefits to swing voters (Cox and McCubbins, 1986; Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987). Our novel argument clearly speaks to the conflicting political incentives of democratic leaders during war.

We test our argument on the case of the United States during the Second World War. We argue that the conscription system permitted extensive manipulation for electoral advantage. The Selective Service System, the institution introduced to carry out conscription policies, was an executive-branch agency directly overseen by the president. The president, through the SSS, had the authority to set the number of conscripted men needed from each county as well as establishing deferments for specific social or economic classifications (Flynn, 1993).

We use a novel dataset containing the names and records of all 9.2 million American service-members in the Army during World War II. We use these records to create an aggregated measure of enlistment rates for each county for each year of the war. We then combine these original data with existing census and electoral data, permitting us to thoroughly answer this question. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the relationship between electoral politics and conscription at such a granular level. We supplement these new data with extensive archival research.

Our findings provide strong support for our theory. The conscription rate in New Deal-era

swing counties was significantly lower than the conscription rate in other counties. We examine swing counties from President Roosevelt's elections, and Democratic Congressional candidates in elections, 1936-1942. Substantively, swing counties' lower conscription rates equates to 100 fewer soldiers per swing county per year that enlisted into the Army, or 139,000 soldiers overall – the equivalent of four Army corps, or the number of U.S. soldiers along the front at the start of the Battle of the Bulge.

We disaggregate our data by year, finding that our effect was strongest in election years. To further demonstrate that swing voters benefited from preferential treatment, we run extensive placebo tests. Finally, we analyze regional effects, to see which locations picked up the slack created by preferential treatment shown to swing counties. We find, as expected, that the most Republican and the most Democratic regions experienced the highest rates of conscription.

More importantly, for each soldier not drafted, there is a larger unobserved network of family, friends, and acquaintances whose support for Democrats may have been contingent on that soldier's health and well-being. A voting bloc of 139,000 potential soldiers and their networks, concentrated in pivotal constituencies, may have been sufficient to sway presidential and congressional outcomes in 1942 and 1944. Scholarship identifies that wartime support for government is tied to a community's experience with wartime losses (Gartner and Segura, 1998; Sullivan, 2008; Hayes and Myers, 2009; Althaus, Bramlett, and Gimpel, 2012). For example, Roosevelt won Michigan in 1944 by only 22,000 votes, while he lost Ohio by 12,000 votes. Political leaders' perceptions of this larger pool of voters is what may motivate them to design inefficient conscription policy.

Not only does our argument add to our understanding of conscription specifically, it adds to the discipline's understanding of the electoral incentives relating to war more generally. Previous research has explored how leaders use war as a tool for electoral benefit, while other work investigates the electoral connection to war outcomes (Arena, 2008). We build on this literature by showing that governments manipulate the geographic distribution of the costs of war for electoral benefit. If politicians view conscription as a redistributive good, they have strong incentives to use conscription policy as a tool for obtaining re-election. This study is a part of a growing body of literature within security studies that explores the war-fighting process from the bottom up by rigorously employing intra-disciplinary domestic level theories

(Lyall, 2020).

Answering this question is as important now as ever, as tensions increase between great powers. The ability of nations to contest major wars remains largely dependent on their capacity to marshal the manpower of their population. To this end, twenty-five countries have re-introduced conscription in the past decade, highlighting the need to understand its institutional implications. If conscription allows for politics, these political considerations will benefit residents of pivotal electoral districts and the public's willingness to bear the burdens of war (Horowitz and Levendusky, 2011).

The Story of Elections and War

One of the most prominent literatures in political science demonstrates that a democratic politician's first priority is assuring that they stay in office (Downs, 1957; Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974; Aldrich and Rohde, 2000). Incumbent politicians appeal to broad coalitions of voters in the hopes of maintaining a majority that will keep them in power. (Strøm, 1990; Adams, Merrill III, and Grofman, 2005). Once elected, politicians will distribute the benefits associated with political power in return for voters' continued support (Lee, 2003; Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr, 2006; Cox, 2009). Such benefits include the redistribution of resources to supporters in the form of pork barrel projects, preferred policy outcomes, or the creation and distribution of public goods (Downs, 1957; Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen, 1981; Cox and McCubbins, 1986). The more tenuous the support of a member of the politician's majority, the more expensive it will be for the politician to maintain their support (De Mesquita et al., 2005). As such, politicians will take steps to ensure that swing voters receive enough benefits, that they will continue to prefer the politician over their opponent (Golden and Min, 2013; Stokes et al., 2013).

This dynamic holds even under the most extreme conditions, including times of war. Voters' demands on government do not cease during war, nor their demands for responsive leadership. In order to maintain power, politicians must still provide their supporters with public resources (De Mesquita et al., 2005). Yet, during war, the kind of public goods voters prefer and that the democratic leader can offer change. Rather than demand that the government redistribute material benefits, supporters of the incumbent party will desire to pay fewer of the war's costs. They will demand that the government wins the war (Conconi, Sahuguet, and Zanardi, 2014),

but they still do not want to pay the full costs of this effort.

Unfortunately for wartime democratic leaders, the public assumes domestic burdens will be borne equitably. Tax increases, shortages of consumer goods and rationing, declines in domestic spending, and labor disruption may affect everyone (Glick and Taylor, 2010; Carter and Palmer, 2015), but most importantly, voters may demand fair distribution of wartime costs. In many democratic forms of government, checks on executive power explicitly prevent politicians from selectively targeting certain groups with wartime tax increases or rationing.

The highest costs of any war are associated with military service (Kriner and Shen, 2010). Those who are chosen to serve make tremendous sacrifices in the short and long run. Returning soldiers bear physical and mental injuries that affect their quality of life (Tanielian and Jaycox, 2008; Cesur, Sabia, and Tekin, 2013). Military veterans also face lower wages than civilian coworkers (Hansen and Weisbrod, 1967; Hosek and Sharp, 2001), as well as substantial education and skills gaps (J. D. Angrist, 1989; J. Angrist and Krueger, 1994). The families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers of soldiers feel the costs of service most acutely (Gartner and Segura, 1998). In communities with large numbers of veterans, the cumulative effects of these consequences can last decades (Goldin and Lewis, 1975). Communities would rather avoid sending their residents to fight, fearing these “lost” generations (Winter, 1977).

Knowing this, politicians will manipulate the costs of war associated with military service. In most democratic societies, elected officials have influence over who serves and in what capacity. The decision of whom to send to fight is therefore a political one; everyone wants to avoid having their community suffer the consequences of military service, but somebody has to serve.¹ If leaders are not victorious in war, they are likely to lose office. As the costs of war mount, they face pressure from the voters bearing those costs, and this pressure has the potential to force them out of office (Kriner and Shen, 2007). Leaders are constrained not just by the need to win the war, but by electoral calculations. Given these competing incentives, how do leaders extricate themselves from this dilemma?

¹ None of this is new; even communities during the Thirty Years War that were not ravaged by plundering armies reported lower harvests and lower birth rates due to the loss of military-eligible men who were away fighting in Germany (Parker, 2013).

Who Fights, and Who Votes

Politicians therefore try to both maintain their electoral majority and win the war. Elected officials may use discretionary war-fighting powers to shield some voters from military service. While politicians should conscript able-bodied individuals to fight based upon their ability to support the war effort, there are strong incentives not to do so. Because the effect of military service on public opinion is localized, citizens who do not personally experience the losses associated with military service will continue to support the leader. Thus, leaders maintain electoral majorities by protecting geographic areas containing crucial swing voter blocs.

The intensity at the onset of the war itself is unrelated to this process; a democratic government should manipulate the costs of war along partisan lines, in both small and large wars. Voters who pay these costs will still have incentives to vote out the government, and leaders will still need to maintain an electoral majority. For example, research has shown that in both the Vietnam conflict and the second Iraq war, black soldiers and lower-class soldiers experienced disproportionate casualties (Kriner and Shen, 2010).

Our argument begins with three assumptions. First, most individuals would prefer not to take on the costs associated with military service; even those citizens most supportive of the war effort would prefer it be won without the risk to their own lives. Second, we assume the central government can coerce individuals to serve. In other words, the decisions about who serves and who does not serve are largely a function of government policy choices rather than individual choice. Third, we assume that the central government is interested in retaining power, and finally that the government desires the war to be fought as efficiently as possible.

Unlike the other costs of war, democratic leaders may determine who serves in the military, and in what capacity. Since the easiest way to prevent soldiers from dying in war is to stop them from enlisting, manipulating conscription policy is the best mechanism to protect their electoral majority. Although systems of conscription vary, most leaders have discretionary powers to defer or exempt groups from military service. For example, during the Vietnam conflict, the Johnson administration established a sweeping set of deferments designed to cause as little disruption to civilian life as possible. (Baskir and Strauss, 1978). These deferments were criticized for their disproportionate benefits to the wealthy and well-connected. Governments routinely extend deferments for a wide variety of reasons, related both to the war effort and do-

mestic politics. Deferments are common practice, and rather uncontroversial, and are routinely extended to religious minorities, conscientious objectors, university students, and employees of industries deemed essential to the war fighting effort (Flynn, 1993).

Draft deferments, a relatively crude instrument, only explain part of the story. They allow democratic leaders to protect large groups of otherwise eligible citizens for politically advantageous reasons, but they do not allow for the precision needed to effectively maintain an electoral majority. This precision can be achieved through the bureaucracy that carries out the draft process.

The logistical demands associated with conscripting millions of soldiers are extraordinary, and implementation varies widely. Governments may centrally manage conscription or delegate ground-level conscription responsibilities to local bodies. We argue that more centralized systems invite more oversight and therefore give political leaders less control to manipulate conscription. Centralized systems are far more efficient in that they can speedily enlist more soldiers from across the country. Yet they have their drawbacks as there are fewer opportunities for elected leaders to manipulate inefficiencies for electoral purposes. This is due to the fact that centralized systems are easily overseen by regulatory or legislative bodies beholden to the public.

Delegation is inefficient, but has political advantages; inefficiency obfuscates the process by which the central government can protect swing voters. Central governments can overlook underperforming localities from electorally-valuable areas, and the arbitrary nature of quotas is less obvious to the voting public. Decentralized systems allow leaders to take advantage of inefficiencies to benefit geographic clusters of swing voters. Since partisans often cluster geographically (Flynn, 1985; Nall, 2015; Johnston, Manley, and Jones, 2016), decentralized, inefficient government conscription policies can aid politicians in achieving their short-term electoral goals during times of war.

In the United States (1865-1973), draft-eligible citizens were required to register with a local draft board. These boards were composed of local elites, thought to be good judges of individual circumstances, who would make fair decisions. While the central government conducted rigorous oversight of these boards and pushed them to meet quotas, boards had broad discretion over enlistments (Broad, 2006; Congress, 1969).²

² The United Kingdom and France also used local draft boards, with less autonomy, to ad-

Decentralized conscription policies work to the advantage of democratic leaders through two mechanisms. First, politicians can target certain areas with disproportionate quotas, relative to population. It is important to note that such politically-advantageous manipulation of conscription will occur at the margins. Blatantly “unfair” quotas are both politically unpalatable and unsustainable over an extended period of time (Flynn, 1998; Levi, 1996).

Second, democratic governments may selectively use oversight capabilities to follow-up with local draft boards and ensure quotas are met. For example, draft boards in swing regions could receive lenient treatment from the central draft agency, while other draft boards may be subject to repeated follow-up and punitive oversight. We offer two justifications for the lack of written documentation on conscription policy manipulated for partisan reasons. First, no reasonable government official would ever put pen to paper to document electorally-based conscription as an official policy. Second, careers of political appointees are linked to the party’s electoral success; they will have strong self-preservation incentives even in the absence of directives from superiors. Therefore, our mechanism holds in the presence of either a top-down directed effort, or a “grassroots” effort from local elites to protect the party.

To understand how conscription was enabled politicians to manipulate the draft for electoral ends, we examine the case of the United States in World War II. We show that President Roosevelt and the Democratic party were under significant strain to hold together the tenuous and fluid New Deal coalition. Large segments of the coalition had previously been reliable Republican voters, or had flirted with voting Republican in the recent past. The Democratic party could not hold Congress in the 1942 elections, or secure Roosevelt’s presidential re-election, without ensuring the continued support of these voters. At the same time, the United States needed millions of men to simultaneously fight against Japan, Germany, and Italy, across four continents. This next section describes how the conscription system may have guaranteed

minister conscription and hear classification appeals during World War II (Levi, 1996; Scott, 1993). Other systems are far more centralized, professionalized, and allow for little local discretion, including Switzerland, Germany (until 2011), and Israel (Linch, 2012; Flynn, 1993). Since 1970, the United States has managed its draft policy through a national lottery system (Congress, 1969).

Democratic control of power by keeping New Deal voters from military service.

Conscription in the United States

Historically, the US was hesitant to use conscription.³ In 1940, Democratic leaders realized they needed to quickly raise a large army, anticipating involvement in the war. Thus Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act, designed and established by the unknown “Joint Army-Navy Selective Service Committee” (Flynn, 1985). This Act provided the funding and bureaucracy required to increase the size of the Army from less than 250,000 men to 1.4 million at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor a year later (Flynn, 1993).

The SSS was directly overseen by the president and run by Brigadier-General Lewis Hershey. The president, through the SSS, could authorize the number of conscripted men needed from each county and establish deferments for specific social or economic classifications (Flynn, 1993). To carry out their task the SSS established 6,400 local draft boards, with a minimum of one board per county, each capped at 8,500 registrants. The draft boards were comprised of local civic leaders whose nominations were approved by the SSS. This arrangement was described as such by the foremost historian of the draft, Dr. George Flynn:

Although committed to decentralization, [the President] still insisted that state headquarters remain loyal to national policy. Decentralization existed, but no-one doubted who was the boss. When a state official decided to take his complaints to the press rather than keep them in the system, Hershey removed the malcontent. (Flynn, 1985).

The government had considerable discretion determining who served. Conscription was highly politicized; Congress and powerful interest groups lobbied the SSS for preferential deferments (Chambers, 1987; Flynn, 1985). While there was strong pressure on the president to ensure the draft gave the appearance of fairness, the president granted deferments to wide

³ Significant fallout resulted from the employment of conscription during the Civil War (1861-1865) (Flynn, 1993; Rorabaugh, 1986). The United States entry into World War I in 1917 required the US to rely on conscription, but the practice was ended soon after the war and the US quickly returned to an all volunteer force.(Flynn, 1998; Chambers, 1987).

swaths of the population. The political pressures on the president to achieve re-election, and retain control of Congress, means that it is very possible the government protected swing voters by shielding them from the draft (Flynn, 1998; Flynn, 1993; Flynn, 1985). This discretionary power is summarized as such:

Congressional sensitivity to Selective Service was inevitable given the nature of the draft. Taking millions of young men away from their families, their schools, and their jobs was bound to generate complaints, many of which found their way to Congress. The decentralization of the system, the wide power of local boards to make deferments, and the absence of uniform standards all contributed to complaints [as early as] early 1941 (Flynn, 1985).

The predominance of the SSS in forcing compliance meant that political leaders could selectively influence where and when the SSS exerted pressure. Draft boards had wide latitude to make decisions regarding who would serve. The board's decisions could be reversed by an appeals process, and failure to comply with the SSS could result in severe punishment. Throughout the war most boards were compliant with the demands of the SSS (Flynn, 1993). In return, the SSS selectively permitted discretionary decision-making of these boards. General Hershey gave the following advice:

'I do advise you to not leave a lot of memoirs on what you did. If you make decisions, you will not have time to justify them.' (Flynn, 1985, p. 189).

To obtain a better understanding of the operations of the SSS, we visited the United States Archives and obtained hundreds of documents on the SSS.⁴ Analysis of these documents reveals that the SSS was highly attuned and responsive to politics and public opinion, both locally and nationally. The SSS was in a tenuous position; there were strong advocates for either an all-volunteer force or universal conscription. To gauge public support for the draft, SSS staff tracked articles and books that mentioned the Selective Service, as well as polling on the topic. They kept track of newspapers as small as the *New London Day* in Connecticut and the *Hazleton Standard Sentinel* in Pennsylvania. At the national level, the SSS sought to build relationships with, influential political and economic elites. The SSS hosted events including

⁴ See Appendix 6 for a selection of those documents.

cocktail parties and an annual birthday ball for President Roosevelt. Additionally, SSS officials had ties with high powered advertising executives, whose job was to manage the agency's public image. The SSS was clearly aware of its risky position, attuned to domestic politics, and susceptible to manipulation by political elites (Archives and Administration, 2020).

The New Deal Coalition and World War II

President Roosevelt won office with a Democratic coalition that reshaped American politics for thirty years. In addition to Southerners, urbanites, Catholics, and immigrants, Roosevelt added to the Democratic party blacks, Midwestern farmers, labor unions, and industrial workers (Sundquist, 2011). By 1940, however, that coalition was showing signs of strain: some of the newer voting groups in the coalition were starting to turn back towards the Republicans, while strains over civil rights in the South threatened another segregationist 'bolt' from the party, as it did in 1928 (Key Jr, 1949; Carlson, 1964). Democrats were attuned to these issues, and saw the maintenance of their coalition as the way to ensure continued Democratic government in Washington.

The outbreak of war threatened this coalition even further. Parts of the New Deal coalition petitioned to ensure deferments, including labor unions, blacks, farmers, and religious minorities. When obtaining large deferments were not possible, members of the coalition abandoned the party; for example, isolationist-minded Midwesterners helped the Republican party gain seventy seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1938 midterm elections, ostensibly to avoid the war altogether. Roosevelt had to keep the New Deal coalition together long enough to secure re-election, but also win the war.

Therefore, the government established a conscription policy that would achieve both the necessary manpower to win the war, as well as minimize damage to the New Deal coalition. This was accomplished through two mechanisms. First, the administration would demand and tolerate lower than average enlistment numbers from swing counties. Second, they would create a system of exemptions and deferments that were likely to disproportionately benefit voters in swing counties.⁵

⁵ We also argue that the Roosevelt administration would shield its swing voters, not the party's core voting blocs, because there was much less risk that these groups would flee the party.

Fortunately for the Democratic party, swing voters were geographically clustered, allowing the SSS to both mobilize for war and aid in re-election. The Roosevelt administration – as are all administrations – were attuned to conditions “on the ground” across hundreds of localities across the country. The party relied not only on public opinion polls but on Democratic state and local party chairs to identify swing voter groups, blocs of voters that might be straying from the party, and potential solutions.

Finally, the effect should be strongest in election years. Voters will remember proximate rather than distant events, and vote accordingly. If large numbers of residents of swing counties are conscripted, their relatives might vote against Democrats. But in 1943 and 1945, without the pressure of imminent elections, the administration faced fewer pressures from their swing voters. They could fill the ranks of the military with soldiers from the tenuous parts of the New Deal coalition, and not worry about the costs of service reducing their popularity. This would be especially true for 1945, as the Allies had largely won the war and newly-enlisted soldiers would see little combat.

The implications of our narrative are simple: swing counties would receive relative protection from conscription during the war. We believe that the severity of the war makes this war a conservative test of our theory; if we find partisan manipulation of the draft here, we expect to find manipulation of conscription policy elsewhere.⁶

Hypothesis 1 (Swing-county Hypothesis) *A lower proportion of eligible citizens were drafted from swing counties than eligible citizens from non-swing counties.*

Hypothesis 2 (Election Year Hypothesis) *A lower proportion of eligible citizens were drafted from swing counties in election years than non-swing counties in election years.*

Data

Our unit of analysis is the county-year, comprising 15,440 observations across 3,088 counties, 1941-1945.⁷ Each observation corresponds to the proportion of conscripted soldiers during

⁶ See Appendix 1 for a further discussion on World War II as a conservative test.

⁷ We use the county as our unit of analysis because the county board was the instrument of conscription. Please see the Appendix 2.1 for a thorough discussion.

that county-year. We match these data with county-level voting data averaged across three presidential elections, 1932-1940 (Haines, 2005). Additionally, we obtain county-level covariates from the 1940 Census (D. Dodd and W. Dodd, 1973). By combining these disparate data, we are able to explore whether elected leaders manipulated conscription policy along partisan lines.

Dependent Variables

We operationalize our dependent variable using a novel, original dataset comprising 9.2 million enlisted US Army service-members during the Second World War (1939-45) (Archives and Administration, 2017).⁸ These data contain the serial numbers, full name, state and county of residence, state of residence, date of enlistment, place of enlistment, year of birth, race, level of education, civilian occupation, marital status, height, and weight for each enlistee.⁹ We aggregate each service-member’s information to the county-year.

Our final measure is the total number of enlistees for each county-year, as a proportion of the number of the county’s population, such that:¹⁰

$$Y_{i,t} = \frac{Enlistees_{i,t}}{Population_{i,t} - Enlistees_{i,t-1}}.$$

This measure therefore adjusts population to account for the draft eligible men conscripted in the previous year.¹¹ We rescale this measure to hundreds of men.

⁸ Data on enlistees in the other branches of the military are unavailable, but the Army comprised the largest and most geographically-representative branch of the military. In 1945 the Army had 8.26 million soldiers, while the Navy and Marines had a combined strength of 3.8 million.

⁹ See Appendix 2 for a detailed discussion of the data, its origins, and our cleaning process.

¹⁰ A detailed description of our dependent variable is found in Appendix 2.2. For a discussion of alternate ways to create this measure, see Appendices 2.2 and 4.11. We disaggregate enlistment data into volunteers and draftees in Appendix 4.6; both volunteer and conscription rates were lower in swing counties.

¹¹ See the Appendix for more discussion on our construction of this variable.

Independent Variables

In order to approximate how politicians perceived the tenuous constituencies in the New Deal Coalition, we operationalize a series of measures of swing-county voters. We obtain county-level and state-level votes for the Democratic party in presidential elections from 1932 to 1940¹². We obtain county-level votes for the Democratic party in House of Representatives elections from 1936 to 1942. In each instance, we create a series of measures of “swing” status. Our theory explicitly argues that the conscription system is manipulated to protect tenuous supporters of the Democrats, not to try to win new voters; therefore, our primary swing-county measure is 50 – 55% Democratic. Doing so also represents the party’s perception of the New Deal coalition.¹³ To relax this assumption, we produce swing-county measures of 47.5 – 52.5%, 45 – 50%, and a series of five- and two- percentage-point placebo tests across the spectrum of vote shares.

We also leverage a number of covariates that affected the enlistment rates. We control for the county urbanization rate, the total population of the county, average crop values per county, the county’s draft-eligible proportion, the county’s black population, and the per-capita number of farms. We report the summary statistics for our covariates in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary Statistics, Covariates

Variable Name	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Obs
(%) Enlistments (100s)	0.933	0.893	0	34.243	15435
Swing County	0.16	0.368	0	1	15275
% GOP Vote	33.479	18.015	0	87.3	15275
% Urban	0.232	0.246	0	1	15435
Total Population (1000s)	42.405	143.398	0.285	4063.342	15435
Avg. Crop Value	85.356	70.183	0	702.911	15320
% Male Eligible	0.307	0.037	0.211	0.547	15435
% Black	0.107	0.178	0	0.855	15435
Farms/Population	0.095	0.047	0	0.23	15435

¹² An averaged measure is preferable to only observing one election; Roosevelt’s vote share in the 1940 election declined for several reasons. See Appendix 2.3 for a detailed discussion.

¹³ See Appendix 2.3 for more on our measure of swing counties.

Method and Findings

We first demonstrate descriptive evidence supporting our theory. In Figures 1 and 2, we map swing counties and conscription rates, 1942-1945. Figure 1 shows that most swing counties were in the Midwest, although many counties in the Northeast and Mountain West also swung between Democrats and Republicans. In Figure 2, the clear division in conscription rates along state and county boundaries are compelling evidence of political manipulation of the draft. In particular, the sharp contrast between the swing region of the Midwest – comprising the Plains and the industrial Great Lakes region – and the rest of the country is striking. There exists no reason other than political expediency to explain such sharp changes in conscription rates along state boundaries.

Swing Counties, 1932-1940 U.S. Presidential Elections

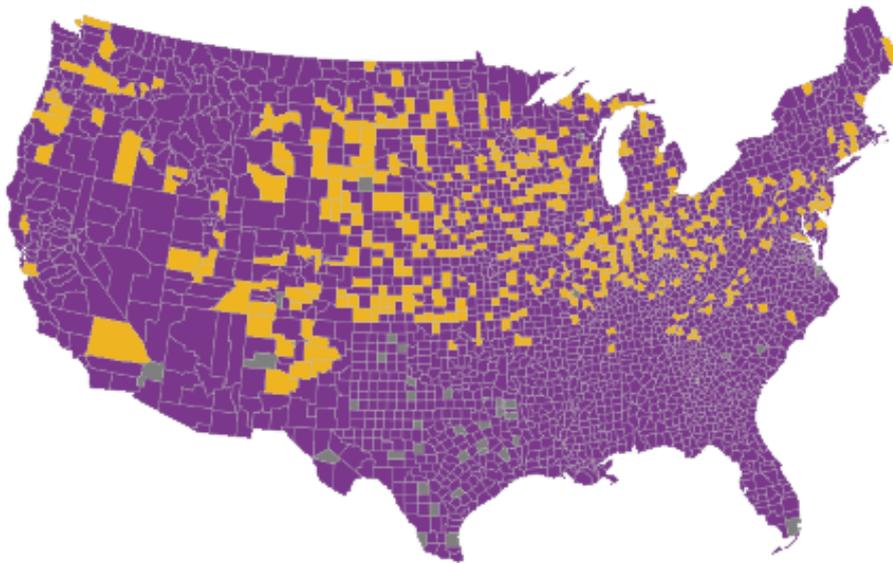
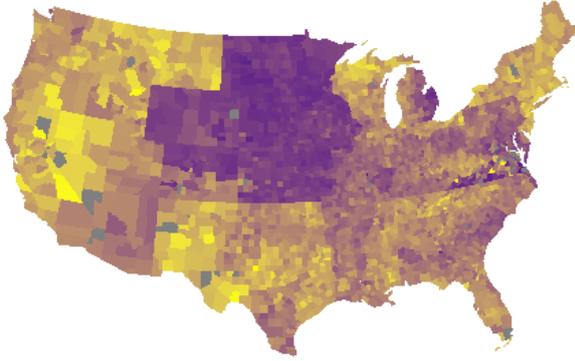
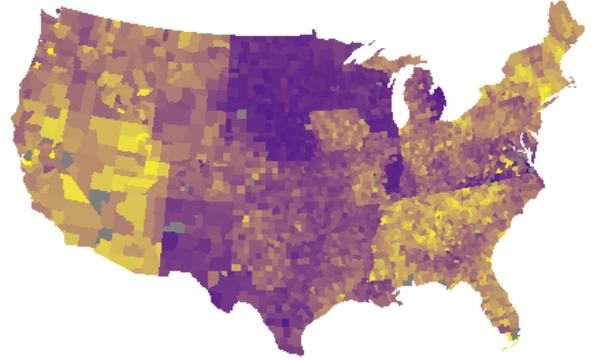


Figure 1: The distribution of swing counties across the United States, 1941-1945. Yellow indicates a swing county. Gray counties indicate zero available data.

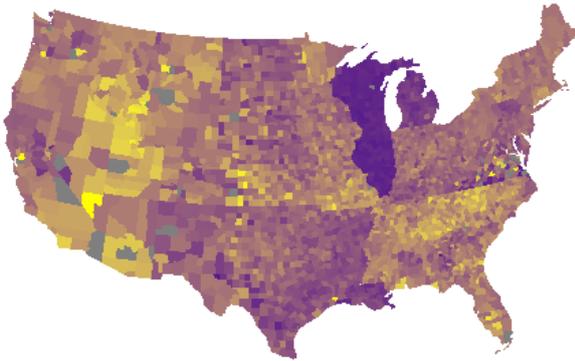
1942, Mean = 1.88



1943, Mean = 0.93



1944, Mean = 0.56



1945, Mean = 0.61

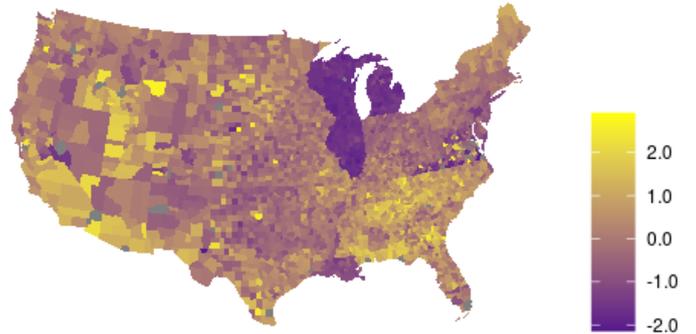


Figure 2: The distribution of conscription across the United States, 1942-1945. Darker purple indicates lower levels of conscription, while brighter yellow indicates higher levels of conscription. Gray counties indicate zero available data. Conscription proportions are normalized; each graphic reports the mean proportion of eligible citizens conscripted into the Army that year.

Analysis

We employ a generalized least squares model with year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by year.¹⁴ This approach controls for variation in both warfighting intensity and

¹⁴We do not include both unit and time fixed effects in this model; see (Imai and Kim, 2019)

for more on the hazards of two-way fixed effects. We estimate models with standard errors

partisan trends.¹⁵ Our first analysis in Table 2 includes three models; the first examines all data and covariates with year fixed effects, while the latter two explore the effects of partisan conscription in election years.

Table 2: Impact of county electoral importance on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Proportion Enlisted in County/Year		
	Main Model	Election Year	Interaction
Swing County	-0.085*** (0.017)	-0.085*** (0.017)	-0.033** (0.015)
Election Year		0.521*** (0.007)	0.542*** (0.008)
% GOP Vote	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)
% Urban	-0.135** (0.055)	-0.135** (0.055)	-0.135** (0.055)
Total Population (1000s)	0.00004 (0.0001)	0.00004 (0.0001)	0.00004 (0.0001)
Crop Value	-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.001*** (0.0001)
% Male Eligible	0.325 (0.378)	0.325 (0.378)	0.325 (0.378)
% Black	0.031 (0.120)	0.031 (0.120)	0.031 (0.120)
Farms/Population	-2.155*** (0.258)	-2.155*** (0.258)	-2.155*** (0.258)
1942	1.325*** (0.016)		
1943	0.355*** (0.011)		
1944	-0.039*** (0.008)		
1945	0.010 (0.009)		
Swing County x Election Year			-0.129*** (0.017)
Intercept	0.950*** (0.116)	1.072*** (0.116)	1.063*** (0.116)
Observations	15,155	15,155	15,155
Adjusted R ²	0.497	0.122	0.122
F Statistic	14,990***	2,106***	2,123***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Our swing-county variable is negative and statistically significant; across all years of the war, fewer eligible men enlisted from swing counties. For perspective, in the average county (determined by the number of eligible male residents), 11.5 fewer men per year enlisted in swing counties compared to non-swing counties. In aggregate, these numbers are very large. Over the length of the war there were 139,000 fewer men enlisted from swing counties than clustered by county and re-estimate with robust standard errors; the two are equivalent.

¹⁵ Our dependent variable is bounded by 0, potentially violating the assumptions of OLS; In Appendix 4.2 we use the Gamma distribution and find similar results.

otherwise would be expected.¹⁶

In Figure 3, we graphically present predicted values for swing counties from the Full and Interaction models. On average, swing counties enlisted 0.84% of their draft eligible citizens per year while non-swing counties enlisted 0.95% of their draft eligible citizens, a difference of 0.11 percentage points. As we anticipated, President Roosevelt and the Democratic party had the incentives to engage in the manipulation of conscription for electoral purposes. We anticipate that if it is electoral considerations driving the difference between swing and non-swing counties, the effect will be strongest in election years.

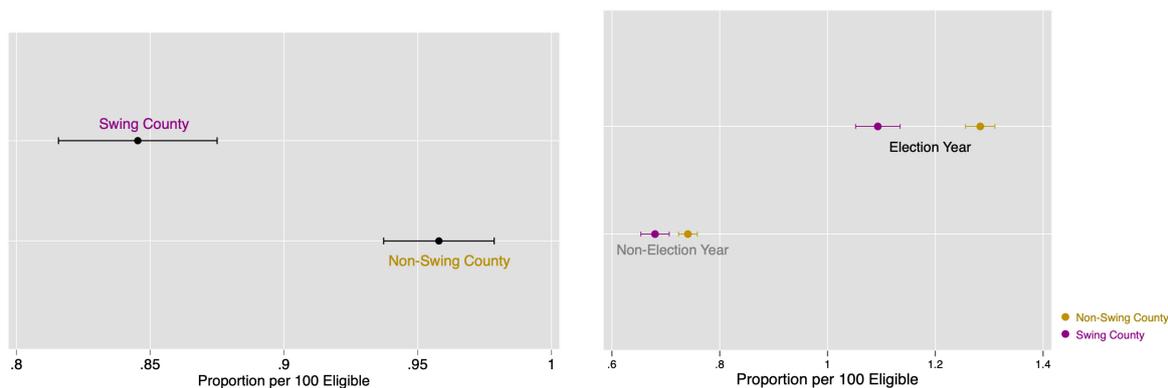


Figure 3: Predicted Values of Proportion of Enlisted Eligible Men.

In the Election Year model, we include a dichotomous measure for election years 1942 and 1944; this election year variable is positive and statistically significant. This is unsurprising given the intensity of the war in these two years. We find that during election years the average county experienced a 1.6% increase in the number of eligible citizens who enlisted in the military. Yet in the Interaction model as seen in Table 2, the coefficient is negative and statistically significant. This means that even during election years, swing counties were protected.

The incentives to manipulate the geographic proportion of enlistment for political purposes were strongest during election years. During election years, 1.1% of a swing county’s eligible citizens enlisted, while 1.3% of a non-swing county’s eligible citizens enlisted, a difference of 0.2 percentage points. In substantive terms, during election years, swing counties had 17.4 fewer enlistments per county, and over the course of the war this translated into 105,751 fewer soldiers. During non-election years, the difference is a small gap of less than 0.05%; 5 fewer

¹⁶ We re-estimate these models with state fixed effects in Appendix 4.5.

soldiers were enlisted from swing counties during election years, or 27,225 across the length of the war. Much of the difference between the number of enlistees from swing and non-swing counties is explained by the incentives that existed during election years.

Turning to our control covariates, we find that urbanism is negatively linked to conscription. We find that crop values are negatively linked to conscription, possibly due to agricultural draft deferments (Flynn, 1993). Finally, we do not observe a statistically-significant relationship between conscription and the percent of black citizens in a county, perhaps because positions in which black soldiers were allowed to serve expanded as the manpower demands of the war increased over time (Flynn, 1993). These variables show that class-based theories of conscription policy are still relevant, but that partisanship also matters.

Next, we disaggregate our results by year; these models permit us to see whether the effects of electoral politics on conscription vary as the war went on. We report those results in Table 3. We find that the estimated effect is highest in 1942, the first full year of the war. Effect sizes are smaller and statistically significant in 1943 and 1945. We anticipate that the non statistically-significant effect in 1944 is due to the demands on manpower needed for the liberations of France, Italy, the Philippines, and other operations in the war.

Table 3: Impact of county electoral importance on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Each ordinary-least squares model focuses on a single year of the war. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses. Control covariates omitted; reported in Appendix.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Proportion Enlisted in County			
	1942	1943	1944	1945
Swing County	-0.241*** (0.045)	-0.085*** (0.026)	-0.019 (0.015)	-0.028** (0.013)
Intercept	2.353*** (0.260)	1.253*** (0.190)	0.919*** (0.077)	1.239*** (0.066)
Observations	3,031	3,031	3,031	3,031
Adjusted R ²	0.108	0.083	0.007	0.081
F Statistic	46.950***	35.140***	3.788***	34.220***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

These findings show continued evidence for a partisan explanation of conscription; moreover, they show how our model continues to provide substantial evidence for existing understandings of conscription. For example, in 1943 – when Democrats did not need black voters’ assistance

in elections – conscription for blacks increased substantially. Furthermore, in 1942 and 1943, counties with higher-than-average crop values – a relatively useful proxy for wealth – had lower conscription rates. This indicates that our model complements class- and race-based explanations for conscription inequities.

Aggregation to States

Archival evidence and our theory note that the SSS was decentralized to the county level. Thus, we would not expect to see state-level electoral manipulation differ from county-level results. That said, here we relax that assumption. In Table 4, we report analysis that aggregates our county-level data to state-level results. We obtain state-level presidential election vote shares in the 1932, 1936, and 1940 elections, and create an averaged measure of Roosevelt’s performance in each state across all three elections.

Table 4: Impact of state presidential vote share on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses. Year and state fixed effects employed in all models.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Proportion Enlisted in State			
Swing State, 1932 election	−0.007 (0.005)			
Swing State, 1936 election		−0.026** (0.011)		
Swing State, 1940 election			−0.021** (0.009)	
Avg. Swing State				−0.026** (0.011)
Intercept	0.018*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.004)
Observations	282	282	282	282
Adjusted R ²	0.761	0.761	0.761	0.761
F Statistic	18.500***	18.500***	18.500***	18.500***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

These findings are consistent with our theory. The weaker coefficients are consistent with the archival evidence that conscription was managed at the local level. Swing states in the 1932 election are not meaningful predictors of reduced enlistment rates, but swing states in the 1936 and 1940 elections are, indicating that swing counties in those states had reduced

enlistment rates.

Alternate Swing County Measures

While the archival evidence demonstrates, and our theory articulates, that electoral manipulation of enlistment would focus on tenuous supporters rather than trying to win over new votes, here we relax that assumption. Surely some counties that gave 49%, or 56%, of their two-party vote share to Roosevelt would be inadvertently targeted. Moreover, the coalition of voters that Democrats wanted to hold together could be drawn from both swing counties and safe counties. We believe that our measure of counties is robust to this alternative explanation, and provide evidence that Roosevelt did target swing voters.

We leverage several robustness checks that assign swing-county status to non-swing counties.¹⁷ As our theory expects conscription rates to be smaller only for counties that narrowly supported Roosevelt, we anticipate no effect when we assign swing-county status to other blocs of counties.

First, we re-code our *swing county* variable to determine if Democratic leaders tried to target erstwhile New Deal voters, or if the conscription process used only information from the 1940 Presidential election when protecting swing voters. We report those results in Table 5. We find that the process was not perfectly accurate and swing counties that narrowly voted for Republicans saw declines in enlistments at nearly the same rate as counties that narrowly supported Democrats. Additionally, we do not find evidence that the 1940 election alone was useful; Democratic leaders still thought of the New Deal Coalition in terms of the 1932 and 1936 landslide elections.

¹⁷ Appendices 4.3 and 4.4 report additional placebo tests.

Table 5: Impact of alternate specifications of swing-county status on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses. Control covariates omitted; reported in Appendix.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Proportion Enlisted in County		
	47.5-52.5%	45-50%	1940 Only
Swing County	-0.146*** (0.016)	-0.084*** (0.021)	0.010 (0.019)
1942	1.325*** (0.016)	1.325*** (0.016)	1.327*** (0.016)
1943	0.355*** (0.011)	0.355*** (0.011)	0.350*** (0.011)
1944	-0.039*** (0.008)	-0.039*** (0.008)	-0.042*** (0.008)
1945	0.010 (0.009)	0.010 (0.009)	0.008 (0.009)
Intercept	0.848*** (0.112)	0.861*** (0.113)	0.881*** (0.113)
Observations	15,155	15,155	15,315
Adjusted R ²	0.497	0.496	0.498
F Statistic	14,973.000***	14,953.000***	15,215.000***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Second, we examine enlistment rates across the entire spectrum of vote share. If Roosevelt saw conscription policy as an opportunity to expand the New Deal coalition, or if he foresaw erosion of the coalition in moderately safe counties, then these counties would also observe reduced conscription proportions. We explore this dynamic with placebo tests. Placebo tests work by changing the intervention – in our case, swing-county status – such that the theory expects no effect.

We change our intervention by re-coding our swing county variable as an iterated window of each five percentage-point vote share bin, from the 30-35% bin to the 70-75% bin; those estimated coefficients and standard errors are reported in Figure 4. As with our other analyses, we show evidence that swing voters were protected. The clear trend in these data are towards protecting swing voters – albeit imperfectly – and incentivizing conscription of both the Republican and Democratic party bases. Additionally, we examine only the 40-60% range of Democratic vote share, creating two percentage-point vote share bins in this range. Those estimated coefficients and standard errors are also reported in Figure 4. Again, we show

evidence that swing voters were protected.

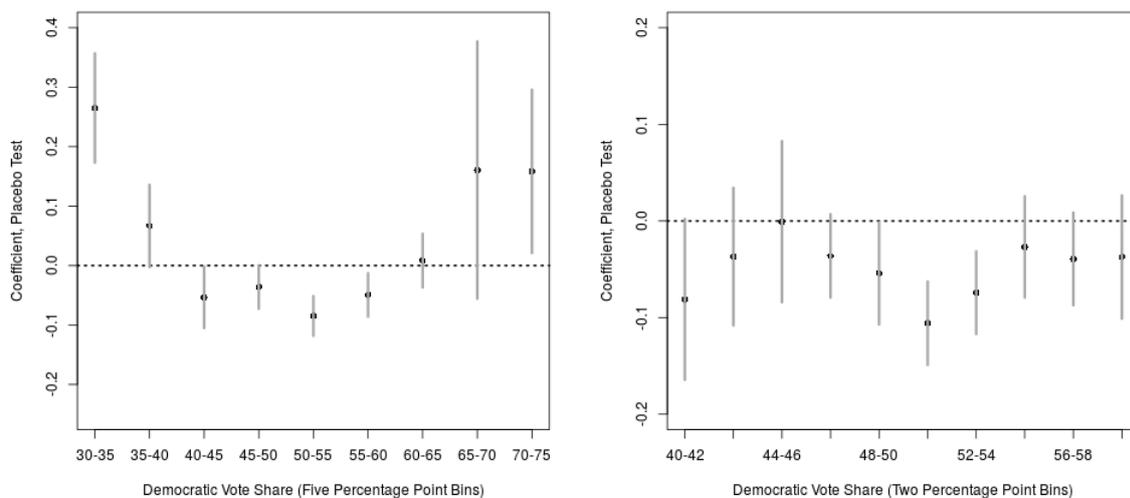


Figure 4: Placebo tests, bins (95% confidence intervals, two-way test).

As is obvious from the second figure, by analyzing these small windows we can observe a marked but asymmetric decline in enlistment rates, beginning at approximately 48% Democratic vote share and persisting until 54% vote share.

These alternate swing county measures suggest two takeaways. First, the selective conscription program was able to precisely target voters in swing counties. Second, conscription targeted both the Democratic and Republican “bases,” as indicated by Figure 4. To ensure that the military had adequate enlistments, the military had to rely on reliable Republican and Democratic counties.

Congressional Results

In Figure 5 we report estimated coefficients from thirteen models that regress county-level conscription on swing counties in Congressional elections from 1936 to 1942, as well as an averaged model. Three measures of swing-county status are employed; 50 – 55%, 47.5 – 52.5%, and 45 – 50%. We examine two elections: the 1940 (prewar) and 1942 (wartime) House of Representatives elections. For the pre-war elections, we examine conscription rates in 1942, while for the 1942 election we examine conscription rates in 1943. The correlation between presidential swing counties and 1940 congressional swing counties is 0.138, and 0.015 for the 1942 congressional election; this indicates that we are not measuring the same set of counties.

We also include two alternate specifications of swing-county status: 47.5-52.5% Democratic candidate vote share, and 45-50% Democratic vote share.

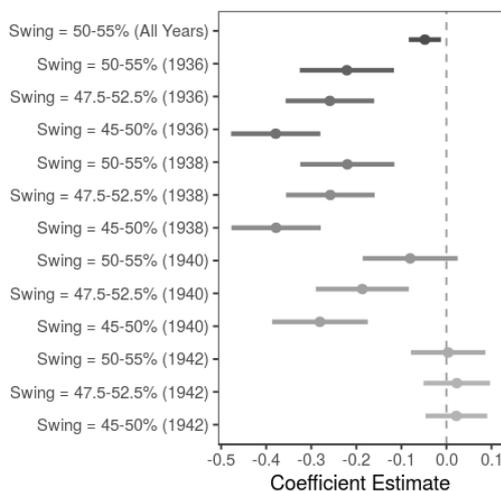


Figure 5: Impact of congressional election results on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Each model relates to a different specification of “swing county” based on Democratic candidate vote share. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses.

Our results remain consistent. Citizens in swing House of Representatives counties in prewar elections were less likely to be conscripted into the military in 1942. Substantively, this effect is approximately the same: between 100,000 and 200,000 fewer soldiers enlisted from swing counties than otherwise would have, depending on the model. We do not find a statistically significant effect for the 1942 congressional election using any specification; this may be because the Democrats, having held their congressional majorities in the 1942 election, were free to prosecute the war without trying to hold onto swing voters, particularly as the conflict required additional demands for manpower in 1943.

Congressional findings approximate our presidential election results. This shows that it was the apparatus of the Democratic party that worked to ensure its political survival during the war. Interestingly, the substantive size of congressional results suggest that the presidential election results may be a conservative test; Democratic leaders protected swing voters from the New Deal Coalition fairly dramatically in 1942 to hold onto power. The lack of findings from the 1942 elections/1943 conscription models suggest that, similar to the presidential results, manpower demands became more pressing as the war progressed.

Regional Analysis

We now turn to an analysis of who picked up the slack for the preferential treatment shown to swing counties. We anticipate that counties in New England – a region that offered very strong support to the Republican party – and in the former Confederacy – the region that offered the most consistent support to the Democratic party – sent a disproportionate number of soldiers to the military. Additionally, we note that New England had a strong industrial sector, and the former Confederacy had an agrarian-based economy – both of which were subject to extensive deferments. To do this, we employ dichotomous variables for counties in the Confederacy and New England regions, which at the time represented the base for the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. In Table 6, we confirm our suspicions that “base” regions were over-conscripted relative to swing counties.¹⁸

¹⁸ Five of the six models use dichotomous indicators for the six New England states and the eleven former Confederate states. Our second model, however, is a regional analysis of the nine Census regions. New England is the omitted reference category.

Table 6: Impact of county presidential vote share on U.S. Army enlistment rates in World War 2. Robust standard errors listed in parentheses.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Proportion Enlisted in County					
	All Years		1942	1943	1944	1945
Swing County	-0.058*** (0.016)	-0.027* (0.014)	-0.177*** (0.043)	-0.049** (0.025)	-0.009 (0.015)	-0.014 (0.013)
New England	0.364*** (0.020)		0.888*** (0.052)	0.481*** (0.045)	0.059*** (0.018)	0.141*** (0.017)
Confederacy	0.282*** (0.042)		0.663*** (0.085)	0.388*** (0.058)	0.125*** (0.031)	0.152*** (0.023)
Mid Atlantic		-0.204*** (0.024)				
North East Central		-0.504*** (0.022)				
West North Central		-0.712*** (0.023)				
South Atlantic		-0.118** (0.057)				
East South Central		-0.150*** (0.032)				
West South Central		-0.404*** (0.030)				
Mountain		-0.184*** (0.032)				
Pacific		-0.136*** (0.042)				
1942	1.325*** (0.016)	1.325*** (0.016)				
1943	0.355*** (0.011)	0.355*** (0.011)				
1944	-0.039*** (0.008)	-0.039*** (0.008)				
1945	0.010 (0.009)	0.010 (0.009)				
Intercept	0.393** (0.169)	0.714*** (0.178)	1.043*** (0.365)	0.487* (0.254)	0.674*** (0.109)	0.940*** (0.083)
Observations	15,155	15,155	3,031	3,031	3,031	3,031
Adjusted R ²	0.499	0.505	0.141	0.108	0.015	0.102
F Statistic	15,092***	15,456***	50.6***	37.77***	5.686***	35.250***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Both the New England and Confederacy variables are positive and statistically significant. Because this is a linear model, interpreting the results of the analysis is relatively straightforward. Counties in New England had 0.4% more eligible citizens drafted than counties outside of New England. Similarly, counties in the former Confederacy sent 0.3% more people to war than counties outside the former Confederacy. Figure 6 shows the predicted proportion of eligible citizens drafted in the Confederacy and New England.

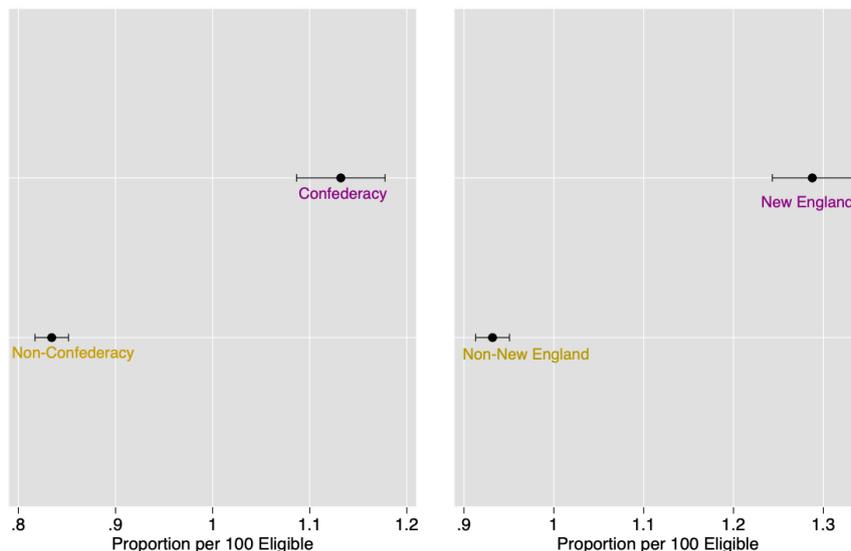


Figure 6: Predicted Proportion of Enlisted for New England and the Confederacy

We provide clear evidence that partisan conscription occurred during World War II. Our estimates suggest that the American military may have been denied tens of thousands of soldiers, and that it was due to the leniency afforded draft boards in electorally-valuable parts of the country. Furthermore, World War II is a conservative test of our theory because it was a fight against an existential threat. Therefore, we would expect democracies fighting other wars would employ partisan conscription to a greater degree. In particular, we expect these findings to hold up in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and France during both world wars. We also expect similar outcomes for the United States in the U.S. Civil War, World War I, Korea, and Vietnam, were those data available.

Discussion

These analyses provide strong support for our theory. We find strong evidence that partisan electoral concerns played an important role in determining enlistment rates. Specifically,

counties that narrowly supported Democrats sent fewer soldiers to war. This effect was largest in 1942, the year such enlistments were most needed. Had swing counties produced enlistments at the same proportion as other counties, more than 139,000 soldiers were available to fight major battles in Europe and the Pacific.

Within the international relations literature, we demonstrate that political manipulation of a technocratic process is a meaningful determinant of how democratic governments wage war. We also show that partisan influence on redistributive politics does not stop when war begins; indeed, it only reinforces the pervasive nature of partisan influence in domestic politics.

The inefficiency of manipulating conscription policies is not normatively good. However, democratic leaders may not be able to win without manipulating conscription because they would lose re-election if they drafted from swing counties. Democracies may be better able to fight lengthy, successful wars because their leaders manipulate conscription policies which allow the leader to stay in office and fight the war. Testing this question on autocracies – who ostensibly face no electoral constraints – remains critical.

Policymakers should take note of these findings. Conscription schemes need to account for the partisan motives of political agents and officeholders. Democratic leaders are driven by strong incentives to listen to their voters, even during war. Our finding does not implicate President Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in any conspiracy. Yet this paper finds evidence consistent with mainstream political science theories that show how incumbent politicians reward swing voters. Having analyzed these data extensively, we do not expect any other outcome from a democracy in wartime.

Partisan manipulation of conscription has consequences for policymakers. We now know that the SSS was concerned their system would be perceived as unfair, which would reduce morale and encourage civil disobedience. Manipulating the draft could reduce manpower such that fighting the war becomes extraordinarily difficult. Third, partisan conscription relies on unified government – in divided government, this system may collapse.

Ending this sort of conscription policy comes with substantial risk. Rationalizing the draft by establishing a lottery system spreads the costs of war to the winning coalition, increasing the odds that the government will lose elections and be replaced. If the government is replaced during a defensive war, chaotic turnover of administrations could lead to territorial

losses, higher casualties, and domestic instability. Turning to an all-volunteer military could result in overstretched armies unable to accomplish major military objectives. It may be that a conscription policy manipulated to protect vulnerable voters offers democracies the best opportunity to win the war and ensure domestic stability. Future research needs to explore the implications of this partisan process on war-fighting efficiency and outcomes. Until then, we may only speculate.

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