The Other Klan: Women and the War on Schools*

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Private organizations have long had a vested interest in the curriculum and operation of the US primary and secondary school system, viewing schools as a vehicle to promote specific social, political, religious, and educational goals. Throughout history, these goals have surfaced through efforts to both change what is taught in public schools and to establish a robust private school ecosystem.

In this paper, we study the role of the Women's Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) in shaping the trajectory of the US schooling system in the 1920s and subsequent decades. The WKKK is notable for both its popularity—with over 1 million members in 1924 and chapters in nearly every state—and focus on shaping local policy through advocacy, social pressure, and intimidation. The WKKK's anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic agenda led them to denigrate Catholic schools and promote public schools. But this enthusiasm for public schools was qualified: they supported a religious-infused, Protestant-dominated system distinct from more secular curricula gaining traction at the time.

Despite the prominence of the WKKK and its strong attempts to influence policy (Blee 1991), to our knowledge no one has investigated whether they succeeded in their goals, and if so, how long the impact of their advocacy persisted. Indeed, many have no idea that the WKKK existed, distinct from the male counterparts in the KKK, with their own leadership, agendas and methods.

Our current analysis proceeds in three parts. First, we provide new descriptive evidence on the rise of the WKKK and its reach across the United States. While researchers have long compiled information on the locations and activities of the KKK during this period, to our knowledge this project is the first systematic attempt to track the activity of the WKKK. We compare the local correlates of KKK and WKKK activity and contrast the local characteristics that predict their entry.

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Second, we show that WKKK activity is related to other factors that have been shown in literature to have causal effects on attitudes and beliefs in the North. We use a shift share instrumental variable strategy to test whether migration from the American South (Bazzi et al. 2023) predicts WKKK activity. In addition, we use a shift-share IV based on immigration patterns to predict whether exogenous inflows of immigration can predict WKKK chapter formation.

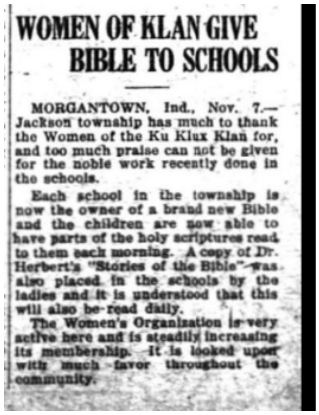
Third, we combine these instrumental variable approaches with information of the formation of WKKK chapters, exploiting the sharp rise of Klan activity in the 1920s to estimate difference-in-difference-style models. We compare the outcomes of places that did and did not establish WKKK chapters, using demographic information and our shift-share variables to identify places that were suitable for the Klan but did not in fact receive a WKKK branch. We then compare outcomes before and after the sharp rise in WKKK activity in the 1920s to test whether the WKKK — distinct from their male counterparts — had effects on their local communities.

Our current difference-in-difference analysis focuses on a key institution targeted by the WKKK: Catholic schools. From the Official Catholic Directories of the United States, we compile novel yearly data on Catholic Enrollment from 1910 through 1940. These directories provide rich local information on Catholic parishes and their schools. Collected each year through correspondence with diocese, the Official Catholic Directory includes information on parishes, their priests and assistant priests, and schools. These directories indicate the yearly count of pupils, the parish that the schools are associated with, the name of the religious order that runs the schools, and the number of members of that order that work at the school. The first part of each entry identifies the city that the parish is in; we use this information to geolocate each town and link them to newspaper data below.

To identify WKKK chapters we rely on a new collection of newspapers, *Documenting White Supremacy and its Opponents in the 1920s*, digitized and organized by Reveal Digital. This is a collection of Klan-affiliated newspapers and newspapers with strong anti-Klan ties, such as *Tolerance*. Many of these newspapers do not exist in standard collections of digitized materials, such as Newspapers.com, and likely for this reason have not been widely used in prior work.

We construct local measures of WKKK presence by searching for information on women and recording locations when we observe confirmed chapters or activities. For example, Figure 1 shows a news article from The Fiery Cross in Indiana. The article highlights a common WKKK

Figure 1 — Women of the KKK Activity Example



WOMEN OF KLAN GIVE BIBLE TO SCHOOLS

MORGANTOWN, Ind., Nov. 7.—Jackson township has much to thank the Women of the Ku Klux Klan for, and too much praise can not be given for the noble work recently done in the schools.

Each school in the township is now the owner of a brand new Bible and the children are now able to have parts of the holy scriptures read to them each morning. A copy of Dr. Herbert's "Stories of the Bible" was also placed in the schools by the ladies and it is understood that this will also be read daily.

The Women's Organization is very active here and is steadily increasing its membership. It is looked upon with much favor throughout the community.

activity—giving bibles to local public schools—and suggests that the WKKK is strong in Jackson Township, Indiana.

We hand-collect a sample of hundreds of these articles and train an AI LLM to search through the corpus of these newspapers to identify other articles. We use the information in these articles to identify local chapters and WKKK activity. We then geocode these articles and link them to the Catholic schooling outcomes described above.

In a sense, the "public schools" the WKKK supported were public in name only — as the prior example suggests, they advocated for replacing a religious schooling system (Catholic schools) with a different religious schooling system (Protestant public schools). Taking our data set to the full count Census, we study the consequence of this tension on teacher labor markets (anecdotes recall WKKK members forcing Catholic school teachers out of town) and the educational attainment and literacy rates of different ethnic groups.

We contribute to an emerging literature on the role of women's groups in hate movements and discrimination (Wishart and Logan 2024). The suffragette movement provided a political training ground for subsequent women's movements and activism; in order to be considered appropriate for the time, this activism often centered on schools (Goldin 2023; Brückman 2021), institutions that sit at the center of the development of the American economy.

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