

The Effects of Banning “Marriage Bars”: Evidence from Teaching in the U.S., 1900-1940*

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT. PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE.

Abstract

“Marriage bars,” the informal practice of firing or not hiring a woman due to her marital status, were a blatant yet widespread form of employment discrimination in the U.S. from 1900-1960. This paper documents that banning marriage bar use directly affected the employment and marriage decisions of women during this period. We leverage the fact that although marriage bar use gradually phased out by the 1960s, there was one notable exception to the trend: in teaching, two states passed state legislation banning marriage bars in the 1930s. We exploit the timing of the bans and the fact that neighboring states did not experience similar bans to show that banning marriage bars in teaching (i) had no effect on the total number nor the gender ratio of teachers, yet (ii) increased the share of teachers who were married women by 4 p.p. (25%) and the share of women teachers with children by 1.9 p.p. (18%). The increases were driven by (iii) experienced women teachers being more likely to get married and keep their jobs, rather than get married and leave the labor force, and by women married post-bans being more likely to become teachers. The bans also (iv) increased the likelihood that men teachers married women teachers as opposed to unemployed women, thereby raising the household income of married women, and specifically of couples in teaching, from single to dual earner status.

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1 Introduction

The prevailing state of discrimination against women in the labor market affects women's life choices and outcomes, including whether and when women work, get married, or have children [Hyland et al., 2020, Goldin, 2021, Tertilt et al., 2022]. Over the course of the twentieth century, various policies have been aimed at curbing employment discrimination against U.S. women, and a large body of work examines whether more recent policies, like affirmative action or federal legislation during and following the Civil Rights Era, were successful in mitigating the effects of prejudice and implicit bias on women's employment, evaluation, and earnings [Altonji and Blank, 1999, Goldin and Rouse, 2000, Balafoutas and Sutter, 2012, Bailey et al., 2023]. Less, however, is known about whether even earlier policy shifts, which preceded the large-scale entry of women into the labor force and may have laid the groundwork for contemporary policies, were effective in mitigating the effects of the different, more overt forms of employment discrimination against women prior to 1950.

This paper explores the effects of one such prominent shift: the end of married women being barred from the workforce. "Marriage bars"—the informal practice of firms either dismissing or not hiring a woman based on ^{her marital status} whether she was married—have been cited as one of the key institutional barriers that kept women out of the labor force in the early twentieth century [Goldin, 1988, Yellen, 2020]. The lack of explicit state or federal protections against the use of marriage bars left employers to decide at the firm level or on a case-by-case basis whether or not to employ married women. It was not until the 1940s and 1950s that marriage bar use began to decline, and married women's employment began to rapidly rise, as rising labor demand increased the cost of continuing to exclude married women from the workforce.¹

In this paper, we identify the effects of *banning marriage bars in teaching* on women's employment and household outcomes by exploiting variation in the timing of the bans across states. Teaching was a key occupation for women in the early 1900s, and school districts were the most prominent employers that used marriage bars: upwards of 80% of all school districts reported using some form of bar in 1942. Like other firms at the time, school districts applied marriage bars at a district level or case-by-case basis. However, in the midst of policy debates concerning labor protections for teachers that took place across the country in the early 1900s, Kentucky and North Carolina passed state-wide legislation explicitly banning marriage bar use in teaching in 1938 and 1933 respectively.² The rest of the states did not pass similar legislation,

¹Prior work shows that drivers of the increase in women's employment included changing social norms [Fernández, 2007], the introduction of birth control technologies [Goldin, 1991, Bailey, 2006], and the changing nature of labor demand following World War II [Goldin and Katz, 2002, Acemoglu et al., 2004].

²Although school districts determined their own hiring protocols, state education departments sometimes passed legislation that regulated school hiring protocols.

Can you extend to rest of the South?

though some tried.³ As such, the teaching environment in the KY, NC, and their neighboring states provides a unique opportunity to identify the effects of banning marriage bars through comparing the evolution of women teachers' outcomes in states with and without the bans.

Our setting allows us to overcome two key challenges inherent to identifying of the effects of the end of marriage bar use on women's employment: (1) data availability and (2) selection. In particular, there is no systematic data on which firms used marriage bars at which points in time, and the timing of individual firms' decisions to stop using marriage bars may have been correlated with unobserved trends that also affected women's employment. In teaching however, an occupation that featured extensive use of marriage bars until 1950, we observe both (1) detailed documentation of employment policies relative to other occupations, and (2) exogenous state-wide changes in the legality of school districts' use of marriage bars.

It is not obvious *a priori* how banning marriage bars in teaching in the 1930s would have affected married women's employment since during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the perceived cost to employers of employing a married woman over a man was at its height. We therefore aim to measure the *net* impact of the bans on women's outcomes by 1940. Our main empirical strategy is a *difference-in-differences* (DD) design, which we use to compare the trajectories of women's outcomes in KY and NC counties ("treated" states) with counties in neighboring Southern states ("control" states).⁴ Under the classic identifying assumption that in the absence of the marriage bars being banned in KY and NC our outcomes of interest would have evolved in parallel to control states, the design identifies the effects of banning the bars. We find suggestive evidence that the "parallel trends" assumption holds: we find parallel pre-trends in outcomes prior to 1930 and reports in newspaper archives that show both treated and control states experienced similar policy discussions around protections for teachers.

We document three main findings. First, what were the effects of banning marriage bars on the composition of the teacher workforce? Our first main finding is that banning marriage bars did not affect the total number nor the gender ratio of teachers, but did increase the employment of married women and women with children in teaching. Treated counties experienced a 4 p.p. increase (a 26% increase) in the share of teachers who were married women. The increase in married women teachers was entirely offset by a decrease in unmarried ~~women~~ ^{female} teachers, with no effect on ~~men~~ ^{male} teachers. We interpret the maintained ratio of men-to-women teachers as being consistent with two common beliefs that schools and other firms held at the time: (1) that men

³Newspaper archives show that similar bills were introduced in other states but failed, e.g. in Virginia. Only one other state, West Virginia, passed a law that marriage was not a violation of a teacher's contract, but many years later in 1961.

⁴Southern states, including KY and NC, differed from the rest of the country in the extent to which married women worked and the demand for teachers, making it difficult to compare either KY or NC to their non-Southern neighboring states. See Section 3 for further discussion.

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and women workers were imperfect substitutes, and/or (2) that employing men took priority over employing women.⁵ We also find that in NC specifically, the bans led to a 2.7 p.p. (18%) increase in the share of women teachers who had children in treated versus control counties.⁶ We interpret the increased employment of women with children as evidence that the bans also reduced discriminatory hiring and firing on the basis of whether a woman had children.

Second, what changes in employment patterns drove the increase in the share of teachers who were married women in treated counties? Our second main finding is that the increase was not driven by schools firing unmarried women and replacing them with married women at a higher rate. Instead, the increase was driven by (1) the continued employment of experienced teachers who responded to the ban by getting married *and* keeping their teaching jobs, and (2) the new hiring of women who got married after the bans took effect. Using linked decennial Census data, we find that relative to control counties, unmarried women teachers in treated counties in 1930 were 2.0 p.p. more likely to get married *and* stay in teaching by 1940, a 39.5% increase on the likelihood that unmarried women teachers in 1920 did the same by 1930. The increase was offset by unmarried women teachers being less likely to get married and exit the labor force. The bans also led to a 0.1 p.p. increase in the likelihood that unmarried working women who were not teachers in 1930 entered teaching as married women by 1940, a 50.9% increase on the likelihood that unmarried working women not in teaching in 1920 did the same by 1930. Taken together, these results suggest that the ban actively kept women in the labor force, specifically as teachers.

Third, how did the bans affect spousal choice and household income? Our third main finding is that the bans had no effect on the average occupational scores of the spouses of married women teachers, yet *increased* the average occupational spousal scores among married men teachers by 1.5 (21.2%). The increase was driven by married men teachers being 4 p.p. (17.8%) more likely to be married to a woman in teaching in response to the ban. Thus, the bans raised the household income of married women, and specifically of married teacher *couples*, from single to dual earner status.

Overall, our results provide new evidence that marriage bars played an active role in keeping married women out of the labor force above and beyond the restricting social norms of the early 1900s. If married women chose not to be employed primarily for reasons other

⁵Schools that held the former belief might have allocated men and women teachers to different types of teaching positions (e.g. high schools or elementary schools) based on beliefs about comparative advantages, while schools that held the latter belief might have only hired a married woman at the expense of letting go of an unmarried woman to uphold to the norm that men needed jobs to provide for their families.

⁶We do not report the change in the number of women teachers with children in KY as the ban only took effect in 1938, two years before our post-treatment data in 1940, which would likely not have been sufficient time for changing child-bearing decisions to take effect.

how do we know? I think there are Gallup Qs.

than the marriage bars, such as social norms, then banning the bars would have had no effect on married women's employment. Yet we find sizeable effects of banning marriage bars on women's labor force participation in an important, albeit single, occupation, even during the 1930s when discrimination against married women in the labor market was at its peak.

This paper contributes to our understanding of how women in the U.S. have historically been affected by employment discrimination and the subsequent policies that have sought to disincentivize such discrimination [Doepke and Tertilt, 2009, Doepke et al., 2012, Cascio et al., 2015, Hyland et al., 2020, Goldin, 2021, Tertilt et al., 2022, Bailey et al., 2023, Marchingiglio and Poyker, 2021]. Few papers study marriage bars specifically. Goldin [1988] explores the economic justifications firms made for using marriage bars and compiles survey evidence documenting marriage bar use. Mosca and Wright [2020] and Mosca et al. [2021] study the long-term effects of the marriage bar on teachers in Ireland. We build upon the work of Goldin [1988] by providing the first quasi-experimental estimates of the effects of banning marriage bars on U.S. women.

This paper also contributes to our understanding of the factors that led to the rise in women's labor force participation throughout the twentieth century, such as World War II [Goldin, 1991, Acemoglu et al., 2004, Rose, 2018], the introduction of oral contraceptives [Goldin and Katz, 2002, Bailey, 2006], shifting cultural attitudes [Fernández, 2007], and the 1963 Equal Pay Act and 1964 Civil Rights Act [Bailey et al., 2023]. A central identification challenge in this literature is the fact that there was significant overlap in the timing of social and economic changes mid-century, which makes it difficult to isolate the contribution of any one factor to the rise in women's labor force participation [Goldin and Olivetti, 2013]. To this end, an advantage of our design is that we use variation that preceded the most significant period of confounding factors, allowing us to isolate the extent to which ending marriage bars in teaching might have contributed to the rise in married women's labor force participation prior to 1950.

The rest of the paper continues as follows. Section 2 describes the historical context of marriage bars and the teaching profession in the early twentieth century, including the justifications for marriage bars across occupations and the circumstances around the unique bans on marriage bars in teaching. Section 3 describes the data we use and the standard differences-in-differences methodology. Section 5 describes the effects of the marriage bar bans on women's outcomes. Section 6 concludes.

2 Marriage Bars and the Teaching Profession in the Early Twentieth Century

This section provides historical background on the evolution of marriage bar use in the first half of the twentieth century, both nationwide and specifically in the teaching profession.

2.1 The Evolution of Marriage Bar Use from 1900 to 1960

Marriage bars were hiring and firing policies specific to married women that began to emerge across the world throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s and have been termed “the most numerically important of all prohibitions in their impact on the employment of married women” [Goldin, 1988]. In the U.S., marriage bars were particularly popular among firms that employed women as clerical workers (e.g. in banking, insurance, etc.) and government agencies that employed women as teachers (i.e. school districts) [Goldin, 1988]. The bars came in two varieties: “hire bars,” which governed whether married women could be hired, and “retain bars,” which governed whether existing women employees who got married on the job could be fired [Goldin, 1988]. Firms used one or both, implemented either formally at the firm level or at their discretion on a case-by-case basis. *maybe “favorable”*

Firms viewed marriage bars as profitable personnel policies for three reasons. First, in light of the general social consensus on the appropriate roles of women and men in society and in the household, it was widely believed that men, rather than married women, were the ones meant to support their families. There was therefore a perceived social cost to offering a job to a married woman who had a husband to provide for them, as succinctly summarized by the Irish Department of Education in 1932: “married women teachers restricted opportunities for other women and created social tensions if married to a farmer, shopkeeper or teacher” [Mosca and Wright, 2021].

Second, it was believed that due to their household responsibilities, married women were less efficient workers than unmarried women and men (“the married woman lacks genuine interest in her work” [Cooke and Simms, 1940]). Marriage bars were thus justified on the basis that single women were more reliable workers than married women, though ironically the stereotype was reversed once married women entered the labor force *en masse*.

Third, many firms used internal promotion practices and tenure-based salary schedules, both of which incentivized firms to maintain high turnover of employees. Marriage bars were thus a convenient and socially acceptable way to avoid paying the higher salaries associated with longer tenures to women specifically Goldin [1988]. Teaching was a key example of an

Airline stewardesses had similar marriage bars through 1970s, I believe.

occupation that featured fixed salary schedules in the majority of school districts as early as the 1920s.

Although marriage bars were widely used, there is no systematic record of marriage bar use across U.S. firms. The available data on firm-level marriage bar use largely comes from a handful of surveys that were carried out between 1931 and 1956 asking non-representative samples of firms about their policies concerning married women. The surveys show that discretionary marriage bar policies were especially common: in 1936, 50-60% of factories and offices in a survey conducted by Purdue University reported using formal or discretionary marriage bar restrictions [Mosca and Wright, 2021]. Formal marriage bar policies were less common, but still affected many working women due to large firms being more likely to adopt formal policies: in 1931, 12% of firms surveyed in five large cities by the U.S. Department of Labor reported having a formal policy in place, affecting 25% of the women employed [Goldin, 1988].

The most comprehensive data on marriage bar use was inadvertently collected by the National Education Association (NEA) in their surveys of school districts in 1928, 1930-31, 1942, and 1950-51 [Goldin, 2021]. The NEA surveys also illustrate how marriage bar use fluctuated with the business cycle from 1920 to 1950. Hire bars in school districts affected 60% of the urban population in 1928 prior to the Great Depression, which increased to 73% in 1930-31 and nearly 80% in 1942. Similarly, retain bars in school districts affected around 50% to 60% of the urban population over the same time period. The increase in marriage bar use over the course of the Great Depression has been attributed to rising unemployment and scarcity of jobs for men.⁷ However, marriage bar use in schools declined significantly by the 1950s: in 1950-51, the share of the urban population affected by school districts' hire and retain bars fell to around 17% and 10%, respectively.

The steep decline in school districts' use of marriage bars between 1940 and 1950 mirrored a society-wide trend towards inclusion of married women in the workforce. After World War II, unemployment was near zero and demand for workers was high. It became too costly for firms to continue excluding older, married women from the workforce [Goldin, 1988]. As such, marriage bar use quickly declined and virtually ended by the 1960s. Incidentally, rhetoric around the efficiency of married women workers also flipped during this time period, with older women being praised for their "maturity," "steadiness," and "reliability," in stark contrast with the earlier justifications in favor of using marriage bars.

⁷There was even federal legislation, such as Federal Order 213 in the Federal Economy Act of 1932, that mandated that "executive branch officials... fire workers whose spouses were employed by the federal government," and was largely used to fire married women [Goldin, 1988].

✓ but 1942 was a very tight labor market.

2.2 Marriage Bars and Marriage Bar Bans in Teaching

School districts were the most prominent employers that used marriage bars throughout the early twentieth century. School districts’ use of marriage bars is particularly notable as teaching was a women-dominated occupation and one of the few socially-accepted occupations for married women at the time. In 1930, 80% of teachers were women. Teaching was especially popular among the minority of married women who were working: 31% of married women with any college were teachers in 1940.⁸

School districts rationalized using marriage bars using the same reasons cited by other firms as described in the previous section: job scarcity for men, the perceived inefficiency of married women, and incentives to maintain high turnover to keep labor costs low for salaried workers. However, unlike in other occupations, discriminatory hiring policies in teaching were particularly contested in debates over tenure protection for teachers, which took place across the country from the 1910s onward.⁹ A non-trivial number of women who were dismissed on the basis of marriage took the school boards to court. Newspaper archives show that the court decisions were mixed, ranging from indicating that local school boards could use their discretion (e.g. in MA, MN, MI, and SC) to indicating that marriage was not a just cause for dismissal (e.g. in NY, WV, OR, and IN) [[Associated Press, 1934, 1938](#)]. By 1931, localities in nine states included protection against dismissal due to marriage for teachers in their tenure legislation; by 1939, the number increased to thirteen, and by 1943 to thirty-three [[Cooke et al., 1943](#)].

The tenure legislations that protected teachers from being dismissed upon marriage increased in popularity from 1920 to 1940 were predominantly not statewide in their application. That said, legislators in multiple states attempted to pass state bills declaring it unlawful to discriminate against married women. Some, like that introduced by the sole woman legislator in Virginia in 1932, failed [[Associated Press, 1932](#)].

By 1940, only two states—Kentucky and North Carolina—had passed state-level legislation that explicitly prohibited the use of marriage bars in teaching [[Cooke and Simms, 1940](#)]. The legislation in North Carolina was broad in its application: in 1933, the North Carolina Public Laws Chapter 562 Section 11 declared that “in the employment of teachers no rule shall be made or enforced on the ground of marriage or nonmarriage” [[North Carolina General Assembly, Regular Session, 1933](#)]. The legislation in Kentucky was more specifically a ban on retain bars for experienced teachers: In 1938, House Bill No. 51 in the Kentucky General Assembly included an act “to prohibit boards of education or school superintendents from adopting rules

⁸The importance of teaching as an occupation for married women has persisted to the twenty-first century, too: in 2000, 12% of married women with any college were teachers.

⁹By 1922, districts in eleven states offered tenure to teachers with various legislative limitations, but did not explicitly protect married women.

preventing marriage of any school teacher who has had five years or more teaching experience” [Kentucky General Assembly, Regular, 1st and 2nd Special Sessions, 1938].

Repeated cross-sectional data on the county-level share of teachers who were married women demonstrates that marriage bar use was local, and provides descriptive evidence suggesting that the state-wide legislation in KY and NC may have led to greater employment of married women in teaching. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the fraction of White teachers who were married women, from 1910 to 1940, for counties in KY and NC versus other counties across the rest of the country. Married women slowly entered teaching between 1910 and 1930 in all states, as evidenced by the rightward shift in the distribution mean. The variances of the distributions increase as well, indicating that some counties still maintained low shares of married women teachers even as married women begin to enter teaching overall. In 1940 however, the mass in the distributions for KY and NC counties shifts right relative to other counties, indicating that nearly all counties in KY and NC began to hire married women at higher rates. Our empirical design described in Section 4 leverages this variation to formally evaluate the effects of the bans in KY and NC on women’s employment in teaching.

3 Data

For our analysis, we use full-count U.S. Decennial Census data from 1910-1940, which covers all individuals in the US [Ruggles et al., 2021b]. In addition to cross-sectional census data, we also use a combination of linkages from the Census Tree [Price et al., 2023a,b,c], the Census Linking Project [Abramitzky et al., 2022a,b,c], and the IPUMS Multigenerational Longitudinal Panel [Helgertz et al., 2023, Ruggles et al., 2021a] to link individuals across subsequent censuses.

3.1 Cross-Sectional Sample

While we are interested specifically in the effect of banning marriage bars on public school teachers, the data do not identify public school teachers separately from other types of teachers. We define teachers in our analysis as adults between the ages of 18 and 64 who report teaching as their occupation, and who are not self-employed.¹⁰

We also restrict our attention to ~~White~~ teachers. Goldin [2021] finds that Black women in teaching were significantly more likely to be married than White women in teaching during this

¹⁰While this definition also picks up private school teachers, enrollment in private schools in the early 1900s was low, totalling less than 10% of total elementary and secondary school enrollment, so we can reasonably presume that public school teachers comprise the bulk of this group [?]. This definition may exclude some subject-specific teachers (for instance, music teachers are categorized under a separate occupation label), however we have no reason to suspect that this omission would vary across counties and over time.

time period, suggesting that marriage bars were not a binding constraint for Black women. The non-binding nature of marriage bars for Black women was likely due to persistent shortages of Black teachers at the time, particularly in the South. In light of the different implications of marriage bars for Black and White women in teaching in the 1930s and 1940s, and the relatively small sample of Black teachers at the time, we focus our analysis on White teachers.

3.2 Linked Samples

The Census Tree is based on linkages obtained directly from FamilySearch, a genealogical website [Buckles et al., 2023]. Additional linkages are added using a machine learning algorithm trained on the FamilySearch linkages [Price et al., 2021], the Census Linking Project [Abramitzky et al., 2021], and the IPUMS Multigenerational Longitudinal Panel [Helgertz et al., 2023]. By using links reported by family members, the Census Tree data has the added advantage of linking more women than previous methods, since other linkage approaches generally rely at least in part on the last name, which often changed for women after marriage. To retain as many people as possible, we only link between adjacent censuses, but we do drop the few linkages for which the sex or race is different between censuses, or for which the implied year of birth varies by more than five years.

3.3 County Sample Selection

Table 1 shows that there is significant heterogeneity in the baseline characteristics of counties in 1930. As shown in Columns (1) and (2), in 1930 Southern counties had much higher labor force participation rates for married women, mostly driven by Black married women, across all occupations, and also exhibited a higher share of married women among teachers than non-Southern counties. Southern counties had much lower shares of the population living in urban areas in 1930, and married women in Southern counties had more children on average than non-Southern counties in 1930. Southern counties also had significantly more White school-aged students per White teacher, consistent with anecdotal evidence of teacher shortages in the South [Goldin, 2021].

Column (4) isolates the counties in KY and NC where marriage bars were banned by 1940. Counties in KY and NC experienced more severe teacher shortages than even other southern counties, and much like other Southern counties, exhibited a low share of the population living in urban areas, and more children per married woman on average. Unlike other Southern counties, however, in 1930 treated counties exhibited a similar share of married women teachers as the national average, despite having relatively low labor force participation rates among White

married women.

Column (3) isolates counties in Southern states that neighbored KY and NC: namely, counties in South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and West Virginia. While these counties are largely similar to other Southern counties, they are more similar to the treated counties in labor force participation of White married women, and in share of married women teachers. Because these “Southern neighbor” counties are most similar to KY and NC culturally and statistically, they comprise our preferred comparison group throughout. Our final balanced sample consists of 217 treated counties and 310 neighboring Southern control counties.

4 Empirical Strategy

It is unclear *a priori* how banning marriage bars in teaching would have affected the employment of married women in the 1930s. On the one hand, banning marriage bars in teaching could have increased the extensive margin labor supply of married women, especially by creating an opportunity for households negatively impacted by the Great Depression to earn additional income. On the other hand, societal pressures for married women to not work and for jobs to be rationed for men were heightened during the Great Depression, potentially increasing the perceived cost to employers of employing married women. Indeed, marriage bars gained popularity in the 1930s and many of the court cases filed by women teachers who were dismissed upon marriage occurred during the 1930s.

We aim to evaluate the *net* impact of the marriage bar bans on women’s outcomes by comparing outcomes over time in counties that experienced plausibly exogenously timed bans—Kentucky and North Carolina—with counties in neighboring Southern states, namely South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. We use a *difference-in-differences* design to evaluate the effects of the state-wide marriage bar bans on three sets of outcomes: (1) the composition of teachers (the total number of teachers; the share of teachers who are married women, unmarried women, and men; the gender ratio within teaching; the share of teachers with children), (2) the transition probabilities into teaching for unmarried and married women between 1930 and 1940, and (3) the household outcomes of married women teachers (husband’s occupation).

Our preferred specification is

$$y_{ct} = \alpha_t^{DD} + \beta_{s(c)}^{DD} + \sum_{k \in \{1910, 1920, 1940\}} \gamma_k^{DD} \times \text{Treat}_{s(c)} \times \text{Year}_{k=t} + \varepsilon_{ct}, \quad (1)$$

where c indexes county, t indexes year, $s(c)$ is the state of county c , y_{ct} is the outcome

variable of interest, $\text{Treat}_{s(c)}$ is an indicator for whether a county is in a treated state, α_t^{DD} and $\beta_{s(c)}^{DD}$ captures year and state fixed effects respectively. The main parameter of interest is γ_k^{DD} , which under certain assumptions captures the effect of being in a treated state in year k on county-level outcome y .

Causal inference relies on the “parallel trends” assumption: in the absence of the bans on marriage bars in teaching between 1930 and 1940, the outcomes of interest in the treated and control counties would have evolved similarly. The main concern is that the passing of the bans and the outcomes of interest might have been jointly affected by some omitted variable. For example, if school districts in Kentucky and North Carolina held more progressive views on employing married women on average than neighboring states, then such views may have both driven the passing of the laws and a steady increase in the number of married women employed in teaching before and after the bans.

We argue that the parallel trends assumption reasonably holds in our setting for three reasons. First, we find suggestive qualitative evidence that state-specific trends in sentiments towards married women teachers did not drive the passing of bills in Kentucky and North Carolina, meaning the main determinant of the bills passing was more likely the actions of the specific legislators involved. Historical newspaper archives show that tenure protections for teachers were being debated across the country, not only in KY and NC. Throughout the 1930s, newspapers reported on school districts that explicitly resolved to not renew teaching contracts for married women teachers in e.g. OH, MN, and TN. Court decisions on whether it was just for women to be dismissed on the basis of marital status were mixed, with some courts in MA, MN, WI, SC, CA, KS, and FL upholding the school boards’ right to dismiss while other courts in NY, AL, CA, FL, IL, IN, KY, LA, NJ, NY, OR, TN, and WV did the opposite [[Associated Press, 1934, 1938](#)]. Furthermore, KY and NC were not the only states in which bills protecting married women against dismissal were introduced: in Virginia, a Mrs. Emma Lee White introduced a similar bill in 1932 to the Virginia General Assembly which was ultimately unsuccessful [[Associated Press, 1932](#)]. We take this context as evidence that the policy discussion and sentiments towards married women teachers were similar in KY and NC and the mix of neighboring Southern states, suggesting that the passing of the were the result of as-good-as-random variation in the priorities and actions of the legislators involved.

Second, we find quantitative evidence that treated counties were not on a differential trajectory in terms of acceptance of married women in other women-dominated professions. Specifically, we conduct a placebo test using *secretaries* as the main outcome of interest rather than teachers. If treated counties were experiencing different changes in societal norms or hiring practices relative to control counties, then our design would erroneously suggest that the the

bans also increased the share of secretaries who were married women. We find no such effect. Further details are discussed with other robustness results in Section 5.4.

Third, we find that there are no differential pre-trends in our outcomes of interest between the treated and control counties until 1930, as shown throughout Section 5. While a lack of pre-trends is neither necessary nor sufficient evidence that the parallel trends assumption holds, it is re-assuring for our identification strategy that KY and NC were not on dramatically different trajectories from the neighboring states.

5 The Effects of Banning Marriage Bars in Teaching

This section presents the main results from estimating Equation (1). Estimates and 95% confidence intervals are presented in Figures 3, 4, and 5. In each case, we include as many pre-periods as possible in the regressions and plots to be transparent as to how outcomes trended in treated versus control counties prior to the 1930. Robustness is discussed at the end.

5.1 The Bans Affected the Composition of the Teacher Workforce

Figure 3 shows the estimated effects of the bans on the set of teacher composition outcomes. We find that the bans had no effect on the average number of teachers employed per county (Figure 3a). In contrast, we find that the bans increased the share of teachers who were married women by 4 percentage points (p.p.) and the share of women teachers with children by 1.9 p.p. Compared to pre-ban levels in treated counties in 1930, these estimates imply that the bans increased the share of teachers who were married women by 25%, and the share of women teachers with children by 18%. Both effects are significant at the 1% level.

Furthermore, we find that the bans did not affect the share of teachers who were men (Figure 3b). Instead, the increase in the share of teachers who were married women is exactly offset by a decrease in the share of teachers who were unmarried women.

5.2 Mechanisms: The Bans Induced Unmarried Women Teachers to Get Married, and Women Married Post-Bans to Teach

The overall effect of the bans on teacher composition—raising the share of married women but not the overall number of teachers nor the gender ratio—could have been the result of three possible mechanisms: (1) unmarried women being fired at an increased rate and replaced with new married women, (2) new hires being more likely to be married women with no change to the rate of firing of unmarried women, and (3) existing unmarried women teachers getting

married and keeping their jobs. The first two mechanisms are mutually exclusive.

To explore which mechanisms are driving the overall effect, we turn to our linked panel data on women. We construct county-level “employment transition probabilities,” which we define as the the county-level share of women in year $t - 10$ who are either (1) employed as a teacher in year t , (2) employed not as a teacher in year t , or (3) out of the labor force in year t . We construct separate employment transition probabilities for unmarried teachers, unmarried non-teachers, and married non-teachers in $t - 10$, to allow for heterogeneity in the trends in employment transitions for women by employment and marital status.

Figure 4 shows the resulting estimates from estimating Equation 1 with the employment transition probabilities as outcomes. The bans increased the county-average likelihood that women who were unmarried teachers in 1930 got married and kept their teaching jobs by 1940 by 1.8 p.p., a 39.5% on the likelihood that unmarried women teachers in 1920 got married and kept their teaching jobs by 1930 in treated counties. The bans also increased the likelihood that women who were unmarried and not teachers in 1930 got married and became teachers by 1940 by 0.1 p.p., a 50.9% increase on the likelihood that unmarried non-teaching women in 1920 got married and kept their teaching jobs by 1930 in treated counties. Both effects are significant at the 1% level.

5.3 The Bans Affected the Spousal Choice and Household Income of Married Teachers

The above finding that the bans increased the likelihood that married women worked in teaching mechanically implies that the women induced to get married and teach, and their husbands, experienced a change in the household income. We therefore explore the effects of the bans on the spousal choice of teachers and the implications for household income.

Figure 5 shows the resulting estimates from estimating Equation 1 with spouse’s occupational score. The bans had no effect on the average occupational scores of the spouses of married women teachers. However, the bans increased the average occupational spousal scores among married men teachers by 1.5, a 21.2% increase on the average occupational spousal score for married men teachers in treated counties in 1930. The increase was driven by married men teachers being 4 p.p., or 17.8%, more likely to be married to a woman in teaching in response to the ban. Both effects are significant at the 1% level. We interpret these estimates as suggesting that the bans raised the household income of married women teachers, and specifically of married men teachers who married women in teaching, from single to dual earner status.

5.4 Robustness Checks

We close the section with a discussion of the robustness checks which suggest our results are not driven by potential confounding variables.

Placebo tests. To test whether the bans may have coincided with differential trends in attitudes towards employing married women in treated and control states, we estimate the same specification Equation 1 with outcomes related to the employment of married women in clerical work, specifically as *secretaries*, rather than our teaching-related outcomes of interest. Were it the case that the bans were induced by differential trends in employment of married women in the treated and control states, we would have expected to also see an increase in the share of secretaries who were married women in treated counties. However, we find no such effect.

show result in appendix?

Matching. We use neighboring Southern states as our preferred control group for two reasons. Firstly, due to geographical proximity, neighboring states were likely most similar in terms of culture. Secondly, as discussed in Section 2, anecdotal evidence from newspapers in the 1930s suggest that courts had conflicting views on whether it was just to dismiss women once married. Newspapers record cases in each of the control states—TN, WV, SC, and VA—where court decisions with rulings coming down in favor of married women in some cases but school boards in others. Although anecdotal, we interpret these reports as evidence that the control states were engaged in similar discussions. Legislators in VA even proposed a similar state-wide bill, but it did not pass.

/nice

Regardless, one might be concerned that the neighboring Southern states are not as close a control as possible. We therefore evaluate whether our results are sensitive to using other counties as our control group obtained through nearest neighbor matching. Our results remain similar when using counties matched on rural or urban classification, growth in population size, growth in literacy rates, growth in labor force participation overall and of married women, growth in the age distribution of the population, growth in the share of the population that is White, and even growth in the share of teachers that are married women and single women.

Again, add to appendix

6 Conclusion

This paper provides new evidence on the effectiveness of historical policies that sought to prevent U.S. firms from using marriage bars, a widespread form of employment discrimination against women, during a time period when women faced various forms of overt discrimination

in the labor market. Marriage bar use in school districts and debates over tenure protection for teachers were both at their height in the 1930s. In the midst of this policy environment, legislators in Kentucky and North Carolina successfully passed state legislation in the 1930s banning the use of marriage bars in teaching. The fact that only two states passed such legislation in the 1930s and that neighboring states never passed similar legislation allows us to directly estimate the effect of banning marriage bars in teaching.

We employ a difference-in-differences strategy to estimate the effect of banning marriage bars in teaching on (1) the composition of the teacher workforce, (2) the employment transition probabilities for women, and (3) household income and spousal choice for women teachers. On composition, we find that the bans led to (i) no differential change in the number of teachers employed nor the gender ratio of teachers, yet (ii) an increase in the share of teachers who are married women, and an increase in the share of women teachers with children. On employment transition probabilities, we find that the bans increased (iii) the likelihood experienced women teachers got married *and* stayed in teaching, rather than get married and leave the labor force, and the likelihood that women married after the bans took effect became teachers. Finally, on household outcomes, we find that (iv) the bans increased the likelihood that married men teachers were married to women in teaching rather than unemployed women, thereby increasing the household income for both married women teachers and teacher couples from single to dual earner status. The results are robust to various matching specifications.

Overall, the results provide causal evidence that the low level of employment among married women in the early twentieth century was in part due to discriminatory hiring and firing policies. We show that despite the social norm that married women stay out of the labor force, there was demand among women (and their eventual husbands) for women to work while married. Banning marriage bars in teaching provided an opportunity for women who would have otherwise gotten married and left the labor force to get married and continue working as teachers. Even in the especially discriminatory environment of the labor market for women in the 1930s, the policy of banning marriage bars in one occupation was effective at pulling more married women in the labor market in just a few years, long before the larger-scale societal transformations of the 1950s and 1960s.

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7 Figures

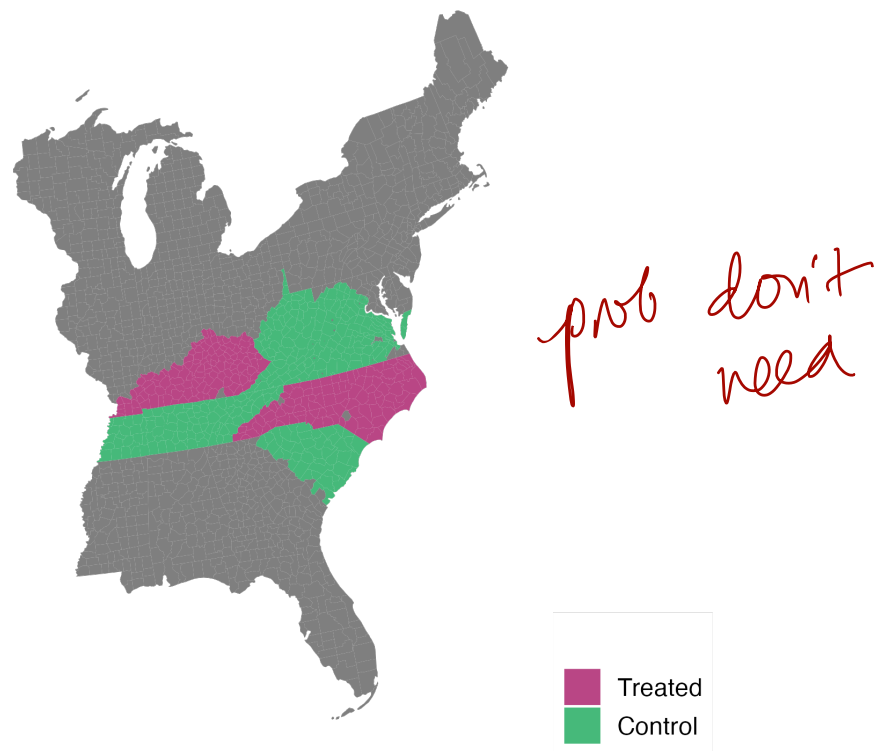


Figure 1: Map of treatment and control states in the Eastern U.S.

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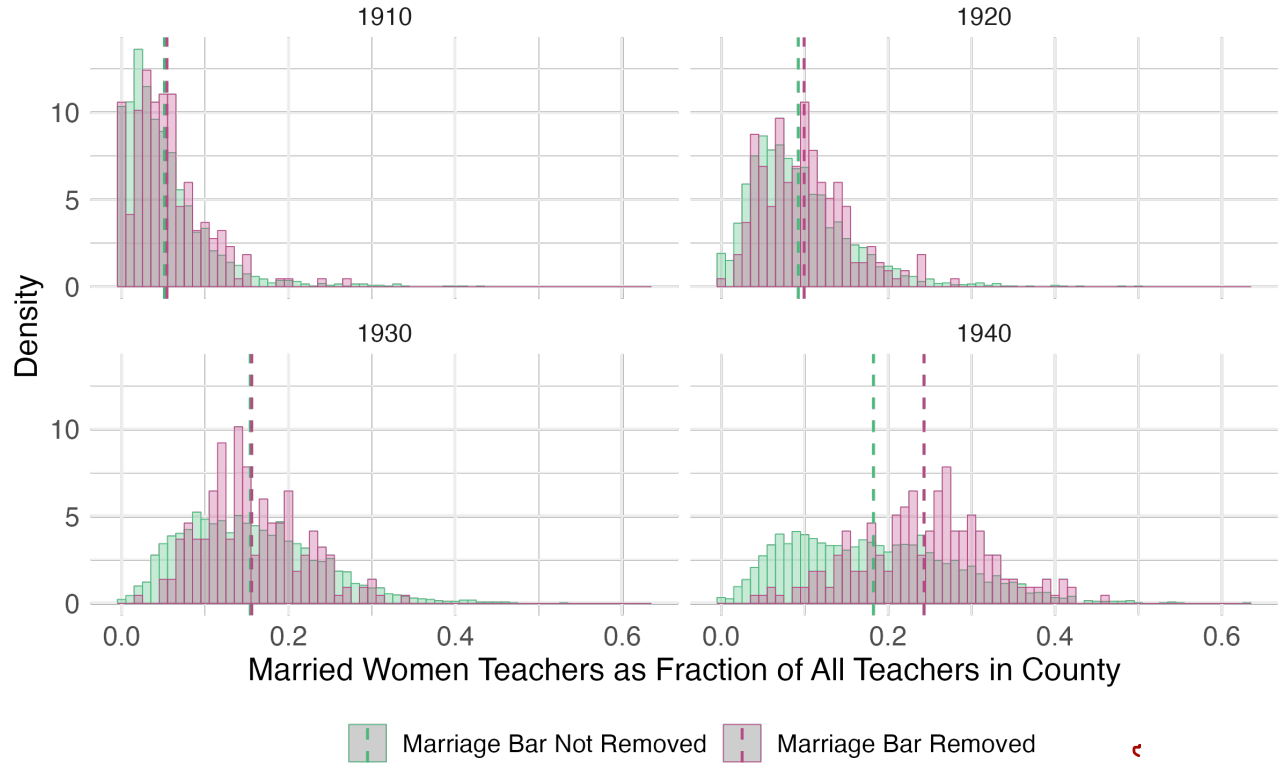
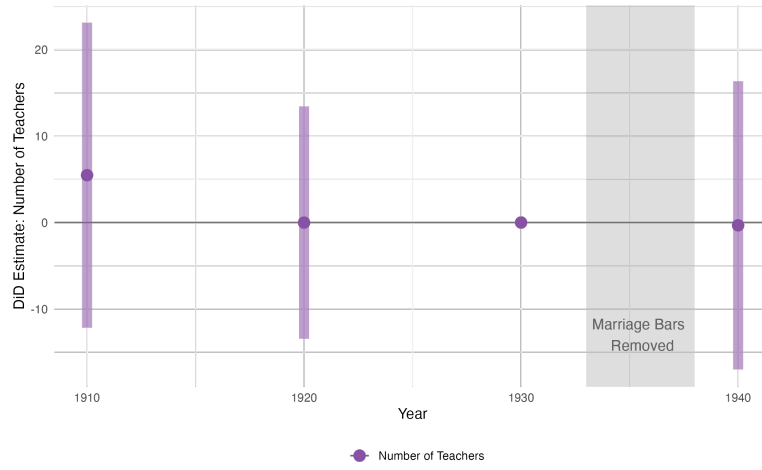
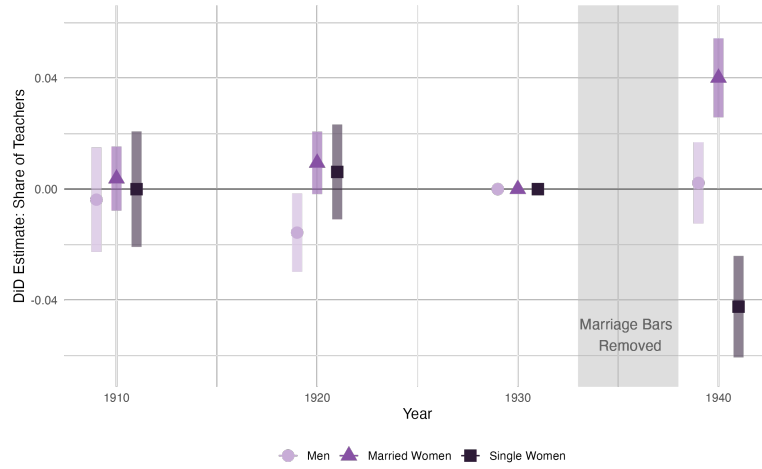


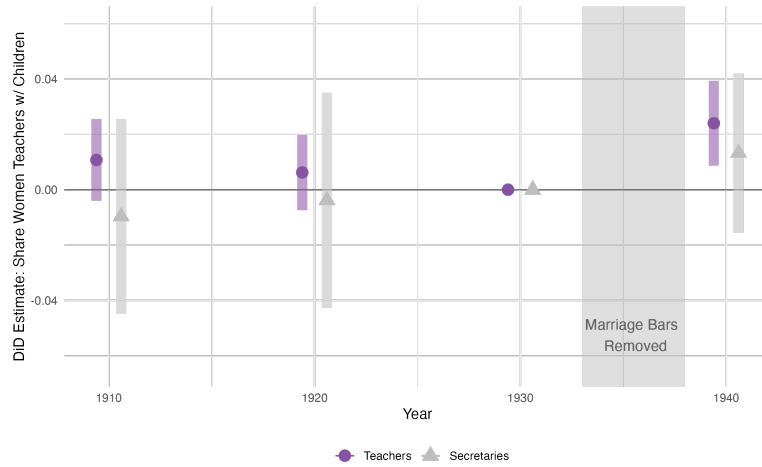
Figure 2: Density plots from 1910-1940 of county-level fraction of White women teachers that are married, for counties in states where marriage bars were removed in the 1930s (KY, NC, DC) and counties not in these states separately, with group means represented by vertical dashed lines. Counties with ten or fewer teachers in 1930 or 1940 are excluded to prevent bias from small samples.



(a) Outcome: Total number of teachers.



(b) Outcome: Gender share of teachers.

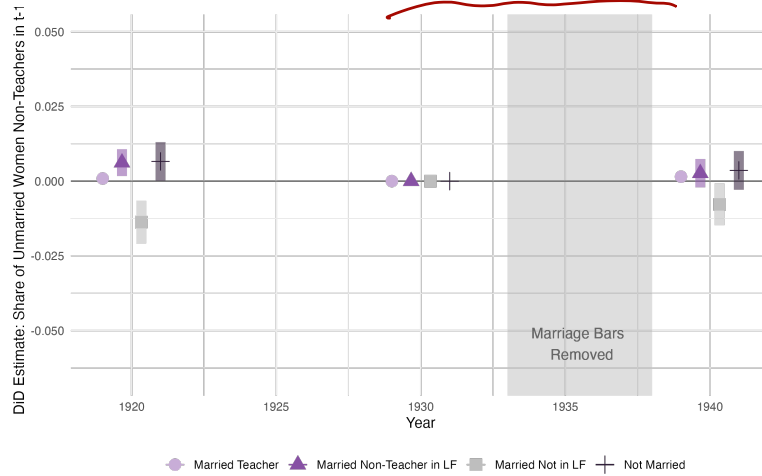


(c) Outcome: Share of women teachers with children. Restricted sample: NC only.

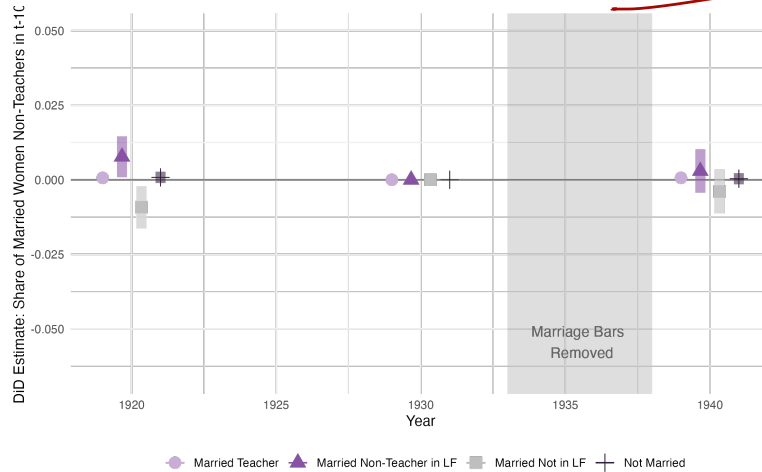
Figure 3: The 1940 point estimates show that effects of banning marriage bars in teaching on the county-level (a) total number of teachers and (b) share of teachers that are married women, unmarried women, and men, and (c) the share of women teachers with children (in NC only). 95% confidence intervals are shown.



(a) Outcomes: Transition probabilities for unmarried women teachers from $t - 10$ to t .

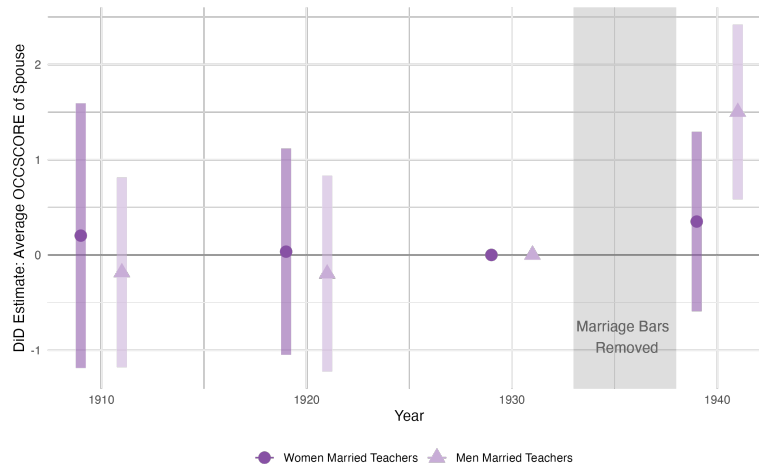


(b) Outcomes: Transition probabilities for unmarried women non-teachers from $t - 10$ to t .

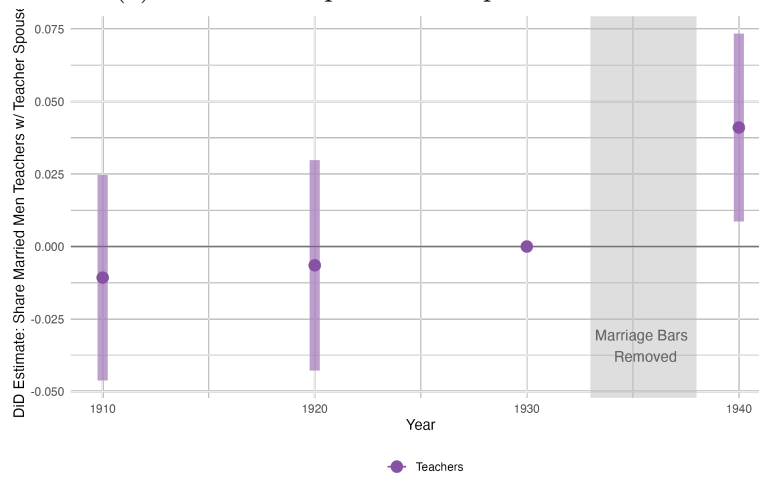


(c) Outcomes: Transition probabilities for married women non-teachers from $t - 10$ to t .

Figure 4: The 1940 estimates show the effects of banning marriage bars in teaching on the county average employment transition probabilities for educated (a) unmarried women who were teachers in 1930, (b) unmarried women not teaching in 1930, and (c) married women not teaching in 1930. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are shown.



(a) Outcomes: Spouse's occupational score



(b) Outcomes: Share of Men with Teacher Spouse

Figure 5: The 1940 estimates show the effects of banning marriage bars in teaching on the county average (a) spouse occupation scores for married teachers (by gender), and (b) ... Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

8 Tables

Table 1: Summary of key county-level statistics by county group.

	All	South	Neighb. South	Treated
Panel A: General County Statistics				
Population (Thousands)	41.03 (2.527)	27.71 (1.394)	27.15 (1.783)	26.47 (2.087)
White School-Age Pop. (Thous.)	9.337 (0.535)	5.832 (0.263)	6.091 (0.347)	6.326 (0.421)
Share Urban	0.2200 (0.005)	0.1532 (0.008)	0.1628 (0.015)	0.1356 (0.014)
LFP of Married Women	0.10134 (0.001)	0.13386 (0.003)	0.11461 (0.005)	0.09249 (0.004)
LFP of White Married Women	0.08010 (0.001)	0.08093 (0.002)	0.07717 (0.003)	0.06753 (0.003)
Num. Children*	2.030 (0.007)	2.257 (0.012)	2.314 (0.02)	2.347 (0.029)
Panel B: County Statistics on White Teachers				
Students/Teacher	30.71 (0.2037)	38.53 (0.4144)	36.31 (0.5987)	44.43 (0.9419)
Share Men	0.1973 (0.002)	0.1941 (0.003)	0.2078 (0.006)	0.2167 (0.007)
Share Single Women	0.6483 (0.002)	0.6406 (0.004)	0.6422 (0.007)	0.6274 (0.007)
Share Married Women	0.1543 (0.001)	0.1653 (0.002)	0.1500 (0.004)	0.1559 (0.004)
Obs.	2932	890	310	217

Notes: All statistics are measured using the full count 1930 census data, aggregated to the county level [Ruggles et al., 2021b]. Panel A presents means and standard errors of county-level variables for the whole county population, including population in thousands, the percentage of the county population living in an urban area, the percentage of married women and White married women in the county between the ages of 18 and 64 who are in the labor force, and the average number of children for married women. Panel B presents means and standard errors of county-level variables related to teachers, including the White school-age population divided by the number of White teachers in a county, and the share of White teachers in a county that are men, unmarried women, and married women.

Table 2: Estimated effects of banning marriage bars on composition of teacher workforce

	Dependent Variable:					
	# Teachers	Stud/Teach	% Teach MW	% Teach Men	% Teach UW	% Teach W w/ Ch.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated \times Post-Ban (γ_{1940}^{DD})	-0.182 (3.581)	0.353 (0.843)	0.040*** (0.007)	0.002 (0.006)	-0.042*** (0.008)	0.019*** (0.006)
Dep. Var. 1930 Treated Mean	155.1	44.43	0.1559	0.2167	0.6274	0.1033
Observations	1,054	1,054	1,054	1,054	1,054	1,054
Adjusted R ²	0.977	0.736	0.556	0.823	0.804	0.573

Notes: Estimation follows equation 1. The estimation sample includes counties in treated states (KY, NC) and neighboring southern states (VA, SC, TN, WV) in both 1930 and 1940. The outcomes for columns (1) and (2) are the total number of White teachers in a county and the number of White school-age children divided by the number of White teachers in a county respectively. Outcomes for columns (3)-(5) are the share of White teachers that are married women, men, and unmarried women respectively (note that these categories are exhaustive). All regressions use the 1930 and 1940 IPUMS full count censuses [Ruggles et al., 2021b].

Table 3: Estimated effects of banning marriage bars on employment transition probabilities

	Dep. Var.: Pr(person in t-10 is ... in t)			
	Married Women Teachers	Married Women Non-Teachers in LF	Married Women Non In LF	Unmarried Women
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Transition probabilities for unmarried women teachers				
Treat \times Post-Ban (γ_{1940}^{DD})	0.020*** (0.007)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.037*** (0.013)	0.016 (0.013)
Dep. Var. 1930 Treat Mean	0.05053	0.0351	0.5369	0.3775
Observations	1,030	1,030	1,030	1,030
Adjusted R ²	0.115	0.058	0.586	0.561
Panel B: Transition probabilities for unmarried women non-teachers				
Treat \times Post-Ban (γ_{1940}^{DD})	0.002*** (0.0004)	0.003 (0.002)	-0.008** (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)
Dep. Var. 1930 Treat Mean	0.005492	0.04476	0.54	0.4097
Observations	1,056	1,056	1,056	1,056
Adjusted R ²	0.150	0.685	0.905	0.872
Panel C: Transition probabilities for married women non-teachers				
Treat \times Post-Ban (γ_{1940}^{DD})	0.001*** (0.0002)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.004)	0.0004 (0.001)
Dep. Var. 1930 Treat Mean	0.001963	0.05359	0.8786	0.06586
Observations	1,056	1,056	1,056	1,056
Adjusted R ²	0.330	0.559	0.676	0.681

Notes: Estimation follows equation 1. The estimation sample includes counties in treated states (KY, NC) and neighboring southern states (VA, SC, TN, WV) in both 1930 and 1940. To compute the outcome variables in Panel A, we take all White unmarried women teachers under age 40 in 1930 (1939) who can be linked to the 1940 (1939) census, and calculate the county

Table 4: Estimated effects of banning marriage bars on the spouses of teachers

	Dependent Variable:		
	Spouse OCCSCORE Wom.	Spouse OCCSCORE Men	Share Men w/ Teach Spouse
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treated \times Post-Ban (γ_{1940}^{DD})	0.284 (0.355)	1.488*** (0.423)	0.041*** (0.015)
Dep. Var. 1930 Treat Mean	23.83	7.005	0.2307
Observations	1,051	1,050	1,050
Adjusted R ²	0.464	0.320	0.305

Notes: Estimation follows equation 1. The estimation sample includes counties in treated states (KY, NC) and neighboring southern states (VA, SC, TN, WV) in both 1930 and 1940. The outcomes for columns (1) and (2) are the county-level average occupational score of the spouses of married women teachers and married men teachers respectively. Note that the occupational score is on a scale of 0 to 80, and we do not exclude values of 0 when calculating means. In column (3), the outcome is the county-level fraction of married men teachers who have a woman teacher as their spouse. All regressions use the 1930 and 1940 IPUMS full count censuses [Ruggles et al., 2021b].

A Additional Figures

Figure A1: Share of non-self employed (a) workers and (b) teachers in the U.S. that are men, married women (including separated, divorced, and widowed), and unmarried women, from 1910-2000.

