Rise of the KKK
Political Rhetoric of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan in the West
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Abstract
Nationwide trends in KKK membership fluctuate in correlation with increasing income inequality, especially between rural and urban demographics. As income levels rise in urban areas, white supremacists, mainly consisting of white workers, seek a decline in average income. This disparity then may manifest itself in waves of white supremacist activity.

As sociologist Frank Bohn expressed in 1925, "no single cause can be alleged for [the Klan's] remarkable strength and its lasting power." While race messages are typically thought of as the primary motivations behind the KKK, the Klan capitalized on various local agendas in Oregon, Idaho, and Utah to perpetuate the group's local presence and appeal to new members, resulting in a myriad of goals driving the Klan's strength and power.

Different Messages of the 1920s KKK

- Anti-Catholic Sentiments
- Economic Inequality
- American Nationalism

Methods and Materials
This research analyzes documents written about the Ku Klux Klan and original documents published by the Klan in the 1920s. Historical documents gathered for this project come mainly from the City of Portland, Oregon Archives, the Idaho State Archives, and the Utah State Archives.

American Nationalism
- "The Klan embodies the group mind of America. It is the representative of complete nationalism. It is not sectional, it is not personal, it is not selfish, it does not represent any private interest—it speaks for all America."
- The Klan of Tomorrow, 1924, p. 4.
- Americans find today that the aliens...seek to destroy Americanism in the name of philanthropy...All Americans, who are Americans by instinct as well as by birth, have been grappling with this problem. They have been searching for something to save our nation and our institutions from perversion.
- The Klan of Tomorrow, 1924, p. 3.

Anti-Catholic Sentiments
- [The Ku Klux Klan] "was very anti-Catholic. They burnt a cross on the priest’s lawn at Clarkston once."
- [About a ladies club in her hometown in the 1920s] "In the ladies club...it was very difficult for a Catholic woman to be accepted. The only one I think there was was the librarian, who was a Catholic, Mrs. Windas. And they couldn’t exclude her. She was superior to all of them in education and everything."
- Catherine Mahon, a Catholic member from the Lewiston-Clarkston area in Idaho
- [The Klan in Idaho] "wasn’t against colored people at all, it was just against the Catholics...I remember once they had some kind of run, escaped from a convent, and she was going to tell all. And one of the churches sponsored her and of all disgusting, revolting things. You could tell the woman was mentally deranged. She just went on and on about the goings on. And there were a lot of men standing around there guarding it and someone said to me, ‘Oh, those are Ku Klux Klan members. They’ve come here to protect her so she can get up and talk.’"
- Lola Clyde, a native of Moscow, Idaho in the 1920s

Economic Inequality
- "We have permitted the crowding in of foreigners, thus forcing upon America’s own sons and daughters economic conditions wherein they cannot support large families. The economic pressure produced by the alien standard of living makes it impossible for them to give to the children of a large family the opportunities in life which every true American demands for his sons and daughters. The best economists declare that we have permitted aliens to enjoy the prosperity which should have gone to our children.
- The Klan of Tomorrow, 1924, p. 9.
- "The Cosmopolitan movement is assailing foundations of our civilization. Cosmopolitanism includes Universalism, Sovietism, Communism, Socialism, Anarchism, Judaism, and especially Roman Catholicism."
- The Klan of Tomorrow, 1924, p. 8.

Women of the Ku Klux Klan
"There is a growing tendency throughout the nation for joint meetings between the Women and the Knights. The two institutions, while distinct in their organization, are dedicated to the same cause and working toward the same ideals."

Future Research
- Historic fluctuations of white nationalism, especially the racially motivated terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan
- The intersection of short-term and long-term economic dynamics in relation to the Klan
- Placing Klan activity within the context of Kuznets cycles and Kondratieff waves
- Trends in income inequality across urban and rural workers

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References