

“When Widows Win: Land Lotteries and Individual Prospects in Georgia”

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Abstract

We know that property rights and wealth are important for economic and individual prospects, but how do women respond to significant changes in their economic fortunes, particularly in settings where they are disadvantaged? We exploit the 1805 Georgia Land Lottery as a natural experiment to estimate the effect of a wealth windfall on individual social and political outcomes. Importantly, we also focus on a never before studied population -- that of female land lottery applicants and winners, who were widows allowed to enter Georgia's first land lottery. Using micro-level data on land lottery entrants, land plots, and petition outcomes from 1805-1820, we estimate the causal effect of winning a land plot on longevity and remarriage, and whether this windfall incentivized winners to protect their new assets using democratic channels via petitioning. Despite the high value of the land lottery, we find no effects on social or political prospects. While a historical case, our results speak volumes about how wealth transfers designed to improve social and economic prospects mean little if women are not able to capitalize on the windfall.