THE SENTIMENT OF WHITE SUPREMACY
AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The will to preserve segregation among white southerners is held to be a direct function of the social and economic gains resulting therefrom and an inverse function of the guilt engendered by contact with the value system outside the South. The socioeconomic gain is held to vary directly with Negro density, and the degree of guilt inversely with the proportion of the white population living on farms. Confirmation of these hypotheses is provided by analyzing, through multiple and partial correlation, the percentage of the vote received in South Carolina counties by the states rights Democratic candidate in the 1948 presidential election.

The community studies of southern race relations by Dollard, Powdermaker, and Davis and the Gardners did not consider ecological differences in the pattern of Negro-white relations and of the ideology of white supremacy. Despite the importance of this topic, not until V. O. Key's Southern Politics appeared in 1949 were these differences generally acknowledged. Key conclusively demonstrated that much southern political behavior is highly correlated with the proportion of the local population that is Negro.

In this paper, the ecological approach initiated by Key will be used to test two hypotheses concerning the determinants of the strength of the idea of white supremacy among white southerners.

The first hypothesis has four propositions and is as follows:

I. The gains to the white race from segregation result from subordinating the local Negro population both socially and economically.

II. The more such persons who can thus be subordinated, the greater is the gain, both social and economic, to the white race.

Proof of the differential economic gain is that the larger the local percentage of Negroes, the greater the income differential between Negroes and whites. The 1950 Census figures for the forty-three Standard Metropolitan Areas contained in the eleven former Confederate states show a negative correlation (—.71) between the proportion of Negro population in the Standard Metropolitan Area and the ratio which the median income of Negro males there bears to the median income of white males. Moreover, with regard to the differential social gain, since social status is relative, the more persons there are who can be defined as beneath one in social status, the higher one's own status becomes. Thus the advantages accruing to southern whites at the expense of the Negro as a result of segregation should be directly proportional to the percentage of the population which is Negro.

III. This gain is appreciated either consciously or unconsciously by the whites.

IV. Therefore, it should follow that the

This article, a condensation of the writer's unpublished Harvard College honors thesis, "Caste, Class, and Local Loyalty as Determining Factors in South Carolina Politics," is a revised version of a paper delivered before the 1957 annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society.


4 Blalock has recently given further proof of the relationship between the density of Negro population and the extent of economic discrimination against Negroes by whites (see H. M. Blalock, Jr., "Per Cent Non-White and Discrimination in the South," American Sociological Review, XXII [December, 1957], 677–82).
will to preserve segregation varies, all other factors being equal, with the proportion of the population which is Negro.

The second hypothesis is the inverse of the first. Its four propositions are as follows:

I. Values in the rest of the United States are opposed to the practice of segregation by the white south.

II. Inasmuch as there is contact between the South and the rest of the nation through mass media and otherwise, this opposition should discourage the efforts of white southerners to preserve segregation in the South. Evidence for this proposition has been provided by Tumin, whose study of Guilford County, North Carolina, shows that readiness for desegregation varies directly with amount of exposure to mass media, most of which originates in northern states.6

III. White southerners' contacts with the values of the rest of the nation are more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas.

IV. Therefore, it should follow that support for the continuance of segregation varies, all other factors being equal, with the proportion of the white population living on farms.

The 1948 presidential election offered an excellent opportunity to confirm or reject the two hypotheses. In that year the long-smoldering conflict between the northern and southern wings of the Democratic party over the question of civil rights for minorities reached a climax. After the Democratic National Convention approved the northern-sponsored civil rights plank, all the Mississippi and half the Alabama delegation walked out in protest. On July 17, 1948, the states' rights Democrats, mostly from Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina, nominated for President of the United States the governor of South Carolina, J. Strom Thurmond, and for Vice-President the governor of Mississippi, Fielding Wright. This convention heard outcries against the threat of Negroes being admitted "to our homes, our theaters, and our swimming pools."

6 Presidential electors for the "Dixiecrat" ticket appeared in all the southern states, and in the November election Thurmond carried Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana—the four states having the highest percentage of Negro population in the nation.

From the tenor of the campaign waged by the states rights Democrats, it is obvious that they sought support in large measure from those most threatened by the civil rights proposals in the national Democratic platform. Thus, if the two hypotheses are valid, one would expect the percentage of votes for Thurmond among whites, as an index of the intensity of the sentiment favoring white supremacy to vary, all other things being equal, both with the percentage of the total population which was Negro and with the percentage of the white population of rural-farm residence.

It has been observed by Key7 and Heard8 that in every southern state the vote for Thurmond was strongest in counties with the largest proportions of Negroes. But confirmation for the hypotheses could be obtained only if other factors which might also influence zero-order correlations were held constant. Certain circumstances which might be responsible for a spurious association suggested themselves. For instance, it could reasonably be presumed that the Democratic candidate, Truman, would enjoy support among industrial workers, especially if they were unionized. It is also well known that the Negro population is relatively sparse in the industrial areas of the South. Furthermore, farm tenants might be more strongly attracted to the national Democratic party than the more conservative farm owners. In addition, there was the problem of determining the attitude of Republican voters toward civil rights. And, finally, of course, there was the Negro vote itself. A test of the hypothe-


7 Key, op. cit., p. 335.

8 Ibid., pp. 342–43.

ses requires isolating the ecological correlates of the white vote alone.

South Carolina and Mississippi were the only states in which all the factors could be held constant. In both, Negro voting was extremely rare and the Republican vote negligible. Because of the writer’s greater familiarity with the political situation in South Carolina, statistics relating to this state rather than to Mississippi were used to confirm the hypotheses.

South Carolina was the only state without the secret ballot. Moreover, it required a poll tax of one dollar to be paid thirty days before the election as a prerequisite to voting. In addition, the requirement that prospective voters satisfactorily read and interpret the United States Constitution was enforced in a discriminatory manner. All this undoubtedly helped to cause the very low turnout; actual voters constituted only 12.2 per cent of the potential voting population (defined as all persons, both white and Negro, over twenty-one years of age). These factors also insured that almost all voters would be white.

Certain additional facts lead to the conclusion that those who did vote were primarily of the middle class. First, the total vote in the 1948 Democratic primary, in which payment of the poll tax was not a prerequisite, was more than twice as large as the vote in the 1948 general election, suggesting that inability to pay the poll tax may have kept many “poor whites” away from the polls in the general election. Further evidence that persons voting in the primary but not in the general election were likely to be “poor white” is provided by the correlation between the percentage of Negroes in the county and the ratio of the general election vote to the Democratic primary vote. This correlation is .64. In South Carolina the “poor whites” are generally most numerous in counties with the lowest proportion of Negroes; in counties with a high proportion of Negroes more of the whites are middle class. Thus a high proportion of Negroes denotes a low proportion of “poor whites” in the white population. Consequently, the higher the proportion of “poor whites” in the white population, the greater the excess of voters in the primary over voters in the general election. The election in South Carolina was an overwhelming victory for Governor Thurmond, who received 72.2 per cent of the vote. President Truman received 24.1 per cent, Dewey 3.8 per cent, and Wallace 0.1 per cent, and Norman Thomas received one write-in vote. But the margin of victory for Thurmond was by no means uniform across the state: he had 98 per cent of the vote in his home county, Edgefield, and only 33 per cent of the vote in Anderson County, a Piedmont county with a small Negro population and many textile mills.

South Carolina’s statistics on voting were used mainly because they could automatically hold constant the effect of two factors: the Negro and also the Republican vote.

In speaking of “middle class” we mean those who rate above average in local socioeconomic status. Proof that in counties with a high proportion of Negroes more of the white population is of the middle class than in counties with a low percentage of Negro population may be found in the fact that, in the twenty-nine South Carolina counties whose proportion of Negro population in 1950 was above the average for the state, the ratio of median income of white families and unrelated individuals in 1949 to the median income of all families and unrelated individuals (of both races) was 1.69; in the remaining counties, on the other hand, it was only 1.22. Thus in the first group of counties the white population is collectively considerably above the total population in economic status, while in the second the median economic level of the whites is only slightly higher than that of the total population.

9 The number of persons in the potential voting population is that existing in April, 1950, as tabulated by the 1950 Census.

10 Key, op. cit., p. 131.

11 Figures from the 1940 Census are the basis for computing these coefficients. This research was completed before the 1950 Census had been published.
To provide, however, that all other factors be equal would necessitate holding several additional factors constant in the partial correlations.

First, we may consider the “friends-and-neighbors” effect, always a good predictor of South Carolina’s elections. Politicians are likely to build up a personal following—mainly in counties near where they were born and raised—which is indifferent to political issues and stays loyal in election after election. One means of holding this factor constant is to parcel out the percentage vote received by Thurmond when he first ran for governor in the Democratic primary of 1946. But this is not enough. At the time of the election there were rumors that Senator Olin D. Johnston was working secretly against Thurmond’s candidacy for the Presidency, although Johnston never openly disassociated himself from his candidacy. To offset any effects of Johnston’s possible secret work in behalf of Truman, the percentage received by Johnston in his campaign for the Senate in the 1944 Democratic primary was also held constant.

There now remained the necessity of holding constant the effect of some of the political issues of the campaign unrelated to the race question. It was generally conceded that Thurmond, in addition to representing “white supremacy,” was supported by opponents of Truman’s economic program of the Fair Deal. Conversely, persons for whom the Fair Deal promised important economic benefits would not be likely to vote against it merely to express their sentiments on the race question. To hold constant the variable of economic conservatism, it was decided to control the estimated percentage of white wage-earners in manufacturing and assumes that the ratio in each county of the probability that a white wage-earner will be in manufacturing to the probability that a Negro wage-earner will be in manufacturing equals unity. In this estimation, bias, if any, was assumed to be on the side of a greater underestimation of the number of white wage-earners in manufacturing in the counties of dense Negro population than in the counties of smaller Negro population. Thus this estimate in the analysis of partial correlation would overestimate the variance of the Thurmond vote attributable to the variation in the percentage of urban and rural non-farm whites employed in manufacturing. Consequently, it would rule out the possibility that the partial correlations between the percentage of Thurmond votes and, respectively, the percentage of Negro population and the percentage of white population of rural-farm residence be higher than they should be. A subsequent comparison of the estimates with the 1950 Census figures, which provide a breakdown by race of the manufacturing labor force of each county, shows that the estimates do indeed understated the number of whites employed in manufacturing to an extent greater in the counties of large Negro population than in the counties of small Negro population.

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Data are from figures for the year 1949 supplied by the South Carolina State CIO Organizing Committee.

All census figures used in defining these seven variables are for the year 1940.
Several of the independent variables are highly interrelated, namely, the percentages of Negro population, of votes cast for Johnston in 1944, of urban and rural non-farm white population engaged in manufacturing, and of tenants among white farm operators.

Let us now consider the multiple and partial correlations. The coefficient of multiple correlation between the seven independent variables and the dependent variable is .814. Table 2 shows the various partial correlations of each of the independent variables with the dependent variable.

The partial correlation analysis confirms both hypotheses. The partial correlation coefficient between the percentage of Negro population in the county and the percentage vote for Thurmond is .387. That between the percentage of the white population of ship in the CIO seem to produce much difference.

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### TABLE 1

**INTERCORRELATION OF VARIABLES AMONG SOUTH CAROLINA COUNTIES**

(\(N = 46\))

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<th>(X_2)</th>
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<td>(X_1), percentage of vote cast for Thurmond, 1948</td>
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<td>(X_2), percentage of Negro population</td>
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<td>(X_3), percentage of white population classified as rural-farm</td>
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<td>-.128</td>
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<td>(X_4), percentage of votes cast for Thurmond, 1946</td>
<td>-.538</td>
<td>-.522</td>
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<td>(X_5), percentage of votes cast for Johnston, 1944</td>
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<td>(X_6), percentage of urban and rural non-farm white population in manufacturing</td>
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<td>(X_7), percentage of white wage-earners in manufacturing belonging to the CIO</td>
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<td>(X_8), percentage of tenants among white farm operators</td>
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### TABLE 2

**COEFFICIENTS OF PARTIAL CORRELATION BETWEEN EACH INDEPENDENT VARIABLE AND PERCENTAGE OF THURMOND VOTES IN 1948 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

(\(N = 46\))

| \(X_2\), percentage of Negro population | .387 |
| \(X_3\), percentage of white population classified as rural-farm | .408 |
| \(X_4\), percentage of votes cast for Thurmond in the 1946 primary | .255 |
| \(X_5\), percentage of votes cast for Johnston in the 1944 primary | -.144 |
| \(X_6\), percentage of urban and rural non-farm population engaged in manufacturing | -.042 |
| \(X_7\), percentage of white wage-earners in manufacturing belonging to the CIO | -.071 |
| \(X_8\), percentage of tenants among white farm operators | -.407 |
rural-farm residence and the percentage vote for Thurmond is .408.

In addition, the signs of all the other partial coefficients are in the predicted direction. Of these control variables, clearly the most important is the percentage of tenants among white farm operators, and here the partial coefficient is —.407. Apparently the Fair Deal program had strong pulling power in areas where the white farm operators were least likely to be farm owners.

The results reflect the behavior only of the voting population, which we may presume to be mainly middle class. Thus it is quite plausible that the phenomena relate to the attitudes only of the politically conscious higher-status segment of the white populace. In the lower strata of the population, support for segregation may vary neither with the percentage of local Negro population nor with type of residence, whether farm or non-farm. Even so, this possibility can only slightly diminish the social significance of the results, since the attitude toward segregation does vary among those whose opinions are expressed at the polls.

That the factors held constant are percentages of the total population rather than of the voting population may introduce error. For example, while keeping constant the greater predilection for Truman which might be expected among tenant farmers and industrial workers, we found it impossible to hold constant the percentage of them in the voting population. It must be assumed that this percentage bore a direct relationship to the percentage in the total white population, for no attempt to test the truth of this could be made.

Finally, the lack of secret ballots may have increased the observed correlations beyond what they might have been otherwise. In the absence of secrecy, deviant voters may have been reluctant to vote according to their real convictions. Truman sympathizers in the Black-Belt counties may have decided that it was expedient to vote for Thurmond rather than to ask openly for the ballot of the national Democratic party. Thus the counties with dense Negro population may show inflated proportions of the vote for Thurmond, and perhaps in the counties with sparse Negro population the opposite may have occurred.

The empirical results presented here, of course, do not prove the two hypotheses but merely prevent their rejection. Undoubtedly, more light can be shed on the whole question by further studies analyzing not only the ecological correlates of voting statistics but also those of directly expressed attitudes. A most interesting beginning has been made in a study by Pettigrew showing that the mean level of anti-Negro prejudice among a random sample of whites in four southern towns of varying percentages of Negro population is proportional to the density of Negro population.18

Some modification of the first hypothesis may be necessary in the light of Price’s finding that the opposition of white to Negro voting registration in two Florida counties which formerly had, but because of Negro outmigration no longer possess, a high density of Negro population is as intense as in counties currently having a high proportion of Negro population.19 A further generalization from this may be valid, namely, that a one-time gain to whites resulting from segregation is believed to go on for some time after it no longer exists. The generalization from Price’s finding, if validated, would make necessary some modification of the writer’s first hypothesis.

Through further research, the various hypotheses of the determinants of the sentiment favoring white supremacy can be tested until we obtain a much clearer picture


than our present one. However, current research appears to challenge theories which ascribe the sentiment solely to an irrational prejudice of the white population. Any such theories must contend with the fact that in areas of dense Negro population the economic standing of whites relative to Negroes (or at least relative to the total population) is generally higher than in areas of lesser Negro density. Thus the motive of economic gain would appear at least to abet, if not to cause, segregation and the ideology of white supremacy.

The partial correlation coefficients reported here prove, perhaps more rigorously than does any previous study of southern political behavior, that the will to preserve segregation as expressed by the whites at the ballot box varies both with the percentage of Negro population and the degree to which the white population resides on farms. Events since the Supreme Court's 1954 decision on segregation in the public schools are completely congruent with these results of the 1948 election. In the Deep South, where the Negro population is dense, desegregation has not occurred. Furthermore, even in the regions with relatively sparse Negro population, resistance has been far greater in farm areas than in the cities.20

Thus it would behoove policy-makers to take account of these ecological factors in considering the further implementation of the judicial decree on segregation in the schools.

BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

20 For a detailed account of the influence of urbanism on the extent of school segregation in the two border states, Kentucky and Missouri, see Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Demographic Correlates of Border-State Desegregation,” American Sociological Review, XXII (December, 1957), 683–89.