

The Rational Basis of Symbolic Racism

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Abstract: Modern political-science research on racial attitudes suggests that white conservatism stems from symbolism, prejudice and socialized resentment. The implication, sometimes made explicit, is that racial conservatism has no rational competitive basis; it does not grow out of the social structure of intergroup competition. Evidence for this claim usually appears in two sorts of analysis: (1) survey analysis connecting racial conservatism (e.g., opposition to affirmative action or busing) to anti-black “symbolic” value judgments, and (2) cross-level models showing that racial conservatism does not respond to measures of a white respondent’s “self interest.” The enclosed paper questions the extent to which racial conservatism can be passed off to mere psychological orientation. Using data from a particularly valuable racial-issues survey, I show that supposedly symbolic judgments in fact possess an underlying structural basis, one that I term Cultural Backlash. Other researchers missed the geographical structure contained in racial data because intergroup competition does not follow a simple pattern, as statistical models typically assume, but one that interacts with a community’s likely investment in white cultural capital.

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Modern political science has fallen heavily under the sway of economic reasoning.

Researchers commonly assume that political actors will attempt to maximize their utility, based upon the particular incentives and information they face, and that the outgrowth of this optimization strategy will be behavior that the observer recognizes as fundamentally rational.¹ This “social choice” perspective, whether accompanied by formal models or applied more loosely, has colored most political-science subfields (e.g., Fiorina 1977, 1978; Mayhew 1974; Peterson 1994; not to mention extensive work by scholars such as Terry Moe, Kenneth Shepsle and Barry Weingast).

The notable exception, within American politics research, is the study of race. Indeed, the trend among those analyzing racial issues has cut in precisely the opposite direction. Early studies of racial conservatism emphasized the extent to which anti-black sentiments in the United States were embedded within the South’s political and economic institutions (Blalock 1967; Key 1949; Heard 1952; Glenn 1963). The most influential recent research, by contrast, operates within an explicit psychological paradigm (Bobo and Licari 1989; Carsey 1995; Gilliam 1996; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995, 404; Kinder and Sanders 1996; McConohay 1982; Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997; Sears et al 1980; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979; Sniderman, Brody and Kuklinski 1984; Sniderman et al. 1991).

Both inside and outside the discipline, writers portray conservative racial attitudes as a pathology—at best a product of extremely poor information, at worst an extreme mental illness (Page 1999). One school of researchers, for example, emphasizes the role that stereotype, rumor and abstract political ideology play in shaping issue attitudes (Feagin and Vera 1995; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Peffley, Hurwitz and Sniderman 1997). Fear of blacks grows out of prejudicial media communications and lack of cognitive sophistication (Bobo and Licari 1989; Carsey 1995; Entman 1990; Gilliam 1996; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995, 404). A second strain of scholarship recognizes white racial attitudes as a struggle to maintain group dominance (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1988; Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Evans 1985, 1986), but relaxes any requirement that group status actually be in jeopardy; the only claim is that whites respond to *perceived* threat (Bobo 1983, 1,200; Giles and Evans 1985, 58; Pettigrew 1957, 683) or their given level of racial sensitivity (Giles and Buckner 1996; Giles and Evans 1986, 471-72).

Probably the most unadorned statement of racial conservatism’s irrationality, however, appears within the “symbolic politics” literature. Scholars bridging the boundary between political science and social psychology offer a long and vibrant research tradition claiming that racial resentment follows a psychological logic—dressed up with socialized values, thick with trite symbolic rhetoric, presumably alleviated by multicultural education or egalitarian contact with minorities. This line of research suggests that one’s position on progressive social policies responds to the assessment of why minorities have fallen behind in the first place. Liberals blame society, and therefore tend to desire institutional solutions to make up for discrimination; those who “blame the victim” see no such need. Presumably psychological orientations either are random or are handed down across generations, because they do not seem to have any basis in the respondent’s actual environment. Whites, that is, suffer an amorphous feeling of resentment with little structural basis aside from unfortunate historical residue. This argument appeared recently in an influential book by Don Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1996), but the fundamental perspective springs up in much of the popular commentary, from the claim that “Americans can’t think straight about race” (DeMott 1995, 179) to Gen. Colin Powell’s nonideological lament that this is a “racist society”

¹ “Rationality” does not ascribe superhuman powers of reasoning to the subject, or even conscious deliberation. The outcome of rational, self-interested behavior may be far from satisfactory or optimal, depending upon the bounds within which decision making must take place.

(Page 1999).

This paper challenges the dominant paradigm, arguing that racial politics are not exceptional, that standards of instrumental rationality should not be foreign to the study of this crucial social problem, that racial conservatism cannot be passed off as mere psychological orientation. Rather, the alleged symbols dominating racial rhetoric are themselves in part an expression of real intergroup conflict. The apparent absence of “self interest” reflects a cursory analysis of where interest lies in contemporary struggles, and therefore an inadequate attempt to model that interest. Using data from a particularly valuable survey, the Kaiser Race Poll, I show that supposedly symbolic judgments in fact possess an underlying structural basis, one that I term Cultural Backlash. Other researchers missed the geographical structure contained in racial data because intergroup competition does not follow a simple pattern, as statistical models typically assume, but one that interacts with a community’s likely investment in white cultural capital.

Looking Behind the Symbols

Modern political-science research on racial attitudes suggests that white conservatism stems from symbolism, prejudice and socialized resentment. The implication, often made explicit, is that racial conservatism has no rational competitive basis; it does not grow out of the social structure of intergroup competition. Evidence for the claim usually appears in two sorts of analysis: (1) survey analysis connecting racial conservatism (e.g., opposition to affirmative action or busing) to anti-black “symbolic” value judgments, and (2) cross-level models showing that racial conservatism does not respond to measures of a white respondent’s “self interest.”

Explaining attitudes with attitudes is always a risky business. It is very hard to know why whites might embrace a particular assessment of minorities. Travelers in the Old South were often struck by the negative stereotypes that planters had of their slaves and, later, their black wage workers (Howard 1917, 588). Yet few outsiders doubted that these negative impressions thrived precisely because such myths operated in service of rational incentives (Howard 1917, 582-84). Indeed, anti-black stereotypes only developed after slavery required an ideological defense (Wilson 1973, 79).

Today’s symbols and stereotypes might be working in service of an equally “rational” goal.² The symbols may not *cause* anything; they may be just another product of a racially stratified society. By accepting purely psychological explanations for racial resentment, simply because policy preferences coincide with acceptance of these symbols, researchers risk missing the competitive underpinnings of the social phenomenon they wish to study.

As a thought experiment, we can consider what the “symbolic racism” methodology would have indicated about the slave system, since that institution was a rather clear case of group-based exploitation. What would antebellum public-opinion surveys have indicated about white racial attitudes? Judging from anecdotal evidence, whites considered slaves lazy, unprepared for democracy, and content with their condition—a myth shared between slave owners and other whites nationwide. Consider Thomas Jefferson’s relatively genteel “stereotypes” about his slaves (recorded in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 14):

A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of

² By “rational” I do not mean that prejudices are correct or socially desirable. I mean only that they promote material goals, and represent one potentially successful means of achieving those goals.

forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present . . . They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.

The likely result of compiling and analyzing these self-reported attitudes, therefore, would be an argument very much like the “racial resentment” analysis popular today. Antebellum racism would have seemed psychologically rooted, built on inherited symbols and socially constructed myths, rather than driven by self interest. One doubts that this explanation could have had much predictive leverage over the instrumental power relationships clearly driving the system.

This paper’s purpose, therefore, is to analyze a few racial resentment variables directly (rather than the issue positions they are supposed to produce). I turn an eye on the symbols and myths that supposedly fuel politics *in place of* self-interested preferences: beliefs about why blacks are poor, about who gets which social resources, about whether racism is a social problem. My expectation, ultimately confirmed, is that acceptance of these symbols is not random, but a probabilistic function of one’s interests in the contemporary struggle over race.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation funded a particularly valuable survey in 1995, in collaboration with the *Washington Post* and researchers at Harvard University (Morin 1995).³ The survey was part of a larger study on the role information and misinformation play in determining policy preferences, but this particular portion focused almost exclusively on race. It offers an extensive battery of race-based questions, including informational questions that allow tracing the genealogy of political preferences. Another virtue of the survey is that Chilton Research Services, who actually implemented the Kaiser Foundation Race Poll, recorded the county of residence for most respondents. Having this geographical information allows linking the individual-level data to aggregate contextual variables likely to influence racial views, in particular the estimated black density in each respondent’s county. The main drawback, for these purposes, is only the small sample size among whites. The Kaiser poll included an oversample of minorities among its 1,970 respondents—roughly 474 African, 353 Asian and 252 Latino Americans.⁴ However, the white sample is almost uniformly large enough to explore the survey instruments used in Symbolic Racism research, and the large sample of African Americans will prove useful for one portion of the below analysis.

Race Through a Contextual Lens

The most influential social psychology research seems to indicate that self-interest plays little direct role in racial attitudes, at least as represented by the density of racial outgroups. The Symbolic Racism school emphasizes this disparity between self-interest and professed beliefs directly (Kinder and Sanders 1996, chap. 4; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979, 374), in a few cases purportedly rebutting the rational “racial threat” approach (Kinder and Sears 1981, 421-22).⁵ Glaser (1994) also finds little connection between prejudice and racial context. These results concur with older research on urban

³ I thank Bob Blendon and Derek Bok for making the survey data, codebook, and initial Kaiser report (Brodie 1995) available to me.

⁴ The exact figures vary depending upon how one treats black Latinos.

⁵ Even the rival “Group Threat” approach, while emphasizing *perceived* group incentives, nonetheless makes no specific claim to an individual’s real interests (Bobo 1983, 1,206). In other words, the competing claim is not that racial polarization comes from self-interest, only that it stems from rational motives (c.f., Hardin 1995, 46-49).

attitudes, which determined that a black community presence managed to ignite conflict yet still *shatter* stereotypes (Lipset and Raab 1978, 341; Pettigrew 1980, 9).⁶ In every case, the analysis operationalized “self interest” in an extremely limited manner: either residence in racially diverse communities or, in the case of research on school desegregation, having children who attend schools that might diversify.

My intent is to revisit the search for proximity effects, armed with a more complex understanding of self interest than the mere expectation that more blacks means more white hostility. Tracing particular narratives about racial politics to observable (and therefore testable) implications risks a couple of pitfalls, however. The first mistake would be to presume that *any* geographical pattern in racial attitudes proves that polarization is rational, let alone self-interested. Even purely psychological phenomena can take on a systematic geographical expression over time. For example, migration patterns might result in racially sensitive whites cloistering themselves in homogeneous communities. Similarly, if the antidote to an irrational impulse is exposure to countervailing evidence, then life experiences in an integrated community might mitigate racial conservatism eventually.

Another pitfall would be to assume that rational intergroup conflict must follow a strict territorial logic. Certainly ethnic groups sometimes fight for control of a particular territory, as they did during the segregation struggles of the 1960s or as they sometimes do in urban neighborhoods today (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998). But conflict can revolve around different stakes, some territorial and some not. Rather than assume that proximity spawns antipathy, that “familiarity breeds contempt,” it is better to differentiate among different forms of conflict and the specific geographical patterns of racial conservatism they might imply. Most forms of social exchange have tangible stakes attached, after all; any might invoke intense feeling from those with vested interest in preserving the status advantages they convey.

Following Max Weber (Bendix and Lipset 1966), and tracking the terminology of Turner (1988, 15-16),⁷ a simple model would be to break racial conflict into the battle for three sources of social status:

- **Economic:** The more blacks in a labor market, for example, the more they seem to threaten white job opportunities (Blalock 1967, 147-50). The more blacks able to move into a particular neighborhood, the more they seem to threaten white property values. The more blacks enrolled in social welfare programs, the more that local government spending saps the economy and decimates the paycheck. It is not quite clear who would exhibit the most extreme racial conservatism in a struggle over economic resources, the whites who profit most from discrimination or the whites whose social class leaves them perilously close to poverty, but few would deny the political importance of a large minority underclass.
- **Political:** The more blacks in an election district, the more discrimination and white mobilization needed to maintain white power (Key 1949; Matthews and Prothro 1963; Blalock 1967, 150-54). If black voters dominate an election, that could mean fewer spoils of office for whites, less attentive police protection, less responsiveness from government bureaucracies, and less influence over legislation. It also might spur government to address social discrepancies among different races (Fording 1997), a condition from which whites otherwise benefit (Glenn 1963).

⁶ Kinder and Mendelberg (1995, 420-21) seem to contradict this dominant interpretation, despite the lead author’s prominence in the Symbolic Racism literature. They dismiss the backlash logic for political *expressions* of prejudice, but curiously wish to retain the theory for prejudice itself.

⁷ Turner (1988, 16) actually uses the term “symbolic” to refer to cultural conflict. I avoid this term to prevent confusion with the “symbolic racism” literature.

- **Cultural:** Racial conflict might revolve around cultural exclusiveness intended to reinforce status distinctions (Bourdieu 1986). Racial debates frequently emphasize “cultural capital”—the value attached to cultural traits that are unequally distributed across racial groups—rather than directly economic or political issues (Merelman 1994, Sowell 1994). Whites may wish to preserve dominance over the values promoted in cultural and educational institutions. They may be defending, or in some spheres trying to *restore*, the status advantages of whiteness. They may be fighting to preserve a cherished way of life, such as values that minorities seem to threaten (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 108-114; Wong and Strolovitch 1996, 4-6).

This simple categorization is parsimonious yet useful, since many seemingly unrelated goods pass through some combination of these channels: the power to purchase, the power to appropriate, the power to legitimate.

I am particularly interested in the third form of conflict, the struggle over cultural capital, because of the resonance that values enjoy in contemporary racial debate. The battle for political equality is mostly over; the ramparts of segregation and disenfranchisement have fallen; the forces of reaction have retreated. Economic conflict is also less prominent these days. White and black financial resources remain stubbornly far apart (Oliver and Shapiro 1995), but black worker incomes have been rising steadily while white incomes have stagnated. To the extent black poverty is a political problem, it cannot be solved through attempts to remove price discrimination, which skilled black labor no longer faces to any appreciable degree (Loury 1995, 97).⁸ Rather, lingering racial differences result from the statistical impact of a large, marginalized black underclass that does not find employment at all (Chandra 2000; Loury 1995, 138-39). Breaking apart this concentrated ghetto population, either through housing desegregation or through redistribution of financial resources, has not been a serious political goal of activists on the right or the left. Not even civil-rights leaders, who are predominantly middle class, show much interest (Marable 1995).

To the extent economic issues do appear in the contemporary debate over race, it is in the guise of affirmative action, which primarily benefits higher-status African Americans (Loury 1995, 109). Affirmative action predominates not in working class job markets, but in professions such as academia, journalism, and management, and among businesses that accept government contracts. These occupational categories are not localized in a mobile society. Rather, they unite a regional, even a national, market—spreading “threat” around widely. An ambitious journalist who currently works in Gary, Indiana, is no more likely to be squeezed by the *Washington Post*’s affirmative-action policy than a similar reporter working in Missoula, Montana. The same is true with access into the professions. A white high-school student applying from South Carolina faces roughly as much “threat” from an elite university’s affirmative-action policy as one applying from Vermont. The commonly tested pattern of “rationality” should not really apply.

More common is racial tension over the cultural battleground (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998, 375; Wong and Strolovitch 1996, 6). Whites perceive a threat to cherished values, including those central to their vision of American society (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 108-14). Consider how frequently race-tinged debates ultimately revolve around *cultural* stakes: Whites resent collective economic strategies,

⁸ One ironic fact: Blacks from the West Indies enjoy a comparable economic position as whites, despite the double whammy of race and immigrant status (Loury 1995, 137). By coming from the outside, they are insulated from the institutional barriers that limit black achievement. I also suspect that the cultural barriers work in their favor, such as how whites perceive Jamaican accents compared to black ghetto accents.

which they perceive circumventing traditional paths to prosperity—citing the example of parents or grandparents who were poor but “never asked for handouts from anyone.” Blacks supposedly undermine “middle-class values,” such as hard work and financial self-sufficiency, by seeking institutional favoritism. Blacks seem to threaten “family values,” breeding out of wedlock at a faster rate than they can support offspring, and with multiple partners, an irresponsible behavior that (infuriatingly) does not lessen the sex appeal attached culturally to urban black males. Their influence in schools substitutes the “three R’s” with multiculturalism, patriotism with cynicism, objective tests with feel-good ideological screening, and the classics with trendy leftist scribbles such as those by Franz Fanon.

Middle-class blacks use their influence in academia and journalism to undermine American prestige, “turning everything into a racial issue,” and defining themselves as an oppressed caste despite professional success that many Americans can only envy (Loury 1995, 54). Their influence in Hollywood and in the music industry results in violent and sexist entertainment, including vulgar rap music, which corrupts otherwise nice white (and black) kids. Disproportionate black criminality and hatred of whites makes cities and towns unsafe, sharply curtailing the freedom of action that law-abiding Americans once enjoyed.⁹ Given the prominent role of values-based language, it is worth considering whether cultural conflict does not veil an underlying struggle over instrumental power (Finkenstaedt 1994, 19).

White resolve to participate in this cultural struggle, and to view it in racial terms, should not necessarily respond to proximity. Enough has changed, rhetorically at least, to warrant a new assessment of the old proximity logic. In particular, if interest in “white middle-class values” is not shared by all whites equally, any attempt at cultural exclusion will reverberate primarily where whites have something to defend. This rational form of symbolism might follow a backlash pattern outside urban areas, but within the modern metropolis it is in the all-white suburbs where we find America’s “keepers of the culture.” Thus I would expect the conventional backlash pattern to decline or even reverse in metropolitan areas.

Based upon the above reasoning, I have derived a handful of testable, interactive geographical hypotheses, each corresponding to a particular narrative about contemporary race relations:

1. **Naive Symbolic Politics Approach**—Racial conservatism does not grow from objective conditions, but from stereotypes and symbols picked up during childhood. Some whites see African Americans as a threat, while others do not, and individual perspectives scatter haphazardly across the population because they have no rational basis. Racial polarization thus should not follow any meaningful geographic pattern, with relation to black proximity, at any level of aggregation (Berard 1998).
2. **Contact Hypothesis**—If racial conservatism is fundamentally irrational, then it must stem from ignorance and unchecked prejudice. Stereotypes cannot persist where African Americans are present in sufficient numbers that regular social interaction will educate whites. Proximity thus would lessen racial conservatism as reality imposes itself, shattering prejudices (Carsey 1995). In keeping with refined versions of the concept, we might expect proximity will do the most good where conditions are more equal between two groups (Miller and Brewer 1984, 2). Also, proximity would only be beneficial if the black population has been in place for some length of time; new arrivals have not enjoyed sufficient contact to overturn stereotypes and may even excite white fears (Wong and Strolovitch 1996).
3. **Migration Hypothesis**—Even if racial conservatism grows out of childhood socialization, rather than any

⁹ Just to be extra clear, I am not claiming that blacks genuinely pose a cultural threat, or otherwise endorsing the perspective summarized by these two paragraphs. Nor do the scholars who have popularized the “symbolic politics” approach necessarily see a genuine cultural conflict, aside from a serious divide over how to deal with race in America (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 29-30).

genuine contextual influence or competitive threat, this perspective will shape individual decisions later in life. In particular, racially prejudiced individuals will gravitate toward communities where their disliked group is in short supply, whereas those for whom race is less salient will pick communities based upon other criteria. The end result of this process would be similar to the contact hypothesis, in cross-sectional data: proximity will appear to produce lower racial conservatism. However, the result should be strongest where more whites are migrants, and could sort themselves out.

4. **Traditional White Backlash Hypothesis (Politics)**—Racial conservatism represents an effort by whites to maintain political control as an empowered majority (Key 1949). Polarization will surge as the African-American population increases in density, with an exceptionally large expression of racial conservatism where blacks approach the point of deciding local elections. This pattern would be especially strong at a level with politically meaningful borders: counties, legislative districts, states.
5. **White Colonizer Backlash Hypothesis (Economic)**—Whites enjoy the fruits of anti-black economic discrimination when surrounded by a large, marginalized African-American population (Glenn 1963). They are able to construct a split labor market, and profit therefrom (Bonacich 1972, 1976). Proximity thus leads to greater racial conservatism. However, in locales where white and black resources become more similar, the labor market is undifferentiated, so whites face little incentive to engage in race-based collective action. Proximity will not matter when conditions are relatively equal.
6. **Hard Times Backlash Hypothesis (Economic)**—A retrenchment against civil-rights gains set in when national finances turned sour around 1968. Americans were happy to see racial progress while the economy was booming, but once job competition became a zero-sum game then repairing statistical disparities among racial groups required sacrificing particular whites. Lean prospects encourage whites to defend historical group privileges, especially when racial advantage would give them leverage against nearby blacks. Poor and uneducated individuals may compensate for material sacrifices by stressing status advantages attached to their group membership (Bettelheim and Janowitz 1964). Proximity thus leads to greater racial conservatism, the more so as economic conditions tighten (e.g., higher unemployment, lower income) or likelihood of a job threat becomes more severe (e.g., white and black socioeconomic resources become more similar).¹⁰
7. **Symbolic White Backlash Hypothesis (Cultural)**—Whites struggle with the African-American population to define the nation's social and political discourse. They fight to preserve a "way of life" that appears threatened (Wong and Strolovitch 1996). They also struggle to determine the value of "cultural capital," or the social value placed on traits that vary across ethnic groups and across geographical locales (Merelman 1994, 3-4). Cultural struggle may revolve around what many commentators call "institutional racism," or facially race-neutral judgments that nevertheless are unnecessary and have a racially disparate impact. Contrary to the "naive Symbolic Racism" approach, this perspective acknowledges that conflict over social values represents a genuine power struggle, and the threat does not strike all whites similarly.

Proximity may produce greater racial conservatism in small-town or rural America, because it forces whites to struggle with a black population to define local social institutions. This is especially true because rural areas tend to resist change, and therefore will have preserved historical proximity patterns that municipalities have cast off (Berard 1998; Ford 1960; Orum and McCranie 1970, 170). However, the proximity effect should decline or even reverse in more urban locales, where whites vary in their attachment

¹⁰ The Authoritarian Personality appears most commonly among lower-status whites, and therefore when applied to geographical data is simply an alternate description of the same argument. Lower-status whites are supposed to prefer order and a simplified world because of their marginal status, and one appealing way to achieve these psychological benefits is by categorizing people racially. The end result is the same: material deprivation makes racial conservatism more appealing.

to “white middle-class norms.”¹¹ Those with the greatest cultural resources, who are more (sub)urbanized, will have the most to lose precisely if they reside in white enclaves where these norms are strongest.¹²

Testing each of these contextual implications requires linking aggregate data to the Kaiser survey, made possible because Chilton recorded the county in which each respondent resided.¹³ In each case, I will need a measure of black racial density, for which I use the black percentage of a county’s voting-age population. For the conventional hypotheses, numbers 1 and 4, this measure is enough; the first predicts a null coefficient on the measure (or any interaction using it) and the fourth predicts a positive coefficient regardless of interactions.¹⁴ The remainder require some sort of interaction term, using a second Census measure. The specific list of interaction terms used in this paper are as follows.

- Hypotheses 2, 5 and 6: All require black density multiplied by a measure of status inequality. I tested several inequality measures in the analysis, but for purposes of reporting results I choose one, the difference between white and black per capita income, where a positive number means whites are wealthier.
- Hypotheses 2 and 3: Both require black density multiplied by a measure of population instability. For the latter I use the percentage of the population that did not live in the county five years previously.
- Hypothesis 6: This requires black density multiplied by a measure of white socioeconomic status, to permit lower-income white communities to exhibit a backlash stronger than found in wealthier locales. I used several distinct measures of white status, including education rates, but for purposes of reporting I use only white per capita income.
- Hypothesis 7: The Cultural Backlash approach is most complicated. Surveys allow multiple, imperfect ways to get at “white middle-class” identification, but I do not wish to use explicit values questions that cannot be pulled apart from the social interests reflected in my dependent variables. The analysis requires more concrete proxies for interest or affiliation. Therefore I tested the idea from several angles, all of which required black density multiplied by some *contextual* measure of the likely prominence of “middle-class values,” the social investment in white cultural advantages (Merelman 1994, 2-5).

¹¹ These norms should not be mistaken for a real class-based identity. Most Americans consider themselves “middle class,” so these values are primarily an associational or ideological quality.

¹² Wong and Strolovitch (1996) assume that conflict over “way of life” is intimately linked to “a struggle for territory and the privilege associated with it.” With New York hate crimes, their supposition apparently proves correct. This is not necessarily surprising, though, because hate crimes require not just the racial hostility but also the victim, which is why lynching studies have struggled to capture the probability of two races running into each other (Reed 1972). The territorial link need not apply to all forms of cultural backlash, so I do not incorporate it here.

¹³ Obviously the county is not the only possible measure of aggregation that might be relevant. However, no smaller level of aggregation was available for this study. Furthermore, the county is a politically and economically relevant areal unit (Glaser 1994), whereas smaller (and therefore more porous) units such as the precinct do not possess any clear meaning.

¹⁴ A fair test of the traditional backlash hypothesis actually requires testing a parabolic model as well, which does not require new data, simply a squared version of the density variable. However, this term *never* achieved statistical significance in any of the tests reported below, and so does not appear in the discussion of results.

First, I use the level of urbanization, since suburban isolation allows white control of cultural capital (Merelman 1994, 5). This test for suburban exceptionalism is a rather blunt measure, however, since counties can be large and diverse. Rather than simply use the county's overall level of urbanization, therefore, I also tried a second approach based upon whether the respondent reported personally living in a metropolitan area. Finally, I tried a measure that would get past pure suburbanization, and look specifically at one component of white middle-class privilege: the percent of the labor force in professional occupations, since these draw heavily on "cultural capital."

These hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1 on the next page.

Tacit Theories of Blame

The socioeconomic status of African Americans is clearly lower than that of whites in the United States, a fact few dispute. Where people disagree is their assessment of *why* the races differ. Racial liberals attribute the gap to racism, discrimination, and inadequate government attempts at equalization. Racial conservatives emphasize faults within the black community. It is their desire to downplay systemic causes of inequality that some scholars dub symbolic "racism."¹⁵ The Kaiser poll included a handful of questions asking why different ethnic groups lag in achievement, and therefore allows a formal exploration of whether these symbols are in fact unrelated to systematic interests. The wording on these questions tends to differ from that found in other surveys, and therefore offers a refreshing look at the issue.

The survey includes two questions centered on black opportunity (MONEYBL and STDLIV). The first asks whether blacks have as much opportunity to be successful and wealthy. The second focuses on the African-American comparative standard of living. Tracing "blame" for economic results is an extremely tricky business; some polemics blame inner-city black culture while others point the finger at mainstream society. Where one falls out seems more a matter of faith than a matter of hard evidence, so I am not worried that this is actually a factual question with different correct answers based upon geography. This is a measure of ideology, of the sort scholars have chosen to call "symbolic racism."

I begin with the standard of living variable, since it was applied to the entire sample. It asked whether black Americans have "the same standard of living and opportunities as whites." This is unfortunate wording, since it combines two judgments—a question of fact ("standard of living") and one of potential ("opportunities"). However, I find no connection between actual black poverty in a county and the response that whites provide to the question, so presumably it evokes a broad social attitude rather than an empirical observation. It taps a judgment of what African Americans could accomplish on their own merits.

The variable takes on two values: 1 if the respondent considered black opportunities worse, 0

¹⁵ While this attempt to demonize rhetorically those who disagree may seem excessive, scholars who use the label are certainly correct that racial conservatism "blames the victim," and therefore implies a rather negative prejudicial judgment of African Americans as a group.

Figure 1: The Observable Implications of Proximity Effects

| | <i>Motive for Polarization</i> | <i>Hypothesis Number</i> | <i>Proximity Argument</i> | <i>Interactive Term</i> | <i>Direction of Relationship when interaction is:</i> | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | <i>Low</i> | <i>High</i> |
| Psychological | | 1 | Naive Symbolic Politics Approach | None | none | none |
| | | 2 | Contact Hypothesis | Status Difference | Negative | none |
| | | | | Population Instability | Negative | none |
| | 3 | Migration Hypothesis | Population Instability | none | Negative | |
| <hr/> | | | | | | |
| Rational | Political | 4 | Traditional Backlash | None | Positive | |
| | Economic | 5 | Colonizer Backlash | Status Difference | none | Positive |
| | Economic | | | Hard Times Backlash | Positive | none |
| | | 6 | Hard Times Backlash | Status | Positive | none |
| | Symbolic or Cultural Backlash | | | Urbanization | Positive | Negative |
| | Cultural | 7 | Symbolic or Cultural Backlash | Professionalization | Positive | Negative |

Note: "Direction of Relationship" indicates whether proximity causes two races to become less polarized (i.e., Negative), more polarized (i.e., Positive), or should have no real effect (i.e., none). "Interactive Term" indicates the variable multiplied by black density to test the hypothesis. For example, the Contact Hypothesis suggests that interracial contact will lessen racial polarization or conservatism, but primarily when two ethnic groups approach equal status or the population is more stable.

otherwise. The binary measurement calls for a probability model such as the probit, which I use here.¹⁶ The initial run was bivariate, using only white respondents, to see how their responses varied with black density.¹⁷ The results seem to overrule a geographic model, since black density does not predict responses (see Table 1, Model A).

Obviously people are not assigned to communities randomly. Those who live in mixed-race counties may differ substantially from those in all-white locales, in a way that would influence their orientation toward racial issues. I therefore switch to a multivariate probit analysis, adding the following controls: a five-point education scale, a nine-point family income scale, the respondent's year of birth, and a dummy variable for whether the respondent is male. All four are typically thought to shape racial attitudes. This more complex version does not overturn the initial results, however (Model B). Symbolic racism does not seem to follow a geographic pattern. This is precisely the sort of finding that often fuels claims that rational self interest does not explain racial views.

My final step, however, is to cycle through the more complex observable implications introduced in the previous section. The absence of geographical patterns may not indicate a purely psychological phenomenon; it may simply indicate that interactive effects wash out when averaged over the population. Most interactive hypotheses did not bear fruit, with one glaring exception: the Cultural Backlash hypothesis. When I include an intercept and slope shift for metropolitan areas, allowing the effect of black density to change around cities, the results are strongly in favor of the Cultural Backlash approach (see Model C).¹⁸ Whites exhibit a classic backlash pattern outside of the metropolis; they are more willing to admit racial inequalities in American society as the African-American population gets smaller. Metropolitan whites, by contrast, do not respond to black density this way. If anything, they become more sensitive to African-American difficulties as their counties become more diverse, whereas racially isolated whites follow their cultural incentive to deny unequal opportunities. The same happens, to a lesser extent, with my interaction using professional status (see Model D). Whites in a heavily professionalized community do not exhibit the classic backlash pattern; if anything those in predominantly white areas are most likely to embrace symbolic racism. In either case, "symbolic" racism is not merely symbolic; it follows a predictable pattern.

Model E presents a similar analysis for the wealth opportunities variable (MONEYBL), this time using an ordered probit model to take into account three options (opportunities are better, the same, or worse). This time responses did seem to respond to actual black per capita income in the county, so I added a control for that information, as well as an interaction between black income and racial density. An information-based pattern does appear, even after testing the Cultural Backlash hypothesis. It shows that the propensity of rural and small-town whites to follow a "backlash" pattern increases significantly as black income rises, which may simply reflect the judgment that local black opportunities *have* improved. Metropolitan whites, however, never follow this pattern. Rather, the model indicates that racially isolated whites are the most likely to claim equality, even after controlling for the actual level of local black incomes.

The coefficients reported here are not immediately meaningful, but Table 2 translates the

¹⁶ I will stick to probit models throughout the paper, because it fits my prior that most people have ambivalent racial attitudes, whereas the numbers get smaller with more extreme positive or negative assessments.

¹⁷ Throughout this paper, my measure of county black density is the black percentage of voting-age residents, drawn from a CD-Rom from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993).

¹⁸ Adding a metro dummy did not alter the results at all; this is clearly a slope shift.

Table 1: Predicting White Theories of Blame

Dependent variable: Whether blacks have the same economic opportunities

| Explanatory Variable | Model A (Simple) | Model B (Controls) | Model C (x Metro) | Model D (Professional) | Model E (MONEYBL) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Racial density: % black among voting-age pop</i> | -0.005 (.004) | -0.006 (.005) | -0.027 (.008) | -0.044 (.02) | 0.020 (.019) |
| 5-point education scale | | 0.17 (.045) | 0.16 (.045) | 0.17 (.045) | 0.18 (.06) |
| 9-point family income scale | | 0.02 (.023) | 0.01 (.024) | 0.02 (.023) | 0.01 (.03) |
| Year of Birth | | -0.01 (.003) | -0.01 (.003) | -0.01 (.003) | -0.01 (.004) |
| Dummy variable for males | | 0.21 (.096) | 0.23 (.097) | 0.21 (.096) | 0.19 (.123) |
| Black per capita income in \$1,000s | | | | | 0.03 (.002) |
| <i>Interaction: Black PCI * racial density</i> | | | | | -0.01 (.002) |
| Dummy variable for Metro area | | | 0.00 (.128) | | 0.11 (.172) |
| <i>Interaction: metro dummy * racial density</i> | | | 0.03 (.008) | | 0.03 (.014) |
| <i>Interaction: % labor force professional * racial density</i> | | | | 0.002 (.001) | |
| Intercept | 0.14 (.059) | 14.46 (5.87) | 14.77 (5.93) | 14.09 (5.87) | |
| observations | 772 | 725 | 721 | 725 | 352 |
| X^2 | 1.07 | 33.69 | 51.23 | 37.59 | 34.30 |
| $p(>= X^2)$ | 0.30 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Cutpoint 1 | | | | | -17.80 |
| Cutpoint 2 | | | | | -16.32 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Models A-D use probit regression on a binary response, whether blacks enjoy the same standard of living. Model E uses ordered probit on an ordinal variable representing the change in black financial opportunities, with higher responses being more optimistic.

STDLIV predictions into probabilities using monte carlo simulation (King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000), as implemented in the CLARIFY code for Stata 5.0 (Tomz, Wittenberg and King 1998). All values are set to their means, except those for black density and each variable interacted with it. The table shows a backlash pattern among rural and small-town whites. On average, 56.3% of those in all-white counties report that blacks enjoy fewer opportunities (standard error of 3.4). This sentiment drops among whites as the African-American density increases, to 48.3% (3.1) with a minor presence, 38.6% (6.0) with a more substantial one, and 17.6% (11.2) in a mixed-race county. The pattern reverses among metropolitan respondents. They start at 56% (3.8) with no blacks present, but rise to 58.3% (2.7), 61% (3.3) and finally 68.2% (9.1) acknowledging racial inequalities as the racial balance evens out. The backlash pattern appears outside of metropolitan areas, but dissipates within cities, as predicted by the Cultural Backlash approach.

Table 2: CLARIFYing the Probabilities for Standard of Living

Percentage Reporting that Blacks Enjoy Fewer Opportunities than Whites

| <i>County Racial Density:</i> | <i>No blacks 0%</i> | <i>Sprinkling of Blacks 9%</i> | <i>Black Presence 19%</i> | <i>Half Black 50%</i> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Rural or Small-Town Respondents | 56.3 (3.4) | 48.3 (3.1) | 38.6 (6.0) | 17.6 (11.2) |
| Metro Respondents | 56.0 (3.8) | 58.3 (2.7) | 61.0 (3.3) | 68.2 (9.1) |

Note: These predicted probabilities illustrate the meaning of the black density coefficient and its interaction with whether a respondent reported living in a metropolitan area, as drawn from Table 1 Model C. The standard errors, which appear in parentheses, come from the CLARIFY software developed by Tomz, Wittenberg and King (1998).

Comparison with Other Immigrant Groups

One useful question asks whether blacks should work their way up “without any special help from the government” the way other immigrant groups have (OTHRGRPS). This is exactly the sort of question often used to represent “symbolic racism,” since it implies that African Americans are more

Table 3: Predicting Unfavorable Ethnic Comparisons**Dependent variable: Whether blacks should help themselves as other ethnics did**

| Explanatory Variable | Model A (Simple) | Model B (Non-Metro) | Model C (Metro South) | Model D (Metro Non-South) | Model E (Total Metro) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Racial density: % black among voting-age pop</i> | -0.002 (.005) | 0.016 (.008) | -0.004 (.011) | -0.018 (.009) | -0.020 (.008) |
| State Racial Density | | | | | 0.03 (.012) |
| Intercept | 0.55 (.061) | 0.61 (.083) | 0.65 (.238) | 0.44 (.106) | 0.25 (.114) |
| observations | 783 | 406 | 89 | 282 | 371 |
| X^2 | 0.25 | 4.27 | 0.01 | 4.31 | 8.03 |
| $p(>= X^2)$ | 0.62 | 0.04 | 0.71 | 0.04 | 0.02 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models use probit regression on a binary response, whether blacks should lift themselves up as other ethnic groups have. Models B-E restrict the sample according to the respondent's region and according to the sort of community in which the respondent reported living.

whiny than the Irish or Italians.¹⁹ Where do such sentiments thrive? The variable is binary, with the high value more conservative racially, so I again opted to use probit analysis. The initial, bivariate results seemed to affirm claims of irrationality, to discount a geographical pattern. On average, the respondent's racial environment does not help predict assignment of blame (see Table 3, Model A), as the symbolic racism school would expect.²⁰

These results hide that white responses follow a perfectly predictable and systematic pattern, in keeping with the suburban orientation of the Cultural Backlash Hypothesis. Model B repeats the regression, this time with metropolitan areas excluded. Outside of metropolitan areas, a statistically significant backlash pattern emerges: whites increasingly embrace bootstraps rhetoric as black density

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, one could answer the question in a way unfavorable to government action and still not blame blacks for their situation, as long as the respondent opposed government intervention *despite* the existence of prejudice.

²⁰ Interaction terms capturing the Contact and Migration hypotheses provide no assistance (analysis not shown).

Table 4: CLARIFYing the Probabilities for Ethnic Comparison

Percentage Reporting that Blacks Should Lift Themselves U

| <i>County Racial Density:</i> | <i>No blacks 0%</i> | <i>Sprinkling of Blacks 9%</i> | <i>Black Presence 19%</i> | <i>Half Black 50%</i> |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Rural or Small-Town Respondents | 73.0 (2.7) | 77.3 (2.2) | 82.0 (3.4) | 90.9 (6.0) |
| Metro Respondents (8.5% Black State) | 69.8 (3.6) | 63.7 (2.6) | 55.6 (4.0) | 32.5 (11.1) |

Note: These predicted probabilities illustrate the meaning of the black density coefficient, as drawn from Table 3 Model B for the top row and from Table 3 Model E for the bottom row. The standard errors, which appear in parentheses, come from the CLARIFY software developed by Tomz, Wittenberg and King (1998).

increases.²¹ Since this is one leg of the Cultural Backlash hypothesis, a natural next step is to see if the pattern disappears or reverses in metropolitan areas. Model C shows that, indeed, black density no longer predicts opinion once we move to metropolitan respondents. In fact, outside the South, symbolic racism decreases with black density, exactly as cultural backlash would produce (Model D). Thus only Southern cities resist the Cultural Backlash pattern. My best guess why, in keeping with the logic of the hypothesis, was that blacks in some Southern states (i.e., South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana) are strong enough that even whites far from the minority population will be cognizant of any perceived cultural challenges (for example conflict at the state university or board of education). Model E thus repeats the analysis for all metropolitan respondents, but this time adds a control for the state's black population density as well. Once we adjust for the state context, metropolitan respondents directly contradict the traditional backlash pattern, rising in symbolic racism as black density decreases.

CLARIFY lets me specify more clearly what these probit coefficients mean (see Table 4). Outside of metropolitan areas, judging from Model B, members of an all-white community would embrace the bootstraps rhetoric 73% of the time (standard error of 2.7). That figure rises to 77.3% (2.2) with a sprinkling of blacks, 82% (3.4) with a genuine black presence, and 90.9% (6.0) in a fully balanced setting. This is a weak backlash pattern. Once we control for the state's black population, metropolitan areas follow the opposite logic. In an 8.5% black state, judging from Model E, on average 69.8% (3.6) of those residing in all-white counties respond that blacks should work their way up without governmental

²¹ Black per capita income does not increase with black density, so there is no fear that white assessments of opportunity correspond to observed achievement.

assistance. This sentiment drops among whites as the African-American presence increases, to 63.7% (2.6) with a minor presence, 55.6% (4.0) with a more substantial one, and 32.5% (11.1) in a mixed-race metropolis. The pattern is the same in a 19% black state, albeit at higher levels; whites in a 19% black county show roughly the same attitude as those in all-white communities for a whiter state (68.3% with a 3.9 standard error).

Table 5: Elaborated Ethnic Comparisons

| Dependent Variables: Explanatory Variable | <i>OTHRGRPS</i> | | | <i>MINCITY</i> | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Model A (Metro Controls) | Model B (Non-Met Controls) | Model C (No South Dummy) | Model D (Simple) | Model E (Full Metro) |
| <i>Racial density: % black among voting-age pop</i> | -0.026 (.008) | 0.007 (.01) | 0.017 (.008) | -0.013 (.008) | -0.024 (.012) |
| State Racial Density | 0.03 (.014) | | | 0.03 (.012) | 0.04 (.020) |
| 5-point education scale | -0.20 (.064) | -0.17 (.07) | -0.18 (.07) | | -0.09 (.088) |
| 9-point family income scale | 0.03 (.035) | 0.07 (.035) | 0.06 (.034) | | 0.12 (.052) |
| Year of Birth | -0.01 (.005) | -0.01 (.004) | -0.01 (.004) | | -0.01 (.006) |
| Dummy variable for males | 0.53 (.146) | 0.12 (.146) | 0.13 (.145) | | 0.21 (.200) |
| Dummy variable for South | 0.34 (.199) | 0.34 (.211) | | | |
| Intercept | 17.45 (9.26) | 12.60 (8.54) | 12.81 (8.54) | -0.05 (.122) | 16.95 (12.5) |
| observations | 356 | 375 | 375 | 339 | 171 |
| X^2 | 36.02 | 16.94 | 14.36 | 5.46 | 12.64 |
| $p(>= X^2)$ | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.05 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models use probit regression on a binary response, either whether blacks should lift themselves up as other ethnic groups have or whether minorities consume most urban aid. All except Model D restrict the sample according to the sort of community in which the respondent reported living. Models D & E only applied to a random subsample of whites.

I then turned to a multivariate analysis, using the same control variables as in the last subsection plus a dummy variable for whether one lives in a Southern state. The effect of these controls is, if anything, to strengthen the observed pattern in metropolitan areas (see Table 5, Model A). They eliminate the backlash pattern elsewhere (see Model B), but only because of the South dummy (see Model C). Once we know whether the respondent lives in a rural Southern county then additional detail about the county's racial density does not clearly help.²² This provides additional evidence, in keeping with the Cultural Backlash approach, that rural racial attitudes represent a vestigial defense of the South's historical "way of life" rather than a concurrent competition for local resources.

In sum, the geographical study of this "symbolic racism" variable fully supports what I call the Cultural Backlash approach, one that supposes these symbols operate as part of a real group struggle. Not only does the backlash pattern appear in rural areas, primarily because of the agrarian South's distinctive racial mores, but a state-level backlash pattern appears among more metropolitan respondents as well. No county-level backlash pattern appears around cities, but this hardly suggests that attitudes are merely "psychological" or based on arbitrary "perception." The *reverse* geographical pattern there is strong and systematic, with those in heavily white areas the most favorable to bootstraps rhetoric—precisely what I would expect if the races clash over status or cultural capital, if racially isolated whites seek a justification for their middle-class subculture.

The Greedy City

A comic figure of our age, at least to those amused by hypocrisy, is the Limousine Liberal (also known as the BMW Bolshevik or Mercedes Marxist, depending upon the elite's automobile of choice). Although committed to racial justice in the abstract, this character only endorses equalizing policies as long as working-class whites bear the burden. They hunker down in token-integrated suburbs far from the poverty, crime and high taxes of American cities. They send their children to prestigious private universities, get them rewarding summer jobs at cushy establishments using personal connections, and pay their way into exclusive fraternities or sororities—ensuring full insulation within their safe, white world. They support inoffensively progressive social policies, and do so vocally, but oppose anything that cuts too close to home, such as busing or significant redistribution of educational resources toward urban schools.

I repeat this stereotype not to endorse its implicit criticism—it seems perfectly reasonable to seek collective action on racial reform while refusing to bear the costs unilaterally—but to emphasize the importance of The City in this mythology. The City is what the Limousine Liberal flees, if not by escaping to a swank suburb, then by building a large stone wall around the neighborhood and posting a guard at the gate. The City is the monster they wish to tame, but only from a distance. Nor is The City's central role in race relations limited to liberals. For conservatives as well, the tendency is to distinguish between "good blacks" who escape from the ghetto based on their own merit, and an urban underclass of culturally deficient "bad blacks" who riot and demand undeserved assistance from government.

One question, asked of a random subset of the Kaiser sample, taps into whether whites view urban areas as a minority-dominated cash sinkhole. It asks whether most recipients of "federal aid for cities" are minorities (MINCITY). Tracing the path of government aid is difficult, of course, but as a factual matter it seems obvious that this statement is false. Of counties greater than 75% urban, non-

²² I did try a few county-level demographics as well, but none made a substantial difference on these models. In particular, none of the interaction terms intended to capture other backlash approaches helped. Adding the respondent's party identification and self-reported political ideology, as some researchers are apt to do, also left the central finding unchanged.

Table 6: Suburban Resentment of Urban Aid

| Statement: | Residential Location | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | <i>Urban</i> | <i>Small-Town</i> | <i>Rural</i> | <i>Suburban</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| minorities receive most aid to cities | | | | | |
| Agree | 31 | 56 | 34 | 65 | 186 |
| Disagree | 37 | 46 | 26 | 43 | 152 |
| % agreeing | 45.6 | 54.9 | 56.7 | 60.2 | 55.0 |

Note: The Kaiser Race Poll asked a subsample of respondents whether they thought minorities received most urban aid. The disproportionate number of suburbanites who responded in the affirmative, even more than rural respondents who would be less likely to know better, suggests that they live in areas where residents see themselves as in conflict with greedy, heavily minority urbanites.

whites on average only make up 18.5% of the recorded population.²³ Thus the question allows me to gauge the distribution of a fallacious, but politically meaningful, perspective.

In theory, the traditional backlash logic could apply to this question. Whites in mixed-race areas might be particularly sensitive to resources invested on nearby minority communities, and particularly resentful of the effort. They may hold the most distorted view. On the other hand, whites who actually live in cities clearly have better access to casual information about where urban spending goes, and if they reside in cities with a significant black population may be more sensitive to the needs of nearby minorities. What about suburbanites? Although lacking intimate familiarity, presumably they would know more than small-town or rural respondents if contact drove the awareness. Not so if, as the Cultural Backlash approach suggests, the stereotype works in service of an underlying status conflict. Racially isolated whites might define themselves culturally as members of the “white middle class,” in contrast to needy, greedy urbanites dominated by minorities.

A quick glance at the distribution of fallacious answers jibes with this last interpretation. Self-reported suburban whites were most likely to consider urban aid a minority program, although the sample is small (see Table 6). About 60.2% of suburban whites hold this view of aid to cities, compared to 45.6% of urbanites and roughly 56% of those outside a metropolitan area. To get more directly at the effect of racial density, however, I used a probit regression model among white respondents. County black density alone did not predict opinions very well, but once I added a measure of state black density a pattern emerged (see Table 5, Model D).²⁴ The more African Americans in a state, the more that whites

²³ Weighted by population, the non-white population is still only about a quarter of the total.

²⁴ The actual question says “minority groups” and not African Americans. I tried using non-white densities rather than black densities, but they revealed less predictive value. Many whites probably connect the term “minority” with blacks first and foremost. Certainly they overestimate the size of the nation’s black population (Brodie 1995, 10).

think they suck up most urban aid. Actually living in a county with blacks may cut against this error, although the small sample size limits confidence in this result. The results are particularly strong in metropolitan areas (analysis not shown). Thus it is not clear whether this initial backlash pattern represents a reaction to the black population, or a relative assessment of how much minorities are available locally to benefit from urban aid.

I followed with a multivariate analysis adding variables that might condition responses: family income, education, year born, and sex. The result is roughly the same. Racially isolated whites expected that minorities were gobbling up urban aid, even controlling for the size of the state's black population (analysis not shown), a finding that was strong and statistically significant among metropolitan respondents (Model E). In an all-white metropolitan county, on average, roughly 65.4% of whites embraced the fallacy (standard error of 6.1). The value falls to 57.7% (4.1) with a sprinkling of blacks, 47.6% (5.5) with a real black presence, and 23% (13.5) in a balanced county. The estimated change of 10.1% between the two middle categories has a standard error of 5, so the null hypothesis that black density makes no difference is outside a 95% confidence interval. Ironically, then, metropolitan whites are most likely to think minorities grab up urban aid precisely where no blacks appear to compete for money. The illusion that minorities suck up funds is thus not a product of resentment among the whites with whom they compete for that money. It is more common among racially isolated metropolitan whites, who can entertain cultural stereotypes and define themselves in opposition to them.

Now You See It, Now You Don't

A series of questions gauged whether whites consider racism and discrimination serious social problems. These questions are similar to those asking whether blacks enjoy equal opportunity as whites, discussed previously, although they accentuate the negative more. Whites wishing to defend the values and prerogatives that ensure their cultural prominence need not reside near an extensive black population to feel the threat. Rather, acknowledging "victim" status for racial and ethnic minorities threatens those most firmly within the white middle class social milieu, those who otherwise monopolize cultural capital to which minorities demand access. Generally that group, in metropolitan areas, will be those enjoying the greatest degree of racial isolation, those in the white suburbs. This is the Cultural Backlash hypothesis that has been most prominent throughout the previous racial attitudes measures.

The first question asked respondents to assess changing racial and ethnic tensions (TENSIONS). The respondent could report that tensions had increased, stayed the same, or decreased over the previous 10 years. Whites wishing minority claims to recede from the political arena presumably should downplay the significance of race. This sentiment bears no simple relationship with the racial demographics of a white respondent's county or state (see Table 7), with (Model A) or without (Model B) controls.

Testing the interactive hypotheses again indicates that a meaningful geographical pattern is suppressed by omitted variables—a pattern compatible with the Cultural Backlash logic. Whether the ordered probit uses level of urbanization (Model C) or professionalization of the work force (Model D), the results are the same. Outside of high-status urbanized areas, whites who find themselves in proximity with a black population are most likely to accentuate American racial progress. Among the most urbanized and professionalized whites, by contrast, those who are the most racially isolated are at least as likely to emphasize racial progress as those in more mixed locales. This is true even after controlling for whether respondent lived in an integrated neighborhood.

My interpretation has assumed that the assessment of tensions is ideological, not factual. The reader may object to this skeptical interpretation. I should stress, therefore, that a less cynical reading of the TENSIONS question does not undermine the Cultural Backlash interpretation that I am offering. Taking the answers to represent local empirical truth, rather than ideological interpretation of national

Table 7: Admitting Racial Tensions in a Polarized Country

Dependent variable: Whether racial tensions have lessened in recent years

Subset:

| Explanatory Variable | WHITES | | | | BLACKS |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| | Model A (Simple) | Model B (Controls) | Model C (Urbanization) | Model D (Professional) | Model E (Simple) |
| Racial density: | 0.011 | 0.007 | 0.034 | 0.045 | -0.003 |
| % black among voting-age pop | (.008) | (.008) | (.015) | (.023) | (.004) |
| Interaction: county * state racial density | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | |
| | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) | |
| State Racial Density (whites) & South dummy (blacks) | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | 0.28 |
| | (.008) | (.008) | (.008) | (.009) | (.119) |
| 5-point education scale | | -0.01 | -0.00 | -0.01 | -0.13 |
| | | (.039) | (.039) | (.039) | (.057) |
| 9-point family income scale | | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | -0.05 |
| | | (.021) | (.02) | (.021) | (.027) |
| Year of Birth | | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.003 | -0.000 |
| | | (.003) | (.003) | (.003) | (.004) |
| Dummy variable for males | | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.28 |
| | | (.086) | (.086) | (.086) | (.121) |
| Integrated (white) & Suburban (black) Dummies | | | 0.18 | 0.17 | -0.51 |
| | | | (.087) | (.086) | (.244) |
| % labor force in professional fields | | | | 0.01 | |
| | | | | (.011) | |
| Interaction: % urban * racial density | | | -0.0003 | | |
| | | | (.0001) | | |
| Interaction: % labor force professional * racial density | | | | -0.0018 | |
| | | | | (.0009) | |
| Interaction: suburban residence * racial density | | | | | 0.02 |
| | | | | | (.01) |
| observations | 796 | 745 | 742 | 742 | 439 |
| X ² | 1.98 | 8.67 | 18.12 | 16.32 | 32.57 |
| p(>= X ²) | 0.58 | 0.28 | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.00 |
| Cutpoint 1 | -0.028 | 6.579 | 5.875 | 6.186 | -0.370 |
| Cutpoint 2 | 1.104 | 7.718 | 7.024 | 7.333 | 0.785 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All are ordered probit models. The model for blacks replaces state black density with a simple dummy for the South, and replaces the dummy asking whether respondents lived in an integrated neighborhood with another indicating whether they were suburban.

forces, would mean that racial tensions were growing among professionals and among those in metropolitan areas—just as I have suggested. Roughly 48.2% of suburban whites report that racial tensions are rising, the highest found in the four residential categories.

This is a case where black attitudes can help understand white attitudes. Although for most of this research I have conflated racial “conservatism” and racial “polarization,” here black respondents should reveal a fair bit of variation themselves. Is it true that blacks find tensions highest in the heavily white suburbs? Model E shows an ordered probit model evaluating which blacks are most pessimistic about race relations. In addition to my typical variables, county black density and the four controls, I have added three others: a dummy variable for the South, a dummy variable for whether the respondent resides in a suburban area, and an interaction term for suburbs with racial density. The results overwhelmingly reinforce a pessimistic assessment of suburban racial polarization. Suburban blacks are extremely pessimistic about racial tensions, even controlling for the radicalizing experience of higher education, a result that fades as the suburb is embedded in a blacker county.

These results are interesting enough to explore with CLARIFY. Let’s start with an African-American man in a small Northern town, only 5% black. He has average income and education. This fellow would be 56.2% likely to say racial tensions had increased (standard error of .05). Change nothing except his place of residence, moving him to a suburb, and suddenly he is 70.3% (.06) likely to be cynical! The difference disappears once the area reaches approximately 20% black. Racial polarization is worst in the suburbs.

Another question simply asks how big a problem racism is “in our society today” (RACISM). Do those whites follow a systematic geographical pattern? The bivariate results, using an ordered probit model, are not auspicious for the traditional backlash logic (see Table 8, Model A). If anything, whites who are racially isolated are most likely to downplay racism. That result is even stronger if I allow perception to interact with the state’s racial density as well (Model B), and does not go away after adding the typical control variables (Model C).

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that living in diverse areas produces a heightened concern with social problems like anti-black prejudice. This model fails to recognize that white respondents may not be worried about the plight of African Americans at all. Rather, they may be complaining about racism or ethnic hatreds directed at *whites*, at least certain categories of whites. The fact is, judging from this survey, a quarter of whites feel either they or a family member has faced ethnic discrimination.²⁵

Obviously such a judgment relies on the individual’s perceptions, and it is possible the likelihood of feeling victimized depends upon the symbols and values one uses to evaluate experiences. However, the evidence weighs against this being a merely “symbolic” judgment. First, it seems fairly clear that respondents who report racial discrimination against their families generally do not mean “reverse discrimination,” as affirmative action policies are sometimes called. There is no relationship between a white respondent’s views on affirmative action and whether they report discrimination. Other variables measuring “symbolic racism,” discussed in earlier subsections, also reveal little if any correlation with this assessment of discrimination. Second, I find no evidence that these whites are particularly hostile to

²⁵ Naturally some of those whites have minority family members. However, only 30% of whites in this category did not report racial discrimination against themselves, so most of these respondents clearly are including anti-white behavior in their response. To whatever extent intermarriage ultimately clouds these findings, however, it only makes my eventual conclusion stronger: that whites and blacks in racially mixed areas share a common pessimism about “meritocratic” American society.

Table 8: Who Sees Racism? Solving a Puzzle

Dependent variable: Whether racism is a problem in American society

| Explanatory Variable | Model A (Simple) | Model B (State) | Model C (Control) | Model D (Faced Discrimination) | Model E (Not Faced Discrimination) |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Racial density:</i> | 0.007 | 0.016 | 0.007 | 0.028 | 0.007 |
| <i>% black among voting-age pop</i> | (.004) | (.008) | (.004) | (.013) | (.012) |
| <i>Interaction: county * state racial density</i> | | -0.000 (.000) | | -0.0005 (.0005) | -0.000 (.000) |
| State Racial Density | | -0.001 (.008) | | -0.010 (.017) | -0.001 (.01) |
| 5-point education scale | | | 0.06 (.038) | 0.13 (.083) | 0.04 (.044) |
| 9-point family income scale | | | -0.03 (.02) | -0.16 (.045) | -0.00 (.023) |
| Year of Birth | | | 0.001 (.003) | -0.01 (.007) | 0.00 (.003) |
| Dummy variable for males | | | -0.24 (.083) | 0.07 (.184) | -0.32 (.095) |
| observations | 793 | 793 | 743 | 174 | 569 |
| X^2 | 2.95 | 4.91 | 15.17 | 21.34 | 13.01 |
| $p(>= X^2)$ | 0.09 | 0.18 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.07 |
| Cutpoint 1 | -1.68 | -1.67 | 0.95 | -22.12 | 1.88 |
| Cutpoint 2 | -0.89 | -0.88 | 1.80 | -21.32 | 2.76 |
| Cutpoint 3 | 0.36 | 0.38 | 3.06 | -19.96 | 4.02 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The variable ranges from a 1, which means racism is not a problem at all, through a 4, which means racism is a big problem. All models use ordered probit techniques. Whites in proximity to a larger black population consider racism a problem only if a member of their family has faced racial discrimination.

African Americans. Those having faced discrimination personally are no more likely, for example, to dread increases in the minority population. They are no more likely to value “merit” over “diversity” as a social value. There is every possibility that the respondents are reporting factual information about their treatment.

Models D and E break whites into two categories: those whose families have faced discrimination, and those whose families have not. Among those who have witnessed anti-white discrimination intimately, racial density strongly and significantly predicts their opinion whether racism

constitutes a significant social problem (a finding all the more impressive given the limited sample size). Views of the remainder bear no relation to nearby density. One's assessment of the seriousness of racism therefore is not purely symbolic; it is closely related to experience with anti-white discrimination and the racial environment in which one lives.

Correlation is not causality, however. To interpret this contextual effect on concern with racism as sign of a territorial "group competition" dynamic is no more credible than a "symbolic" interpretation. We have no evidence that neighboring blacks are discriminating against the whites who live among them, or even that whites perceive this to be the case. Rather, non-Hispanic whites who report facing discrimination are those who strongly identify with an ethnic grouping more specific than mere whiteness. Only 14.3% of whites with no specific ethnic identity report discrimination against them or their families. By contrast, 27.6% of whites with a strong ethnic identification report intimate experience with discrimination. The difference across categories of ethnic identification is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 11.8$, $n = 792$, $p < .005$), and might be even larger if we knew which non-ethnic whites had intermarried.²⁶

Thus the most likely interpretation of these data comports with my claim that whites and blacks who share territory possess similar perceptions. Whites in mixed-race counties share a world view with the blacks who live around them: that the world is a rough place, that American society is hostile to people holding their ethnic identity, that the partitioning of American society is a serious problem. This commonality is the sort of shared interest upon which political coalitions are built, and contrasts with the rosier view of why people succeed or fail that characterizes racially isolated whites.

Fear of a Minority Horde?

Thus far my research has concentrated on white attitudes about blacks. However, the Kaiser survey also taps attitudes about other minority groups, as well as "minorities" in general. One question asked whites whether they thought the U.S. minority population was growing. Among those who knew that it was, interviewers then asked whether this growing minority population was a good thing or a bad thing (MINPOPGD). They also asked about blacks specifically (GDBADBL).

The main problem with expanding my methodology to all minorities is that I have no reason to expect that the pattern describing white-black polarization also would apply to, for example, white-Asian polarization. Asian values are not identical to African-American values, either in fact or according to white perception. In particular, Asians generally are not viewed as challenging the white-middle-class meritocracy, or as beneficiaries of race-conscious governmental policy, so I have no reason to suspect hostility to concentrate in the suburbs. Indeed, the absence of such a pattern would reinforce that white racial attitudes are something more than a psychological intolerance for "otherness."

I began by computing county minority population densities for all three groups: blacks, Asians and white Hispanics.²⁷ Model A in Table 9 suggests that white respondents generally do not distinguish much between questions about blacks and questions about minorities. Whites are somewhat more likely to dread minority population increases as the black density of their county grows, but do not show the same reaction to linguistic minorities. Indeed, whites surrounded by a relatively large Asian population appear

²⁶ Presumably someone who placed more emphasis on their ethnicity would be more likely to try marrying within that grouping. Whites with no ethnic identity would seem more likely to marry an Asian, Latino, or African American.

²⁷ I also created a general variable to represent county minority population density, the sum of the other three. This latter variable ended up bearing no direct relation to the assessment of minority population increases, judging from an ordered probit model.

Table 9: Fear of Other Minorities As Well?

Dependent variable: Whether increases in the U.S. minority population is a bad thing

| Explanatory Variable | Model A (Simple) | Model B (Controls) | Model C (Asian State) | Model D (Metro) | Model E (GDBADBL) |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| <i>Racial density: % black among voting-age pop</i> | 0.008 (.005) | 0.008 (.005) | 0.011 (.004) | 0.021 (.007) | 0.023 (.008) |
| 5-point education scale | | -0.18 (.045) | | | -0.06 (.053) |
| 9-point family income scale | | 0.01 (.023) | | | 0.01 (.028) |
| Year of Birth | | -0.01 (.003) | | | -0.01 (.004) |
| Dummy variable for males | | -0.10 (.097) | | | -0.03 (.115) |
| State % Asian among voting-age population | | | 0.06 (.035) | 0.06 (.036) | 0.03 (.039) |
| <i>Racial density: % Asian among voting-age pop</i> | -0.04 (.018) | -0.02 (.019) | -0.15 (.042) | -0.13 (.043) | -0.00 (.031) |
| <i>Racial density: % Latino among voting-age pop</i> | 0.00 (.000) | 0.00 (.006) | -0.00 (.005) | 0.00 (.005) | -0.01 (.007) |
| <i>Interaction: metro dummy * racial density</i> | | | | -0.02 (.008) | -0.02 (.009) |
| <i>Interaction: % state * % county Asian population</i> | | | 0.01 (.005) | 0.009 (.006) | |
| observations | 622 | 579 | 622 | 615 | 593 |
| X ² | 6.95 | 34.22 | 20.56 | 23.99 | 21.91 |
| p(>= X ²) | 0.07 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| Cutpoint 1 | -1.14 | -16.15 | -1.15 | -1.12 | -23.76 |
| Cutpoint 2 | 0.43 | -14.49 | 0.45 | 0.49 | -20.79 |

Note: All models are ordered probits. For both variables, a value of 1 means increasing minority population is a good thing, 2 represents a neutral answer, and 3 means minority population increases are a bad thing. The last column uses a different variable, one that singles out blacks rather than all minorities.

significantly more likely to look *favorably* upon minority population increases.

Model B adds the four demographic controls. These variables temporarily wash out the intriguing positive reaction to Asians, but do little harm to the negative reaction that blacks invoke. The next step is to implement the interactive hypotheses. Whites who actually live near Asians may be relatively assimilated, and thus consider increases a good thing, but I doubt whites elsewhere in the state would feel the same way. They would share few interests with distant Asians, yet presumably would consider themselves in cultural conflict with a large immigrant population. Model C therefore adds a measure of the state Asian population, plus an interaction between that variable and the county density.²⁸ As anticipated, a “near proximity” pattern appears: whites are more likely to embrace minority population growth when they reside in heavily Asian *counties*, but they become much less sanguine in similarly diverse *states*.²⁹

Next I walked through the interaction terms available for blacks, to see whether the typical Cultural Backlash phenomenon appears. It does, after controlling for Asian density. Whether I use the professionalization term, the urbanization term, or simply whether respondents reported living in a metropolitan area, the result is the same: whites respond badly to nearby blacks when they reside in rural areas, but the pattern disappears in the more urban locales. Model D offers one example, the simple metropolitan model.³⁰ In keeping with my rebuttal of the traditional white backlash argument, results presented here for Asians suggest that ethnic polarization is not necessarily localized. Whites in both urban and rural areas respond the same way to Asians, becoming more friendly to minorities as the Asian population increases. Similarly, white attitudes about minorities do not respond negatively to the presence of a large local Hispanic population. Only black-white proximity increases white hostility to minorities as a group, and only then in rural areas—more historical residue than contemporary competition. Heavily black rural areas in the South stand out for anti-minority attitudes that date back several centuries, but outside the South or in metropolitan areas familiarity simply does not breed contempt with any group.

Model E switches to the question that singles out black population increases. I suspect fairly similar patterns with this variable as observed with the last, because most whites probably conflate the terms “minority” and “black” (the exception being those in a state or county with many immigrants). The results reported for Model E mostly uphold my expectations. The main change, not surprisingly, is that nearby Asian populations no longer matter, for good or ill. Otherwise, though, both variables allow the same conclusion: outside of rural areas, whites do not react negatively to a large black population.

Merit According to Whom?

Affirmative action elicits strong opposition from whites. The Kaiser survey, for example, asked whether Congress should limit affirmative action, eliciting approval from more than two-thirds of white respondents who expressed an opinion. Almost half said they *strongly* supported such a move. Even including the uncertain respondents, a solid majority of whites opposed the policy. Of course, ask the question a different way, and the numbers can shift around—but it takes a truly tortured question to

²⁸ Other interactive hypotheses, parallel to those used for blacks, show little effect on the county-level variable.

²⁹ Measures for the state black and Hispanic populations did not behave the same way. That for Hispanics did nothing. That for blacks, meanwhile, cut into the county-level black effect because of multicollinearity, but gave no sign of being a better predictor or having independent effects on the dependent variable.

³⁰ Offering parallel black and white variables—a state density variable and a metropolitan interaction variable—does not overturn this pattern.

produce the illusion that whites *endorse* treating people differently depending upon race.

What makes this racial policy particularly interesting is the strange pattern of incentives it sets up. First, the risk of losing a job or admission to an educational program because of affirmative action is relatively small. Even with the most extreme racial preference, say a 15% quota for African American applicants in a 200-member class at an elite law school, at most 30 whites could lose out to minority candidates who were less qualified. That number only decreases, of course, if some of those 30 blacks would have won admission without special preferences. Considering the hundreds of applications such a school would receive, the probability of falling prey to racial favoritism is quite small even for those who apply, and of course no one else suffers any risk at all.

Equally important is that affirmative action's costs seldom fall upon a localized constituency. Rather, affirmative action policies appear most prominently (or, at least, most contentiously) among professions and institutions that draw from a geographically dispersed candidate pool: academia, journalism, law, education, the military. Occasionally controversy swirls around local secondary schools or the community police force, and to a certain extent these job markets are more centralized, but affirmative action is likely to play little role in the unskilled and semi-skilled markets that draw from the narrowest labor pool. The policy therefore not only represents minimal risk to individual whites, it spreads that risk fairly evenly across the white population.³¹

Affirmative action is quite different from school busing, the desegregation policy upon which much of the symbolic racism literature draws for evidence. Tracing the costs of busing minority students into majority-dominated schools is not difficult. Any risk or sacrifice necessarily would fall only upon whites with children, and only upon those who live in a city diverse enough to require such measures. We reasonably might expect opinions to follow predictable geographical patterns for the busing issue—which is why the apparent absence of such patterns represents such compelling evidence against considering racial conservatism an outgrowth of real group conflict. The unpredictability of self-interest for affirmative action, by contrast, should provide an easy case for showing that racial ideology rather than racial interest drives individual preferences. White resentment surely must drive policy preferences when the sacrifices are so diffuse as to make self-interest untraceable.

However, the above reasoning makes a critical (and common) assumption: that opposition to affirmative action primarily derives from fear of being squeezed out of racial privileges. Yet this is flawed logic. It ignores the plausible alternate hypothesis that some whites have more to lose from an alternate cultural voice than others do, and therefore may oppose affirmative action for the emphasis it places on diversity. It ignores that some whites have more vested in America's meritocratic myths than others do, have more vested in the legitimacy of the country's structured social inequalities. They therefore feel more sharply the implicit criticism upon which affirmative action is based.

That these alternative pressures may play a greater role in the policy environment should be clear when we consider exposure to any given admissions policy. Take, for example, the hypothetical 200-student admissions pool, with 30 slots set aside for minorities and 2,000 applicants. Even if not a single minority candidate managed to fall in the top 200, an applicant's chance of losing a slot from the policy would be quite small ($30 / 2,000 = 1.5\%$); the chance for anyone else would be nil. By contrast, the chance of attending the now-diverse school would be significantly higher ($170 / 2,000 = 8.5\%$). If whites find diversity unpleasant or even threatening, they are more likely to pay the "costs" of affirmative action than whites who simply do not want to give up access to privileged resources. Meanwhile, by implying

³¹ I do not mean to imply that every white has the same level of self-interest on affirmative action—only that the arrangement of interests bears little relation to geography or the distribution of a state's minority groups.

that past admissions were unfair, the policy might threaten any whites who previously graduated from the institution, and perhaps offend the sensibilities of many more.

The Kaiser poll shows that these general value orientations do indeed correspond to more specific policy preferences. Whites who consider diversity more important than purely meritocratic practices (MERIT) are almost two-thirds likely both to consider affirmative action a good thing (JUDGAFFA) and oppose scaling it back (POLAFFAC). The difference from other whites is dramatic, and clearly statistically significant ($p < .001$). We cannot rule out, therefore, that opposition to affirmative action reflects an encompassing distaste for diversity rather than merely a fear of economic exclusion. It is possible that opposition stems from genuine cultural struggle: over what constitutes value when one is hired or admitted, over the voices that are included and excluded within important institutions. In that case, we would indeed expect a geographical pattern to emerge on the affirmative action issue, just as it has on the supposedly “symbolic” racial orientations. White suburbanites should reveal as much opposition to affirmative action as whites in much more diverse locales, because residents typically enjoy the cultural advantages rewarded best in a “meritocratic” system and in practice have the least experience with racial diversity.

Model A in Table 10 presents an ordered probit model predicting the desire to cut affirmative action, using only county black population density as an explanatory variable. Unlike with the symbolic politics measures, even this simple model indicates that preferences are geographically distributed, validating Glaser’s (1994) claim that “political” attitudinal variables follow a proximity pattern. Whites who reside in blacker counties tend to want limits on the policy, represented by the positive sign on the coefficient—a pattern inconsistent with either naive or complex psychological threat models. Adding the typical controls in Model B does not change the basic picture: county black density still helps predict policy preferences, even after considering both the opposition men typically reveal and the higher levels of support that characterize the educated elite.

One possibility is that this “threat” pattern actually reflects historical patterns of racial resentment. Model C adds a control for respondents who reside in the South. Once we know that the respondent is a Southern white, having the actual population density of their county appears to provide little extra predictive power. Thus the simple proximity pattern found for affirmative action is literally a “Black Belt” effect, not a clear reaction to racial densities found in all regions of the country. However, the weakness of the racial density measure as usual results from failure to consider differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Model D adds a dummy variable identifying respondents who live in metropolitan areas, as well as an interaction between that variable and the racial density measure.

The effect of racial density is strong and significant outside of metropolitan areas: the blacker a county, the more whites oppose affirmative action. CLARIFY indicates that whites residing in a 25% black county would have a 63.6% chance of strongly opposing affirmative action (standard error of 6.4), compared to only a 44% (2.7) chance among a 5% black population. Within metropolitan areas, by contrast, local population demographics matter little. The interaction term actually flips the estimated effect of black density until it is slightly negative. Whites in racially cloistered suburbs and cities are, if anything, more likely to oppose affirmative action than those in more diverse counties.³²

Model E reinforces the point by adding several “symbolic racism” variables from earlier in this

³² The analysis did not vary if I added controls for the county Hispanic and Asian populations. It was also similar, although slightly weaker, for the other affirmative action question, whether affirmative action has had a positive effect (JUDGAFFA). Racial density always predicts affirmative action views outside of metropolitan areas, but not inside them.

Table 10: Racial Conservatism on a Policy Question

Dependent variable: Whether Congress should limit affirmative action

| Explanatory Variable | Model A (Simple) | Model B (Control) | Model C (South) | Model D (Metro Interaction) | Model E (Symbolic Controls) |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Racial density: % black among voting-age pop</i> | 0.011 (.004) | 0.011 (.004) | 0.006 (.005) | 0.025 (.008) | 0.027 (.009) |
| <i>Interaction: county racial density * metro dummy</i> | | | | -0.029 (.01) | -0.026 (.01) |
| Dummy variable for metro areas | | | | 0.216 (.119) | 0.277 (.123) |
| 5-point education scale | | -0.10 (.042) | -0.09 (.042) | -0.10 (.042) | -0.05 (.044) |
| 9-point family income scale | | 0.03 (.022) | 0.03 (.022) | 0.03 (.023) | 0.02 (.023) |
| Year of Birth | | 0.00 (.003) | 0.00 (.003) | 0.00 (.003) | 0.00 (.003) |
| Dummy variable for males | | 0.30 (.091) | 0.30 (.091) | 0.30 (.091) | 0.22 (.095) |
| Dummy variable for South | | | 0.27 (.114) | 0.21 (.118) | 0.08 (.123) |
| Should rise like other groups? | | | | | 0.68 (.106) |
| Lower standard of living? | | | | | -0.21 (.100) |
| Tensions growing? | | | | | -0.00 (.069) |
| Racism a serious problem? | | | | | -0.09 (.066) |
| observations | 672 | 633 | 633 | 631 | 608 |
| X^2 | 6.66 | 23.40 | 29.19 | 39.08 | 99.72 |
| $p(>= X^2)$ | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Cutpoint 1 | -0.88 | -0.19 | 0.19 | 0.16 | 1.80 |
| Cutpoint 2 | -0.39 | 0.30 | 0.69 | 0.66 | 2.32 |
| Cutpoint 3 | 0.18 | 0.89 | 1.28 | 1.26 | 2.96 |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The variable ranges from a 1, which means the respondent strongly opposes Congress cutting affirmative action, to a 4, which means the respondent strongly supports such a move. All models use ordered probit techniques. "Symbolic racism" measures do help explain affirmative action preferences, but they do not wash out the Cultural Backlash pattern.

paper: whether blacks should raise themselves up as other ethnic groups did, whether blacks enjoy the same standard of living, and whether racism and racial tensions are significant social problems.³³ Something prompts racially isolated metropolitan respondents to reveal as much hostility to affirmative action as those in more diverse locales—a trend that does not go away when I control for “symbolic racism,” a trend that does not change depending upon the mobility of the white population or their economic resources relative to the black population. More plausible than explanations based upon migration, contact or hereditary resentment, therefore, is the Cultural Backlash interpretation that has received consistent support through this research. The stakes of racial conflict unite whites who, because of their residential patterns, have the greatest investment in “white middle class” culture: those in rural counties and small towns where they must compete with a sizeable black population for control of local institutions, as well as those in suburbs isolated from the nation’s African Americans.

Summary

Consistent with previous literature in the symbolic politics vein, I find using simple contextual models that “material incentives” fail to predict adherence to symbolic racism’s articles of faith. However, I then explored the possibility that self interest follows somewhat more complicated patterns, in the form of interactive backlash hypotheses. The results indicate that survey responses usually interpreted to reflect a psychological orientation actually follow a clear and systematic geographical pattern, consistent with the Cultural Backlash approach that I have advocated.

Too many scholars assume, because racial conservatives reveal ignorance and prejudice, that education is a valuable method for combating the political views that stereotypes characterize. My results suggest the need for a fundamental reconsideration of American racism. Racial stereotypes operate in service of rational motives, and are not likely to fold in the face of disconfirming evidence (no matter how persuasive). They are not likely to dissolve in the face of an education cultivated at a distance, in predominantly white suburban schools or by watching well-meaning television programs.

The only type of “education” in which I have any faith, based on the results reported in this paper, is the sort that lessens the fundamental cultural divide perceived between whites and blacks in America. The sort of assimilation that this involves would require a radical restructuring of residential patterns, as well as an alteration of the recreational insularity that both whites and blacks commonly pursue. It also seems to require greater political commitment to residential integration, since few whites and blacks reside in close-enough proximity for cultural assimilation to change American attitudes. These implications are ultimately much less sanguine, I think, than the tone that usually underlies racial discourse within the discipline—because truly irrational impulses, in fact, would be much easier to combat than what I have found.

References see <http://www.uky.edu/~dsvoss/docs/diss/refs.html> for most; additional references are:

Chandra, Amitabh. 2000 (Forthcoming). “Is the Convergence in the Racial Wage Gap Illusory?” *American Economic Review* 90(May).

King, Gary, Michael Tomz, and Jason Wittenberg. 2000. “Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation.” *American Journal of Political Science* 44(April):347-61

³³ These were selected because they were the four asked of my entire white sample. The other variables, while interesting, would have decimated the sample.