

Racial Divisions and Attitudes

Summary: As the United States grows more diverse, white Americans have become increasingly unsettled. Racial polarization in America became widespread with the implementation of Nixon's "southern strategy," which cemented race as a party-line issue. Nixon's strategy relies on elites propagating reduced dimensionality of conflict to increase ideological convergence and affective polarization. These factors have stoked *white resentment*, and further entrenched race as a hot-button topic in American politics.

The memo below will further explain the theories that drive racial polarization, discuss the severity of the divide, examine the long-term consequences, and explore what we have yet to learn about racial polarization.

Racial Polarization Defined:

The Supreme Court has defined racial polarization as, “a consistent relationship between [the] race of the voter and the way in which the voter votes,’ or, to put it differently, where ‘black voters and white voters vote differently.” *Thornburg v. Gingles*, 478 U.S. 30 (1986)

Key Theories Explaining the Division:

- Partisanship and race are deeply intertwined
 - Most people tend to think that people are sorted into political parties by their previously held racial beliefs; however, research by Andrew Engelhardt (2018) casts a different light.
 - Engelhardt (2018) emphasizes that increased partisanship has also lead people to adopt racial views espoused by pundits and other party elites. These tactics will presumably create a “vicious cycle” that will further cement interconnectedness of race and partisanship.
- The white reaction to civil rights
 - Pundits are able to impact opinions on race because white people are already primed. Prior to the Civil Rights movement both parties minimized the importance of class to pit lower-income black and white Americans against each other. (Olson 2008)
 - Olson (2008) outlines that the end of the Civil Rights movement brought the power of white standing to an end, which bred white *resentment*. Elites, like Nixon and Goldwater, backed away from overt racism and codified it to appeal to the “virtuous middle.” This paradigm shift has made it more difficult to discern racial animus from general conservative ideals about self-reliance.
- The Spillover Effect
 - According to Tesler (2015), this resentment has created a *spillover effect* that has led to racialized opinions about things associated with black elites.
 - This created problems during Obama’s presidency that impacted his policies, allies, and strikingly, American’s opinions on Portuguese Water Dogs (the breed of dog the Obama’s owned while in the WH). (2015)

Disagreements among Scholars:

- Muste (2014) argues that racial polarization has decreased over time. Using a “feeling thermometer,” Muste shows a gradual decrease in positivity for one’s in-group and an increase in positivity for one’s out-group; therefore, supporting his theory.
- Other scholars, like Carney and Enos (2017), contend that the racial-resentment scale is flawed because the codification of racism has made it difficult to discern between conservative ideals and outright bigotry. They examined the difference in resentment towards black Americans versus other non-black target groups, and found little variance in responses. These findings show how views on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic standing have become melded in a world increasingly muddled by identity politics.

Long-Term Consequences and Effects:

- Black Candidates
 - Possibly due to the spillover effect, research conducted by Krupnikov (2015) has shown that black candidates have a harder time mobilizing electorates who share their party. In fact, Krupnikov (2015) shows that the turnout of strong *Democratic* partisans was depressed during Obama’s election. This points to the fact that racial bias isn’t exclusive to Republicans.
- White Identity Politics
 - The rise in racial polarization has birthed white identity politics. White identity politics centers around the ideas of color-blindness and postracialism, but Knowles and Marshburn (2010), have found that most whites hold these views to protect their in-group, and position in the intergroup hierarchy.
- A young progressive generation?
 - Many Americans feel like race is becoming a problem of the past as Millennials have become more liberal; unfortunately, research conducted by Schildkraut and Marotta (2018) uncovers the disturbing truth. Schildkraut and Marotta (2018) find that Millennials are more liberal, but *white* Millennials are closer in their political beliefs to the older white generations than they are to other Millennials.

What We Don’t Know:

- Contact Theory
 - Fortunately, there is still hope for the future. As the country grows more diverse, scholars like Schildkraut and Marotta (2018) are hopeful that white Americans will become more exposed to diversity, and gradually become more accepting due to exposure.

Bibliography

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Deborah J. Schildkraut, and Satia A. Marotta. "Assessing the Political Distinctiveness of White Millennials: How Race and Generation Shape Racial and Political Attitudes in a Changing America." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 158-87. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.08>.

Schildkraut and Marotta explore the idea that Millennials are making America more liberal. Their research shows that, while this idea is generally true, there is more to the story. The reason Millennials as a whole appear to be moving to the left is because they are a more diverse generation. White millennials are actually closer older white generations than they are to their millennial peers. They conclude that race plays a bigger role in political preferences than age and generation. However, they are hopeful that contact theory will help break down these racial barriers by exposing younger white people to diversity that older generations never experienced.

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