

## Chapter 2 – Backlash Politics: Product of the Black Belt Soil

Few behavioral or institutional theories have emerged directly from the study of Southern politics. Perhaps the region's uniqueness is responsible; projecting Southern patterns outside those borders just does not seem credible.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps the internal variations are so great, even within this relatively homogeneous territory, that explanations of Southern politics are too complicated to transport outside the subfield.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the reason, the most popular work in Southern politics stands out for narrative skill rather than theoretical generality (Bartley and Graham 1975; Bass and DeVries 1976; Black and Black 1987; Lamis 1988; Pierce 1974; Sherrill 1968).

The outstanding exception is V.O. Key Jr.'s *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1984). This volume, despite presenting a detailed exploration of mid-century Southern politics, was nevertheless an explicit attempt at political-science theory building (Holcombe 1950, 192).<sup>3</sup> Key believed, and shaped his volume to prove, that African Americans formed the core of the Solid South. He traced almost all the quirks of Southern politics to the region's racial caste system, by linking prototypically Southern political institutions to the region's Black Belt.<sup>4</sup>

Out of this, others have derived the one great "behavioral theory" of Southern politics: that racial conservatism varies with the size of a community's African-American population. More

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<sup>1</sup> That is, Southern findings may lack "external validity."

<sup>2</sup> That is, Southern findings may not provide enough "leverage" for understanding political outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> Key's intellectual contributions, within that one volume, are numerous and complex. I do not offer a complete treatment here.

<sup>4</sup> This name for the South's fertile plantation lands refers to the rich soil found there, not to the population demographics.

generally, racial heterogeneity spawns polarization; proximity generates fear; interaction creates conflict; familiarity breeds contempt. Students of Southern politics latched onto “Key’s hypothesis” to such an extent that it still reverberates throughout the subfield (e.g., Berard 1998; Buchanan 1999; Corbello 1998; Glaser 1998; Mayer 1996; Orey 1997). Indeed, the white backlash concept has grown in theoretical weight, spreading into other social-science disciplines, and even into the popular consciousness.

So broad a judgment, with such ominous ramifications, should not be accepted as uncritically as it has been. My purpose in the following chapters is to outline the evolution of this idea, tracing it from its roots in the Jim Crow South and Key’s book to its adaptation as a central theory of race relations. As the discussion shows, Key’s methodology remained long after his reasoning slipped out of the hypothesis attributed to him. Whites in close proximity to a dense black population are thought to feel threatened, but no one has settled quite where, when or why.

In the first section that follows, I explore Key’s argument and methodology in more detail. I then turn to other political scientists who have used proximity in behavioral studies, to show how influential the concept eventually became. The literature review mostly only discusses work through the 1968 elections, though; the modern period appears in chapters 4-5 as part of my discussion of contemporary racial politics. Readers uninterested in the details of this older work, who nevertheless wish to confirm my claims about the significance of the white backlash hypothesis, may skip the second section and simply glance at Table 2-1 at the end. Both the table and the discussion it summarizes show clearly how abiding Key’s idea proved to be.

### **The Key Hypothesis**

Although V.O. Key had an ear for both the clever turn of phrase and the telling anecdote, it is surely his broad theoretical scope that keeps scholars turning to *Southern Politics* 50 years after its

first publication. Key's volume stands out, despite its age, as highly modern—a *tour de force* of social science. Key applied the scientific method to his native region, not just to see what he could learn about the South, but also to see what the South could teach about politics (Holcombe 1950, 192).<sup>5</sup>

Key wanted to explain the pathologies of Southern political institutions (Key 1984, 4), such as one-party rule and stingy public policies (Jennings 1977; Key 1984, 11-12). Backed by the analysis of Southern voting returns, congressional roll-call data, and dozens of off-the-record interviews, he settled on the Solid South's racial caste system as the ultimate culprit. Southern institutions embodied a rational attempt by elite whites to maintain political control; they were the natural extension of "an economic and social system based on subordinate, black labor" (Key 1984, 9).<sup>6</sup> If two parties contended for office, blacks might swing certain counties where they were more populous. Progressive policies, similarly, might liberate blacks by providing them with financial resources from outside the region. Either development would undermine existing social relations, and so were intolerable to voters there. Key's summary (1984, 665):

Southern sectionalism and the special character of southern political institutions have to be attributed in the main to the Negro. The one-party system, suffrage restrictions departing from democratic norms, low levels of voting and of political interest, and all the consequences of these political arrangements and practice must be traced ultimately to this one factor. All of which amounts to saying that the predominant consideration in the architecture of southern political institutions has been to assure locally a subordination of the Negro population and, externally, to block threatened interferences from the outside with these local arrangements.

Despite a long book, this conclusion stands out for most readers (Hesseltine 1950, 140; Holcombe 1950, 193; Kirwan 1950, 377-78; Parent 1995, 119; Sydnor 1950, 137).

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<sup>5</sup> Key resolutely resisted conducting a study of the South, because he questioned the scholarly value of such a project. Not even an entreaty from President Truman swayed him. Given this skepticism, Key presumably continued searching for insights worthwhile to the entire discipline even after he accepted the task (under sway of a bottle of Old Crow, according to Heard's introduction for the 1984 printing). At any rate, he succeeded at the task.

<sup>6</sup> Havard (1979) also emphasizes both Key's success at developing parsimonious hypotheses and his belief in the "rational" nature of most political behavior.

Not all portions of the South shared this caste system, however. Highland counties in most states never could support plantation agriculture, so historically they had imported few slaves. Voters in those localities therefore did not face the same rational political imperatives as Black Belt voters. In particular, they held less investment in Southern political unity (Key 1984, 8). Voters in these mountainous regions would never have to compete with black voters for political control, so two-party competition did not threaten the stability of social relations there. Such voters did not profit directly from the political suppression of black workers, so liberal social policies also posed at best a minor threat to them. In other words, for Key the South's racial conservatism was historically contingent (Key 1984, 315), and would follow meaning geographical patterns as a result.

#### *Alternate Sources of Southern Unresponsiveness*

Blaming the Solid South's racial caste system might seem obvious today, but at the time such an assertion required proof. Southern history offered many potential causes for institutional backwardness (Hesseltine 1950, 939). Limiting the explanation to a single, root force—the desire to suppress an already disenfranchised and dispossessed minority (Key 1984, 5-9)—struck some readers as egregious reductionism. Hesseltine (1950, 940), reviewing the volume for a major history journal, summarily dismissed this conclusion. “The author's labored effort to find a synthesis in the melee is hardly . . . convincing,” he wrote. The 650 pages of analysis “furnish so many exceptions, so many special variations, and so many other conditioning factors that the hypothesis appears untenable.” Sydnor (1950, 138), who was more sympathetic, nonetheless also admitted that some readers would think that “the conclusion is too absolute and that the book comes to its end at too single a point.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, most explanations for the South's political culture would have centered on slavery

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the criticism Key faced clearly resulted because the historians reviewing his work did not understand probabilistic social-science models (Kirwan 1950, 378), but the problem ran deeper.

in one way or another. For example, Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, recognized that human bondage produced an “unhappy influence on the manners of our people” (Jefferson 1999, Query 18). But Jefferson did not attribute the white South’s “unremitting despotism” to political needs as Key did, since blacks at the time did not enjoy political influence; he blamed acculturation to tyranny in the household.<sup>8</sup>

The South’s fertile soil, tilled by relatively pliant black labor both before and after emancipation, allowed the aristocratic practices of large-scale agriculture. Landowners sometimes enjoyed both excessive leisure time and absentee ownership, resulting in an undemocratic and immoral sense of entitlement among Southern elites (Cobb 1992, 17, 135-41).<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the historical weight of the Civil War, including the sequence of Reconstruction and “Redemption” that followed, left white Southerners with an unhealthy defensiveness. Southern political culture developed into a “folk unity almost unique in the modern world” (Williams 1966, 19), one that included an appreciation of paternalism and a desire to maintain uniformity in the face of a hostile North.<sup>10</sup>

All of these answers stem in part from slavery, yet in no case is the description as directly tied to racial struggle as Key’s. Nor is the emphasis as overtly electoral. Furthermore, some explanations available involved neither slavery nor Jim Crow. Alexis de Tocqueville, after surveying the antebellum United States, criticized the imported culture of Southern immigrants. He calls the first southern settlers “great English landowners” who “brought with them aristocratic

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<sup>8</sup> Imitating the parents, a southern infant “gives a loose to the worst passions, and thus nursed, educated and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities” (Query 18). No doubt the sharecropping system that replaced slavery did little to disabuse white southern elites of authoritarian values.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass makes this point evocatively but concisely in his famous Rochester Fourth of July address (1979, 383-84). He says of slavery: “It fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it ... Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom.”

<sup>10</sup> See Cash’s 1941 masterpiece *The Mind of the South* (1991, 103-104, 111-13) for a romanticized version of this narrative.

principles, including the English law of inheritance” (Tocqueville 1969, 51). He notes that, from the beginning, property qualifications for the vote were much higher in southern colonies (Tocqueville 1969, 59). The suffrage restrictions Key studied (1984, chaps. 26, 27), and the elitist political tradition they implied, thus had antecedents from a time when imported Africans were not an electoral threat.

Similarly, Jim Crow suffrage restrictions did not emerge immediately after “Redemption,” despite the presence of thousands of African-American voters on the rolls. Rather, elected officials implemented disenfranchising laws only when Southern agrarians launched a Populist revolt late in the 19th century. The explicit (although not exclusive) intent was to suppress class-based threats to Bourbon hegemony, which blacks might have joined (Kousser 1974, 38-40; Williams 1966, 56-57).

Even the humid climate sometimes appeared as an explanation for Southern lethargy and decadence.<sup>11</sup> Thus numerous forces—cultural, economic, geographic, national—were thought to militate against democracy in the South.<sup>12</sup>

### *Testing for White Backlash in the Solid South*

Key’s attempt to boil this complex narrative down to a single, overarching origin was a radical case of parsimonious theory building.<sup>13</sup> He traces the Solid South’s pathologies back to political suppression of “the Negro” and sets out, using a method of inquiry firmly grounded in empirical social science, to test the observable implications of his hypothesis (Ewing 1950, 155; Holcombe

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Jefferson wrote, “In a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him.” (Query 18). Whites sought others to bear the burden. In contrast, the independence of northern yeoman farmers formed the basis for republican vigilance against governmental encroachments (Query 17).

<sup>12</sup> In methodological terms, the failure of republican institutions was overdetermined.

<sup>13</sup> King, Keohane and Verba (1994, 29) judge a social-science theory by how well it “maximizes leverage,” how well it explains “as much as possible with as little as possible.”

1950, 192; Sydnor 1950, 138).<sup>14</sup>

If Southern exceptionalism results from reaction to African Americans, Key reasons, then Southern distinctiveness should center in the Black Belt, in the states and counties with the largest minority population. That is, (1) as the black percentage of a state or county's population rises, white voting cohesion should increase with it. Also, (2) as the black percentage rises, single-issue voting based upon racial issues should increase. These were two observable implications of his narrative, although he "pursued nearly every avenue of approach to an understanding of his subject" (Kirwan 1950, 378).

Key applies the proposition to two presidential elections, the 1928 contest between Herbert Hoover and Al Smith, and the 1948 Dewey-Truman contest with Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat protest (Key 1984, chap. 15). Key's choice of the 1928 contest was not accidental. Smith, the Democrat, was a reform governor from New York with ties to the Big Apple's Tammany machine. From his diction (garbled) to his religion (Catholic) to his views on alcohol (wet), Smith was "a symbol of the possibilities of urban America" (Hofstadter 1955, 298; c.f., Key 1984, 318). Given that "conflict between urban and rural folkways underlay most of the social tensions of the period" (Shannon 1979, 74), Smith held little appeal to the Protestant South. Hoover, meanwhile, was a lukewarm progressive whose opposition to national economic regulation played well with states' rights.<sup>15</sup> Southern defection to Hoover may have seemed a natural response.

Southern Democrats could play the race card to overcome Smith's Catholicism, however. As Craig (1992, 168) puts it, "Religious prejudice was fought with racial bigotry." Hoover's uncertain

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<sup>14</sup> The term "observable implications" comes not from Key, but from King, Keohane and Verba (1994, 30). Key's appreciation of this method was intuitive; he did not pursue it explicitly or formally. But his disciplinary grounding was recognized even then. "The method of Key's work is definitely the method of political science," Holcombe wrote (1950, 192). "He is interested primarily in the purposeful and systematic study of political structures and political processes."

<sup>15</sup> Al Smith was also a philosophical supporter of states' rights (Craig 1992, 119). The point is only that Hoover seemed acceptable.

credentials on race made this easier; as Secretary of Commerce he had desegregated government offices (Lisio 1985, 86).<sup>16</sup> However, the tactic would work best where race held most political salience. White supremacy in the Black Belt—and, by extension, federal laws favoring the racial status quo—hinged on Southern influence in the Democratic Party. “The whites of the black-belt counties were bound in loyalty to the Democracy by a common tradition and anxiety about the Negro. Whites elsewhere could afford the luxury of voting their convictions on the religious and prohibition issues,” Key writes (1984, 319).

In sum, voters less concerned with the racial caste system might defect across parties, because the cultural contest held particular salience in 1928, but the South's true forces of white supremacy would hold their noses and stand by their party. Faced by cross-cutting loyalties, southern voters would stick with Smith when race drove their vote, and switch to Hoover when culture mattered more. Key hypothesizes that defections from Smith will decline as the black density increases, since race would hold most salience in heavily black rural areas, and indeed that is what he finds (Key 1984, 319). Smith won all but five of the 191 majority-black counties, but only 30% of Southern counties with few blacks (i.e., fewer than 5%). Defections were lowest in Mississippi and South Carolina, the only states where many whites feared the prospect of being outnumbered politically.

The 1948 election represents just the opposite dynamic. In that year, Southern voters abandoned President Truman, the Democratic nominee, precisely because of his liberal racial policies. For single-issue racists, the obvious choice was South Carolina segregationist Strom Thurmond, running on a states' rights ticket with Mississippi Gov. Fielding Wright. So Key expects the Black Belt to defect from the two-party system, while other Southern counties will remain relatively loyal. Again, the county-level analysis apparently backed up his hypothesis. The more

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<sup>16</sup>The Republican's humanitarianism does not mean that he held racial views inconsistent with the era. Indeed, not unlike a plantation owner, Hoover spent his early career as a mining engineer commanding what he considered “lower races” (Hofstadter 1974, 381).



blacks in a county, on average, the more votes Thurmond and Wright received.<sup>17</sup>

### **Racial Density: An Implication Too Easily Observed**

Key's theory was nuanced, a larger vision of how Southern institutions operated. Key did test the theory's observable implications, to see whether voting behavior matched his expectations, but this was a small part of a long book. Reviewers generally only mentioned the voting-behavior studies obliquely (Holcombe 1950, 193; Kirwan 1950, 377-78; Sydnor 1950, 136), and to my knowledge only one, fairly hostile, reviewer described the "white backlash" analysis explicitly (Ewing 1950, 155). The analysis of voting behavior supported his ideas, but only formed a compelling case because Key had combined it with hundreds of interviews, with state-by-state analyses of factionalism (Key 1984, chap. 3-12), and with independent statistical tests (Key 1984, chap. 2, 16, 17).

Even then, the motivational side to Key's theory—a desire to maintain political control—is not the only explanation for the book's evidence. Key's emphasis is on rational group conflict, but the stability of Southern demographic patterns before World War II makes it hard to reject other explanations (e.g., the influence of "political culture" or socialization in former plantation regions). He did not, for instance, use historical measures of black population as a control to make sure that 1920s population levels were the root of the phenomenon. He did not parse out the many things a large black population represented: a history of slavery, wide income disparities, an agricultural base, etc. Indeed, Key's (1984, 320-28) discussion of exceptions explicitly recognizes the

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<sup>17</sup> Key's discussion of the 1948 election is one of the most bizarre portions of his book. He digresses into a long, winding tale of the contest—even introducing a conspiracy theory that oil companies masterminded much of the Dixiecrat campaign (Key 1984, 341)—but then demurs from showing the actual data analysis backing up his hypothesis. Readers are restricted to a hastily discussed map of Arkansas (Key 1984, 342-44).

persistence of historical patterns in Southern voting.<sup>18</sup> He ends by noting (Key 1984, 329): “Not only high Negro population ratios were associated with Democratic steadfastness. A complex of factors—ruralism, cotton-growing, plantation organization, intense Reconstruction memories—as well as anxieties about the racial equilibrium characterized the Democratic areas.” So not even Key “proved” that Southern voting behavior responded rationally to the contemporary black population.

The voting-behavior analysis was deceptively simple, however, a tool other researchers could use without the solid backing of field work, without the nuance, and without bothering to perform independent verifications. Exploring the “effect” of county black density on a political variable is not difficult; the Census Bureau regularly measures county population by race. Researchers could carry Key’s methodology unreflectively to other sources of data. The cost is an unpleasant reductionism.

Not that Key shied away from the statistical implications of his ideas. He underscored them for purposes of clarity. “If the whites of the black belts give the South its dominant political tone, the character of the politics of individual states will vary roughly with the Negro proportion of the population,” Key (1984, 5) writes. He makes a similar claim about county population. But he does not anticipate a general relationship between black population and racial hostility. His claim only applies to the South, since he recognizes that political culture varies considerably from place to place despite equivalent black populations (1984, 10). Nor is it clear whether his theory was intended to apply to the South’s few urban areas (1984, 315). He writes (Key 1984, 670), “In the cities . . . the white vote is conditioned to a much less degree by the Negro than in the rural counties.”

What survived in social science was not Key’s complex yet incomplete historiography, but the statistical outgrowth of his theory: measures of racial hostility should correlate with the black density

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<sup>18</sup> Key (1984) includes the following as explanations for outliers: long partisan traditions (pg. 323), religious affiliations (pg. 326), the strength of old social movements such as anti-Catholicism or populism (pg. 326), the “Negrophobia” that leaks over county borders or even across a whole state (pg. 326), and the “conditions of city life” (pg. 328). These explanations are not obviously consistent with a “rational” interpretation of voting behavior, and provoked criticism from some reviewers (Hesseltine 1950, 940; Kirwan 1950, 378).

in a community. Few relationships have been tested so frequently and so incessantly in political science, and after five decades the method has cut loose from both its contextual and theoretical moorings. The remainder of this chapter presents a history of the Black Belt argument in Southern politics research, followed by a treatment of other applications in the next chapter.

### *White Backlash in the New South*

Key's students and colleagues were first to pick up the white backlash hypothesis where their mentor had left it.<sup>19</sup> They did so within the Southern context for which Key had initially formulated it. Alexander Heard (1952, 251-78), a partial contributor to Key's volume, expanded their evidence for the 1948 Dixiecrat rebellion to the entire South. After a detailed analysis of the Dixiecrat vote, shunted to the appendix of a book otherwise focused on the potential for two-party Southern politics, Heard (1952, 27) seconds the white backlash logic: "When the votes were in, they showed that appeals to race consciousness had reaped their reward. In state after state the Dixiecrats won their greatest support among the whites who live closest to large numbers of Negroes."<sup>20</sup>

Heard, like Key, implicitly limited his observations to the Solid South context. Far from ignoring the connection between politics and the social conditions in which they are embedded, he built his work around the assumption that the two were intimately entwined (Heard 1952, 145). Thurmond's vote was highest not simply where "Negroes are concentrated in large numbers" (Heard 1952, 149), although that was part of the political calculus, but specifically in the Black Belt "where white livelihood has been most closely tied up with the plantation economy, with its associated racial and social attitudes, and with the relationships of interdependence between whites and blacks"

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<sup>19</sup> The first such effort may have been David M. Heer's 1950 masters thesis, submitted at Harvard University. This analysis of the 1948 South Carolina presidential vote was never published, but drew the attention of Harvard social psychologist Gordon Allport (1979, 227).

<sup>20</sup> Note that, even here, Heard is forced to assume that whites who live near blacks are most susceptible to "race consciousness." This connection appears not in the statistical measures, but in the election's historical context.

(Heard 1952, 160). Not coincidentally, Thurmond's strongholds were the bedrock of secession a century before (Heard 1952, 252). These rural whites would continue to feel "fear and dislike of people of different color" (Heard 1952, 27) because federal civil-rights initiatives threatened their "racial identities" (Heard 1952, 30).<sup>21</sup> That is, for Heard the primary mode of racial competition may have been political, but the stakes were much wider.

Evaluating the Dixiecrat revolt years later, Alexander Lamis (1988, 11) reached much the same conclusion. Deep South states with the highest black populations were, far and away, those most hostile to Truman's platform. The Democratic vote dropped between 1944 and 1948 from 85% to a mere 30% in these areas, an impressive display of white cohesion. Despite the confusion many voters may have faced, since the Democratic Party's rooster symbol accompanied Thurmond's name rather than Truman's in the four Dixiecrat states, Lamis firmly situates the Dixiecrat revolt within the language of intergroup competition. "For the Deep South whites," he (1988, 10) explains, "blacks were a more serious threat, and as a result the race issue held greater sway over political life there than in the Rim South states."<sup>22</sup>

Keefe (1956) analyzed Eisenhower's 1952 presidential victory, when the Republicans broke the Democratic Party's lock on the South, to see whether Black Belt whites who had bolted their party in 1948 stayed away four years later. Keefe suspected that the General's historic success represented, in large part, an endorsement of the racial status quo. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee, had softened Truman's appeal to black voters—yet he was still a Northerner and an intellectual, and therefore worthy of suspicion to Southern segregationists. Eisenhower, meanwhile,

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<sup>21</sup> Heard (1952, 251-78) is quite clear, throughout his detailed analysis of the Thurmond vote, that the effect of racial density is mediated by the norms, history and political institutions of each state or region.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that another scholar, Perry Howard (1971, 308-12), visited Louisiana's 1948 election returns with less auspicious results for the white backlash hypothesis. Howard noted that, while the seven blackest parishes did support Thurmond overwhelmingly, the vote otherwise did not respond to racial density. Some of Thurmond's strongholds held few blacks, including several of the North Louisiana hill parishes, and other parishes with a substantial black population resisted his appeal—including Morehouse and Ouachita, which border on the Delta in Northeast Louisiana.

led a party whose strong platform in favor of states' rights attracted those same voters. Keefe's findings validated the Black Belt hypothesis; Eisenhower performed best in Dixiecrat counties.<sup>23</sup> "It would be an oversimplification to conclude that politics in the Dixiecratic states involves only the economic and social position of the Negro," Keefe (1956, 410-11) warned. But ultimately he embraces Key's claims: "The determining issue in elections in these states has nevertheless been, and in the short-run at least will continue to be, the Negro."<sup>24</sup>

Ogburn and Grigg (1956) analyze Virginia's 1956 vote on whether to let parents place their children in private schools with state money, one plank of the state's "massive resistance" campaign. They are testing the backlash logic, trying to determine whether counties with a mixed-race population were the staunchest supporters of the proposal. Unfortunately, the authors confuse the matter by controlling for black educational levels. This variable emerges as a stronger influence on the vote than mere black population when included in a multivariate model—but including it was not appropriate, because black educational attainment was itself a function of discrimination.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise the finding is unambiguously positive; black density strongly predicted segregationist views (Ogburn and Grigg 1956, 303).

Pettigrew and Campbell (1960) concentrated on the Arkansas gubernatorial campaigns of Orval Faubus, a highland populist who adopted segregationist rhetoric late in his career (Peirce 1974, 130). They show that Faubus managed to reconstitute his electoral coalition in 1958, after a strident stand against civil rights. The mountainous counties, once his stronghold, slipped so that they became

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<sup>23</sup> Eisenhower's Black Belt advantage disappeared when he faced reelection (Strong 1977, 31), presumably in reaction to his appointment of Earl Warren as Supreme Court Chief Justice and his fortitude upholding desegregation in Little Rock.

<sup>24</sup> Howard's analysis of the 1956 Eisenhower vote in Louisiana does not support the white backlash logic, however. The primary division was not between high-black and low-black parishes, but between North and South Louisiana—which differ culturally but both feature former plantation regions (Howard 1971, 330-33). The vote also bore little resemblance to Louisiana's 1948 results, since Eisenhower attracted both black votes and segregationist votes.

<sup>25</sup> More formally, I am claiming that the analysis partly controlled for the dependent variable.

Faubus' weak spot—even though he did not face an opponent from the region (Pettigrew and Campbell 1960, 439). Instead, the governor's vote surged in Mississippi Delta counties with the greatest black population, a rapid realignment that accentuates how strongly single-issue backlash voting shaped Arkansas politics (Pettigrew and Campbell 1960, 437).

One contribution of this article was that it managed to verify the Key/Heard logic in a later election, and a statewide contest at that. More important, though, is that the white backlash effect showed up clearly within metropolitan areas. Urban counties with a substantial African-American citizenry tended to give segregationist Faubus greater backing than those with whiter populations—a backlash effect among the whites, since black voters certainly were not throwing him support (Pettigrew and Campbell 1960, 444). Arkansas may have been peculiar in this regard, since it contained a more urban black population than most Southern states at the time, but the finding represented an early success at exporting the Black Belt hypothesis to a new area.

Bernard Cosman's analysis of the 1964 Goldwater campaign followed closely along previous lines—focusing on the county vote for a white-backlash candidate (Cosman 1966, 40).<sup>26</sup> He noted, ironically, that the Black Belt counties of the Deep South had become the most overwhelming sources of Republican support—not because racial hatreds had abated since Key's time, but because the political parties had rearranged voter choices (Cosman 1966, 52). His book therefore underscores the importance of contextual knowledge. The same theory could imply radically different observable implications, even in the same sort of data, depending upon the political context. Similar underlying racial feelings produced Democratic voting in 1928, third-party voting in 1948, and Republican voting in 1964. The Deep South's GOP vote revealed little continuity with that of

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<sup>26</sup> I do not mean to imply that Goldwater was a “racist,” only that his appeal explicitly attracted white-backlash impulses.

four years earlier, but notable similarity with the 1948 Dixiecrat voting patterns.<sup>27</sup> Thus Cosman gives early evidence that the South's Republican realignment grew out of white backlash politics, although Alabama Gov. George Wallace would arrest the trend by running for President four years later.

### *The Wallace "Whitelash"*

George Wallace's race-baiting campaigns opened up a wave of aggregate-data electoral studies. Some of these restricted their scope to the South, and therefore flow directly from Key's example. These studies usually suffered from serious methodological flaws, as discussed in chapter 6, but mostly agreed in their rough conclusions. Birdsall (1969, 59-60), for example, finds that Wallace's support was greatest in racially heterogeneous counties; those with few blacks and those with many blacks rejected him. In general, Wallace's vote declined as the black population increased, especially in the Deep South (Birdsall 1969, 62-63), contrary to earlier work on white backlash.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, David R. Segal (Schoenberger and Segal 1971; Wasserman and Segal 1973, 179) concludes that Wallace's Deep South vote declined as black density rose.

Wrinkle and Polinard (1973, 312) restrict their scope to Texas. As a result, they are able to validate the white backlash hypothesis statistically; the Wallace vote increased as the black population rose in Texas. However, the authors are careful to position their findings within historical and cultural context. East Texas, with a history of slavery and racial hostility, contained both a large black population and a large Wallace vote; the state's other regions had neither. But within each region, the pattern of vote bore little relation to black density. Thus Wrinkle and

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<sup>27</sup> Again, the general results do not always carry over to politics within a given state. Lamis (1988, 94) observes that, in Georgia, "The strongest rejection of Johnson, Humphrey, and McGovern came in the rural, small-town, predominantly white area of South Georgia" (94).

<sup>28</sup> North Carolina and East Tennessee provided the only real exception; there counties with a larger black population did throw heavier support behind Wallace than elsewhere (Birdsall 1969, 62-63).

Polinard's work challenged previous interpretations of the white-backlash phenomenon. The correlation between black density and racial reaction did not necessarily result from on-going competition, but might be an historical residue in the form of regional culture.<sup>29</sup>

*Black and Black* (1973) focus on Wallace's vote in his native state of Alabama, which allows comparison across multiple elections. The authors predict Wallace's vote using two racial variables: the black percentage of the county population, and the black percentage among registered voters. Their logic is that the voter density would capture black voting behavior, and remaining variation in the population density would capture white backlash. The overall interpretation appears accurate. Early elections reveal the white backlash phenomenon, with Wallace's vote usually increasing as black voting density increases, whereas in late elections blacks have been so successful at registering to vote that Wallace loses where they predominate.

Seagull's (1975, 42) work on Southern Republicanism similarly tried to explain voting behavior over multiple elections using the black percentage both among registered voters and among the population, this time in presidential-election data. White voters from the Black Belt are not the South's firmest Republicans, Seagull notes, so partisan realignment was not fundamentally an expression of racial preferences. White-collar areas form the core of Southern Republicanism. The unreliability of Black Belt whites hardly refuted the backlash concept, though, or even the view that they were single-issue voters. The reason Republicans could not count on their support is the Black Belt proclivity for bolting to third-party protest candidates like George Wallace, who place race front and center in their campaign appeals.

These contextual studies were so troubled by methodological problems that Gerald Wright (1977) returned to the subject a decade after Wallace's campaign, armed with surveys rather than

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<sup>29</sup> Heard (1952) did recognize that racial views were sticky—a high degree of racial hostility could persist in a county for five decades to a century after the underlying socio-economic source of the hostility disappeared. But Heard, while acknowledging the role of cultural legacy, nevertheless left the impression that southern hostility represented real racial competition.



just aggregate statistics. Wright offers what is probably the most influential political-science treatment of Wallace's constituency. He links county- and state-level census data to the 1968 Comparative State Elections Project survey, and observes that Wallace's professed support increased strongly with black population density—concluding with a strong endorsement of the white backlash approach (Wright 1977, 507).

Yet we should not take Wright's own interpretation at face value, guided as it was by the existing white-backlash paradigm. For one thing, his backlash findings were stronger at the state level than at the county level (Wright 1977, 504). No longer do we have the Black Belt locking local preferences into state institutions. Rather, voters across the Deep South apparently share racial animosities; those in the more heterogeneous counties at most exhibit hostility to a higher degree. This is not what other political scientists were arguing (Cosman 1966, 86; Strong 1977, 55-56), but Wright does not explain the distinction. In fact, he complicates matters further by suggesting that neighborhood-level data would be especially appropriate (Wright 1977, 499). By this point the white backlash phenomenon has become murky enough that numerous arenas seem equally appropriate for its validation.

Wright (1977, 500) also compares the success of 1940 and 1970 race data in explaining Wallace's vote, and determines that 1940 figures are perfectly acceptable. The addition of 1970 data accomplishes nothing. That is, 30 years of racial change had no apparent effect on white "backlash." Wright explains that people develop their racial attitudes early in life, orientations that are resistant to short-term fluctuations. No doubt this is true; Price (1957, 36) had observed as much two decades before. What remains a black box, though, is the political process that ties deeply held racial intolerance with the Key/Heard logic that rational desire for political control drives white solidarity. The white backlash phenomenon has become murky enough that numerous motives seem equally appropriate for its validation.

Wright (1977, 507) adds a final complication for the white backlash hypothesis, although again not framed as a challenge. He finds that the entire backlash effect is mediated through a few attitudinal variables: racial policy preferences, stand on Vietnam, assessments of presidential character, and membership in a “primary group” that leans toward Wallace. Leaving aside the Vietnam matter, which is obviously not a direct representation of racial attitudes, this emphasis on group influences also seems to draw away from an explanation based upon local context. What if white behavior is different in heterogeneous locales not because they are heterogeneous, but because different sorts of whites live in those places?<sup>30</sup> This is not the Key/Heard logic at all. Thus, although his article was presented as a validation of the white backlash hypothesis, the solid evidence that Wright presents undercuts the foundation of what preceded him.

### **Politically Motivated Discrimination: Studying Voter Registration and Turnout**

Not all studies of white backlash focused on electoral data. In fact, the main energy quickly shifted to a different area entirely: the study of voting discrimination. Because southern electoral laws and white registrars generally suppressed African-American voting, registration rates were more a function of white tolerance than of black political interest.<sup>31</sup> This slide from studying white voting behavior, primarily a grassroots phenomenon, to studying a matter of official (if somewhat decentralized) policy, was sensible only because of Key's political emphasis. If whites in the Black Belt were fighting to maintain power, the results would appear both in local political preferences and

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<sup>30</sup> Cnudde (1971, 88), by contrast, suggests that different sorts of *blacks* might live in these areas. His claim is less problematic when studying white voting than it is when studying black voter registration, an approach I consider in the section that follows. Regardless of what indicator of racial conservatism one wishes to study, however, it is risky to use traits of the local black population as an independent variable. White hostility presumably influenced African-American economic opportunities as much as the reverse.

<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Price (1957, 45) notes the importance of an active and successful black leadership.

in electoral law. A similar leap to other policy areas would not necessarily make as much sense.<sup>32</sup>

H. Douglas Price (1957, 35-54), drawing in part on Key's suggestions, led the way by looking closely at the white backlash pattern in Florida voter registration. Although recognizing that white reaction to a large black population could take place at numerous levels, Price (1957, 36) also emphasizes the role political control played in white backlash: "In a relatively stable social situation it is easy to see why Southern whites who are locally outnumbered by Negroes are likely to take a dim view of large-scale Negro political participation." Yet he found only a weak negative relationship between minority population density and black registration rates (Price 1957, 40n).<sup>33</sup> Several of the harshest counties held few African Americans (Price 1957, 40). He attributes the difficulty to socialization differences—south Florida contained more Northern-born residents (Price 1957, 43-44), plus their black populations had arrived more recently (Price 1957, 40). Once again white hostility appears less "backlash" than acculturation to the "Old South way of life" (Price 1957, 41), which should cast doubt on the extent it really resulted from intergroup competition.

Work by John Fenton (1960, chap. 4; Fenton and Vines 1957) also underscored the mediating role that acculturation plays in white backlash. Fenton focused on black registration rates in Louisiana, the one Southern state with a widespread *native* culture of racial tolerance. He found that black registration rates were much higher in South Louisiana, controlling for any white backlash effect. The reason is cultural. South Louisiana's population of French Catholics displays a more easy-going and fluid style of race relations predating the Louisiana Purchase, an inter-generational

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<sup>32</sup> A fairly large body of research tried to extend the white backlash logic to studies of school desegregation, and not entirely successfully (e.g., Dye 1968; Giles 1975; Pettigrew 1957; Pettigrew and Cramer 1959, 66-68). The Key/Heard emphasis on political control is missing. Pettigrew (1957, 683), generalizing from white backlash patterns found in electoral data, makes the leap to educational discrimination with the following logic: "The intervening variable presumably underlying these relationships is perceived threat." The word "threat" took on a loose meaning, including comparative educational resources and not just political control.

<sup>33</sup> Price (1957, 47-51) also looked at voting in presidential primaries and gubernatorial races, as well as a roll-call state senate vote on white primaries. In all cases, black population density mattered less than whether a county was part of Florida's Old South panhandle.

phenomenon that cannot be passed off as mere inertia the way Florida's patterns were.

Donald Matthews and James Prothro entered the fray in the early 1960s (Matthews and Prothro 1963a, 1963b, 1966), armed with an impressive data set that included racial registration estimates by county for the entire South. They too treated black registration rates as a proxy for white voter discrimination, and confirmed existence of a white backlash effect in the data (Matthews and Prothro 1963b; 1966, 115-16). Their findings were not restricted to rural or farming counties, but embraced the entire South—and were replicated at the attitudinal level with surveys (Matthews and Prothro 1966, 117, 124). They also contradict the implication, in both Wright's (1977) analysis of 1968 presidential voting and Price's (1957) analysis of Florida registration, that white behavior responds to historical rather than current competitive pressures. Black registration rates found in the mid-century South responded to racial densities found in the mid-century South, and not to patterns present in 1900 (Cnudde 1971, 45; Matthews and Prothro 1966, 118). In other words, their work supported not just the pattern V.O. Key predicted, but also the theoretical explanation he provided. Yet even here, the authors note puzzling fluctuations that seemed more a result of cultural attitudes than of local political exigencies (e.g., Matthews and Prothro 1966, 130).

Passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 put this line of research out of business. Although black political participation was never solely an expression of white attitudes (Price 1957, 34), since black leaders could and did influence the politicization of the rank and file (Price 1957, 45, 56-57), national intervention in the late 1960s took influence almost entirely out of white Southern hands. Examiners hired from outside the Delta South were sent into the most benighted rural counties with the sole purpose of registering black voters en masse. The strong white backlash pattern quickly disappeared from voter rolls, in part because registration soared in particular counties after federal intervention (Kernell 1973, 1313), and in part because informal norms and unequal black resources took on a greater role in shaping variation (Salamon and Van Evera 1973, 1290-91, 1303).

Disenfranchising blacks is one way to stem their political influence. Another approach is for whites to mobilize at a rate sufficient to counterbalance African-American votes. Of course, as Blalock (1967, 153) shows formally, this tactic becomes increasingly demanding as black density rises. Nevertheless, disproportionately high mobilization is a natural means for whites to defend their political influence, since it costs individual Southerners little. Another, less formal, way to reduce black voting power is to suppress political competition—so that no one has to vie for black votes.

Research published in the decade following passage of the Voting Rights Act confirmed both of these patterns. Jewell (1967, 34-36, 48) notes that uncontested state legislative races were particularly common in the Black Belt region where black voters were numerous. Bass and DeVries (1976, 273-74), meanwhile, confirm that a large and active black population produced a reaction among whites. They conclude that, “as expected, the combination of heavy black population and high rate of black participation greatly stimulates white political participation” (Bass and DeVries 1976, 273-74).<sup>34</sup> Sam Kernell (1973, 1315) confirmed their conclusion with an analysis of voting in Mississippi. “White voter turnout,” he explains, “largely represents a response to the potential and actual black turnout.” These results confirm the presence of white “backlash” in the most literal sense.

### *Legislative Roll-Call Voting*

Key's initial formulation of the white backlash hypothesis did not restrict itself to election returns. Any attempt by Southern whites to maintain political power would express itself among elected officials once they were in place as well. A legislator who represented one of the South's racially diverse districts would be pressured to preserve “the Southern way of life,” whereas

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<sup>34</sup> The mobilization produced no apparent conservative tendency among officials once elected, however (Bass and DeVries 1976, 273-74).

representatives from whiter districts would enjoy more latitude. Key confirmed this speculation with an intensive study of congressional roll-call voting from 1933-1945 (Key 1984, chap. 16-17). Black Belt representatives showed the greatest cohesion in their voting patterns among Southern members of Congress, whereas those from heavily white districts were the likeliest mavericks. Legislation touching upon the South's racial caste system was most likely to pull Southerners together.

This logic becomes more complex now that African-American registrants have flooded the voting rolls. We would not expect racial conservatism to thrive among representatives from predominantly black districts anymore, because they are beholden to a substantial African-American constituency. At the same time, the backlash hypothesis certainly implies that all-white districts would incline toward racial progressivism, relative to those with more of a mixture. Voters should coalesce into a racially conservative force only in the middle range, where black voters approach meaningful levels of influence but have not quite reached it. Keech (1968, 101) therefore proposes that discrimination, at least as embodied in policy, should not respond linearly to black density in the population. White backlash would cause discrimination to increase as blacks increased, but only where they had little numerical strength; once African Americans reached sufficient number to swing elections then their increasing presence should have the opposite effect.<sup>35</sup>

Political scientists have looked specifically at roll-call voting to see how district racial composition influences voting behavior, a straightforward extension of Key's argument. Extending Key's findings on legislative behavior across time, however, produces ambiguous results. The literature on this subject is voluminous, and technical decisions apparently account for the main differences from one study to the next, so I will not take the time to survey every contribution in the

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<sup>35</sup> Price (1957, 39) and Blalock (1967, 148) also propose a curve of this sort for describing discrimination, but based on different logic. They suppose that, with certain forms of competition, discrimination would be most important *to whites* at some intermediate range of blacks density. Wright (1977, 502n) similarly tests a non-linear model when explaining George Wallace's white support, which he attributes to Blalock despite using it outside the discrimination context. Neither version relies on black political power to explain departures from linearity.

area (e.g., Black 1978, 1979; Boeckelman, Arp, and Terradot 1995; Flinn and Wolman 1966; Herring 1990; Whitby 1985, 1987). But a quick review of the main points would be useful.

Many African-American Southerners cast ballots even before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Few of those black voters inhabited rural counties, however (Ogburn and Grigg 1956). Urban areas had a harder time resisting black demands for influence, and their economies did not rely on the same level of racial control as elsewhere. As Keefe (1956, 408) described the 1950s situation, "Serious researchers on the politics of the Deep South still find Negro non-voting to be the general pattern, particularly in rural areas." The only exceptions tended to be areas with an historical quirk, such as South Louisiana's tolerant Latin culture (Fenton and Vines 1957; Peirce 1974, 61) or Panhandle Florida's time-honored tradition of letting blacks register as Republicans (Price 1957, 14-15, 31-33). Thus the main determinant of racial liberalism was not the presence of black adults, so much as whether a district were urban (Feagin 1972).

Although the VRA overturned many truisms about Southern politics, one that it did not change was the difficulty translating Key's Black Belt hypothesis to the elite level. Although an occasional study has found that a district's racial composition influences the representative's voting behavior (e.g., Flinn and Wolman 1966), most attempts to sustain the white backlash concept have fallen flat. An early study by Bass and DeVries (1976, 46), for example, concluded that a district's racial composition was less important when predicting Black Caucus support than a representative's party affiliation. Democrats did follow a more liberal line when their constituency was more than a quarter black, but even then the effect was weak. "Only rarely do they consistently represent the interests of blacks," the authors note (Bass and DeVries 1976, 381).

Bullock's *Journal of Politics* article (1981) on the subject is particularly interesting, because he tests for, and finds, the classic curvilinear pattern. The South's most liberal members of Congress usually hailed from districts that either were overwhelmingly white or predominantly black, whereas

the staunchest conservatives usually appeared in districts where black voters approached levels of influence. Yet it is not clear that this historical pattern, which appears superficially consistent with the Key/Heard logic, necessarily derives from any practical urge among Southern voters. Bullock notes that patterns have changed over time, and concludes that *generational* differences guided legislative behavior more than district characteristics did. Other scholars analyzed Southern liberalism a decade later, and came to roughly the same conclusion: generational replacement was making the South's elected representatives more liberal, not the mere presence of black voters (Fleisher 1993; Whitby and Gilliam 1991).

## **Conclusion**

My burden of proof was to establish the widespread influence of V.O. Key Jr.'s backlash observation in the study of Southern politics. This chapter amply demonstrates the popularity his insight has enjoyed within the subfield—even though I certainly have not introduced every piece of political science that draws on it, and have excluded work on elections since 1968. Research within the Southern politics subfield has been relatively successful at building a firm foundation for Key's findings, as reflected by the summary presented in Table 2-1, but they perform less well when sought in legislative roll-call voting behavior. The next chapter turns to applications of the concept outside of both its region of origin and its original discipline, where the transplant resulted in even more serious sacrifices.



**Table 2-1: Backlash Studies in Southern Politics Through the 1960s**

	<i>Data Level</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Election</i>	<i>Pattern?</i>	<i>Special Contribution</i>
<b><u>Election Returns</u></b>					
Key ([1949] 1984)	County	Entire South	1928 Presidential	Yes	Originated idea
Heard (1952)	County	Entire South	1948 Presidential	Yes	Evidence from postwar politics
Keefe (1956)	County	Entire South	1952 Presidential	Yes	Tied to fall of Solid South
Ogburn & Grigg (1956)	County	Virginia	1956 Referendum	Yes	Confirmed outside partisan politics
Pettigrew & Campbell (1960)	County	Arkansas	1950s Gubernatorial	Yes	Confirmed outside of rural areas
Cosman (1966)	County	Entire South	1964 Presidential	Yes	Ties to South's Republican realignment
Jewell (1967)	State Leg.	Entire South	Var. State Leg.	Yes	Tied to uncontested legislative races
Birdsall (1969)	County	Entire South	1968 Presidential	No	Evidence VRA was ending pattern
Schoenberger & Segal (1971)	Congress'l Dist.	Entire South	1968 Presidential	No	Tied to congressional districts
Wasserman & Segal (1973)	County	Entire South	1968 Presidential	No	Ecological inference problem noted
Wrinkle & Polinard (1973)	County	Texas	1968 Presidential	Mixed	Pattern does not hold <i>within</i> regions
Black & Black (1973)	County	Alabama	Var. Wallace Races	Mixed	Tracked effect of growing black vote
Seagull (1975)	County	Entire South	Var. Presidential	Mixed	Race did not fuel consistent GOP gains
Bass & DeVries (1976)	Turnout Rates	South Carolina	1974	Yes	Tied to voter mobilization
Wright (1977)	County	Entire South	1968 Presidential	Yes	Moved to survey data
<b><u>Voter Registration</u></b>					
Price (1957)	County	Florida		Weak	Introduced study of registration data
Fenton & Vines (1957)	County	Louisiana		Weak	Stressed role of culture
Fenton (1960)	County	Louisiana		Weak	Stressed role of religion especially
Matthews and Prothro (1966)	County	Entire South		Yes	Confirmed outside of rural areas
Cnudde (1971)	County	Entire South		Yes	Tied to contemporary conflict
Salamon & Van Evera (1973)	County	Mississippi		No	Pattern ending because of black resources
Kernell (1973)	County	Mississippi		Mixed	Pattern ending because of federal law

Note: This table only includes the most significant work testing the white-backlash hypothesis through the end of the 1960s. More recent work appears in chapters 4-5, where I discuss contemporary racial politics. The "Pattern" column identifies whether the work discovered a white-backlash pattern, although sometimes this judgment was a tough one given complex findings.