

Chapter 3 – The Threat of Proximity: Variations on a Theme in V.O. Key

Generalizing the backlash concept initially relied on the unifying mechanism of majority insecurity. A dominant social group will feel more frightened in diverse settings, and therefore more intolerant, because minorities pose a greater “threat” to their privilege in these locales. This expectation goes beyond political activity, or even individual-level behavior, because the fear should bleed over into all racial issues. So the literature eventually evolved to equate mere proximity with a uniform threat, allowing scholars to shrug off the burden of tracing exactly who should have the most vested in a particular form of intergroup conflict.

Social-science studies incorporating this “racial threat” or “group threat” hypothesis expected proximity would result in more hateful racial *prejudices* (a psychological disposition that might or might not undergird racial polarization in politics), and in racially discriminatory *policy* (which intergroup political competition might or might not produce). They similarly expected proximity to produce intergroup conflict at every level of social organization, from small neighborhoods to entire states or countries, even though racial composition influences different aggregations in different ways. They collapsed all sorts of social resources, from political dominance to economic superiority to cultural prominence, into the same rough hypothesis. Finally, they extended the same logic to predict backlash against numerous racial and ethnic groups, in entirely unrelated settings.

The political calculus, in a polarized setting with roughly majoritarian electoral institutions, is fairly straightforward (Blalock 1967, 150-54). Why the same reasoning should carry over outside its native region, to embrace other minorities engaged in unrelated forms of competition at unrelated geographical levels, is less than obvious. At best the transition is not clean, since cultural traits, the

nature of the labor market and the shape of existing institutions will all sway the expression of racial hostility (Blalock 1967, 147-50).

The evolved theory no longer describes a particular form of competition, so the empirical burden for testing it is no longer clear. Researchers cannot agree on the proper level of aggregation (c.f., Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Giles 1977; Giles and Buckner 1993, 1996; Voss 1996a, 1996b). They get different results, depending upon the measure of racial hostility used (Glaser 1994). And they do not necessarily know what they have proved even when the findings confirm a proximity pattern. This has produced an approach notable more for its ubiquity than its usefulness, a body of work with little intellectual cohesion.

It is usually easy to throw a measure of black density into any statistical model, and say that one has tested the “white backlash” or “racial threat” hypothesis—not only because racial data are almost always available, but also because the theoretical demands of empirical social science usually are superficial. Interpretation of the same explanatory variable can shift from study to study without setting off alarms. One goal of this dissertation, therefore, is to trigger exactly those alarms. Researchers no longer should be allowed to get away with atheoretical use of racial proximity measures.

In this chapter, I will trace how V.O. Key's backlash concept has permeated social-science research, emphasizing the ways in which these various applications depart from the historical contingency and political exigencies that its creator clearly recognized.

The Backlash Concept Mutates

It is evident from citations that the early development of “racial threat” sociological theory owes its debt to the study of Southern politics, and to V.O. Key, Jr., in particular. Social psychologist Gordon Allport ([1954] 1979, 221) offered as a “sociocultural law” the observation that prejudice

increases “where the size of a minority group is large.” Since Allport’s volume was a classic work of social psychology, one that shaped a generation of scholars (Pettigrew 1997), it is rather troubling to note the limited data upon which he drew to formulate this generalization. Evidence that a large minority breeds hostility? Key’s book (1984), and an unpublished masters thesis (Heer 1950).¹ Nothing more. Allport’s student Thomas Pettigrew (1957, 683), who became an authority on intergroup conflict to rival his mentor, applied the hypothesis to educational segregation, citing only Key, Heer and Allport as justification. He built a lengthy research agenda out of the idea they had imported, deriving the bulk of his empirical evidence from the U.S. South as well. Sociologist Herbert Blalock (1956, 584) built on the same few sources while studying economic discrimination.

Of course, disciplines borrow ideas back and forth all the time. For scholars in one field to lift ideas from a researcher in another is hardly sinister; that sort of intellectual ferment is precisely what creates great scientific advances. What’s regrettable is how drastically the concept warped, and not necessarily in a positive way, to meet the exigencies of a new discipline. In particular, I have in mind two changes: (1) ignoring the historical contingency to create an abstract behavioral law, and (2) turning backlash into a subjective rather than an objective phenomenon, thereby removing the importance of proximity altogether.

Both alterations are all the more tragic because they represent exactly the trends that V.O. Key fought up until his death. Key was not fully comfortable with the behaviorist emphasis in social science, despite the influence of his mentor Charles Merriam—indeed, he reportedly mocked the jargon in private (Heard 1984, xxiv). Key therefore took the luxury of embedding his work within the Southern context, with rich cultural and institutional detail, conveying “a spirit” and not just

¹ Allport used a couple of other sources to justify his claim that a “growing” minority causes the majority to feel threatened. But this part of the “socio-cultural law” is distinct from the white backlash finding that racial reaction is greatest where “a minority group is large.” Minorities can grow quickly in places where their numbers are politically insignificant (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998). Meanwhile, most of the Black Belt areas in which the white backlash phenomenon developed actually had *declining* black populations; the reaction must have been to absolute or historical levels rather than short-term increases.

facts. Fundamentally, identifying “sociocultural laws” of human behavior was not part of his craft or his conviction. His work was not shaped to identify such laws, and certainly did not provide sufficient evidence to establish them. Turning his historically contingent findings into a psychological paradigm therefore seems a rather irresponsible stretch, one that created a sharp imbalance in the burden of proof toward the “group threat” language. Key thus was wise to fear “the tendency of [innovative scholars'] followers to turn complex, carefully qualified conclusions into simplistic doctrine” (Havard 1984, xxvii), as well as to warn against readers only digesting part of his message (Key 1984, 2).

Adding to the problem is that, once social psychologists got hold of the backlash concept, they stripped from it the central intellectual claim on which it was founded using semantic sleight of hand. Although not dogmatic, V.O. Key, Jr., believed that political behavior ultimately derived from rational impulses (Havard 1984, xxxv). Indeed, he fought quietly but persistently at the end of his career to reverse the damage he thought sociological theory and social psychology had done to the study of voting, typified by the “Michigan model” (Blydenburgh 1985, 14; Natchez 1985, 74). His unfinished final book, *The Rational Voter*, was a direct effort in that direction, but the previous work mined a similar research agenda (Natchez 1985, 185-87). His purpose in *Southern Politics* was to expose the rational underpinnings of the South’s dysfunctional political institutions.

Turned into a psychological concept, however, “threat” becomes what the individual perceives, and may lack any tie to rationality or objective conditions. Even the earliest adaptations of Key’s idea made this stretch (Pettigrew 1957, 683), but recent work on “group threat” entirely cuts loose the requirement that threat be objective (Bobo 1983, 1,200; Pettigrew 1985, 339). Now the burden is merely to prove that survey respondents dislike groups they consider threatening to folks like them. In other words, the purported law founded on Key’s authority has evolved into exactly the opposite phenomenon from what he intended.

Racial Discrimination and the White Backlash

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down school segregation in 1954, the same year Allport ratified the white backlash concept into socio-cultural law. States and counties differed in their reaction to the controversial ruling, some enacting the Court's mandate "with all deliberate speed" and others dragging their feet or even responding with "massive resistance." The variation across states and counties offered a ripe opportunity to test the backlash logic in an entirely new form of data: measures of policy discrimination.

Thomas Pettigrew (1957) pioneered research in this area. His early use of the backlash concept, although drawn from political-science sources, nevertheless imposed a psychological interpretation. Black density predicts white backlash, but "the intervening variable presumably underlying these relationships is perceived threat" (Pettigrew 1957, 683), not historical legacy *per se* or an objective struggle over resources. Pettigrew collected information on which counties in Kentucky and Missouri still segregated students racially, and which had a desegregation policy in place. Whites in mixed-race counties would oppose integration more than those in whiter counties, Pettigrew supposed, because they would feel more threatened. For example, they might be more likely to hold prejudicial assumptions about what black students would do to their schools.

Looking back at his evidence, one is struck by how poorly the backlash concept performed in these data. It did not describe the pattern in Missouri at all, since most (72.7%) of the blacker counties had desegregated, whereas few (37.8%) of the heavily white ones had followed suit. In Kentucky, meanwhile, the results were not much more impressive. Exactly half of the more heavily black counties had desegregated, whereas the least-black counties exceeded that figure by a mere 6.5 percentage points. If anything, counties in the middle range (i.e., between 1% and 6% black) were most likely to desegregate, but the difference between those and blacker counties was not statistically significant in Missouri ($\chi^2 = 1.3$, $p > .25$; analysis mine). Despite the weak evidence,

however, this early work gets cited as supporting the threat hypothesis—since it stresses that Kentucky “did reveal the expected relationship in its rural counties” (Pettigrew 1957, 688).

Pettigrew and Cramer (1959) returned to the topic of border-state desegregation two years later, using regression techniques with more states included in the analysis. This time the backlash evidence was stronger (Pettigrew and Cramer 1959, 68). To the extent findings diverged from the backlash pattern after other controls, the discussion passed it off to inertia; they attributed enduring racism in particular counties to “norms” that persist as population changes (Pettigrew and Cramer 1959, 64), and conformity pressures that vary by geographical location (Pettigrew and Cramer 1959, 70). Between the weak evidence of the first study and the stress on cultural legacy found in the second, it is not quite clear how much this work really supports the white backlash approach.

Elizabeth Vanfossen (1968) also replicated the backlash pattern successfully in desegregation data, this time using overall state performance rather than deviation across counties within the states. Her findings indicate that the relative size of the state’s non-white population was the best predictor of how much a state desegregated. Those more than 20% black showed the least progress (Vanfossen 1968, 40-41). However, these states clearly were in the Deep South, with a long-standing history of slavery and reliance on the plantation economy—so Vanfossen admirably admits that she cannot be certain whether whites are actually responding to the current non-white population (Vanfossen 1968, 41). She looks at other angles, and these support the backlash logic. For example, segregation was most common where the socioeconomic gap between whites and blacks was greatest, perhaps indicating that whites resisted integration most where the educational costs of mixing were highest (Vanfossen 1968, 43), but perhaps only indicating nothing more than that educational and economic discrimination go together. Also, a state’s level of urbanism did not influence integration levels, as it presumably would if the plantation legacy drove segregation rather than current racial-density levels (Vanfossen 1968, 44).

Thomas Dye (1968), a political scientist specializing in public policy, focuses on individual schools, providing a streamlined look at where desegregation actually took place. Nevertheless, his findings on the backlash hypothesis are as ambiguous as those of Vanfossen. The prime culprit for explaining segregation, he contends, is regional culture—since schools in the North were much more integrated than those in the South, despite similar levels of racial density (Dye 1968, 148). On the other hand, within the South he found a strong correlation between the black percentage in a school system and its level of segregation, so the backlash concept did help understand racial politics there (Dye 1968, 151).

Longshore (1982) approaches desegregation from an alternate perspective. Rather than study which states desegregated, he analyzes popular acceptance of the policy using a survey designed for that purpose. Longshore suspects that white opposition to integration is shaped more by cultural norms, such as racism found in the Deep South, rather than any on-going calculation of the “threat” posed to white control. His method is to control for traits that might influence racial attitudes—region, socioeconomic status, ruralism—and see if black population density still holds predictive power. The results (1982, 75) rely upon the dependent variable used: the backlash pattern no longer helps explain acceptance of interracial contact, but does still explain specific preferences on desegregation. His finding foreshadows more recent work, which also suggests that the backlash pattern is more common with “political” issue preferences than with pure stereotypes (Glaser 1994).

The other form of discrimination that has enjoyed particular attention is financial: access to jobs, to high incomes, to suitable housing. Early research featured an implicit debate between two sociologists, Hubert Blalock and Norval Glenn, over the relationship between black density and discrimination. Blalock (1956, 1957), grounded in the white-backlash literature, looked at the discrimination data through that filter. His early attempt, while complex, mostly discounted the white-backlash pattern in a sample of 88 non-Southern cities (Blalock 1956, 584). He was only able

to muster the hypothesized relationship by adding in 26 Southern cases; they exhibited greater discrimination and higher black densities (1956, 587). A later study, restricted to Southern counties, was also ambiguous. It was more supportive of the white backlash logic, but did not remove Blalock's skepticism entirely (1957, 682).

Glenn (1963, 443), by contrast, assumes from the start that discrimination increases in step with black density—but not for the same reason as the Allport school. He places little emphasis on the “threat” of competition, and instead focuses on the payoff that whites can anticipate from discrimination. Whites gain more from the practice as more African Americans are available to exploit, because whites can concentrate more uniformly in attractive occupations when the black population is sufficiently large (Glenn 1963, 446-48). His research is important for stressing that racial competition tends to derive from motives of rational self interest, whereas Blalock left white incentives mostly unexplored in his early work.

Jiobu and Marshall (1971, 640) tried to adjudicate between these competing perspectives. Using a path analysis, they discount the role of black density on economic discrimination. The direct relationship is limited, they show, and if anything black in-migration corresponded with improved economic standing for blacks (1971, 645n, 647). The main feedback between racial density and black finances was indirect, working through educational attainment (Jiobu and Marshall 1971, 645). In other words, the backlash pattern did show up for education, but not for income, occupation or housing—entirely consistent with the concept's record in each policy area. When they turned to the backlash question more directly in a later article (Marshall and Jiobu 1974), the authors discover a North-South distinction that other researchers also would identify. Black density bears little relation to discrimination outside the South, suggesting that regional culture may matter much more than any realistic perception of “threat” (1974, 455-57).

One recent study by Richard Fording (1997) borrows the curvilinear backlash pattern suggested

by Keech (1968) and discussed in the previous chapter. Fording wants to determine where political institutions will respond to violent protest by coughing up more generous welfare spending. He posits that, where blacks lack formal political power, informal protests will accomplish little, an influence that will decline further as blacks become more numerous. Where blacks enjoy formal political power, however, institutions will respond to explosions of violent activity with financial attempts at pacification—especially when blacks approach numbers sufficient to swing elections. Both represent the backlash logic, although under alternate conditions of black power. Fording analyzes data from 1962-1980 in a pooled cross-sectional time-series model, and confirms both backlash hypotheses. Violence is particularly effective in the South (1997, 22).

In sum, the study of discriminatory policy has turned up only spotty evidence in favor of the “racial threat” logic. The few cases in which a backlash pattern appears generally rely on Southern data, and therefore cannot escape the historically contingent nature of the findings. The authors try to differentiate among competing explanations for discrimination, but their data essentially limited them to blunt tests and speculation.

“Whitelash”: The Nationalization of Southern Politics

George Wallace’s presidential campaigns took the politics of white backlash to the entire nation. Wallace shocked political elites by attracting widespread electoral support outside his native region. But he not only carried the vocabulary of Southern politics outside its natural borders, he also carried the vocabulary of Southern political-science research with him. Scholars evaluating the Wallace vote, and later instances of racial politics outside the South, carted to the new task the same old expectation that proximity would generate conflict. Yet they warped the idea in peculiar ways to accomplish this. No longer was white backlash a product of a stable caste system, but an intense reaction to social *change* (Bettelheim and Janowitz 1964; Weed 1973, 66; Wong and Strolovitch

1996)—perhaps struggle for material resources, perhaps struggle for political control, and perhaps struggle over the preservation of cultural values.

Michael Rogin's (1969) study of Wallace's 1964 Democratic primary battles is indicative of the uncomfortable fit produced by nationalization of the theory. Rogin focuses exclusively on states outside the South for his exploration: Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland. He also uses precinct-level data rather than county-level data, even though political control of a precinct has no real institutional or policy implications. Despite such inconsistencies, Rogin (1969, 30) frames the exploration as an explicit test of the "Black Belt effect."

The analysis does offer some indication that whites living near blacks were more sympathetic to the Wallace effort (Rogin 1969, 27, 30), but the main thrust of his findings bears little resemblance to the Southern politics literature. For example, Wallace performed well in Milwaukee's middle class suburbs, the Republican areas, not in its low-status neighborhoods. Gary's all-white precincts similarly fell in behind Wallace; Wallace support had little to do with proximity to the ghetto (Rogin 1969, 29-30).² The Indiana county vote is even more discouraging. Wallace swept counties with hardly any blacks at all, and did not dominate in regions with the greatest density of Southern natives (Rogin 1969, 32). The pattern instead followed an "ideological" logic—success in Protestant counties, failure in German counties (Rogin 1969, 23). Ultimately, Rogin (1969, 33) is forced to accept the white backlash hypothesis only for lower-status voters, and to emphasize competition over housing rather than over political institutions as the source (Rogin 1969, 47n).

Lipset and Raab (1969), who popularized the term "whitelash" for Wallace's political efforts, also apparently approached their study with expectations drawn from the Southern politics literature.

² Rogin (1969, 30) does note that all-white suburbs closer to the ghetto were more supporting than all-white suburbs farther away. This may be true, but it's not in any way an observable implication of the "Black Belt" theory.

Indeed, an earlier Lipset publication is often cited as one of the first works endorsing the white-backlash pattern (Lipset [1959] 1981, chap. 11). Yet once again, the logic wound up an uncomfortable fit. Their conclusion, as it appeared in a volume on right-wing extremism, militates against any white backlash hypothesis tied to a numerically large minority: "Sheer proximity is not the explanation," they conclude (1978, 341).

Wallace's 1972 presidential campaign was cut down by the bullet of a would-be assassin, but he was in the contest long enough to provide social scientists one last shot. Knoke and Kyriazis (1977) explicitly frame their National Election Studies analysis of Wallace's support as a test of "Key's hypothesis." Because the analysis mostly restricts itself to the South, and frames the white backlash effect explicitly as an attempt to maintain political power, this is probably a fair characterization. The hypothesis holds up in Southern states, they find, especially in the Deep South where black density could seriously threaten white political power (Knoke and Kyriazis 1977, 903). "The political behavior of southern whites was still governed to some degree by desire to maintain political domination over the black population" (Knoke and Kyriazis 1977, 904). Similar results show up in other 1968 and 1972 surveys. But in both cases, no such phenomenon appears outside the South; the "Black Belt vote" disappears once researchers move too far from that soil.

Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989) approach the white backlash phenomenon only incidentally, as part of a broader treatment of how racial politics undermines the American party system. Their primary purpose is to mourn the loss of the New Deal's class-based parties.³ The Democratic Party's decision to mobilize black voters undercuts its ability to recruit new white supporters and to retain old ones, they explain, even when those voters represent natural class allies with African Americans (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 14-15). The Democrats went into a tailspin after 1964,

³ Politics oriented around class, in which the lower-status party concentrates on mobilizing new voters and the upper-status party specializes in stealing from the conservative wing of their competition, is purportedly healthier than racial politics (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 191). "Predatory" politics of this sort is, in particular, safer for the Democratic Party (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 175).

losing five of six presidential elections, mostly because lower-status whites in close proximity to a numerically large black population refused to form biracial coalitions (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 81-83).

The pattern of white defections seems clear. They show that Walter Mondale, whose 1984 presidential campaign remained faithful to Old Left materialist politics, still could not hold white voters in racially mixed counties (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 49-51). The authors also analyze voting data for Southern cities from 1952-72, showing that lower-status white precincts swing away from the Democratic Party in urban areas (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 81-83).⁴ “Lower-class whites,” they write (1989, 91), “are precisely the group that rejects class politics, the group most sensitive to the presence of blacks and most unwilling to cooperate with them in the same political coalition.” So, looking at the South’s cities, Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989) agree with Rogin (1969) that only lower-status voters respond to racial density (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 52-53).

Perhaps because Huckfeldt and Kohfeld were not testing the white backlash concept itself, the implications of their findings are difficult to discern. For most of the analysis, they portray the hostility that lower-class whites feel toward blacks as an external, and immutable, property of political attitudes. The tone is fatalistic.⁵ Elsewhere, however, the authors show an awareness that political strategies condition white vote choice, that working-class preferences are not fixed (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 47). They argue that, because white defection from the Democrats does not respond to shifting black party preferences, conflicting political interests are not driving

⁴ Thus the bulk of their white backlash evidence still comes from the South, and the rest includes it, suggesting that the South (and especially the Black Belt) might be driving both sets of findings.

⁵ It is also condescending. Consider this summary judgment of Solid South politics: “Long-term economic rationality should have led to a lower-class coalition between whites and blacks, but lower-class whites were not acting on the basis of any long-term rational calculus” (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 75).

it—abstract racial hostility is the cause.⁶ Elsewhere, however, they tie white backlash directly to political calculations to maintain control (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 182). Therefore, while a numerical relationship between black density and white backlash shows up in their (mostly Southern) data, at least for low-status voters, the driving logic remains unspecified.

Carsey (1995) recently refuted the white backlash logic as applied to two racially polarized mayoral elections, one in New York City (1989) and one in Chicago (1987). Both campaigns featured prominent black Democrats who had some difficulty attracting white support: David Dinkins in New York and Harold Washington in Chicago. Carsey linked precinct-level racial data to media polls from each city, and showed that whites who lived in racially diverse neighborhoods were more likely to cross the racial barrier than whites in more homogeneous communities. White voters in New York City's most black precincts backed Dinkins roughly 74% of the time, whereas those in all-white precincts only gave him approximately 20% support (Carsey 1995, 225). Failure of the "Black Belt hypothesis" in this instance may not be terribly damaging to the idea. Carsey's article not only removed the concept from its region of origin, it changed the research focus along almost every dimension: local elections rather than national, reported intent rather than actual votes, precincts rather than counties, urban areas rather than rural ones.⁷ Nevertheless, his work illustrates the abiding difficulty researchers have faced when trying to export the white backlash logic.

Legislative roll-call voting has never followed a backlash pattern very closely, even in the South—partly because of the instability introduced by having black voters in the mix. So it is no

⁶ This inference, mostly undefended in the text, is questionable at best. Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989, 89-91) seem to assume that black partisanship is a proxy for local party issue positions, or at least the interests they represent. They also assume that lower-status economic interests are unrelated to the black density where they reside, that national party platforms would have equivalent impact on whites everywhere. Social-science research from the period does not support this assumption (Blalock 1956, 587-88; Glenn 1963; Jiobu and Marshall 1971, 645).

⁷ Given the importance of patronage and municipal services, we may anticipate that white voters in predominantly black neighborhoods would see a rationale for desiring a black mayor. The balance of power in City Hall presumably would favor their neighborhood more.

surprise that recent studies carried out for the nation as a whole similarly contradict the pattern. Legislators do not become particularly conservative in districts where the black vote is approaching significance, nor are members of Congress or state legislatures particularly likely to be Republicans in that range, which would happen if whites coalesced in reaction to black voters. Rather, representatives become consistently more liberal and more Democratic as the black density increases (Cameron, Epstein and O'Halloran 1996, 803; Overby and Cosgrove 1996), at least outside of the South (Grofman, Griffin and Glazer 1992, 372).

Lublin (1997b, 87-89) studies how well a district's racial composition predicts roll-call liberalism within the explicit terms of the white backlash hypothesis.⁸ He experiments with curvilinear models, including parabolic and cubic functional forms, that would allow a surge in conservatism where blacks were just short of the numbers necessary to swing political contests. The result, however, is consistently negative. Liberalism increases monotonically as a district's black density rises, including a steep jump as the black population approaches 40%. Similarly, the probability of electing a black Democrat for legislative office increases consistently as blacks become more numerous, with no decline in the critical range where whites could coalesce into a backlash reaction (Lublin 1997a; 1997b, 46). As with the voting behavior results, roll-call analysis cannot replicate the supposed backlash pattern outside its region of origin.

Racial Attitudes and the White Backlash

Surveys eclipsed aggregate-data analysis in the 1970s, in part because black voting veiled the white behavior underlying election results (see Chapter 6). Some of the backlash survey work did not deviate from previous traditions, aside from using individual-level measures (e.g., Carsey 1995; Knoke and Kyriazis 1977; Wright 1977). The dependent variable was still a respondent's vote

⁸ Lublin does not measure racial liberalism, but liberalism as an overall ideology as captured by Poole-Rosenthal nominate scores (Lublin 1997b, 67-68; Poole and Rosenthal 1991).

choice, and a community's black density remained the explanatory factor of greatest interest. However, few candidates in the 1970s experimented with race-baiting techniques, even in the South, so electoral and policy choices lost their potency as a means of studying racial politics. Therefore, some scholars broke off to study racial orientations that *were* available in their data.

The change in research design evolved with little fanfare. Yet studying racial attitudes is hardly the same thing as studying racially motivated behavior (Wong and Strolovitch 1996, 3). Knowing that someone dislikes a minority is not the same thing as knowing that someone poses a barrier to their political, social or economic success. At the same time, someone with no particular antipathy against a group can be a significant threat. Consider this poignant anecdote, attributed to a Jewish woman who lived in 1939 Berlin (Gill 1993, 247-48):

I remember going to a ball, and at it an SA man in full uniform asked me to dance. What could I do? I danced with him. He was quite a young man. After we'd been dancing for a while I said to him: 'Isn't your racial instinct telling you anything about me?' And he blushed as red as a beetroot and said, 'You mustn't think we're all like that, Miss.'

One can only guess how this boy, who was not "like that," nevertheless found himself among Hitler's brownshirts. But there he was, helping push Germany down the road to genocide all the same. The same can be said of one Croatian paramilitary thug, who found himself embroiled in the Bosnian civil war despite many cross-ethnic friendships. "I really don't hate Muslims," he explains (Hardin 1995, 148), "but because of this situation I want to kill them all."

It is easy to see that, more generally, attitude and action often are divorced. Institutions structure political competition, thereby molding the expression of particular attitudes. So do political entrepreneurs, through their campaign tactics and agenda-setting choices, and individuals through their weighting of priorities. Political alliances can spring up from a multitude of motivations, only one of which is mutual respect (Roosevelt and Stalin spring to mind!). Superficially friendly policies may spring from demeaning attitudes as well as from tolerant ones, just as people often find themselves fighting those whom they hold in high regard. Awareness of

this distinction shows up in clichés such as “worthy adversary,” and maxims such as “politics makes strange bedfellows.” In sum, attitudes and political behavior are not interchangeable (a point I formalize early in the next chapter).

The prime thrust in political science, over the last two or three decades, has been to study racial conservatism expressed in attitude rather than action. As a result, distinguishing between the study of race as conducted in social psychology and as conducted in political science is not easy. Indeed, scholars in the subfield cross disciplinary boundaries frequently when publishing (e.g., Jackman 1978; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979). Attitudes certainly deserve attention, but not at the expense of what politics *does* with this raw material—so one purpose of my research is to help redirect attention toward racial outcomes as they filter through the system.

Most of the high-profile work on racial politics has abandoned a geographical focus, aside perhaps from separating out Southerners in some way. I survey that literature in Chapter 5. Until recently, the main exception was Micheal Giles. Giles has tested the white-backlash hypothesis in numerous sorts of data, not just survey data. I will deal with this output closely in later chapters, but his work on racial attitudes deserves brief mention here.

Giles (1977) explores 1972 National Election Studies data not to study candidate preferences—very few Southerners backed McGovern, after all, regardless of their community’s racial density—but to explain racial attitudes. Among those attitudes he includes an assessment of civil rights progress, fair job treatment, and especially orientation toward desegregation. The results parallel those found when studying vote choices: a county’s racial density helps predict attitudes in the South, but not in the North (Giles 1977, 415). Once again the backlash logic resists transplant, leaving him to speculate on the extent to which racial feelings are historically contingent: “Higher concentration of a minority may be related to negative attitudes only where a cultural set of beliefs supportive of that relationship is present” (Giles 1977, 416).

Giles later faced criticism for using county data in his analysis. Fossett and Kiecolt (1989) returned to his work, and substituted racial data for entire metropolitan statistical areas in place of the county figures. They argued that counties were much smaller than the “life space” in which people existed—the context in which they fought for jobs and interacted with people of other ethnicities. Their case is not terribly persuasive (Voss 1996a, 1,160-62). Leaving aside the political irrelevance of an entire metropolitan area, neither interracial contact nor economic competition fits the empirical pattern they operationalize: flowing unhindered over county borders within metropolitan areas, while stopping at the county’s edge outside those aggregations. Both the isolation of suburbs and the mobility of small-town and rural dwellers violate this proposal. Nevertheless, whatever the meaning of this inconsistent context variable, the results indicate a “racial threat” pattern for racial attitudes in the North as well as the South, a rare case of success for the hypothesis.

Giles and Evans (1986) later revisited the 1972 NES data, this time probing more deeply the mechanism connecting racial density to perceived threat. The authors suggest that prejudice persists because it responds to self-interested group competition. Whites living in racially mixed counties, and especially those with emotional investment in their “whiteness,” would be most likely to oppose desegregation—a finding that holds up in the data. This confirmation of the “white backlash” pattern is ambiguous, however. The statistical model they use controls for “affect toward blacks,” and therefore may strip out the greater portion of prejudice resistant to contextual differences.

Giles and Evans (1985) also explored the 1982 NES, with a similar orientation. They strongly expected lower-status whites to feel most threatened by African Americans, because of their economic marginality. To the surprise of Giles and Evans (1985, 58), this expectation failed to hold. Whites resented blacks when they felt powerless, regardless of social class; if poorer whites showed more resentment it was only because they tended to have a lower sense of efficacy. In turn, it was

only among low-efficacy respondents that racial density followed the white-backlash pattern. Whites with a reasonable sense of control over their lives did not seem particularly threatened by the presence of other racial groups, nor did whites surrounded by higher-status blacks (1985, 58-59). Looking over this research record, the success of white-backlash reasoning in predicting racial attitudes is spotty and highly contingent.

Giles probably deserves greater credit for the vibrancy of the white-backlash concept than any other scholar. He has applied the proximity logic across most outputs of the American system, from racial attitudes (Giles 1977; Giles and Evans 1985, 1986) to political behavior (Giles and Buckner 1993, 1995) to policy outputs (Giles and Gatlin 1980). Along the way, he has published a body of research that is among the best work on racial politics. I build on his work heavily in this research—mostly by reinforcing his positive example, but also by trying to address three limitations in the Giles *oeuvre*:

- **Uncertain Proximity:** Giles is on record (1977, 413n) suggesting that proximity should apply at a very low level, within single neighborhoods. At other times, he has endorsed the view that whole metropolitan areas are necessary to capture racial context, because people do not limit their horizons to a single urban county (Giles and Buckner 1996, 1,175-76). The discipline still needs to offer a framework for making contextual decisions, so that research can capture proximity in a politically meaningful way (Voss 1996a, 1,160-61). It is possible that theoretical development must progress along parallel, but nonetheless distinct, tracks depending upon the relevant level of locality.
- **Uncertain Source:** Giles consistently suggests that white racial conservatism responds to rational group interests. Among those interests, though, existing work lumps multiple forms of self interest: economic, political and socio-cultural (e.g., Giles and Evans 1986, 471). Only the most unreconstructed Marxist would suggest that these three power structures overlap

entirely. Social theorists, in particular Max Weber, generally treat them as (at least) intellectually distinct—but the study of racial politics has not regularly done so. It is possible that the fluctuating salience of each agenda offers a valuable tool for diagnosing intergroup conflict.

- **Uncertain Rationality:** He rightly criticizes “purely psychological” approaches to racial hostility (Giles and Evans 1985, 51), preferring a model grounded in political reality. Yet reliance on survey data often makes this orientation uncomfortable. For example, in one work Giles attaches importance to an individual’s sense of “whiteness” (Giles and Evans 1986, 480), and otherwise allows psychological attachments to mediate the expression of competitive pressures. He also embraces a view of “racial sensitivity” that is impervious to community context (Giles and Buckner 1996; Voss 1996b). It could be rewarding to shift away from attitudinal measures, back to electoral data (or at least specific policy preferences).

These unresolved questions are important not because scholars have an obligation to remain consistent across the research agenda, but because they underscore promising areas for growth. These are, collected into one scholar’s output, some of the same discontinuities that I have exposed throughout the literature building on V.O. Key’s initial idea. The discipline simply provides no theoretical guidance for determining the proper level of aggregation, for distinguishing among varied forms of competition, or for parsing out psychological and material threats to the reference group—so it is no surprise that even a careful and thoughtful researcher would run into difficulties.

Even a superficial survey of current work in the area exposes this confusion. Branton and Jones (1999) purport to test the backlash logic (which they call the “Inter-Group Conflict Perspective”)—using group affect and welfare policy preferences, aggregated at the congressional district level, with a measure of diversity that bears little relation to non-white population proportion. Glaser (1998) purports to test the backlash logic—using individual-level data, and hypothetical

population proportions rather than the real ones that shape each person's context. Mayer (1996) purports to test the backlash logic, using self-reported presidential election votes, aggregated at the state level, controlling for other measures of attitude and affiliation. These are all nice research projects, but they simply are not testing the same thing, and the urge to shoehorn such unrelated work into the same, indistinct, research tradition prevents rather than promotes accumulation of knowledge. Some clarity is necessary before the backlash concept can be useful again.

Conclusion

The white backlash hypothesis not only escaped the bounds of Southern politics, it eventually escaped the study of political competition altogether. Seeking a vocabulary to explain geographical patterns of intergroup competition, social scientists latched on to the terminology and methodology. They imported the logic into forms of intergroup conflict that had nothing to do with Black Belt electoral considerations, even though they initially owed their intellectual debt to political scientists studying the U.S. South.

What began as an historically contingent form of rational racial conflict has transmuted into a quick-and-easy approach to studying ethnic relations. It embraces any setting, any minority group, any level of aggregation, any form of expression, and any stakes. Any empirical study can test the "threat" hypothesis with little formal justification; all the researcher must do is throw a measure of the minority percentage into a statistical model, with the burden of proof soundly in its favor.

Political scientists still claim today that the backlash (or "group threat") concept enjoys widespread support (e.g., Glaser 1998; Mayer 1996). Yet, as this chapter shows, it actually performs quite poorly when transplanted outside the South. The idea turns up a spotty performance record in almost every extension outside of its natural setting, even after being adapted substantially from its original form. If this failure goes unnoticed, it is only because partial findings still get credited

as “success” for the idea. The weakness of this body of empirical research, despite numerous individual studies of high quality and great value, is disappointing.

One source of difficulty is that most of the literature reviewed here uses objective measures of the racial environment. The study of racial attitudes, by contrast, enjoys much greater success confirming the logic—but only by mutating “threat” into a subjective concept (see chapter 5). It does not take advantage of the central insight that different forms of conflict have different observable implications in spatial data, and that these varying forms are politically meaningful.⁹ The remaining chapters therefore offer an alternative way to redeem the backlash logic, one that connects empiricism to theory more rigorously, and in a way that is true to the original research tradition.

⁹ One book, Hubert Blalock's *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*, did try to capture empirically the rich complexity of sociological theory—but his attempts mostly ended in frustration (Blalock 1967).

Table 3-1: The Backlash Concept Outside Southern Politics

	<i>Data Level</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Year/Election</i>	<i>Pattern?</i>	<i>Special Contribution</i>
<u>Education Discrimination</u>					
Pettigrew (1957)	County	MO, KY		No, Weak	Early policy study
Pettigrew & Cramer (1959)	County	Border South		Yes	More successful version
Vanfossen (1968)	State	Entire Nation		Yes	Interactive hypotheses
Longshore (1982)	Individual	89 Schools		Mixed	Used surveys
<u>Economic Discrimination</u>					
Blalock (1956)	Metro area	Entire Nation	1950	No	Early discrimination work
Blalock (1957)	County	South only	1950	Yes	More successful version
Glenn (1963)	Metro area	Entire Nation	1950	Assumed	Challenged Blalock interp.
Jiobu & Marshall (1971)	Metro area	Entire Nation	1960	Education only	Sought synthesis
Marshall & Jiobu (1974)	Metro area	Entire Nation	1970	South only	Split off South sample
Fording (1997)	State	Entire Nation	1962-1980 pooled	Yes (curvilinear)	Incorporated Keech
<u>Electoral Choices</u>					
Rogin (1969)	Precinct, County	WI, IN, MD	1964 Pres. Primaries	Mixed	First outside the South
Lipset & Raab (1969)			1968 Presidential	No	Historically contingent theory
Knoke & Kyriazis (1977)	Individual	Entire Nation	1972 Pres. Primaries	South only	Faithful to V.O. Key
Huckfeldt & Kohfeld (1989)	Individual	18 States	1984 Presidential	Low status only	Fit within party change
Huckfeldt & Kohfeld (1989)	Precinct	Urban South	1952-1972 Pres.	Low status only	Fit within party change
Carsey (1995)	Precinct, Borough	NY city, Chicago	Late 1980s Mayoral	No	Falsified in urban elections

Note: This table only includes work testing the white-backlash hypothesis discussed in the thesis. The full literature is much more extensive than this quick survey indicates. 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.