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Trends in Racial Attitudes

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A Portrait of African American and White Racial Attitudes

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How do people feel about race? For those who believe that we live in a post-racial society, this question may seem simple. Although survey data collected since the 1940s *do* show that racial attitudes held by whites and African Americans have changed, that change is much more complicated than generally assumed. As state and federal policies have been adopted to battle racial inequality—from the desegregation of schools to preventing housing discrimination to affirmative action—there have been changes in some aspects of the nation’s racial climate. But has there been change in the hearts and minds of Americans? The answer to this question is complex.

This document provides a portrait of the trends in racial attitudes held by white and African American citizens as told through the record of survey research.

Trends in white American attitudes

Over the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the survey data on white racial attitudes shows improvement, stagnation, or decline, depending on the dimension of racial attitudes and the time period on which one focuses. First, since the mid-twentieth century when such questions were first included in national

surveys, whites have shown dramatic increases in support for the principles of racial equality—things like support for equality in jobs, schools, and public accommodations. Along with the dramatic liberalizing of support for the principles of equality, questions of how much social distance whites prefer to keep from blacks, and the extent to which whites endorse negative stereotypes of blacks, also show clear evidence of improvement: fewer and fewer white Americans readily endorse statements that blacks are less intelligent and hardworking than whites; and fewer verbally object to interracial mixing in neighborhoods and in marriage partners.

But there is a need for some caution in interpreting the trends from these kinds of questions because they do not capture all aspects of racial attitudes and because some of the liberalizing trend may be due to changes in social norms about what kinds of answers should be reported in surveys—so-called social desirability pressures—rather than changes in actual levels of stereotyping and in openness to living with and marrying African Americans. Studies using other kinds of measurement approaches, such as survey experiments, measures of unconscious stereotyping, and in-depth qualitative studies, can be used to complement the survey data reported here, in order to provide a more complete

About the Research

Trends in Racial Attitudes is a research project that compiles the results of several national surveys that have been tracking Americans’ racial attitudes from as early as the 1940s up until today. The focus is on data that can shed light on trends. The researchers include questions that have been repeated at least three times, spanning at least 10 years. The surveys measure American attitudes on racial equality, government efforts to ensure equal treatment, affirmative action, preferred social contact with racial groups, and other topics for which trend data are available.

The project builds on a book published in 1997 titled *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations, Revised Edition*, by Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan (Harvard University Press).

Visit igpa.uillinois.edu/programs/racial-attitudes for in-depth analysis and spreadsheets that compile the historical data.

understanding of how these softening attitudes translate outside of the survey context. Regardless, it is safe to say that positive trends like these reflect changes in racial norms¹ about what are acceptable responses in the semi-public setting of a survey interview. This in itself reflects a change in the racial climate in this country even if it does not reflect changes in the hearts and minds of white Americans.

While the *long-term* trends for stereotyping and social distance questions tend to show substantial reductions in negative attitudes, the more recent trends (since the mid-2000s) reveal little *additional* change. Other domains of racial attitudes show a similar pattern of stagnation. For example, questions about support for the programs or policies that would ensure racial equality in areas such as schools and jobs have always lagged behind the levels of support for the principle itself (the so-called principle-implementation gap). After peaking in the 1960s and 1970s, support for things like government expenditures on programs to benefit blacks and preferential treatment in jobs have been at about the same—generally low—levels from the 1980s up until today. These questions also reveal evidence of a heightened disengagement with racial topics: whites in greater numbers opt not to give a specific answer to some racial questions, instead saying they have “no interest” in the issue.

Finally, there are another set of questions that show some signs of reversing direction, so that the responses are less racially liberal than in the past. Specifically, fewer whites acknowledge that African Americans are adversely affected by past and persistent discrimination. This trend is of consequence, since support for policies intended to help African Americans is closely related to whether or not an individual believes that African Americans continue to face such barriers. In addition to fewer whites agreeing that inequality is due to discrimination, fewer whites endorse any of the explanations for inequality that are offered in a particular survey. This may be another sign of a broader trend of disinterest in racial issues.

Trends in African American attitudes

On many of the dimensions of racial attitudes that our long-term surveys have tapped, there has been little change in African American attitudes since these questions were first asked. To some extent, the lack of change is because of the high levels of agreement with the racially liberal position that existed when the questions were first asked; this is especially true of questions related to the principles of racial equality and social distance. At this point, for many questions on the principles of racial equality, levels of white support have now “caught up” with black attitudes.

However, on questions related to the implementation of racial equality, affirmative action, and explanations of inequality, the black-white gap persists. Specifically,

¹Schuman, H., et. al. (1998). *Racial attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*. Revised edition. Harvard University Press.

African Americans are more likely than whites to support race-targeted policies (e.g., implementation of equality, government expenditures, and preferential treatment). And African Americans are also much more likely to perceive that African Americans face substantial structural barriers in American society. In recent years there is some evidence of a closing of the black-white gap, driven mainly by African Americans becoming somewhat less likely to perceive discrimination and more likely to oppose certain racial policies. In other words, African American attitudes are showing some of the same trends as whites’ attitudes: an increase in disinterest, a decline in support for interventions, a decrease in perceived structural causes of inequality and a decrease in social distance. However, there is still a very substantial gap between African Americans and whites in their recognition of inequality and support for policies that try to address it: African Americans are significantly more likely to recognize structural causes of racial inequality and to support efforts to reduce it.

It is worth mentioning at this point some methodological limitations of national survey data that make it difficult to know how to interpret African American attitudes, particularly the conservative trend. First, because of small sample sizes, it is not possible to assess whether subgroups in the African American population are more or less likely to have become more conservative.

Second, there is the persistent challenge of race of interviewer effects. That is, we know that African Americans interviewed by white interviewers for some (though not all) racial questions tend to give different answers.² Typically the effects run towards more conservative responses when an interviewer is white; and we know that in many large national surveys, blacks are overwhelmingly likely to be interviewed by white interviewers. On the one hand, given the *persistently* low race-matching, one might conclude that any changes over time in survey responses could not be explained by race of interviewer, since the racial mis-matching between respondent and interviewer has been essentially unchanged. However, this pattern, taken together with the trends for white attitudes (e.g., a declining recognition of discrimination), raises a concern. Specifically, the racial climate (vis a vis whites’ attitudes) in which African Americans are answering these survey questions has changed in a direction of being less sympathetic on these issues. It is possible that the effect of being interviewed by a white interviewer has become *greater* over time—so that even if racial mis-matching had been stable, it may have a different impact in the contemporary racial climate where whites are decreasingly sympathetic to the idea that discrimination persists. The conservative trend in African American attitudes, then, could be a result of the greater *consequences* of race mis-matching rather than being entirely

²For academic scholarship on these effects, see: Davis, D. W. (1997). The direction of race of interviewer effects among African-Americans: Donning the black mask. *American Journal of Political Science*, 41(1):309–22. Krysan, M. and Couper, M. P. (2003). Race in the live and the virtual interview: Racial deference, social desirability, and activation effects in attitude surveys. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66(4):364–383.

due to a more conservative turn among African American respondents.

Overall, the historical survey record on black racial attitudes is not as robust as that for whites for a variety of reasons. However, it is clear from the data summarized throughout this website that racial attitudes of African Americans are distinctive from whites in many ways. What is also clear is that black racial attitudes are as complex and nuanced as whites, particularly when it comes to more contemporary issues, such as the persistence of racial discrimination, and what should be done to solve problems of racial inequality. On these kinds of topics, there is both a persistent black-white racial divide that persists, as well as increasing diversity of opinion among African Americans.

With these broad strokes in mind, the nuances of racial attitudes in America—both in the past and present—becomes evident. As such, the historical and contemporary survey record provides important insights into the complexity of race relations in America. We encourage you to take a closer look at the specific patterns and trends for the more detailed topics and survey questions throughout this website to gain even greater nuance and complexity about this important issue.

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