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American Attitudes toward Race Relations

Presidential elections are usually occasions for national pride and at least some stirrings of patriotism. Our sometimes unseemly—but usually undramatic—democracy rolls on, replacing president after president without major disruptions. Yet, this year, in certain postelection analyses, we have heard a note that, if true, would subtract from our self-congratulation. CBS's Bill Moyers, for one, bemoaned this election as one of the most racially divisive in recent memory.

In 1960, the Republicans could claim about one-third of the black vote. By 1984, only one out of ten black Americans supported Ronald Reagan, and blacks provided Walter Mondale more than one-quarter of his support, up from about one-fifth in 1980. Reflecting their electoral fortunes at the presidential level, the Democrats have received a majority of the white vote only once since 1948. But what does all this mean? Because blacks and whites tend to vote differently, does this make us a racist society?

In 1942 Gunnar Myrdal finished his seminal work on race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Up to this point it had been easy for many to live comfortably with what Myrdal described as the contradictions between our noble pronouncement that "all men are created equal" and the segregation of and discrimination against black

Americans. As Ronald Reagan noted during the 1980 presidential debate, those years preceding Myrdal's book were a time "when this country didn't even know it had a racial problem." Signalling a new sense of things, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Denver (now at the University of Chicago) conducted the first national survey of white attitudes toward blacks in 1942, and continued investigating race relations in over a dozen different surveys over the next four decades.

Looking over this forty-year span, we are struck by the steady, massive growth in racial tolerance. In the early forties, segregation was deeply entrenched in virtually every important institution and organization from major league baseball to the armed services. These institutional barriers to equality reflected the ignorance, mistrust, and feelings of superiority that generally dwelt in white Americans' minds. Forty years later, we find that every *de jure* and many *de facto* manifestations of racism and segregation have disappeared. Equally impressive have been the changes that have occurred in the sphere of "folkways," which educator and social scientist William Graham Sumner had considered almost impervious to adaptation.

We have only a single attitude measure that spans the entire forty years, but it deals with a crucial area

Table 1

Question: Do you think white students and (Negro/black) students should go to the same schools or separate schools?

	Black/white students should go to the same schools
1942	30%
1956	49
1956	49
1956	48
1963	63
1963	62
1964	62
1964	60
1965	67
1965	68
1970	74
1972	85
1972	83
1976	83
1977	86
1980	86
1982	88
1984	90

Note: White respondents.

of racial attitudes—school integration—and, as we will see, it reflects general changes in race relations (see table 1).

In 1942, only 30 percent of whites thought that blacks and whites should attend the same schools. Since then, support for integrated schools has grown nearly 1.5 percentage points per year. By 1977, a pro-integration consensus of more than 85 percent had emerged. The most striking features of this trend are: (1) its

massive magnitude, moving from a solid pro-segregation majority to an overwhelming pro-integration consensus; (2) its long duration, continuing over four decades; and (3) its steady relentless pace.

The trend on school desegregation was echoed by answers to numerous other questions on race relations (see table 2). Acceptance of a black neighbor who has

Table 2

Question: If a (Negro/black) with the same income and education as you have moved into your block, would it make any difference to you?

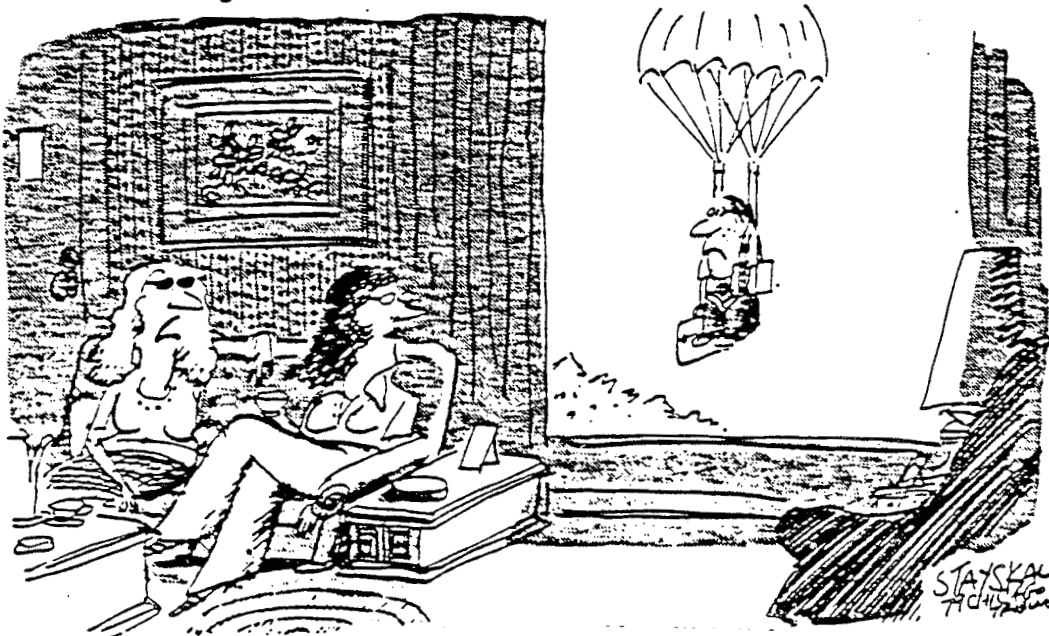
Generally speaking, do you think there should be separate sections for (Negroes/blacks) on streetcars and buses?

Do you think (Negroes/blacks) should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job, or do you think white people should have the first chance at any kind of job?

	"Equal" black neighbor okay	Same streetcar, bus okay	Hire equally
1942 (NORC)	35%	44%	—
1944 (NORC)	—	—	42%
1946 (NORC)	—	—	47
1956 (NORC)	52	60	—
1963 (SRS)	61	—	—
1963 (SRS)	65	77	83
1964 (SRS)	64	—	—
1965 (SRS)	68	—	—
1965 (SRS)	75	—	—
1966 (SRS)	69	—	87
1970 (SRS)	76	88	—
1972 (GSS)	84	—	96

Note: White respondents.

'When we pointed out the faults of busing, the government came up with a new plan.'



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the same education and income, integrated public transportation, and equal job opportunities all moved from less than 45 percent support in the early forties to well over 70 percent support by 1970 (see table 2). In fact, because approval had reached such a consistently high level by the late sixties, and therefore no longer differentiated the white population into two meaningful subgroups, these questions were discontinued from NORC surveys. Each item closely parallels the school integration question trend.

Table 3 monitors racial change from 1963 to the present. The table maps changes in the five-item Treiman scale on race relations. Donald J. Treiman originally developed this seven-item race scale in the sixties, using the school integration and public transportation items discussed above plus questions on integrating public facilities, interracial dining, neighborhood segregation, laws on interracial marriage, and black activism. With the discontinuation of the items on public trans-

Table 3

Question: Do you think (Negroes/blacks) should have the right to use the same parks, restaurants, and hotels as white people?

How strongly would you object if a member of your family wanted to bring a (Negro/black) friend home to dinner?

White people have a right to keep (Negroes/blacks) out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and Negroes/blacks should respect that right. . . . Agree strongly, agree slightly, disagree slightly, disagree strongly?

Do you think there should be laws against marriages between (Negroes/blacks) and whites?

(Negroes/blacks) shouldn't push themselves where they're not wanted. . . . Agree strongly, agree slightly, disagree slightly, disagree strongly.

Treiman Scale*

1963	2.09
1970	2.49
1972	2.91
1976	3.06
1977	3.07
1980	3.22
1982	3.37
1984	3.50

Note: *Possible scores on the Treiman Scale run from zero, for one who opposes all forms of racial tolerance as posed in the questions, to five, for one who favors all forms of racial tolerance. The values in the tables are means.

White respondents.

portation and public facilities, we had a five-item scale that ran from a score of zero, for someone who opposed all forms of racial tolerance, to a score of five, for someone who favored racial integration and accommodation. This scale also reinforces the pattern illustrated by the single school integration item. The mean value increased from 2.09 in 1963 to 3.50 by 1984. In sum, the NORC series indicates that a massive and wide-ranging liberalization of racial attitudes has swept America over the last forty years.

When Changes Occurred

While the increase in racial tolerance has followed a

Table 4

Question: See table 1.

	Black/white students should go to the same schools	
	North	South
1942	40%	2%
1956	61	14
1963	73	30
1963	75	34
1970	83	46
1972	91	67
1976	89	67
1977	90	72
1980	92	75
1982	93	79
1984	93	83

Note: White respondents.



"Here is a list from Otis Figby. He says that this year he expects affirmative action."

nearly linear ascent, there has been some variation by period. Support for integration of schools, neighborhood, and public transportation increased at an average of 1.2 percentage points per year from 1942 to 1956. That average increased to 2.1 percentage points from 1956 to 1963, with the emergence of the civil rights movement and the beginning of bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins, and the dismantling of dual school systems. A second period of accelerated advancement occurred around the late sixties and early seventies. (Two other questions, one on school integration with half black enrollments and another about voting for a black for president, showed maximum increases in tolerance from 1969 to 1972 and from 1967 to 1971.) In recent years, growth in racial tolerance has neither stopped nor even slowed. The annual change of .06 points on the Treiman scale for the 1977 to 1984 period is identical to that achieved during the peak of the civil rights movement in the sixties, and it is twice the rate of the early seventies.

Factors Affecting Tolerance

White racial attitudes have not been monolithic. Three major factors determine white attitudes toward blacks: (a) culture, which consists of region, ethnic and religious heritage, and community type; (b) socioeconomic status, which includes education, occupation, and income; and (c) birth cohort. Racial tolerance is highest among whites who are members of recent birth cohorts and who have been raised in liberal cultures, with above average education and social standing. Region has traditionally been the largest divider among whites. In 1942, for example, almost no white southerners (2 percent) endorsed school desegregation, while 40 percent of whites outside the South ("northerners," for short) already endorsed the principle of integrated education. The gap remained virtually unchanged until 1970 to 1972, years that marked a period of rapid growth in racial tolerance (see table 5). Since then, racial differ-

Table 5

Question: See table 3.

	Treiman Scale	
	North	South
1963	2.45	1.11
1970	2.88	1.47
1972	3.16	2.17
1976	3.35	2.40
1977	3.35	2.43
1980	3.47	2.66
1982	3.65	2.74
1984	3.70	3.02

Note: White respondents.

ences on school desegregation have continued to narrow slightly as northern attitudes began to hit a ceiling. The Treiman race relations scale shows a similar pattern. In this case, however, the 1970 to 1972 period marked the only time when attitudinal differences between

North and South grew significantly closer.

Religion shows a similar, though less dramatic, difference. Jews have consistently been most tolerant, Catholics next, and Protestants the least tolerant (see table 6).

Table 6

Question: See table 3.

By religion:	Treiman Scale		
	Jews	Catholics	Protestants
1963	3.61	2.58	1.81
1970	3.79	2.75	2.28
1972	3.67	3.08	2.64
1976	4.04	3.36	2.79
1977	3.94	3.22	2.90
1980	3.75	3.49	3.00
1982	4.08	3.58	3.48
1984	4.15	3.75	3.31

Note: White respondents.

Some of these differences merely reflect the greater concentrations of Protestants in the South, but the same ordering of religions occurs when we look at northerners and southerners separately. (There are too few Jews in the South to study as a distinct group.) Likewise, tolerance is highest in large metropolitan areas and lowest in rural communities. Alterations in classification schemes over the years hinder exact comparisons, but it is clear that rural communities have consistently been the least supportive of racial integration, while large central cities and their suburbs have had the highest levels of approval.

Table 7

Question: See table 3.

By education:	Treiman Scale				
	Less than high school	Some high school	High school	Some college	College graduate
1963	1.32	1.88	2.32	2.73	3.15
1970	1.69	2.24	2.57	3.06	3.48
1972	1.97	2.56	3.03	3.28	3.88
1976	2.06	2.53	3.14	3.59	4.00
1977	2.06	2.58	3.21	3.56	3.98
1980	2.18	2.68	3.20	3.71	4.10
1982	2.37	2.90	3.36	3.84	4.19
1984	2.38	2.97	3.36	3.96	4.30

Note: White respondents.

As with religion, this distinction prevails in the North as well as in the South. Briefly, racial tolerance has been, and continues to be, lowest in small southern communities among the majority Protestants and highest in large northern metropolitan centers among the minority Catholics and Jews. In effect, these three cultural indicators are tracers of how close one is to remnants of the plantation slave economy.

The second major factor dividing whites is socioeconomic status (SES). Advanced education, greater

occupational standing, and higher income are all associated with racial tolerance. Unlike cultural differences, which show at least some decline, SES differences appear to be quite stable. As we see in tables 7 and 8, the education and income differentials remain virtually unchanged from 1963 to 1982. Education appears to have the most consistent independent effect, but high status occupation and high income also lead to racial tolerance. Besides the humanizing impact of a liberal education itself (explicit emphasis on tolerance, equal rights, and cultural relativism) socioeconomic status adds a margin of generosity that inclines people to think about the common good and also raises them above most direct competition with blacks for jobs, housing, and governmental services.

The final major factor contributing to racial attitudes is birth cohort. Younger age groups have always been more willing to endorse integration than members of older cohorts (see table 9). Since racial attitudes have been growing more tolerant for at least forty years, each succeeding birth cohort has been raised in a culture more liberal on race relations, and thus each cohort starts its adult phase at a more liberal intercept than previous generations. This process is augmented by the fact that each cohort is also better educated than its predecessor, though the cohort effect is independent of, and in addition to, the education effect. Both operate in a similar fashion in the North and South.

Opening the Door

If we consider simultaneously the contribution of time, culture, socioeconomic status, and cohort, we can isolate the period of 1970 to 1972 as one of especially significant social change. From the Treiman scale and other race items we can identify the late sixties and early seventies as a period of rapid increase in pro-integration attitudes, especially among a fairly narrow subgroup—the better educated and younger segments of the urban South. We have a major collective shift among the more progressive segments of the South away from the traditional “stand in the doorway” attitude. This shift is perhaps best symbolized by the new George Wallace, who recaptured the Alabama governor’s seat in 1982 after abandoning his “segregation forever” statements of the sixties and even carrying a large share of the black vote. This shift is incomplete, since even among the young and better educated, the South remains less racially tolerant. But the North-South gap is smaller among the young and better educated than it is among other groups.

Where the Line Is Drawn

While the broad, four-decade-long advance of racial tolerance has steadily driven out once popular notions of white superiority and practices of Jim Crowism, it has hardly turned Americans into a colorblind society.

Table 8

Question: See table 3.

Income by thirds:	Treiman Scale		
	Low	Medium	High
1963	—	—	—
1970	2.09	2.53	2.88
1972	2.41	2.89	3.32
1976	2.66	3.02	3.46
1977	2.71	3.08	3.54
1980	2.86	3.22	3.54
1982	2.97	3.49	3.82
1984	3.12	3.50	3.87

Note: White respondents.

Table 9

Question: See table 3.

By age:	Treiman Scale			
	Under 25	25-44	45-64	65+
1963	2.38	2.32	1.93	1.53
1970	3.23	2.72	2.28	2.06
1972	3.61	3.16	2.69	2.19
1976	3.65	3.40	2.80	2.29
1977	3.69	3.41	2.92	2.27
1980	3.70	3.56	2.93	2.54
1982	3.92	3.74	3.13	2.64
1984	4.07	3.85	3.17	2.64

Note: White respondents.

Table 10

Question: See table 3.

	Treiman Scale									
	North					South				
By area size:	Top 10	Other Metro	Urban	Rural		Other Metro	Urban	Rural		
1970	3.04	2.94	2.96	2.51		1.52	1.38	1.31		
1972	3.42	3.14	2.98	2.75		2.54	2.60	1.48		
By age:	Under 25	25-44	45-64	65+		Under 25	25-44	45-64	65+	
1970	3.75	3.11	2.66	2.91		2.17	1.53	1.36	1.15	
1972	3.78	3.39	2.42	2.55		3.08	2.37	2.09	1.38	
By education:	Grade school	Some high school	High school	Some college	College graduate	Grade school	Some high school	High school	Some college	College graduate
1970	2.09	2.74	2.95	3.36	3.77	1.03	1.17	1.75	1.95	2.33
1972	2.33	2.85	3.15	3.48	4.08	1.30	1.76	2.51	2.80	3.03

Whites have steadily abandoned beliefs in the desirability of segregation and the notion that blacks are and should be second-class citizens, but they have balked at taking drastic measures to implement full racial integration. Some see this as negating the advances in tolerant attitudes, or even as exposing those attitudes as tokenism.

School integration illustrates some of the contradictions. By 1982-1984, 89 percent of whites opposed separate schools for whites and blacks, but in 1983 only 23 percent of whites favored racial busing (see table 11).

Table 11

Question: See table 3.

Treiman Scale	
Percent completely opposed to busing (7 on 7-point scale)	
1972 (SRC)	75%
1974 (SRC)	70
1976 (SRC)	69
1980 (SRC)	61
Percent favoring busing	
1970 (Gallup)	14%
1971 (Gallup)	18
1971 (Gallup)	17
1972 (GSS)	20
1974 (GSS)	20
1975 (GSS)	17
1976 (GSS)	16
1977 (GSS)	16
1978 (GSS)	20
1982 (GSS)	19
1983 (GSS)	23

Note: Black and white respondents.

Similarly, in 1983 only 6 percent of whites objected to sending a child of theirs to a school with a few blacks, but 26 percent objected to their child attending a school

Table 12

Question: Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups even if it means giving them preferential treatment. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point number 1. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

	Government help blacks				No special treatment		
	1	2	3	4	5		
1980	—	—	—	—	—		
1984	6.5%	8.6%	30.5%	19.5%	34.9%		
	Government help minorities						Minorities help themselves
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1980	3.0%	4.3%	10.5%	24.7%	18.6%	16.2%	22.8%
1984	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: White respondents.

that was half black, and 62 percent rejected the idea for a school that was mostly black. Whites are willing to accept school integration in principle and in practice when it does not put their children in the minority, but they strongly oppose busing. Yet it is noteworthy that, even in this area, white opposition to busing has slightly diminished over the last decade and a half.

Whites are firmly opposed to favoring whites in educational and occupational opportunities but draw the line at compensating blacks for past discrimination and disadvantaged backgrounds by applying racial quotas or other preferential treatment. Majorities opposed special assistance to minorities in 1980: 23 percent placed themselves at the extreme "no help" position, on a seven-point scale, while only 3 percent were at the extreme "help" position. On a related 1984 question about blacks, the "anti-special treatment" extreme (five-point scale) tops the extreme "pro-special treatment" position by 35 percent to 7 percent. Yet, it is not the notion of helping blacks that whites appear to reject, but the anti-egalitarian principle of special treatment itself—the idea of reversed discrimination. Over 32 percent of whites favor more government spending to improve the condition of blacks as opposed to only 19 percent who want less spending. These 1984 figures represent the highest level of support since the series of spending questions began in 1973. Compared to other spending preferences, support for helping blacks falls in the middle—near support for mass transportation, parks and recreation, and assistance to cities. There is more support for an increase in spending for blacks than for space exploration, foreign aid, welfare or defense. Yet the demand falls below that for increased assistance to the poor, solving the problems of big cities, crime, drugs, health, social security, the environment, and education.

Whites are willing to take certain steps to further racial tolerance and equality, such as government spending to improve the conditions of blacks, without going so far as endorsing ideas like preferential treatment and quotas. Whites frequently object to various strong types of implementation, but these rejections do not appear to amount to the actual negation of racial egalitarianism.

In the forty years since Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* appeared, the very nature of the racial dilemma he referred to has changed. He wrote of the often sharp contrast between the lofty moral and political principles of the American Creed and the suspension of that Creed when race relations were concerned. Today, whites are increasingly willing to apply the principles of the American Creed—democracy, equal protection, and liberty and justice for all—to blacks. The dilemma today is whether what most whites still consider to be extreme measures—busing, preferential treatment, racial quotas—are needed to achieve full, functional equality for blacks, or whether such measures are counterproductive and may even violate the principles of equality they seek to achieve.