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# RACE AND THE “I HAVE A DREAM” LEGACY Exploring Predictors of Positive Civil Rights Attitudes

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In the study reported here, the author had two objectives: (1) to test the relationship between racial attitudes toward Blacks and attitudes toward civil rights and (2) to find predictors of positive civil rights attitudes. Using multivariate regression modeling, the author finds that there is a positive relationship between racial attitudes toward Blacks and attitudes toward civil rights. The model also suggests a positive relationship between ideological proximity, or how close one feels to Blacks, and attitudes toward civil rights. In addition, the author finds that political party identification, age, education, gender, racial identification, and region of residence are all significant predictors of positive civil rights attitudes. The final model has an explained variance of 19%, thus calling for additional research in this area.

**Keywords:** *racial attitudes; civil rights; racial predictors*

**The 38th anniversary** of the ill-fated death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has recently passed, and America continues to revisit the question of whether or not there has been instrumental, positive change in America's conception of civil rights (Gamble, 1997). Tolerance and camaraderie, along with justice and equality, are ideals that Dr. King believed would counteract the discrimination and prejudice that existed in society (King, 1968/2000; Ognibene,

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2001). This research attempts to answer the question of racial progress: Have we progressed in society in our conceptualization of racial equality? Specifically, what are some determinants that guide our perceptions of the American government and its debated responsibility to correct the wrongs of the past by uplifting those that have been put down for nearly 400 years?

## BACKGROUND

A very crude trajectory of African American historiography (Balibar, 1991) of the twentieth century could be conceptualized as beginning with the Jim Crow era, then onward to the civil rights movement and, last, to the post-civil rights era. Although a resurgence of a civil rights movement has been proposed by various scholars (Bobo, 1997; Morris, 1999), it is uncontested that the struggle for civil rights in America has been the most nostalgic and influential movements that affect African Americans and their life outcomes today. Above all, the Jim Crow era created a tripartite system of domination for Blacks—politically, socially, and economically (Morris, 1984). What was to follow was almost two decades of widespread protest from the Black community to achieve the rights and privileges enjoyed by other members of racial and ethnic groups.

The impact of the civil rights movement on race relations and the nation's social fabric has been monumental (Williams, 2002). One of the key outcomes is the creation of self-perpetuating momentum that allowed for other movements to occur. By showing that human oppression is not inevitable and that collective action can generate change, the civil rights movement aided in the conceptualization of the women's movement as well as the Latino civil rights movement (Freeman, 1983; Morris & Herring, 1987; Morris & McClurg, 1992; National Council of La Raza, 2001; Suleiman, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). The sentiments of these collective movements drive public opinion, both in terms of change and in terms of the people involved in change. To clarify, movements create and perpetuate attitudes toward progress as well

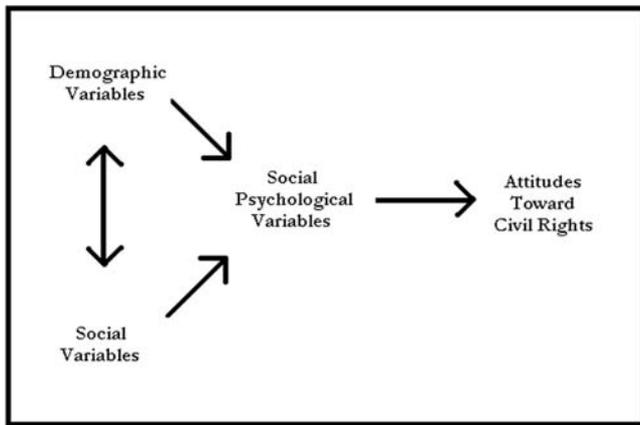


FIGURE 1 Schematic Model Representation

as attitudes toward specific groups responsible for a particular movement (Burstein, 1985; Klein, 1984). This fact is the driving force of this research: to evaluate the effect of a past event on present-day sentiments of the people most involved in the civil rights movement.

## FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 above shows the framework that guides the research. There has been no previous research on this subject; however, I would surmise that this framework is an accurate model for analysis. Certain demographic and social variables are known to influence each other (Santoro, 2002). An example of this would be the effect of gender (demographic) on political party identification (Ladd, 1997). Somewhat intuitive, these two combined variable types greatly influence certain social psychological variables, which, in turn, exude an effect in one's attitudes toward civil rights. Demographic and social variables tap into a suppression effect, an effect that creates a greater association between the two blocks of variables. Thus, it is necessary to separate these variables into different blocks, each with its own influential path to social psychological variables.

The combined effect of all demographic variables should be positively associated with social psychological variables. In addition, the combined effect of all social variables should be positively associated with social psychological variables. Even more interesting, the combined effect between demographic variables and social variables will also be positive, as the suppression effect would increase the strength and the nature of the preexisting positive relationship (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003). In effect, the combined effect of social psychological variables should be positively associated with attitudes toward civil rights.

### HYPOTHESIS

The expectation of this research is both twofold and conditional. I will explore the relationship between attitudes toward Blacks and attitudes toward civil rights and, if the relationship is established, then I will explore some determinant in positive racial attitudes. For the first exploration, I hypothesize that there is a direct, positive relationship between racial attitudes toward Blacks and attitudes toward civil rights. Specifically, people with positive attitudes toward Blacks will have positive attitudes toward civil rights. This hypothesis comes from the assumption that people equate and translate civil rights with African Americans because the struggle for civil rights was primarily led by African Americans. I also hypothesize that there is a direct, positive relationship between ideological proximity and attitudes toward civil rights. How close one feels to Blacks is an alternate measure of attitudes toward Blacks and should be directly related to attitudes toward civil rights because of the same notion of people equating and translating civil rights with African Americans.

For the second exploration, I hypothesize that some demographic and social variables will exude a strong effect on explaining civil rights attitudes. Among the demographic variables, education, age, race, and family income will have significant, predictive value on civil rights attitudes, whereas among the social variables,

political viewpoint and neighborhood composition will have significant predictive value on civil rights attitudes. I expect to find a direct, positive relationship between education and civil rights attitudes. As the level of education increases, there will be a greater likelihood for positive attitudes toward civil rights. Education allows for free thinking, a potential mediator variable. I believe that those who would not be in favor for civil rights would be those who identify more with ideals instilled in them at early ages. Education would therefore be the liberating factor for individuals. Specifically, graduate and professional degree holders (those with more than 16 years of schooling) will have the highest likelihood of agreeing with civil rights legislation, according to this hypothesis.

I also expect to find an inverse relationship between age and civil right attitudes. At later ages, I expect to find that people will hold negative attitudes toward civil rights. This age group captures people who have lived in the civil rights era as well as before the era. I expect this relationship because at these ages, there is a tendency to hold certain viewpoints more strongly at later ages than earlier ages, when opinions are seen as being more malleable. Thus, the attitudes of discrimination and governmental intervention would be solidified at later ages if the individuals were born prior to the civil rights era.

With regards to race, I expect to find that Whites will hold more negative attitudes toward civil rights compared to non-Whites. The rationale is quite apparent: Group solidarity is best achieved when the members of the group hold certain ideals as important (Gerth & Mills, 1958). As such, Whites should be less concerned with the welfare and well-being of African Americans.

Family income, directly correlated with education, will also be predictive of attitudes toward civil rights. With regards to income, lower levels of income predict a lower likelihood for positive civil rights attitudes. There is a potential interaction effect here between race and income: Poor Whites have a tendency to disagree with civil rights legislation regarding racial and ethnic minorities. Some theorists note that preservation of the understood racial social order was the underlying rationale for this phenomenon (Sollors, 1996).

Poor Whites still enjoy a certain privilege with the social order because of race; as such, by uplifting African Americans to a higher state, this act will disrupt the racial-social order in society, placing poor Whites at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Gender may also be correlated with attitudes toward civil rights. Women should have more positive attitudes toward civil rights than men. Women, who were oppressed and marginalized more so in the past, would be more accepting of actions of equality (as they would identify their oppression with an oppressed group) than men and therefore would be in favor of governmental assistance to helping African Americans achieve higher standards of living. As such, they would be more likely to identify with another oppressed group via their own oppression. In addition, more men tend to believe in self-sufficiency and that change should be instrumented at the individual level rather than through legislation; therefore, men would be less likely to agree with civil rights legislation.

Political viewpoint should also predict civil rights attitudes. The more liberal a person self-identifies, the more likely a person is to hold positive civil rights attitudes. Politically, African Americans tend to be more democratic in party affiliation and also more liberal in political stance (Tate, 2003). More practically, to be liberal is to favor progress and reform, to protect in civil liberties, and to support governmental intervention. As such, self-identified liberals should hold positive civil rights attitudes.

Last, neighborhood composition should be correlated with attitudes toward civil rights. Those who have African Americans living in the neighborhood would be more in favor of civil rights attitudes than those who have no African Americans living in the neighborhood. Exposure to African Americans is the underlying phenomenon governing this relationship: I feel that if there is interaction on some level with African Americans, then one is then more likely to believe in civil rights attitudes. This can be achieved in different ways—through diffusion of ideas, actual comparison of lifestyles, and so forth.

## DATA

To test the various hypotheses, I will use the 2002 General Social Survey data set. The General Social Survey has been conducted by the National Opinion Research Center annually since 1972 and biennially starting in 1994. The content of each survey changes slightly as some items are added or deleted from the interview schedule. Main areas that are covered in the data include socioeconomic status, social mobility, race relations, and civil liberties (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2002).

The robust data are collected by means of personal interviews. The individuals interviewed for this survey were a representative cross-section of the total population of the continental United States, 18 years of age or older, English speaking, and living in noninstitutional arrangements.

This data was ideal to use for this research for two main reasons. First, the data asks, among other things, attitudinal questions regarding race, gender, sexuality, and political standpoints, which is precisely what this research question is addressing. Second, the data is cross-sectional, and because the interviewees are not interviewed in the subsequent years, intra-individual change cannot be ascertained. Rather, contemporaneous sentiments at a point in time are observed, which again follow the nature of the research question. These two rationales provide support for using this data in this research.

## IMPUTATION AND MISSING VALUES

There are 2,801 ( $N = 2,801$ ) observations in the data. There were missing values for many variables in the data set. Age and education were the only variables for which I deleted the missing cases. For the remainder, I used Schafer's (1997) method of imputation by using cell mean. Respondents are divided into groups (cells) based on known variables, such as gender or race. Then, the mean response for the missing variable is assigned to the missing data.

Some assumptions are present in this tactic: A “missingness” mechanism (or a relationship between the focus variable and the “missing” variable) must be assumed, and a distribution must also be assumed. I used age and race to impute missing values and employed standard normal distribution assumptions.

To operationalize some of the variables from the data set, vis-à-vis the dependent variable, the variables had to be converted into a scale. The response variable, attitudes toward civil rights, is measured by three variables that are standardized and summed to create a scale. These three variables have a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.6973, indicating that interitem correlations are high and therefore showing good reliability of the scale (Dubin & Rivers, 1990). In addition, the attitudinal scale measuring attitudes toward Blacks was created by six variables that are standardized and then summed. These six variables have a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.5998, again indicating good reliability of the scale. The appendix shows the variables used to create the scales and the range for the individual variables.

## RESULTS

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the characteristics of respondents. The demographic characteristics of the respondents paint an overall picture of the people who were interviewed for this sample. The mean age of those in the sample is 46.2, indicating that this sample is slightly right-skewed. On average, people in the sample have completed high school and about 1 year of college. About 50% of the sample are male and 50% female. The average family income for the respondents is between \$15,000 and \$19,999, indicating that this sample is slightly left-skewed with respect to income. Approximately 30% of the sample were never married.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Demographic variables				
Age	Age of respondent	46.2	17.3	18-89
Education	Education level of respondent	13.3	3.0	0-20
Gender	Gender of respondent (0 = male)	0.5	0.5	0-1
Income level	Total family income	10.7	2.3	1-12
Marital status	Marital status of respondent (0 = ever married)	0.3	0.4	0-1
Nativity	Whether respondent was born in the U.S. (0 = yes)	0.1	0.3	0-1
Race	Race of respondent (0 = White)	0.3	0.5	0-1
Region	Geographical region of residence (0 = South)	0.6	0.5	0-1
Social variables				
Neighborhood composition	Whether there are any Blacks in respondent's neighborhood (0 = yes)	0.2	0.4	0-1
Political party	Political party affiliation (0 = Democrat)	0.5	0.5	0-1
Political viewpoint	Conservative-liberal scale for respondent's political views	4.2	1.3	1-8
Social psychological variables				
Ideological proximity	Attitudinal scale of how close respondent feels to Blacks	5.1	1.2	1-8
Attitude toward Blacks <sup>a</sup>	Attitudinal scale of how respondent feels toward Blacks	21.2	3.4	9-31
Dependent variable				
Attitude toward civil rights <sup>a</sup>	Attitudinal scale of how respondent feels toward civil rights	7.9	1.7	4-17

NOTE: Variables that have parenthetical expressions in their descriptions are dummy variables. Within the parentheses is modal response, which is the reference category for analysis. a. This denotes variables that have been created using several standardized variables.

Also, about 10% of the sample were born outside of the United States. Whites dominate the sample, representing about 70%. Forty percent of the sample lives in the southern region of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
**OLS Regression Models of Attitudes Toward Civil Rights**  
**Using Demographic, Social, and Social Psychological Measures**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Intercept	5.63**** (0.31)	5.97**** (0.037)	5.67**** (0.50)
Ideological proximity	0.10**** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.04)
Attitude toward Blacks	0.08**** (0.01)	0.07**** (0.01)	0.07**** (0.02)
Neighborhood composition (Blacks in neighborhood)		-0.00 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.11)
Political party (Democrat)		-0.25*** (0.10)	-0.24*** (0.10)
Political viewpoint		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Age			-0.00**** (0.00)
Education			0.01**** (0.02)
Gender (males)			0.29*** (0.10)
Income level			-0.02 (0.02)
Marital status (ever married)			0.04 (0.12)
Nativity (U.S. born)			0.27 (0.18)
Race (White)			-0.12**** 0.12
Region (South)			0.17* (0.10)
Adjusted $R^2$	.170	.184	.191

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

#### **SOCIAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS**

Social and social psychological characteristics give insights into the respondents' affiliation. Approximately 20% of the sample live where there are no Blacks in their neighborhood. Half of the sample is affiliated with the Democratic Party, and the other half is divided among the Republican and Independent parties. Moreover, on the

conservative-liberal political viewpoint scale, the average score is 4.2, denoting a moderate political viewpoint. Last, on the ideological proximity scale, the average score is 5.1, meaning that the average response is moderately close (neither very close nor not close at all).

#### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD BLACKS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CIVIL RIGHTS**

Table 2 presents the ordinary least squares regression models of attitudes toward civil rights using the various demographic, social, and social psychological measures. Model 1 tests the relationship between racial attitudes toward Blacks and attitudes toward civil rights. In this model, we see that both racial attitudes toward Blacks and how close one feels to Blacks are predictive of positive attitudes toward civil rights. Specifically, the better the attitude toward Blacks and the more one feels close to Blacks, the higher the attitude toward Blacks. These are highly significant, and this model alone explains a great amount of variance (17.0%).

#### **PREDICTORS OF POSITIVE CIVIL RIGHTS ATTITUDES**

Models 2 and 3 in Table 2 explore predictors in the two different classes of variables (social and demographic). Using the schematic model representation as a guide, I first entered the social variables into the variables in Model 1. Accordingly, as seen in Model 2, only political party was significant.<sup>2</sup> With a negative coefficient, the model suggests that Democrats will have positive attitudes toward civil rights, as compared to Republicans and Independents. The model maintains the significance of the social psychological variables already explained in Model 1. In sum, the model has more explanatory power, with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .184.

Model 3 adds the control variables, or the demographic characteristics, to Model 2. Model 3 maintains the significance of variables in Model 2. The regression model finds that age, education, gender, race, and region are all significant.<sup>3</sup> With a negative coefficient ( $\beta = -.00$ ), the model predicts that as age increases, attitudes

toward civil rights decrease. Education is positively associated with civil rights attitudes. The model predicts that males will have lower civil rights attitudinal scores than females, and the model also predicts that Whites will have lower civil rights attitudinal scores than minorities. Last, the region of residence is positively associated with attitudes toward civil rights: Those that reside in nonsouthern areas have greater civil rights attitudinal scores than those who live in the South. This model has the greatest explanatory power, with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .191.

## DISCUSSION

In this research, I found, based on the final model, that at later ages, people will hold negative attitudes toward civil rights. Whites will hold more negative attitudes toward civil rights compared to other minority groups. As the level of education increases, there will be a greater likelihood for positive attitudes toward civil rights. Women have more positive attitudes toward civil rights than do men. Those not in the southern region of the United States hold greater civil rights attitudes. Self-identified Democrats have the most positive attitude toward civil rights. The more ideologically close a person is to the African American community, the more the person will hold positive civil rights attitudes. As attitudes toward Blacks become increasingly positive, attitudes toward civil rights also follow that trend.

Civil rights attitudes have changed drastically from the pre-1960s when essentially race was the strongest predictor of positive civil rights attitudes. Since then, we can see that there are many more variables with equally strong weight that also need to be taken into account in order to understand positive civil rights attitudes. The strongest predictors were political party identification, age, education, gender, race, and region of residence.

This research is not without limitations. Strongly assumed predictors that were found to be nonsignificant were neighborhood composition and political viewpoint. In addition, the data set used is cross-sectional, which raises some methodological issues. The

inability to directly assess intra-individual change and the restriction of inferences to group averages are significant disadvantages of cross-sectional designs for the study of developmental issues (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1988; Creswell, 1994). As such, cross-sectional designs have been referred to as a “weak shortcut to the study of change” (Baltes et al., 1988). Last, the overall explained variance was found to be .191, or about 19%. With such a low value, it is necessary that more research be done on this topic to really capture what is driving positive *and* negative civil rights attitudes in American society.

**APPENDIX**  
**Description of Variables Used to Create Attitudinal Scale**

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Variable in Codebook</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Range</i>
Attitudes toward civil rights	NATRACE <sup>a</sup>	Improving the conditions of Blacks	1-3
	AFRRMACT	Favor preference in hiring Blacks	1-5
	HELPBLK <sup>a</sup>	Should U.S. government aid Blacks?	1-5
Attitudes toward Blacks	RACMAR	Favor law against racial intermarriage	1-3
	RACPUSH	Blacks should not push themselves where they are not wanted	1-5
	WRKWAYUP <sup>a</sup>	Blacks overcome prejudice without favors	1-5
	LIVEBLKS <sup>a</sup>	Favor living in a neighborhood half Black	1-5
	MARBLK <sup>a</sup>	Favor close relative marrying a Black person	1-5
	FEELBLKS <sup>a</sup>	How respondent feels toward Blacks	1-9

a. This denotes variables that had to be reverse recoded for the scale to be directionally accurate.

## NOTES

1. Three of the seven possible categories for region had to be collapsed to encompass the entire Southern region. The south Atlantic region (consisting of Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and District of Columbia), the east south central region (comprising Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi), and the west south central region (comprising Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas). These were grouped according to the 2004-2005 *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 2005 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

2. A nested *F* test was done on this block of three variables to establish whether this block was significant before adding it to the regression model (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). As such, the test was found to be significant at the 0.001 level. A separate nested *F* test was done on the block of variables that were nonsignificant in the regression model. As such, the test was also found to be significant at the 0.01 level, which is why they remained in the model.

3. A nested *F* test was also done on the block of variables that were nonsignificant in the regression model. As such, the test was also found to be significant at the 0.001 level, which is why they remained in the model.

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