The impact of place? A reassessment of the importance of the South in affecting beliefs about racial inequality

J. Scott Carter [a],[*], Mamadi Corra [b], Shannon K. Carter [c], Rachael McCrosky [c]

[a] University of Central Florida, 1200W International Speedway Boulevard, Daytona Beach, FL 32114, USA
[b] East Carolina University, A-416 Brewster Building, Greenville, NC 27858, USA
[c] University of Central Florida, 4000 Central Florida Boulevard, Orlando, FL 32816, USA

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that individuals living in the southern part of the United States express more negative racial attitudes than those living outside the South. Using data from The American National Election Study (NES), the purpose of this paper is to assess whether key factors often associated with the Southern attitude distinction are indeed more potent in the South than elsewhere. Drawing data from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, we further assess whether the impact of the South has increased or decreased over time. Results indicate that the impact of the South is negligible at best. Findings do show that place does matter for conservatives. However, in this case, non-South location matters more than the South. Relative to their liberal counterparts, conservatives in the non-South espouse more individualistic beliefs than do their Southern counterparts. These findings are discussed within the dominant theoretical framework in this area.

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1. Introduction

The bulk of research dealing with US regional sub-cultures shows views toward Black Americans are less accepting or tolerant in the South than in other regions (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Carter, 2005; Kuklinski, Cobb, & Gilens, 1997; Middleton, 1976; Smith, 1981; Taylor, Greeley, & Sheatsley, 1978). With respect to trends over time, some recent analyses of public opinion surveys suggest an emergence of a New South, with racial attitudes increasingly in line with those found in other regions of the country (Griffin & Hargis, 2008; Schuman & Bobo, 1988; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Tuch, 1987). However, some caution against this interpretation by noting

that the purported convergence may simply be a reflection of an overall national trend toward more liberal racial attitudes (Carter, Steelman, Mulkey, & Borch, 2005; Carter, 2010; Steeh & Schuman, 1992).

As to beliefs about the causes of racial inequality, current research shows that Southerners continue to hold more negative beliefs than non-Southerners (Carter, 2005, 2010). That is, when asked about the causes of racial inequality, Southern Whites are more likely to cite individual characteristics of Blacks, such as laziness, while non-Southern Whites are more likely to point to external causes, such as discrimination and a lack of access to equal education.

We examine three theoretical arguments commonly used to explain racial attitudes and beliefs in order to explore more specifically Southern and non-Southern beliefs about the causes of racial inequality. The first explanation proposes that racial attitudes in general and Southern racial attitudes in particular are impacted by the persistence of negative racial affect. Explicit in the prejudice literature is that, regardless of the overt or subtle

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 386 506 4047.
E-mail addresses: carter@ucf.edu (J.S. Carter), corram@ecu.edu
(M. Corra), skcarter@ucf.edu (S.K. Carter),
Rachael.McCrosky@knights.ucf.edu (R. McCrosky).

nature of prejudice, racism continues to find its roots in negative affect developed early in life (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sears, Henry, & Kosterman, 2000). The second perspective proposes that negative attitudes toward racial issues stem not from racism but from "principled objections" born out of conservative ideals (Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000). The third perspective proposes that racial animosity is based partly on self-interest (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993). While individual self-interest is often associated with tangible gains or losses to individuals and their families, Bobo and Kluegel (1993) argue that this definition is too narrow and can relate to broader groups and their shared assessment of self-interest. That is, those with less access to valued resources are more likely to exhibit racial animosity because they see Blacks as potential threats to their own well-being.

These perspectives each offer an explanation that emphasizes certain key variables as determinants of racial attitudes and beliefs. This paper will assess whether the noted variables are more potent in the South than in the non-South in explaining beliefs about continuing racial inequality. We further assess whether the effect of the South on these key variables is diminishing over time. Cooper and Knotts (2013) pose that Southerners maintain strong levels of regional identification not necessarily found in other locations. Myrdal (1944) claims the impact of the South is not only apparent and strong but has a great deal of staying power. Residents of the South develop perspectives about race that last over time. Yet, almost seventy years after Myrdal (1944), it is still relevant to ask whether or not region matters less in producing negative beliefs about continuing racial inequality.

2. Background

Early research on racial attitudes suggests that regional differences will diminish over time, that Southern distinctiveness on racial issues will eventually be a distant memory. Research by Hurlbert (1989), for example, suggests "cohort replacement" as one factor for this decline. Cohort replacement is the process by which older, more racially prejudiced generations are replaced by younger, less prejudiced ones. Hurlbert (1989) finds young respondents in the South to be more accepting of Blacks than older respondents. Firebaugh and Davis (1988) similarly note a decrease in the effect of region and point to a faster growing tolerance in the South than in the North. Similar trends are noted in the literature (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1974; Smith, 1981; Steeh & Schuman, 1992).

However, a steady trend toward toleration does not seem to hold. Consistent with early research that finds a racist subculture (Abrahamson & Carter, 1986; Boyd, 2011, in press; Greeley & Sheatsley, 1974; Middleton, 1976; Schuman et al., 1997; Smith, 1981), more contemporary research continues to find a Southern subculture of negative racial affect. For instance, in assessing racial attitudes with measures examining principles of racial equality, such as interracial marriage, political support, and desegregations, Tuch (1987) notes distinct negative racial attitudes among Southerners compared to non-Southerners. Carter et al. (2005) find more negative attitudes toward Blacks

among Southerners than non-Southerners and less support for governmental interventions aimed at helping Blacks. Griffin and Hargis (2008) similarly note a "distinctive, pervasive white southern racial attitudinal pattern" (2008, p. 121). They state "For every question, whites below the Mason-Dixon Line expressed more conservative views, including, on some questions, more laissez-faire racist views" (Griffin & Hargis, 2008, p. 121).

3. Theoretical perspectives

Three theoretical explanations for regional distinctions are proposed in the literature negative racial affect, conservatism, and self-interest. These perspectives each offer an explanation that emphasizes certain key variables as determinants of racial attitudes and beliefs, and thus regional differences.

3.1. Negative racial affect

This theoretical orientation posits that tolerance and intolerance are normative, and that regional differences are due to varying cultural norms and values that promote or discourage intolerance (Nunn, Crockett, & Williams, 1978; Weakliem & Biggert, (1999). Blumer (1965) links the predominance of negative racial affect in the South to the unequal power structure produced by slavery. Blumer suggests that the hegemonic relationship between Blacks and Whites during this era produced social and economic inequality in particular and broader beliefs about the position of Whites and Blacks in general. This hegemonic relationship, Blumer argues, is paramount in current racial prejudice where one group holds the other group in a negative light. More specifically, years of brutally unequal interactions during slavery and the Jim Crow Era produced feelings of superiority and in-group affiliation among White Americans that continue to shape current race relations. Accordingly, Whites develop the beliefs that they deserve the resources they hold while Blacks are seen as undeserving and complicit in the lack of resources they hold. Expressions of negative racist beliefs and discriminatory behavior that persist represent the need for Whites to protect the racial status quo.

More generally, scholars argue that while traditional racism might be declining, negative racial affect is still a cornerstone of race relations in America. The "Modern" or "Symbolic" racism characterizing current race relations is more subtle in nature (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Tarman & Sears, 2005). In this new form of racism, Blacks are seen as violating long-standing American values of hard work and individualism (Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000), and not trying "hard enough to overcome difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned" (Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000, p. 73). These attitudes and beliefs are not expressed overtly; rather they are said to guide beliefs about racial policy subtly. Kinder and Sanders (1996), for example, note that, among White Americans, prejudice is most pronounced in reference to race-specific policies and less so in relation to race-neutral policies, such as Medicare and education. In short, whether racism reflects traditional views of racial superiority or a