

The Spatial and Demographic Determinants of Racial Threat*

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Objective. Although scholars have cast doubt on Key's (1949) racial threat hypothesis, race continues to play a central role in American politics. But does living in a racially diverse context lead to liberalization or a white backlash? We aim to test the validity of the racial threat hypothesis in the modern-day Deep South. *Methods.* The data used for this analysis span multiple federal elections from the state of Louisiana, from 2000, 2004, and 2008, in addition to census data from 2000 and 2010. We utilize ArcGIS mapping software to construct a detailed depiction of voters' racial environments. *Results.* We find that whites who live in racially diverse precincts exhibit lower rates of turnout than whites in homogenous precincts; however, segregation within the precinct mitigates the liberalizing effects of precinct-level diversity among whites. *Conclusion.* The results of our analysis provide help to clarify the previously mixed empirical findings regarding the geographic distribution of minorities and white racial conservatism.

The question of how the geographic distribution of ethnic minorities influences white voting behavior has been the subject of scholarly debate for decades. In *Southern Politics*, V. O. Key claimed that white support for the segregationist Democratic Party was strongest in the South's "Black Belt," as this region's high density of African Americans posed a political and social threat to whites. The threat hypothesis presupposes that the racial context of a political geography matters for how whites perceive their political environment (Baybeck, 2006:386). The core assumption is that competition between groups over political representation and economic resources fuels intergroup hostility (Glaser, 2003:607). Key's claims generate the following empirical expectation: we should observe a positive relationship between the proportion of a political unit that is African American and the level of political backlash

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SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

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DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.12095

among whites. However, many empirical tests of the threat hypothesis find mixed evidence.

We seek to revisit the racial threat hypothesis and test its validity using data and methods that are considerably improved but fundamentally similar to those upon which the hypothesis was initially formulated. Empirical referents and the intellectual roots of the racial threat hypothesis both lie in the Deep South (Voss, 1996). We test the predictions generated from our theoretical model in that geographic and racial context; like numerous scholars in the literature (Giles and Buckner, 1993; Voss, 1996; Liu, 2001), we use electoral data from the state of Louisiana. Unlike previous scholars, who were limited to analyses utilizing only precinct- or county-level demographics, we are able to construct a more nuanced measure of neighborhood-level racial composition and segregation. We use the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to process data sets from the U.S. Census to construct sophisticated measures of voters' racial and economic environments. In this context, we seek to clarify what geographic distributions (if any) of black and white voters lead to the racially derived differences in white turnout initially formulated by Key.

We pursue our analysis of the geographic conditions under which race influences turnout in three sections. First, we establish how the racial environment can influence an individual's political behavior. In the second section, we analyze the relationship between whites' voting patterns and their local racial environment using three U.S. presidential elections in Louisiana (2000, 2004, and 2008). This research design includes an analysis of turnout by race across different geographic units. We incorporate multiple measures of the geographic distribution of racial minorities, which allows us to perform a nuanced test of the threat hypothesis. We find that both the racial heterogeneity of the precinct and level of segregation within the precinct are important predictors of white turnout. The final section of the article consists of discussion of the results and some potential directions for future studies.

The Geographic Distribution of African Americans and the Associated White Response

The racial threat hypothesis grew out of V. O. Key's observations of politics across the Jim Crow South. Key (1949; also see Blalock, 1967; Giles, 1977, 1994; Giles and Buckner, 1993, 1996; Giles and Hertz, 1994; Tolbert and Grummel, 2003) argued that whites' racial attitudes were determined by the degree of political and social threat posed by African Americans.¹ Accordingly, whites in the most heavily black counties had the greatest incentives to

¹As noted by Hopkins (2010), it is somewhat odd that Key conceives racial threat as primarily a political mechanism, as African Americans were disenfranchised in the South at the time of Key's writing.

maintain the apartheid system and African-American disenfranchisement. Threats to the existing racial hierarchy led southern whites to overwhelming support of the segregationist Democratic Party. Key noted that white turnout was highest and Democratic partisanship was strongest in the “Black Belt” counties, the area of the South with the highest concentration of African Americans. The degree of white political backlash against African Americans was determined by the size of the potential electoral threat.

Yet, the mixed empirical evidence from tests of the relationship between racial diversity and white racial conservatism provides reason to think the relationship is more complex than Key initially suspected. Voss and Miller (2001; also see Carsey, 1995; Voss, 1996; Voss and Lublin, 2001) demonstrated that whites in predominately white precincts were more racially conservative than whites in racially diverse precincts. These analyses suggest that the geographic patterns of racial conservatism are more complex than originally thought. There is considerable evidence that racial context on the neighborhood level, not just the composition of the county, influences political behavior as well.

There is agreement between Key, Voss, and numerous others that an individual’s community and racial context matters for determining political participation; the task is determining which racial contexts matter and how they matter. Stated broadly, there are two basic schools of thought:

1. Diversity promotes acceptance: racial diversity promotes racial liberalism among whites and thus mitigates backlash;
2. Threat: racial diversity promotes racial hostility among whites and thus induces a political backlash.

Different studies have found different results—depending on the unit of analysis and outcome of interest. This lack of consensus has led scholars to propose alternative theories to explain the relationship between white racial attitudes and the geographic distribution of minorities. Many scholars now regard perceptions of racial threat as motivated by psychological forces opposed to the relative size of the minority population—notably, numerous scholars have argued that interracial contact mitigates perceptions of threat posed by outgroups (Allport, 1954; Forbes, 1997; Sigelman and Welch, 1993; Welch and Sigelman, 2001; Welch et al., 2000; Rocha and Espino, 2010; Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995; Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000; Oliver and Wong, 2003; Branton and Jones, 2005).

As Rocha and Espino (2010:416) note, studies that assess the effect of interracial contact consistently find that interracial contact mitigates racial hostility. The plausibility of and empirical support for the contact hypothesis show the importance of segregation; racial segregation mitigates contact between members of different races. Recent research (Rocha and Espino, 2009, 2010; Roch and Rushton, 2008) has found that whites in racially diverse but segregated environments exhibit greater threat responses than whites in diverse but racially integrated contexts. These findings indicate that the

distribution of voters within a political unit—not just the relative size of the racial groups—is an important determinant of the nature of intergroup relations. Increasing racial diversity can have a liberalizing effect on racial attitudes if it induces increased levels of interracial contact. In a study that examined individual attitudes toward immigrant groups, Rocha and Espino (2009) found that large immigrant populations produced a threat response only in highly segregated environments. The authors also found that whites formed more positive attitudes toward immigrants in places with large immigrant populations and low levels of segregation. However, racially-based residential segregation is prevalent. Most individuals—even those in racially diverse precincts and counties—live in residentially segregated neighborhoods with little opportunity for interracial contact (Massey and Denton, 1993; Welch et al., 2000:19). White Louisianans live in voting precincts that are on average 15.1 percent African American, while the state's population is 32.4 percent African American overall. The median is lower still, at 8.2 percent. Comparable values for parishes are a mean of 15.9 percent and median of 14.5 percent. At the precinct level, the average white lives in an area that contains less than half the proportion of African Americans than the state mean. This discrepancy implies that the distributions are skewed, or in this context, that there is residential segregation by race.²

The fact that most individuals live in racially homogenous neighborhoods helps to explain the divergent effects of racial heterogeneity on the county and precinct levels. We argue that whites react differently to racial diversity depending on whether racial diversity is accompanied by the potential for interracial contact. Diversity in the absence of interracial contact has been demonstrated to increase racial hostility. Much of the previous literature on the racial threat hypothesis assesses a single geographic context (typically precinct or county). This is problematic when we consider that the racial composition of several different geographic units might be simultaneously shaping white attitudes and behaviors. Statistical analyses that only include variables for racial composition and segregation level of the county or the precinct suffer from omitted variable bias, as they fail to include a critical variable. The effects of omitted variable bias, in addition to the possible conditional relationship between racial diversity and segregation, are potential reasons why so many mixed empirical findings exist in the racial threat literature.

²It should be noted that Key was writing at a time when racial politics in the United States were constrained to two primary groups—whites and blacks. Demographic changes have altered the ethnic and racial composition of the modern electorate. Latinos and Asians are now prominent segments of the U.S. electorate and society in general. One of the advantages in constraining our analysis to Louisiana is that the population of Louisiana is overwhelmingly composed of whites and blacks—Latinos represent less than 3 percent of the population and Asians represent less than 2 percent of the population.

Empirical Implications

The threat hypothesis articulated by Key and more recent theories of threat that are psychologically based generate a number of testable empirical predictions. Key hypothesized that whites perceiving the greatest amount of threat from African Americans would vote at the highest rate and in the most racially polarized fashion (that is, by opposing the African-American candidate of choice). Threat responses were directly related to the relative size of the African-American population in the political unit. This claim leads to the following hypothesis:

H₁: *Key's Threat Hypothesis*—white turnout increases as a function of the proportion of African Americans in the political unit.

However, several other scholars, most notably Voss (1996; Voss and Lublin, 2001; Voss and Miller, 2001), have argued that Key was fundamentally wrong and the relationship between racial diversity and political engagement runs in the other direction. This claim leads to an opposing hypothesis:

H₂: *Diversity Promotes Racial Liberalism*—white turnout decreases as a function of the proportion of African Americans in the political unit.

However, we argue that these two hypotheses are incomplete (and generate inconsistent findings) because they both ignore how groups are distributed within a political unit. If interracial contact is an important influence of racial attitudes, then residential segregation along racial lines—a phenomenon that mitigates interracial contact—is an important variable. Racial diversity mitigates racial threat if it is associated with interracial contact. Racial diversity exacerbates perceptions of threat in the absence of contact, which is conditional on the level of segregation. This leads us to our hypothesis:

H₃: *White Response to African Americans is Conditional*—the effect of racial diversity on white levels of turnout is conditional upon the level of segregation. Racial diversity induces threat in the absence of interracial contact but produces more liberal attitudes if diversity is associated with low levels of segregation.

Data, Research Design, and Statistical Results

We are seeking to explain how the geographic distribution of racial minorities affects variations in the rates of white voter turnout. Following numerous studies of racial politics (Giles and Buckner, 1993; Giles and Hertz, 1994; Liu, 2001; Voss, 1996), we test our hypotheses in Louisiana. Louisiana has qualities that make it an attractive choice for analysts: the state has the second-largest proportion of African Americans in the United States (ensuring the potential for variance in demography) and Louisiana reports postelection

turnout statistics by race and party affiliation. Our data set incorporates information from nearly every voting precinct in the state of Louisiana.³ Our analysis makes use of three state-wide elections in Louisiana: the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections as well as demographic data from the 2000 and 2010 Censuses (State of Louisiana, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d; U.S. Census, 2010).

We focus on voter turnout as our outcome of interest. Key's initial observation was that whites perceiving the highest degree of threat voted at the highest rate and supported candidates that opposed African-American interests. The expectation that individuals who experience the greatest perception of threat will turn out to vote at the highest rate is fairly noncontroversial. The debate in the literature is what geographic distribution of whites and blacks will produce perceptions of threat among whites. Is diversity on the neighborhood or the county level associated with patterns of white voting behavior? What role does segregation play in conditioning the effect of racial diversity on white voting patterns? Our analysis will attempt to answer these questions.

Measurement of the Dependent Variable—White Turnout

Measuring turnout by race is straightforward as the state of Louisiana provides the number of registered voters and voters by race on the precinct level.⁴ Knowing the exact voter turnout by race eliminates any potential problems we might have that would be caused by unobserved differences in voter turnout across racial groups. We calculate turnout by race on the precinct level as the following:⁵

$$T_{ij} = \frac{V_{ij}}{R_{ij}}.$$

Measurement of the Independent Variables

Our strategy for measuring an individual's racial environment is multidimensional and our approach should be seen as a departure from previous

³It should be noted that Hurricane Katrina caused a widespread displacement of voters in 2006. We utilize data from the 2010 census (opposed to the pre-Katrina 2000 data) to account for post-Katrina population movement. Coverage by parish increases with each subsequent election, with the least coverage in 2000 and the most in 2008. Missing data were due to an inability to match state-level precinct reporting with U.S. Census geographic data in some cases. The authors made numerous calls to parish and state-level authorities in an attempt to resolve inconsistencies, but it was not always possible to do so.

⁴These data are official registration and postelection statistics compiled and published by the Louisiana Secretary of States. They are available at <<http://www.sos.la.gov/>>.

⁵Where V is total voting, R is total registered voters, i are the racial groups, and j are precincts.

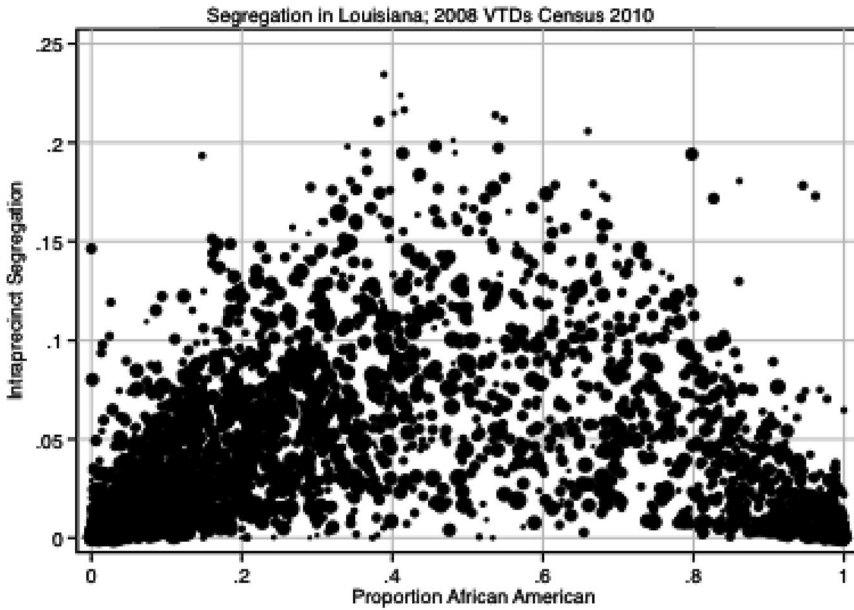
studies. The basic building blocks of our analysis are the precinct-level and parish-level proportions of African Americans. These are our most basic measures of white voters' racial environments. However, precincts do not exist in spatial isolation; they do not form relevant political or social boundaries. They are administrative tools for collecting votes. Few studies of racial politics speak to the theoretical relevance of the precinct; most analysts utilize the racial composition of the precinct out of convenience. Precinct-level voting and demographic data are often available and are amenable to analysis, but ultimately it is an individual's racial environment at large, opposed to the precinct narrowly defined, that is of interest to scholars. To create a more valid measure of an individual's racial environment, we use GIS software to measure the racial composition of adjacent precincts. We create a variable containing the mean racial composition (weighted by population) of adjacent precincts. This represents a more nuanced picture of an individual's racial environment, measuring a broader but still closely related context.⁶

$$B_i = \frac{\sum w_j(x_{ij})}{n_{ij}}$$

The levels of racial heterogeneity on the precinct and parish levels are both important components to measure in our attempt to capture the racial environment of voters. These measures of racial heterogeneity are averages; they are limited because they do not reveal anything about how group members are distributed. For instance, the distribution of individuals in a precinct that is 50 percent African American can range from completely integrated to completely separate. We expect to observe different types of political behavior in these precincts despite the fact that they are both 50 percent African American. To account for this possibility, we are including a measure of segregation on the precinct level as well as a measure of segregation on the county level. In order to capture the level of segregation within the precinct, we calculate the population variance of the racial composition of the constituent census blocks that comprise the voting precinct. Blocks that are different from one another will increase the variance. For instance, if a voting district is composed of two blocks of equal population, both of which are half black and half white, the variance will be zero. If a voting district were composed of two blocks of equal population, one 10 percent white and another 90 percent white, the variance would be 0.16 and we would consider this to be a highly segregated voting precinct. This measure captures racial segregation at the neighborhood level (the smallest available) and aggregates it up to the voting precinct (the smallest available to which we can attach political outcomes). In this way, we make the most effective use of data at the levels that we think are

⁶Where i is a precinct, j is a neighborhood of adjacent precincts, x is the proportion of blacks in a precinct, w is the proportion of a neighborhood of adjacent precincts' population residing in a particular precinct, and n is the number of precincts in a group of adjacent precincts.

FIGURE 1
Intraprecinct Segregation



important: individuals' experiences at the geographic level with which they are most knowledgeable and familiar. The formula used to construct our measure is depicted below:

$$\text{Variance} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n w_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2.$$

The strength of this measure is that it differentiates heterogeneous precincts that are internally segregated from precincts that are truly mixed racially and allows us to assess a theoretically relevant concept in a fine-grained way. We utilize the same formula for calculating segregation on the parish level; only we utilize the precincts (opposed to the census blocks) as the building block of our measure.⁷ Figure 1 displays the distribution of segregation across precincts using the 2010 Census data.

⁷There are numerous measures that scholars have utilized to measure segregation. For a more in-depth discussion of these measures, please consult the online appendix that accompanies this article. It can be found at <<http://joshzinger.com/Papers.html>>.

Control Variables

We include a number of precinct-level control variables that might affect turnout rates in addition to the five measures chose to measure an individual's racial environment. First, we include a variable for the median white income of the precinct. Income is generally positively associated with the propensity to vote (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980); therefore, we include income in our model. We control for the percentage of people in a precinct that have some amount of college education and for the median age in the precinct. To control for other potential differences due to Creole and Cajun culture, French language, and Catholicism, which are more common in the southern areas of the state, we include precinct latitude in our model.

Statistical Models

We are interested in how white voters' turnout varies according to the racial environment that they inhabit. In the previous section, we laid out our strategy for measuring our dependent variable, turnout, as well as our primary independent variables, the proportion of the precinct that is African American, the mean racial composition of the adjoining precincts, the proportion of the county that is African American, residential segregation on the precinct level, and, finally, racial segregation on the county level. In this section, we outline our strategy for incorporating these variables into a statistical analysis. We need to know if there is a systematic geographic component to variations in white turnout. Specifically, we want to know if that systematic component can be tied to propensity for interracial contact, which could mitigate white perceptions of racial threat. Our dependent variable is the proportion of white voters in a precinct that turn out to vote. We utilize a series of hierarchical linear models to test our hypotheses. We adopt a hierarchical modeling strategy because our units of analysis are precincts that are nested within parishes. Analyzing multilevel data with a more conventional OLS model can lead to inefficient estimates, misestimated standard errors, and ultimately a greater chance of committing Type 1 error (Rocha and Espino, 2009:421; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2001). The hierarchical structure of the data is displayed in Table 1A. Precinct-level variables are labeled as level 1, while parish-level variables are labeled as level 2.

The strength of a hierarchical model is that a hierarchical model partitions the variance of the dependent variable by level—our model partitions the variance in between the precinct and parish level. A simple analysis of the variance using the 2008 data reveals that 84 percent of the variance is due to differences across precincts, while the remaining 16 percent of the variance is accounted for by differences between parishes.⁸ We utilize a random intercepts

⁸Seventy-seven percent of the variance is due to differences between precincts in 2004 and 78 percent of the variance is due to between-precincts differences in 2000.

TABLE 1A
Summary Statistics 2008

	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Median	Min	Max
Level 1 Variables						
White turnout	3382	0.65	0.15	0.68	0.00	1.00
Precinct % African American	3382	0.33	0.34	0.19	0.00	1.00
Intraprecinct segregation	3382	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.23
Adjacent precincts % African American	3382	0.35	0.26	0.29	0.00	0.99
Republican two-party %	3382	0.57	0.31	0.69	0.00	0.98
Median white income (thousands of dollars)	3382	26.78	10.23	24.94	0.00	201.7
Mean age, voting-age population	3382	46.39	2.50	46.65	31.82	57.55
Percentage with college education	3382	0.43	0.14	0.40	0.13	0.93
Level 2 Variables						
Parish % African American	3382	0.33	0.15	0.31	0.02	0.69
Parish segregation	3382	0.091	0.36	0.1	0.004	0.18

TABLE 1B
Summary Statistics 2000

	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Median	Min	Max
Level 1 Variables						
White turnout	2929	0.63	0.14	0.65	0.00	1.00
Precinct % African American	2929	0.30	0.34	0.14	0.00	1.00
Intraprecinct segregation	2929	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.23
Adjacent precincts % African American	2929	0.34	0.27	0.28	0.00	1.00
Republican two-party %	2929	0.50	0.26	0.58	0.00	1.00
Median white income (thousands of dollars)	2929	18.75	7.17	17.15	0.00	108.11
Mean age, VAP	2929	45.14	2.39	45.24	30.65	52.96
Percentage with college education	2929	0.39	0.15	0.34	0.13	0.90
Level 2 Variables						
Parish % African American	2929	0.34	0.18	0.32	0.04	0.67
Parish segregation	2929	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.002	0.15

model—in addition to the parish-level variables—to account for between-parish variations in the mean level of white turnout. In models 1, 2, and 3 we include all of the variables mentioned above but omit interaction terms for the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. These basic models establish

an empirical baseline. In models 4, 5, and 6 we include the same set of variables from the first three models and add two interaction terms. The first interaction is between African-American share of the precinct and precinct-level segregation. The second interaction is between African-American share of the precinct and parish. We include these interaction terms in order to test whether the effect of racial diversity on white turnout is conditional upon the level of segregation.

Results

We start the summary of our statistical results by assessing the coefficients in models 1, 2, and 3. These models show that white voter mobilization increases as the proportion of the African Americans in the parish increases. When we increase the percentage of the parish populated by African Americans from 0 to 66 percent (a range of 1 *SD* above and below the mean) white turnout increased 21 percent in 2000. In 2008, the magnitude of this effect peaked, as whites were 23.1 percent more likely to turn out in parishes that were 66 percent African American compared to whites in homogeneously white parishes. This effect is seemingly consistent with Key's threat hypothesis (H_1).⁹

The effect of diversity on the precinct level runs in the opposite direction of racial diversity on the parish level. Whites in racially heterogeneous precincts are generally less likely to turn out to vote compared to white voters in all white precincts—although in the absence of the interaction term the significance of this relationship varies. The results of our models show that whites in diverse precincts were not significantly less likely in 2000 and 2004, but 13 (in 2008) percent less likely to turn out in precincts that were 66 percent (1 *SD* above the mean) African American compared to all white precincts (1 *SD* below the mean) holding all other variables at their means and modes. These findings provide limited confirmatory evidence that racial diversity can mitigate white political backlash in the form of higher turnout (H_2)—however, it is necessary to assess the affect role that segregation plays on both the parish and precinct level before jumping to conclusions.

High levels of segregation are associated with increased white turnout on the precinct level. In 2000, whites in a precinct with no internal segregation (between-block variance of 0) were 3.6 percent less likely to vote than an individual in a precinct with a considerable internal segregation score of 0.11 (2 *SD* above the mean). In 2008, this effect was even stronger and white individuals were 6.2 percent less likely to vote in a precinct with no segregation compared to a precinct with an internal segregation score of 0.11. Thus far we have established that racial diversity on the parish level is associated with increased levels of white turnout and that racial diversity on the precinct level

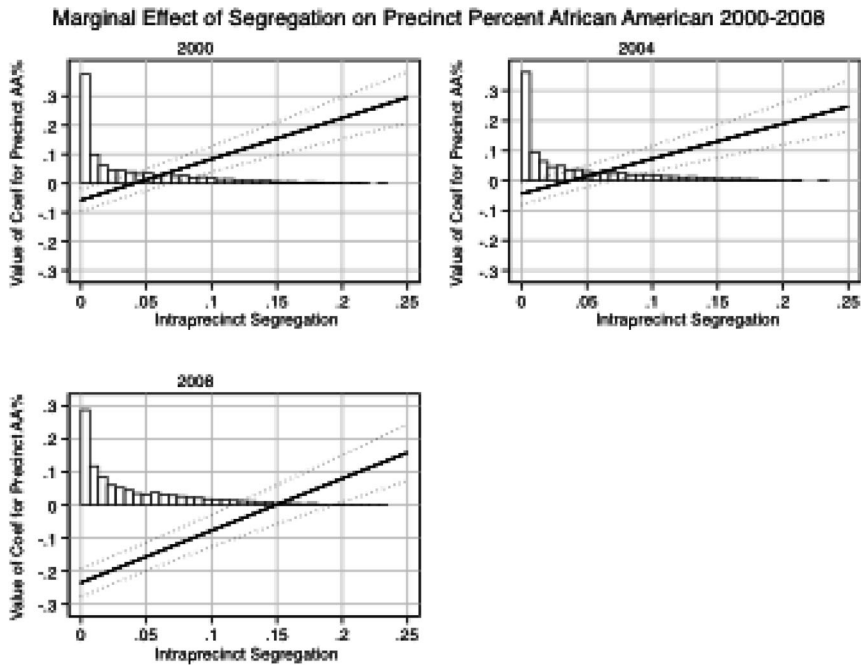
⁹The results of the models are very similar when the models are run as weighted least squares (WLS) regressions opposed to hierarchical linear models.

is associated with lower levels of white turnout. We interpret these results as a product of reduced threat due to increased amounts interracial contact in diverse neighborhoods. To assess that possibility, we include a pair of interaction terms in models 4 through 6: first, an interaction term between precinct-level segregation and precinct percent African American, second an interaction term between parish-level segregation and parish percent African American.

Including the pair of interaction terms improves the fit of our models of turnout for all three elections. The coefficients for the precinct-level interaction term are all statistically significant across all three elections. However, it is not possible to evaluate the substantive effects of the interaction terms by viewing the regression table; the interaction term makes coefficient for precinct diversity vary as a function of the conditioning variable, segregation (Brambor, Clark, and Golder, 2006). We therefore present the marginal effects (from models 4–6) of segregation on racial diversity on the precinct level in Figure 2. The ranges of values for segregation displayed in the marginal effects graphs are limited to values of segregation that actually occur in the data.

The level of segregation in the geographic unit conditions the effect of racial diversity on white voter turnout. Racial diversity on the precinct level is associated with a lower rate of white voter turnout—at low and moderate levels of intraprecinct segregation. The magnitude of this effect is both substantively large and consistent. In 2008 the effect of the interaction term is negative across the majority of values for segregation—however, the magnitude of the coefficient diminishes as the level of segregation increases and the coefficient becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero at high levels of intraprecinct segregation. In 2000 and 2004, the effect of percent African Americans on the precinct level is negative and significant at low levels of segregation and positive and significant at high levels of segregation. Racial diversity must be associated with interracial contact in order to produce a liberalizing effect on white attitudes—otherwise, the presence of minority populations can evoke threat responses among whites. While the magnitude and significance of the diversity and segregation coefficients vary in models 1 through 3, the effect of the interaction term is stable—indicating that a potential reason why there were so many mixed findings in the existing literature is because the majority of previous studies fail to account for the effect of residential segregation. The effect of the interaction between racial diversity and segregation on the parish level is smaller, both statistically and substantively, than the effect of the interaction between racial diversity and segregation on the precinct level. The effect of this interaction term never reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. A possible explanation for why the parish-level interaction term never reaches statistical significance is that the majority of the variance is between precincts opposed to between parishes, and that the effect of segregation is largely felt on the precinct level—highly segregated precincts aggregate into segregated parishes. Disaggregating parishes into the constituent precincts likely mitigates the effect of the interaction on the parish level.

FIGURE 2
Marginal Effects Plots 2000–2008



The coefficients for the control variables are in the expected direction. The median age, white income, and percent of the precinct with some college education are all positively and statistically significantly associated with white turnout. These associations are statistically significant across all of the models. In addition, the coefficients for latitude variable are negative and significant across the series of models. This finding suggests that white turnout is higher in the northern Anglo/Protestant region of the state than in the southern French/Catholic region.

While it is important to assess the effects of the variables individually, it is also important to assess the joint effect of the variables on the outcome of interest: white turnout. Table 2 displays the predicted values from model 6 when the theoretically relevant variables are set to different values.¹⁰ The predicted values illustrate several important relationships—diversity on the precinct level is associated with lower turnout—but diversity at the parish

¹⁰Intraprecinct segregation is set to its 5th, median, and 95th percent values. Percent African American in the precinct is set to the 5th, median, and 95th percent values. Percentage African American in the parish is set to the 5th, median, and 95th percent values. Parish-level segregation is fixed at the mean value. The values for all other variables are set to their respective means and modes.

TABLE 2

Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) Models Regressing White Turnout on Precinct-Level Racial Composition and Segregation

	2000	2004	2008	2000— Interactive	2004— Interactive	2008— Interactive
Precinct % African American (AA)	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.013 (0.018)	-0.2*** (0.022)	-0.058*** (0.020)	-0.044** (0.018)	-0.24*** (0.022)
Intraprecinct segregation	0.33*** (0.048)	0.41*** (0.042)	0.56*** (0.044)	-0.17** (0.081)	-0.0049 (0.075)	-0.091 (0.082)
Adjoining precinct % AA	0.033** (0.013)	0.0022 (0.012)	0.011 (0.012)	0.061*** (0.014)	0.025** (0.013)	0.039*** (0.012)
Rep two-party vote	0.27*** (0.024)	0.25*** (0.023)	0.047** (0.024)	0.28*** (0.024)	0.27*** (0.023)	0.065*** (0.024)
Median white income	0.003*** (0.0004)	0.003*** (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.003*** (0.0004)	0.003*** (0.0004)	0.0002 (0.0002)
Latitude	-0.024*** (0.0046)	-0.02*** (0.004)	-0.002 (0.0054)	-0.024*** (0.0045)	-0.017*** (0.0043)	0.0001 (0.005)
Median white age	0.0062*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)
Percentage with HS diploma	0.091*** (0.024)	0.13*** (0.022)	0.21*** (0.021)	0.081*** (0.024)	0.12*** (0.022)	0.2*** (0.021)
Orleans Parish	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.033)	-0.22*** (0.043)	-0.16*** (0.038)	-0.12*** (0.034)	-0.20*** (0.045)
Pct % AA × Inter-Pct seg				1.42*** (0.18)	1.17*** (0.17)	1.58*** (0.17)
Parish % AA	0.33*** (0.054)	0.27*** (0.05)	0.35*** (0.058)	0.27*** (0.08)	0.31*** (0.07)	0.39*** (0.09)
Parish segregation	-0.55*** (0.19)	-0.48*** (0.17)	-0.56** (0.23)	-0.71** (0.34)	-0.16 (0.30)	-0.28 (0.35)
Parish % AA*Parish seg				0.71 (0.99)	-0.77 (0.67)	-0.68 (0.87)
Constant	0.8*** (0.14)	0.82*** (0.13)	0.25 (0.16)	0.83*** (0.13)	0.77*** (0.13)	0.19 (0.17)
Observations	2,929	3,298	3,382	2,929	3,298	3,382
Number of groups	52	61	64	52	61	64

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 3
Predicted Values for White Turnout from Model 6

	Parish Proportion AA—Low (0.11)			Parish Proportion AA—Median (0.31)			Parish Proportion AA—High (0.6)		
	Precinct 5% AA	Precinct 19% AA	Precinct 59% AA	Precinct 5% AA	Precinct 19% AA	Precinct 59% AA	Precinct 5% AA	Precinct 19% AA	Precinct 59% AA
Precinct segregation low (0.02)	65.7%	62.8%	54.7%	73.3%	70.4%	62.3%	84.3%	81.5%	73.3%
Precinct segregation moderate (0.06)	65.6%	63.4%	58.1%	73.2%	71.3%	65.7%	84.3%	82.3%	76.7%
Precinct segregation high (0.13)	65.6%	65.1%	63.9%	73.2%	72.7%	71.5%	84.2%	83.8%	82.5%

level is associated with higher white turnout. These competing effects make sense because few whites live in diverse precincts even in racially diverse counties—limiting the opportunities for interracial contact. The importance of interracial contact is driven home by the effect that intraprecinct segregation has on the predicted rate of white turnout. Our model predicts that white turnout is roughly 10 percentage points higher in highly segregated precincts opposed to precincts with low levels of segregation. Moreover, the predicted turnout rates in this table illustrate the complex relationship between racial diversity and white voting behavior.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of our analysis confirm that whites’ turnout varies as a function of their racial context. Racial diversity has the potential to decrease or increase white turnout depending on how the variables’ effects combine with one another to produce an aggregate outcome. Our analysis certainly does not universally support Key’s hypothesis, but it does provide an explanation as to why Key might have found his hypothesized relationship while others have found an opposite relationship between racial diversity and white political behavior. The absolute level of racial diversity within a political unit and how the groups are distributed relative to one another both matter for shaping white turnout.

One dimension of the relationship between the geographic distribution of whites and minority population that we left unexplored is residential selection. While there is considerable evidence, including the findings of this analysis, that interracial contact is an important determinant of racial attitudes, individuals might select into interracial contact nonrandomly. Individuals with more liberal racial attitudes might be more willing to live in diverse settings

and interact with members of the other racial groups. Previous studies have established that interracial contact has a distinct effect on racial attitudes that are distinct from any type of residential selection effect (Oliver and Wong, 2003), but there is nothing in our research design that suggests that our findings are not the product of both self-selection and interracial contact. Separating these two potentially reinforcing processes is a promising direction for future analyses.

While we are confident about the general premises that our argument rests upon, we test our argument in one state in the Deep South. It is possible that our findings fail to generalize outside the South. The relationship between African Americans and whites in the South is unique (at least in the context of the United States) and it is certainly possible that the level of racial polarization observed between whites and blacks in Louisiana does not extend to other racial and ethnic groups in the same fashion (Voss, 2001). However, racial segregation is even more prominent in many northern U.S. cities and states than it is in the South (Massey and Denton, 1993), which raises the possibility that the relationships that we observe in Louisiana will be even stronger in other parts of the country.

The argument and empirical evidence presented in this article hopefully brings some clarity to the mixed empirical findings that exist in the literature on racial threat. The magnitude and direction of the effect of racial diversity are not universal; these qualities of the effect are conditional upon how the groups are distributed geographically. The degree of segregation matters a great deal. Our evidence suggests that familiarity certainly does not breed contempt, but cursory interaction may also do little to encourage harmony.

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