

Linking Geographically-Mediated Racial Threat and Racial Resentment

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In recent years, the utility of the racial resentment scale for measuring specifically racialized attitudes of white Americans has come into question. This visualization shows that—despite these critiques—racial resentment is highest in precisely the parts of the country where geographically mediated threat is most salient: the whitest parts of the least-white states. This link between threat and resentment provides a helpful way for thinking about these two distinct but related theoretical concepts together.

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In recent years, the theoretical concept of geographically mediated racial threat has been advanced in sociology and the other social sciences (e.g. Andrews and Seguin, 2015). The basic premise of the theory is that local *and* supralocal conditions matter for race relations. Andrews and Seguin (2015), for instance, demonstrate that white counties in Michigan were more likely to adopt “dry laws” in the early 20th century if they bordered counties with many immigrants. Morris (2023) similarly shows that in the aftermath of the 2020 election, lawmakers representing very white parts of racially diverse states were the most active on restricting access to voting. The logic extends to other policies: white areas of racially diverse states might face competition in state legislatures with nonwhite citizens over issues like education and social welfare programs.

But what psychological tools do white Americans rely on to translate the feeling of threat into acceptable reasons to discriminate against nonwhite citizens? This visualization shows that racial resentment plays a key role. For nearly three decades, the concept of *racial resentment* has been central to the social scientific study of white Americans’ attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities—and, in particular, Black Americans. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the racial resentment, or symbolic racism, scale was developed to capture shifts in whites’ attitudes away from beliefs about the “biological inferiority” of Black Americans to a belief in their undeservingness and their violations of the Protestant work ethic (see Kinder and Sears, 1981; Kinder and Sanders, 1996).

If racial resentment presented an acceptable way to “launder” a desire to discriminate in response to racial threat, we would expect to see racial resentment—the feeling that nonwhite Americans do not deserve the government support they receive—in areas where racial threat is highest.

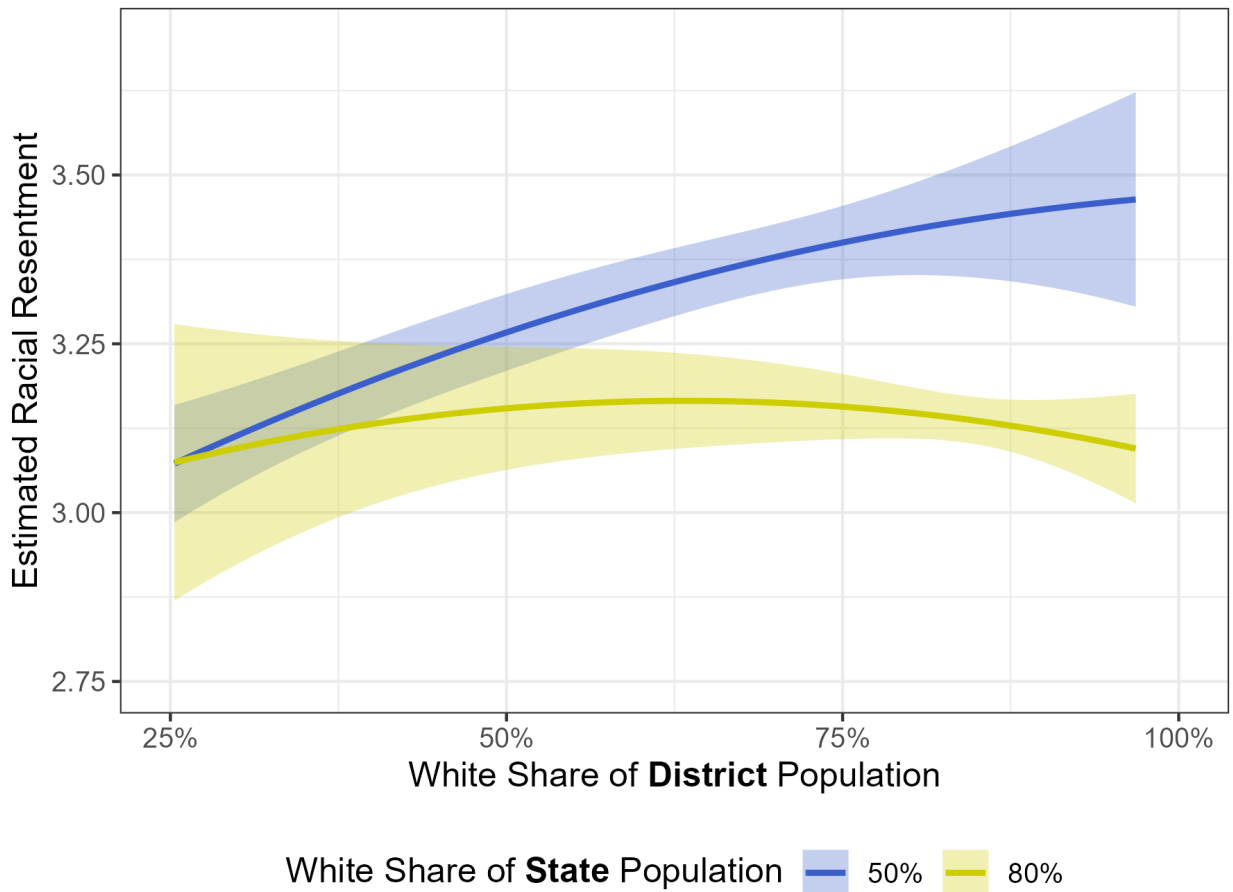
This visualization makes clear that this is precisely what is happening. The visualization presents the marginal effects plot of an ordinary least squares regression, where resentment is regressed on the interaction of state and local racial demographics. All other covariates are held at their means. Net of these other covariates (income, age, education, and

population density), state- and local-racial characteristics interact to predict local-level racial resentment among whites in state senate districts around the country. I focus specifically on state legislative districts, because it is through representatives elected in these districts that political competition is organized at supralocal level.

The whitest parts of very white states—where white Americans are in competition with minorities at neither the local nor state level—have relatively low levels of racial threat. Racial resentment is highest, meanwhile, in the homogeneous white enclaves of racially-diverse states. Regardless of the state characteristics, however, whites living in diverse areas have low levels of resentment.

The racial resentment scale has been critiqued many times as mapping not onto racial attitudes, but other characteristics like opposition to government programs (Feldman and Huddy, 2005), general conservatism (Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986), or commitments to fairness (Carney and Enos, 2017). Recently, Davis and Wilson (2021) provided a new scale that clears some of the muddiness surrounding the measure. Nevertheless, the tight link uncovered here between geographically mediated threat and racial resentment demonstrates that the classical resentment scale remains an important way for white Americans to justify supporting policies like cutting the social safety net when threatened by the political power of nonwhite Americans.

Figure 1: Racial Resentment is Highest Where Geographically Mediated Racial Threat is Most Salient



This figure indicates that racial resentment is highest in the whitest parts of the least white states—areas, in other words, where whites do not interact with racial and ethnic minorities, but are in political conflict with nonwhite Americans at one level up (i.e., the State Senate).

Racial resentment scores come from white respondents to the 2018 and 2020 waves of the Cooperative Election study (rake weighted to the legislative district). Demographic characteristics come from the 2017–2021 5-year ACS estimates.

Covariates include district income (logged), median age, share with an associate’s degree or higher, and population density (logged). 99% confidence intervals plotted.

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