

The impact of school desegregation on individuals' racial attitudes and politics

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Background:

School integration has again risen to the forefront of political debate (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Research shows that black students attending more racially integrated schools experience more positive outcomes (e.g., Guryan, 2004; Johnson, 2011). Yet efforts to desegregate face legal (e.g., *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007) and social (e.g., opposition to busing; white flight, see Reber, 2005) challenges. Furthermore, black students may experience negative unintended consequences when attending less intensely segregated nonwhite schools (Bergman, 2018).

Potential “spillover” effects of school integration, however, may help reduce long-term racial disparities. Intergroup contact resulting from integration may change racial attitudes (Allport, 1954). These changes may subsequently reduce the discrimination against and stereotyping of blacks in schools (Quinn, 2017) and the labor market (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), or increase support for policies targeting racial inequities (e.g., affirmative action). Yet very few rigorous studies confirm the impact of intergroup contact on racial attitudes (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2018). Though some studies in education lend empirical evidence for its basic tenets (e.g., Boisjoly, Duncan, Kremer, Levy, & Eccles, 2006; Shen, 2018), only Merlino, Steinhardt, and Wren-Lewis (2019) show diverse school environments to positively impact racial attitudes. Given the cost of integration, more research is needed that explores its theoretical spillover effects.

Research Questions:

In this study, I ask:

1. What is the impact of court-mandated school desegregation on white individuals' racial attitudes and politics at adulthood?
2. What is the relationship between: (a) black adults' educational attainment and labor market outcomes and (b) the racial attitudes and politics of white adults living in the same county?

Contact theory argues increased exposure between black and white students will change racial attitudes. Yet mandated integration may not have fostered the intergroup cooperation necessary for successful intergroup contact (Allport, 1954), and within-school segregation (Moody, 2001) and white flight from desegregated districts (Reber, 2005) may have limited contact. Furthermore, existing research does not predict whether changes in attitudes persist into adulthood and translate into changes in politics (Paluck et al., 2018). This study contributes to existing literature by providing evidence on these questions.

Data:

I use data from two sources. Data compiled by the American Communities Project at Brown University identifies districts ever under court order to desegregate (my analytic sample) and the year of each district’s earliest order. Following Johnson (2011), I leverage the timing of orders to identify quasi-random variation in “exposure” to desegregation across cohorts of students. Prior research shows a significant decrease in black-white segregation in schools following court-mandated desegregation.

The second data source is the General Social Survey (GSS), a near-annual nationally representative survey. Using GSS respondent geocode data, I identify white adults who live in counties where districts were mandated to desegregate ($n_{counties} \approx 150$). I consider their responses to survey items describing racial attitudes and politics; see Table 1 for measure descriptions.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Research Design:

To identify the impact of school desegregation, I estimate the following model:

$$Y_{ijkt} = \alpha + \beta_1 Exposed_{ijkt} + \beta_2 Stay_{ijkt} + \beta_3 (Exposed_{ijkt} \times Stay_{ijkt}) + \lambda_j + \gamma_{kt} + \varepsilon_{ijkt} \quad (1)$$

Y_{ijkt} captures the attitudes or politics of survey respondent i living in county j where schools were ordered to desegregate; k identifies the cohort (the year when s/he turned 18), and t identifies the survey year (note that k and t together identifies a respondent’s age). I cluster standard errors at the county level and, for simplicity, I rescale all outcomes as z -scores.

For each respondent, I identify exposure to desegregated schools ($Exposed_{ijkt}$) and place of residence at 16 years old ($Stay_{ijkt}$). Those who turned 18 years old *after* the year of court-mandated desegregation in his or her current county of residence are considered exposed. Place of residence is determined using responses to the GSS.

Differences in outcomes between individuals exposed and not exposed (i.e., β_1 , the first difference in a differences-in-differences [DD] strategy) may be attributable to contemporaneous shifts between cohorts. I thus compare changes in attitudes and politics for those who lived in the same city at 16 years old (i.e., those plausibly exposed to desegregated schools) to those that moved from a different state (i.e., β_3 , the second DD difference). Prior research often considers how mobility influences estimates, as data linking adults to their districts as students is rare. Consequently, I also share results without disaggregating impacts to identify the influence of mobility.

Finally, I include county fixed effects (λ_j) and cohort-by-survey-year fixed effects (γ_{jt}) in the model. The former accounts for county-specific differences in attitudes and politics, and the latter provide another control for contemporaneous trends in outcomes by considering outcomes from individuals in the same cohort living in comparison counties.

Results:

In Figures 1 through 5, I plot the impact estimates of exposure to desegregated schools and their 95% confidence intervals. These estimates are all displayed in Table 2.

[Insert Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 here.]

[Insert Table 2 here.]

From these figures, several patterns emerge. First, the mobility of white individuals from childhood to adulthood matters; estimates differ for several measures after accounting for mobility. Second, exposure to desegregated schools increased republicanism and decreased voting for democratic presidential candidates (Figure 1). Third, exposure improved white adults' racial attitudes toward blacks (Figure 2). Fourth, exposure had surprisingly little effect on support for social policies targeting inequalities, despite these changes in attitudes (Figure 3). Fifth, exposure increased support for the freedom of speech of racists (Figure 4), but this was also true for other measures considering freedom of speech (Figure 5).

Conclusions:

As predicted by contact theory, exposure did improve the long-term racial attitudes of white individuals. However, these improvements did not necessarily change their policy preferences. In fact, exposed individuals were more likely to identify as Republican—the political party that generally opposed historic policies improving racial equity like the Civil Rights Act—and were less likely to vote democratic. These surprising results suggest that the capacity for school integration to remedy racial disparities through spillover impacts on attitudes and politics may be overstated.

References

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Table 1. Outcome measures

| Variable name | Description | Scale | Mean | SD |
|------------------------------------|---|--------|-------|------|
| Panel A. Politics | | | | |
| Conservatism | Identifies as extremely conservative | [1,7] | 4.16 | 1.45 |
| Republican | Identifies as strong republican | [0,6] | 3.02 | 2 |
| Votedem | Voted (or would have voted) for democrat in last presidential election | {0,1} | 0.42 | |
| Panel B. Racial attitudes | | | | |
| Pro_blk_bias | Feels closer to blacks than whites | [-8,8] | -1.42 | 2.27 |
| Pro_blk_intl | Views blacks as more intelligent than whites | [-6,6] | -0.46 | 1.2 |
| Pro_blk_wlth | Views blacks as wealthier than whites | [-6,6] | -1.31 | 1.38 |
| Pro_blk_work | Views blacks as more hardworking than whites | [-6,6] | -0.85 | 1.52 |
| Panel C. Social policy preferences | | | | |
| Blk_face_prejudice | Blacks should overcome prejudice and work their way up without special favors (reversed) | [0,4] | 1.01 | 1.2 |
| Blk_neighbor | Lives in neighborhood with blacks | {0,1} | 0.77 | |
| Discaff | Feels that whites are hurt at work by affirmative action (reversed) | [1,3] | 2.13 | 0.71 |
| Discrimination | Believes that black-white labor market and housing market disparities are due to discrimination | {0,1} | 0.33 | |
| Gov_eq | Believes government should reduce income differences between rich and poor | [0,6] | 3.01 | 1.99 |

| | | | | |
|---------------|---|-------|------|------|
| Gov_help_blk | Believes government should help blacks because of historic discrimination | [0,4] | 1.3 | 1.2 |
| Not_cultural | Believes that black-white disparities are due to lack of motivation and will (reversed) | {0,1} | 0.49 | |
| Pro_affrmaact | Strongly supports preferential hiring and promotions of blacks | [0,2] | 0.55 | 0.72 |
| Spend_blk | Believes government is not spending enough to improve the condition of blacks | [0,2] | 1.12 | 0.72 |

Panel D. Free speech

| | | | | |
|--------------|---|-------|------|--|
| Colrac | Believes that a racist should be allowed to teach at college/university | {0,1} | 0.51 | |
| Librac | Believes that a racist's book should not be removed from a library | {0,1} | 0.69 | |
| Spkrac | Believes that a racist should be allowed to make a community speech | {0,1} | 0.65 | |
| Speech_rac | Average of colrac, librac, and spkrac | [0,1] | 0.62 | |
| Speech_ath | The same as speech_rac, but for atheists | [0,1] | 0.73 | |
| Speech_hmsxl | The same as speech_rac, but for homosexuals | [0,1] | 0.82 | |
| Speech_mil | The same as speech_rac, but for militarists | [0,1] | 0.66 | |

Table 2. Impact of exposure to desegregated schools on outcomes

| | M1: Combined | M2: Disaggregated | |
|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| | | Beta2 | Beta3 |
| Conservatism | .04 (.06) | .04 (.07) | .01 (.06) |
| Republican | .03 (.06) | -.04 (.07) | .15* (.06) |
| Votedem | -.03 (.06) | .02 (.07) | -.12* (.06) |
| Pro_blk_bias | -.04 (.07) | -.15~ (.08) | .20* (.09) |
| Pro_blk_intl | .06 (.08) | -.05 (.09) | .22* (.10) |
| Pro_blk_wlth | -.06 (.07) | -.12 (.08) | .12 (.08) |
| Pro_blk_work | -.08 (.09) | -.15 (.10) | .15~ (.08) |
| Blk_face_prejudice | -.15* (.07) | -.13 (.08) | -.07 (.07) |
| Blk_neighbor | .06 (.06) | .04 (.06) | .03 (.05) |
| Discaff | -.01 (.08) | -.03 (.09) | .03 (.08) |
| Discrimination | .08 (.06) | .11 (.07) | -.07 (.07) |
| Gov_eq | -.04 (.07) | -.02 (.08) | -.03 (.07) |
| Gov_help_blk | -.05 (.07) | -.06 (.08) | .01 (.08) |
| Not_cultural | -.01 (.08) | -.02 (.09) | .01 (.07) |
| Pro_affrmact | -.11~ (.06) | -.09 (.06) | -.06 (.07) |
| Spend_blk | .01 (.10) | -.06 (.11) | .13 (.09) |
| Colrac | .05 (.08) | .02 (.08) | .07 (.07) |

| | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Librac | -0.07 (.09) | -0.13 (.10) | .11~ (.07) |
| Spkrac | .00 (.08) | -0.06 (.08) | .11 (.07) |
| Speech_rac | -0.02 (.09) | -0.08 (.09) | .13~ (.07) |
| Speech_ath | -0.06 (.09) | -0.10 (.10) | .08 (.07) |
| Speech_hmsxl | -0.02 (.07) | -0.09 (.08) | .14* (.06) |
| Speech_mil | -0.09 (.08) | -0.19* (.09) | .20** (.08) |

Note: M1 does not disaggregate exposure impacts between those moving to the county after the age of 16. M2 disaggregates exposure impacts (see Equation 1). Standard errors, clustered at county level, reported in parentheses. $\sim p < .1$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

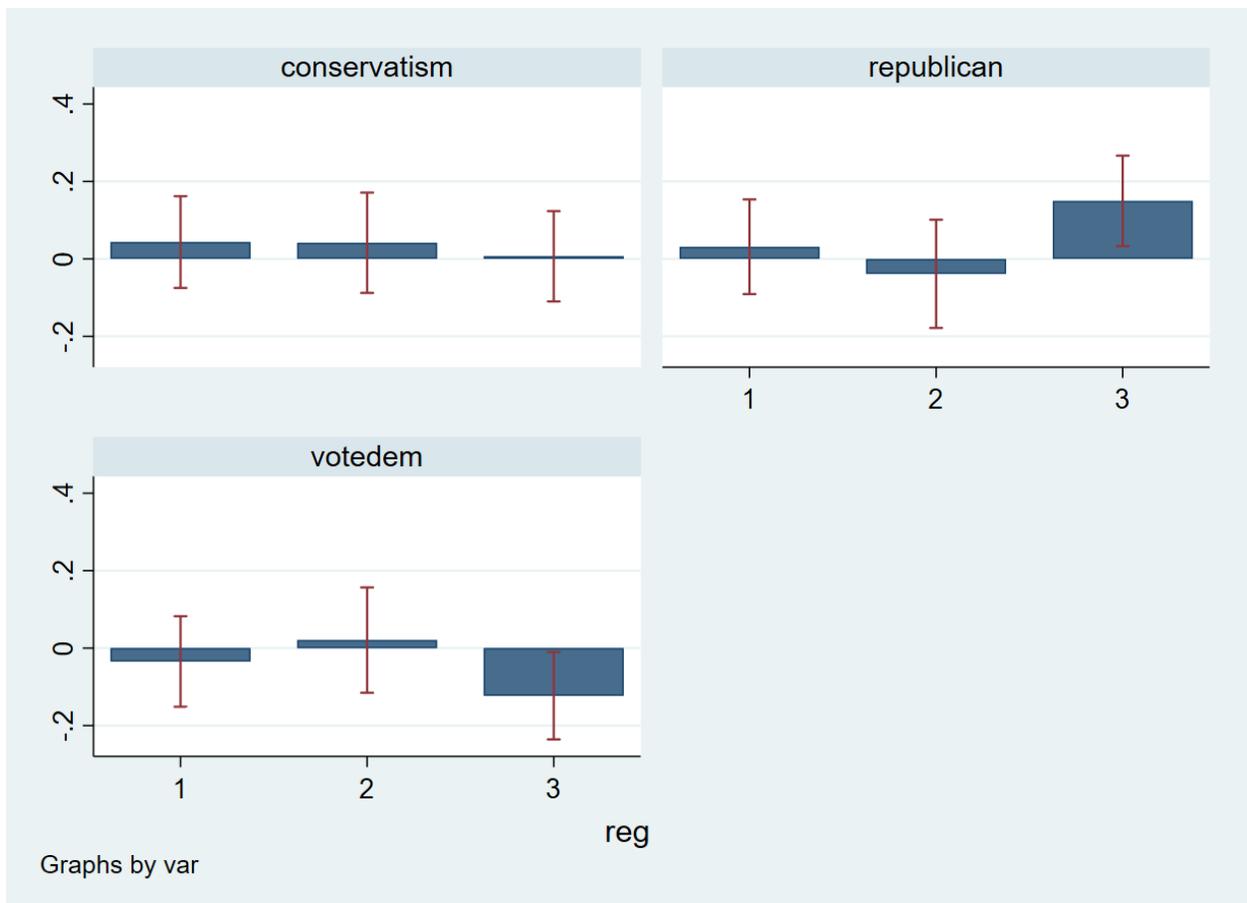


Figure 1. Impact of desegregation on politics. On the y-axis is the regression coefficient for exposure from the estimated model represented by Equation 1. The x-axis denotes different regression coefficients. 1 = effect of exposure considering both those who moved to the county as adults and those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 2 and 3 come from the same regression (Equation 1); 2 = effect of exposure for those who moved to the county as adults, 3 = the additional effect of exposure for those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 95% confidence intervals also plotted.

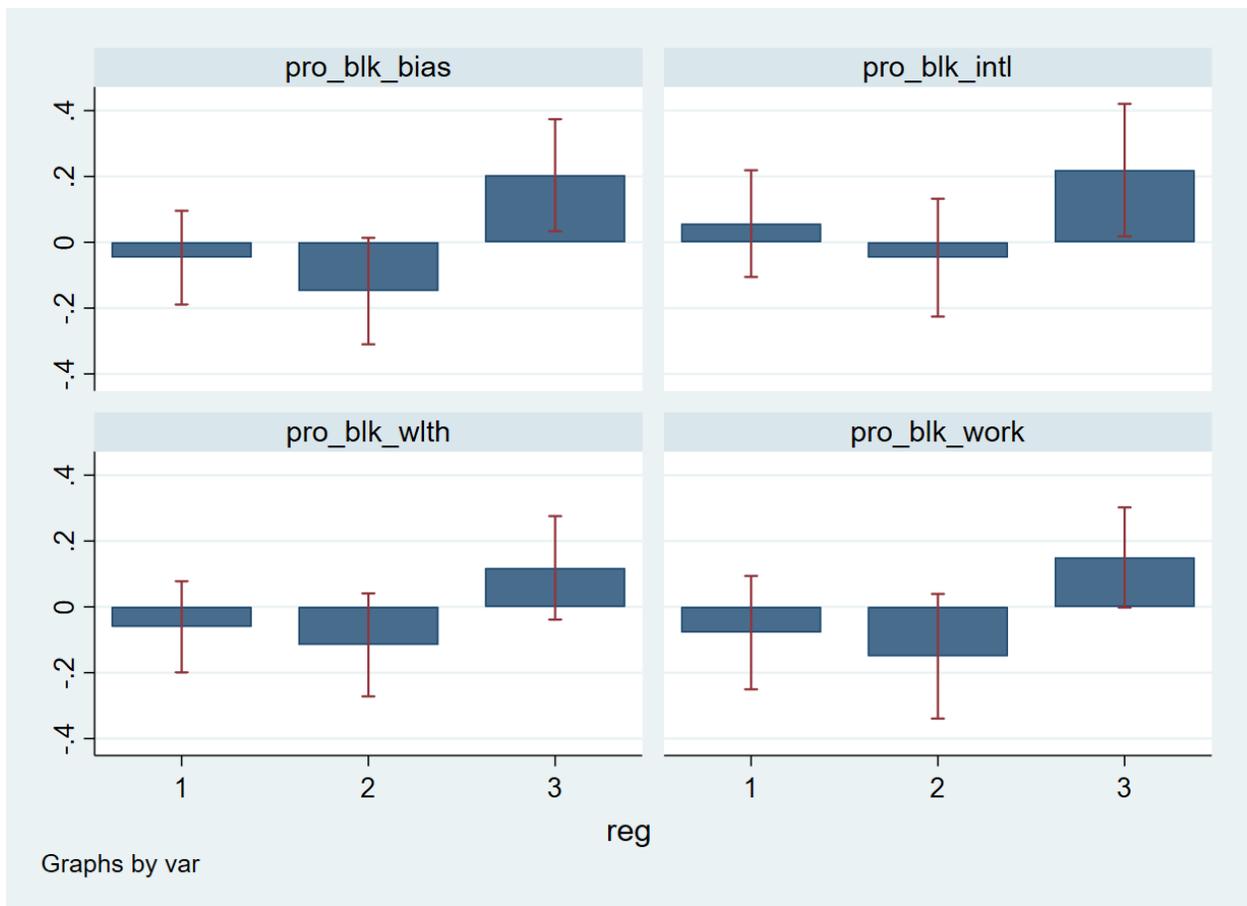


Figure 2. Impact of desegregation on racial attitudes. On the y-axis is the regression coefficient for exposure from the estimated model represented by Equation 1. The x-axis denotes different regression coefficients. 1 = effect of exposure considering both those who moved to the county as adults and those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 2 and 3 come from the same regression (Equation 1); 2 = effect of exposure for those who moved to the county as adults, 3 = the additional effect of exposure for those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 95% confidence intervals also plotted.

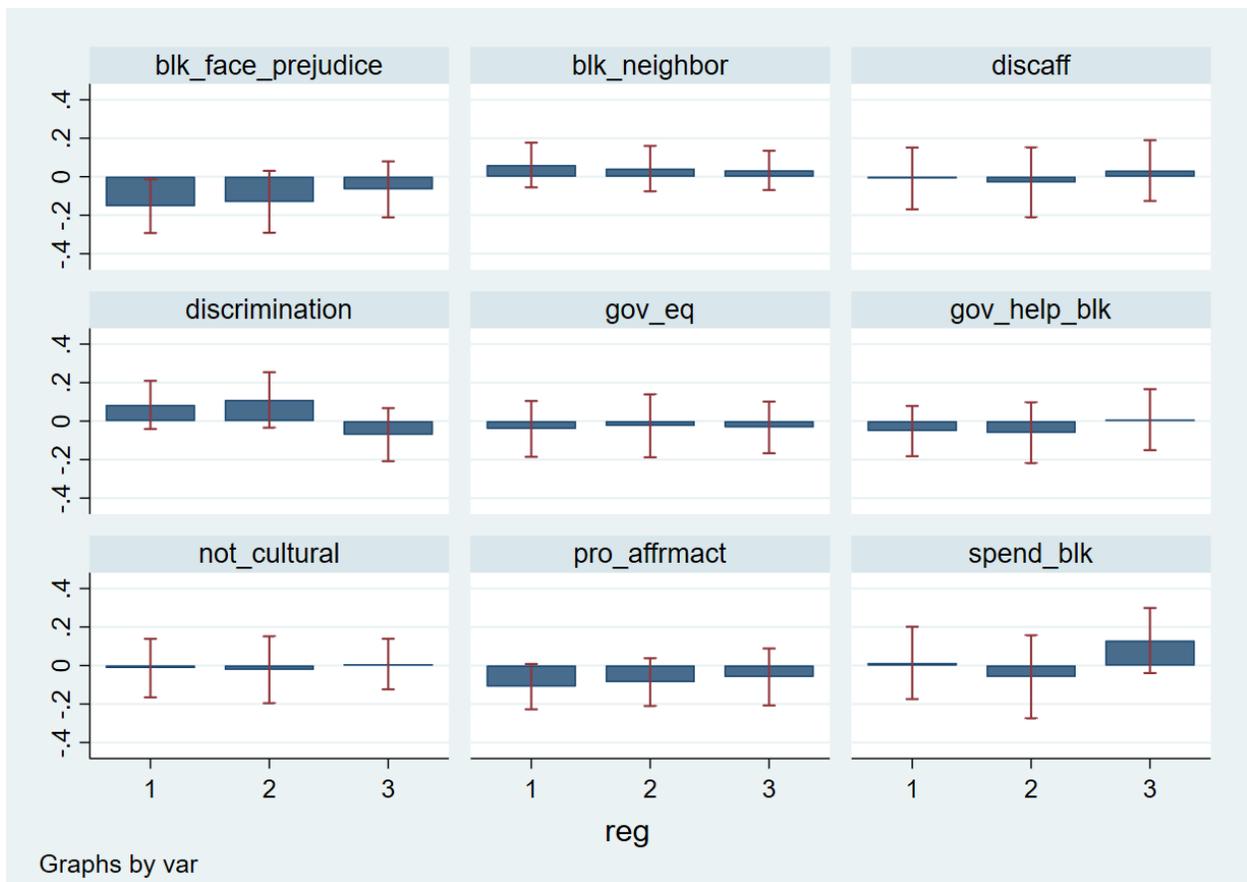


Figure 3. Impact of desegregation on social policy preferences. On the y-axis is the regression coefficient for exposure from the estimated model represented by Equation 1. The x-axis denotes different regression coefficients. 1 = effect of exposure considering both those who moved to the county as adults and those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 2 and 3 come from the same regression (Equation 1); 2 = effect of exposure for those who moved to the county as adults, 3 = the additional effect of exposure for those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 95% confidence intervals also plotted.

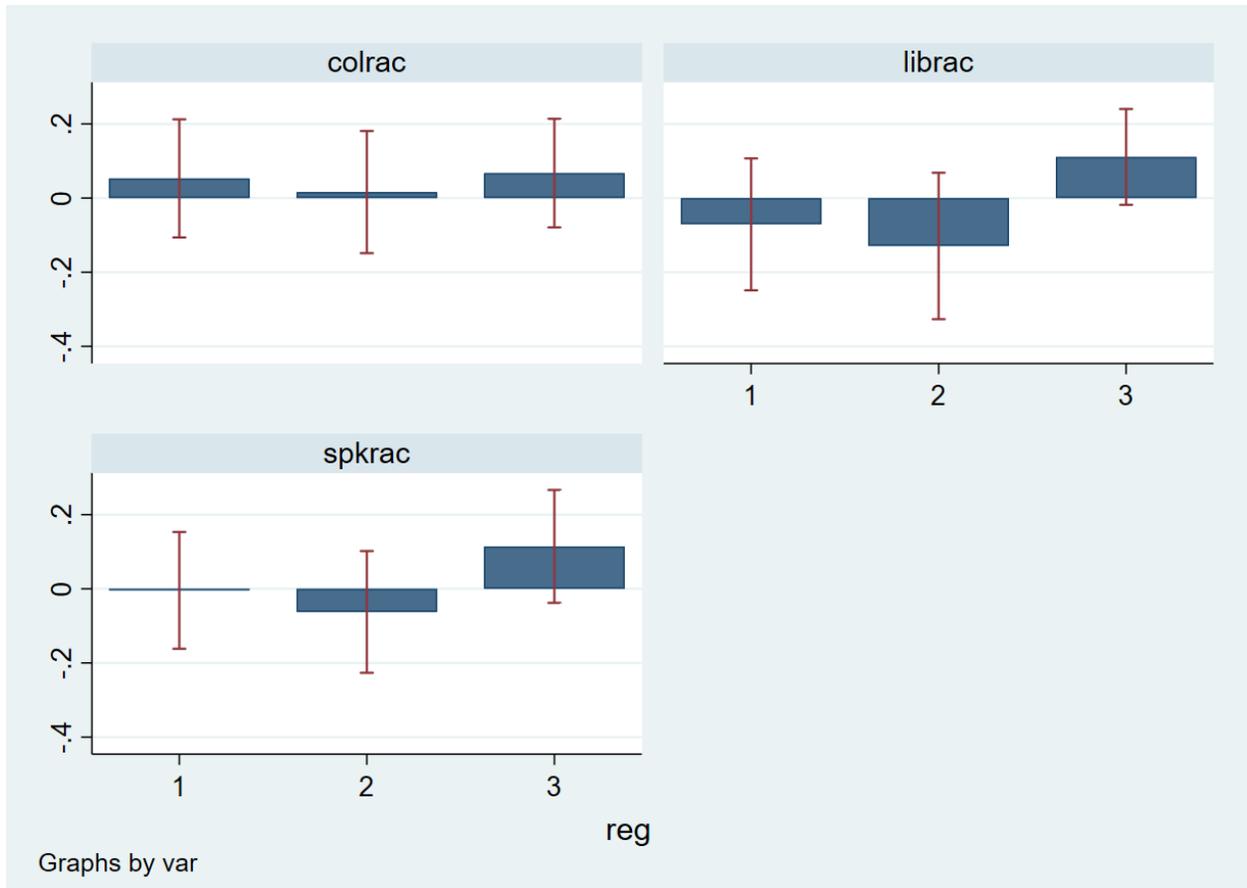


Figure 4. Impact of desegregation on beliefs regarding the freedom of speech for racists. On the y-axis is the regression coefficient for exposure from the estimated model represented by Equation 1. The x-axis denotes different regression coefficients. 1 = effect of exposure considering both those who moved to the county as adults and those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 2 and 3 come from the same regression (Equation 1); 2 = effect of exposure for those who moved to the county as adults, 3 = the additional effect of exposure for those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 95% confidence intervals also plotted.

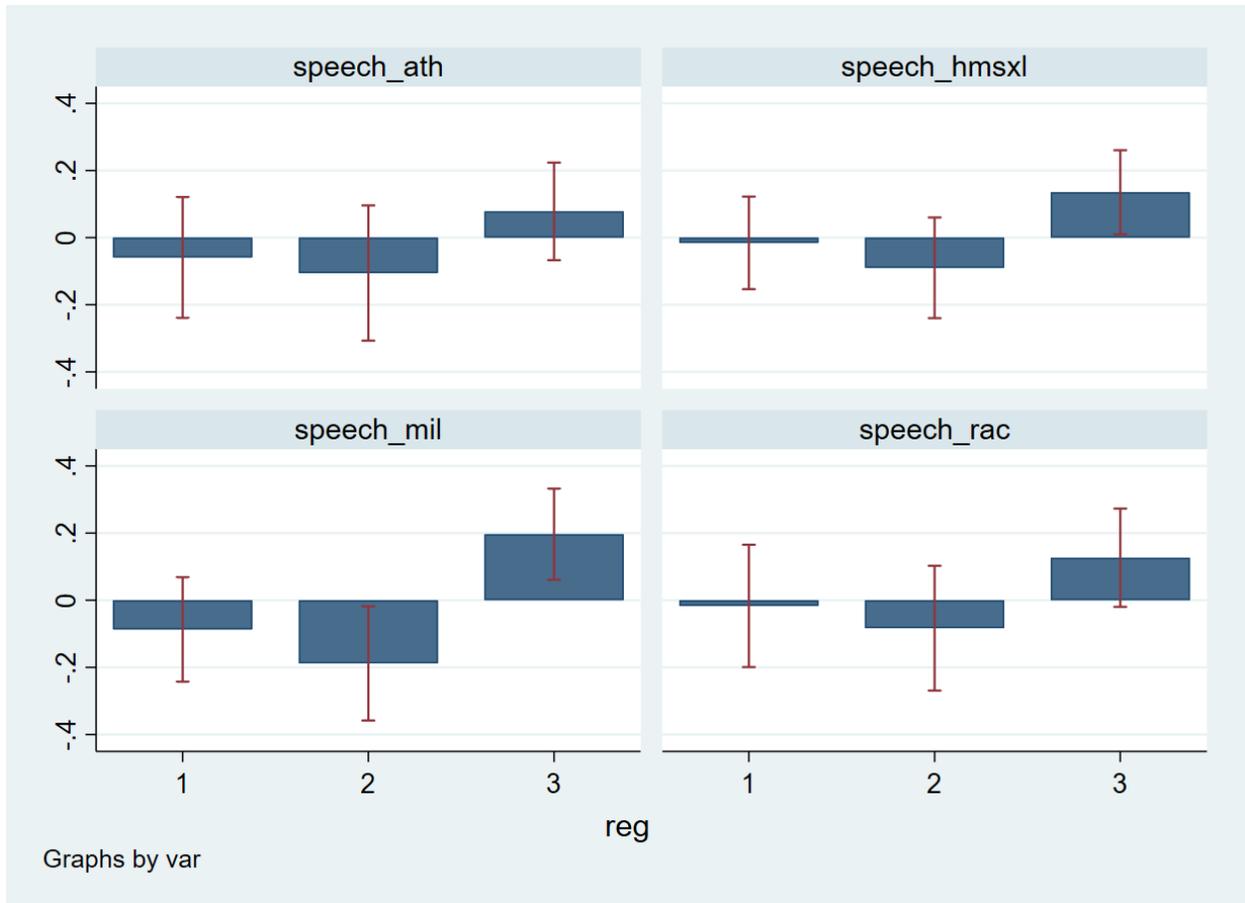


Figure 5. Impact of desegregation on beliefs regarding the freedom of speech for atheists, homosexuals, militarists, and racists. On the y-axis is the regression coefficient for exposure from the estimated model represented by Equation 1. The x-axis denotes different regression coefficients. 1 = effect of exposure considering both those who moved to the county as adults and those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 2 and 3 come from the same regression (Equation 1); 2 = effect of exposure for those who moved to the county as adults, 3 = the additional effect of exposure for those who lived in the county at 16 years old. 95% confidence intervals also plotted.