

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

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Background

Research shows that school integration benefits black students. But desegregation policies face many challenges though they may be uniquely able to address social inequalities. Specifically, unlike other reforms, school integration also changes the experiences of white students. Racially diverse schools can increase intergroup contact and psychological theory posits that this contact may improve racial attitudes. However, few studies provide real-life, long-term causal evidence for this theory. In this study, I identify the impact of exposure to historic school desegregation on the racial attitudes and politics of whites in adulthood.

Data

General Social Survey: restricted-use geocoded measures of individuals' racial attitudes and politics; respondent demographics (age, race); mobility

Public court-ordered school desegregation data: districts; years of court mandates to integrate

American Community Survey: estimates of black adults' educational attainment and income

Figures

Figure 1: Impact estimates (standardized outcomes) for exposure to school desegregation

Figure 2: County-level correlations between black adults' outcomes and white adults' politics

Outcomes: 1=Supports racist speech; 2=Liberal politics; 3=Positive racial attitudes; 4=Diverse neighborhood; 5=Support policies on racial equity

Identification

Two-way fixed effects difference-in-difference (TWFE DD) model:

$$Y_{ijkt} = \beta_1 Exposed_{ijkt} + \beta_2 Age_{ijkt} + \delta_j + \gamma_k + \nu_t + \varepsilon_{ijkt}$$

Where the outcome consists of multiple items within a specific factor (e.g., "liberalism of politics" comprises four unique items) of white adults' racial attitude and politics. Included in the model are controls for age, item, county, and birth cohort.

Exposure is determined by individuals' birth cohort: those younger than 18 at or after court-mandated desegregation in their county are exposed.

Figure 2

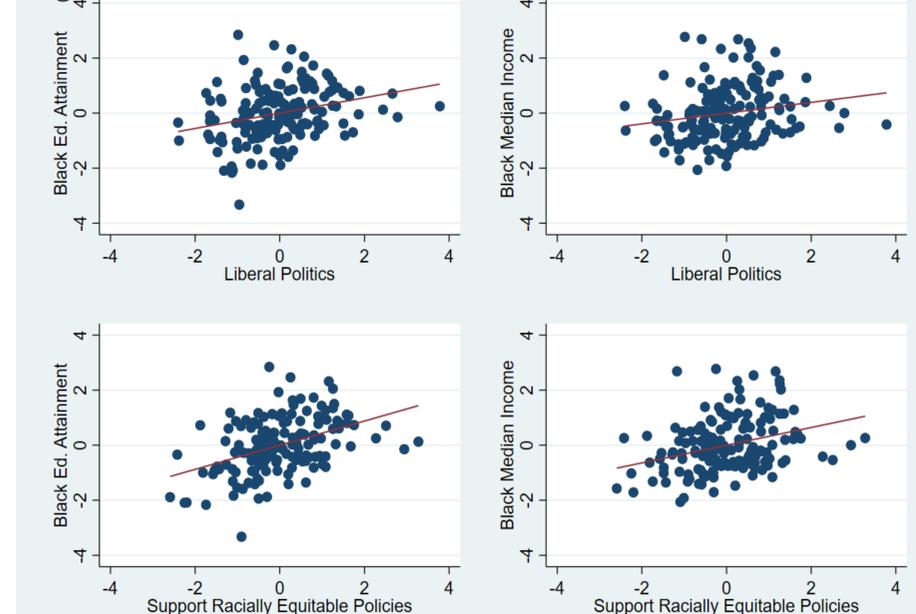
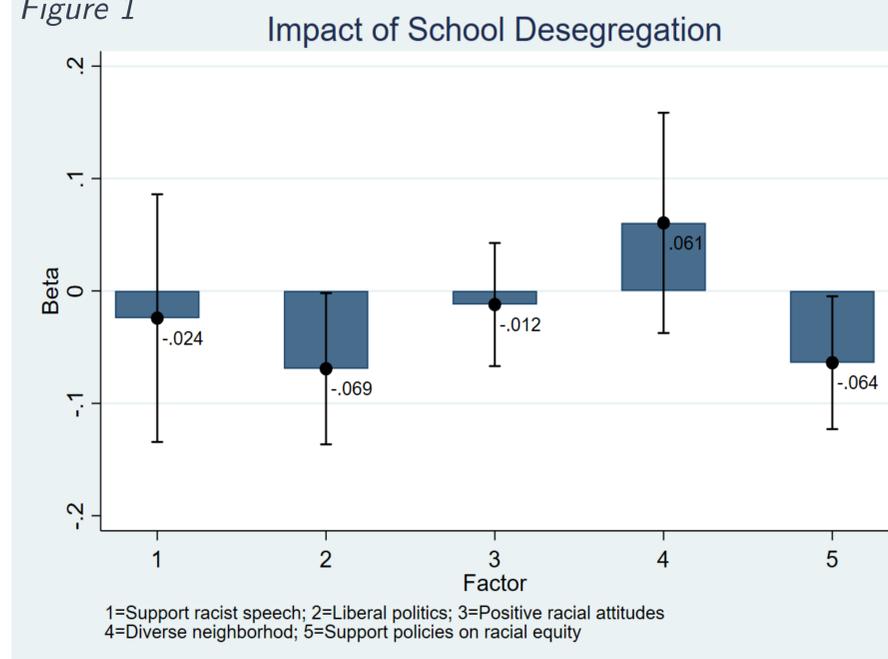


Figure 1



Other Results and Next Steps

- Using unique data on mobility since school age, I find similar results between those who moved to desegregating counties and those who stayed
- Sensitivity analyses do not show pre-treatment trend differences or heterogeneous impacts by length of exposure or year of desegregation
- Sample districts experienced significant decreases in school segregation during 1970s-90s; exposed white adults do not report worse economic outcomes
- To do: heterogeneity analysis; test potential mechanisms

Main Results

Historic school desegregation did not improve white adults' racial attitudes towards blacks or increase their opposition to racist speech. Instead, exposure to desegregation increased the conservatism of white adults' political views and decreased their support for policies that promote racial equity (e.g., affirmative action). These outcomes predict black adults' educational attainment and income.