

Racial Threat, Republicanism and the Rebel Flag

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Abstract

More than a half century ago V.O. Key posited that Southern white political behavior was a direct function of the black population density. This phenomenon has since been labeled as racial threat or black threat. The current research employs the April 17, 2001 Mississippi Flag Referendum to investigate the black threat hypothesis. Aggregate level election returns and U.S. Census data are examined to test this hypothesis. Using King's EI software (Ecological Inference) and Generalized Least Squares, the findings reveal that the support for the Mississippi state flag (also known as the Confederate flag) tends to vary as a direct function of black density and the Republican vote, *ceteris paribus*. The findings corroborate V.O. Key's black density hypothesis.

Introduction

Over 50 years ago, in his seminal book *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, V.O. Key wrote, “in its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro” (1949: 5). According to Key (1949), “those whites who live in counties with populations 40, 50, 60, and even 80 percent Negro share a common attitude toward the Negro” (5). The phenomenon described by Key has since been labeled as racial threat or more specifically, “black threat” (Giles and Hertz 1994). Arguably, whites who live in high black density areas perceive blacks to be a threat to their social, political and economic hegemony. More recently, a *revisionist* group of scholars has found empirical support that runs counter to the black threat hypothesis. Contrary to the racial polarization that is caused by the racial threat phenomenon, these scholars find a positive relationship between black density and the phenomenon of whites forging alliances with blacks. In other words, whites are found to be more likely to join alliances with blacks in defeating racially conservative candidates or supporting African-American candidates (see for example Voss 1996; Carsey 1995; Sadow 1996).

The current research examines the 2001 Mississippi Flag Referendum to test the black threat thesis. Once known as the bastion for massive resistance to civil rights in the South, Mississippi is an excellent case for this analysis for a number of reasons. First, Mississippi has the largest statewide black population in the nation. At about 40 percent, it creates the perfect setting to test the black threat hypothesis. Similar to 1949, when Key conducted his work, 36 out of the 82 counties in Mississippi possess black populations of over 40 percent. Following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the percentage of black registered voters went from 6 percent in 1960 to well roughly 59.8 percent in 1967. This dramatic increase was the highest among the seven states originally covered by the Act (Bass and DeVries 1976). Moreover, this

increase has transcended into the largest number of black elected officials in the nation. Hence, given the success of blacks in electing blacks into office, the flag referendum created a serious threat to the potential removal of the state flag.

Supporters of the current Mississippi flag (with the Confederate insignia in the left hand corner) argue that the flag represents heritage, while those who oppose the flag complain that the flag stands as a symbol of hatred. The division generally breaks down along racial lines. On average, whites say that the flag represents heritage, while many African Americans see the flag as offensive, serving as a symbol of hatred. According to a pre-referendum poll conducted by the *Clarion Ledger* newspaper, approximately 76 percent of whites indicated that, “The Confederate battle symbol is a part of the state’s proud history and traditions, and therefore should not be removed from the flag” (*Clarion Ledger* 2001, 1). To the contrary, approximately 69 percent of African Americans responded that “the Confederate battle symbol is offensive and divisive to some groups and should be removed” (*Clarion Ledger* 2001, 1). In one of the most extreme cases of racially polarized voting, Figure 1 clearly captures the tug-of-war between the two races over the state flag. In fact, one need not stretch his/her imagination to see that the extreme polarization exhibited in Figure 1, actually replicates the bars (without the stars) embedded on the Confederate flag.

Edelman (1964) states, “[p]ractically every political act that is controversial or regarded as really important is bound to serve in part as a condensation symbol. It evokes a quiescent or an aroused mass response because it symbolizes a threat or reassurance” (7). Condensation symbols are especially important here, because as Edelman notes, “one man’s reassurance is another’s threat guarantees that threat will always be present for all men” (1964, 7). Given the contentious debate surrounding the symbolism of the Mississippi state flag, the research at hand

empirically examines whether support for the Confederate flag is a direct function of the black population, *ceteris paribus*.

The 2001 Mississippi Flag Referendum

Similar to 1995, when Mississippi became the last state in the union to ratify the 13th amendment (abolishing slavery), Mississippi currently serves as the last state to officially fly the Confederate flag. On April 17, 2001, Mississippi held a referendum for the purpose of choosing a state flag. During the referendum, voters were given the option of retaining their 107-year old state flag with the Confederate insignia of 13 white stars on a blue X over a red field in the top insider corner (proposition A on the ballot); or replace it with a new flag possessing concentric circles of 20 white stars on a blue square (proposition B on the ballot), representing Mississippi as the 20th state accepted to the union. The proposed new flag failed by a wide 65 percent to 35 percent margin.

The referendum was made possible after it was discovered that Mississippi did not have an official state flag. In 1993 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a lawsuit to remove the Mississippi state flag. According to the organization the flag serves as a “vestige of slavery.” Upon review of the case, the Mississippi Supreme Court revealed that Mississippi had not possessed an official state flag since 1906. A Governor appointed bipartisan commission decided that a state flag referendum would occur.

Black Density: Cooperation or Conflict

Whites who find themselves in high black density areas can either join alliances with blacks to form coalitions, or they can engage in “turf wars.” According to Kinder and Sears (1981), African Americans may pose a threat to whites’ perceived “good life”. In such a case, whites view the world as a zero sum game. In the context of the flag, if African Americans win

the option to adopt a new state flag, whites lose a symbol of their heritage in the old flag. This can lead to a “now the flag, what next” resistance by whites. So, in short it becomes a struggle for power. This notion is consistent with the work of Giles and Evans. According to these authors, “The power model views racial and ethnic groups as participants in ongoing competition for control of economic, political and social structures and suggests that intergroup hostility and antagonism are natural products of that competition” (1986, 470).

Overall, the findings in the black density literature have been mixed. Indeed, Forbes (1997) states that empirically, “roughly equal numbers of studies show positive, zero, and negative effects of contact” (112). Wright (1977) confirms Key’s thesis in an analysis examining the white vote for Wallace in the 1968 presidential election. Using both individual level data and an aggregate measurement of black density, Wright concludes that black density has an indirect effect on the white vote for Wallace. Giles and Buckner (1993, 1995) find support for the racial threat hypothesis in their examination of the white vote for David Duke across parishes in Louisiana in the 1990 United States Senate race.

According to Campbell (1965), whites are threatened by the real possibility of African Americans infringing upon their social, political and economic hegemony. This type of threat has been categorized as a *realistic group conflict* between blacks and whites. Clearly, the flag referendum has both political and social underpinnings. The flag referendum proved to be a political issue, in that the state legislature decided to “pass the buck” in the form of a statewide referendum. Additionally, the conflict over the flag is deeply rooted in southern white heritage. Given this scenario, the flag vote was seen by both sides as a zero sum game.

Contrary to the racial threat hypothesis is the social contact hypothesis. This hypothesis holds that as majority group members interact with members of the minority, they become more

racially tolerant. Carsey (1995) provides empirical support for the social contact hypothesis. The author reports that, the higher the black density in precincts in New York City and Chicago and boroughs in New York City, the higher the probability that a white person voted for the black candidate. Voss (1996), in challenging the evidence reported by Giles and Buckner (1993), finds support for the social contact hypothesis by reporting a negative estimated effect of racial density on vote choice for parishes (the name for counties in Louisiana) in Louisiana that are at least 75% urban. Voss (1996) reports that those whites in Louisiana who reside in urban areas, and areas with high black densities, were least likely to have voted for David Duke in the 1990 U.S. Senate race, the 1991 gubernatorial open primary, and the 1991 gubernatorial runoff. Based on his findings, Voss points to the whites living in the Suburbs as being the most likely supporters of Duke.

Given the high symbolic value placed on the Mississippi state flag, whites will provide strongest support to the flag in those high black density counties where they perceive there to be a greater “threat” that they might lose their flag. In keeping with Voss (1996), we contend that the highest black density areas are expected to be in urban areas. Hence we expect the black threat hypothesis to hold up in those high urban settings with high concentrations of blacks. According to Voss (1996), whites should be most threatened in majority black cities where they have lost their political edge and in areas where poverty and crime have the potential to “... exacerbate racial strife” (1163).

The research here builds on the previous work of Giles and Buckner (1993) and Voss (1996) by positing a model that includes a variable tapping Republicanism. To be sure, Mississippi once served as the epitome of a one-party state, serving as the anchor for the solid-South. In recent years, however, the state has undergone a dramatic transformation towards a

two-party state, at least at the national-level. Arguably, this transformation is rooted in issues that pertain to blacks. Key writes, “on the surface at least, the beginning and the end of Mississippi politics is the Negro” (229). In 1964 the Republican party moved to the right on the race issue when Barry Goldwater suggested that issues pertaining to Civil Rights were “state-rights” issues. Mississippi was one of many deep-South states that supported Goldwater’s bid for the presidency. While Mississippi has joined other southern states in serving as a strong swing group in presidential elections, the voters rarely self-identify as Republicans. In recent years, this group of voters has been labeled as culturally conservative “Regan Democrats” (Knuckey n.d.). Black and Black (1992, 296) sum the Republicans’ “southern strategy” up by stating,

From Goldwater’s vote against Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Nixon’s vocal opposition to “forced busing” in 1968 to Ronald Reagan’s coolness toward civil rights laws in the 1980s and George Bush’s veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1990, Republican presidential nominees and Republican presidents have consistently taken significant positions in opposition to the wishes of most blacks.

Similarly, during his bid for the 2000 Republican nomination for President, George W. Bush stated that the Confederate flag issue in South Carolina was a “state” issue. Attorney General John Ashcroft has expressed strong support for the Old Confederacy. In an interview with *Southern Partisan*, Ashcroft praises the magazine by stating,

Your magazine also helps set the record straight. You’ve got a heritage of doing that, of defending Southern patriots like Lee, Jackson and Davis. Traditionalists must do more. I’ve got to do more” (*Southern Partisan* 1998, 2).

Based on the Republicans’ stance on these issues, the research here employs Republicanism in an attempt to better understand the flag vote. Indeed, in a statewide poll conducted by the *Clarion Ledger* newspaper, 72 percent of the Republicans surveyed indicated that they would support the Mississippi state flag (*Clarion Ledger* 2001, 1).

Data and Methods

The unit of analysis for this study is the county. The data consist of aggregate level election returns by county and demographic and socio-economic data derived from the United States Census and the Mississippi Employment Security Commission.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the estimated white support for the Confederate flag. Turnout and registration data are unavailable in Mississippi. As a result, white eligible voters are combined with the vote for the Confederate flag and the total flag vote to estimate the white support for the Confederate flag. Typically Ecological Regression (double regression method) has been employed to estimate the vote by race. This method, however, has been found to produce unrealistic estimates. Thus, I have adopted a more reliable approach with King's (1997) Ecological Inference (EI) approach. First, the county level white support is estimated using the precinct as the unit of analysis. These estimates are then employed as the dependent variable for the county level model.

Independent Variables

The primary independent variable in this analysis is the interaction between the percent black variable and the percent urban variable. The percent black variable is measured based on the percentage of blacks in a county, as defined by the 2000 U.S. Census. Unlike Giles and Buckner (1993), however, we choose the total black population rather than the percent black registered voters, because the threat that blacks pose to whites is based on the perception of the black population as a whole, and not just black-registered voters. Abrahamson (1980) notes that residence in urban areas tend to be more tolerant on the issue of race. Urbanicity is

operationalized as the percent of a county that is classified as urban, as defined by the 1990 Census.¹

In addition to those variables used to construct the interaction, other variables have been employed to ensure that the model is fully specified. Bonacich (1976) contends that working class whites, who are argued to be in direct competition with African Americans, are likely to be racially conservative. These whites view job competition as a zero sum game, whereby African Americans are given an edge through such programs as affirmative action, and as a result, whites lose out. As a result, we expect that whites who possess low levels of income will be more likely to support the Confederate flag, than whites on the higher economic scale. The income variable is the median white income level as defined by the 1990 United States Census. Additionally, unemployment is measured as the percentage of whites who are unemployed, by county, as defined by the Mississippi Employment Security Commission.

Oliver and Mendelberg (2000) find that white hostility toward blacks is shaped more by their low educational level than by their residential proximity to blacks (see also Giles and Evans 1985). In this analysis we employ the percent of whites, 25 years and older, who possess a high school diploma as capturing education. We expect a negative relationship to occur between the flag vote and those counties with a high percentage of white high school graduates. Beck (1977) suggests that the different age cohorts experienced different socialization in the South. Thus, we expect those individuals who were socialized in the “old” South to want to hold on to the traditions of the South, in this case, the old flag. Said differently, we expect those whites over 65 years of age to support the old flag. Here, a variable is constructed to capture the percentage of those counties that possess whites 65 years of age and older. Since the 1964 presidential

¹ The 1990 urban and rural data are the most recent data released by the U.S. Census.

election, whites in the Deep South have generally supported the Republican candidate. Here, we employ the percent vote for George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential general elections, as a proxy for Republican partisanship. Consistent with Giles and Buckner (1993), we posit that those whites socialized outside of the state to be less likely to support the state flag. Here, the percentage of the population that migrated into the state is employed.

Given the expected correlation between the interaction and its' components, variance inflation factors (VIFs) are examined for the purpose of detecting multicollinearity. The results indicate that there is a high level of multicollinearity amongst the interaction term and its' component variables. High levels of multicollinearity result in large standard errors and low significance levels. The remedy employed in this paper "centered" the component variables about their means prior to constructing the interaction terms (Cronbach 1987; Jaccard, Turrishi, and Wan 1990). This technique will result in reduced standard errors, however, it will not affect the magnitude of the coefficients of the interactions, nor the calculated slopes for the component variables.

The method employed in this analysis is ordinary least squares. Given that the proportion of white turnout varies significantly, the Cook-Weisberg diagnostic is employed to test for heteroskedasticity. In the event that heteroskedasticity is a problem, Generalized Least Squares and the Huber/White/sandwich for estimating robust standard errors will be employed as a remedy.

Findings

The effects of the levels of blacks living in large urban areas and the control variables on the white support for the Mississippi State flag are reported in Table 1. Our first cut at the data produces results that are consistent with the black threat hypothesis. The results presented in

Table 1, model 1, reveal that the interaction term between percent black and percent urban is statistically significant.

[Table 1 about here]

However, given that the counties' estimated white turnout vary, with the lowest being 24 percent and the highest equaling 84 percent, the Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity is employed. Based on the highly significant chi-square statistic reported in Table 1, model 1, heteroskedasticity clearly poses a problem. As a remedy, generalized least squares is performed and the model (including the constant) is weighted by the squared root of the proportion of white turnout. Specifically, we multiply the square root of the estimated proportion of white turnout by each variable (including the constant). Additionally, Huber/White/sandwich robust standard errors are estimated. The results are presented in Table 1, model 2.

Here, again, the interaction achieves statistical significance. However, as stated above, there is reason to believe that this model is misspecified, and that it should include a measurement for partisanship (this also may help to explain the heteroskedasticity problem). Using the Bush vote as a proxy for Republicanism, we can retest the model. The results are much different than the findings presented in model 2. Specifically, it appears that the significance levels of the composite terms for the interaction, percent urban and percent black, are attenuated in model 2, however, both achieve statistical significance in model 3. On the other hand, the inclusion of the Bush variable appears to attenuate the significance level for the interaction. Indeed, an analysis of the variance inflation factors (VIF) presented in appendix A indicates that the percent black variable continues to contribute to the problem of multicollinearity (i.e., the VIF is above 10). A further examination of the correlation matrix, in Appendix B, indicates that there is a strong negative correlation between the black density

variable and the Bush variable. While this high level of correlation does not affect the independent components of the interaction (i.e., black and urban), it may contribute to the lack of significance obtained by the multiplicative term. Despite the interaction's lack of statistical significance, the coefficient remains in the posited direction.

According to Table 1, model 3, the black coefficient achieves a score of .56. A 40 point increase in the black density variable (i.e., a change in the black density variable of two standard deviations) increases white support for the flag by roughly 22 points. The urban variable, although statistically significant, has a much lower effect. For example, a 48 point increase (i.e., a two standard deviation increase), only increases the white vote by 4 points. Further, the Bush variable achieved a coefficient score of approximately .66. A 26 point increase (i.e., a two standard deviation increase) in the Bush vote increases white support by roughly 17 points.

The percent in-migration notwithstanding, all of the coefficients achieve signs in the posited direction. It may be the case that those people who move to Mississippi are similar to those whites within the state, and therefore are supportive of such traditional symbols as the Confederate flag. As expected, a county with a high percentage of white 25 year olds with a high school degree, were less likely to support the Confederate flag. Further, counties that possess high populations of whites who were socialized during or before the civil rights era were found to have a positive impact on support for the Confederate flag. The rationale here is simple. This group of voters is expected to possess traditional values that encompass preserving such symbols as the state flag, for the purpose of protecting their heritage. Indeed, their preadult socialization occurred during an era when blacks were inferior to whites and during a period when whites staged a massive resistance to the progressive demands made by blacks.

In sum, the findings presented here run counter to the revisionist claim that the racial threat hypothesis is dead. To be sure, the interaction between black density and urban population fails to achieve statistical significance however the coefficient is in the posited direction. Further, both of the components of the interaction are in the posited direction and both achieve statistical significance.

Conclusion

Historically, research examining the racial threat hypothesis has focused on white support for a racially conservative candidate, or the white vote against an African-American candidate. The research here differs by examining the social threat that blacks posed on whites. Said differently, the Mississippi state flag with the Confederate insignia located in the left hand corner, serves as a symbol of heritage for Southern whites. With Mississippi's black population nearing 40 percent and their recent success at the ballot box, the flag referendum served as a serious threat to the removal of this symbol.

The results here corroborate those reported by V.O. Key over 50 years ago. White support for the Mississippi state flag is found to be significantly greater in those areas with high black concentration. Further, once the model is expanded to control for white Republicanism, there is also strong support that the vote for the flag is a direct function of the 2000 vote for Bush. This finding supports survey data indicating that Republicans provided strong support for the flag. Such results are also consistent with the support of Republicans such as Attorney General Ashcroft in his support for the old Confederate.

In closing, the current research should be expanded to cover the black vote for the newly proposed flag as a function of white population density. To be sure, the racial threat hypothesis should not be limited to black density. Further, an investigation of the percent white turnout as a

function of black density would also prove to be instructive. Finally, as always when conducting case studies, caution should be used when making generalizations beyond Mississippi.

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Figure 1

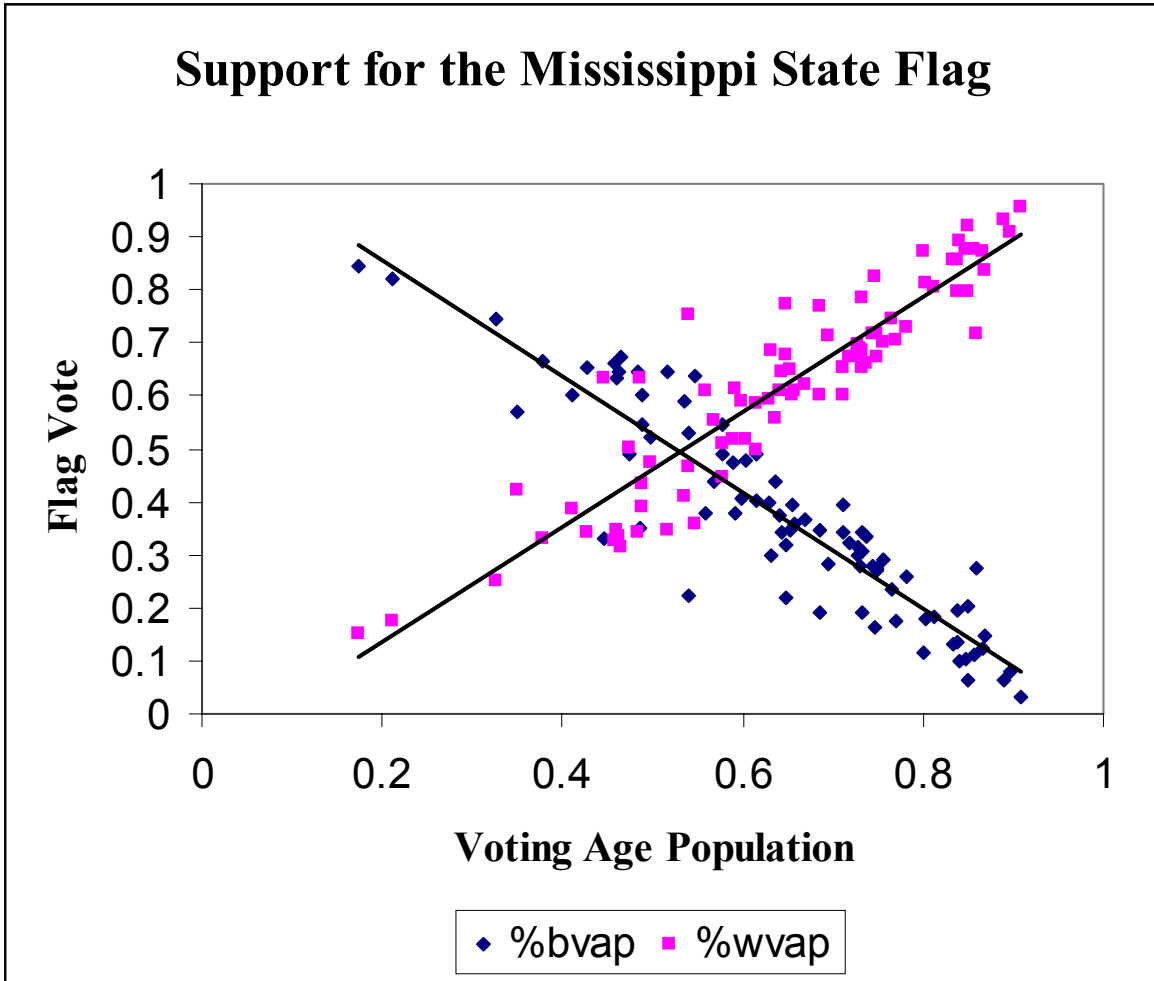


Table 1
Regression of White Support for the Flag on the
Percent Black x Percent Urban and Control Variables

Explanatory Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
black x urban	0.501 (2.27) *	0.410 (2.04) *	0.166 (0.83)
black	0.024 (0.21)	0.142 (1.44)	0.563 (5.00) **
urban	0.004 (0.07)	0.036 (0.76)	0.082 (2.09) *
in-migration	0.194 (0.76)	0.475 (2.09) *	0.484 (2.31) *
white high school grads (25 over)	-0.278 (1.44)	-0.496 (2.98) **	-0.718 (4.14) **
white median income	4.77e-07 (1.15)	2.55e-07 (0.72)	1.54e-07 (1.37)
white unemployment	0.229 (0.38)	0.306 (0.53)	0.490 (0.85)
whites 65 and over	1.737 (2.68) **	1.327 (2.48) *	1.381 (2.74) **
bush vote			0.658 (5.27) **
Constant	0.873 (5.17) **	1.070 (7.28) **	0.844 (5.96) **
Cook-Weisberg χ^2	29.21**		
Observations	82	82	82
R-squared	0.45	0.50	0.64
Absolute value of t statistics in parentheses			
*p < .05; ** p < .01			

Appendix A

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
Black	11.36	0.088
Bush	6.2	0.16
Whites 65 and over	3.33	0.3
In-Migration	3.23	0.31
White High School Graduates 25 and older	2.36	0.42
Urban	1.85	0.54
Black x Urban	1.46	0.68
White Unemployment	1.34	0.75
White Median Income	1.17	0.85

Appendix B

Correlation Matrix Among Independent Variables

	black	b x u	urban	immigrate	high school	income	unemp.	wold	bush
black	1.0								
blackxurb	-0.1362	1.0							
urban	-0.1442	0.2036	1.0						
immigrate	-0.7617	-0.0704	0.1351	1.0					
high school	0.2503	-0.0993	0.4737	0.0498	1.0				
income	0.1886	0.1355	0.1728	-0.0984	0.0739	1.0			
unemployed	-0.0629	0.0168	-0.3860	-0.0716	-0.3156	-0.0978	1.0		
white old age	-0.7194	0.2769	-0.0723	0.3535	-0.5561	-0.2164	0.20	1.0	
bush	-0.8898	0.2315	0.1456	0.7127	-0.0819	-0.1309	0.01	0.6061	1.0

b x u = black x urban

unemp = unemployed

wold = white old age

Appendix C

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
black	82	-.0011873	.2023983	-.3687123	.4669342
blackxurban	82	-.0068666	.0495943	-.1307416	.1327217
urban	82	-.0018415	.2383008	-.28	.587
Flag vote	81	.8627161	.112439	.31	.98
In-migration	82	.0053347	.0706893	-.1539823	.2163712
High School	82	.6765854	.0761107	.493	.865
Income	82	25666.51	25321.54	17705	249355
Unemployed	82	.0410004	.0182208	.0136986	.1173913
White Turnout	82	.487973	.1096193	.24	.84
White 65 over	82	.0912972	.028405	.0256252	.1632632
Bush	82	.5501692	.131661	.1761597	.7961139