

Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism Versus Racial Threats to the Good Life

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Although theories of prejudice have been extensively catalogued, empirical confrontations between competing theories are surprisingly rare. The primary goal of the present research was to test two major theoretical approaches to prejudice by whites against blacks: realistic group conflict theory, which emphasizes the tangible threats blacks might pose to whites' private lives; and a sociocultural theory of prejudice termed *symbolic racism*, which emphasizes abstract, moralistic resentments of blacks, presumably traceable to preadult socialization. The main dependent variable in our analysis is suburban whites' voting behavior in two mayoral elections in Los Angeles, both strongly influenced by racial issues, that matched the same two candidates, one black and one white. In both elections, symbolic racism (sociocultural prejudice) was the major determinant of voting against the black candidate for people removed from possible personal threats posed by blacks as well as for those at risk. Direct racial threats to whites' private lives (to their jobs, their neighborhoods, their children's schooling, their families' safety) had little effect on either antiblack voting behavior or symbolic racism. The article closes by developing the implications of these results for theories of prejudice and, more speculatively, for interpretations of the effects of voters' private lives on their political behavior.

Theories of racial prejudice suffer from benign neglect. Although the theories themselves have been extensively and ably catalogued (most notably, by Allport, 1954; Ashmore & DelBoca, 1976; LeVine & Campbell, 1972), empirical confrontations between alternative theories occupy surprisingly little

space in the prejudice literature. Some observers even contend that such tests, although never common, are now actually on the decline (Katz, 1976). The principal purpose of this article is to present a systematic empirical comparison between two major theoretical approaches to understanding whites' prejudice against blacks: realistic group conflict theory, which emphasizes the tangible threats blacks pose to whites' private lives, and a sociocultural theory of prejudice, which emphasizes abstract, moralistic resentments of blacks traceable to preadult socialization.

Portions of this material were originally presented by Sears and Kinder to the Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles, 1970. A more elaborate version of this article won the 1978 Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize from the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues. The data were collected as part of a larger project on black mayoral candidates under the direction of Thomas Pettigrew, to whom we owe deep thanks. Robert Riley was an invaluable collaborator in early stages of the project. John Morgan, Andrew Walker, and Richard E. Whitney also contributed valuable assistance. Comments on earlier drafts by Faye Crosby, Barbara Gutek, Richard R. Lau, John B. McConahay, M. Brewster Smith, Tom Tyler, James Q. Wilson, Raymond Wolfinger, and the Journal's anonymous referees have been particularly helpful. Support was provided by a Rockefeller Foundation grant to Pettigrew, and by National Science Foundation and U.S. Public Health Service grants to Sears.

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We are partly interested in the origins of prejudice itself, but our primary focus in this article is on prejudice as a political force. It remains in this century, as it was in the last, a potent influence in many political choices. Black candidates for public office at all levels of government are increasingly common; "forced busing" and affirmative action are hot issues in the courts and in school board, mayoral, congressional, and even referendum elections; and even seemingly nonracial issues such as the "tax revolt" and unemployment are often interpreted as having a

strong racial component. So our main concern is with racial prejudice as a determinant of whites' political behavior.

In all these cases the signs of white resistance to change in the racial status quo are unmistakable, but how might such resistance be understood in psychological terms? At the heart of one prominent hypothesis is racial threat. That is, resistance may be traced at least in part to whites' perception that blacks pose real and tangible threats to their personal lives. As blacks increasingly demand a larger share of the Good Life, whites react with predictable hostility. Thus it is said that northern whites' enthusiasm for the civil rights movement waned when the movement "moved north," because they supposedly favored it only when it did not disrupt their own lives.

This line of reasoning is of course drawn from realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). The origins of this kind of prejudice (and presumably its political force), according to this theory, are to be found in the realities of direct competition between blacks and whites for scarce resources. Competitive interdependence produces the perception of threat, which in turn leads to hostility directed at members of the threatening group. Social attitudes, in short, reflect private interests.

It is easy to imagine the areas of conflict that might now be feeding whites' racial animosities. Many blacks want to move into pleasant suburban neighborhoods, most of which are currently all white. They want better jobs, which threatens to displace white workers. They often want their children to attend integrated schools, which threatens to entail "forced busing" and racial mixing for young children. And the rising threat of violent crime in our society is widely perceived as due to high rates of criminal activity among urban blacks. So a white voter's hostility toward blacks, and consequent political behavior, might plausibly stem from the perception that blacks constitute a tangible threat to his or her own private life.

A somewhat more formal version of this racial threat hypothesis can be generated from the familiar means-ends formula for rational decision making. This normative equation specifies that rationally derived at-

titudes or decisions should be the product of the value placed on some end state and the probability of its attainment. In social psychology this is often described as the expectancy-value theory of decision making (e.g., Edwards, 1954; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It is easily applied to the case of racial threat. The magnitude of racial threat to an individual white should be the product of *affect* about some end state and *expectancy* that it may materialize (or, as it is perhaps better described in the racial threat context, *vulnerability* to it.) For example, the threat posed by blacks' possibly moving into a white person's own neighborhood is the product of (a) the white person's evaluation of blacks' living in the neighborhood and (b) the probability that blacks actually will move in. Maximum threat is posed by a very probable and intensely disliked end state. Threat is obviously much reduced if the end state either is not much disliked or is improbable.

Compelling as the racial threat hypothesis may seem, its empirical support turns out to be surprisingly weak. Evidence that threat leads to prejudice (or antiblack political behavior) has been provided by studies of three types: (a) those that employ aggregate correlations to show, for example, that among southern whites prejudice covaries with the relative size of the nearby black population or that groups presumed to be in direct economic competition with blacks (such as working-class ethnics) express more prejudice (Blalock, 1967; Key, 1949; Pettigrew & Cramer, 1959); (b) informal time-series observations of change in group stereotypes, as for example, in the shifts in American attitudes toward the Japanese registered after Pearl Harbor (this evidence is reviewed by Ashmore, 1970, and by Ehrlich, 1973); and (c) experimental research on interdependence, the exemplar being Sherif's (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961) field experiment that varied the nature of interdependence between groups of schoolboys at a summer camp. All in all, the findings either are quite indirect; invite alternative interpretations; or, in the case of the experimental results, are of uncertain generality.

Our research is partly a response to these limitations. It attempts to test the racial

technical prejudice

threat hypothesis directly, by using explicit measures of affect and vulnerability for each of several potent areas of threat: neighborhood and social contact, economic competition, busing of school children for racial integration, and threats to personal safety from black violence. In so doing, we hope at the same time to be providing a sensitive test of realistic group conflict theory.

A second major approach to prejudice attributes it to sociocultural learning. In this view, children and adolescents acquire prejudice along with other values and attitudes that are normative in their social environments. Conformity pressures, as well as the intrinsic strength of early-learned attitudes, promote the persistence of prejudice through the vicissitudes of later life. Realistic threats may come and go, but the solid core of prejudice remains, no matter how anachronistic it may become. There is of course no question that the acquisition of prejudice begins in childhood (e.g., Ashmore & DelBoca, 1976; Maykovich, 1975; Middleton, 1976). Our particular purpose here is not to add to this already well-documented case, but rather to examine the version of sociocultural learning with most political impact today.

In years gone by, it was easy to specify the content of this early-learned prejudice; it centered on intentional and legitimate discrimination and segregation. However, over the past 30 years, white opposition to equal opportunity has sharply declined. On voting rights, schools, public accommodations, housing, and employment practices, segregationist sentiment has by now all but disappeared. White America has become, in principle at least, racially egalitarian—a momentous and undeniably significant change (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971; Taylor, Sheatsley, & Greeley, 1978). Since the explicitly segregationist, white supremacist view has all but disappeared, it no longer can be a major political force.

What has replaced it, we suggest, is a new variant that might be called *symbolic racism*. This we define as a blend of antiblack affect and the kind of traditional American moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic (Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears & McConahay, 1973; McConahay & Hough,

1976). Symbolic racism represents a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline. Whites may feel that people should be rewarded on their merits, which in turn should be based on hard work and diligent service. Hence symbolic racism should find its most vociferous expression on political issues that involve “unfair” government assistance to blacks: welfare (“welfare cheats could find work if they tried”); “reverse discrimination” and racial quotas (“blacks should not be given a status they have not earned”); “forced” busing (“whites have worked hard for their neighborhoods, and for their neighborhood schools”); or “free” abortions for the poor (“if blacks behaved morally, they would not need abortions”).

If symbolic racism is rooted in deep-seated feelings of social morality and propriety and in early-learned racial fears and stereotypes, it may well have little to do with any tangible and direct impact of racial issues on the white person's private life. The stereotypical symbols of blacks' violation of traditional values, which are in the media and informal communication all the time, may be more important than the realities of the more occasional actual damage blacks do to whites' own lives. So, symbolic racism may be, politically, the most potent vehicle for racial prejudice today, whereas racial threat to whites' personal lives may have little political effect and little role in the origins of symbolic racism.

In summary, our purpose is to investigate contemporary white prejudice from two general theoretical points of view: realistic group conflict theory, which emphasizes the importance of tangible racial threats to private life; and the symbolic racism version of the sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes general and moralistic resentments of blacks and is more likely traceable to preadult socialization than to current racial threat. These two theoretical perspectives will be tested in an explicitly political context. Although the study of attitudes for their own sake has an honorable history, its value is

blacks
discouraged him
maintains

3. Is symbolic racism itself determined by racial threat, contrary to the sociocultural perspective outlined above?

The sample area was identical in both cases: the 1st and 12th council districts in the City of Los Angeles,

This section of the valley, like most suburban communities, is rather distant from any major concentration of blacks, preventing high levels of interracial contact, but is nevertheless close enough to yield widespread feelings of racial threat. The valley itself contains a small black and Chicano community, Pacoima, but as a whole was only 1.6% black in 1970. It is separated from the rest of the city by a low mountain range and is far from the major black residential area of the city (e.g., it is about 20 miles from Watts, at the closest point). About one third of the sample (36% in 1969 and 34% in 1973) reported virtually no contact with blacks ("are around blacks less than once a week"). Nevertheless, as will be seen, many valley residents felt substantial levels of racial threat, perhaps, *inter alia*, because of the substantial black population in the city as a whole (18% in 1970), the savage violence of the 1965 Watts Riot (see Sears and McConahay, 1973), and the then slowly but inexorably progressing court case that ultimately (in 1977) would force desegregation of the area's schools.

As indicated earlier, racial threat involves both affect and vulnerability (as we choose to call *expectancy* in this context). Affect questions tapped the evaluative nature of respondents' reactions to a particular racial threat if it were to materialize—for example, how they would feel if their own neighborhoods were to be desegregated. Vulnerability questions are of two sorts. Subjective vulnerability questions (confined for the most part to the 1973 survey) asked respondents to judge the likelihood that a particular potential personal racial threat would actually materialize—for example, the likelihood that black families would soon be moving into their neighborhoods. As shown in Table 1, substantial numbers of suburban respondents felt personally racially threatened, although the exact percentage varied considerably from domain to domain and from question to question. Objective vulnerability questions assessed whether respondents were in objective situations that might make them more vulnerable to racial threats, such

> suggest the content is
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by demogr. differences -
age, marital, prof.

Table 1
Personal Racial Threats: Affect and Vulnerability

Question	Percent threatened ^a		Correlation with candidate preference ^b	
	1969	1973	1969	1973
Neighborhood desegregation and interracial social contact				
If a Negro/black family with about the same income and education as you moved next door, would you mind it a lot, a little, or not at all? (% a lot or a little)	36	30	.43**	.48**
[How likely is it that] a few black families will move into this neighborhood? (% very or somewhat likely)	NA	80	NA	.06
How strongly would you object if a member of your family wanted to bring a Negro/black friend home to dinner? (% very strongly, strongly, or slightly)	27	27	.50**	.58**
Economic competition				
Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your economic gains compared to those of Negroes/blacks? (% dissatisfied)	12	18	.03	.31
Have the economic gains of Negroes/blacks been about the same, much greater than, greater than, or less than yours over the past five years? (% greater)	35	29	.30	.30**
In the next few years, it is possible that you or members of your family will have more contact with blacks than you do now. How likely is it that you will have a black supervisor at work? (% very or somewhat likely)	NA	48	NA	-.18
In the next few years, how likely is it that members of your family or friends will be denied applications for jobs or promotions because of preferential treatment to members of minority groups? (% very or somewhat likely)	NA	58	NA	.12
Racial busing				
How likely is it that black children will be bused into the elementary schools of this neighborhood? (% very or somewhat likely)	NA	46	NA	.09
How likely is it that children from the elementary schools in this neighborhood will be bused to other parts of the city to achieve school desegregation? (% very or somewhat likely)	NA	36	NA	.04
Have children (% with children not in parochial school)	75	NA	.03	NA
Have children in public elementary school	NA	36	NA	.16
Have children in public high school	NA	21	NA	-.05

Table 1 (Continued)

Question	Percent threatened ^a		Correlation with candidate preference ^b	
	1969	1973	1969	1973
Black violence				
How likely is it that Negroes/blacks will bring violence to this neighborhood? (% very or somewhat likely)	35	27	.27	.46**
Live close to Pacoima (% in closest one third of census tracts)	30	30	.41**	-.09

Note. NA = not asked.

^a The percent not threatened is the remainder of the sample, less about 5% to 10% "don't knows."

^b The entry is the gamma coefficient indexing the relationship between personal discontent and voting. Some items have been reflected so that in each case, a positive gamma means that the threatened are more likely to vote for Yorty. In the 1969 sample, n ranges from 157 to 178; in 1973, n ranges from 181 to 232.

* $p < .05$, by χ^2 . ** $p < .01$, by χ^2 .

as having children in the Los Angeles public schools (who might be affected by busing) or living close to Pacoima (which might increase vulnerability to residential desegregation or crimes committed by minorities).

Symbolic racism. The symbolic racism items are shown in Table 2. As indicated earlier, they are characterized by their abstraction, by their moral tone, and by the absence of any reference to the respondent's personal situation. Almost all relevant items were used in 1969. In 1973, in an effort to refine our measurement of symbolic racism, a factor analysis was conducted on the more numerous symbolic racism items available. Two main factors emerged. One clearly reflected attitudes on racial busing: The five busing items loaded from .50 to .81 on it, and less than .20 on the other factor. The second factor was nearly as distinctive: The remaining nine items loaded from .36 to .65 on it, and only one of them loaded as high as .23 on the busing factor. This dimension included a mixture of symbolic resentments, such as affirmative action, government favoritism, and black activism. As shown in Table 2, the items with the highest loadings formed the basis of two additive scales in each survey: *opposition to racial busing* and *expressive racism*. The scales are not identical in both years, since new questions were added in 1973, but the core of items is the same. The median gamma across items within the busing scale was .63 in 1969 and .65 in 1973; within the expressive racism scale, it was .43 and .38. Defined in this way, the two indexes represent conceptually separable dimensions of symbolic racism, although as expected, they are correlated (in 1969, Pearson $r = .33$; in 1973, $r = .39$).

Candidate preference. Respondents were asked directly who they intended to vote for. In 1969, 45% reported that they intended to vote for Yorty, 43% for Bradley, and 13% were undecided. In 1973, the corresponding percentages were 51% for Yorty, 41% for Bradley, and 8% undecided.

In both surveys, respondents were also provided with a list of six trait adjectives and asked whether or not

each described the two candidates, completing the list first for Yorty and then for Bradley. Three of the traits were positive (honest, intelligent, effective) and three negative (underhanded, unpleasant, corrupt). An evaluative index was formed for each candidate, reflecting the number of positive traits attributed to him minus the number of negative traits attributed (hence ranging from -3 to +3). An overall candidate preference measure was then constructed by subtracting the Yorty index from the Bradley index. In both 1969 and 1973, this measure ranged from -4, indicating a decided preference for Yorty, to +4, indicating a decided preference for Bradley.

The analysis of voting behavior we will present uses the trait measure of candidate evaluation, rather than vote intention, because a 9-point scale is more sensitive than is a simple dichotomous choice. Furthermore, use of a dichotomous dependent variable in multiple regression analysis violates standard Gauss-Markoff assumptions (Wonnacott & Wonnacott, 1970), which poses difficulties for estimation and significance testing. The candidate preference index is highly correlated with vote intention (in 1969, Gamma = .90; in 1973, Gamma = .88), of course, and the basic findings are the same whichever measure is used.

Results

As indicated earlier, white opposition to equal opportunity for blacks has all but disappeared, according to national survey evidence (e.g., Taylor, Sheatsley, & Greeley, 1978). Our samples resemble the rest of the white public in this respect. Despite Jensenism, few thought blacks less intelligent than whites (15% in 1969; 16% in 1973); despite controversy over "forced busing" for school integration, almost no one supported separate schools for blacks (8% and 10%, re-

Table 2
Symbolic Racism

Question	Percent nonliberal		Correlation with candidate preference	
	1969	1973	1969	1973
Expressive racism				
Do you think that most Negroes/blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried, or do they really need the help? (% could get along) _x	54	52	.69**	.56**
Negroes/blacks shouldn't push themselves where they're not wanted (% agree) _x	63	64	.48**	.44**
Because of past discrimination, it is sometimes necessary to set up quotas for admission to college of minority group students (% disagree) _x	NA	47	NA	.39**
Do you think Los Angeles city officials pay more, less, or the same attention to a request or complaint from a black person as from a white person? (% more) _x	26	34	.55**	.30**
Of the groups on the card, are there any which you think have gained more than they are entitled to? (% choosing "black")	8	10	.40	.48*
It is wrong to set up quotas to admit black students to college who don't meet the usual standards (% agree)	NA	73	NA	.30
Over the past few years, blacks have got more than they deserve (% agree) _x	23	30	.40*	.40**
In Los Angeles, would you say many, some, or only a few blacks miss out on jobs or promotions because of racial discrimination? (% only a few or none)	34	36	.49**	.32*
Opposition to busing				
Busing elementary school children to schools in other parts of the city only harms their education (% agree) _y	54	62	.43**	.25
In some cases it is best for children to attend elementary schools outside their neighborhood (% agree) _y	68	70	.45**	.26
Are you in favor of or opposed to the busing of children to achieve racial desegregation of the public schools? (% opposed) _y	NA	86	NA	.42*
If the Supreme Court ordered busing to achieve desegregation of the public schools, would you be opposed to it? (% yes) _y	NA	79	NA	.40*
If necessary, children should be bused to achieve racial desegregation of the public schools (% disagree) _y	NA	83	NA	.22*

Note. The percent liberal is the remainder of the sample, less about 5% to 10% "don't knows." Item wordings are approximate; exact wordings are available upon request. Correlations are gamma. A subscript *x* indicates that the item is included in the indices of expressive racism used in the subsequent analysis, and a subscript *y* that it is included in the antibusing index. NA = not asked.
* $p < .05$, by χ^2 . ** $p < .01$, by χ^2 .

spectively). Consequently, the major political impact of racism must be carried by other forms of prejudice.

One obvious candidate is racial threat, because many respondents experienced blacks as directly or potentially threatening their personal lives. As indicated in Table 1, about half thought that they would be personally affected by affirmative action in the near future. Eighty percent thought black families would soon be moving into their neighborhoods. Almost a third felt their neighborhoods vulnerable to black violence, that blacks' economic gains had exceeded their own, or that more intimate social contact with blacks would be objectionable. So, to a considerable number of these white suburbanites, personal safety, economic status, and the sanctity of the home and of the neighborhood all were in some jeopardy.

At the same time, whites also expressed much antiblack feeling on symbolic issues (see Table 2). A vast majority opposed busing for racial integration. Nearly as many resisted the idea of quotas for black college students. From one third to two thirds believed that blacks get more than they deserve, push themselves where they are not wanted, milk welfare programs, or get more attention from government than they should. Our first problem, then, is to determine the relative contribution of these two seemingly potent forms of racial prejudice—racial threat and symbolic racism—to white suburbanites' political choices.

Determinants of the Vote

Symbolic racism versus racial threat. We begin by simply comparing the bivariate relationships between symbolic racism and personal racial threat on the one hand and candidate preferences on the other. Such comparisons suggest that symbolic racism was the more important determinant of voting behavior in both elections, with the more prejudiced supporting the white conservative, Yorty. Symbolic racism had a mean gamma with candidate preference of .41 when all 21 items included in the two surveys are considered (shown in Table 2); racial

threat yielded a mean gamma of .21 over 20 items (shown in Table 1).

It is likely that the symbolic racism and racial threat measures share some overlapping variance, because of their common racial content. So to sort out more satisfactorily their separate contributions, it is necessary to turn to multiple regression analyses. The first set of these are done separately for the 1969 and 1973 data, assessing the simple main effects of symbolic racism and racial threat. (The only difference between the two was that the 1973 analysis included the vulnerability measures.) The results are shown in Table 3. They also demonstrate the greater importance of symbolic racism in several ways. The simplest is that the R^2 contributed by symbolic racism is greater than that contributed by personal racial threat when each is considered alone. Equation 1 for each election year considers only symbolic racism and accounts for R^2 s of .223 and .153. Equation 2 considers only racial threat and yields less than half that R^2 : .096 and .055.

However, this does not show the unique contributions of each factor. When both factors are considered simultaneously, in Equation 3, the symbolic racism terms are all statistically significant (though busing was only marginally so in 1973, $p < .10$).¹ In contrast, only 2 of 12 racial threat terms were significant in the 2 years. This shows that symbolic racism is a considerably more powerful determinant of voting behavior than racial threat when both are considered simultaneously.

The disadvantage of this analysis is that it pits a series of individual racial threat items against two symbolic racism scales and therefore may stack the cards against the latter. We next turned to the hierarchical possibilities of multiple regression analysis as a vehicle for guarding against this. Here the question is: do all the several racial threats to personal life, as a set, add significantly to our ability to predict mayoral voting above and beyond the contribution made

¹ This is one instance in which the finding varied somewhat depending on the dependent measure. In 1973, the busing index had a stronger, more reliable effect on vote intention ($p < .05$) than on the candidate preference measure presented above.

Table 3
Effects of Symbolic Racism and Racial Threats on Candidate Preference

Measure	1969 (n = 178)			1973 (n = 220)		
	Equation			Equation		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Symbolic racism						
Expressive racism	.365**	—	.309**	.338**	—	.300**
Opposition to busing	.217**	—	.260**	.119	—	.108
Racial threats						
Neighborhood desegregation and interracial social contact						
Oppose neighborhood desegregation	—	.070	-.066	—	.122	.083
Dislike social contact with blacks	—	.124	.057	—	.053	-.039
Likelihood of neighborhood desegregation	—	NA	NA	—	-.038	-.030
Economic competition						
Economic resentment of blacks	—	.080	-.022	—	.179*	.113
Likelihood of black supervisor	—	NA	NA	—	-.103	-.062
Likelihood of being affected by affirmative action	—	NA	NA	—	-.058	-.112
Racial busing						
Children not in parochial school	—	.094	.136*	—	—	—
Children in public elementary school	—	—	—	—	-.090	-.083
Children in public high school	—	—	—	—	-.039	-.046
Likelihood of busing blacks in	—	NA	NA	—	.057	.012
Likelihood of busing whites out	—	NA	NA	—	-.076	-.025
Black violence						
Closeness to Pacoima	—	.107	.075	—	-.037	-.040
Fear of black violence	—	.148*	.160*	—	.133	.112
<i>R</i> ² values						
	.223	.096	.253	.153	.055	.144
Additional variance contributed by:						
Symbolic racism (3-2)			.157			.089
Racial threat (3-1)			.030			-.009

Note. Variables are coded so that a positive effect of either racism or threat will yield a positive beta. Entry is the standardized regression coefficient (beta) for each predictor variable. *R*² is adjusted for number of variables in the analysis.
* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

by symbolic racism? The answer is no. In this analysis we start by determining how much racial threat adds to *R*² once symbolic racism already has been included in the equation—which is not very much (3% in 1969, 0% in 1973; subtract the *R*² for Equation 1 from that for Equation 3). In contrast, when this procedure is reversed, the power of symbolic racism is maintained. Symbolic racism accounts for considerable variance

not accounted for by racial threat (16% and 9% for the 2 years, as indicated by subtracting the *R*² for Equation 2 from that for Equation 3). This procedure has the advantage of pooling all the contributions made by the separate racial threat items into one increment to *R*². This comparison is in our view the strongest and most compelling test of the main effects of symbolic racism and racial threat. It is apparent that symbolic

racism has powerful unique effects, whereas those of racial threat are only at chance levels.

As indicated earlier, even this analysis tests only the most rudimentary version of our hypotheses, since it assesses only the main effects of each set of variables. Before moving on to tests of more complex hypotheses, however, we need to determine that these effects of symbolic racism are not artifacts of some third variable or set of variables. A most obvious possibility is demographic factors, but these results were completely unaffected by the addition of demographic variables (age, education, and sex) to the regression analysis.

Political predispositions represent another category of artifactual possibilities. We have interpreted the effects of symbolic racism as reflecting racial prejudice, and hence as revealing a predominantly racial basis for the choice between the two candidates. But they could conceivably instead reflect some other correlated political predispositions, such as liberalism-conservatism and party identification, since the candidates also differed quite markedly on those dimensions. Indeed, in both contests, both predispositions were associated with candidate preference, with Republicans supporting Yorty more than Democrats did (in 1969, $r = .15$; in 1973, $r = .12$; $ps < .10$), and conservatives more likely to prefer him than liberals were (in 1969, $r = .25$; in 1973, $r = .34$; $ps < .01$).

But these political predispositions did not account for the effects of symbolic racism. When they were added to the 1969 regression analysis summarized in Table 3, virtually nothing changed: Candidate preference did not become more predictable; neither partisanship nor liberalism-conservatism contributed independently to the vote, once the effects due to symbolic racism were taken into account; and finally, none of the regression coefficients indexing the effects of racial attitudes changed with the entrance of political dispositions into the regression analysis. To be sure, adding them to the 1973 regression analysis resulted in a modest but clearly significant increment in R^2 (due entirely to ideology). Nevertheless, symbolic racism continued to have a

significant contribution to voting (though diminished by about 10%), and racial threats to personal life continued to have no effect at all, when the unstandardized regression coefficients were considered. Symbolic racism had substantially more effect than ideology, even when added to the equation after it. Hence there is some evidence of slightly increased shared variance from 1969 to 1973. But in general, the effects of symbolic racism on voting preferences seem indeed properly interpreted as mainly reflecting racial prejudice rather than nonracial political predispositions. The racial issue generally, and symbolic racism in particular, was central to white voters' choices in these two elections.

The expectancy-value approach to racial threat. The suprisingly poor showing of the racial threat hypothesis so far suggests that we mainly devote our remaining analyses to testing it more precisely, in the hope of finding conditions under which it does hold, even if they are more limited than originally expected. An obvious first move is to test an expectancy-value approach to racial threat. This approach suggests in general that choice behavior is the product of both affect toward some end state and the likelihood of its occurrence. So the political impact of any given disliked aspect of racial change ought to be greater among respondents most personally vulnerable to being affected by it. For example, opposition to integrated neighborhoods should have maximum political impact among respondents whose own neighborhoods are in danger of being desegregated.

To test this expectancy-value hypothesis, we considered each area of racial threat in turn. In each case we determined the impact on candidate preference of the affect about the threat (e.g., liking or disliking desegregation of one's own neighborhood) separately for vulnerable respondents (e.g., those feeling their own neighborhood was likely to be desegregated) and those not vulnerable to it (e.g., those feeling it was unlikely to be desegregated). In operational terms, regression Equation 2, the results of which are shown in Table 3, was reestimated, this time separately for vulnerable and not vulnerable respondents, taking the threats one at a time.

If the personal manifestation of racial threat was fueling antiblack voting, these regression coefficients ought to be larger for vulnerable than for nonvulnerable respondents.

The results provide no support for this expectancy-value version of the racial threat hypothesis. The data are shown in Table 4. In every single case, affect toward the specified racial threat has more effect on voting behavior among the least vulnerable respondents—exactly contrary to the hypothesis. This difference is significant in only one case (using Multiplicative Affect \times Vulnerability interaction terms; see Cohen & Cohen, 1975). It would be inappropriate (though tempting) to conclude that supposed racial threats actually have most political impact among those for whom they are most hypothetical, but the data do consistently run counter to the racial threat hypothesis.

A second and complementary version of the expectancy-value racial threat hypothesis predicts that symbolic racism will have

important political effects only among whites whose own lives are safe from racial change. Ideological or moral thinking may be a luxury that can be afforded only when an issue has no tangible consequence; for example, only people without children vulnerable to being bused will decide about busing on the basis of their racial prejudice or integrationist beliefs. Vulnerable parents, in this view, think first about the welfare of their own children and second about what is best for society as a whole. So, according to this hypothesis, only among the nonvulnerable respondents should symbolic racism affect voting behavior.

The data do not support this version of the racial threat hypothesis either, as shown in Table 5. Symbolic racism relates to candidate preference at almost exactly the same level no matter how personally vulnerable the respondent is. This is true for both versions of symbolic racism: expressive racism and opposition to busing. Not one of the in-

Table 4
Impact on Candidate Preference of Affects Associated With Potential Racial Threats Among Respondents High and Low in Vulnerability

Affect/vulnerability	Impact of affect among respondents who are:			
	Highly vulnerable		Not vulnerable	
	<i>b</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>n</i>
Threat of neighborhood desegregation and interracial social contact				
Oppose neighborhood desegregation				
Likelihood of neighborhood desegregation (1973)	.05 _a	85	1.51 _a	39
Proximity to Pacoima (1969)	-.05	62	.25	84
Proximity to Pacoima (1973)	-.12	48	.76	69
Dislike social contact with blacks				
Likelihood of neighborhood desegregation (1973)	.10	85	.33	39
Threat of economic competition				
Economic resentments of blacks				
Likelihood of being affected by affirmative action (1973)	-.05	73	.21	81
Likelihood of having a black supervisor (1973)	.01	103	.18	113
Threat of black violence				
Fear of black violence				
Proximity to Pacoima (1969)	.22	48	.26	69
Proximity to Pacoima (1973)	.04	62	.46	84

Note. *b* is the unstandardized regression coefficient, the appropriate measure for subgroup comparisons. Entries with common subscripts differ significantly. For proximity, the comparison is between adjacent and distant; for likelihood, between very likely and unlikely, ignoring likely.

Table 5
Impact of Symbolic Racism on Candidate Preference Among Respondents High and Low in Vulnerability

Form of symbolic racism/dimension of vulnerability	Impact of symbolic racism among respondents who are:			
	Highly vulnerable		Not vulnerable	
	<i>b</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>n</i>
Expressive racism				
Likelihood of neighborhood desegregation (1973)	.08	85	.08	39
Likelihood of being affected by affirmative action (1973)	.13	73	.09	81
Likelihood of having a black supervisor (1973)	.11	103	.11	113
Likelihood of blacks bused in (1973)	.14	115	.08	99
Likelihood of whites bused out (1973)	.13	98	.09	121
Proximity to Pacoima (1969)	.17	48	.11	69
Proximity to Pacoima (1973)	.14	62	.09	84
Opposition to busing				
Likelihood of blacks bused in (1973) plus parents of school children	.09	53	.02	52
Likelihood of whites bused out (1973) plus parents of school children	.08	43	.02	61

Note. *b* is the unstandardized regression coefficient for the effect of symbolic racism on candidate preference within the high or low vulnerability group specified. In the case of racial busing, the highly vulnerable group was defined by those who thought busing likely or very likely *and* had children in the Los Angeles public schools. The not vulnerable group was made up of respondents who thought busing unlikely or very unlikely *and* had no children in the Los Angeles public schools. For other operational definitions of vulnerability, see note to Table 4.

teraction terms reflecting these differences is significant.²

In short, the expectancy-value renditions of the racial threat prediction fail to find any support in our data. Affects associated with potential threats do not become more politically consequential as the threats become more real. Nor does symbolic racism diminish in political significance among the most personally vulnerable whites. If anything, the relationships run in the opposite direction in both cases. Affects tied to potential racial threats affected voting, if at all, only as they became less anchored in personal experience—and therefore less realistic and more symbolic (as indicated in Table 4). Likewise, the relationship between symbolic racism and voting appears to, if anything, gently increase as vulnerability increases (as shown in Table 5). In our view, these analyses represent our most sensitive tests of the political impact of racial threat, and they detect none. Indeed, the largely nonsignificant results tend mainly to go in the opposite direction.

Symbolic Racism Determined by Vulnerability to Racial Threat?

Symbolic racism had a strong effect on voting behavior, whereas racial threat had none. Yet there is another possible version of the racial threat hypothesis. Racial threat may produce symbolic racism and in that way have indirect political effects. Does symbolic racism in fact merely represent quasi-ideological rationalizations of feelings

² We have included opposition to busing in Table 5 rather than Table 4, which is consistent with treating it as an aspect of symbolic racism. However, the two analyses are conceptually identical, and the same regression coefficients could have been placed in either. The opposition-to-busing items are not as precise indicators of what we mean by "affect toward a racial threat" as we would have liked; better, perhaps, would have been, "How would you feel about your own children being bused for racial integration?" Irrespective of whether opposition to busing is regarded as an aspect of symbolic racism (as we argue here and elsewhere; see Sears et al., 1979) or the affective component of a realistic racial threat, the finding remains the same: Personal vulnerability to it does not increase its political impact.

of personal vulnerability to blacks? To test this, multiple regressions were conducted, using the several indices of vulnerability to racial threat as predictors of the two versions of symbolic racism (expressive racism and opposition to busing).

Racial threat is not a strong predictor of symbolic racism, as shown in Table 6. Regressing the expressive racism index on 11 indicators of racial vulnerability yields a link between the two, but it is a tenuous one ($R^2 = .049$). When measures of social background (age, education, and sex) are added to the equation, just one measure of vulnerability continues to exert a statistically reliable effect: Suburbanites who thought it likely that they (or members of their family or their friends) would be denied opportunities for jobs or promotions because of preferential treatment to members of minority groups were higher in expressive racism than were those who anticipated no interference from affirmative action practices.

Much the same holds for busing. Opposition to racial busing was intense, of course, but this was so largely irrespective of personal vulnerability. In particular, attitudes on busing were unrelated to whether or not respondents thought black children were about to be bused into their local schools, whether white children from their neighborhoods were soon to be bused into black schools, or whether they had children in the Los Angeles school system. As shown in Table 6, the only significant effect was due to an interaction between judgment that it was likely that whites would be bused out of their neighborhoods and having children in the Los Angeles high schools. But it is, once again, an anomalous result for the racial threat hypothesis: suburbanites who believed that their own high school aged children might become participants in a racial busing program were actually less intensely opposed to busing. However this curious result is interpreted, the influence of vulnerability on attitudes toward racial busing was marginal at best ($R^2 = .03$). Opposition to racial busing did not come from those personally at risk.

The independence of racial threat and symbolic racism can be illustrated in yet another way. Living close to blacks was as-

sociated with suburbanites' sense of racial threat: Fears that blacks might bring violence to their own neighborhood diminished with distance from Pacoima, sharply so in 1969 (Gamma = $-.47$, $p < .01$) and less so but still significantly in 1973 (Gamma = $-.25$, $p < .05$). In both years, however, symbolic racism was completely unrelated to proximity to blacks: Opposition to busing and expressive racism were just as intense among suburbanites whose personal lives were centered far from blacks as for those who lived adjacent to Pacoima (mean Gamma across the four tests = $-.03$). So although the personal threat component of suburban racism was responsive to the fear-provoking "realities" of adult life, symbolic forms of racism were not. Whether suburbanites lived many miles from blacks or within a stone's throw had nothing to do with their symbolic racism.

Finally, we explored one last route by which racial threat might conceivably influence symbolic forms of racism. Rather than producing opposition to racial change, vulnerability to racial threat might *polarize* whites' racial attitudes. Threat may provoke more thinking about race, and according to Tesser's (1978) research, thinking about an attitude object may lead to more extreme attitudes. We tested this hypothesis by "folding" the two symbolic racism indexes at their neutral points to form new dependent variables and then repeating the regression analyses summarized in Table 6. As it turned out, extreme attitudes on expressive racism or busing were no more common among the personally vulnerable than among those who were personally removed from racial threats. For expressive racism, of the 11 indicators of vulnerability to racial threat included in the regression equation, none was related to extremity. Collectively, their predictive failure was complete ($R^2 = .00$). Similarly, suburbanites who thought that busing was coming soon to Los Angeles or who had children enrolled in the Los Angeles school system held only slightly more extreme views on busing than did those who were personally unaffected ($R^2 = .05$, $p < .05$). So personal vulnerability to racial change did not produce more extremity on our symbolic racism measures.

Table 6
Effects of Racial Vulnerability on Symbolic Racism (1973 Only)

Vulnerability	Type of symbolic racism	
	Expressive racism	Opposition to busing
Racial threat to neighborhood		
Likelihood of neighborhood desegregation	.036	—
Threat of economic competition		
Likelihood of black supervisor	-.121	—
Likelihood of being affected by affirmative action	.209**	—
Threat of busing		
Likelihood of busing blacks in (A)	.271*	.083
Likelihood of busing whites out (B)	-.169	.110
Have elementary school children (X)	.039	-.074
Have high school children (Y)	-.086	-.050
(A × X)	-.198	-.042
(B × X)	.173	-.046
(A × Y)	.035	.080
(B × Y)	-.103	-.283**
R ²	.049*	.030*

Note. The entry is β , the standardized regression coefficient. A positive beta means that greater vulnerability goes with greater symbolic racism. $N = 238$. R^2 is adjusted for number of independent variables included in the equation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

Our findings consistently support the symbolic racism hypothesis, which is associated with the sociocultural perspective on prejudice, at the expense of the racial threat hypothesis, which is drawn from realistic group conflict theory. Racial attitudes were shown to be major determinants of voting behavior in both mayoral elections we examined; and abstract, moralistic resentments of blacks—what we have called symbolic racism—proved to be the overriding determinant of voting, for whites shielded from possible tangible threats posed by blacks as well as for those in more imminent jeopardy.

At the same time, and in direct contradiction of realistic group conflict theory, direct racial threats to whites' private lives were largely irrelevant, either in accounting for racially relevant political choices or in producing symbolic racism. We went to considerable pains to measure carefully the threats blacks might pose to whites in several domains: neighborhood desegregation and social contact, economic competition, school

desegregation, and crime and violence. We included both subjective measures of threat (e.g., the judgment that racial busing was about to be implemented in neighborhood schools) and objective measures (e.g., having children in the Los Angeles school system who could be bused). Nevertheless, we could uncover little evidence that threat affected voting behavior or generated more symbolic racism. Nor did we find support for the predicted expectancy-value interactions: Suburbanites' affective reactions to threat did not produce more antiblack voting when the threats were more likely to materialize. Nor, finally, did personal vulnerability to threat intensify or polarize symbolic forms of prejudice. By our analysis, the political consequences of racial prejudice are carried by symbolic resentments, not by tangible threats.

What methodological problems might vitiate these conclusions? We assessed symbolic racism with multiple-item scales, and racial threat with individual items. It is conceivable that symbolic racism is therefore more powerful than racial threat just because of its greater consequent variability

and perhaps greater reliability as well. However, there are good reasons for adopting this procedure. It would be conceptually inappropriate to operationalize racial threat as a single, internally consistent scale. The various racial threat items represent a collection of quite separate respondent characteristics. The appropriate way, then, to deal with the racial threat indicators is to treat them separately in estimation but to pool their individual contributions for comparative purposes, as we have done in the bottom of Table 3. Second, our most pointed analyses of the racial threat hypothesis feature interactions between appropriately paired affect and vulnerability measures (see Table 4). Such analysis can only be done by treating the threat measures separately rather than grouping them into a scale.

In any case, we are confident this procedure does not account for the main results of the study for several reasons. Both symbolic racism and racial threat were analyzed as individual items rather than scales in preliminary reports of the 1969 data (Sears & Kinder, 1971, Note 1), and the substantive results were identical to those reported here, though not as economically represented. Then, after finding (to our surprise) that symbolic racism dominated racial threat in the 1969 data, we substantially bolstered the measurement of threat in the 1973 survey. Improving the measurement of threat nevertheless leads to essentially the same disappointing return for the racial threat hypothesis. The greater variability of the symbolic racism scales might indeed give them more statistical power, but we took the precaution of analyzing them also as trichotomized variables, and the results were identical. Finally, the most sensitive analyses of racial threat (Tables 4 and 5) show it coming out overwhelmingly in the direction counter to hypothesis; scaling racial threat would not reverse this situation.

Generality of Results

Our main conclusion is strengthened by the consistency of our findings, even over a variety of tests and measures, across two independent replications 4 years apart and during a period of sharp political change.

But to draw implications for general theories of racial prejudice—for the failure of realistic group conflict theory and for the success of the sociocultural perspective—demands consideration of external validity. How cautious should we be in extrapolating from these results to other settings and populations?

We believe first of all that the pattern of findings roughly represents what would be found in American suburbs generally, since demographically our respondents resembled suburbanites throughout the country. But generalizing beyond suburban America is more risky. According to their retrospective judgments, our respondents had behaved politically quite like California voters as a whole in recent elections, and their racial attitudes were similar to those held by northern whites more generally at the time (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971; Sears & Kinder, 1971). Still, in exploring racism in suburbia rather than in an area where tangible racial conflict is more intense, we may have systematically underestimated the effects of racial threat. Perhaps symbolic racism, with its overtones of disinterested morality, is the luxury of those not personally threatened. Of course large numbers of our suburban respondents did perceive themselves as being directly threatened by blacks, and these threats had no discernible impact (Tables 3–6). Nor did symbolic racism flourish only in the absence of threat (Table 5).

Furthermore, racial threat has failed to have a significant effect in other research we are aware of as well, all of it centering on conflict over racial busing. For example, opposition to racial busing has proved to be largely irrelevant to measures of the personal impact of busing, such as having public school children living in an area where busing had already been implemented or was promised to be implemented soon, the length of the bus ride, or the racial composition of the host school (Gatlin, Giles, & Cataldo, 1978; Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979; Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980; McConahay & Hawley, Note 2). One exception is that parents in Los Angeles, just before the announcement of a long-awaited desegregation plan, were somewhat more opposed to busing

than non-parents or those in adjacent unaffected school districts (Allen & Sears, Note 3). Nevertheless, in this and all these other studies, prejudice was the major determinant of antibusing attitudes. These results corroborate our own and extend, if suggestively, their generality.

Another objection argues for more prudent, cautious generalization. Perhaps race invites symbolic thinking among suburbanites because they have virtually no friendly personal contact with blacks. In the suburban world, there is simply no personal experience with blacks that might offset outdated racial and moral socialization. There is no question that suburbanites in our samples had little direct contact with blacks, as indicated earlier. The degree of racial isolation and lack of direct interracial contact for white suburbanites is striking. However, racial isolation is hardly limited to the suburb. Friendly social encounters between races are rare even in integrated neighborhoods. According to Bradburn, Sudman, and Gockel's (1971) survey, just 1% of whites living in substantially integrated neighborhoods reported going out for dinner or to a movie with blacks in the preceding several months; less than a third (32%) said that anyone in their family had ever stopped to talk with black neighbors when they met on the street. Racial isolation is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary American social life. Whether or not symbolic racism would remain the politically potent form of racial prejudice with higher levels of interracial contact cannot be answered with our data.

Symbolic Politics

Our findings imply that the white public's political response to racial issues is based on moral and symbolic challenges to the racial status quo in society generally rather than on any direct, tangible challenge to their own personal lives. The political problems with busing do not arise merely from whites whose children are threatened with busing. Resistance to busing may be as intense as it is in part because it conjures up images throughout the white population of innocent white children being sent far from their safe

white neighborhoods into schools jammed with academically unmotivated, disorderly, dangerous blacks. Similarly, opposition to affirmative action may not come disproportionately from those whose own careers are in jeopardy. The political problems surrounding affirmative action may be traced in part to popular images of hardworking whites being unfairly displaced by underserving and underqualified blacks. The politically important component of prejudice—symbolic racism—is compartmentalized away from the personal impact of racial conflicts.

Such "psychic segregation" not only holds for symbolic racism, but also shows up as a broader distinction made by these suburbanites between the quality of their personal life on the one hand and the quality of national life on the other. Most of our respondents seemed quite satisfied with their personal lives—with their communities, neighborhood schools, economic progress, and safety—yet in each domain, they expressed considerable pessimism about the broader society. For example, whereas most in our samples were optimistic about their own economic futures and quite satisfied with their own recent gains, a majority agreed that "the condition of the *average* man is getting worse, not better" (see Andrews & Withey, 1976, for similar findings based on national surveys). Moreover, what personal discontent suburbanites did express seemed not to spill over into their judgments about society. Concern about personal safety, for instance, had virtually no implications for suburbanites' broader views on crime. Those who believed that crime was on the rise in their own neighborhood were not, as a consequence, any more enthusiastic about a number of "law and order" policies such as the death penalty and restrictions on bail or any more likely to think that streets in America were no longer safe. Personal fears and frustrations, however important and preoccupying they may be, seemed not to affect their broader social attitudes.

Additional support for this argument is provided by a number of recent investigations. We have already referred to the research on racial busing, which consistently demonstrates that opposition to busing stems

largely from longstanding political and racial values and that the personal impact of busing is of far less significance. The failure of personal concerns and discontents to take on political significance has been demonstrated in several other contexts as well: in attitudes toward the Vietnam war (Lau, Brown, & Sears, 1978), in public response to the energy crisis (Sears, Tyler, Citrin, & Kinder, 1978), and in the political consequences of economic discontent (Kinder, in press; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979, Note 4). In each case, judgments about the national condition were largely autonomous from personal experiences and predicaments, and each time it was the more general form of discontent, not the personal, that influenced political preference.

One recent study provides an interesting counterexample. Self-interest did seem to influence Californians' attitudes toward Proposition 13, the property tax referendum, in 1978 (Sears, Note 5). Owning a home and not having a government job both were related to greater support for Proposition 13; yet even in this case, where self-interest seemed so clearly linked to a political choice, the impact of symbolic predictors on support for Proposition 13 was very great. So, although it seems unlikely that attitudes never serve an instrumental function, it is possible that they do so more rarely than is usually assumed or under only special circumstances.

In short, unhappiness with American society appears to be largely unrelated to personal discontents. The stresses and strains of private life are insulated from political and social malaise. *Why* this is so—why the concrete realities of people's everyday lives are so compartmentalized away from their judgments about the society as a whole—is a complicated but researchable question. In pursuing it we hope to learn more about the particular case examined here: why symbolic resentments have a more salient influence than tangible threats on whites' political responses to racial conflict.

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