

# Reconsidering the Environmental Determinants of White Racial Attitudes

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Most research on the environmental determinants of whites' racial attitudes focuses on the "threat" hypothesis, i.e., that white racism increases with the competition posed by a larger black population. We argue that in the segregated United States, contextual effects are more complicated than this, involving both race and socio-economic status. Cross-level data on individual racial attitudes and the environment's racial and education composition, constructed from the 1991 Race and Politics Survey and the 1990 Census, support this assertion. Living amongst more uneducated whites has a greater impact on whites' racial attitudes than does living amongst more blacks. Further analysis shows that the sources of this effect come less from interracial competition and more from a psychological response of out-group hostility generated by low status contexts. We also find that whites' views on racially targeted policies are shaped by racial contexts but only where the contextual parameter coincides with the policy outcome. Our findings suggest specific limitations to the threat thesis and highlight other ways that social contexts shape racial attitudes.

In recent years, scholars have begun to reexamine the role of social environments as a determinant of whites' racial attitudes. Most of this research focuses on the "power-threat" hypothesis, which states that white racial animosity increases with the percent of blacks in an environment (Blalock 1967; Key [1949] 1984). According to this hypothesis, whites engage in racial violence, resist desegregation, vote for racist candidates, and switch political parties partly in response to the threat that living among many blacks poses to their political and economic privilege. Over the past two decades, numerous studies have validated this claim: whites' negative racial attitudes increase with higher percentages of blacks in the county, metropolitan area, and state, and not just in the South (Bobo 1988; Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Giles and Hertz 1994; Giles and Evans 1986; Glaser 1994; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Matthews and Prothro 1966; Wright 1977). In perhaps the most thorough test, Taylor (1998), using national cross-sectional data from the past twenty years, finds consistent patterns of prejudice and opposition to race-targeted policies among whites as the black percentage in a metropolitan area increases. Across all of these works, a large body of evidence supports the argument that white racial hostility rises in direct proportion to the size of the surrounding black population.

As compelling as these findings are, they leave many unanswered questions about the relationship between whites' social surroundings and their racial attitudes. To begin with, these studies conceptualize racial threat solely in terms of racial environments. The originators of the threat hypothesis, however, also paid attention to socio-economic contexts. For example, in *Southern Politics*, V. O. Key noted that the political differences between the black-belt counties of Alabama and North Carolina arose not

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from their racial populations (which were equally large) but from their distinct class arrangements ([1949] 1984, 217). Despite this fact, the research of the past several decades has consistently ignored the socio-economic status of whites' environments—none of the contemporary studies of white racial attitudes considers their economic contexts.<sup>1</sup>

The nation's high levels of residential segregation also call for another look at the ways in which interracial competition affects white racial attitudes. The vast majority of whites live in highly segregated communities: nearly 75 percent of all whites live in municipalities that are less than 5 percent black. Because most whites are sequestered in predominantly white, suburban municipalities, they are removed from local political arenas where their power or privilege is contested by African-Americans or where the effects of race-targeted policies are felt. While many important race-targeted policy decisions are made at the state and federal levels, their implementation often hinges on locally based decisions and their effects may only be felt at the neighborhood or municipal level. In other words, one type of policy may be contested within the county, another across a metropolitan area, and a third within a municipality. For example, inter-racial competition for jobs takes place across counties or the metropolis, but competition for housing and primary education may occur within municipalities or special districts. Although previous research typically measures threat with large contextual units, such as counties, it is not self-evident that the black percentage in a geographic unit as large as a county or metropolitan area is a sufficient threat to any given privilege, much less all privileges (for related arguments see Voss [1996] and Forbes [1997]).<sup>2</sup>

Given these considerations, alternative explanations for the contextual variation in racial attitudes are in order. Scholars have long noted that intergroup hostility does not come solely from "realistic" conflict over power or material resources (Levine and Campbell 1972; Sherif 1966) but is also influenced by psychological responses to

economic and physical duress (Bettelheim and Janowitz [1950] 1964; Fromm 1941; Sales 1973). If these hypotheses are correct, the social environment can influence racial attitudes in ways that have little to do with racial composition or with interracial competition for resources. These alternative theories, however, have not been adequately tested with cross-sectional data that measure both individual and environmental characteristics.

Thus, despite a flurry of recent research, the environmental determinants of whites' racial attitudes are still unclear. Identifying them requires three modifications to the study of social environments and racial attitudes: (1) attention to the context's socio-economic composition as well as its racial composition; (2) distinctions among different contextual levels and their correspondence to interracial competition for geographically distributed resources; and (3) a fuller exploration of alternative hypotheses to realistic competition. With these three goals in mind, we reexamine the threat hypothesis and test some alternatives.

## Reconsidering the Threat Hypothesis

The impact of racial threat on whites' racial attitudes is typically demonstrated with an elegant, bivariate relationship: the greater the percentage of blacks in an environment, the more racially antagonistic whites seem to be.<sup>3</sup> But while intuitively appealing, this formulation overlooks the impact of the environment's socio-economic composition. Recent studies of racial threat have not neglected the impact of social status per se, but they have operationalized it only as an *individual-level* variable (Giles and Hertz 1994; Huckfeldt and Kohfeldt 1989). Yet the socio-economic characteristics of the *environment* may be just as important for shaping interracial competition. For example, tipping models predict that housing values are affected more adversely by racial integration in lower-status white neighborhoods than in affluent ones (Massey and Denton 1993). As racial integration is a greater material threat to residents of low-status neighborhoods, racial animosity in these settings may be higher. Low-status white neighborhoods also are more likely to be located in racially heterogeneous cities, in which competition between racial groups for public

<sup>1</sup>Other, nonattitudinal research has supported Key's claim. For example, James (1988) found that depressed black registration was caused not so much by a large black population as by repressive economic arrangements that required white farm owners to keep black farm workers politically quiescent.

<sup>2</sup>Carsey (1995) and Wright (1977) also compare different levels of context but focus largely on electoral behavior. The difficulty in drawing conclusions from these works comes from the substantial differences between the determinants of voting behavior and racial attitudes, particularly with respect to context; for instance, rural and urban counties may have different voting procedures or mobilization efforts that could affect voting choice in a way that do not shape racial attitudes.

<sup>3</sup>Many of these studies differentiate between political threat, economic threat, or status threat and some (Blalock 1967) specify curvilinear relationships between black populations and white racial animosity. In taking these works as a whole, however, it seems clear that all types of threat are closely linked and most view threat increasing as a linear function of the black population.

services, jobs, and contracts is likely to be more frequent and intense. To properly gauge white vulnerability to black political and economic advancement, one must take into account the *interaction* between socio-economic and racial contexts. Neighborhood tipping, for example, may be more likely in low-status neighborhoods, but it is only possible if sufficient numbers of minorities are nearby. If interracial competition for resources is the source of white racism, then the greatest levels of white racial hostility should be at the intersection of racial and socio-economic contexts.

Given the reality of white residential patterns, however, we may question whether this interaction still takes place. In today's metropolis, most whites are politically and spatially separated from blacks by municipal jurisdictions. White suburbanization has not only increased the racial and economic segregation of the population (Massey and Eggars 1993; Schneider and Logan 1984) but solidified these differences with municipal boundaries (Danielson 1976). Because a municipality's social composition shapes its tax burdens, home values, and the quality of education and other public services (Boger 1997; Danielson 1976, Schneider 1989), politically bounded racial segregation drastically curtails the racial competition for both public and private goods. Although interracial competition may still exist in state or national politics, the effects of many race-targeted policies are determined by local jurisdictions. For most whites, these local political jurisdictions are so racially segregated as strongly to reduce the interracial competition for political and economic resources.

But if segregation undercuts realistic group conflict, do social contexts still shape whites' racial attitudes? We believe they do. In particular, socio-economic contexts may influence racial attitudes independent of racial contexts. Most American cities and suburbs are not simply divided along racial lines; they are highly distinguishable by their socio-economic status. While high levels of racial segregation may eliminate much of the racial competition for resources, high levels of economic segregation may affect racial attitudes in other ways.

For example, socio-economic environments may foster distinct racial *norms*, particularly when socio-economic status is measured by education. According to Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989), citizens' racial opinions are shaped in part by informational cues from their social environment. If less educated whites tend to have racially antagonistic views, then living among many people with such views is likely to produce "spatially structured patterns of preference" (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989, 57). Conversely, highly educated settings may encourage greater racial tolerance.

Socio-economic environments also may influence racial attitudes as part of a larger psychological response to stressful collective circumstances. Research on authoritarianism and on ethnic conflict has generally found that out-group animosity is heightened by conditions of economic stress or status anxiety (Bettelheim and Janowitz [1950] 1964; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Gurr 1968; Horowitz 1985; Konecni 1979; Sales 1973; but see Green et al. 1998). Low-status settings, defined by low rates of education and employment, expose residents to a daily dose of petty crime, concentrated physical decay and social disorder, such as abandoned buildings, verbal harassment, and public drug consumption (Skogan 1990). This exposure in turn leads to a constellation of negative psychological states which are experienced by residents: feelings of anxiety and fear, alienation from neighbors, lack of trust in others, and suspicion toward out-groups in general. In settings characterized by general anxiety and fear, anti-black affect may arise because African Americans are a salient target in a racially divided society. The stigma and stresses of living in a low-status environment also may propagate more racial animosity from feelings of relative deprivation (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In other words, whites in low-status settings may seek to denigrate out-groups as a means of maintaining their own sense of well-being (Brown 1985; Rieder 1985). By increasing negative psychological states, these collective circumstances foster racist sentiments for reasons that have little to do with interracial material competition. The collective circumstances hypothesis has usually been tested with historical records or experimental data, often times with weak or inconsistent results (Konecni 1979). Researchers have not utilized cross-sectional survey data to examine whether individuals have systematic psychological responses to the status composition of their surroundings, leaving the relationship between social environments, psychological states, and racial attitudes undetermined.

## Measuring Social Contexts

To test these propositions, we use data from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study (NRPS), a nationwide random-digit telephone survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Alvarez and Brehm (1997, 349) describe the sample: "The survey was a telephone interview based on random-digit dialing using a stratified two-phase sample selection procedure. The first phase sampled from known area codes and prefixes, appending a four-digit random number to generate a complete ten-digit telephone

The NRPS is one of the richest data sources for American attitudes on race, carrying scores of items measuring racial predispositions and policy preferences. Because we are interested primarily in the effects of context on white attitudes, we analyze only non-Hispanic whites (1,854 of the original 2,223 respondents). We constructed the contextual measures for the 1,681 white respondents with identifiable zip codes by extracting data on the zip code and metropolitan area levels from the 1990 Census (Summary Tape File 3B).

Identifying a context's boundaries is essential for understanding its potential effects. An environment's racial composition can vary widely depending on what geographic unit or level is measured. The impact of the geographical unit on a given policy is also likely to be contingent on the extent to which that unit affects the implementation of the policy. We take these differences into account by measuring two levels of racial context: the percent black at the zip-code level and percent black at the metropolitan level.<sup>5</sup>

Measuring the environment's socio-economic composition represents a different set of challenges. Unlike racial contexts, socio-economic contexts must be measured primarily in smaller units, such as zip codes, because larger units, like metropolitan areas, have too much internal heterogeneity and too little external variation.<sup>6</sup> While the racial percentage of a metropolitan area may provide some indication of interracial proximity, the educational level of the metropolis will be a very poor indicator of what any particular socio-economic context is like. Unlike racial contexts, socio-economic status environments also can be measured by any number of indicators such as income, unemployment, occupation, and education. We chose educational composition, measured by the percent of residents in a zip code with a college de-

number. The second phase drew disproportionately from sample strata containing at least one known residential number, although drawing also from strata where there was no known residential number. . . . The target population consisted of all English speaking adults over 18 years old, residing in households with telephones within the contiguous 48 states."

<sup>5</sup>Zip-code level data may not precisely measure a respondent's immediate neighborhood, but they provide a much better indicator of the respondent's immediate context than county or metropolitan area data. Most zip codes in our study contain between 10,000 and 40,000 inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup>The average percent black across 265 metropolitan statistical areas is 10 percent with a standard deviation of .09; it is 19 percent (a standard deviation of .06) for percent with a college degree. For smaller contextual units the averages and standard deviations for race are about the same but much higher for education: the average percent black across zip codes is 8 percent with a standard deviation of .13; the average percent with a college degree across zip codes is 22 with a standard deviation of .14.

gree. As Huckfeldt, Skogan, and others have shown, education is often a more reliable indicator of an area's socio-economic status than its median household income, is better distributed than unemployment, and is more easily ordered than occupational categories (Huckfeldt 1986; Skogan 1990).<sup>7</sup> At the individual level, education and income are only moderately correlated ( $r = .38$ ), but at the contextual level they are highly correlated ( $r = .68$ ).

The NRPS also allows us to measure racial predispositions with a variety of sophisticated measures. These include "modern" or "symbolic" racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996). Following Alvarez and Brehm (1997), we measure symbolic racism with a three-point Likert scale asking respondents to rate the amount of attention government pays to minorities and two eleven-point scales assessing respondent anger at "special advantages" for blacks in jobs and schools and minority spokesmen who are "always complaining" about discrimination.<sup>8</sup> We also use a traditional measure of racial prejudice composed of five positive and five negative stereotypes of blacks.<sup>9</sup> Sniderman and Piazza (1993) and Feldman and Stenner (1997) suggest the importance of two other predispositions that are not directly racial but may be related to

<sup>7</sup>Many zip codes with low to moderate incomes may be comprised of middle- to upper-class residents who are either in school, retired, live in southern or rural areas, or simply work in low-paying professions (see Massey and Eggars 1993; Huckfeldt 1986). While the percent with a college degree ranges from 5 to 75 percent in our sample, unemployment only varies from 2 to 23 percent. Occupational categories are not so easily ranked (not all administrative jobs are necessarily middle class; some are low-skill, low-paid work). The possibility that zip-code education may nevertheless capture effects that are distinct from zip-code income is explored in Appendix A, which suggests that the effects are in fact quite similar.

<sup>8</sup>Three items were averaged, summed, and rescaled from 0 to 1 to create the symbolic racism measure. First, respondents were asked, "Taking everything into consideration, do you think the government has been paying too much attention to the problems of minorities, about the right amount of attention, or do you think they haven't been paying enough attention to these groups?" Then respondents were asked to rate their anger from 0 (no anger) to 10 (extremely angry) on a variety of items. The two used in the symbolic racism measure were "How about giving blacks and other minorities special advantages in jobs and schools?" and "spokesmen for minorities who are always complaining that blacks are being discriminated against?"

<sup>9</sup>Respondents were asked, "How about (STEREOTYPE)? On a scale of 0 to 10, how well do you think it describes most blacks?" with 0 being a "very inaccurate" and 10 being a "very good" description, where STEREOTYPE is a characteristic. Negative characteristics included aggressive or violent, lazy, boastful, irresponsible, and complaining. Positive characteristics were dependable, intelligent in school, determined to succeed, hardworking, and good neighbors. A composite scale was created by subtracting the sum of the positives from the sum of the negatives. This score was then rescaled from 0 to 1.

racial attitudes: authoritarianism and anti-Semitism. Authoritarianism is measured with a composite scale of five items on the importance of “preserving traditional ideas of right and wrong,” “respect for authority,” “standards of politeness,” “strengthening law and order,” and “maintaining respect for America’s power in the world.”<sup>10</sup> The anti-Semitism scale is comprised of four questions measuring the extent to which respondents agree or disagree that Jews use “shady practices,” believe themselves to be “better than others,” are “more loyal to Israel than America,” and “do not care about non-Jews.”<sup>11</sup> All four predisposition measures were rescaled on a zero-to-one interval scale for comparability.<sup>12</sup> The mean scores (and standard deviations) are .59 (.24) for symbolic racism, .47 (.14) for negative stereotypes, .36 (.24) for anti-Semitism, and .73 (.21) for authoritarianism.

Finally, the 1991 NRPS has a battery of questions regarding race-targeted policy preferences. We selected the items that best capture materialistic competition between races: support for government efforts at housing desegregation, job programs for minorities, and university affirmative action.<sup>13</sup> In the first policy item, respondents were asked about “blacks buying houses in white suburbs.” Respondents who were in favor (either strongly or mildly) were then asked a follow-up question about their support for programs to encourage blacks to buy homes in white suburbs. Responses to the follow-up question were used to create a single four-point Likert scale.<sup>14</sup> The second item is a three-point measure of sup-

port for federal programs to help blacks get jobs and eliminate discrimination.<sup>15</sup> The third item is a four-point measure of support or opposition to giving blacks preference in university admissions.

## Social Contexts and Racial Predispositions

We begin with the bivariate relationships between predispositions and contexts. Figure 1 depicts mean scores on the four predisposition items across quartiles of the percent black in the zip code and of the metropolitan area, and across quintiles of zip-code education.<sup>16</sup> In the crosstabulations, the greatest environmental effects come from education—not race. Whites’ racial predispositions stay relatively constant across a zip code’s racial composition. The average stereotype score is nearly identical in zip codes that are more than 10 percent black (.49) as it is in zip codes with no blacks (.48), with the same pattern holding for the symbolic racism, authoritarianism, and anti-Semitism predispositions (for similar findings see Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995). Across the larger context—metropolitan areas—white racial prejudice increases with larger percentages of blacks. Residents of metropolitan areas that are more than 20 percent black score, on average, six percentage points higher on symbolic racism and four percentage points higher on the negative stereotype scale than do residents of metropolitan areas that are under 5 percent black—small but statistically significant differences.

But where opinions vary only sporadically and mildly with the racial composition of the environment,

cally worded follow-up questions, were in favor of efforts by either government, religious, or business groups to encourage blacks to buy homes in white suburbs.

<sup>15</sup> The question asked, “Some people feel that the government in Washington should (increase spending for programs to help blacks get more jobs/do more to make sure that blacks are not discriminated against in getting jobs). Others feel that blacks should take care of their own problems. How do you feel?”

<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, the racial composition of the zip code mirrors the hypersegregation found in most American cities and neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993). Roughly a quarter of white Americans live in zip codes that are less than 1 percent black. The next quartile live in zip codes under 3 percent black and the third quartile in zip codes under 10 percent black. Only a quarter of all white respondents live in zip codes that contain at least the same percentage of blacks as live in the country as a whole. The distributions across the other contextual measures are not so imbalanced: for example, 50 percent of whites live in a metropolitan area that is at least 10 percent black. There are no systematic variations in the standard deviations of the mean scores.

<sup>10</sup> Respondents were asked to rate the importance of these values on a scale from 0 to 10. These five items were drawn after a principle component analysis of an original group of twelve indicators that might capture the elements within Adorno et al.’s (1950) “F scale.” The five items we chose all had a factor loading above .7. The excluded items measured questions on important values in raising children, tolerance of different groups, and questioning rules and authority.

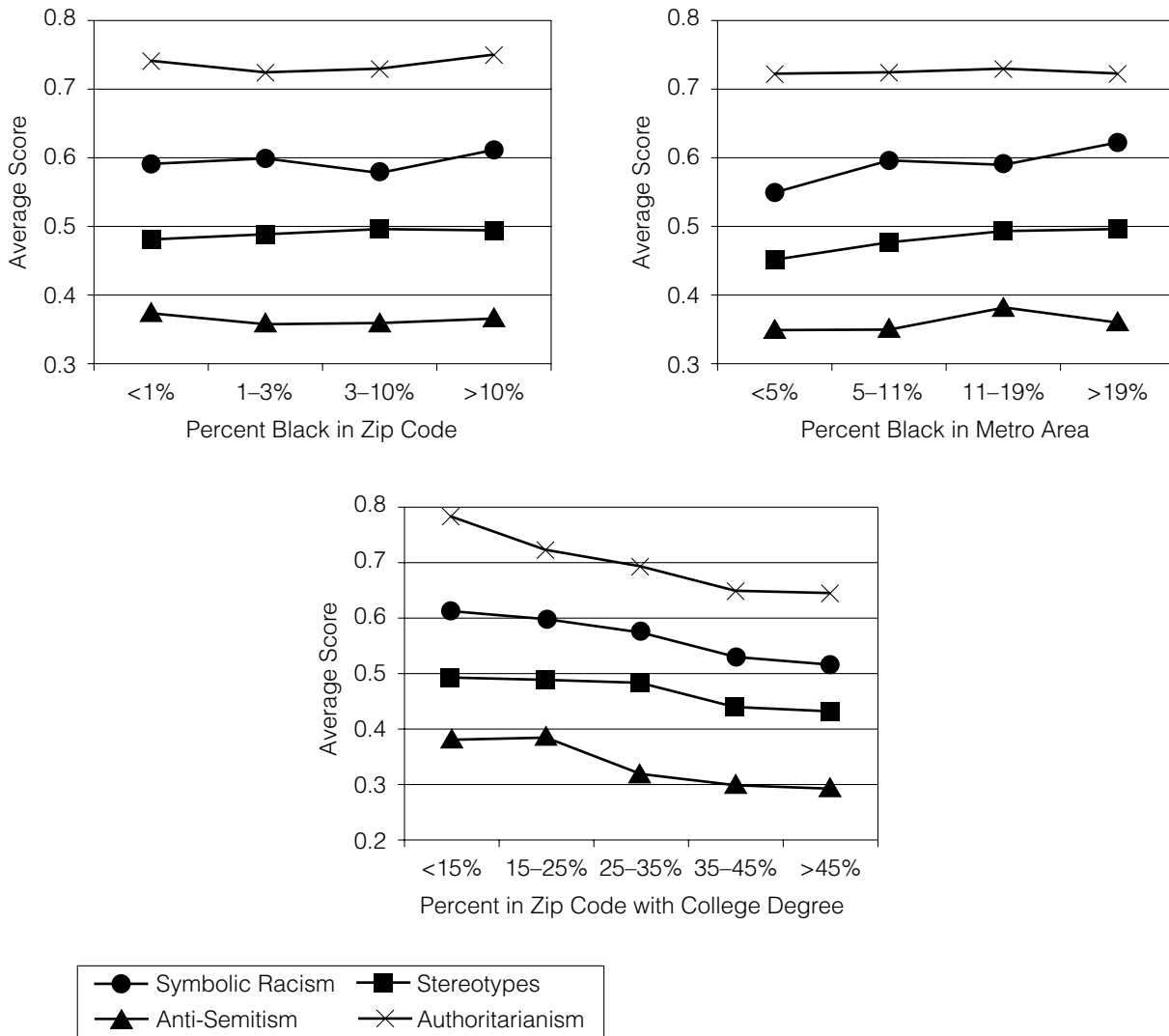
<sup>11</sup> Respondents were read a series of statements about Jews and asked how much they agreed or disagreed (strongly or somewhat) to each. Responses were combined in an unweighted average to generate a four-point scale.

<sup>12</sup> All predispositional measures have alpha scores over .57.

<sup>13</sup> The NRPS made heavy use of wording experiments in asking about policy preferences. Because of the limited sample size in some of the contexts, we combined different versions of questions. As a check, we first estimated our equations separately within each experimental condition. In all cases, the size and direction of the contextual coefficients were approximately the same as when the experimental conditions are combined, although they would typically lose statistical significance, a product of the reduced sample size.

<sup>14</sup> The question asked, “How do you feel about blacks buying houses in white suburbs?” While 88 percent of white respondents initially reported being in favor of blacks buying homes in white suburbs, only 50 percent of this subgroup, when asked in identi-

**FIGURE 1** Average Racial Predisposition Scores by Three Social Contexts



Source: 1991 Race and Politics Study and 1990 U.S. Census, Summary Tape File B

they vary quite sharply with its level of education. The mean score on all four predispositions steadily declines between people in the least and most educated contexts. Between zip codes with less than 15 percent college educated and those with more than 45 percent college educated, the average score decreases by nine percentage points for symbolic racism, by six points on the stereotype scale, by fourteen points on the authoritarianism scale, and by ten points on the anti-Semitism scale.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, a simple, bivariate analysis suggests that: (1) the greatest contextual difference lies in an environment's

educational and not its racial composition; and (2) the negative effect of racial composition occurs in the largest setting. Of course, such results may reflect individual-level characteristics and have little to do with the environment. After all, respondents in more educated zip codes are themselves more educated, which may explain their more liberal predispositions. To control for these and other factors, we employed a series of Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regressions that include relevant contextual and individual demographic variables. Table 1 presents coefficients from the first set of equations, regressing each of the four racial predispositions on zip-code education, zip-code racial composition, two dummy variables measuring the racial composition of the metropolitan area, southern residence, and several individual-level characteristics that

<sup>17</sup>The standard errors for the means did not vary consistently across values for any of the predisposition items or for any of the three contextual measures.

**TABLE 1** The Effects of Racial and Economic Contexts on White Racial Predispositions (with Individual-Level Controls)

	Symbolic Racism	Negative Stereotypes	Anti- Semitism	Authoritarianism
<b>Environmental Variables</b>				
Education—Zip code	-.274** (.054)	-.089** (.031)	-.106* (.057)	-.248** (.040)
Percent Black—Zip code	-.072 (.072)	-.039 (.033)	-.064 (.056)	-.028 (.044)
Medium Black Metro	.020 (.020)	.015 (.010)	.009 (.017)	.004 (.014)
High Black Metro	.034 (.019)	.031** (.012)	.030 (.018)	.019 (.014)
Rural	.015 (.018)	-.005 (.010)	.021 (.016)	.004 (.013)
South	.037** (.016)	.032** (.009)	.025 (.015)	.027* (.012)
<b>Individual-level Variables</b>				
Education	-.025** (.006)	-.021** (.004)	-.045** (.006)	-.056** (.005)
Income	.005** (.002)	-.001 (.001)	-.004* (.002)	-.001 (.002)
Age	.001 (.000)	.001* (.001)	.000 (.000)	.001** (.000)
Length of Residence	-.004 (.006)	-.000 (.004)	.002 (.006)	.003 (.005)
Female	.000 (.013)	-.020** (.008)	-.067** (.013)	.001 (.011)
Republican	.070** (.014)	.015 (.009)	.016 (.014)	.061 (.011)
Independent	-.021 (.034)	-.050* (.021)	-.068* (.034)	-.031 (.026)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.08	.11	.20
N	1476	1416	1389	1469

Source: 1991 Race and Politics Survey/1990 Census

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

might influence racial attitudes, including education, income, age, sex, length of residence, and dummy variables for Republicans and political independents (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sniderman and Piazza 1993).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In order to measure the racial composition of metropolitan areas without excluding rural residents, we divided metropolitan areas into three categories: under 7 percent black, 7–16 percent black, and over 16 percent black. This allows us to include all respondents by making two dummy variables from the later categories (medium black metro, high black metro), one variable for rural residence, and treating the metropolitan areas with few blacks

Even controlling for individual education, income, partisanship, and other characteristics, the relationships depicted in Table 1 are remarkably similar to the bivari-

as the excluded category. We found little variation in the racial composition of the rural areas—in comparing the percent black in the county of our rural respondents, we found that over 85 percent lived in counties under 5 percent black. Consequently, most of the rural areas in this sample are predominantly white. Individual education is a six-category scale, income a thirteen-category scale, length of residence a five-category scale, and age is coded directly from 18 to 94.

ate pattern. As in Figure 1, no significant differences exist among whites based on their zip code's racial composition.<sup>19</sup> In larger contexts, however, the racial environment does have a small effect. Like earlier studies using multivariate equations (Taylor 1998; Fossett and Kiecolt 1989), we find that whites in heavily black metropolitan areas exhibit greater negative stereotypes about blacks. Our model predicts that residents of predominantly black metropolitan areas (more than 17 percent) score three percentage points higher on the stereotype scale than whites in metropolitan areas with few blacks (under 7 percent). Unlike past research, however, we find no statistically significant relationships between the percentage of blacks in the metropolitan area and other indicators of racial hostility.<sup>20</sup>

Once again, the largest contextual effects arise from the zip code's level of education, even when taking individual education and income into account. The model predicts that residents of zip codes with fewer than 5 percent college-educated residents score 27 percentage points higher on the symbolic racism scale, twenty-five percentage points higher on the authoritarianism scale, 11 percentage points higher on the anti-Semitism, and 9 percentage points higher on the negative stereotype scales than residents of the most educated zip codes (i.e., zip codes with more than 70 percent of residents with a college degree). These differences are much larger than those across *any* of the racial context measures.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Nor are there any significant effects from the percent black in the county. When a term measuring the percent black in the county was substituted for both the zip code and metropolitan area racial measures, no statistically significant coefficients emerge. Because metropolitan areas are comprised of counties, this finding is generally not surprising.

<sup>20</sup>Given the correlation between the percent black in the zip code and metropolitan area (i.e., metropolitan areas with more blacks are more likely to contain zip codes with more blacks), high multicollinearity was obviously a concern for the multivariate estimates. Multicollinearity, however, does not appear to be influencing the results. When separate equations were run with only one of the racial contextual indicators used at a time, the results were virtually the same. For instance, including percent black in the zip code as the only contextual measure of race did not yield large or statistically significant coefficients for that measure. Nor could we find any interactive effects among the racial contexts. In other words, the effects of living in a predominantly black zip code were no different in a metropolitan area with more blacks. Finally, given the low number of cases per context, multi-level estimation procedures like HLM cannot be used.

<sup>21</sup>As illustrated in Appendix A, similar results are attained when the median household income is used in place of zip-code education: the equations predict that residents of zip codes with higher incomes will score lower on the symbolic racism, negative stereotype, and authoritarianism scales, although the size of the coefficients is lower and their relative standard errors greater, reflecting the noisy character of median household income. Nevertheless, the

Given that interracial threat is typically characterized in terms of competition for economic resources and political power, these findings, while new, seem consistent with the threat hypothesis. A zip code's education level is probably a better indicator of white material vulnerability than its racial composition. For instance, less educated white neighborhoods are more likely to be poor than black neighborhoods. Yet this consideration also implies that the above test is incomplete. If the material vulnerability of whites in low-status neighborhoods is much greater when those neighborhoods are situated in heavily black areas, then the greatest racial animosity should occur at the intersection of race and status contexts. In other words, if the threat hypothesis is true, then whites in low-education zip codes in highly black metropolitan areas should be more racist than those in low-education zip codes in sparsely black environments.

To test for these effects, we reestimated the equations in Table 1 with interaction terms between the percent black in the metropolitan area and the zip-code education measures. Using the three categories of metropolitan area, two interaction terms were created by multiplying the dummy variables representing medium and high black metropolitan areas with the zip-code education measure. Another interaction term measuring the effects of zip-code education in rural areas was also included, leaving the dummy variable for a low black metropolitan area as the excluded term. The results are depicted in Table 2.

Contrary to the threat hypothesis, the effect of educational composition does not change with the racial environment. Whites in low-education zip codes in predominantly black metropolitan areas were no more racially antagonistic than whites in low-education places in largely white metropolitan areas. In none of the equations listed in Table 2 are the interaction effects between zip-code education and metropolitan racial composition large or statistically significant. Quite simply, the effects of zip-code education are the same irrespective of the surrounding racial environment. Nor are the effects different when the racial context is the zip code. When similar equations were estimated with interactions between

consistency of these results shows that zip-code education is not fundamentally different from income as an indicator of zip-code socio-economic status. This does not distinguish among the three rival hypotheses—threat, norms, and collective circumstances—because zip-code education may be a more reliable measure of material circumstances than is zip-code income. Additional tests (not depicted) with both the education and income level of the metropolitan area included failed to yield any significant results, the consequence of metropolitan economic contexts being so diffuse.



**TABLE 2** The Interdependent Effects of Racial and Economic Contexts on White Racial Predispositions (with Individual-Level Controls)

	Symbolic Racism	Negative Stereotypes	Anti- Semitism	Authoritarianism
<b>Environmental Variables</b>				
Education—Zip code	-.219** (.091)	-.114* (.057)	-.257** (.095)	-.210** (.075)
Percent Black—Zip code	-.092 (.055)	-.022 (.034)	-.056 (.056)	-.022 (.044)
Medium Black Metro	.023 (.033)	.001 (.021)	-.027 (.034)	.022 (.027)
High Black Metro	.059 (.032)	.014 (.020)	-.014 (.033)	.008 (.026)
Rural	.007 (.030)	-.013 (.019)	-.027 (.031)	.010 (.024)
Zip Educ. x Md. Blk. Metro.	-.045 (.729)	.054 (.081)	.172 (.134)	-.083 (.440)
Zip Educ. x Hi. Blk. Metro.	-.116 (.120)	.036 (.075)	.201 (.125)	.045 (.099)
Zip Educ. x Rural	.019 (.140)	.046 (.089)	.245 (.147)	-.033 (.114)
South	.037** (.014)	.032** (.009)	.026 (.015)	.026* (.012)
<b>Individual-level Variables</b>				
Education	-.025** (.006)	-.021** (.004)	-.046** (.006)	-.053** (.005)
Income	.005** (.002)	-.001 (.001)	-.004* (.002)	-.001 (.002)
Age	.001 (.000)	.001* (.001)	.000 (.000)	.001** (.000)
Length of Residence	-.004 (.005)	-.000 (.004)	.002 (.006)	.003 (.005)
Female	.000 (.012)	-.027** (.008)	-.067** (.012)	.001 (.009)
Republican	.068** (.012)	.015* (.008)	.008 (.012)	.068 (.010)
Independent	-.092 (.029)	-.052** (.021)	-.059* (.029)	-.038 (.023)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.08	.11	.20
N	1476	1416	1389	1469

Source: 1991 Race and Politics Survey/1990 Census

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

zip-code education and racial composition, the same results emerged: the effects of zip-code education are no greater in microcontexts with larger percentages of blacks.

To explore the effects of material threat further, we turned from whites' racial predispositions to their opinions on specific policy items. Several threat scholars have argued that material threat is largely distinct from such

racial predispositions as symbolic racism and racial stereotypes (Bobo 1988; Glaser 1994), in which case the weak findings about racial predispositions may not be a true test of the impact of threat. If the threat hypothesis is true, white opinion on policies that seem to benefit blacks at the expense of whites (e.g., affirmative action in university admissions and in jobs, and housing programs encouraging integration) should be greatest in settings where whites are most vulnerable, i.e., low-status neighborhoods in racially mixed metropolitan areas. To test this hypothesis, we regressed the three policy items (opinions on housing segregation, jobs programs, and university admissions) on the same set of predictors used in Table 2. We also included the two indicators of racial predispositions (symbolic racism and racial stereotypes).<sup>22</sup> The results are listed in Table 3.

Whites' preferences on race-targeted policies are influenced by their social environment, as the threat hypothesis might expect, but only in very specific ways. Opposition to home buying programs for blacks in white areas is related to the zip code's educational level, but only in metropolitan areas with black populations above 7 percent. In these places, whites in low-educated zip codes (under 15 percent college educated) score 12 to 14 percentage points higher in opposition to housing integration programs than white residents of high-educated zip codes (more than 45 percent college educated). As the threat hypothesis would predict, this effect depends on the presence of sufficient numbers of blacks; in metropolitan areas with few blacks, the educational composition of the zip code is unrelated to opinions on housing integration. Similarly, opposition to job programs is affected by the percent of blacks in the metropolitan area; whites in metropolitan areas more than 40 percent black score 35 percentage points higher on the opposition-to-jobs scale than whites in metropolitan areas under 3 percent black. Opinions on affirmative action in university admissions, however, are not affected by any of the contextual measures. We found a similar absence of contextual effects when we tested other racially tinged policies

<sup>22</sup>We considered an alternative model to address the concern that the racial composition of a person's zip code is endogenous to their racial predispositions (i.e., more racist people are less likely to live in black zip codes) which would require a simultaneous estimation procedure. Within the NRPS data, however, we could not locate any variables suitable for identifying the equation. Most individual characteristics that would shape residential location (i.e., age, income, education) are also related to racial predispositions. The one variable that might predict residential choice and not racial attitudes, home ownership, is not available in the NRPS. Consequently, we remained with the nonrecursive, linear estimations used above although, in principle, they may not be the optimal methods.

that also had no local geographical correspondence, such as support for welfare or preferential federal contracts.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, an environment's racial and status composition can shape its residents' opinions on race-targeted policies, but only where the contextual parameter coincides with real racial competition. The racial composition of the metropolitan area is related to opinion only on job programs because the metropolitan area is the context in which competition for jobs is prevalent. Similarly, the socio-economic composition of the zip code is relevant to opinion on housing desegregation as the status of a neighborhood determines its vulnerability to tipping. By the same token, opposition to preferential university admissions for blacks is not related to any of the contextual measures because the arena of competition for university admissions is the state or nation and not a smaller racial context.

These findings suggest a real but limited role for material threat as a determinant of whites' racial hostility. If whites in low-status contexts are more racist because of the economic or political competition they feel from a nearby black population, then we would expect to find the highest levels of racism in those low-status zip codes in metropolitan areas with the greatest number of blacks. Yet this is not the case: the racial hostility of low-status zip codes does not increase in heavily black metropolitan areas. Instead, we find that interracial material competition seems to drive white attitudes only toward specific policies. Opposition to race-targeted public policies does not simply increase uniformly with the educational and racial composition of the context, but varies specifically in relation to the relevance of the policy to the social environment.

## Alternative Responses to the Social Environment

But if the evidence suggests that the impact of realistic group competition is rather confined, then what explains the high degree of racial hostility among whites in less-educated zip codes? We see several possible explanations. One views racial hostility as part of a general out-group hostility created by low-status environments. While this hostility may manifest itself in anti-black predispositions, it has little to do with the *racial* composition of the environment but is instead driven by responses to the stressful circumstances of a low-status environment.

<sup>23</sup>We also found no interactions between the predispositions and all the social contexts in relation to the policy preferences.

**TABLE 3** The Interdependent Effects of Racial and Economic Contexts on Opposition to Race-Target Policies (with Individual and Predispositional Controls)

	Integrated Housing	Jobs Programs	University Admissions
<b>Environmental Variables</b>			
Education—Zip code	.039 (.115)	.267 (.232)	.019 (.054)
Percent Black—Zip code	-.072 (.139)	.080 (.120)	-.120 (.165)
Medium Black Metro	.089* (.039)	.024 (.077)	.032 (.056)
High Black Metro	.087* (.038)	.150* (.078)	.018 (.055)
Rural	.065 (.035)	.066 (.019)	.016 (.052)
Zip Educ. x Md. Blk. Metro.	-.355* (.152)	-.007 (.287)	.047 (.219)
Zip Educ. x Hi. Blk. Metro.	-.279* (.143)	.051 (.305)	.028 (.204)
Zip Educ. x Rural	-.289 (.161)	-.318 (.329)	.026 (.236)
South	.013 (.016)	.006 (.033)	-.023 (.024)
<b>Individual-level Variables</b>			
Anti-Black Stereotypes	.259** (.048)	.410** (.098)	.186** (.070)
Symbolic Racism	.119** (.030)	.746** (.059)	.464** (.042)
Education	.004 (.006)	-.007** (.012)	.019* (.009)
Income	.000 (.002)	-.002 (.004)	-.003 (.002)
Age	.002** (.000)	.003* (.001)	.000 (.000)
Length of Residence	.002 (.006)	-.001 (.012)	.000 (.006)
Female	-.020 (.013)	-.017 (.026)	.015 (.019)
Republican	.032* (.012)	.050 (.028)	.026 (.020)
Independent	-.003 (.032)	-.046 (.065)	-.028 (.046)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.10	.19	.11
N	1379	1266	1395

Source: 1991 Race and Politics Survey/1990 Census

\*\* p &lt; .01, \* p &lt; .05

Less-educated surroundings are also more likely to harbor a variety of social ills, to provide fewer necessities, and to be more stress inducing. Table 1 provides some support for this view: anti-Semitism and authoritarianism, both indicators of general out-group hostility, are significantly higher in less-educated zip codes, a finding that the threat hypothesis cannot explain. A second possibility is that the zip code's educational level is capturing a social norm. Low-status settings, populated by less-educated and racially conservative individuals, may foster attitudes of racial antagonism or make racism more socially acceptable. A final possibility is that racist predispositions have little to do with the social environment, but come instead from unmeasured differences in individual-level characteristics. Even though our multivariate equations control for the respondent's education, income, and many other individual characteristics, the zip-code education measure may be picking up other individual-level characteristics such as political sophistication or cognitive complexity that influence racial attitudes (Sniderman and Piazza 1993).

These assertions can be tested in the following ways. If out-group hostility arising from either psychological responses or social norms is the source of anti-black predispositions in low-status settings, then the effect of zip-code education on symbolic racism and on anti-black stereotypes should attenuate once the predisposition toward out-group hostility is controlled. In other words, if whites in less-educated zip codes are more racist because their surroundings make them more hostile to out-groups in general, then the strong relationship between zip-code education and anti-black predispositions should be smaller once this out-group hostility is taken into account. If, however, the zip-code education coefficients are simply capturing unmeasured individual differences in political sophistication, then they should attenuate once we control on individual-level political knowledge.

To test between these alternative hypotheses, we used the best available measures of individual political sophistication and out-group hostility. The former is gauged by a political information scale based on factually correct answers to a question about the number of Supreme Court Justices and the maximum number of Presidential terms.<sup>24</sup> Out-group hostility is represented by the authoritarianism measure used above and another item estimating tolerance of out-groups.<sup>25</sup> When regressing the out-

group hostility and political-knowledge measures separately on the same set of predictors used above, we find that whites in low-status zip codes are less tolerant of out-groups and less likely to have correct factual knowledge about political institutions, even when controlling for their individual education and income. To see how much these factors account for the hostility of whites in low-status settings toward blacks, we reestimated the equations for symbolic racism and anti-black stereotypes from Table 1, adding first the measure of political knowledge and then the measures of general out-group hostility and authoritarianism. The results are listed in Table 4.

Controlling for the respondent's political knowledge slightly alters the relationship between zip-code education and anti-black predispositions. Compared to their counterparts in Table 1, the new coefficients for zip-code education are 10 percent smaller in the equation predicting negative stereotypes and 4 percent smaller for symbolic racism, although in both cases the coefficients are still statistically significant. The effects of zip-code education do not seem to arise, therefore, from unmeasured levels of political sophistication. When we controlled on authoritarianism and group hostility, however, the coefficients for zip-code education show large declines and, in the case of stereotypes, lose statistical significance. Once again, comparing the zip-code education coefficients in Model 2 of Table 4 to those in Table 1, we find a 65 percent reduction for predicting stereotypes and a 30 percent decline for symbolic racism. In short, whites in low-status contexts are more hostile to blacks in large part because they are more authoritarian and more hostile to out-groups in general.

Although it is not clear from these findings whether the tendency toward out-group hostility is a result of a psychological response or a group norm, we believe that, taken as a whole, the evidence supports the former hypothesis. It is unlikely that a zip code of 10,000 to 30,000 residents provides frequent interpersonal interactions or far-reaching normative institutions capable of producing a single strong norm. Moreover, if neighborhood norms were a source of racial attitudes then long-term residents of low-educated zip codes should be more racist. This, however, is not the case. Regressions with interaction terms between length of residence and zip-code education fail to show any differences between long-term and short-term residents. Consequently, it seems more likely that zip-code education is capturing the collective

groups "with different ideas and values" should try to "fit in." We chose not to use the anti-Semitism measure because it relied on stereotypes; consequently, when using it to predict anti-black sentiment, particularly on old-fashioned racism, it is unclear whether it measures out-group hostility or tendencies toward stereotyping behavior.

<sup>24</sup>A three-point scale was created from the responses to both items (0 = both incorrect, 1 = 1 correct, 2 = 2 correct).

<sup>25</sup>The out-group measure was a composite of two four-point Likert scales in which respondents gauged how much they agreed with statements about tolerance for different groups, how much

**TABLE 4** The Effects of Racial and Economic Contexts on White Racial Predispositions Controlling on Political Knowledge and Outgroup Hostility

	Symbolic Racism		Negative Stereotypes	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
<b>Environmental Variables</b>				
Education—Zip code	-.258** (.051)	-.186** (.050)	-.076** (.031)	-.027 (.031)
Percent Black—Zip code	-.079 (.055)	-.082 (.053)	-.014 (.033)	-.010 (.032)
Medium Black Metro	.019 (.018)	.019 (.018)	.016 (.011)	.016 (.011)
High Black Metro	.035 (.019)	.026 (.018)	.026* (.013)	.019 (.011)
Rural	.014 (.017)	.011 (.017)	.001 (.011)	-.000 (.010)
South	.036* (.015)	.033* (.015)	.031** (.009)	.028 (.009)
<b>Individual-level Variables</b>				
Political Knowledge	-.031** (.011)	-.014 (.011)	-.039** (.007)	-.031** (.007)
Authoritarianism		.202** (.033)		.052** (.020)
Outgroup Hostility		.018** (.027)		.241** (.025)
Education	-.020** (.006)	-.006 (.006)	-.017** (.004)	-.010** (.004)
Income	.006** (.002)	-.001 (.002)	.001 (.001)	.000 (.001)
Age	.001 (.000)	.000 (.001)	.001* (.000)	.000 (.000)
Length of Residence	-.004 (.005)	-.007 (.004)	-.002 (.003)	-.004 (.003)
Female	.000 (.013)	.006 (.012)	-.035** (.007)	-.026** (.007)
Republican	.066** (.013)	.040** (.013)	.015* (.008)	.001 (.008)
Independent	-.025 (.030)	-.017 (.030)	-.051** (.018)	-.050** (.018)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.19	.11	.18
N	1476	1454	1416	1394

Source: 1991 Race and Politics Survey/1990 Census

\*\* p < .001, \* p < .05

circumstances of the residential environment, circumstances that generate greater hostility to African Americans as a salient out-group in American society. The greatest environmental determinants of racial attitudes

come not from material competition, social norms, or unmeasured individual characteristics, but from psychological responses of out-group aversion that are triggered by low status contexts.

## Conclusion

In the United States, the vast majority of whites reside in areas that separate them, physically and politically, from blacks. This fact invites a reexamination of the notion that social environments shape racial attitudes primarily by making whites feel more threatened by a large black population. Throughout American history, whites have erected institutional barriers to protect themselves from black advancement. Segregation within cities is no longer legally or even socially sanctioned, yet the vast majority of whites live in places that limit the extent and scope of interracial competition. This severe segregation diminishes the impact of interracial material threat.

The repercussions of racial segregation are manifest in our findings. Across smaller contexts such as zip codes, where there is relatively little variance in racial composition, the size of the black population has no relation to white racial attitudes. In larger contexts, such as metropolitan areas, the size of the black population is moderately related to more racial antagonism, but this relationship is weaker and more inconsistent across different types of racial attitudes than past research suggests. The educational composition of a zip code, perhaps the best indicator of white material vulnerability, does correspond to higher out-group hostility, but we find little evidence that realistic racial threat is the primary source of this effect. Rather, interracial material competition shapes white racial attitudes primarily on specific policies, when there is a direct connection between the resource being contested and the geographical area in which it is contested or distributed. White opposition to

housing desegregation is related primarily to the socioeconomic composition of the zip code; opposition to jobs programs to the black percentage of the metropolitan area. In both instances, group competition is shaped by the environment only in so far as the environment is relevant to the policy in question—the zip code to housing, the metropolitan area to jobs.

While the impact of interracial material competition is limited, social environments do have a large impact on whites' racial attitudes above and beyond the impact of an individual's characteristics, be they education, income, or political sophistication. In particular, the educational composition of the environment affects white attitudes in ways unrelated to interracial material competition. Our findings suggest that theories based on negative psychological responses to stressful environments hold promise for future research. Whites in low-education environments express greater out-group hostility in general, which partially accounts for their higher level of racism. In an era of political separation between blacks and whites, environmental characteristics other than racial composition, such as socio-economic status, may be more potent determinants of racial attitudes. But the environmental sources of white racial hostility may work less through realistic conflict over resources than through psychological states that produce out-group animosity; an animosity that, in a racially divided nation, is often directed against African Americans.

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**Appendix A**  
**The Effects of Racial and Zipcode Level Income on White Racial Predispositions**  
**(with Individual-Level Controls)**

	Symbolic Racism	Negative Stereotypes	Anti- Semitism	Authoritarianism
<b>Environmental Variables</b>				
Med. Hse. Inc.—Zip code	-.002** (.001)	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.001)	-.001* (.000)
Percent Black—Zip code	-.070 (.056)	-.015 (.011)	-.043 (.057)	-.000 (.045)
Medium Black Metro	.020 (.019)	.016 (.011)	-.001 (.019)	.001 (.015)
High Black Metro	.041 (.019)	.027** (.012)	.018 (.018)	.019 (.016)
Rural	.017 (.018)	.002 (.011)	.015 (.018)	.006 (.014)
South	.031* (.016)	.031** (.009)	.025 (.015)	.026* (.012)
<b>Individual-level Variables</b>				
Education	-.031** (.006)	-.025** (.003)	-.053** (.006)	-.056** (.004)
Income	.006** (.002)	-.000 (.001)	-.004* (.002)	-.001 (.002)
Age	.001 (.000)	.001* (.001)	.000 (.000)	.001** (.000)
Length of Residence	-.003 (.006)	-.001 (.004)	.001 (.006)	.007 (.005)
Female	.000 (.013)	-.026** (.007)	-.065** (.012)	.001 (.010)
Republican	.065** (.014)	.015 (.008)	.016 (.014)	.065 (.010)
Independent	-.027 (.030)	-.050* (.018)	-.062* (.030)	-.042 (.025)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.07	.10	.18
N	1476	1416	1389	1469

Source: 1991 Race and Politics Survey/1990 Census

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

Median Household Income (Med. Hse. Inc.) is measured on a 50 point scale where (0 = <\$11,000 year, 49 = >\$49,000).

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