

**Whites' Perceptions of Group Economic Differences**

**1987 Pilot Study Report**

**Submitted to the 1987  
National Election Study Board  
and Pilot Study Committee**

**September 25, 1987**

**Katherine Tate  
Department of Political Science  
The University of Michigan**

Echoing the Kerner Commission report released twenty years ago, Thomas Cavanagh recently concluded that blacks and whites are living in two different Americas. "Whites," he notes (1985: 3), "perceive a victory in a struggle against racism that blacks feel has only begun." Using JCPS/Gallup data collected in 1984, he found that the majority of whites felt that the situation of blacks had improved over the past five years, while only 4% felt it had worsened. In contrast, as many blacks thought things had worsened (30%) as had improved (37%). National Election Study data reported in Racial Attitudes in America (1985: 141-3) paint a similar picture. From 1964 to 1976, increasing numbers of whites came to believe that substantial progress had been made in the area of civil rights. During the same period, growing numbers of blacks felt that only limited gains had been made. Another national sample of Black Americans in 1984 found that 36% of blacks felt that they would never achieve full social and economic parity with whites in this country.

The optimistic appraisals of whites and the pessimistic assessments of blacks are not especially surprising. While remarkable racial strides have been made over the past thirty years, blacks still remain at the bottom most rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Thus, there will be disagreement on what weight to place on the relative gains of blacks (see especially, Farley 1984). Moreover, these assessments are highly subjective. They are based as much on whether the individual perennially sees the glass as half-empty or half-full as on the social vantage he or she has when viewing the glass. Furthermore, these different racial outlooks are not without their potential consequences. Given their different outlooks, blacks and whites may tend to talk past one another. The resulting miscommunication then is likely to generate ill-feelings and racial conflict. The two different worldviews may also lead to different

political agendas, with blacks thus pursuing policies aimed at improving their condition that whites reject as illegitimate (see Kluegel, 1985). In order to better understand the dynamics of race in American politics, we need to start measuring these perceptual worlds.

Although there are many measures of Americans' perceptions of change in the economic condition of blacks over time, there are few which measure their perception of how blacks fare relative to whites<sup>1</sup>. The two indicators are distinct, because as noted above, blacks' economic position can improve dramatically over time, but still lag behind that of whites'. We are interested in both types of measures especially because white perceptions of black economic advances may obscure their recognition of the persistent economic gap between whites and blacks. The 1987 National Election Study Pilot contains a single item which captures respondents' assessment of the size and direction of the economic gap between blacks and whites. 457 respondents were asked:

"On the whole, would you say that the economic position of blacks is better, about the same or worse than whites? Is that much better (worse) or somewhat better (worse)?"

This question was asked of blacks in a 1984 national survey of black Americans, called the National Black Election Study (NBES)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, comparisons will be made between white responses (actually nonblacks) in the 1987 pilot study and

---

<sup>1</sup>Kluegel (1985) references a 1983 survey of San Francisco residents by Apostle and colleagues that found that whites are cognizant of the fact that blacks are less likely to possess good jobs, housing, education, etc.

<sup>2</sup>The 1984 National Black Election Study is a pre- and post-election study of black political attitudes and electoral behavior, carried out by the Program for Research on Black Americans, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The sample for the pre-election wave was derived using a disproportionate Random Digit Dial procedure. 1150 voting eligible blacks were interviewed in the pre-election and 870 were reinterviewed after the election. The percentages reported are weighted. Because this question was asked of respondents in the post-election survey as well, its reliability can be estimated.

blacks in the 1984 study. In addition, factors that influence these responses will be assessed. Finally, the policy implications of the measure will be determined. The limited numbers of variables in the pilot data and subsection of the 1986 study constrained the depth of analysis. As a consequence, this report will present general findings.

#### General Findings

As presented in Table 1, a slight majority of whites (54.9%) felt that blacks as a group are economically worse off than whites. Only 7.5% felt that blacks were better off than whites. The black-white responses to this question differ only slightly. Whites are only slightly more likely than blacks to see the groups as having comparable economic positions, and only slightly less likely to perceive blacks as much worse off. Indicators of white perceptions of black progress over time were not available, so a direct comparison between these two types of economic assessments cannot be made. But the findings seem to suggest that while whites and blacks sharply disagree over the amount of economic gains blacks have made, majorities of each group acknowledge the presence of racial stratification in the United States. Most Americans see blacks as having a subordinate economic position to whites, although blacks and whites disagree somewhat over the degree of that inequality.

Although, in fact, the average family incomes of blacks fall behind those of whites, the perceptions of racial inequality are subjectively based. To determine what factors may influence whites' perceptions, Tables 2 and 3 present the comparative economic indicator regressed on demographic variables, partisan ties, feelings toward blacks and level of commitment to egalitarian principles. Self-identified middle-class whites were more aware of blacks being worse off than working-class whites. The same was true of better educated whites as

compared to less educated whites. Education also served as a strong predictor of black responses in the 1984 National Black Election Study data. Family income, age, gender, partisan affiliations and liberal/conservative orientations were not related to whites' responses. Neither do white evaluations seem to be based on warmth or coolness toward blacks (see Table 3). This finding makes some sense given the small racial differences found for the group comparison question. Thus, perceptions of racial inequality seem somewhat class-based and devoid of strong racial affect. Finally, whites who strongly support egalitarian values seem to be especially aware of blacks' subordinate economic position relative to whites'.

Other nonracial measures of economic conditions were included in the model to see if they were tied to whites' assessments of the group's position relative to blacks (see Table 4)<sup>3</sup>. Whites' assessments of President Reagan's performance were also added as a control since prior work has shown that voter assessments of economic patterns are subject to partisan influences. Assessments of the national economy, the impact of federal policies on the economy, the inflation rate and Reagan's performance in office were not significant predictors of white attitudes. Perceptions of the unemployment level, however, were somehow related. Whites who thought that the unemployment rate had dropped were more likely to perceive that blacks as a group were worse off than whites. It is possible that these respondents do not believe that

---

<sup>3</sup>It is assumed that white responses to the racial economic comparison question are fairly stable over a short span of time. In the 1984 National Black Election Study, this question was asked in both the pre- and post-election surveys. The correlation between the two is .40. Black responses however were influenced by strength of party identification (see Table 2). As a result, the election may have influenced post-election responses, violating test-retest assumptions. White responses are class-based, and consequently might be more reliable over time.

decreasing unemployment is the source of the racial gap. They may simply be more aware of both issues.

Table 5 presents the impact of black/white economic differences on racial policy opinions. The measure is weakly associated with white policy positions. Whites who feel that blacks are economically worse off than whites are not significantly more likely to support federal assistance to blacks, and school quotas for blacks<sup>4</sup>. This nonfinding carries several interesting explanations. First of all, in contradiction to Kluegel's (1985) assertion, many whites are aware of the racial inequalities. Thus, the subordinate position of a minority group in society does not seem to move the majority to support programs to improve the group's plight. On the contrary, white support or opposition to affirmative action programs and other policies aimed at redressing racial discrimination seems to be based on a variety of other sentiments, such as racial prejudice and the belief in equal opportunity for all, to name a few (Kinder and Sanders, 1987). The perception of racial inequality, and in this case economic-based inequality, is perhaps irrelevant to the formation of policy positions for whites.

#### Conclusion

The racial economic differences item should be carried in the 1988 and subsequent National Election Studies under certain conditions. Despite the failure of this item to directly account for whites' opposition to racial policies, it remains an important addition to the racial measures. If a subset

---

<sup>4</sup>Several comments must be made about the analysis process here. Because whites (and blacks for that matter) who perceive blacks to be economically superior to whites seem suspicious, to say the least, scatterplots of their responses were scanned to see if they constituted outliers in these models. They did not. Several other steps were taken, including verifying the measure's ordinality.

of the 1986 NES measures are carried in the 1988 study, this measure should be added as well, particularly, if the racial attribution measures are repeated, which were not available in the pilot. The nonfindings presented in Table 5 carry important political implications as well. Egalitarians are more perceptive of racial inequalities, but appear to support programs aimed at correcting racial inequalities out of principle rather than fact. Here, ideology seems to triumph over what Americans consider to be reality. A larger sample with better race measures would allow a fuller analysis.

If, however, no significant set of racial measures will be repeated in 1988 study, the item might be added as a more specific indicator of racial change. The typical NES racial progress question, in fact, reads: "In the past few years we have heard a lot about improving the position of black people in this country. How much real change do you think there has been in the position of black people in the past few years?" The first half of the question suffers from an acquiescence bias. In addition, the question is far too vague. What type of progress have blacks made--economic, social or political? Shifts in white opinion on racial issues have undergone dramatic changes over the past two decades. In addition, nearly two-thirds of white Americans feel that blacks have made tremendous progress over the years. Perhaps in time, like questions of integrating public accommodations, even greater percentages of whites will feel that blacks are making progress. The question will lose its usefulness as a predictor. As a result, we may need new measures of the public's perception of the type and depth of racial inequalities as perceived by the public. The proposed item is one step toward building new measures.

## References

- Cavanagh, Thomas E. 1985. Inside Black America, the Message of the Black Vote in the 1984 Elections. DC: Joint Center for Political Studies.
- Farley, Reynolds. 1984. Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap? Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kinder, Donald and Lynn Sanders. 1987. Pluralistic foundations of American opinion on race. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, the Palmer House, Chicago, IL, September 3-6, 1987.
- Klugel, James R. 1985. If there isn't a problem, you don't need a solution. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 28 No. 6: 761-784.
- Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo. 1985. Racial Attitudes in America. Trends and Interpretations. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Table 1  
B/W Economic Position Responses

"On the whole, would you say that the economic position of blacks is better, about the same, or worse than whites? Is that much better (worse) or somewhat better (worse)?"

	87 NES Whites	84 NBES Blacks*	87 NES Blacks
Much Better	2.3	2.9	0.0
Somewhat Better	5.2	4.0	6.4
About the Same	37.8	26.2	36.2
Somewhat Worse	35.5	30.7	27.7
Much Worse	19.2	36.2	29.8
N	307	1215	47

\*weighted data

Table 2  
 Regression of B/W Economic Position on Demographic Variables and Partisan Measures

	87 NES Whites		84 NBES Blacks	
	Beta	T-ratio	Beta	T-ratio
Social Class-Middle	.20	3.47	-.07	1.78
Gender-Male	.10	1.74	.07	1.73
Age	.02	0.38	.09	2.33
Family Income	.09	1.36	.05	1.02
Years of Schooling	.27	4.08	.14	2.91
Lib/Con Id	-.06	1.01	-.04	0.88
Party Id	.00	0.06	-.09	2.19
N	281		607	
R-squared (adj)	.16		.04	

Table 3  
 Regression of B/W Economic Position on Demographic Variables, Partisan Measures,  
 Black Feeling Thermometer and Egalitarian Scale

87 NES Whites Only

	Beta	T-ratio
Social Class-Middle	.19	3.18
Gender-Male	.11	1.88
Age	.06	1.03
Family Income	.12	1.81
Years of Schooling	.25	3.96
Lib/Con Id	-.03	0.49
Party Id	.02	0.48
Black Thermometer	.07	1.26
Egalitarianism	.12	2.02
N	269	
R-squared (adj)	.18	

Table 4  
 Regression of B/W Economic Position Including Reagan Performance and Economic Assessments  
 87 NES Whites Only

	Beta	T-ratio
Gender-Male	.09	1.50
Social Class-Middle	.13	2.01
Age	.10	1.55
Family Income	.10	1.45
Years of Schooling	.22	3.27
Lib/Con Id	-.04	0.58
Party Id	-.04	0.52
Black Thermometer	.02	0.35
Egalitarianism	.14	2.15
Reagan Approval	.06	0.78
Nation's Economy	-.08	1.01
Federal Impact on Economy	.01	0.15
Unemployment Level	-.26	3.54
Inflation Rate	.01	0.21
N	229	
R-squared (adj)	.23	

Table 5  
 Regression of Racial Programs on Demographic Variables, Black Feeling Thermometer,  
 Egalitarian Scale and B/W Economic Position

87 NES Whites Only

	Decrease Fed. Spending on Black Assistance		Oppose Preferential Hiring for Blacks		Oppose Student Quotas for Blacks	
	Beta	T-ratios	Beta	T-ratios	Beta	T-ratios
Gender-Male	-.09	1.42	-.08	1.24	.05	0.81
Social Class-Middle	.08	1.27	-.00	0.04	-.03	0.52
Age	.03	0.47	.04	0.70	.10	1.52
Family Income	.05	0.75	.10	1.47	.05	0.74
Years of Schooling	-.02	0.27	-.08	1.09	.05	0.65
Lib/Con Id	.03	0.51	.05	0.80	.16	2.37
Party Id	.04	0.67	.01	0.07	-.00	0.02
Black Thermometer	-.18	2.93	-.15	2.50	-.18	2.82
Egalitarianism	-.24	3.80	-.20	3.07	-.08	1.14
B/W Economic Position	-.10	1.49	.01	0.18	-.08	1.05
N	259		256		251	
R-squared (adj)	.12		.08		.07	

