

## Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the South

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The two papers distributed for the seminar are intended as components of a larger work with the above title. To help set the context for the discussion, here is a brief synopsis of the plan. Most of the work remains to be done, so comments and advice are welcome.

The book will consider the causes and consequences of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South from an economic perspective. The perspective is both economic and regional, on the grounds that the movement itself was quintessentially southern, yet the regional dimensions of its impact are commonly neglected. Contrary to many pessimistic accounts, economic gains for African-Americans from the 1950s to the 1970s were real and substantial: wages jumped upward with desegregation of jobs; the quantity and quality of schooling markedly advanced; health conditions improved as blacks gained access to federally-funded hospitals; and voting rights supported the rise of black elected officials to state and local positions, generating a fairer distribution of public facilities and services. These economic gains were sufficient to reverse a fifty-year pattern of black outmigration from the South, replaced by in-migration from every other part of the country. Today the South leads the nation in black businesses, black elected officials, and black incomes relative to whites or to other regions.

The book then poses a different question: Were these advances for African-Americans won at the *expense* of white southerners or as part of an economic restructuring that *also* enhanced the wellbeing of most southern whites? The book argues that with few exceptions, southern whites did not lose economically from desegregation; instead they gained. Supporting evidence includes: incomes and wages for southern whites continued to rise through the 1960s and into the 1970s; growth in New South metropolitan areas accelerated after desegregation, expanding opportunities for whites as well as blacks; the quality and quantity of schooling improved for most southern white children even after the region's schools became the most integrated in the nation. As the inclusive rhetoric of the movement promised, this was a win-win revolution. Although this formulation may appear straightforward, in fact it poses a paradox for economic historians, because the great majority of southern whites opposed desegregation and acquiesced only reluctantly in a revolution that ultimately served their own economic interests.

Why then do so many observers believe that the Civil Rights movement was an economic failure, or that its idealism was diverted into forms of racial favoritism? The primary change was the redirection of the national economy, from the "shared prosperity" of the postwar decades to a new era of rising inequality and falling real wages. The break began with the economic turbulence of the 1970s and was shaped in part by global economic forces; but after 1980 it was largely political, and strongly supported by white politicians from the South who were the beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Revolution. As economic prospects faltered, both whites and blacks often blamed the race issue, but the deeper source of their frustrations was the deterioration of the American labor market.

## **Proposed Chapters**

1. The Economics of the Jim Crow South
2. The Paradox of Public Accommodations
3. Desegregating Southern Labor Markets
4. Race and Southern Schools: The Contested Legacy of *Brown vs. Board of Education*
5. The Economic Consequences of Voting Rights
6. The Dark Side of the Civil Rights Revolution
  - i. Displacement of Black-Owned Businesses
  - ii. Triumph of Pro-Growth Politics
  - iii. Rise of Conservative State Majorities
7. The Post-Civil Rights Southern Economy
8. The Legacy and Promise of the Civil Rights Revolution