

The development of changing attitudes towards civil rights, 1968–90

Racial desegregation

After 1968, all black Americans could vote and *de jure* segregation had ended. Between 1968 and 1990, the number of middle-class black Americans grew, many of them were integrated within white society, and more black politicians were elected to office. However, the political, economic and social status of many black Americans remained inferior to that of white Americans. Arguably, the positives outweighed the negatives. Amongst the positives were the improved situation in the South and the election of black Americans to high office.

Migration back to the South in the late twentieth century

From the 1970s, demographers and the media took notice of a new and pronounced migratory trend:

black Americans were returning to the South in great

numbers and fewer black Americans were leaving it. In the period 1965–70, only one ‘border’ Southern state, Maryland, was among the top ten black migration gainers, but by the period 1975 and 1980, seven Southern states ranked amongst the top ten black migration gainers and black Americans migrated back to the South at twice the rate of white Americans.

What explains black American migration to the South after 1970?

The states that attracted the most black migrants were Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas. While New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco experienced a great out-migration, the most attractive metropolitan magnet for black Americans was Atlanta, Georgia. Other metropolitan magnets for migrants were Washington DC, Dallas and Houston (Texas), Charlotte and Raleigh (North Carolina), and Orlando and Miami (Florida). Over half of these black migrants had college degrees. The main underlying reason for the return was that the South had changed dramatically since the original Great Migration: Martin Luther King Jr’s friend Bayard Rustin found the South transformed by 1980, ‘from a reactionary bastion into a region moderate in racial outlook and more enlightened in social and economic policy’.

The ‘pull’ factors for the mass black migration back to the South included:

- quality of life
- ‘call to home’
- economic prospects
- climate and geography.

Quality of life

In many ways, the Great Migration to the North had proved disappointing. In the North and Midwest, black Americans were concentrated in ghettos with ever-decreasing economic opportunities, poor housing and schools, high crime levels, and urban congestion. In the ‘**New South**’, *de facto* segregation was less pronounced than in other American regions, racial violence was no longer a common instrument of social control, there was less crime, and more black Americans held office in the South than in any other region (Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Houston Mayor Lee Brown were migrants).

Desegregation in the South after 1970

One reason behind the return of black Americans to the South was that the South was a less *de facto* segregated society in housing and in schools.

KEY TERM



New South Some people consider that the South was totally transformed after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legislation that helped bring about greater racial equality.

During the presidency of Richard Nixon (1969–74) the percentage of Southern black American children in segregated schools fell from 68 per cent to 8 per cent. That statistic owed much to the Supreme Court's ruling of 1971, which said that it was time for the full implementation of school desegregation. Southern school desegregation peaked in 1988, when 43 per cent of black schoolchildren attended schools that were more than 50 per cent white. In an interesting contrast, Boston's public schools contained 45,000 white children in 1974 but only 16,000 in 1989. However, Southern schools slowly began re-segregating after 1988.

Economic prospects

A major factor behind the Great Migration to the North was the perceived opportunity for economic betterment. While the South was a region with an impoverished rural economy, the North and Midwest were booming industrialized areas with plentiful unskilled and semi-skilled work available. However, in the later twentieth century, manufacturing industries struggled in the old industrial centres of what became known as the 'Rust Belt'. Great manufacturing cities such as predominantly black Detroit, the centre of the American automobile industry, decayed dramatically. The number of jobs available was more than halved between 1945 and 1977.

While economic opportunities in the North and Midwest decreased, they increased in the South. Companies preferred to invest in the South because the unions were less powerful, regulations were lighter, land was cheaper, and national and local government offered tax breaks. Employment opportunities in the 'Sun Belt' became greater than those in the 'Rust Belt'.

Along with more job opportunities, the South offered lower taxes and cheaper property. Groceries, utility bills and healthcare also cost less in the South. The appeal of an area where the cost of living was lower was great, especially for those who had experienced the exceptionally high cost of living in California, a state that began to experience great economic problems in the 1990s.

'Call to home'

Anthropologist Carol Stack considered the 'call to home' a major factor in migration. Many of those who had participated in the Great Migration, along with their children or grandchildren, felt an affinity with the culture of the South — the migrants had brought their language, music and food from the South, so returning there felt like going home. This was especially so when there were still relations living in the South.

A 1973 survey of returning migrants to Birmingham, Alabama, noted that more than half of the respondents had moved back for family reasons. Some were returning to take care of ageing relatives. Atlanta businessman Jesse B. Blayton explained, 'Grandma is here ... Most American blacks have roots in the South. The liberation thinking is here. Blacks are more together. With the doors opening wider, this area is the Mecca.'

The phenomenon of 'heirs' property' encouraged migration to the South. It was possible to build a home near family members on land that had been deeded to multiple family members as long ago as the Reconstruction era.

Climate and geography

While the North and Midwest suffer harsh winters, the South has a temperate climate and many so-called 'snowbirds' (especially retirees) sought to escape freezing winters. Younger migrants liked the beaches.

This is not to say that the situation of all black Americans in the South was totally transformed.

Some continued to face poverty and social and institutional prejudice. Nevertheless, by the late twenty century, life in the South was very different for black Americans from what it had been between 1890 and 1965.

With the death of Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement finally lost the sense of being a national movement. Organized direct action ended. Although Jim Crow had been destroyed, the problems of inner-city deprivation, drug abuse, rural poverty, job discrimination, unstable families, and segregated schools remained. How did Americans try to solve these problems in the last quarter of the twentieth century? Violence proved ineffective. The Black Panthers, the most famous of black 'terrorist' groups, were crushed by the FBI. More successful solutions were increased ethnic minority participation in American politics and federal intervention. The extent of federal intervention depended greatly upon presidential policies.

Affirmative action and presidential policies

a) President Nixon

Richard Nixon is one of America's most reviled presidents (his 'crime' was to get caught lying about a break-in of Democrat offices). Historians such as Manning Marable believe the forces of racial inequality won a major victory with Nixon's election in 1968.

How much did later presidents help black Americans? What were their attitudes and policies?

Nixon's record on civil rights was a strange mixture. Compared to his contemporaries, he had been exceptionally liberal on civil rights issues during the 1950s. However, he had a dim view of blacks, privately adjudging that 'there has never in history been an adequate black nation, and they are the only race of which this is true'. As president, Nixon did not want to meet black leaders and opposed the proposal that Martin Luther King's birthday should be a national holiday. Nixon crushed black radicals like the Black Panthers. He attempted a revision of the Voting Rights Act in order to win the white Southern vote. He nominated an unimpressive Southern racist to the Supreme Court (a Nixon supporter contended that as many Americans were mediocre, they should have a representative on the court). He refused to back the Supreme Court when it said it was time for school desegregation to be fully implemented (1971). That necessitated busing children considerable distances in order to ensure racially mixed schools, which Nixon considered bad for the child and the local community. However, the courts continued to endorse busing. So, whereas 68% of Southern black children attended segregated schools in the first year of Nixon's presidency, it was only 8% by the time he left the White House. Busing made Southern schools amongst America's best integrated by 1972, despite Nixon's funding of white segregationist private schools.

On the other hand, Nixon set up the Office of Minority Business Enterprise to encourage black capitalism, and embraced **affirmative action** (or 'reverse discrimination' as its critics described it). Why? He believed jobs were the way out of the ghetto. The NAACP had flooded the Equal Employment Commission (EEOC) with protests over employment discrimination, so Nixon's 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act gave the EEOC greater powers of enforcement through the courts. Nixon fought off congressional and trade union opposition to help ensure that over blacks proportionate to the size of the population. The Supreme Court supported affirmative action in 1971.

KEY TERM



Affirmative action an action favouring those who tend to suffer from discrimination; positive discrimination.

Thus the civil rights movement retained sufficient support in the courts, the federal bureaucracy, Congress and even a reluctant Nixon White House to facilitate further progress in school desegregation, employment discrimination and voting rights. Although Nixon sometimes tried to totally turn back the tide, it proved too strong. His administration actually dramatically increased federal expenditure on poverty programmes. Although Nixon said he hated having to pretend any sympathy for 'all that welfare crap', social security and welfare payments doubled during his presidency. Statistics suggest federal anti-poverty efforts helped raise black living standards. In 1940, 87% of blacks were below the poverty line, in 1960 it was 50%, and it was down to 30% in 1974. The civil rights movement had aimed to effect greater federal intervention on behalf of blacks. They had succeeded.

b) President Carter

Was the first Southern president since Woodrow Wilson a racist? Jimmy Carter grew up in segregated Georgia. He did not challenge segregation in his younger days. He claimed subsequently that he had been naïvely unaware. When campaigning to be governor of Georgia he opposed busing but, as governor, declared segregation was over and employed many blacks. While campaigning for the presidency, he declared he had 'nothing against' a community 'trying to maintain the ethnic purity of their neighbourhoods', which prompted Jesse Jackson to call him a Hitlerian throwback.

As president, Carter appointed more blacks to the federal judiciary than any previous president. The percentage of black federal judges rose from 4% in 1977 to 9% in 1981. Carter made significant minority appointments. He appointed black women to his cabinet and made Andrew Young US ambassador to the United Nations. He renewed the Voting Rights Act's special provisions, ensured minority-owned companies had their fair share of government contracts, and deposited federal funds in minority-owned banks. He increased Justice Department power over voting rights, strengthened the EEOC, and supported the Supreme Court's decisions in favour of affirmative action.

c) President Reagan

As a student, Reagan supported integration of the college football team. When working as a sports broadcaster he favoured integrated baseball. However, Reagan's pre-presidential political career was not encouraging for ethnic minorities. He attacked President Johnson's civil rights legislation and the desegregation of schools and housing. When campaigning to be governor of California in 1966 he got on well with the right-wing extremist John Birch Society. However, when attacked for not supporting the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he shouted, 'I resent the implication that there is any bigotry in my nature. Don't anyone ever imply that.' He urged job training for ghetto youths to counter 'dependency culture'. Campaigning for the presidency in 1976, he explicitly linked criminal blacks with expensive welfare financed by white taxpayers. He said Chicago's Linda Taylor had 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and [she] is collecting veterans' benefits on four non-existing husbands ... Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000.'

He exaggerated. When Taylor got convicted of welfare fraud (1977), it was only for using two names to collect 23 welfare cheques worth \$8,000. The *New York Times* recorded Reagan as using the racist epithet 'young buck' when telling a Southern white audience about a young black male receiving food stamp benefit.

Although Abernathy and other black leaders supported Reagan's presidential campaign, he had little time for them once elected. He refused to speak at the NAACP annual convention in 1980 because of a prior engagement — a riding holiday. When he attended the NAACP convention

in July 1981, he infuriated his audience when he said black problems were due to Democrats like Lyndon Johnson:

'Many in Washington over the years have been more dedicated to making the needy people government dependent, rather than independent ... They've created a new kind of bondage. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation freed black people 118 years ago, today we need to declare an economic emancipation.'

Reagan's budget director boasted that the 'Reagan Revolution' launched 'a frontal assault on the American welfare state', because welfare programmes were 'family-destroyers' which 'subsidised a culture of poverty, dependency, and social irresponsibility'. Such attacks on 'welfare dependency' were not limited to whites. Ralph Abernathy declared welfare 'a millstone around the neck of the black population'. Reagan sacked the head of the US Commission on Civil Rights (a conservative Republican appointed by Richard Nixon!) and appointed an anti-welfare conservative black Republican. Reagan did little to help the poor of any colour. Under Reagan, America's richest 5% increased their earnings by 37%, while the poorest 10% had theirs cut by 10%.

In 1982 Reagan supported Bob Jones University, South Carolina, when it challenged the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) right to deny tax exemption to segregated schools (something the three previous presidents had supported). Bob Jones University admitted a few minority students but prohibited interracial dating and marriage on biblical grounds! Reagan backed off when faced with a black outcry. He unsuccessfully opposed the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988. Congressional Republicans voted with Democrats to override his veto on the act. The act countered a Supreme Court ruling of 1984 that had eroded the effectiveness of previous civil rights laws.

According to the historian W.T.M. Riches, in the same way that Lyndon Johnson caught the liberal spirit of the 1960s, Reagan 'personified, and exploited' the conservative 'fears of a nation that had been transformed by the civil rights revolution'. Interestingly, Reagan had the support of many middle-class blacks.

d) President Bush

Republican presidential candidate George Bush used a TV commercial linking race and crime to defeat his liberal opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. The 'Willie Horton' TV commercial depicted convicted black murderer Willie Horton leaving prison on parole, thanks to Governor Dukakis, and emerging to rape and murder a white woman. Many historians think the advertisement stirred up racial fears for political gain, and helped Bush win the presidency. When the Bush aide who masterminded the Willie Horton advertisement was dying of a brain tumour in 1990, he apologized for its exploitation of American racial fears.

In 1990, Bush vetoed a bill which countered Supreme Court decisions which made it difficult to prove job discrimination. According to the historian Steven Shull, Bush's veto 'represented the first defeat of a major civil rights bill in the last quarter century'.

Bush, like Reagan, nominated conservative judges to the Supreme Court. The black conservative Clarence Thomas replaced the retiring Thurgood Marshall. Thomas had entered Yale Law School through affirmative action but nevertheless opposed the policy and advocated black self-help. Thomas said he would never 'play the race card', although when a fellow black conservative accused him of sexual harassment, Thomas indicated the outcry owed much to racism.

The status of black Americans, 1968–90

The late twentieth century was a period of progress for some black Americans, but economic, social, legal and political inequality remained an issue.

Economic status

Statistics for the last decades of the twentieth century demonstrated continued black inferiority:

- One-third of black Americans and one half of black children lived below the poverty line.
- One-third of black Americans had low-status, low-skilled jobs in low-wage occupations, their average earnings half those of whites.
- Black unemployment was twice that of whites.

On the positive side, the federal government promoted affirmative action which helped make one-third of African Americans middle class by the end of the century, but a white backlash developed and an increasingly conservative Supreme Court threatened its continued existence.

Social status

White opposition to integrated education demonstrated continuing black social inequality. In 1971 the Supreme Court ruled it time for the full implementation of school desegregation, specifying the busing of black and white children to each other's schools as the way to achieve it. The percentage of black students in the South in integrated schools peaked during the 1970s and 1980s, but *de facto* segregation proved harder to combat in the North, which experienced a great white backlash against busing. The nationwide opposition to integrated schools caused private school numbers to rise and 'white flight' to accelerate. The federal government became less supportive and schools across the nation grew increasingly segregated in the later twentieth century. However, black educational prospects improved (see below) partly as a result of affirmative action.

Percentage of black adults aged 25-29 who completed college between 1970 and 1990

Year	Black females	Black males
1970	6%	6%
1980	12%	11%
1990	15%	10%

Trends in housing were more encouraging. By 1990, half the black population lived in neighbourhoods over 50 per cent white, and the number of interracial marriages and cohabitants rose — slowly. However, around one-third of black Americans continued to live in segregated, overcrowded and impoverished inner-city ghettos where life expectancy was lower (see below) and schools remained poorly funded and segregated.

Black and white American life expectancy 1960–90

Year	Av. age at death for black Americans	Av. age at death for white Americans
1960	63.6	70.6
1970	64.1	71.7
1980	68.1	74.4
1990	69.1	76.1

Status in the legal system

By 1990, black Americans were quite well-represented in police departments, but racism in law enforcement and the legal system continued. For example, after a high-speed car chase in Los Angeles in 1991, white police caught up with black suspect Rodney King and were filmed beating him up. Riots erupted in Los Angeles after an all-white jury found the police innocent: 55 died, 2,300 were injured and riots followed in Atlanta, Birmingham and Chicago. In 1990, in statistical proportions common across the United States, it was found that the Sheriff's Department of Volusia County, Florida, stopped a disproportionate number of black American drivers on the portion of the interstate highway that ran through the county: although black Americans constituted only 5% of the drivers on that portion of the road, they constituted 70% of those stopped by the police, and were stopped for far longer periods than white drivers. Equally disproportionate was the number of black males in gaol. Black Americans constituted around 12% of the country's population, but over half of the prison population. The black viewpoint was that this denoted unequal black status and that the police unfairly victimized black Americans. White conservatives insisted that black Americans were more likely to commit crime, while white liberals pointed out that poor education and a high unemployment rate contributed to black involvement in crime, drugs and gang turf wars.

Political status

The number of elected black officials rocketed in the late twentieth century. The number of black Americans elected mayors of major cities increased dramatically. During the 1970s and 1980s, many major cities elected black mayors — Detroit (1973), Los Angeles (1973), Washington, DC (1974), Birmingham (1979), Chicago (1984) and Philadelphia (1988). Black mayors of major cities became unexceptional.

A growing number of black Americans were elected to the US House of Representatives. The number of black congressmen had reached 45 in 1990. However, black candidates rarely won nationwide contests in which white votes were crucial. As a result, black US senators were rare; there were none in 1990. On the other hand, in 1988, Jesse Jackson made a serious run for the Democratic nomination for the presidency and was the frontrunner until controversy erupted over his anti-Semitic remarks.

a) Black Organizations

Blacks continued to try to influence the political process through organizations such as the NAACP, which continued lobbying and litigation. The NAACP launched school desegregation suits and backed integration orders. However, some blacks criticized busing. They worried about the loss of black cultural cohesion. They suggested that more resources for black schools was preferable to complex busing and less likely to cause a white backlash. The most ferocious backlash came from Irish Americans in Boston, who in 1974 set up alternative schools, and used protest marches and sit-ins. Across America there was a growth in private education and a white exodus from the cities to the suburbs. In 1974 the Supreme Court overturned a Detroit busing plan by 5 to 4. Four out of the 5 judges were Nixon appointees.

Other NAACP activities were less controversial and more clearly successful. NAACP was the most important black organization in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which represented blacks, Hispanics, women, the disabled and the elderly, and lobbied powerfully in Washington, for example, over the keeping the special provisions of the Voting Rights Act (1981–2).

b) Black Politicians

Now securely within the Democratic Party, blacks used the vote to gain political power. In 1972 Andrew Young was elected to Congress. Birmingham had its first black mayor in 1979,

Chicago in 1983. Although black advancement should not be exaggerated (in 1980 only 1% of America's elected officials were black) the magnitude of black political progress is best illustrated by the career of Jesse Jackson.

c) *Jesse Jackson*

Jesse Jackson was the son of an illiterate South Carolina sharecropper. As a student he was involved in the Greensboro sit-ins. He hoped to be Martin Luther King's successor. He advertised their closeness. On the day of King's assassination, Jackson infuriated SCLC by appearing on TV claiming to have King's blood on his shirt and to have been the last to speak to him. Abernathy disciplined Jackson in 1971 for financial impropriety in helping black businessmen. Jackson left SCLC and set up his own organization, 'People United to Save Humanity' (PUSH). The 'save' was quickly and modestly changed to 'serve'! PUSH used black buying power to gain black employment.

Jackson campaigned for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988. His appeal owed much to fears of and antagonism toward Republican President Reagan's cutbacks in welfare spending. In 1980 blacks constituted 11.7% of America's population, but 43% of those receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Welfare cuts, coupled with the Reagan Justice Department's opposition to affirmative action, led many blacks to support Jackson. Other black leaders such as Andrew Young, however, did not support Jackson, whom they considered to be an unrepresentative egotist. They believed he was not the best Democrat to defeat Ronald Reagan. They disliked his alliance with controversial black nationalist Louis Farrakhan, his preference for Arabs rather than Jews, and his reference to New York City as 'Hymietown' (Jew-town). Nevertheless, Jackson was 1984's third most popular Democratic candidate. He won 20% of his support from whites. Jackson did even better in 1988 because he worked more with the Democratic Party establishment and took care to appeal more to white liberals. He doubled his vote, and 40% of his supporters were whites. His 'rainbow [all colours] coalition' appeal was demonstrated when he won 60% of New York's Hispanic vote. He came a close second to the eventual Democratic candidate.

Summary diagram: The status of black Americans, 1968–1990

	Improved?	No better?
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing middle class • Affirmative action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many impoverished
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half lived in neighbourhoods over 50% white 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many <i>de facto</i> segregated schools across USA • One-third in ghettos
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many black police officers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial profiling • White police brutality (perceived)
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Far more elected officials • Black mayors of major cities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely won statewide elections • Supreme Court less keen to protect Voting Rights Act