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Legislation**



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*The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2. (Summer, 1979), pp. 157-172.

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# Public Opinion, Demonstrations, and the Passage of Antidiscrimination Legislation

PAUL BURSTEIN

**A**T the beginning of 1957, Congress had not passed any laws protecting the civil rights of minorities since adopting the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (U.S. Statutes at Large, 1975:335 ff.) over 80 years before. At times, in fact, Congress opposed attempts to involve the federal government in protecting minority rights, voting down proposed laws against lynching and discrimination in employment (see Bardolph, 1970:181, 301–10; Congressional Quarterly, 1965:24–25).

Legislative change began in 1957, when Congress passed a weak Voting Rights Act (Public Law 85–315, U.S. Statutes at Large, 1957:634–38). During the next few years, Congress outlawed discrimination against minorities in many areas. The landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination against minorities in employment, public accommodations, public facilities, public schools and colleges, and federally assisted programs. By the end of 1977,

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**Abstract** This paper considers the relationship of public opinion and demonstrations to the passage of federal civil rights legislation since World War II. Congress passed such legislation when substantial majorities of the population favored equal rights and the proportion favoring equal rights was clearly increasing. The evidence is consistent with the notion that civil rights demonstrations played a significant role in the passage of the legislation. Both demonstrations and changes in public opinion appear to have been necessary components of the drive to provoke congressional action.

Paul Burstein is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Yale University. The author wishes to thank Richard Berk, Mildred Schwartz, William Freudenburg, Russell Neuman, and Russell Schutt for helpful advice and comments. The data utilized in this paper were made available in part by the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, the National Opinion Research Center, and the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research. Neither the original collectors of the data nor these organizations bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

discrimination against minorities was prohibited in higher education, credit transactions, the sale and rental of housing, and in a wide variety of government-assisted programs; in addition, some loopholes in early legislation had been closed and enforcement provisions strengthened.<sup>1</sup>

Under what circumstances did Congress act against discrimination? This paper describes the relationship between public opinion, civil rights demonstrations, and the passage of antidiscrimination legislation. The aim is to examine the link between what the public wants and what legislation it gets—a critical issue in democratic politics.<sup>2</sup>

### Public Opinion and Congressional Action

#### EXPECTATIONS

What would we expect the relationship between public opinion and congressional action against discrimination to be?

There are at least three reasons for believing that Congress will act only when a substantial majority—rather than a majority of just over 50 percent—favors legislation. First, members of Congress find it difficult to gauge public opinion on complex issues. Because electoral politics is fraught with uncertainty, many members of Congress adopt conservative voting strategies, changing their stands on issues only when it is very clear where their advantage lies (see Downs, 1957; cf. Mayhew, 1974). This is likely to mean waiting until substantially more than 50 percent of constituents favor proposed legislation (everything else, such as intensity of preferences, being equal).

Second, to the extent that their constituents value consistency and reliability, members of Congress may be loath to change their votes on an issue during a particular term in office (Downs, 1957). This reluctance will slow their response to change in public opinion.

<sup>1</sup> For a description of antidiscrimination laws, see Emerson et al. (1978).

<sup>2</sup> The article does not consider in detail *how* the public gets what it wants. The causal analysis of legislative change is still in its early stages; for a review, see Berk, et al. (1977), and Burstein and Freudenburg (1978). For technical reasons related to the patterns of congressional voting on discrimination, the recently developed methods cannot be applied to the data described here. The aim of this article is to see *whether* the public gets what it wants in a salient and controversial area—an important question in itself.

Mildred Schwartz's (1967) extensive analysis of public opinion on civil rights helped to stimulate this paper, but she did not deal with legislative change. Work on antidiscrimination legislation has focused on factors other than those dealt with here; see Dye (1969) on the social structural correlates of legislation, Lytle (1966) on lobbying in behalf of such legislation, and Berman (1966) on the role played by party leaders; see also Congressional Quarterly (1965).

Third, Congress does not always operate on the majority principle. The filibuster rule in the Senate implied that early antidiscrimination legislation needed the support of two-thirds of the Senate to pass, rather than a simple majority.

In addition to the proportion of people on each side of an issue, trends in opinion are likely to be of concern to Congress. In those areas where Congress is concerned with public opinion, there is no reason to change a law until the public demands change. Once change begins, members of Congress would hope to come out in favor of action that would become increasingly popular, while trying to avoid supporting action favored by a majority that might reverse itself.

No theory predicts precisely when legislation is most likely to pass (see Burstein and Freudenburg, 1978), but the most plausible hypothesis is that legislation on an issue of concern to the public will pass when a substantial *and* increasing majority favors it.<sup>3</sup>

#### MEASUREMENT

Difficulties in estimating the potential impact of public opinion on political change are numerous. Marginals are strongly affected by question wording, so a finding that a majority of the public favors a particular course of action must be interpreted very cautiously. People are likely to agree with abstractly worded democratic or egalitarian principles, but are often much less positive when asked about applying the principles in their own lives. People may favor rights in principle, but oppose laws to guarantee them, object to paying the costs of enforcement, or fail to understand the complexities involved in a favored course of action. Intensity of feeling on an issue and willingness to translate feelings into political action are sometimes difficult to gauge.

To take these complexities into account, a satisfactory analysis of public opinion would consider questions about day-to-day situations and legislation, as well as rights in principle. Because of the importance of question wording and Congress's hypothetical concern with trends, the analysis would focus on changes over time in public response to identically worded questions.

<sup>3</sup> Evidence supporting the hypothesis would implicitly begin to disconfirm at least four others: (1) that Congress ignores public opinion; (2) that Congress would respond to a simple majority; (3) that Congress would lead public opinion on a moral issue, taking a stand against discrimination before most of the public opposed discrimination, and hoping to convert the public by its example; (4) that Congress will respond to the majority, but is not concerned with trends.

## DATA

To find repeated questions about discrimination, the holdings of the Roper Public Opinion Research Center were examined, as were the national election studies of the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies and the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center.<sup>4</sup> In order to examine trends satisfactorily, most questions analyzed were asked at least five times. Because of the hypothetical importance of trends and the continuing political and judicial controversies over discrimination, data about public opinion before *and* after the passage of legislation were analyzed. Public opinion on specific issues—education, employment, and housing—will be considered first, followed by opinion on the importance of civil rights and the speed of integration generally. (Unfortunately, repeated questions were not asked in all areas where legislation was passed. Specific data sources are detailed in the Appendix.)

## EDUCATION

Figures 1 and 2 deal with the issue that has probably generated more controversy than any other—integration of education. Although

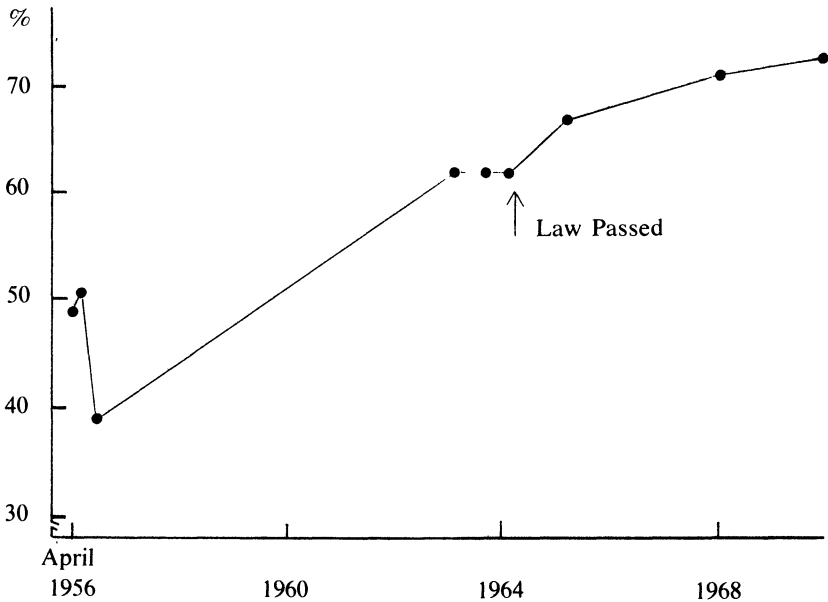


Figure 1. Whites Thinking White and Negro Students Should Go to Same Schools

<sup>4</sup> See Hastings and Southwick, 1974, on Roper holdings; in the Figures that follow, Roper holdings are identified as: AIPO, American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup

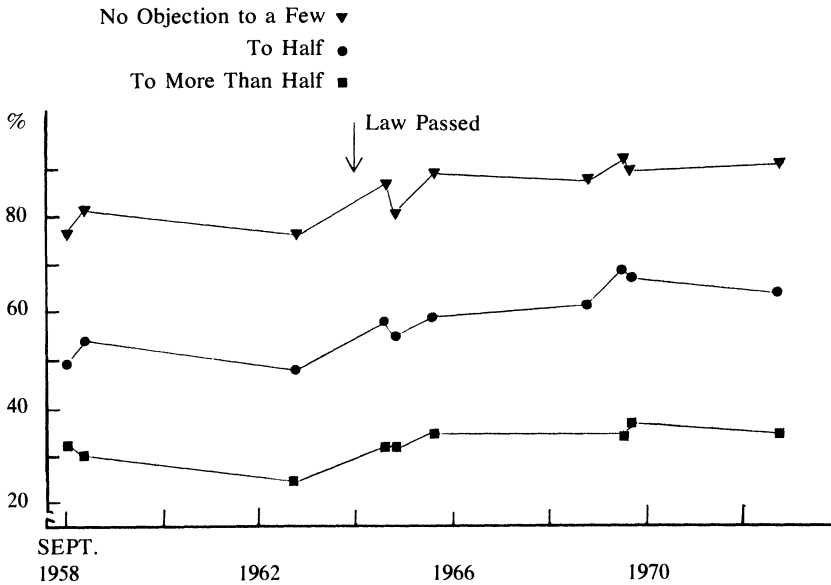


Figure 2. White Pupils' Parents Not Objecting to Children's Attending School with Blacks

the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in education in 1954, enforcement was extremely slow until the passage of the first federal legislation on the subject, Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Figure 1 reports positive responses to the question: "Do you think white students and negro students should go to the same schools or to separate schools?" The trend is clear. Shortly after the 1954 court decision, approximately half of the American public agreed with school integration in principle. By the time the legislation was signed (July 2, 1964), slightly over 60 percent of the white public favored integrated education (62 percent in May 1964, 67 percent in June 1965). The member of Congress who wanted to vote for integrated education only after a substantial and increasing majority of the public favored it would have found this an opportune time to do so.

Poll); NORC, National Opinion Research Center; RFOR, Roper Organization, Inc. (Fortune); SRS, Survey Research Service (conducted by NORC). In addition, SRC refers to the American national election studies of the Survey Research Center and Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, made available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research (1964; 1968; 1970; 1972). GSS refers to the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (1973; 1975; 1976). On the characteristics, quality, and use of the Roper data, see Glenn (1974). National trend data are used for the sake of simplicity. Schwartz (1967) shows that, although opinion on equal rights varies by education and region, trends in opinion were very similar in all groups.

Figure 2 reports on questions that bear more directly on the day-to-day lives of those polled. White parents with children in grade school or high school were asked: "Would you, yourself, have any objection to sending your children to a school where a few of the children are colored?" If the answer was no, they were asked: "Where half the children are colored?" If the answer was no, they were asked: "Where more than half of the children are colored?" (AIPO survey 784 substituted "negroes" for "colored"; survey 875 substituted "black" for "colored.")

Figure 2 shows that when the 1964 Act was passed approximately 80 percent of the parents had no objection to sending their children to a school where a few of the children were black. In addition, the trend line was moving slowly but fairly steadily upward; by mid-1973 over 90 percent of parents had no objection.

The proportion having no objection to their children attending schools that were half black has been much lower, as might be expected. Nevertheless, half the white parents had no objection in mid-1964 (48 percent in May 1963, and 58 percent in April 1965), and the trend line was moving slowly but fairly steadily upward. The figure shows that most white parents had no objection to having some blacks in a predominantly white school. Both normatively and personally, whites claimed to support school integration fairly strongly by mid-1964.

#### THE LABOR MARKET

Figure 3 deals with labor market discrimination against blacks, which was substantially prohibited by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>5</sup> The figure reflects white response to the question: "Do you think Negroes should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job, or do you think white people should have the first chance at any kind of job?" (NORC survey 150 ends the question with ". . . white people should have a better chance.") The trend is clear. Although only a minority of whites favored equal opportunity just after World War II, over 80 percent favored it in principle when Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The 1964 Act prohibited racial discrimination in employment, but exempted many major employers (such as state and local govern-

<sup>5</sup> Title VII and other laws also dealt with sex discrimination. Because of differences in the structure and timing of the blacks' and women's movements (see Freeman, 1975), as well as space limitations, the women's movement will be analyzed elsewhere. Although little data are available, the patterns presented here with regard to opinion on blacks characterize the women's movement as well.

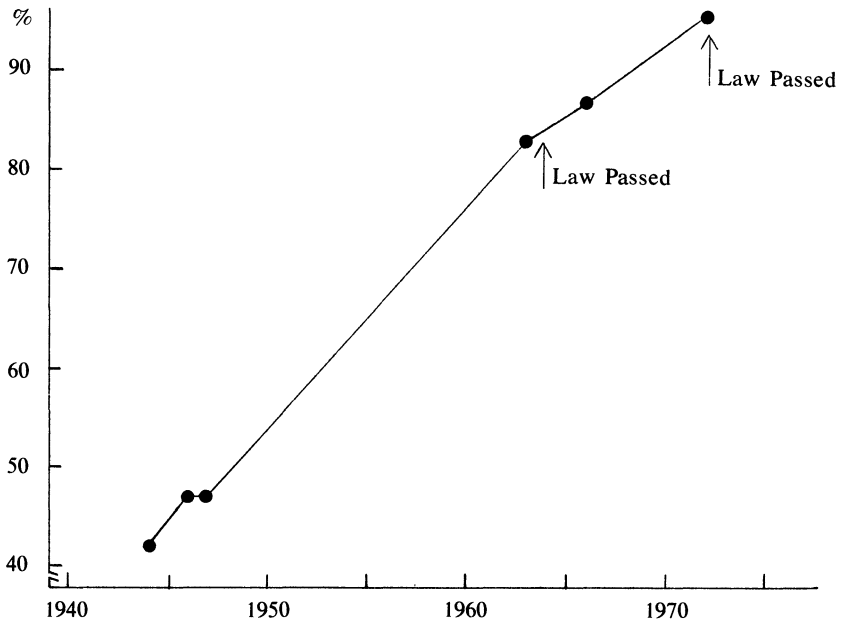


Figure 3. Blacks Should Have Equal Chance at Jobs

ments), and the enforcement provisions were extremely weak. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (PL 92-261, U.S. Statutes at Large, 1972: 103-13) closed many loopholes and strengthened the enforcement provisions. Figure 3 shows that the proportion of the white public favoring equal opportunity in employment continued to rise after the passage of the 1964 Act; by 1972, white support was virtually unanimous—95 percent of those polled agreed that blacks should have an equal chance at jobs.

Support for the principle of equal opportunity was overwhelming. Why did Congress wait so long to pass an equal employment opportunity law? Delay was due partly to doubts about the wisdom and constitutional justification of massive federal intervention into the labor market, but conflict between what whites agreed to in principle and what they were willing to see legislated may also have played a part. In June 1966, almost two years after a law had been passed, whites were asked: "Would you favor or oppose making it against the law to discriminate against Negroes in employment?" Forty-nine percent opposed such a law; 45 percent favored it (SRS survey 889A). Interpretation is complicated, however, by responses to a question asked in April 1968: "How do you feel about fair employment laws—that is, laws that make white people hire qualified Negroes, so that



Negroes can get any job they are qualified for—do you favor or oppose such laws?" (NORC survey 4050). Eighty-three percent said they favored such laws. There is no way to tell how much of this apparent shift in opinion was genuine and how much of it was a result of question wording. Legislation may have been delayed, despite public support for equal opportunity in principle, because the public opposed it in practice, or because the signals received by Congress were ambiguous.

#### HOUSING

Open housing legislation was not passed until April 1968, four years after laws protecting the rights of racial minorities in education, jobs, public accommodations, etc. Laws prohibiting discrimination in other areas have been passed since 1968, but open housing legislation was the last to provoke massive controversy and resistance in Congress. Opinion on this issue was extremely complex. Figure 4 shows that by the time open housing was mandated, probably two-thirds of the white public favored it in principle. In late 1968 whites were asked:

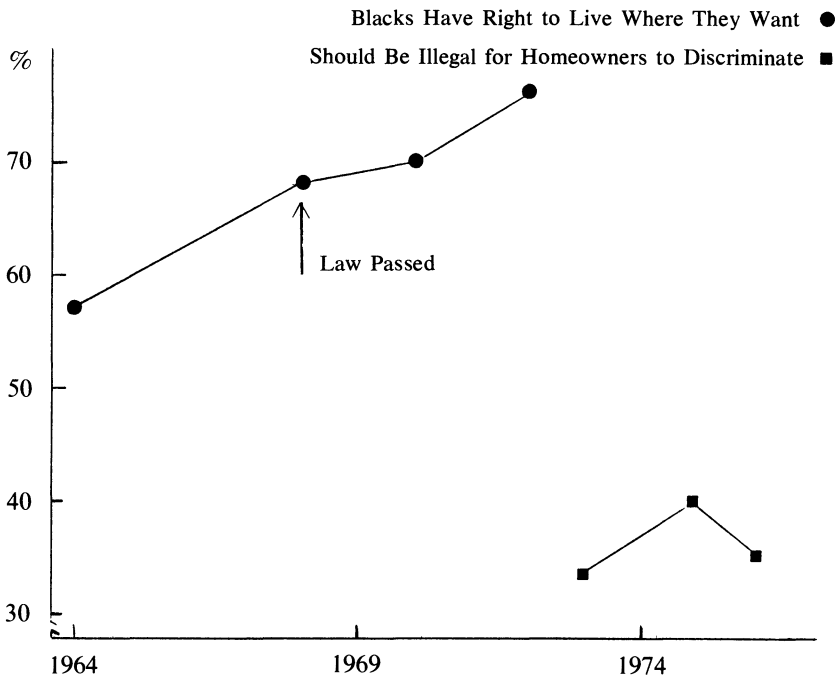


Figure 4. Whites' Attitudes Toward Open Housing

“Which of these statements would you agree with? (1) White people have a right to keep Negroes out of their neighborhood if they want to. (2) Negroes have a right to live wherever they want to, just like white people.” Sixty-eight percent agreed with the latter. In addition, the trend in opinion was unidirectional between 1964 and 1972.

Figure 4 also shows, however, that although whites favored open housing in principle, they probably opposed passing a law to guarantee it. In 1973, 1975, and 1976, whites were asked: “Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on: A. One law says that a homeowner can decide for himself who to sell his house to, even if he prefers not to sell to Negroes. B. The second law says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color. Which law would you vote for?” Responses must be interpreted cautiously because of question wording, differences between the hypothetical and actual laws, and the timing of the polls. It appears, nevertheless, that most people oppose open housing legislation; barely a third support it, and there is certainly no upward trend.

There is a significant similarity between opinion on housing and on education: whites are willing to accept integration that affects them personally, but only up to a point; they are unwilling to be part of a white minority interacting with a black majority, and this unwillingness declined little if at all over time.

During the month open housing legislation was passed, whites were asked: “If a negro with the same income and education as you have moved into your block, would it make any difference to you?” Seventy-two percent said it would make no difference (SRS survey 4050). The proportion of the white public accepting an equal-status black on their block had risen steadily from 52 percent in 1956 (NORC survey 390) and continued upward after the law was passed, reaching 83 percent in March 1972 (NORC survey 9001; the same question was asked in SRS surveys 160, 330, 630, 857, and 889A). If this was seen as the likely outcome of an open housing law, whites accepted it.

Whites responded differently, however, to the question: “Would you move if colored people came to live in great numbers in your neighborhood?” In August 1967, 40 percent said they would definitely move, 32 percent said they might, and only 27 percent said they definitely would not (AIPO survey 749). The proportion saying they definitely would not move rose from 20 percent in 1958 (AIPO survey 605) to 32 percent in May 1966 (AIPO survey 729), but then declined to a level below what it had been in 1965 (28 percent in AIPO survey 710; see also AIPO surveys 673 and 730).

When members of Congress tried to decide how to vote on open

housing, therefore, they had to balance increasing white acceptance of individual equal-status blacks and the principle of open housing against opposition to legislation and hostility to the influx of many blacks into white neighborhoods. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that Congress failed to pass a law until very substantial majorities of whites were willing to accept open housing in principle.

#### INTEGRATION IN GENERAL

When Congress voted on antidiscrimination legislation, it probably considered general attitudes toward civil rights, integration, and related issues, as well as attitudes toward legislation in specific areas. Figures 5 and 6 deal with public opinion toward integration and civil rights.

Berk, Brackman, and Lesser hypothesized that legislatures are likely to pass laws when public concern with an issue is unusually great (1977:234–36). Figure 5 shows the proportion of the public that saw civil rights or race relations as the most important problem facing the country from 1955 to 1976.<sup>6</sup> The figure shows that the 1964 act

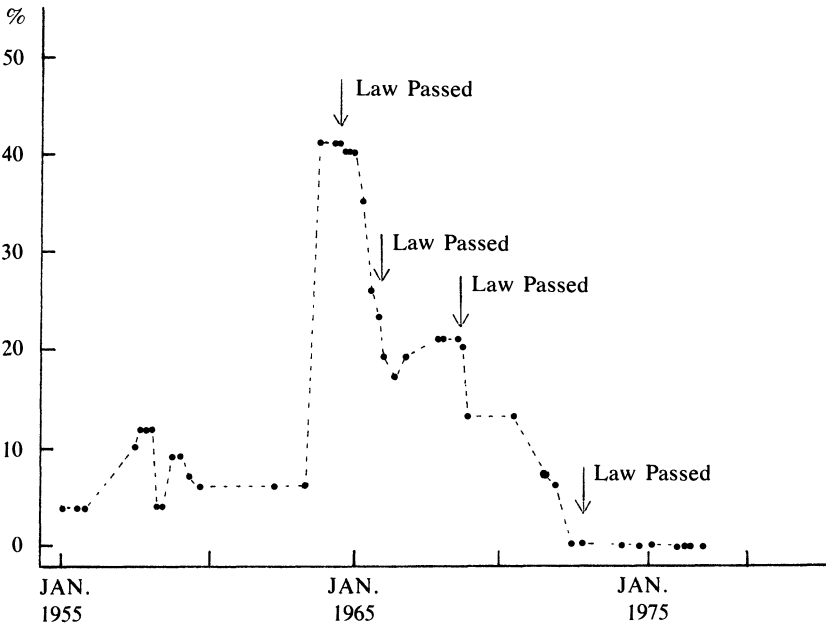


Figure 5. Percentage Considering Civil Rights "Most Important Problem"—Smoothed

<sup>6</sup> The data were "smoothed" in a way Tukey developed to help bring out the underlying pattern in a graph while "smoothing" point to point perturbations that make the picture confusing; the 3R smoothing was used (Tukey, 1977: ch. 7).

and, to a lesser extent, the 1968 open housing law, passed after major upsurges in public concern with civil rights. The 1965 voting law was passed during a period of substantial but declining concern. The 1972 employment law and a number of other laws passed more recently (not noted on the figure), however, were adopted when public concern with civil rights was at a low ebb.

Initial major antidiscrimination legislation, therefore, passed at a time of great public concern with the issue, but new legislation was passed while public concern declined. This pattern may be a common one. Walker (1977) concluded that initial successes in passing laws in a new area often prompt the passage of further legislation, as activists sense that legislative progress may be possible in areas logically related to the original breakthrough. Public concern may be essential for the passage of innovative legislation, but less important for later but related laws.

Figure 6 presents data on the degree of likely resistance to prointegration legislation—the proportion of the public which responded with the answer “too fast” to the question: “Do you think the (Kennedy, Johnson) administration is pushing racial integration too fast or not fast enough?” (The data are smoothed, as in Figure 5.) The figure shows that two of the major antidiscrimination laws were passed

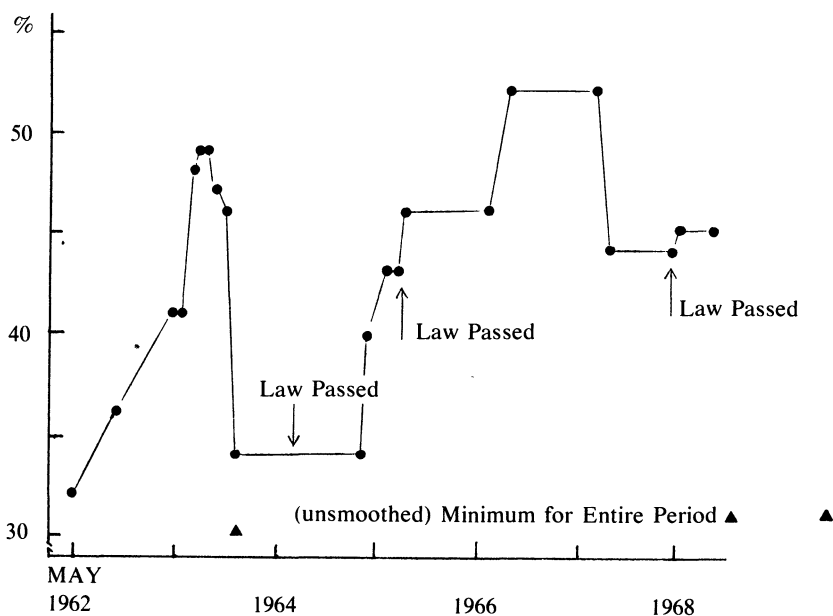


Figure 6. Proportion Thinking Integration Being Pushed Too Fast—Smoothed

when popular feelings about the speed of integration were least negative. The sweeping 1964 Civil Rights Act passed shortly after the proportion feeling integration was proceeding too fast had dropped precipitously to what turned out to be its lowest point for the entire period for which data are available. Like the 1964 law, the 1968 open housing law was passed after white resistance to integration, as gauged by this question, had dropped significantly and rapidly.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act confuses the picture, however; it passed during a period when the proportion of people feeling integration was being pushed too fast had been rising rapidly.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 6 shows that the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed at a time when likely public resistance to further integration was uniquely low; but factors other than general public feeling about the speed of integration must have a major impact on the passage of other laws.

### Civil Rights Demonstrations and Congressional Action

The impact of civil rights demonstrations on the passage of antidiscrimination legislation has been the subject of considerable controversy. Members of Congress and the mass media often claimed that demonstrations had little effect, or even that they were counterproductive (see the *New York Times*, July 18, 1963:8, and August 29, 1963:1), while many academic observers saw the demonstrations as essential elements of the black fight for equality (see, for example, Lytle, 1966; Berman, 1966:49; Sundquist, 1968:250–61). Black leaders disagreed among themselves at times about the efficacy of demonstrations, the circumstances in which they were most likely to be effective, and the magnitude of white resentment they might create (see, for example, the statement by Martin Luther King, Jr., *New York Times*, October 18, 1963; and the *Times*, August 3, 1964:12; December 18, 1964:36; August 3, 1974:26).

Figure 7 provides some data bearing on the controversy. It presents the annual total of civil rights demonstrations reported by the *New York Times*, where a demonstration was defined as a public, manifestly political action by at least five people on behalf of the rights of racial minorities (see Snyder and Kelly, 1977, on the validity of this kind of data). Figure 7 also provides some indication of the extent to which demonstrations were planned with an eye to influencing the passage of legislation. For 1964 and 1965, the rate at which demon-

<sup>7</sup> National opinion may have been less relevant to the passage of the Voting Rights Act than to other laws because it was essentially regional legislation, affecting only the South. It is, of course, easy to think of ad hoc explanations for deviant cases when the sample of laws is so small.

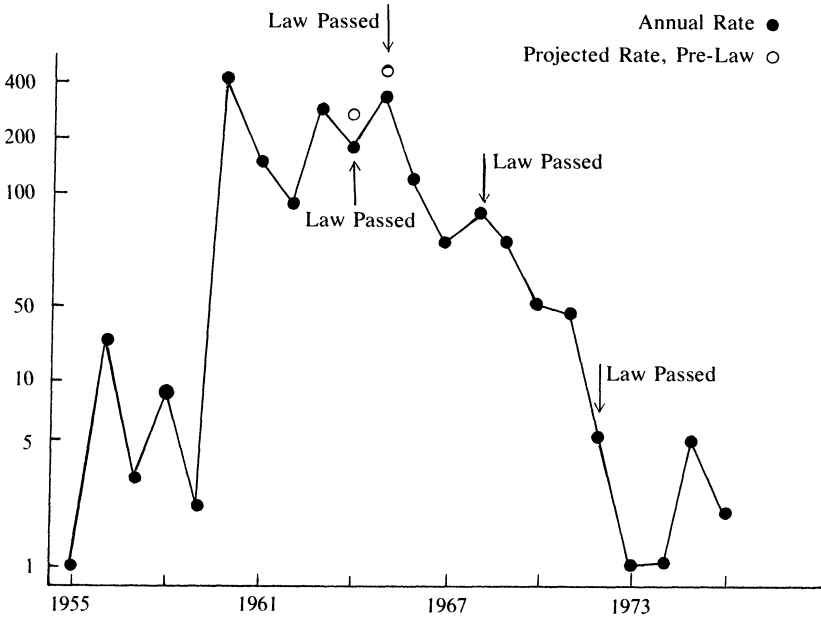


Figure 7. Total Civil Rights Demonstrations

strations occurred prior to the passage of that year's law has been projected for the entire year; this provides some evidence of the extent to which demonstrating slackened because the desired law passed. (For 1968 and later laws, the projected rate was no different from the actual one.)

The data cannot show that demonstrations caused Congress to act, but the major laws of 1964 and 1965 did pass after demonstrations had been occurring at a high rate for several years; in addition, the demonstration rate rebounded a bit during 1968, the year open housing legislation was approved. The decline in the annual rate late in 1964 and 1965, after legislation was passed, is indirect evidence that some demonstrations were planned to influence Congress.

The overall pattern is similar to that shown in Figure 5—a high level of civil rights activity and concern in 1964 and 1965, an upsurge in 1968, and a decline in more recent years which nevertheless saw the passage of substantial legislation. A comparison of Figures 5 and 7 shows that the demonstration rate rose to its highest point several years before public concern rose. This is consistent with the notion that the demonstrations caused the rise in public concern (though the evidence is only circumstantial).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Demonstrations and other protest activities have been seen as effective primarily when they were played up by the mass media (see Wirmark, 1974; Hubbard, 1968). In

## Summary and Conclusions

The analysis makes two main points. First, Congress passes legislation when the proportion of the public favoring a right in principle is well over half—usually two-thirds or more—and increasing. Congressional passage of a law appears to confirm that a change in norms is binding upon all, including those who oppose it.

Second, changes in public opinion alone do not tell us precisely when legislation will be passed. Support for rights in principle, and for token integration in practice, increased fairly steadily for years before and after the passage of legislation in every area in which there is evidence. Why was legislation passed at one time and not another? The data are consistent with the notion that demonstrations preceded a rise in public concern (and in media attention to civil rights), and that all of these helped transform continuing changes in public opinion into support for specific legislation. Once initial, pathbreaking legislation is passed, it seems possible to pass additional legislation even when levels of public activism, concern, and attention are lower. Both demonstrations and changes in public opinion were probably necessary but not sufficient conditions for the passage of legislation. Without underlying changes in public opinion about discrimination, demonstrations would not have led to legislation. Without demonstrations, it might have been much longer before changes in public opinion were translated into government action.

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addition, legislative action on an issue is often preceded by increased media attention to the issue (Berk et al., 1977: ch. 6–7; Walker, 1977). An examination of newspaper and magazine coverage of the civil rights movement—gauged in terms of the amount of space devoted to it in the *New York Times Index* and the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*—showed that such coverage reached its peak in 1964 and 1965—several years after demonstrations rose to peak intensity, and during the period when major laws were passed. The timing of the peak of newspaper and magazine coverage is consistent with the coverage having been a response to the activities of civil rights groups. Once the movement succeeded in attracting media attention, demonstrations and coverage moved in tandem.

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#### Appendix: Source Data

*Figure 1.* Source: April, 1956, NORC Survey 386; June, 1956, NORC Survey 390; June, 1956, NORC Survey 393; May, 1963, SRS Survey 160; December, 1963, SRS Survey 330; May, 1964, SRS Survey 630; June, 1965, SRS Survey 857; April, 1968, NORC Survey 4050; April, 1970, NORC Survey 4100.

*Figure 2.* Source: All are AIPO Surveys. September, 1958, Survey 604; February, 1959, Survey 610; May, 1963, Survey 673; April, 1965, Survey 710; June, 1965, Survey 712; May, 1966, Survey 728; July, 1969, Survey 784; March, 1970, Survey 801; April, 1970, Survey 804; July, 1973, Survey 875.

*Figure 3.* Source: May, 1944, NORC Survey 225; May, 1946, NORC Survey 241; April, 1947, NORC Survey 150; December, 1963, NORC Survey 330; June, 1966, SRS Survey 889A; March, 1972, NORC Survey 9001.

*Figure 4.* Source, right to live: 1964, 1968; 1970, 1972 SRC national election studies. Source, illegal to discriminate: 1973, 1975, 1976 General Social Surveys.

*Figure 5.* Source: Gallup, 1972, vol. 2-3; Gallup Opinion Index, reports 86, 88, 100, 104, 111, 112, 117, 125, 127, 131, 137.

*Figure 6.* Source: All are AIPO Surveys. May, 1962, Survey 658; October, 1962, Survey 664; May, 1963, Survey 673; June, 1963, Survey 674; July, 1963, Survey 675; August, 1963, Survey 676; September, 1963, Survey 677; October, 1963, Survey 678; November, 1963, Survey 679; January, 1964, Survey 684; March, 1965, Survey 708; March, 1965, Survey 709; June, 1965, Survey 713; July, 1965, Survey 714; August, 1965, Survey 716; June, 1966, Survey 730; September, 1966, Survey 734; July, 1967, Survey 748; August, 1967, Survey 749; April, 1968, Survey 760; April, 1968, Survey 761; September, 1968, Survey 769.

*Figure 7.* *New York Times Index.*