EDUCATION FOR EMPOWEMENT OR CONTROL? SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AFTER THE U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

AGUSTINA S. PAGLAYAN[1]

November 2024

The enfranchisement of Black Americans in 1965 led southern state governments to increase education expenditures in predominantly Black school districts. What motivated these educational investments, a redistributive or a social control logic? To answer this question, I examine the content of state-approved History school textbooks between 1955 and 1975. Did southern states reform textbooks after the Civil Rights Movement in ways that better acknowledged the racial injustice and institutionalized discrimination denounced by Black activists? A comparison of textbooks from Alabama, Indiana and California suggests that the answer is no: while non-Southern states' textbooks became more aligned with activists' demands, in Alabama textbooks remained virtually unchanged and continued to minimize the history of racial discrimination. The findings support a theory of education reform whereby politicians who feel threatened by mass demands for institutional change respond by investing in teaching children that there is little reason to rebel against the status quo.

[1] Assistant Professor, University of California, San Diego (apaglayan@ucsd.edu). I thank the Hellman Fellowship for funding, and Jose Ayala, Courtney Chan, Karen Thai, and especially, Alison Boehmer and Marianna Garcia for outstanding research assistance.

Non-democratic regimes around the world have often responded to internal conflict and mass protest by turning to education reform as a means of social control. Mass education in these post-conflict settings is used by autocratic rulers not to address the economic or other grievances of the masses, but to teach them to be content with the status quo and obey the state and its laws.[2] How do elected politicians in democratic settings respond to mass protest when they feel threatened by protestors' demands? Do they also respond by turning to education systems to inculcate obedience and respect for the status quo, or are elected politicians more likely to respond to mass protest by reforming education systems in ways that address protestors' demands? I examine this question by looking at how southern politicians in the United States responded to the Civil Rights Movement in the realm of education policy.

Past work by Elizabeth Cascio and Ebonya Washington has shown that Civil Rights Movement, and in particular the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) which enabled millions of Black citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote, led southern state governments to increase both the level and proportion of education funds they transferred to school districts with a high proportion of Black residents.[3] Cascio and Washington interpret this finding as evidence that southern politicians had electoral incentives to respond to the education demands of newly enfranchised Black voters. However, the history of education reform by non-democratic regimes in Europe and Latin America suggests a different possibility: perhaps southern politicians put more money into education in predominantly Black communities not as a means to address Black voters' demands but as a means to enhance the social control function of schools, using schools to instill among Black children messages and behaviors of obedience, docility, and acceptance of the status quo.

Education spending levels alone do not tell us which of these possible logics—a redistributive logic or a social control one—explains why southern states responded to Black activists and the enfranchisement of Black voters by investing in education in predominantly Black communities. To understand the motivation behind these state-level education investments, I examine how the content of state-approved History school textbooks changed after the Civil Rights Movement. History textbooks are especially helpful for understanding the political goals of state-level education policymakers. How a state-approved textbook discusses slavery, the causes of the Civil

[2] Paglayan, Agustina S. 2022. "Education or Indoctrination? The Violent Origins of Public School Systems in an Era of State-Building." *American Political Science Review*.

[3] Cascio, Elizabeth U., and Ebonya Washington. 2014. "Valuing the Vote: The Redistribution of Voting Rights and State Funds following the Voting Rights Act of 1965." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(1): 379-433.

War, or discrimination during the Jim Crow Era, among other topics typically covered in History textbooks, and how it depicts Black individuals and their lives, tells us a lot about the messages that a state wants children to learn when it comes to the history of racial tensions in the United States. The question is: Did southern states reform History textbooks after the Civil Rights Movement in ways that better acknowledged the history of racial injustice and institutionalized discrimination voiced by the Black community? As I explain below, the answer appears to be no.

Education desegregation in the U.S. South

Although at the federal level Black activists accomplished major legal victories, including the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Right Act of 1965, at the state level, where education policy is made, southern politicians during the Civil Rights Movement encountered considerable resistance to reform.[4]

Some of the fiercest battles in the Deep South were fought in the domain of education. In 1954, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*[5] case, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that state-mandated racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, marking an end to the legal doctrine of "separate but equal" which had been in place since 1896. However, ten years after the *Brown* ruling, racial segregation in public schools in southern states remained intact because of the countermobilization of white citizens and the action of district- and state-level politicians.[6] "Across the Deep South," writes Robert Mickey, "the Brown ruling and rulers' responses to it led both to a surge in white supremacist civic and political mobilization and to concomitant setbacks for black protest." Politicians in Deep South states "pursued strategies of 'massive resistance,' by which they sought to decry, deter, and then defer the racial desegregation of their schools."[7]

It was only in the mid-1960s, a decade after *Brown*, that school desegregation in the South began. Two main factors contributed to desegregation at that time. The first were financial incentives: In 1965, the U.S. Congress approved the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and Title

[4] The United States Constitution does not mention education. Per the Tenth Amendment, any issues not delegated to the federal government by the Constitution are reserved to the states. The federal government *can* provide funding for education, and it has often used the "power of the purse" to incentivize states to adopt specific types of education policies.

[5] The full name is *Oliver Brown, et.al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et.al*.

[6] Cascio, Elizabeth, Nora Gordon, Ethan Lewis, and Sarah Reber. 2008. "From Brown to Busing." *Journal of Urban Economics* 64: 296-325.

[7] Mickey, Robert. 2015. *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-72*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

I of that Act provided considerable funds for public school districts serving a large proportion of low-income students. However, the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in hiring, promotion, and firing decisions, in public accommodations, and crucially, in any program that received federal funds. The inability to receive federal dollars for education unless they desegregated schools incentivized many southern school districts that served a large number of low-income students to desegregate public schools. The second factor that contributed to desegregation was litigation. While about half of southern school districts desegregated without the intervention of federal courts, largely owing to the financial incentives for desegregation that emerged in the mid-1960s, the other half did not desegregate until a court ordered them to do so. Large school districts and relatively wealthier school districts were more likely to be imposed a court-ordered desegregation plan.

Even when federal courts ordered a school district to desegregate, the implementation of desegregation plans in the South encountered considerable obstacles not only because of large-scale protests by white students and parents against these plans,[8] but also because of the direct intervention of governors and other state-level politicians. In Macon County, Alabama, for example, the federal district court ordered the school board to begin desegregation in 1963. However, on the day when desegregation was scheduled to begin, the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, signed an executive order and sent state troops to suspend integration, citing law and order concerns and "the express intention of the governor to preserve the peace, maintain domestic tranquility and protect the lives and property of all citizens of this state."[9] This was not an isolated example. Time and again, court orders to desegregate were met with protests by white students and parents and the intervention of state troops which, instead of enforcing the court's order to desegregate, repressed Black activists and removed Black students from school premises alleging that this was for their own safety.[10] George Wallace's predecessor, Alabama Governor John Patterson, boasted in front of the legislature about his administration's deliberate and successful efforts to maintain a desegregated school system:

> There was no integration in the schools when I took office and there is none today. This is not because of luck or chance, but due to constant work, diligence and attention. To hold the line, we have fought many legal battles, and we have been able to keep the N.A.A.C.P. out of Alabama since 1956, a fact which has had a distinct bearing on our success in this

[8] "Whites in Mobile Fight School Plan of Full Integration," *New York Times* (1968).
[9] "Alabama Police Block First School Integration: Wallace Cites Fear of Violence Alabama Schools," *Los Angeles Times* (1963).
[10] Mickey (2015).

> fight. We have also endeavored to build and improve the school systems for both white and Negro, in the conviction that we owe children of all races the best possible education and that a segregated school system best affords this opportunity.[11]

Despite this resistance, the combination of financial incentives to desegregate since 1965, particularly for school districts serving a large proportion of low-income students, and the N.A.A.C.P.'s persistent legal action to end desegregation, meant that by 1972, school desegregation in southern states had been completed at least in terms of the composition of student enrollment.[12]

While the ability of Black students to attend the same schools as white students was a major victory for the Civil Rights Movement, some school districts embarked on a variety of efforts to limit civil rights activists' influence over education. One such effort entailed removing Black educators from integrated schools. A study conducted in Alabama, for example, found that between 1966, when large-scale desegregation began in that state, and 1970, when students were extensively integrated under federal court orders, the number of Black principals dropped from 620 to 362 and the percentage of Black principals fell from 35 to 25 percent.[13] Numerous studies conducted by the National Education Association's Commission on Professional Rights and Responsibilities, the Race Relations Information Center, and other organizations also found that Black teachers and civil rights activists across the South were being fired in the wake of desegregation, demoted, or pressured to resign.[14] Inside schools, the practice of grouping children by ability was also used as a mechanism to separate white and Black children into different classrooms.

This grim picture of the consequences of school desegregation, particularly in the South, coexists with evidence that desegregation led to increases in Black students' high school graduation rates, suggesting that desegregation implied an improvement in the quality of education available to Black communities. As with education expenditures, the composition of the teaching workforce and high school graduation rates alone tell us little about the intentions of Southern policymakers. Were Black teachers fired as part of deliberate efforts to prevent Black activists' ideas from

---

[11] Message of Governor John Patterson to Joint Session of the Alabama Legislature at Organizational Session, 1963.

[12] For a detailed description of the process of desegregation, see: Cascio, Elizabeth, Nora Gordon, Ethan Lewis, and Sarah Reber. 2008. "From Brown to Busing." *Journal of Urban Economics* 64: 296-325.

[13] "Alabama Schools Scored on Blacks: Study Finds Policy to Drop Negroes as Educators," *New York Times* (1971).

[14] "16 Black Alabama Teachers Reinstated and Given Back Pay," *Atlanta Daily World* (1972).

entering the classroom, or were they fired, as some argued during the 1960s, because they lacked adequate skills to be effective teachers? Was the improvement in Black students' graduation rates a goal of Southern education policymakers, or was it an unintended outcome of desegregation?

Looking at the content of textbooks adopted by states can tell us a lot about the extent to which policymakers responded to the Civil Rights Movement by investing in education to promote the social mobility of Blacks, or whether they invested in education as a tool to teach Black children that the status quo was not as bad as they might think.

School textbooks in three states

If elected politicians in democratic settings respond to mass protest in similar ways as non-democratic regimes, then we should observe greater resistance to reform the curriculum in a direction consistent with the demands of protestors in those states where elected politicians felt more threatened by protestors' demands. In the case of the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, this corresponds to states in the Deep South. First, the practice of racial segregation, which civil rights activists wanted to end, was especially pervasive and persistent in southern states. Second, although the Civil Rights Movement was a nationwide movement, most *violent* protests were concentrated in southern states,[15] which gave both political elites and white citizens in these states ammunition to frame the protests as a threat to social order.[16]

To understand how southern politicians responded to the Civil Rights Movement in the realm of education, and in particular what choices they made with respect to the content of education, I focus on analyzing changes in the content of History textbooks in Alabama between 1955 and 1975. There are two main reasons for focusing on Alabama. First, Alabama was the center of many key events during the Civil Rights Movement; Rosa Park's stance against racial segregation while riding a public bus in Montgomery sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, a foundational event in the Civil Rights Movement. As such, textbooks in Alabama provide insight into how southern state politicians responded to the demands of civil rights activists in a state where these

[15] Although most protests associated with the Civil Rights Movement were peaceful, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on 4 April 1968 sparked a wave of violent protests that included vandalism, violent confrontation between protestors and police forces, and multiple deaths and arrests (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/10/12/critics-claim-blm-was-more-violent-than-1960s-civil-rights-protests-thats-just-not-true/).

[16] Wasow, Omar. 2020. "Agenda seeding: How 1960s black protests moved elites, public opinion and voting." *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 638-659.

demands had the potential to upend the balance of power between white and Black Americans and were thus perceived as a major threat by state-level politicians.

Second, school textbooks in Alabama are selected by officials appointed by the governor. This is not true across all states: in some states, school districts have full autonomy to choose textbooks; in others, the state makes a preselection of textbooks but districts then have autonomy to choose a textbook from this state-approved pool. My goal is to understand how *state*-level politicians reform education in response to threatening mass protests because what Cascio and Washington found was that southern *state* governments throughout the 1960s and 1970s responded to the enfranchisement of Black Americans by increasing the level of *state* spending on education in predominantly Black communities. What we need to understand, then, is what drove *state* governments to do this—whether a redistributive or a social control logic. Focusing on Alabama enables us to examine state-level responses in the realm of textbooks because a state-level Textbook Adoption Commission appointed by the governor is in charge of commissioning, reviewing, and determining what textbooks can be used in each grade and subject. Local school districts in Alabama have no autonomy over textbook selection. This allows state-level politicians to influence the content of education in all districts and ensure that the textbooks are aligned with the state curriculum. Understanding how the content of textbooks adopted by Alabama's Textbook Adoption Commission changed over time can help us understand the educational goals pursued by state-level policymakers.

To understand how Alabama politicians responded to the activism of Black communities during the Civil Rights Movement, we also need to consider how History textbooks changed in states where the Civil Rights Movement posed less of a threat to state-level politicians. To this end, I compare textbook changes in Alabama between 1955 and 1975 with textbook changes in two non-southern states, Indiana and California, both of which also had state-level textbook adoption commissions. Looking at a state with a predominantly white population like Indiana can help us determine whether or not the observed evolution of textbook content in Alabama reflects a general trend common to all states, even those where the Civil Rights Movement did not pose a major threat. Looking at textbook changes in California, a state with a large Hispanic but small Black population, can help us assess whether the patterns we see in Alabama reflect a common response to non-white voters generally, though not necessarily to Black voters specifically.[17]

[17] Textbook availability also affected the choice of states. To analyze how the content of History education changed after the Civil Rights Movement, I needed states where (i) the textbooks used both before and after the Civil Rights Movement were selected by a state-level Textbook Adoption Commission; (ii) the list of textbooks approved by the Commission could be found; and (iii) copies of the History textbooks used

For each of these three states—Alabama, Indiana, and California—, I obtained and analyzed copies of the main History textbook used in public high schools in 1955 and 1975. Analyzing how History textbooks changed in Alabama between 1955 and 1975 compared to Indiana and California involved several steps. First, with the help of a team of graduate students, I marked every sentence of each textbook that explicitly or implicitly referred to Black individuals, Black lives, or Black history. For example, in 1955, Alabama's high school History textbook, *Alabama History for Schools*, contained 1,343 sentences that explicitly or implicitly referred to Black individuals; Indiana's *This is America's Story* contained 837; and California's *America, Land of Freedom* contained 819 sentences. The number of sentences referring to Black individuals and Black history remained similar in Alabama and Indiana in 1975, but more than doubled in California.

Second, drawing on the work of social scientists who have studied the role of race in school textbooks, I developed a methodology to classify whether or not a given sentence of a textbook

before and after the Civil Rights Movement could be located and obtained. Many states met condition (i), whereas much fewer states met conditions (ii) and (iii).

contained racist content.[18] To determine this, I asked eleven questions about each sentence that explicitly or implicitly referred to Black individuals. Some examples of these questions include:[19]

1. Does the sentence generalize positive experiences in U.S. political, social, or economic life without distinguishing between the experiences of Black and white Americans? For example, does it talk about freedom, liberty, voting rights, access to education, improvements in education, poverty mitigation, democracy, or other positive aspects of life as if these applied to everyone, without distinguishing between Black and white Americans?
2. Does the sentence minimize the hardships endured by Black Americans, or does it exaggerate their positive experiences? For example, does the sentence minimize the cruelty of slavery, or does it equate the experiences of Black slaves with those of poor white individuals?

---

[18] The review included: Jimenez, Jeremy. 2020. "Race, Discrimination, and the Passive Voice: Hardship Narratives in U.S. Social Studies Textbooks: 1860 to the Present." *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 11(2): 1-26; Smitherman-Donaldson, G., & van Dijk, T.A. (eds.) 1988. *Discourses and Discrimination*. Wayne State University Press; Garcia and Goebel. 1985. "A comparative study of the portrayal of Black Americans." *The Negro Educational Review*. July-Oct; Turner, Richard, and John Dewar. 1973. "Black History in Selected American History Textbooks." *Educational Leadership* 6(3): 441-444; Stampp, Kenneth L. 1964. *The Negro in American History Textbooks*. Sacramento: California State Department of Education; Sloan, Irving. 1966. "The Negro in Modern American History Textbooks: A Study of the Negro in Selected Junior and Senior High History Textbooks as of September, 1966." *Curricular Viewpoints Series*; Czemiak, J. 2006. "Black slave revolt depiction and minority representation in US History textbooks from 1950-2005." *UW-L Journal of Undergraduate Research* IX; Council on Interracial Books for Children, Inc. 1977. "Stereotypes, Distortions and Omissions in U.S. History Textbooks." New York: Carnegie Corporation; Henry, J. 1970. *Textbooks and the American Indian*. Indian Historian Press; Coats, L. & Wade. A. 2004. "Telling it like it isn't: obscuring perpetrator responsibility for violent crime." *Discourse and Society* 15(5): 1-28; Jimenez, J.D. & Lerch, J. 2019. "Waves of Diversity: Depictions of Marginalized Groups and Their Rights in Social Science Textbooks, 1900-2013." *Comparative Education Review* 63(2), 166-188; Glazer, Nathan, and Reed Ueda. 1983. *Ethnic Groups in History Textbooks*; Krug, Mark. 1970. "Freedom and racial equality: A study of "revised" high school history textbooks." *School Review* 78: 297-354; Epstein, Terrie L. 1994. "Tales from Two Textbooks: A Comparison of the Civil Rights Movement in Two Secondary History Textbooks." *The Social Studies* 85(3): 121-126; Carpenter, M.E.R. 1941. *The Treatment of the Negro in American History School Textbooks: A Comparison of Changing Textbook Content, 1826 to 1939, with Developing Scholarship in the History of the Negro in the United States*. Banta Books; Moreau, Joseph. 2003. *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Marcus, Lloyd. 1961. "The treatment of minorities in secondary school textbooks." *Anti-Defamation League on B'nai B'rith*. Chapter III; Banks, James. 1969. "A Content Analysis of the Black American in Textbooks." *Social Education* 1: 954-963.

[19] The complete methodology and the manual used to train coders can be found in the Appendix.

3. Does the sentence implicitly or explicitly reinforce stereotypes of Black people as inferior human beings? Here, we looked for words like "violent," "lazy," or "inferior" and related synonyms or phrases that imply such stereotypes, as well as sentences that de-humanize or commodify Black individuals.
4. Does the sentence discuss racism as an issue stemming from specific prejudiced individuals, or does it discuss racial inequalities as something that resulted from existing policies, laws, and institutions? For example, does it acknowledge the slave codes, the Jim Crow laws, the policies that enabled racial segregation in public service provision, etc.?

Next, I trained a group of students to answer these questions for each sentence in the Alabama, Indiana, and California's History textbooks of 1955 and 1975. Students worked independently from one another and, because I redacted the textbooks before sharing them with students, did not know the state or year of the textbook they were analyzing. Because some of the questions that students had to answer about each sentence involved a subjective assessment, it comes as no surprise that some students were systematically more likely to identify racist content in sentences than others. However, regardless of the baseline level of racist content that each student identified in the 1955 textbooks, there was remarkable consistency across students in how much *change* in racist content they detected between the 1955 and 1975 textbooks—even though, again, students did not know what textbooks they were coding.

In addition to this sentence-by-sentence content analysis, I also used two other methodologies: (1) a classification of textbooks based on a holistic assessment of how they fared compared to the ideal content as determined by the Council on Interracial Books for Children; and (2) an analysis of textbooks using automated text analysis tools. First, in 1976, the Council on Interracial Books for Children published a list of twenty-one benchmarks that all school textbooks should meet in order to give a fair treatment to the history of racial discrimination. According to the Council, all textbooks should acknowledge the following: (1) African, as well as European, culture forms an integral part of the U.S. heritage; (2) Africans were in the Americas prior to 1619; (3); The North American slave trade created enormous profits, became the most brutal system of slavery known, and disrupted African civilization; (4) The significance of the Revolution, to Blacks, goes beyond participation in combat; (5) The Constitution was a pro-slavery document and remained so for 78 years; (6) Slavery was inherently cruel and inhuman; (7) Rebellion and slavery went hand in hand; (8) While there were differences in the institution between North and South, slavery was never a regional issue; (9) Blacks initiated anti-slavery activity and were central to the abolition leadership; (10) The life of the free African American was often only a slight improvement over the life of a slave; (11) Blacks who participated in the take-over of the West were also oppressed

by white society; (12) The lack of land redistribution was the fundamental failure of Reconstruction; (13) When freed people had land, they displayed incentive and skill, establishing productive lives; (14) Sharecropping resulted in the economic re-enslavement of Black people; (15) The Reconstruction governments were more progressive and democratic than later southern governments; (16) Post-reconstruction brought a rigidly segregated society, with full Federal support; (17) The racism of organized labor has harmed Black people and disrupted the potential for working-class unity; (18) Wilson's "progressive" policies were meant "for whites only;" (19) Discrimination faced by European immigrants was different from the racism faced by Blacks; (20) Institutional racism, not merely individual prejudice, causes and perpetuates racial inequality; (21) The myth of "progress" obscures the existing reality of the majority of Black people. Coding every textbook based on whether or not they met these benchmarks reveals similar results as the analysis reported in the main text. However, the analysis of benchmarks does not provide the kind of nuanced understanding of textbooks that the in-depth content analysis of sentences does.

Second, I used automated text analysis methods to analyze the content of History textbooks. Specifically, following Lucy, Demszky, Bromley, and Jurafsky's (2020) Natural Language Processing (NPL) analysis of the History textbooks used in Texas today, I applied their methodology to the 1950s and 1970s History textbooks of Alabama, California, and Indiana. The analysis classifies what the verbs used to describe Black individuals convey about their power (strong vs. weak), valence (positive vs. negative), and agency (active vs. passive). For example, in the phrase "X affects Y and Y applauds X," X has power while Y does not; in the phrase "X suffered," the verb suffered implies the writer may have positive sentiment toward X because it suggests sympathy; and in the phrase "X obeys," X has low agency.

The results using these two alternative methodologies are consistent with the main results stemming from the sentence-by-sentence content analysis reported below.[20]

The persistence of racist content in southern textbooks after the Civil Rights Movement

The analysis of textbook sentences reveals that while History textbooks in Indiana and California became considerably less racist after the Civil Rights Movement, textbooks in Alabama remained

[20] See the Appendix. The NPL analysis shows that: (1) in Alabama, the valence and power associated with Black individuals remained unchanged between 1955 and 1975, but the agency associated with them became more passive over time; (2) in Indiana, there was no temporal change in the valence, power, or agency associated with Black individuals; and (3) in California, there was no change in valence, a worsening in power, and an improvement in agency.

as racist in 1975 as they were in 1955. These results are summarized in figure 1. The first key thing to note in this figure is that at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement the level of racist content was high and extremely similar across all three states: around sixty percent of the sentences in History textbooks that referred to Black individuals were antithetical to the demands of Civil Rights Movement activists, who wanted governments to acknowledge and correct the history of racial discrimination in policies and institutions. Among other things, the 1950s textbooks of Alabama, California and Indiana talked about the political and economic rights that existed during the Early Republic as if they applied equally to everyone, described the life of a slave in rosy terms, and downplayed the hostility and discrimination faced by Black Americans during the Jim Crow Era. By 1975, however, the proportion of racist content had declined by 26 percentage points in Indiana and by 27 percentage points in California. In Alabama, by contrast, there was no such decline. Textbooks remained as unlikely in 1975 as in 1955 to acknowledge the history of racial inequality in the state and the country.

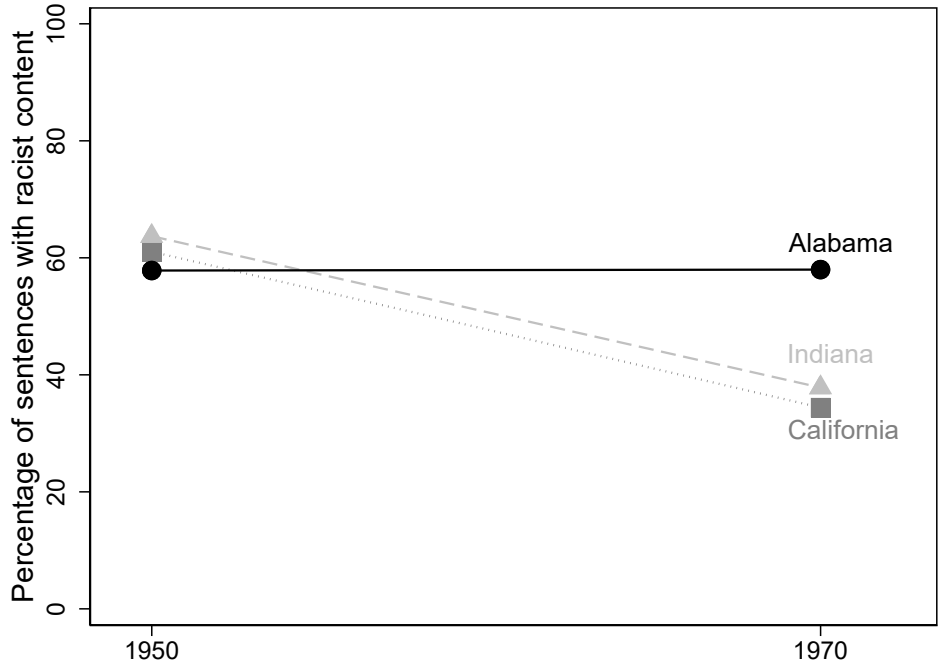

Figure 1. Change in the percentage of sentences with racist content in the History textbooks of Alabama, California, and Indiana before and after the Civil Rights Movement

A good illustration of how little change there was in the content of Alabama textbooks from the 1950s to the 1970s comes from the chapters devoted to describing life under slavery in each edition. Both the pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement textbooks depict slaves as cheerful

individuals with no deprivations. When telling readers about the food that slaves ate, both textbooks suggest that slaves suffered no want or need. They describe plantation owners as caring individuals who liked to provide a balanced diet to slaves, highlight the "extra delicacies" that slaves ate during hog killing time without acknowledging that these were in fact the leftovers rejected by white plantation owners, talk about the watermelons that slaves ate during "the good old summertime," tell readers that many slaves "loved to fish" and "had their own gardens," "raised their own chickens" and sold them to buy "luxuries," and talk about the "special feast" that plantation owners provided to slaves during Christmas and other holidays. When talking about where slaves lived, both the 1955 and 1975 textbooks tell readers that "like the white people in the slavery country, the blacks liked to live near each other to keep from getting lonesome." Both textbooks also tell readers that "white playmates" taught young slaves to read (without acknowledging that slaves were prohibited from attending school) and suggest that there were opportunities for upward mobility for slaves by becoming domestic servants or drivers. One especially bold paragraph in the 1955 textbook which argued that "slavery was the earliest form of social security in the United States" because "the slave received the best medical care that the times could offer" was removed from the 1975 textbook. However, even in 1975, Alabama's History textbook continues to minimize the hardships and cruelty endured by slaves, writing that, when it came to health care, the slave was "better off than free laborers, white or black." Finally, while both the 1955 and 1975 textbooks mention the slave codes, they explain that slaves were prohibited from selling property without the plantation owner's permission in order "to limit stealing;" they minimize the role of the slave codes by stressing that many provisions were not enforced; and they tell readers that "the execution of a slave was considered to be more of a punishment for the master than for the slave."

The evolution of History textbooks in Indiana and California is considerably different from that in Alabama. In Indiana, for example, the 1950s textbook gives children a similar rosy picture of how slaves lived similar to that in the Alabama textbook of the same period. As the following excerpt shows, the 1950s Indiana textbook minimizes the grievances endured by slaves, and while it acknowledges that some were treated cruelly, it teaches children that in general slaves were treated well:

> Life in the slave quarters on many a plantation was not too unhappy. During the day the small children played merrily, often with the younger white children from the "great house." In the twilight young and old gathered to sing and dance. . . Of course there were some harsh masters who treated their slaves cruelly. In general, however, slaves were too valuable to be mistreated.

By contrast, Indiana's 1970s textbook does not describe the slaves as cheerful or happy, and while it acknowledges that some of them were treated better by plantation owners, it highlights that in general life as a slave was very difficult and subject to cruel treatment:

> The slaves lived a hard and cheerless life. They were owned by their master and were completely under his control. Life in the slave quarters was not always unhappy. The small children sometimes played with the younger white children from the "great house". . . Yet despite instances of individual kindness on the part of some masters, life in bondage war very difficult. Harsh masters or their overseers treated slaves cruelly, whipping them if they misbehaved or ran away.

The differential evolution of Alabama textbooks compared to Indiana and California textbooks extends well beyond the discussion of slavery. In their discussion of the Early Republic, Reconstruction, and Post-Reconstruction, Indiana and California's History textbooks of the 1970s, unlike the 1950s editions, tend to acknowledge that the political and economic rights of white and Black individuals differed, and they invite 1970s students to think critically about whether they still observe racial discrimination. By contrast, the Alabama History textbook of the 1970s, like its 1950s predecessor, talks about the political and economic rights that "all Americans" enjoyed during the Early Republic, exaggerates the improvements in Black individuals' lives during Reconstruction, and minimizes or legitimizes many of the discriminatory policies of the Jim Crow era. This is reflected in figure 2, which shows separately for sentences related to slavery and for sentences related to the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction period how the proportion of sentences with racist content evolved over time in each of the three states.

The failure of Alabama's 1970s textbooks to address the demands of civil rights activists is reflected, for example, in their treatment of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist hate group which emerged during Reconstruction, used violent tactics to suppress Black voting, and killed thousands of Black Americans. In the 1955 edition of *Alabama History for Schools*, there is a one-page section dedicated to the KKK, whose members are described as "masked night ridders who flogged people and otherwise took justice into their own hands." The textbook does not mention that the KKK targeted Black individuals; the only mention of Black people in the section devoted to the KKK is a sentence that says they supported the one-party system of conservative Democrats, which according to the book replaced the KKK as "a better method of combatting Radicals." In the 1975 edition, the entire section on the KKK no longer appears. The only mention of the KKK in this edition is the following sentence about Alabama's anti-masking law of 1949: "Because of the Ku Klux Klan, the state government made it illegal to mask in public." In other

words, like the 1955 textbook, the 1975 edition remains silent about the violence that the Ku Klux Klan inflicted on Black individuals.

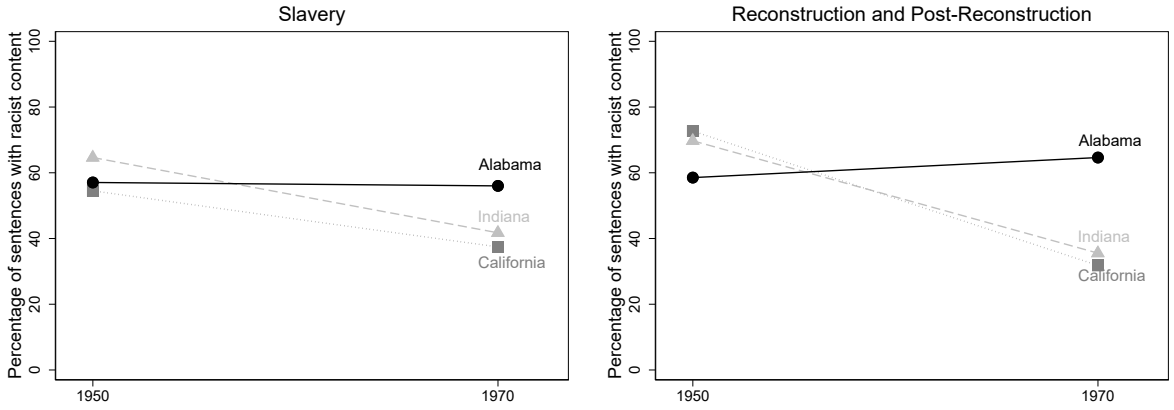

Figure 2. Change in the percentage of sentences about slavery, Reconstruction, or Post-Reconstruction, that contain racist content in the History textbooks of Alabama, California, and Indiana before and after the Civil Rights Movement

The persistence of racist content in Alabama's History textbooks after the Civil Rights Movement is reflective of a broader pattern of resistance among state politicians to alter the status quo. One of the domains where this resistance was most visible was in the roll-out of desegregation plans. In Alabama, as in other states, governors responded to court-ordered desegregation by pushing for legislation that openly defied the courts' decisions and by pouring money into education to *prevent* the racial desegregation of schools. In 1966, when George Wallace was governor of Alabama and ex-officio chairman of the State Board of Education, Wallace told school district Superintendents that if any of them signed desegregation compliance forms, he would hold mass meetings in their communities, present his position and have them explain to local citizens why they "wanted to have Negro students and teachers in schools with Whites." Around that time, the State Superintendent of Education, Austin E. Meadows, sent telegrams to school districts warning that state funds would be cut off if they did not disclose their desegregation plans to state officials. On the other hand, Meadows and the state school building authority, controlled by the governor, offered to construct two extra classrooms or provide mobile classrooms for white students to avoid attending the classrooms of racially integrated schools.[21] In 1969, with Albert Brewer as governor, Alabama's state legislature passed a law urging parents to insist that their children be registered in schools of their choice—including their old, racially segregated

[21] "Alabama Defiance Told on School Segregation; Superintendent Informs Jurists How He and Gov. Wallace Put Pressure," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 1, 1966.

schools—regardless of federal court decisions.[22] Years later, with George Wallace back in the governor's seat, he again attempted to block desegregation. Speaking to the press, he said that court-ordered desegregation plans had "sounded the death knell to education on a quality level in this country." If the majority of voters in a county "are proud of their school and want it preserved as it was," he argued, then they should be allowed to do so.[23]

The multiple tactics employed by Alabama state officials to maintain racial segregation—including intimidation of school district officers, state legislation, appeals to white parents to "raise their fists" in defiance of integration,[24] and state funding to construct separate classrooms for white children—are not consistent with the view that state politicians in the south responded to the Civil Rights Movement by acknowledging the demands of Black activists. The striking similarity of 1955 and 1975 History textbooks is also indicative of state officials' resistance to change. While states like Indiana and California reformed school textbooks in a direction consistent with the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, in the southern state of Alabama, where civil rights demands constituted a larger threat to the status quo of racial segregation and discrimination, the textbooks remained virtually intact. If southern states devoted more money to schools in communities with a large proportion of Black residents following the Civil Rights Movement, the history of Alabama suggests that they did so as part of a broader state effort to maintain the status quo by teaching children that the grievances suffered by the Black community were not as bad as they might have been told.

Conclusion

The education policy responses seen in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement are similar to the responses to internal conflict of nineteenth-century autocracies in Europe and Latin America: in those places where mass violence posed a larger threat to the status quo, politicians responded by investing in education to teach (Black) children that there was little reason to rebel against the status quo. Because the Civil Rights Movement was a threat to those in power in southern states more so than outside the south, textbooks in southern states like Alabama remained tools for indoctrination, whereas elsewhere, where the Civil Rights Movement did not pose such a major threat, textbooks changed to reflect the demands of civil rights activists.

---

[22] "Alabama Legislature Endorses Wallace Plan: Adopts Proposals Urging Parents to Defy Federal Courts on School Integration," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 5, 1969.
[23] "Wallace Blocks School Integration in 2 Cities," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 19, 1971.
[24] "Alabama Legislature Endorses Wallace Plan: Adopts Proposals Urging Parents to Defy Federal Courts on School Integration," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 5, 1969.

It might be easy to disregard the evidence presented above as indicative of an odd or anomalous period in U.S. history. However, recent education reforms following the Black Lives Matters protests of 2020 suggest a common pattern: Democratically-elected politicians who feel threatened by mass protests and mass demands for a deep change in the status quo—e.g., a change in the institutions and policies that produce racial inequality—are likely to turn to education reform to ensure that schools contribute to maintain the status quo. This is precisely the goal behind the wave of so-called Anti-Critical Race Theory bills introduced by conservative politicians in thirty-six state legislatures since the Black Lives Matters protests. These state-level bills ban public schools from teaching "divisive concepts" such as institutionalized racism[25] and build on the recommendations of the 1776 Commission, created in the summer of 2020 by former Republican President Donald Trump to promote "patriotic education" and "correct the distorted perspective" and "radicalized view of American history"[26] that holds that racial inequalities are the product of laws and public policies. Like southern states after the Civil Rights Movement, these recent bills seek to teach children that racial inequalities are not as bad as some might think, and that existing inequalities are the product of a few prejudiced individuals and do not require institutional reforms.

[25] https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism
[26] https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/02/trump-1776-commission-education-433885