Racial Segregation in Small Towns: Municipal Underbounding and Racial Exclusion

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Introduction

In this paper, we examine recent patterns of municipal "underbounding" and segregation in rural communities, i.e., whether black and Hispanic populations living at the fringe of rural municipalities is systematically excluded from incorporation. The population size and racial composition of small towns in rural America are heavily influenced by legal decisions to annex or incorporate peripheral territory and population (Aiken 1985; Klaff and Fuguitt 1978). Annexation – or the lack of annexation – can therefore be a political tool used by municipal leaders to exclude disadvantaged or low-income populations, including minorities, from voting in local elections and from receiving access to public utilities and other community services (Austin 1999; Hagman 1976). Such exclusionary practices are often part of a larger political repertoire that includes discriminatory zoning ordinances, restrictive land-use regulations, and local investment strategies that often prevent rural minorities and other disadvantaged populations from full participation in local governance.

A large urban research literature can sometimes provide a rather hopeful view of declining racial residential segregation and accelerated minority suburbanization in America's largest cities (Logan et al. 2004; Wilkes and Iceland 2004). But recent trends can cause us to overlook continuing patterns of minority population concentration and segregation in isolated rural areas, such as the "black belt" crescent of the South (Beale 2004; Lichter, Fuguitt, and Heaton 1985). Subtle and less visible micro-level political and economic processes often insure the continuing separation of racial minorities from whites in American society (Massey and Hajnal 1995; Fischer et al. 2004).

Indeed, the political geography of small towns has been a neglected topic of racial and demographic change in America (Johnson et al 2004; Purcell 2001), especially in the South where blacks often reside at the outskirts of local municipalities (Aiken 1985) and in Midwestern communities with large influxes of Hispanic immigrants (Kandel and Cromartie 2005). For example, a recent case study of a small North Carolina community (Mebane, NC) by Johnson and his colleagues (2004) provides evidence of discriminatory intent on the part of local public officials to exclude black fringe neighborhoods from incorporation into the municipality. They suggest that vestiges of Jim Crow are part of the daily social and political life of small southern towns. Many local municipalities are controlled by "white elites" that largely serve their own narrow social, political, and economic interests, which typically do not include the incorporation of black residents that potentially dilute their power or local political influence. Black exclusion and white economic interests thus converge around issues of commercial and residential zoning, racial gerrymandering through selective annexation, and the provision or denial of public services in fringe neighborhoods

with a large black or poor population. Johnson et al. (2004) conclude that racial residential segregation "has been perpetuated by government policies and decisions, thus institutionalizing separate and unequal political power and disparate social, health and economic conditions, a system of local apartheid" (p. 104).

To be sure, some small towns go to extraordinary means to disenfranchise blacks or limit their involvement in local community affairs (Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno 1996; Falk and Rankin 1992). Indeed, nearly five decades of research on the "visibility-discrimination" hypothesis has consistently shown that racial subordination and inequality are exacerbated whenever the minority population is large, visible, and potentially threatening to whites (e.g., Blalock 1956; Glenn 1964; Brown and Fuguitt 1972; Beggs, Villemez, and Arnold 1997; Albrecht, Albrecht, and Murguia 2005). The specific goals of our paper are: (1) to document the racial composition of the population annexed (and not annexed) in small towns over the 1990 to 2000 period, and (2) to identify various local demographic, economic, and legal factors associated with racial underbounding and racial exclusion. To our knowledge, this paper provides the first systematic analysis of municipal underbounding across all nonmetropolitan towns and communities that annexed population during the 1990s.

Methods and Preliminary Results

A GIS-based methodology is used to identify the annexed and non-annexed territory in nonmetropolitan towns. We start with the identification of census-defined places (towns, villages, and cities) for each of the states. The 1990 place administrative boundaries are overlaid with the 2000 place boundaries to determine if a place annexed any territory. We identified annexed territory as census blocks located within 2000 place boundaries that were not within the 1990 place boundaries. Non-annexed territory is defined as blocks that did not fall within the 2000 place boundaries but that were physically contiguous to the 1990 place boundaries. An illustration is provided in Figure 1, which separates the study area into three parts: (1) territory within the 1990-defined place boundaries; (2) territory annexed between 1990 and 2000; and (3) territory adjacent to the 1990 place boundaries but not annexed between 1990 and 2000.

Each of the census blocks within the annexed and non-annexed territories is given a place identification code. Information on annexed and non-annexed fringe territories (e.g., race-disaggregated population counts) is then generated by summing data across blocks with common geographic identification codes. Our guiding hypothesis is that the black composition of the area "at risk" of annexation is negatively associated with annexation. Using data from the 1990 and 2000 censuses we calculate the number and percentage of black and other racial minorities in each block of the annexed area.

This is a data intensive exercise. We have completed preliminary analyses of black segregation and exclusion in the "Old South." Our preliminary results suggest that 22.6 percent of the fringe areas "at risk" of annexation in our study communities was African American, while 20.7 percent of the area that was actually annexed during the 1990s was African American. However, communities with large black populations at the fringe were significantly less likely than other communities to annex at all – either black or white population. Largely white communities that faced a "black threat" – which we defined in instances where the county "percent black" was higher than the place "percent black" – also were less likely to annex black population during the 1990s. Finally, predominately white communities were much less likely to annex black populations, even

when we controlled for the size of the black fringe population "at risk" of annexation. Such results provide evidence of racial exclusion in small southern towns.

Implications

Racial gerrymandering of community boundaries historically has been used as a political weapon to exclude racial minorities and the poor from full membership in local civic life (Aiken 1987). In this paper, our goal is to reevaluate the extent that rural minorities at the fringes of small towns have been excluded through racially selective (and biased) annexation practices. Unlike metropolitan areas – with predominately black central cities and white suburbs – the racial residential pattern in many small towns in the South and Midwest has exhibited a decidedly different pattern. Rural blacks, for example, often reside at the peripheries of small towns, where they lack access to public services (e.g., sewer and water) and are denied a voice in community affairs (Aiken 1987; 1990).

Is a large and visible minority fringe population threatening to predominately white small towns, as predicted by the "visibility-discrimination" hypothesis (Blalock 1955), and is this threat manifested in the practice of municipal underbounding? Our study represents the first systematic attempt to examine whether the practice of racial exclusion through selective annexation is systematic or widespread across nonmetro communities. .