

# Region, Race, and Support for the South Carolina Confederate Flag\*

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*Objective.* Existing research suggests that conservative racial attitudes are one of the strongest factors explaining support for the Confederate flag, but this conclusion has been reached by examining the attitudes of only white southerners. We provide a more complete understanding of this issue, focusing on both white and black opinion from across the country. *Methods.* We use a rolling cross-sectional survey with a large sample size to model support for the South Carolina Confederate flag nationally and then among two groups: southerners and nonsoutherners.

*Results.* Although racial attitudes are important among both southerners and nonsoutherners, region and race also influence support for the Confederate flag. Southern whites have the greatest support for the flag followed by nonsouthern whites, nonsouthern blacks, and southern blacks. *Conclusions.* Support for the Confederate flag is not simply about racial attitudes, but a more complex phenomenon where region and race exert important influences.

Symbols frame many of the debates in American politics, evoking strong affective reactions among those who support and denounce them (Edelman, 1964; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000:36). Symbols take on an even greater importance as successive generations express their ethnic identity through symbolic means (Gans, 1979). As southerners have become more assimilated in American culture, the Confederate flag has become a polarizing symbol in both state and national politics (Martinez, Richardson, and McNich-Su, 2000). Flag controversies have erupted in Georgia and Mississippi, and in 2000, the South Carolina flag controversy became national news. Republican presidential candidates debated the issue during the South Carolina primary and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began an economic boycott of the state. The debate over the Confederate flag was also part of the 2004 presidential campaign when Vermont Governor Howard proclaimed that “white folks in

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the South who drive pickup trucks with Confederate flag decals ought to be voting with us” (Shepard, 2003).

To some, the flag represents a symbol of hatred, an in-your-face emblem of southern racism, used by Klansmen, White Citizen’s Councils, and modern neo-Nazis. To others, the flag is a symbol of heritage, not racial prejudice, and represents pride in both a region and a fading way of life. As Clark argues: “The [Confederate] flag is no longer simply a flag; it becomes the manifestation of anger and frustration by both supporters and opponents toward a seemingly unresponsive political system” (1997:492). In this article, we examine the factors that predict support for the Confederate flag, with particular attention to the relative importance of region and race.

### **Explaining Support for the Confederate Flag**

The political fight over the Confederate flag is often framed as “heritage verses hate” (Woliver, Ledford, and Dolan, 2001) and research explaining support for the Confederate flag has evaluated which of these two factors provides the best explanation. Studies among whites in Georgia (Clark, 1997; Reingold and Wike, 1998) and Mississippi (Orey, 2004) have generally concluded that conservative racial attitudes are more important than measures of southern heritage in explaining support for the flag. Reingold and Wike (1998) found that southern identity and whether someone was born in the South did not impact attitudes toward the flag. Similarly, Clark’s (1997) study of campaign contributors in Georgia demonstrated that controlling for other factors, being born in the South does not make a person more likely to support the flag.

In addition to conservative racial attitudes, a number of other predictors of support for the flag have emerged. For instance, because flag supporters often label flag opponents as anti-states rights, previous studies have found that ideological conservatives are more likely to support the Confederate flag, even after controlling for racial attitudes (Clark, 1997; Orey, 2004).

Age may also influence support for the Confederate flag among whites, although the direction of this relationship is uncertain. Clark’s (1997) analysis of Georgia campaign contributors suggests that older residents were more supportive of the Confederate emblem on the Georgia state flag. In a statewide analysis of the same issue, however, Reingold and Wike (1998) find that older residents were less supportive of the Confederate flag. The authors provide two possible explanations for this seemingly counterintuitive finding. First, they argue that older residents may be more aware of the meanings attached to Confederate symbols and the symbols may have greater salience for those individuals who lived through the civil rights movement (Reingold and Wike, 1998:577). Second, they build on Herbert Gans’s (1979) concept of “symbolic ethnicity” to explain the attachment of younger generations to a symbol like the Confederate flag. Gans argues that

as ethnic groups become more assimilated, they rely less on traditional ethnic culture and organizations. Instead, they express their ethnicity through expressive means, such as flying a flag or wearing a t-shirt. John Shelton Reed (1982) argues that southerners are an ethnic group; and Gans's theory suggests that as the South becomes more like the rest of the country, younger southerners will be more supportive of the Confederate flag—a symbol that they associate with their heritage.

Existing work has come to mixed conclusions about the influence of sex. Women may be more sensitive to the plight of African Americans and therefore would be more likely to support taking the flag down. Orey's (2004) findings among Mississippi college students support this hypothesis, while Reingold and Wike (1998) find no relationship between sex and support for the flag in Georgia.

Educational attainment may also influence an individual's views on the Confederate flag. Although Clark (1997) and Orey (2004) examine populations with roughly equivalent education levels, they assume that people with higher education will support removing the flag. Reingold and Wike (1998) find that support for the Confederate flag decreases with education.

Together these findings suggest that conservative racial attitudes are important predictors of support for the Confederate flag in Georgia and Mississippi. In addition, studies demonstrate that ideological conservatives and those with less education are more likely to support the Confederate flag. The findings are mixed on the influence of age and sex, and research indicates that whether a person was born in the South has little to no effect.

## **Our Approach**

Existing literature has taught us much about support for the Confederate flag—particularly the influence of conservative racial attitudes—but the focus on one group (white southerners) within single states has limited theoretical development. Theoretical predictions are better tested when samples provide variation on a broad array of characteristics. Clearly, racial attitudes are important among the group most likely to support the flag, but what about groups less likely to support the flag? If the theory is generalizable, racial attitudes should be important predictors among a variety of groups—particularly nonsoutherners.

The focus on a single state also restricts theoretical development by limiting our understanding of regional effects on support for the Confederate flag. A long line of research suggests that social context has a strong influence on voting behavior (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995) and policy opinions (Branton and Jones, 2005). Living in the South, a culturally distinct region (Reed, 1986; Black and Black, 1987, 2002), may very well have an independent effect on a person's opinion about the Confederate flag. Southerners have a strong connection to the region and to other southerners

(Reed, 1986). Many of these individuals grew up learning about the “War of Northern Aggression,” hearing stories of Sherman’s march through the region, and living in communities with countless Confederate memorials. Existing studies modeling support for the Confederate flag do not test whether current residence has an influence—only whether where someone was born influences attitudes about the flag. Because we expect that current residence has a stronger influence on a person’s opinion than where he or she was born, the null findings concerning the impact of region on support for the flag may be spurious.

Our theoretical understanding of support for the Confederate flag is also limited by previous researchers’ focus on only one racial group. Opponents (and supporters) of the flag come from a variety of racial backgrounds. What factors explain the opinions of African Americans toward the Confederate flag? Although we expect that blacks would be less likely to support the flag than whites, it is a mistake to treat blacks as a monolithic group, as sizable numbers of blacks actually support the flag. Orey reports a poll taken by Jackson, Mississippi’s *Clarion Ledger* indicating that 69 percent of blacks find “the Confederate flag is offensive, serving as a symbol of racial hatred and a reminder of slavery,” leaving a proportion who do not (2004:4). Perhaps most importantly, the regional effects of living in the South may have a substantially different influence on blacks than on whites. Theories of racial threat suggest that when whites live in areas with higher concentrations of blacks, some whites feel threatened and consequently respond in hostile ways (Giles, 1977; Giles and Buckner, 1993; Giles and Hertz, 1994). Because the concentration of blacks in the South is generally higher than in other areas of the country, we expect that whites in the South are more likely to support the Confederate flag (a hostile symbol) than whites in other parts of the country. The racial threat theory also leads us to hypothesize about the ways blacks may respond to a hostile symbol like the Confederate flag. We believe that blacks in the South will be more likely to perceive the flag as hostile and will consequently have stronger opposition to this political symbol than blacks outside the region. This hypothesis represents a different twist on racial threat and needs to be empirically tested.

Finally, existing work has limited external validity because two of the three extant studies use samples that are not drawn from the general population. Although Clark’s (1997) study teaches us much about white campaign contributors in Georgia and Orey’s (2004) article uncovers patterns of support among white college students in Mississippi, there are questions about whether these findings would hold in a broader population study.

To increase our theoretical understanding of this issue, we rely on a nationally representative rolling cross-sectional telephone survey (usable  $N = 5,544$ ) conducted through the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Questions about the South Carolina Confederate flag were asked of roughly the same number of respondents each night between January 20, 2000 and April 3, 2000 (Romer et al.,

2004). The timing of the survey, during the high point of media coverage over the South Carolina flag controversy, is ideal for answering questions about support for the flag. About 42 percent of the television stories that were broadcast on the three major networks from 1994–2003 appeared while the survey was in the field. Likewise, almost 39 percent of the stories published in print media from 1994–2003 appeared during this time period.<sup>1</sup> Because symbolic politics are most important when issues are salient (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000), this is an optimal sample to help us understand the nature of support for the Confederate flag.

We include three models in our article—one that uses data from virtually the entire national sample,<sup>2</sup> and two that divide the analysis up by group: southerners then nonsoutherners. In each model, our dependent variable represents responses to a question about support for removing the South Carolina Confederate flag, where a 1 indicates that the respondent wants to remove the flag and a 0 indicates that the respondent believes the flag should stay atop the State House. Of those who had an opinion, 3,248 (51 percent) people wanted the flag to stay and 3,113 (49 percent) people wanted the flag removed. Among southerners, 59 percent want the flag to stay, while 47 percent of northerners believe the flag should remain above the South Carolina State House.

Because the survey was conducted over 11 weeks we ran each of the three models with dummy variables representing each of the weeks. Our results were nearly identical, indicating that predictors of opinions about the flag were remarkably stable over time. For ease of interpretation, we report models without the “week” dummy variables.<sup>3</sup> There were 852 respondents who answered “don’t know” and 167 respondents who gave no answer. We exclude the “don’t know” and “no answer” responses from our analysis.<sup>4</sup> We include independent variables for region, sex, age, ideology, race, education, and racial attitudes, as well as two dummy variables representing whether someone lives in an urban or rural area (suburban is the excluded

<sup>1</sup>We searched the Vanderbilt News Archive and LexisNexis for stories about the South Carolina Confederate flag.

<sup>2</sup>Because of low numbers of other racial groups (there were 159 Asian respondents), we limit our study to blacks and whites.

<sup>3</sup>Copies of these supplemental analyses are available from the authors.

<sup>4</sup>Because of concerns that “don’t know” responses may bias our understanding of public opinion (Berinsky, 1999, 2002), we ran a logistic regression predicting whether people gave an answer or responded don’t know. We found that the people who answered don’t know on the Confederate flag are more likely to be females, older Americans, whites, conservatives, and those with less education. To evaluate the substantive influence of don’t know responses on our results, we ran a series of ordered logistic regressions with identical model specifications to those presented in the text, except that we placed all don’t know responses at the midpoint between support for the flag and support for removal. The directions of the variables were identical in all cases and significance levels changed only slightly. Given these findings, we believe our results are robust. These supplemental analyses are available from the authors.

category). Details on the question wording and coding of our variables appear in Table 1.

## **Results I: National Sample**

Table 2 reports the results of a logistic regression predicting support for removing the Confederate flag in South Carolina for our national sample. The first column of data presents the logit coefficients and standard errors. The second column includes the odds ratios for each variable and the third column presents the predicted probabilities of wanting to remove the flag for the low value and high value of each significant independent variable, holding all other variables at their sample means (see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003).

Not surprisingly, and consistent with Clark (1997), Reingold and Wike (1998), and Orey (2004), we find that racial attitudes have a strong influence on support for the Confederate flag. Holding all other variables at their means, a person with conservative racial attitudes has a 27 percent chance of supporting removal of the Confederate flag, whereas someone with liberal views on race has a 57 percent probability of wanting to remove the flag from the South Carolina State House.

Our analysis differs from previous studies, however, because we demonstrate that region is also vitally important in explaining support for the Confederate flag. Previous research suggests that natives of the South living in Georgia did not feel significantly different about the Confederate flag than those who were born outside the South (Clark, 1997; Reingold and Wike, 1998). As we recounted earlier, data limitations prevent these authors from exploring the impact of current region of residence on opinions about the flag. Consistent with the literature on contextual effects and southern exceptionalism, we find that people living in the South are 39 percent less likely than people living outside the South to want to remove the Confederate flag. In fact, holding all other independent variables at their sample means, a southerner has a 40 percent probability of supporting removal of the Confederate flag from the State House, as opposed to a 53 percent probability for a nonsoutherner.

By including both blacks and whites in our analysis, we are also able to determine the influence of race on support for the Confederate flag. Consistent with our expectations, blacks are more than two-and-a-half times more likely than whites to want the Confederate flag removed from atop the South Carolina capitol. The predicted probabilities indicate that when all other variables are held at their means, an African American has a 74 percent probability of believing that the Confederate flag should be removed from the South Carolina State House.

Previous studies have come to mixed conclusions about age, but we find that older people are more likely to want the flag removed than are younger

TABLE 1  
Question Wording and Coding

Variable	Question Wording and Coding
Support for the Confederate flag	The Confederate flag currently flies above South Carolina's state capitol. In your view should it stay there, or should it be removed?" 0—Stay; 1—Be removed
Racial attitudes	Racial attitudes—"Trying to stop job discrimination against blacks—should the federal government do more about this, the same as now, less, or nothing at all?" 1—None; 2—Less; 3—Same, 4—More
South	No question. 0—Nonsouth, coded from state variable as person living in 39 nonsouthern states plus the District of Columbia; 1—South, coded from state variable as person living in 1 of the 11 states of the old Confederacy
Female	Female—No question. 0—Male; 1—Female
Age	Age—"What is your age?" 18–97—Coded continuously
Black	Black—"What is your race? White, black, Asian, or some other race?" 0—White; 1—Black
Liberal ideology	Liberal ideology—"Generally speaking would you consider your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?" 1—Very conservative; 2—Conservative; 3—Moderate; 4—Liberal; 5—Very liberal
Education	Education—"What is the last grade or class you completed in school?" 1—Grade eight or lower; 2—Some high school, no diploma; 3—High school diploma or equivalent; 4—Technical or vocational school after high school; 5—Some college, no degree; 6—Associate's or two-year college degree; 7—Four-year college degree; 8—Graduate or professional school after college, no degree; 9—Graduate or professional degree
Urban	No question. 0—Rural and suburban; 1—Urban
Rural	No question. 0—Urban and suburban; 1—Rural

TABLE 2

Logistic Regression Model Predicting Support for Removing the Confederate Flag

	Logit Coefficient (S.E.)	Odds Ratio	Low-High Probability
Racial attitudes	0.428*** (0.035)	1.53	0.27–0.57
South	– 0.503*** (0.065)	0.61	0.53–0.40
Female	0.048 (0.059)	1.05	
Age	0.005*** (0.002)	1.01	0.45–0.55
Black	1.25*** (0.108)	3.48	0.45–0.74
Liberal ideology	0.240*** (0.032)	1.27	0.38–0.61
Education	0.239*** (0.014)	1.27	0.26–0.71
Urban	0.103 (0.073)	1.11	
Rural	– 0.131* (0.073)	0.88	0.49–0.46
$\chi^2$	886.59***		
<i>N</i>	5,544		
% correctly predicted	66.59		
PRE	31.74		

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ , two-tailed test.

NOTE: Low-high probability refers to the probability of wanting to remove the Confederate flag for the lowest and highest value of the independent variable, holding all other variables at their means.

SOURCE: Romer et al. (2004).

people. The third column of Table 2 indicates that a person with the highest possible value for age is 10 percent more likely to support removing the flag than a person with the lowest value for age in the sample, holding all other variables at their means.<sup>5</sup>

The significance levels, odds ratios, and predicted probabilities indicate that education, ideology, and whether a person lives in a rural area are also important variables predicting support for the Confederate flag. Our findings mirror past work demonstrating that sex is not a significant factor predicting views toward the Confederate flag.

<sup>5</sup>We experimented with different functional forms for the age variable; all indicate that age is best expressed as a linear relationship.



## Results II: Regional Differences

The results reported in Table 2 indicate that there is a regional component to support for the Confederate flag but do not demonstrate how patterns of support differ between southerners and nonsoutherners. As we reviewed earlier, the Confederate flag has become an issue in national politics as evidenced by the 2000 Republican primary, the 2004 Democratic primary, and the continuing NAACP boycott. To gain a better understanding of the regional differences that define the flag debate, we divided the national sample between southerners and nonsoutherners. The first three columns in Table 3 present results from the model for southerners only. These columns are structured similarly to Table 2—the first column of data contains logit coefficients and standard errors for each variable, the second column presents odds ratios, and the third column of data contains predicted probabilities for the low and high values of each variable, holding all other variables at their means. The next three columns of data present the same statistics for nonsoutherners.

Three variables were significant in one model and not the other. Outside the South, older people are more likely to favor removing the Confederate flag. For those living outside the South, the youngest person in our sample has a 48 percent probability of supporting removal of the flag, while the oldest person in our sample has a 61 percent probability of wanting the flag removed. Among southerners, however, age exerts no influence on support for the flag—young people in the South are just as likely to support the flag as are older people.<sup>6</sup> Based on our findings, living in a rural area was significant in explaining attitudes in the South and residing in an urban area was significant in explaining support for the flag outside the South. Holding all variables at their means, a rural southerner has a 33 percent probability of supporting removal of the flag and a nonrural southerner has a 42 percent probability of supporting removal of the flag.

Both models indicate that racial liberals, blacks, ideological liberals, and the educated are most likely to support removing the flag from the South Carolina State House. Interestingly, conservative racial attitudes are important in explaining support for the flag both inside and outside the South, although the difference in the high and low values of the predicted probabilities indicate that racial attitudes exert a stronger influence in the South. By interpreting the predicted probabilities, however, we see other important substantive differences between southerners and nonsoutherners. Liberal ideology has a stronger influence among nonsoutherners than southerners—moving from liberal to conservative, the shift in attitudes toward the flag is steeper among nonsoutherners than southerners. In addition, the change in predicted probability for the race variable is much greater in the South than

<sup>6</sup>This relationship holds even when examining southern blacks and southern whites individually.

**TABLE 3**  
**Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for Removing the Confederate Flag by Region**

	South			Nonsouth		
	Logit Coefficient (S.E.)	Odds Ratio	Low-High Probability	Logit Coefficient (S.E.)	Odds Ratio	Low-High Probability
Racial attitudes	0.527*** (0.067)	1.69	0.18–0.51	0.383*** (0.041)	1.47	0.32–0.60
Black	1.766*** (0.168)	5.85	0.33–0.74	0.779*** (0.141)	2.18	0.51–0.69
Female	–0.063 (0.113)	0.94		0.091 (0.070)	1.09	
Age	0.003 0.003	1.00		0.007*** (0.002)	1.01	0.48–0.61
Liberal ideology	0.327*** (0.061)	1.39	0.27–0.57	0.209*** (0.038)	1.23	0.43–0.63
Education	0.249*** (0.026)	1.28	0.20–0.64	0.238*** (0.016)	1.27	0.29–0.73
Urban	–0.034 (0.133)	0.966		0.192** (0.084)	1.21	0.51–0.56
Rural	–0.365*** (0.138)	0.096	0.42–0.33	–0.058 (0.087)	0.94	
$\chi^2$	398.99***			464.44***		
<i>N</i>	1,715			3,829		
% correctly predicted	61.40			64.32		
PRE	21.13			27.10		

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ , two-tailed test.

NOTE: Low-high probability refers to the probability of wanting to remove the Confederate flag for the lowest and highest value of the variable, holding all other variables at their means.

SOURCE: Romer et al. (2004).

outside the region, indicating that the difference between black and white opinions is more polarized in the South.<sup>7</sup>

We stated at the outset of this article that previous studies have examined only white southerners, the group that is most likely to support the flag. By looking at the predicted probabilities for the race variable for both the South and the non-South models, we are able to see the probability of each group supporting the flag—identifying three different out-groups that vary in their distance from the in-group. Specifically, we see that a white southerner has a 33 percent probability and a white nonsoutherner has a 51 percent probability of wanting to remove the flag. For African Americans, a black nonsoutherner has a 69 percent probability and a black southerner has the highest probability of wanting to remove the flag at 74 percent.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research on support for the Confederate flag demonstrated the strong influence of conservative racial attitudes. By testing this theory on southerners and nonsoutherners, blacks and whites, we echo this finding but present a more complex picture of support for this polarizing political symbol. Most importantly, we find that controlling for other factors, the experience of living in the South has an independent effect on opinions about the flag.

Past studies have focused only on whites who live in the South, and do not adequately consider the influence of race and region on support for the flag. We find that region is vitally important in forming attitudes about the flag, but that region works differently for blacks and whites. White southerners are more likely to support the flag than white nonsoutherners, while black southerners are *less* likely to support the flag than black nonsoutherners. For southern whites, a connection to the South likely explains some support for the Confederate flag. We also believe that racial threat (Giles, 1977) plays a role in explaining support for the flag among southern whites and opposition to the flag among southern blacks. Compared to nonsouthern blacks, southern blacks are closer to the issue, see more Confederate flags, and undoubtedly have more interactions with flag supporters. As such, the threat stems from the proximity of southern blacks to southern whites and the knowledge of what the Confederate flag means to many whites in the South.

We also demonstrate that age is positively correlated with support for removing the Confederate flag for our national sample and among non-southerners. In general, these findings suggest that older Americans are more aware of the negative history of Confederate symbols and are therefore less likely to support them. However, these results also suggest that the preadult

<sup>7</sup>In a similar model for blacks only, a dummy variable for the South was both positive and statistically significant.

socialization that Clark (1997) finds so important is likely conditioned by region. Nonsoutherners of both races were more likely raised to oppose the symbol of the old Confederacy and are therefore more sensitive to the negative connotations of the flag. Southerners, who grew up closer to the flag, are probably less likely to have shifting opinions throughout their lives. Our findings also provide little support for Gans's theory of symbolic ethnicity because our data suggest that younger southerners are no more likely than older southerners to support the Confederate flag. Indeed, age has no independent effect on opinions on the flag among southerners.

In sum, support for the Confederate flag is not simply about racial attitudes, but a more complex phenomenon where region and race exert important influences. Given the divisive nature of this symbol, politicians who use the flag as a political issue are likely to draw ire from voters regardless of region. Returning to our initial puzzle about explaining support for the flag, the answer is not racial attitudes or southern heritage, but both.

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