

The Law and Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution

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Gavin Wright, [Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South](#) (2013).

Quantitative scholars too often seem intent on sucking the complexities and nuances out of history. Sometimes, however, throwing numbers at history can have the reverse effect. Historians get themselves into ruts, embracing assumptions and approaches that ultimately shorten the horizons of analysis. A certain predictability develops in the scholarship. New contributions add more bricks to a building whose dimensions have already been charted. What may be needed is a jolt to these assumptions and approaches, a compelling case for reconceiving the central issues. At its best quantitative analysis delves beneath the surface of the familiar, revealing unfamiliar patterns or connections. And in the unfamiliar may be the complexities, contradictions, and puzzles that suggest productive new directions for scholars of all methodological proclivities to explore.

While not a discipline-shaking work of scholarship, [Gavin Wright's *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South*](#) does use quantitative analysis to make a persuasive case for reconsidering several tenets that have become accepted wisdom among scholars of the civil rights movement. Wright, an economic historian, synthesizes an array of quantitative research—some his own, some the work of others—in support of a claim that is both striking and important: the landmark federal civil rights policies of the 1960s marked not just a revolution in legal rights for African Americans, but also a significant advancement in their economic wellbeing.

Improvements in the material welfare of African Americans in the South cannot be reduced to the product of larger economic trends, Wright argues. The civil rights movement was a “true revolution,” which he defines as “a fundamental break with past trends and behavior that cannot be explained away as the inevitable consequence of market forces or modernization.” (P. 4.) The heart of *Sharing the Prize* is an assessment of the economic effects of the “historic, game-changing breakthroughs” (P. 20) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. In each area he explores—public accommodations, employment, schools, and voting—Wright finds the same basic dynamic: Jim Crow's demise brought substantial economic benefits for black America. Incomes increased, and African Americans were able to take advantage of better jobs, schools, health care, and social services.

Wright argues further that these advances in the economic status of blacks did not come at the expense of whites. Southern whites assumed that civil rights reforms would cost them. Lunch counter operators, for example, believed that integration would scare away their white clientele. But their fears proved wrong. In the wake of desegregation department store profits increased. The fall of Jim Crow bolstered the economic growth of the entire South. The post-civil rights movement era saw increased investment in education, social services, and public works, which benefited southerners of all races. The civil rights movement turned out to be good for whites, not just in terms of their moral health, but also in terms of their bottom line. “[T]his was a revolution in which almost all parties gained.” (P. xi.)

Wright is not alone in drawing attention to the economic component of the civil rights movement, of course. Historians have recognized that economic justice was a key component of the civil rights struggle, particularly at the grassroots level. Yet most scholarship emphasizes the limits of substantive change, highlighting the vast chasm between activists' bold claims for economic equality and the actual changes in the economic status of African Americans. Social welfare is often assumed to be the issue on which the movement foundered. Wright argues that these scholarly lamentations are overstated. Not only were economic goals part of the movement from the start, advances in economic justice were among the most impressive achievements of the civil rights movement.

To arrive at this notably optimistic assessment, Wright makes several key decisions at the outset. Most significantly, he confines his analysis to the movement's impact in the American South. In sharp contrast to historians who have attacked the "myth" of southern exceptionalism in the civil rights era, emphasizing instead the movement as a national experience, Wright argues that the barriers to political and economic advancement for African Americans in the Jim Crow South were categorically different. Outside of the South, economic development tended to lessen racial inequalities. In the South of the 1940s and 1950s, segregationists found ways to maintain white supremacy alongside economic development. The distinctive nature of Jim Crow in the South requires a regional analysis to fully capture the effects of its downfall, Wright argues.

Wright's other threshold decisions are more in line with the work of other scholars of the civil rights movement. His insistence on placing economics in the foreground is in line with much recent historical scholarship on the movement. And his willingness to push aside the traditional end dates of the civil rights movement (usually some time in the late 1960s) in order to examine the struggles to implement civil rights policies in the 1970s and 1980s places him in line with the "long civil rights movement" framework that has become commonplace among scholars.

Having defined his scope of inquiry in this way, Wright argues that scholars have failed to fully capture the achievements of the civil rights movement. Considered as a national reform campaign, the movement's failures loom large. Racially balkanized schools persist across the country, as do racial wealth disparities, inequities in the criminal justice system, and patterns of residential segregation. Civil rights policy made only modest inroads against the resilient dynamics of structural racial inequality in the North. Yet if we confine our focus to the South—which was, after all, the primary target of most civil rights era reforms—and broaden our focus to include the 1970s and 1980s, a more hopeful picture emerges.

The civil rights movement improved the lives southern blacks, ensuring them not only new legal rights but also, over time, a marked improvement their economic status. Wright concludes that the civil rights revolution offers "an example of a strong interventionist central government policy that worked." (P. 262.) To make this point, he emphasizes, is not to diminish the work that remains to be done to achieve racial equality. It is to recognize what the movement actually accomplished. In an area of scholarship overpopulated by triumphalism on the one side and lamentations on the other, to write an account of the civil rights movement that is optimistic without being naïve is no small feat.

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