

## **Local Civil Rights Struggles and School Desegregation<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This paper includes material from my forthcoming book, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the impacts of local civil rights struggles on the pace and magnitude of school desegregation. I focus on the state of Mississippi – a major battleground for the civil rights movement and, surprisingly, the state where widespread school desegregation took place earliest between 1969 and 1971. During this short period, Mississippi’s public schools underwent a massive transformation. Using county-level data for all Mississippi counties, I examine the variation across counties in the extent of school desegregation at intervals between 1968 and 1978. I also use present data from three case studies of Mississippi counties based on extensive archival materials and newspaper accounts to document this process of change. My analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data shows that prior local civil rights activity in a community strengthened white resistance to school desegregation. This resistance was reflected in patterns of institutional change with lower levels of desegregation within public schools and higher levels of support for private segregationist academies. I highlight the ways that this understanding of school desegregation as shaped by local patterns of civil rights struggle differs from one centered on national court decisions and federal implementation, and I also discuss the implications for theories of movements and political change by focusing on the interactions among federal agencies, courts, local authorities, local mobilization and counter-mobilization.

This paper examines the impacts of local civil rights struggles on the pace and magnitude of school desegregation. I focus on the state of Mississippi – a major battleground for the civil rights movement and, surprisingly, the state where widespread school desegregation took place earliest between 1969 and 1971. During this short period, Mississippi’s public schools underwent a massive transformation. Using county-level data for all Mississippi counties, I examine the variation across counties in the extent of school desegregation at intervals between 1968 and 1978. I also use present data from three case studies of Mississippi counties based on extensive archival materials and newspaper accounts to document this process of change. My analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data shows that prior local civil rights activity in a community strengthened white resistance to school desegregation. This resistance was reflected in patterns of institutional change with lower levels of desegregation within public schools and higher levels of support for private segregationist academies. I highlight the ways that this understanding of school desegregation as shaped by local patterns of civil rights struggle differs from one centered on national court decisions and federal implementation, and I also discuss the implications for theories of movements and political change by focusing on the interactions among federal agencies, courts, local authorities, local mobilization and counter-mobilization.

This paper is drawn from a broader project in which I have examined the influence of civil rights struggles in Mississippi on electoral politics, social policy, and schools through the 1970s and early 1980s. In this project I have attempted to contribute to historical scholarship on the civil rights movement and advance theoretical

explanations for the relationship between social movements and social change. Part of the puzzle that motivates this paper is the differential impact of the civil rights movement across these different outcomes. In electoral politics, I show that there was a long period of minimal gains in the acquisition of political power. However, by the late 1970s civil rights groups began to break down some of the legal barriers to black electoral power, and communities with sustained movement infrastructures capitalized on new opportunities (Andrews 1997). With social policies, local civil rights leaders and groups mobilized opportunistically to create poverty programs benefiting from the initial support of federal agencies (Andrews 2001). However, as I have already indicated, the impact of the movement on school desegregation followed a much different pattern. Unlike poverty programs where federal agencies provided strategic leverage to the movement, the implementation of school desegregation favored local white elites and excluded local activists, so communities with sustained civil rights activism had much lower levels of desegregation during the 1970s. These patterns show that movements play a central role in political change, and the same movement can have dramatically different effects across arenas.

The Mississippi movement directed the majority of its resources toward gaining political access and power (see Dittmer 1994 and Payne 1995 for histories of the Mississippi civil rights movement). In many communities, the movement was opportunistic in using this organizational capacity to address the grinding poverty in Mississippi's black communities. When we examine the efforts of movement groups and activists, schools were less central than political and economic objectives throughout this period. Nevertheless, schools were transformed in the period following the 1964 Civil

Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. These massive changes and the conflicts around them merit serious consideration. Although it varied considerably from community to community, desegregation generated major changes in the public school system. The pattern of change was complex, as many whites mobilized around a set of parallel educational institutions, segregationist academies, which were designed to maintain white institutional control and protect white privileges. Further, school desegregation was implemented in ways that sustained ongoing racial inequalities, such as the displacement of black school teachers, a key segment of the black middle class (Arnez 1978; Cecelski 1994).<sup>2</sup>

### **The Mississippi Movement and the Politics of Schools**

I begin by outlining the contours of the civil rights movement's development in Mississippi as it pertains to schools and desegregation.<sup>3</sup> With education, resistance passed through several phases marked by distinct strategies. The first wave of widespread resistance followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. The *Brown* decision's major impact in Mississippi was the consolidation of white resistance in the Citizens' Council. Efforts were made in a handful of school districts to act on the implication of *Brown* in the mid-1950s. In Yazoo City, Clarksdale, Natchez, Vicksburg and Jackson petitions for desegregation were circulated through some of the most

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<sup>2</sup> These processes are also noteworthy because much of the research on resistance to school desegregation has focused on urban and Northern school districts. There is a vast literature on desegregation; see, for example, Hochschild (1984), James (1989), Orfield (1994), Rossell (1983), Rossell and Crain (1982), and Smock and Wilson (1991).

<sup>3</sup> For studies examining the impact of the Mississippi movement on electoral politics see Andrews (1997), Colby (1986); Stewart and Sheffield (1987) and on social policies see Andrews (2001), Quadagno (1994); Colby (1985).

established NAACP chapters in the state. John Dittmer (1994) argues that the Citizens' Council response was two-pronged -- (1) public announcements including full page advertisements in local newspapers listing the names of petition signers and (2) economic retaliations including firing employees and boycotting black businessowners. In short, moves toward implementation of the Brown decision were met by swift "massive resistance".

In 1956, the Mississippi Legislature invoked the legal principle of interposition to claim that the Supreme Court's decisions on school desegregation were "in violation of the Constitution of the United States and the State of Mississippi, and therefore, are considered unconstitutional, invalid and of no lawful effect within the confines of the State of Mississippi." The legislature "directed and required" any state officials to block implementation of the decisions "by any lawful, peaceful and constitutional means." More specifically, the Legislature authorized the Governor to close any public school when it was in the public's interest, and this authority was granted to local school districts in 1960 (USCCR 1969:14).

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Mississippi Legislature passed extensive legislation, often meeting in special sessions to buttress the system of segregated schools. These included general restrictions on civil liberties and expanded the legal support for segregation (Southern Education Reporting Service 1964). Governor Ross Barnett made the maintenance of school segregation a key issue throughout his administration. Most notably, Barnett led a massive effort to block the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi in 1962 (see Dittmer 1994).

## Freedom of Choice Plans and Token Desegregation

Beginning in the early 1960s, desegregation suits were being filed in Mississippi by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Justice Department. In addition, following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) was authorized to withhold federal funds from school districts that were not desegregating under Title VI provisions. These provisions allowed HEW to withhold funds when schools were not engaged in systematic efforts to reduce segregation.

Following the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, the federal government took on an increasingly important role in subsidizing the funding of local school districts, especially in the impoverished rural areas of the South. This expanded role provided potential leverage to generate compliance from local school districts.

Frank Parker points out that this pressure generated a two-stage process. The first stage was court-ordered “freedom of choice” plans that produced token desegregation followed by a second stage of massive desegregation prompted by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Alexander v. Holmes County* (1969).<sup>4</sup> The freedom of choice plans allowed parents to ‘voluntarily’ switch schools for their children. Freedom of choice plans were an obvious stalling mechanism generating very little change. Parents and children who did enroll in formerly all-white schools faced violence and economic reprisals. Prior to the *Alexander* decision, HEW reported that 88% of blacks attended all-black schools and 12% of whites attended all-white schools (Munford 1973). In other words, there was 'token' integration. In most school districts a handful of black children attended formerly all-white public

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed accounts of the court case and implementation see Parker (1987); Rosenberg (1991); Wirt (1970).

schools. Parker concludes that the first stage "generally left the black schools all-black, and resulted in very little integration of the white schools" (1987:691).

In the fall of 1966, there were an estimated 6,407 black students attending desegregated schools in Mississippi. There were more students in counties that had sustained civil rights movements (151.4) than those with either episodic (71.6) or no civil rights activity (31.6).<sup>5</sup> (See Appendix A for an overview of the study design and measurement of the index of movement strength.) However, these numbers were very modest even in the counties with the most extensive participation in the 'Freedom of Choice' plans. Throughout this period, civil rights attorneys attempted to monitor the implementation of desegregation. Marian Wright and Henry Aronson wrote to civil rights leaders that even though many school districts were filing desegregation reports,

a majority of the school boards within the State of Mississippi have submitted a plan to [the] Office of Education of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare providing for the desegregation of their school districts. These plans have been submitted by local school boards to enable them to receive federal funds. We know that many school districts have not complied with the full conditions of the plans which they have submitted.<sup>6</sup>

The withholding of federal funds was a key source of leverage throughout the desegregation process. The plans were often implemented over multiple years, desegregating several grade-levels at a time. In many cases, school districts started at the lower grades and worked up to the higher grades over three or four years. Frederick Wirt

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<sup>5</sup> Data reported in "Negroes in Desegregated Schools in Mississippi, Autumn, 1966," box 6, folder 253, Rims Barber Papers, Tougaloo College.

<sup>6</sup> Memo from Marian E. Wright and Henry M. Aronson, folder: Carthan, reel 138, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

notes that “the advantage often lies with the regulated, who have the expertise and strong will to push their views of detailed decisions” (1970:184). In other words, local school districts were in a position to influence the extent and form of school desegregation if there was a thorough effort to resist.

The small numbers of black students attending predominantly all-white schools elevated fears for black parents and students. In 1965, Stanford University’s Oral History Project sent researchers to conduct interviews and tape-record meetings in the South. One researcher recorded the efforts of Susan Lorenzi in Holmes County while she was talking with parents about registering children to attend desegregated schools. The recording provides a fascinating glimpse into the concerns of parents in rural Mississippi about school desegregation. One parent wondered how her students would get to the new school, whether their clothes were in good-enough shape, and whether her welfare benefits would be cut off in retaliation for sending her kids to the all-white school. Lorenzi referred repeatedly to the other parents who are committed to sending their children, and several meetings had been organized in Mileston and throughout the county to provide additional solidarity and information about the registration process.<sup>7</sup>

Reports of harassment by other students, teachers, and administrators were common during this period. For example, Thomas Bartley who desegregated Shaw High School in Bolivar County was “subjected to harassment and intimidation from white students” including “being tripped on the stairs, roughed up on the playfield during physical education, thrown down and punched in the showers, having his clothes urinated upon while in the showers, and called “nigger””. He was later arrested and charged with

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<sup>7</sup> Sue Lorenzi, Stanford Oral History Project, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

using “vulgar and indecent language” for allegedly saying “I’m gonna beat your ass” to another student on his way home from school.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that the harassment, threats and violence toward black students desegregating all-white schools were a major reason for the ineffectiveness of these plans. A small number of families stepped forward to enroll in formerly all-white schools, but even in counties with strong movement infrastructures, the obstacles undermined the possibility of substantial change. In many cases, these were the children of local civil rights leaders, such as C.O. Chinn in Canton and Velma Bartley in Shaw.

What accounts for the widespread failure of freedom of choice plans? It should be obvious by this point that there were significant formal and informal barriers to “choosing” to attend desegregated schools. These included concerns about reprisals, such as job loss and cuts to welfare benefits and concerns for children, including their well-being, educational needs, and exposure to social isolation, harassment, and violence. In his study of Panola County, Wirt (1970) reports that many students faced serious problems keeping up with the curriculum in desegregated schools. This may have resulted from poor preparation and neglect or discrimination from white teachers in the new schools. Civil rights attorneys working in Bolivar County pointed out that this situation was an indictment of the segregated school system because it demonstrated the extreme inferiority of black schools or discrimination against the black students attending historically white schools.<sup>9</sup> In Canton, six seniors who had transferred to Madison Ridgeland High School were told by teachers and the principal that they would have to

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<sup>8</sup> *State of Mississippi v. Thomas Bartley*, reel 7, folder: Bartley, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

<sup>9</sup> “Abstract from Answers to Interrogatories,” *Cowan et al. v. Bolivar County School Board*, reel 141, folder: Cowan et al., Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

stay in school an extra year to graduate. The determination required to enter these hostile school environments suggest that discrimination was common.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Wirt notes that news of black academic failure in desegregated schools traveled widely in the black community. Certainly, these barriers and the efforts by white school authorities to implement desegregation at the slowest possible pace went a long way toward undermining freedom of choice plans.

However, another possible factor is that school desegregation was not as highly valued as some of the other goals around which black communities mobilized in Mississippi. In this repressive context, it would be difficult to assess whether black Mississippians would have preferred to send their children to desegregated schools. Moreover, one has to be careful in trying to assess what any group “wants” because of internal heterogeneity within any group and the massive social inequalities that shaped preferences and collective action. With those cautions in mind, the best indicators of collective preferences can be found in the moments where there were collective challenges concerning educational institutions. I have already described the extensive mobilization that took place in Shelby during the late 1960s concerning the quality of the schools and the attempts to fire politically active teachers. In the early 1960s, a similar conflict occurred in Shaw where a student initiated protest began in the cafeteria and escalated to a school boycott with a broader set of demands. Following a mass meeting on August 3, 1964, a boycott of McEvans High School began following an incident where students were prohibited from meeting with COFO workers in the school cafeteria. The students’ initial list included four demands: “(1) Brand new, up-to-date books for our

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<sup>10</sup> “School Year ’65-’66, Canton, Mississippi,” Michael Grossman Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

school, (2) well-equipped workshop and laboratory, (3) a well-stocked library including a section on Negro History, and (4) foreign language courses and other courses which meet the requirements for entrance to accredited colleges.” The students sought meetings with the local school board to voice their concerns, and the conflict escalated when a more comprehensive list of demands was issued by “Parents of Shaw School Students.” The parent’s list of 28 items stated that “we want all schools in Shaw integrated beginning in September, 1965, and that all grades should be integrated.” Nevertheless, all of the other demands referred to specific ways to improve the quality of instruction at McEvans High School including a qualified principal and teachers, art and music classes, a better playground, a complete library, a better gym, work shop equipment, better and free food, and driver’s education. The parents also wanted teachers removed who beat their children and an end to the split session (a school calendar established so that students could pick cotton during the fall) and the establishment of a standard, nine month schedule. Among other things, desegregation allowed a small number of blacks to gain first hand knowledge of the systematic differences between black and white schools. In Bolivar and Madison counties, students and civil rights activists wrote detailed reports documenting these differences. This new information may have heightened demands for the improvement of all-black schools, where the majority of black students continued to go to school.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Boycott Victory,” in *Freedom Flame*, Shaw Mississippi Student Union, August 5, 1964, reel 141, folder: Cowan et al., Litigation Records, Tougaloo College; “Petition to the School Board of Bolivar County from Parents of Shaw School Students,” 1965, reel 141, folder: Cowan et al., Litigation Records, Tougaloo College; “School Integration 1965 Canton, Mississippi and Differences Between White and Negro Schools in the City of Canton,” Bobbie Ruth Chinn, Mary Catherine, and Carl Taylor, Michael Grossman Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Viola McGee, “School Desegregation

These and other educational demands during this period demonstrate that educational quality was very central to black Mississippians. Historical studies of Mississippi and the U.S. suggest that there was a long tradition of individual and collective struggles for high quality education in black communities (Lieberson 1980, McMillen 1989). In addition, surveys of black Americans throughout this period show strong preferences for integration (Kinder and Sanders 1996). However, black collective action in Mississippi illustrates a more complex picture of the demand for school desegregation and school reform more generally. These demands are neither an endorsement of integration for its own sake nor a statement of support for black separatism. Rather, the demands suggest a pragmatic orientation built on the desire to gain the highest quality schools possible. Nevertheless, school desegregation was on the horizon regardless of whether or how strongly it was desired by black or white Mississippians, and I examine this process and how it shaped Mississippi communities in the next section.

### The *Alexander v. Holmes Case* and Rapid Desegregation

The second stage in the desegregation of Mississippi schools began in the middle of the 1969-70 school year through the mandate of the Supreme Court's decision in *Alexander v. Holmes County*. The decision combined a set of nine Justice Department suits and sixteen NAACP Legal Defense Fund suits. The outcome of this complex trip through the legal system was an end to 'Freedom of Choice' plans in 33 Mississippi

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Report for Cleveland," reel 141, folder: Cowan et al., Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

school districts and a court order to desegregate 30 districts in the middle of the 1969-70 school year.<sup>12</sup>

In the summer of 1969, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered desegregation for the upcoming school year. At the local level, white Mississippians began mobilizing. For example, in Cleveland the local Farm Bureau sponsored a mass meeting of a thousand local whites to protest the decision. The meeting was attended by local political leaders, who vowed to fight the decision.<sup>13</sup> The desegregation order was followed by an unusual intervention on the part of the Nixon Administration, when the Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, Robert Finch, requested a delay in the implementation of the decision. While the Fifth Circuit panel of judges granted the delay, the lower courts decision was quickly reversed by the Supreme Court on October 29, 1969 (See Munford 1973). Frank Parker notes that “within ten months [of the Supreme Court decision], 146 of Mississippi's 148 school districts had been forced to abandon ineffective freedom of choice plans and to adopt new desegregation plans that revised attendance boundaries and employed zoning, pairing, busing, and other remedies to achieve fully integrated school systems” (1987:693).

Table 1 summarizes the aggregate pattern of desegregation of Mississippi counties. I have measured the level of segregation using a dissimilarity index. Enrollment data were compiled from multiple volumes of the *Directory of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in Selected Districts* (U.S. Department of Health,

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<sup>12</sup> Three of the districts included in the *Alexander* case "were brought against three county school boards of education which controlled only transportation systems" (Munford 1973:14).

<sup>13</sup> “Bolivar County Whites Rally to Protest Order on Schools,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 31, 1969, Reel 93, folder: Desegregation, General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

Education, and Welfare, Office of Civil Rights). The dissimilarity index is a standard indicator in studies of school segregation that can be interpreted as the proportion of black students who would have to be transferred to achieve a racially balanced distribution of students within a school district. High values indicate higher levels of segregation (James and Tauber 1985). Table 1 shows that there was a substantial transformation of the public school system from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Despite open resistance, a massive institutional change occurred in an amazingly brief period of time.

	<b>1968-9</b>	<b>1970-1</b>	<b>1972-3</b>	<b>1978-9</b>
<b>Index of Dissimilarity (mean of counties)</b>	0.849	0.312	0.311	0.316

The National Education Association (NEA) sent a team to observe and collect information on the desegregation process in the spring of 1970 for the counties covered by the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision. The report provides a detailed and immediate assessment of the changes that were taking place in Mississippi. The NEA team identified three major concerns about the unfolding desegregation process – (1) the extent of meaningful integration within desegregated schools, (2) the rise of private segregationist academies, and (3) the displacement of black teachers and administrators.

Their findings merit detailed consideration because there is little evidence this close to the ground during this process.

The NEA's findings described ongoing mechanisms to avoid integration within formally desegregated schools. Again, they noted several communities where community groups such as the League of Women Voters or a local Human Relations Council attempted to broker a smooth transition through this period. Nevertheless, there were many indications that the resistance was quite strong:

Virtually all elementary schools have maintained internal segregation, with white and black classes retaining their former composition and teaching personnel.

Black and white students eat lunch at separate hours, have separate recess periods, and in at least one school, use separate libraries...In another school, bells to signal class changes ring at different times for black and white students so that even walking through the halls is segregated.

Segregation in extracurricular activities was pervasive if not stronger. Especially noteworthy is the NEA's observation that there was no in-service training of teachers and other school personnel to facilitate desegregation and that school officials regularly complained about the lack of support and leadership from state authorities.<sup>14</sup>

The NEA's second set of findings pertained to the formation of private segregationist academies. I describe this process in greater detail below, but it is worth highlighting some of the NEA's findings during this peak period of school desegregation. In some communities, white leaders took an active role in moving toward a unified public

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<sup>14</sup> "Preliminary Fact-Finding Report of NEA Staff Team on School Desegregation in Mississippi", Reel 93, Folder: Desegregation, General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

school system. However, in many school districts there was a “massive exodus.” The report describes the process in one community from local press coverage:

The public school, opened in 1947, was declared surplus by school officials in June 1969 and sold to an individual, using sealed bids for \$1,500. Team members learned that the purchaser, in turn, sold it to a private group for \$10. The school, a relatively modern and well-built facility, is now privately operated for white students only; former public school buses, also declared surplus and put up for bid, have been obtained and are now being used to transport the students to the school. In another county, a retired district superintendent set up a private school; in still another district, a local judge is responsible for the establishment of the private school.<sup>15</sup>

The NEA team speculated that the support for these academies might be short-lived, but as we will see below, this was not the case in most Mississippi communities.

Finally, the NEA noted the potential threats to black teachers and administrators during the process of desegregation. Department of Health, Education and Welfare data show that there was a decline in the employment of black teachers and administrators during this period. Data are available for 62 Mississippi counties for the period from 1968 to 1972, and they show that the absolute decline was relatively small (52 fewer teachers in 1972), but the relative decline was more substantial because the total number of teachers in these counties grew during this period with an increase of 1,177 white

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<sup>15</sup> “Preliminary Fact-Finding Report of NEA Staff Team on School Desegregation in Mississippi”, Reel 93, Folder: Desegregation, General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

teachers.<sup>16</sup> The NEA staff did not find cases of black principals who were fired, but most did have their authority significantly reduced. In the mergers, there were often black and white “co-principals” with the black principal taking on “responsibilities that are either undefined or of a clerical or menial nature, or restricted to black students and teachers.” In many cases, black teachers continued to teach all-black classrooms, and they were also vulnerable to having their responsibilities and authority reduced.<sup>17</sup> The limited involvement of teachers in the civil rights movement may have reduced the likelihood of a collective mobilization to address these developments.

The picture that emerges is a major process of systemic reorganization with significant cross-pressures that left black students and school personnel open to new forms of discrimination. In addition to the trends noted by the NEA, another key element of this story is the social organization of program implementation. Like the freedom of choice plans, most of the negotiation occurred between HEW staff and local school administrators making the process closed to civil rights groups, teachers, parents and the broader public. Unlike the poverty programs that established formal mechanisms for community input, school desegregation was a process administered by professionals. The lack of clear forms of communication closed off avenues for public input, and it also led to significant confusion and misinformation because there were minimal channels through which the details of school desegregation could be communicated.

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<sup>16</sup> Data from *Directory of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in Selected Districts*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Civil Rights, 1968 and 1972; see also details from court case against Madison County Board of Education (1974), Rims Barber Papers, box 7, folder 289, Tougaloo College.

<sup>17</sup> “Preliminary Fact-Finding Report of NEA Staff Team on School Desegregation in Mississippi”, Reel 93, Folder: Desegregation, General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

### The Formation of Private Academies

The process of public school desegregation was mirrored by the process of private school formation by whites. Mississippi's State Department of Audit tracked the enrollment decline for the districts covered by *Alexander v. Holmes County* finding that enrollments declined 15.29% from the 1968-9 school year to the beginning of the 1969-1970 school year before the implementation of desegregation. Enrollments fell another 15% from the beginning of the fall to the beginning of the spring semester.<sup>18</sup>

State and private support were critical in the formation of the academies. State support came through tuition grants, tax exemption and school materials that were transferred from the public to the private school system. The flow of these resources was eventually challenged by civil rights groups but this was after an initial 'boost' was provided to the new "private" institutions by the state (Graham 1970; Rosenthal 1970). For example, the State Legislature provided a tuition stipend of \$240 annually to students attending private schools (Wooten 1970a). During these formative years, state support ranged from 17.2% to 90% of the total tuition costs at private school.<sup>19</sup> Terry Carroll conducted a study of the formation of private academies in Mississippi, and in his interviews with local academy leaders, he found that "some early private school founders have questioned the possibility of operating their organizations without this early state support" (1981:134).

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<sup>18</sup> "Comparison of Attendance of Pupils in the Various School Districts of the State before and after the Dates of Court Ordered Desegregation Thereof," State Department of Audit, Jackson, Mississippi, reel 93, folder: Desegregation, General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

<sup>19</sup> Data from *Coffey v. Educational Finance Commission*, reported in Carroll (1981, 134).

Court documents reveal the funding for the Cruger-Tchula Academy in Holmes County, one of the first academies in Mississippi. For the 1965-6 school year, the school took \$104,685. This included “\$94,210 in cash, \$9,749 in non-cash contribution of labor and equipment, and \$725 in textbooks given by the State of Mississippi”. The cash contributions included \$38,831 in tuition of which \$22,200 came from the state as tuition grants.<sup>20</sup> In Canton 579 desks from the public schools were reportedly sold for 50 cents each, and three buses were sold for \$500.<sup>21</sup>

Sociologist James Loewen was on the faculty of Tougaloo College in the late 1960s and 1970s, and he organized a project with the Southern Regional Council where Tougaloo students conducted intensive field research on school desegregation in Mississippi towns. During the 1972-3 year, one of his students conducted research in Lexington in Holmes County. She found that the public schools in Lexington had been abandoned by all but three white students, and black faculty were shocked to find after desegregation that much of the school infrastructure had been removed, including athletic and shop equipment.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the flow of resources from public to private institutions, the public school system sustained a \$12 million dollar budget cut by the State Legislature because of the loss of students (*New York Times* 1970). State support for public schools was based on the average daily attendance, so the abandonment of public schools undermined the resources of the public school system.

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<sup>20</sup> Thelma Head et al. v. Randolph Thrower et al., reel 93, folder: Desegregation – General, Litigation Records, Tougaloo College.

<sup>21</sup> “Leads on Private School Support,” box 6, folder 243, Rims Barber Papers, Tougaloo College.

<sup>22</sup> “School Involvement Project,” James Loewen Papers, box 14, Tougaloo College.

A second type of resource for the emerging academies was the mobilization of private funds into the academy system which included donations of money, land, materials and labor. In Canton, for example, parents and students spent part of the Christmas break renovating a former tent factory that would serve as a new private school. One teacher noted that whites in Canton "have decided that the battle with the Federal Government is over and that there is nothing left to do but either let their kids go to school with the coloreds or pay tuition to keep them apart" (Wooten 1970b:28). Additional resources came from religious institutions like the Baptist Church, which attempted to organize and support academies and local banks which provided low-interest loans to the new academies (Reed 1969; 1970)

To what extent were academies linked to the prior organizational foundation of the Citizens' Council? Although the Citizens' Council claimed to sponsor 150 academies throughout the South by 1969, the role of 'sponsor' was a bit vague (Bigart 1969). Only a small percentage of the academies were actual 'Council Schools' and these were concentrated in Jackson, the state capital and the headquarters of the organization. While the Citizens' Council did not play a direct organizing role in most academies, it did play two pivotal roles. First, the Jackson headquarters "served as 'a clearing house of information,' maintaining a register of private schools and available instructors and administrators, as well as potential physical facilities" (McMillen 1971:303). By the mid-1960s, much space in the organization's monthly newsletter was reserved for articles such as "How to Start a Private School" and "Private Schools Continue to Increase". The second role played by the Citizens' Council was the residue of informal ties solidified in many Mississippi communities from earlier organizing. As social movement scholars

have noted, one of the most important legacies of a movement organization is the networks left behind when the organization collapses (Tarrow 1998). These ties were also mobilized in the Mississippi Private School Association (MPSA), a statewide organization which linked academies and sponsored activities including athletic events. The MPSA held its first statewide meeting in 1968 building upon the earlier foundation of the Citizens' Council and the Council School Foundation.<sup>23</sup>

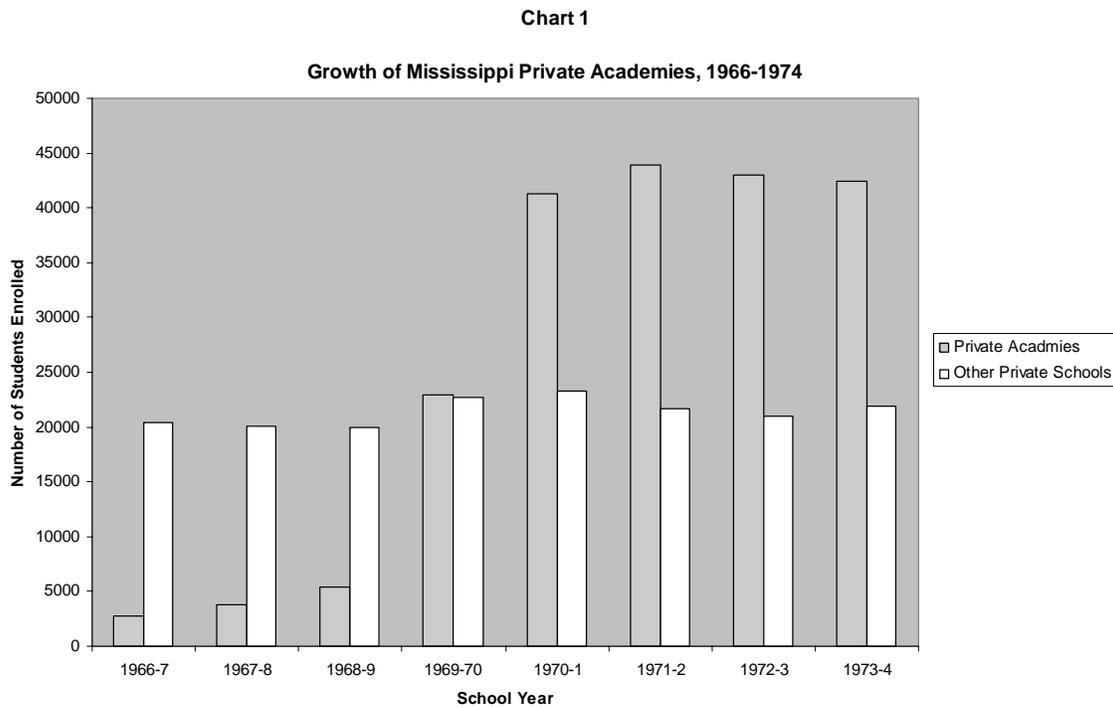
Chart 1 presents yearly totals of the number of students attending private academies and other private schools. Again, there is a substantial increase in the enrollments for the 1969-70 school year (22,919) over the 1968-9 year (5,393). Enrollments quadrupled followed by further increases in the early 1970s. In this short time, a parallel system of schools emerged in Mississippi that has survived to the present day. Similar institutions developed throughout the South. Nevin and Bills estimated approximately 750,000 students in 1975 attending segregationist academies in the South (1976:9).

Some studies of 'white flight' find that after the implementation year, substantial numbers of whites re-entered the public school system at times, offsetting the initial losses. Private school attendance clearly dropped by the mid-1970s though the drop is slight. More detailed data would be required to determine whether this drop actually represented white public school re-entry. In general, the academies that were established and survived several years were likely to continue beyond the 1970s.

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<sup>23</sup> See the following dissertations for background on the MPSA: Carroll (1981), Mathis (1975), and Sansing (1971). As noted earlier, movements often change their goals over the course of their development. In the case of the Citizens' Council, it is both interesting and revealing that the primary goal of the organization had shifted in slightly over ten years from a thorough defense of segregated public institutions to a rearguard attempt to establish private institutions.

The dataset excludes enrollment figures for parochial, military, and all-black private schools. Enrollments at parochial schools remained relatively constant before and after 1969, and parochial schools were not part of the strategy pursued by whites resisting school desegregation in Mississippi. For the most part this is because parochial schools were concentrated in a different set of counties than the one where academies were established in the late sixties and early seventies.



By the fall of 1970, the types of desegregation orders that had been implemented in the *Alexander* school districts were being implemented in school districts throughout the state. Hence, the aggregate pattern observed in Chart 1 shows a substantial lift in the 1969-70 school year followed by a near doubling of that number for the 1970-1 year. This makes the 1970-1 school year the pivotal year for the establishment of academies.

## Indicators of School Desegregation and White Resistance

Table 2 compares the patterns of desegregation and academy attendance for counties by the level of movement activity. Here, we see that the counties with sustained civil rights activity had much lower levels of desegregation during this period and much higher levels of academy attendance. Ironically, the counties that resisted desegregation most effectively also had the strongest private all-white school systems. It seems likely that in these counties there was a dynamic interaction between the private and public systems. In movement counties, public school administrators may have worked harder to resist desegregation as they attempted to keep white parents from enrolling their children in private academies. To a large degree, the most intense and successful efforts to resist desegregation occurred in communities with highly mobilized civil rights movements.

**Table 2: School Desegregation and Level of Movement Activity for Mississippi Counties (Mean Values)**

	Movement Counties		Non-Movement Counties	State
	Sustained	Episodic		
<b>Segregation - Index of Dissimilarity</b>				
1968-1969	0.912	0.881	0.777	0.849
1970-1971	0.480	0.267	0.255	0.312
1972-1973	0.451	0.262	0.267	0.311
1978-1979	0.433	0.289	0.269	0.316
<b>Private Academies Enrollment as percentage of white school age children (ages 5-17)</b>				
1966-1967	2.8%	3.8%	0.0%	1.9%
1967-1968	3.3%	4.1%	0.2%	2.2%

1968-1969	4.4%	5.8%	0.8%	3.3%
1969-1970	16.8%	13.2%	7.8%	11.7%
1970-1971	24.1%	21.9%	12.4%	18.3%
1971-1972	25.4%	21.9%	13.1%	18.9%
1972-1973	24.9%	21.6%	13.2%	18.7%
1973-1974	23.9%	20.8%	13.8%	18.5%
1974-1975	23.3%	18.6%	11.3%	16.6%
Number of counties	19	27	35	81

Black mobilization seemed to be a unifying threat for whites, creating the solidarity necessary for widespread countermobilization. Some scholars have found that a similar phenomenon occurred with voter registration where increases in black voter registration escalated white voter registration (Alt 1994). These findings underscore the importance of examining the interaction between movements and countermovements.

There are several additional factors that played a role in determining the extent of desegregation in Mississippi counties. Counties that were included in the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision had much higher levels of support for the academies (37% of white school age children attending academies in 1970-1 as compared to 12% in all other counties). Surprisingly, this case had no effect on the level of desegregation as measured by the dissimilarity index. In terms of academy formation, the *Alexander v. Holmes* counties were given a tactical advantage in the establishment of academies. These counties were part of one of the key desegregation decisions to go before the Supreme Court receiving enormous public attention. The “weightiness” of the situation combined with an external actor to mobilize against gave local countermovements an opportune context within which to organize new institutions. In Bolivar County, a thousand whites

rallied against the decision before it was even clear that the decision would be implemented. In addition, the final decision called for desegregation to take place at the beginning of the second semester. This disruptiveness may have provided extra incentive to those inclined toward organizing a private academy or sending their children to one, and this may have added to the sense of institutional crisis. In the counties covered by *Alexander v. Holmes*, whites were likely to be busy organizing academies during the first half of 1970 while their counterparts in the non-covered counties were watching to see what happened next.<sup>24</sup>

The academies were also facilitated by the organizational residues of local Citizens' Council organizations. Counties that had Citizens' Councils in the 1950s also had greater levels of support for private academies – 22.7% of school age whites attending academies in Citizens' Council counties versus 8.4% in all other counties. This relationship makes sense when combined with the key role played by the state-level Citizens' Council in encouraging the development of academies. However, there is no relationship between the presence of a Citizens' Council organization and the level of desegregation in a county.

Finally, one might expect that the percentage of black students in a county would be related to the support for academies and the level of desegregation. In fact, one might also expect that the relationships described above could be accounted for if the

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<sup>24</sup> There has been substantial research on the impacts of law (see Rosenberg 1991). One of the major constraints of law as a mechanism of change is that court orders often lack an effective institution to oversee and enforce decisions. The *Alexander* decision may be unique because of the extensive interaction between HEW, the Justice Department and the courts. Hence, it would be inaccurate to attribute the effects of the *Alexander* decision measured in the models to 'the courts' exclusively. Rather, there was a coordinated federal effort in these counties greater than was present in other locales.

percentage black is taken into consideration. First, it is true that the percentage black in a county is correlated with academy attendance and desegregation. For example, 52.3% of white school age children attended academies in majority black counties (10.5% in all other counties). The mean dissimilarity score for majority black counties is 0.501 compared to 0.274 for all other counties (note that higher values indicate greater levels of segregation).<sup>25</sup> Although it is true that the percentage black in a county is related to resistance to desegregation, this factor does not undermine any of the other relationships described above in analyses that take all of these factors into account.

### **Explaining White Countermobilization**

An important line of argument suggests that the primary determinant of white resistance to black challenges is the level of contact between blacks and whites that would result from changes in existing institutions. Susan Olzak and her colleagues (1994) make a variant of this argument which they call 'competition theory'. The theory proposes that conflict emerges within a sequence of processes. In particular, conflict is most likely as intense forms of ethnic boundaries break down (i.e., housing or labor markets) and competition over institutional resources increases. Olzak et al. argue that "both anticipated fears that racial contact will rise and actual shifts in interracial contact foster racial conflict that has been generated by competition processes" (1994:201). According to competition theorists, labor markets are key sites of interracial competition which can lead to conflict. In venues beyond the labor market, competition theorists have found support for this claim. For example, a recent study on the rate of anti-busing

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<sup>25</sup> With academies the relationship between percentage black and academy attendance is linear, but with segregation there is a threshold corresponding to majority black.

protests in U.S. cities was predicted by "(1) increases in white's exposure to African-Americans, (2) decreases in school segregation, and (3) decreases in whites' residential isolation levels" (Olzak, Shanahan and West 1994:232).

Research on white flight finds strong support for competition theory showing that the proportion of the population black plays an important role in "virtually all" of the studies reviewed by Christine Rossell, a leading scholar of school desegregation (1983:31). Luther Munford in a study of the thirty school districts affected by the *Alexander* decision, argues that "a demographic factor -- the Negro percentage within the school district's boundaries -- appears to have an extraordinary influence on white resistance to unitary desegregation" (1973:23; see also Bullock and Rodgers 1976).<sup>26</sup>

Typically, 'white flight' is considered to be the aggregation of individual calculation. However, in Mississippi, whites faced a situation where the two obvious individual choices of moving to different school districts or attending already established private schools were either not available or not sufficient to accommodate all of the whites resisting integrated education. Certainly, many whites pursued 'individualistic' strategies for dealing with the perceived consequences in desegregation. For example, in Natchez where a system of zoning was implemented, the school superintendent found many whites submitting 'change of address' forms to remain in a majority-white school

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<sup>26</sup> A variation on Olzak et al.'s competition theory argues that white resistance is not targeted at all African Americans (or the total proportion within a population). Rather, middle- and working-class white resistance is targeted toward poor and working class African Americans; this argument suggests that whites are less motivated by racial prejudice than class prejudice (see Bullock and Rodgers 1976; and Conlon and Kimenyi, 1991). To the extent that white responses are motivated against contact with poor blacks and not against contact with poor whites, we could argue that class and race dynamics are at play. Class-based variants of competition theory suggest that whites' resistance is greatest to poor blacks. I expect greater support for academies where the number of black households in poverty constitutes a greater proportion of a county's population.

(Reed 1969). Because Mississippi had repealed its compulsory attendance law in 1956, parents also had the option of withdrawing their children from school altogether. At the level of collective action, Mississippi whites engaged in boycotts and protests. Yet, ultimately, the establishment of academies became the dominant countermovement strategy.

The resistance to desegregation was part of a broader countermovement strategy that flowed out of the prior history of organized white resistance to the civil rights movement. In other words, whites were not only responding to the proportion of African-Americans in their community, but to the *social movement mobilization* of that community -- the history of protests, boycotts, voter canvassing, legal action and other activism. In addition to movement mobilization, more conventional electoral mobilization, such as black candidates running for office, influenced white resistance to school desegregation.

Countermovements are often distinguished from social movements along a number of key dimensions including membership, structural position, tactics and goals (see Lo 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1987). This was especially important in the case of academies -- a strategy requiring the mobilization of a substantial amount of resources. This is in contrast to less 'costly' strategies like antibusing protests or letter-writing campaigns. This difference in the 'cost' of the strategy helps to differentiate the establishment of academies as an elite-sponsored strategy versus antibusing movements which seem to have a working and lower-middle

class base (Olzak et al. 1994; James 1989; Mottl 1980).<sup>27</sup> In the case of large metropolitan areas, upper and middle-class whites are likely to move from school districts experiencing desegregation (Rossell 1983). This strategy was not viable for many white elites (and non-elites) in Mississippi.

Movements and countermovements become involved in complex interactions that are shaped by the intervention of the state. Successes for movements can become opportunities for countermovement by crystallizing the threat. This insight is crucial for understanding the 'opening' created by the *Alexander* decision for advocates of an all-white private school system.

Not surprisingly, when whites began establishing private academies this created a new set of tactical dilemmas for the civil rights movement. The most important was stopping the flow of public resources into the private school system. In the case of Mississippi, the *Alexander* decision signaled a major shift in the political opportunity structure. The shift would have impacted groups across the South interested in resisting desegregation. However, the signal would have been loudest and clearest to those within the school districts covered by the *Alexander* decision.

The resistance to school desegregation shows the underlying political nature of educational institutions (James 1989). Christine Rossell notes that "few studies have examined systematically the effect of [white] protest and leadership support for desegregation on white flight, primarily because the costs of collecting such data are quite high" (1983:35). Studies that examine the political mobilization of blacks are even less common. Munford's study of the school districts affected by the *Alexander* decision

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<sup>27</sup> There is substantial evidence that movement leadership in antibusing movements had an 'elite' base (Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1987).

showed that the population ratio (proportion black in a district) was the single most important factor explaining white flight (Munford 1973). At the end of his study, he begins to reflect on the factors associated with the relative proportions of blacks and whites, and he speculates that the perceived threat of black political power was the motivating force for parents exiting the public school system.

The effort to establish segregationist academies was linked to a broader countermovement aimed at resisting the civil rights movement. This argument contrasts with the idea found in individualistic explanations of white flight as a direct aggregation of white parental preferences (e.g., Conlon and Kimenyi 1991). Movements can present a threat through the development of ongoing local organizations. When movements do emerge they are likely to engender countermobilization -- in this case, white support for a system of private schools.

### **Conclusion**

The research presented in this paper speaks to several unresolved theoretical debates on the study of social movements and provides further insights into the process of institutional formation and social change. Overall, questions about the influence of social movements have received relatively less attention. Although there has been a substantial increase in the amount of research in this area, most studies and theoretical argument have focused on explaining impacts that are consistent with a movement's objectives (Amenta et al. 1994; Burstein et al. 1995; Button 1989; Gamson 1975; Giugni 1998; Piven and Cloward 1979). However, as Amenta and Young (1999) argue "it is possible for challenges to worse than merely fail to achieve goals" (26). The core claim of this

paper is that understanding the consequences of movements requires an analysis of the interactions among movements, countermovements, and state actors.

Patterns of racial contention are undoubtedly shaped by racial competition as proposed by ecological theories. However, political processes and movement dynamics have effects independent or beyond these aggregate structural characteristics. The primary questions addressed here concern the relations between social movements, the political and legal context, and institutional outcomes.

The research argues that strategies of white resistance were shaped by broad features of the local social structure -- in this case, the relative size of the black population. The salience of this factor may be a proxy for perceived threat of interracial contact in schools, or it could be related to the indirect factor of white institutional control of schools and an electoral-political threat to white political dominance at the municipal and county level.

Aggregate structural characteristics are central but incomplete explanations of this particular case of countermobilization. The actions of the Supreme Court in the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision had differential effects for Mississippi school districts, which is reflected in higher levels of support for academies in the covered counties. The decision provided a window of opportunity when a new pathway of institutionalized resistance was open to would be challengers. Resource mobilization arguments have been faulted for overemphasizing organizational factors (at the expense of ideological and cultural factors) and for limited attention to the factors external to the movement. However, in this case, the organizational capacity of movements and countermovements explains the extent of white resistance to school desegregation. Many scholars have

noted that the process of movement mobilization sets in motion the process of countermobilization (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Luker 1984; Lo 1982; Zald and Useem 1987; Schwartz 1976). However, there have been few efforts to specify beyond a narrative or descriptive level the interactive dynamics of this process and the outcomes generated by these dynamics. By focusing on the process of institution building and transformation this analysis challenges prior research that focuses on education and white flight after the institutions had been established.

## **Appendix A: Research Design and Data**

### Research Design

My empirical questions focus on movement dynamics at the local level. This allows me to examine the substantial variation at the county level within Mississippi. This design strategy of conducting a case study with multiple sub-units allows scholars to effectively combine the historian's concern with case specificity with the more sociological objective of theory building and testing, and this strategy has been used with increasing frequency by historically-oriented sociologists (Amenta 1991). As a result, this research provides a useful model for examining processes of historical change.

For the dataset I use counties as the unit of analysis (N=81) for several reasons.<sup>28</sup> In Southern politics counties have much greater political significance than in other parts of the U.S. (Krane and Shaffer 1992). In addition, the Mississippi movement organized on a county-by-county basis attempting to build organizational structures at this level. As a case Mississippi provides significant variation on key variables such as the size of the black population, the presence and strength of local movements and the amount of change in local schools.

### Index of Movement Strength

How were local movements distributed throughout the state? Having summarized some of the basic factors associated with movement presence in Mississippi

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<sup>28</sup> I exclude Hinds County from the analysis reported here. Hinds County is an outlier because of its large population size, so its inclusion biases the estimates of the models presented in this paper. In the models, residual values are beyond three standard deviations from the predicted values.

communities, I will present a more refined comparison of the counties. For this purpose we need a reasonable indicator of the presence of civil rights activity in a county during the early 1960s. I have coded all Mississippi counties as having either sustained, episodic or no civil rights activity in the early 1960s. This measure is based on a multidimensional index that combines seven indicators of movement activity from 1961 to 1966: (1) a SNCC or CORE project prior to Freedom Summer, (2) an NAACP chapter in 1963, (3) an MFDP chapter in 1965, (4) an NAACP chapter in 1966, (5) participation in Freedom Summer, (6) participation in the 1963 Freedom Vote, and (7) participation in the 1964 Freedom Vote. Counties with zero or one indicator of movement activity are considered non-movement counties. Counties with two to four indicators of movement activity are labeled episodic movement counties, and counties that had five to seven indicators of movement activity are considered sustained movement counties.

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