

Racial Inequality and Attitudes:

Reflections on Some of the Micro-processes Involved

Lawrence D. Bobo
W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences,
Harvard University

Presidential Plenary Session
American Sociological Association
August 10, 2013
New York Hilton

An Agenda

- Snapshot 40 years ago: Ebb of Jim Crow Racism
- Elements of the New or Laissez Faire Racism
 - Social distance/#s and domain matter
 - No government or social obligation
 - Rejection of strong affirmative action
 - Persistent negative stereotypes
 - Cultural blame for disadvantage
 - Resentment of black demands
- Attitudes, Behavior, and Sociological Meaning

Table 1 Whites' responses to racial attitude questions, General Social Survey (GSS) 1972-1973^a

	National	Region		Education			Age		
		North	South	> 12	12	13+	18-33	34-50	51+
Racial Principles									
Whites first chance at jobs (RACJOB)	3%	3	5	7	2	0.3	1	4	5
Blacks should go to separate schools (RACSCHOL)	13	8	31	26	9	3	7	16	17
Not vote for black president (RACPRES)	25	18	48	36	22	15	16	24	35
Favor laws against intermarriage (RACMAR)	37	31	53	59	33	18	23	37	51
Right to segregate neighborhoods (RACSEG)	39	35	53	53	38	24	26	39	52
Home sellers can discriminate in sales (RACOPEN)	64	60	73	70	68	54	52	67	73
Social Distance Feelings									
Object to same SES black neighbor (RACOBJCT)	13	9	25	19	12	7	7	13	18
Object to school with few blacks (RACFEW)	7	4	16	12	5	3	4	6	11
Object to school with half blacks (RACHALF)	17	14	26	22	16	12	12	18	21
Object to school with mostly blacks (RACMOST)	41	41	45	38	43	44	40	45	40
Object to black dinner guest (RACDIN)	30	23	46	38	32	18	26	31	32
Government Policy on Race									
Opposes school busing (BUSING)	86	84	94	87	88	83	80	88	90
Too much spending on blacks (NATRACE)	26	22	34	33	26	19	20	28	30
Miscellaneous									
Blacks shouldn't push (RACPUSH)	74	71	83	81	75	58	61	76	84

^a N ranges between 960-2,583. GSS variable mnemonics in parentheses. Data are from the 1972 GSS, except for RACOPEN and NATRACE (1973).

Patterns from the Early Years of the GSS

Three Optimistic Trends Circa 1972/73

1. Endorsement of Jim Crow principles has yielded to preferred ideals of Integration and Equal Treatment
2. Endorsement of Integration seemed to reach beyond mere principle
3. Sharp differences separate North from South, Young from Old, and Better Educated from the Poorly Educated

Patterns from the Early Years of the GSS

Three Pessimistic Trends Circa 1972/73

4. The number of Blacks in Hypothetical Contact Situations Matters Enormously to Whites
5. No Enthusiasm Among Whites for Strong Government/Societal Obligation to Reduce Racial Inequality
6. Early Signs of Collective Resentment ("Blacks shouldn't push themselves where they're not wanted")

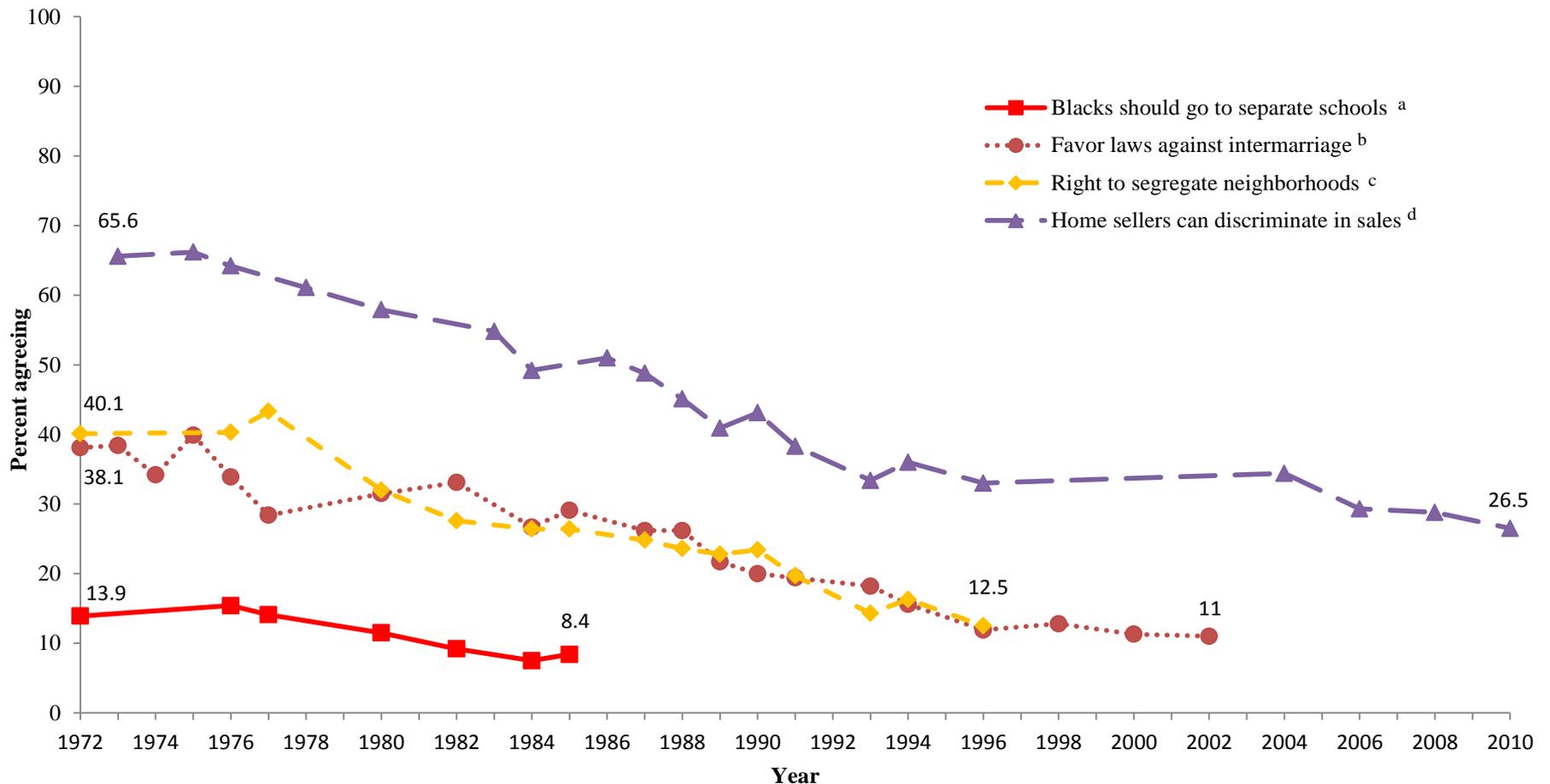


Figure 1 Whites' attitudes toward racial principles

^a “Do you think white students and (Negro/Black) students should go to the same schools or separate schools?” (“separate schools” coded as agreeing)
^b “Do you think there should be laws against marriages between (Negroes/Blacks/African Americans) and whites?” (“yes” coded as agreeing)
^c “White people have a right to keep (Negroes/Blacks/African Americans) out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and (Negroes/Blacks/African Americans) should respect that right.” (“agree strongly” and “agree slightly” coded as agreeing)
^d “Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on. One law says that a homeowner can decide for himself whom to sell his house to, even if he prefers not to sell to (Negroes/Blacks/African Americans). The second law says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color. Which law would you vote for?” (“owner decides” coded as agreeing)

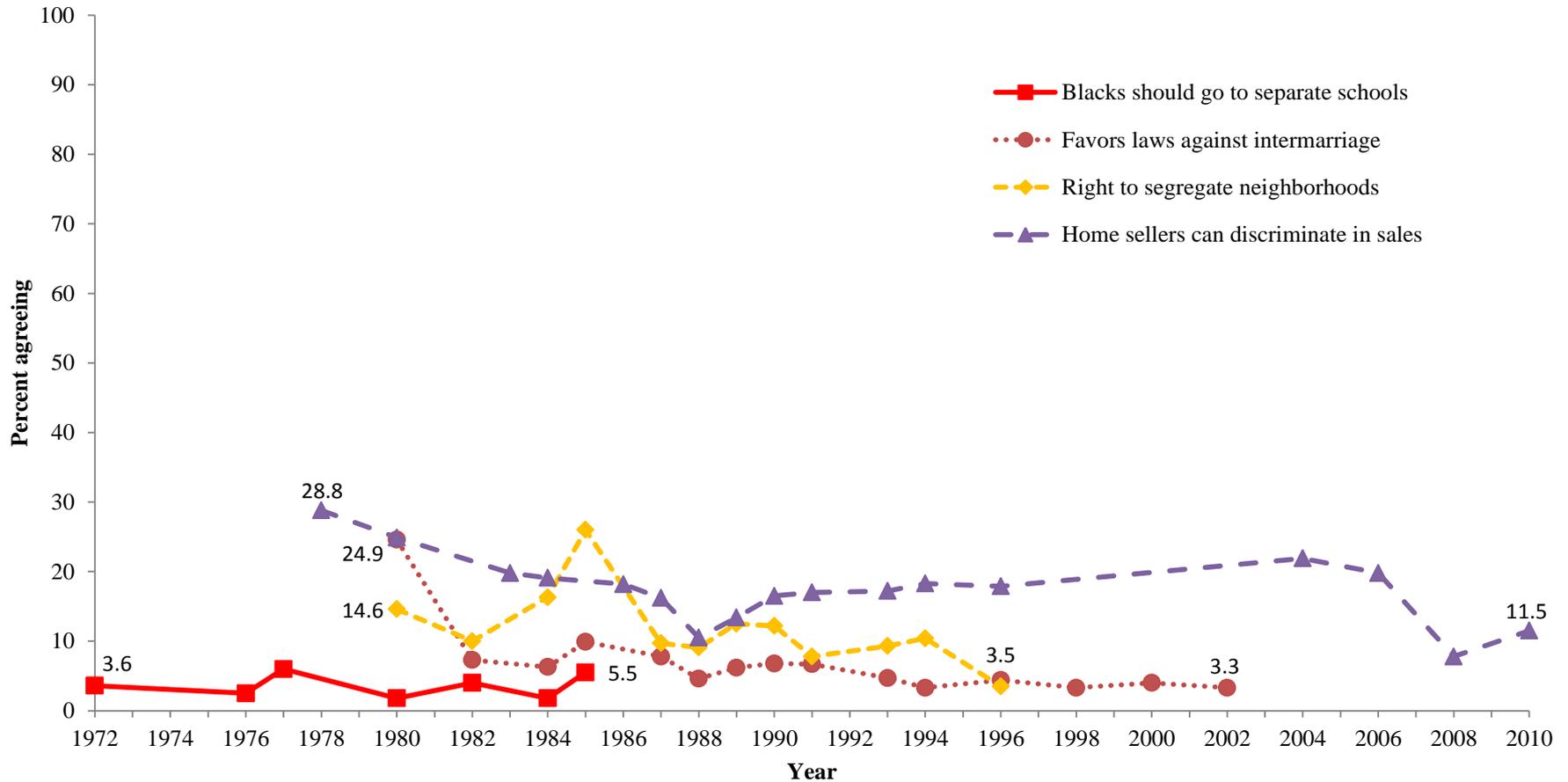


Figure 3 Blacks' attitudes toward racial principles ^a

^a See Figure 1 for question wording

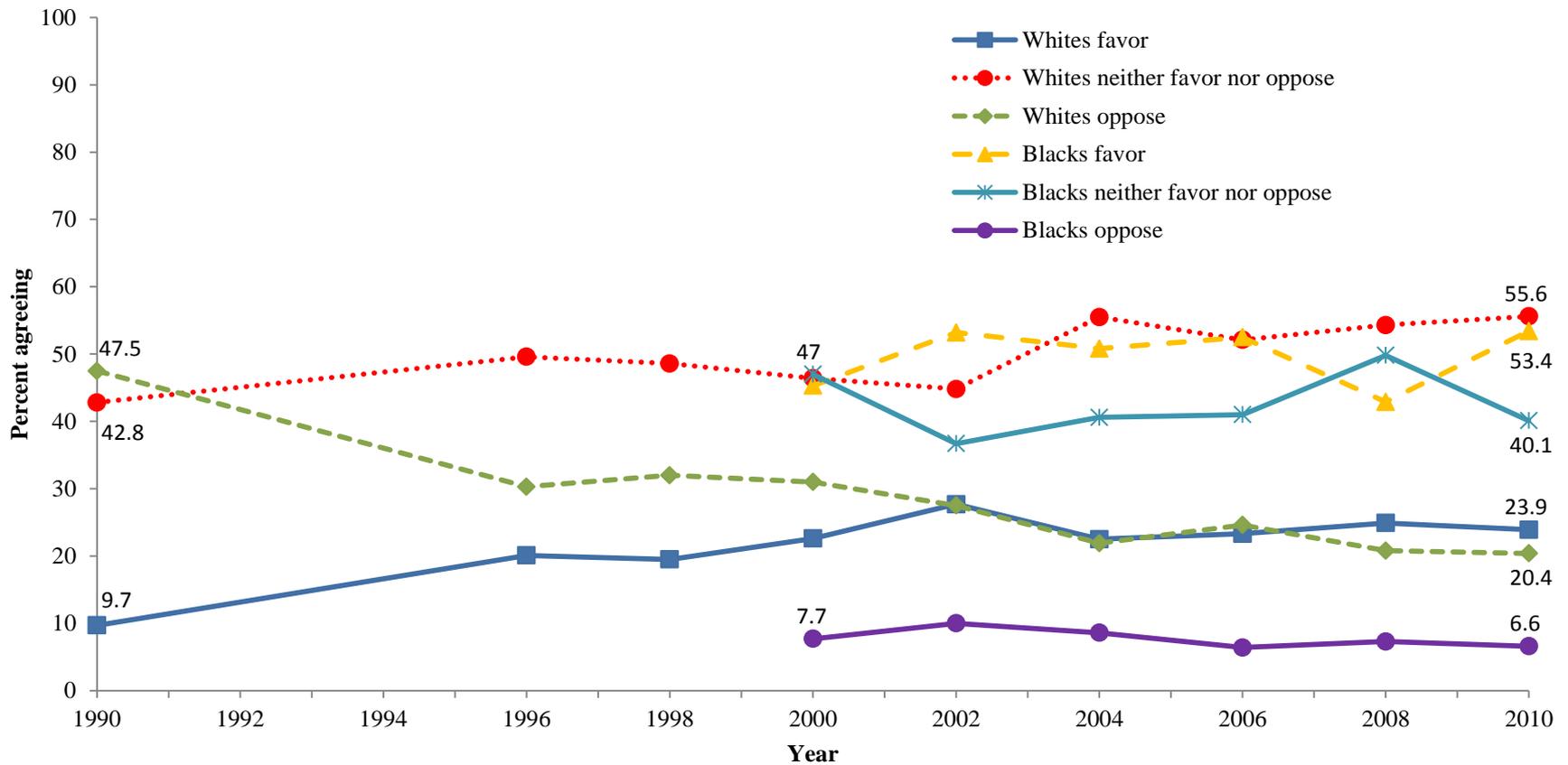


Figure 5 Opinion toward living in a neighborhood where half of the residents are opposite race ^a

^a “Now I’m going to ask you about different types of contact with various groups of people. In each situation would you please tell me whether you would be very much in favor of it happening, somewhat in favor, neither in favor nor opposed to it happening, somewhat opposed, or very much opposed to it happening? Living in a neighborhood where (half of your neighbors were whites/half of your neighbors were blacks)?” (white responses are about black neighborhoods and black responses about white neighborhoods)

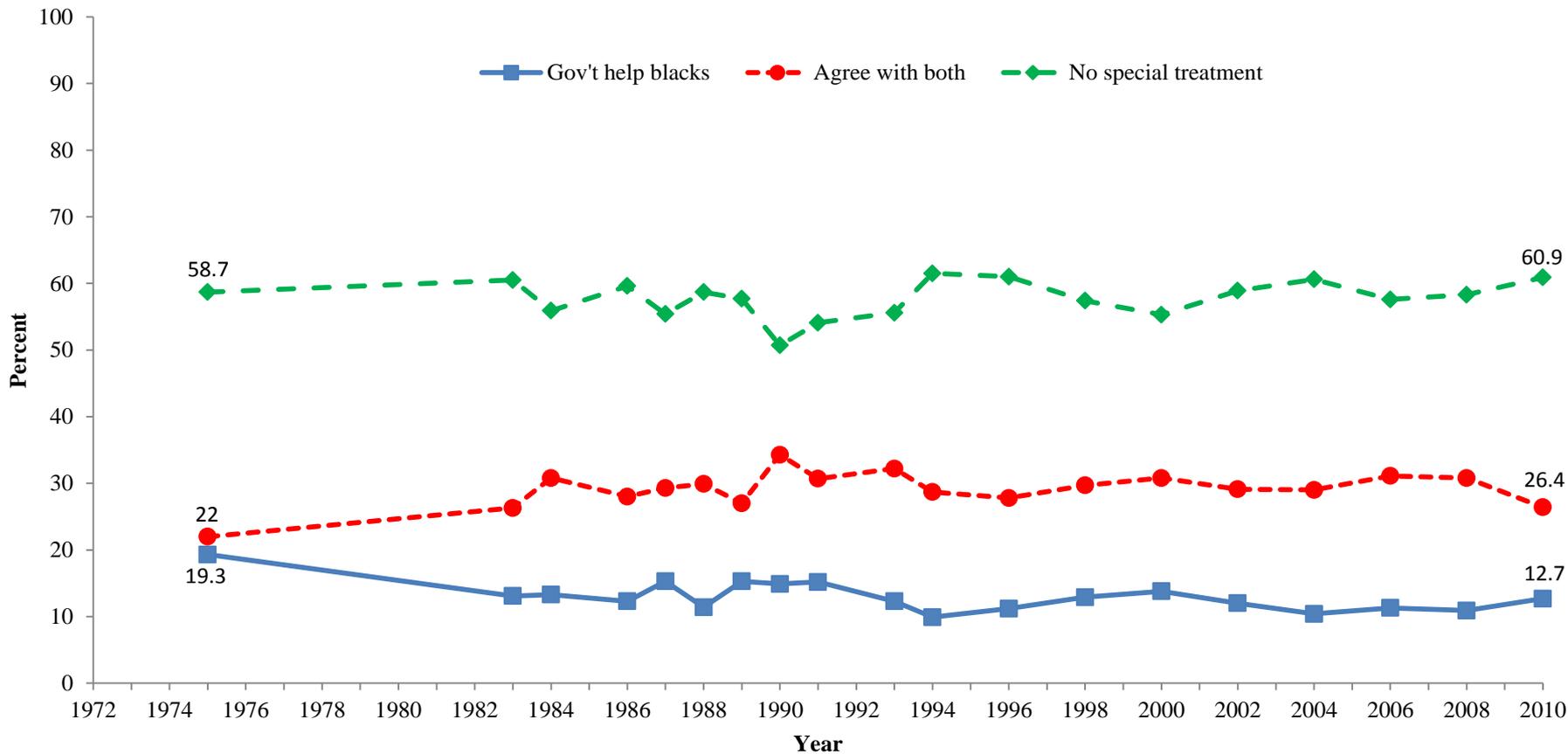


Figure 7 White attitudes toward government aid for blacks ^a

^a “Some people think that (Blacks/Negroes/African-Americans) have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to (Blacks/Negroes/African-Americans). Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you made up your mind on this?” (“1-2” coded as government help blacks, “3” coded as agree with both, and “4-5” coded as no special treatment)

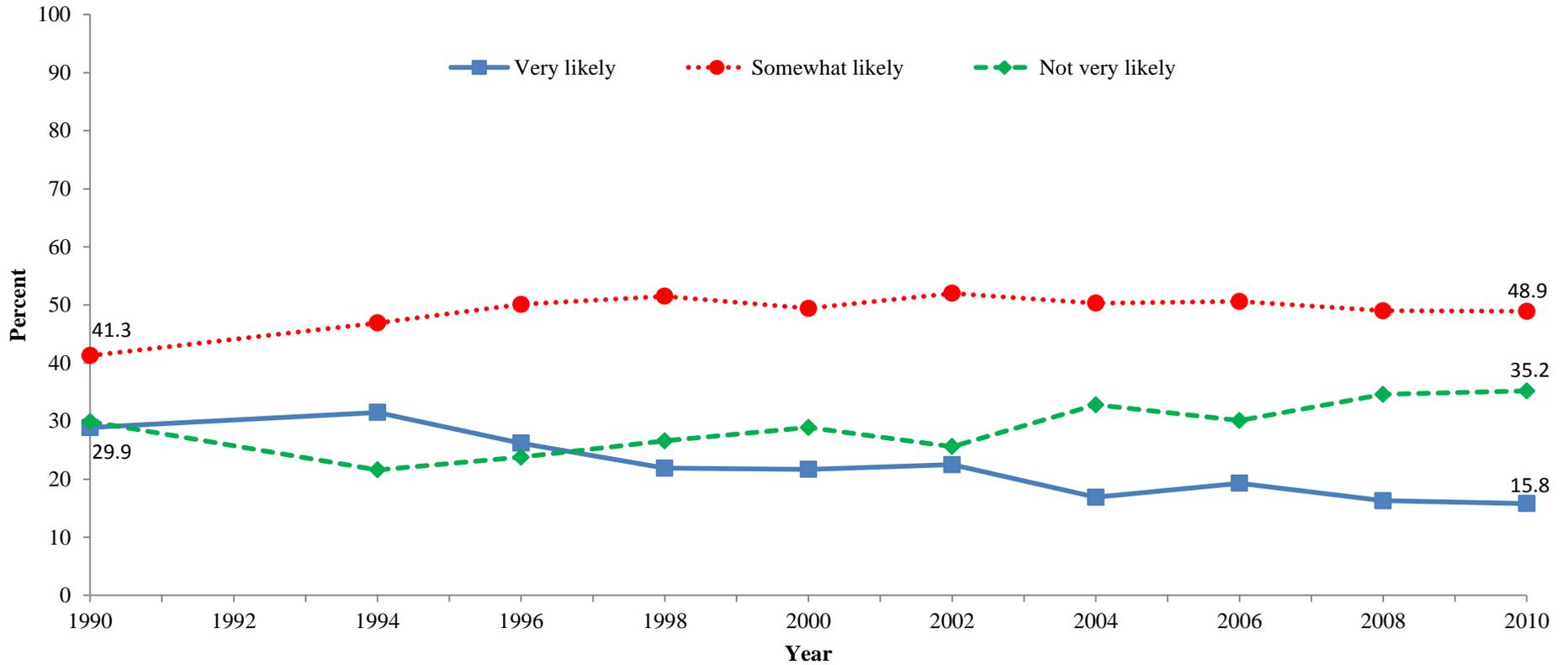


Figure 8 Whites' belief about the likelihood of affirmative action hurting whites ^a

^a "What do you think the chances are these days that a white person won't get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified black person gets one instead? Is this very likely, somewhat likely, or not very likely to happen these days?"

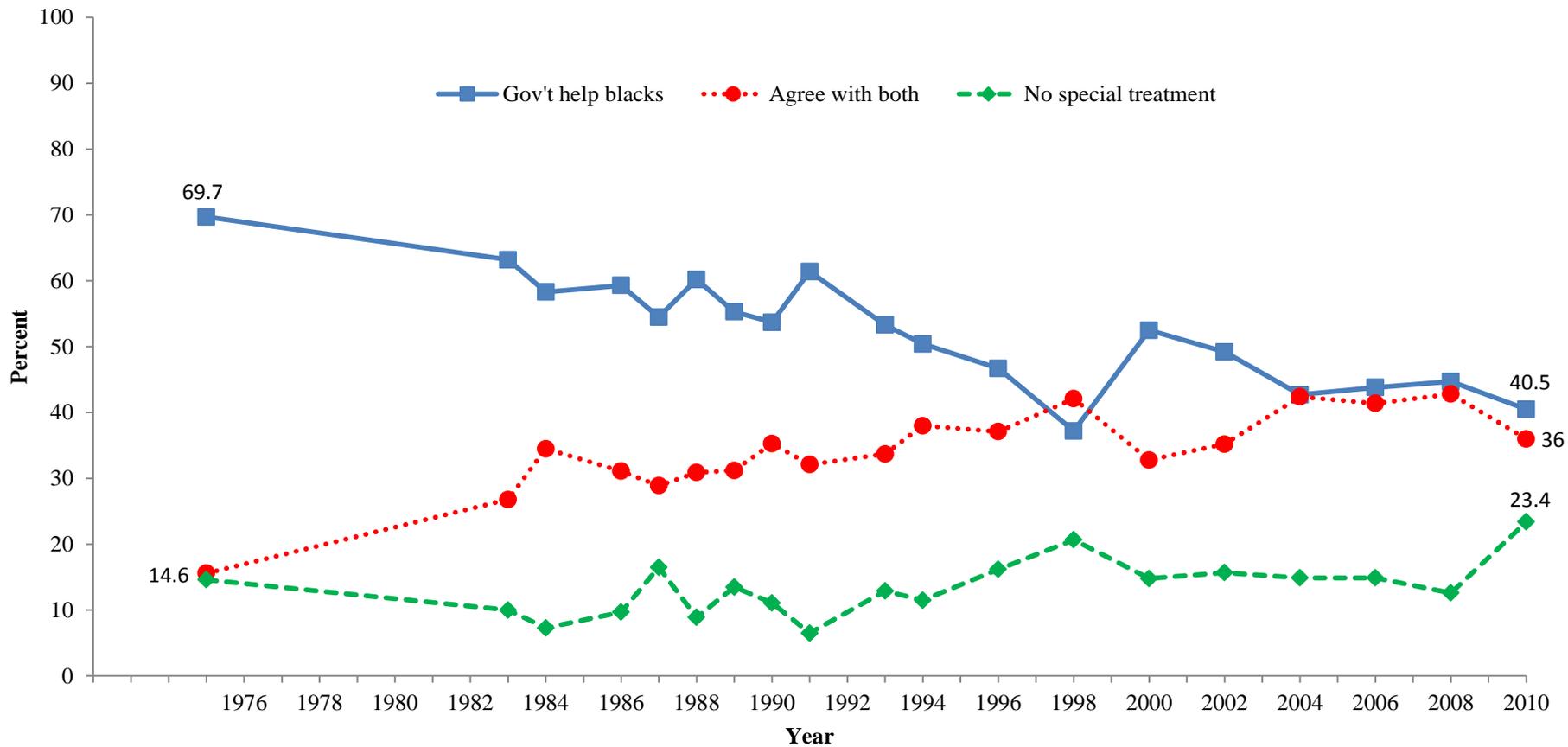


Figure 9 Blacks' attitudes toward government aid for blacks ^a

^a See Figure 7 for question wording.

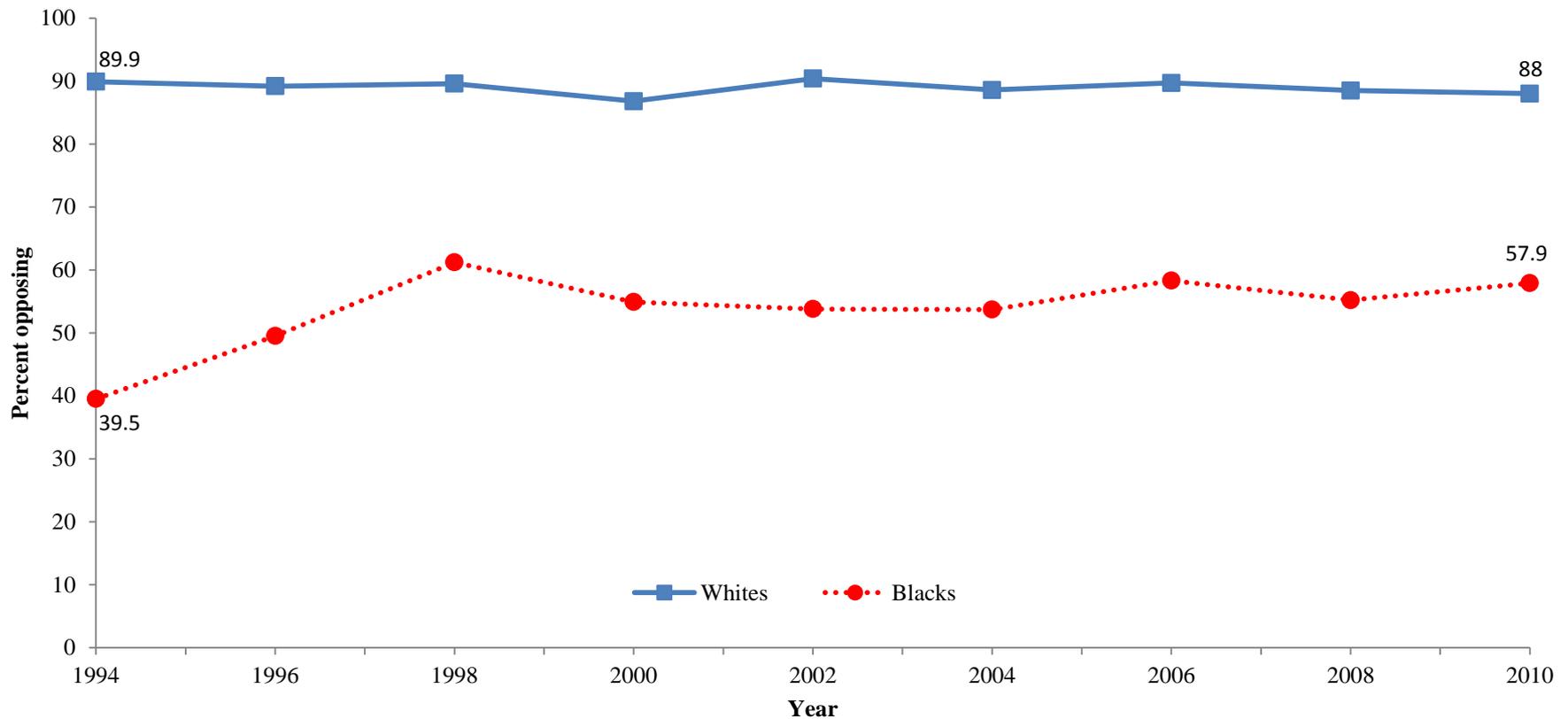


Figure 10 Opposition to preference in hiring or promotion for blacks^a

^a “Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it discriminates against whites. What about your opinion – are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks? If favors: Do you favor preference in hiring and promotion strongly or not strongly? If opposes: Do you oppose preference in hiring and promotion strongly or not strongly?” (“strongly oppose” and “oppose” coded as opposing)

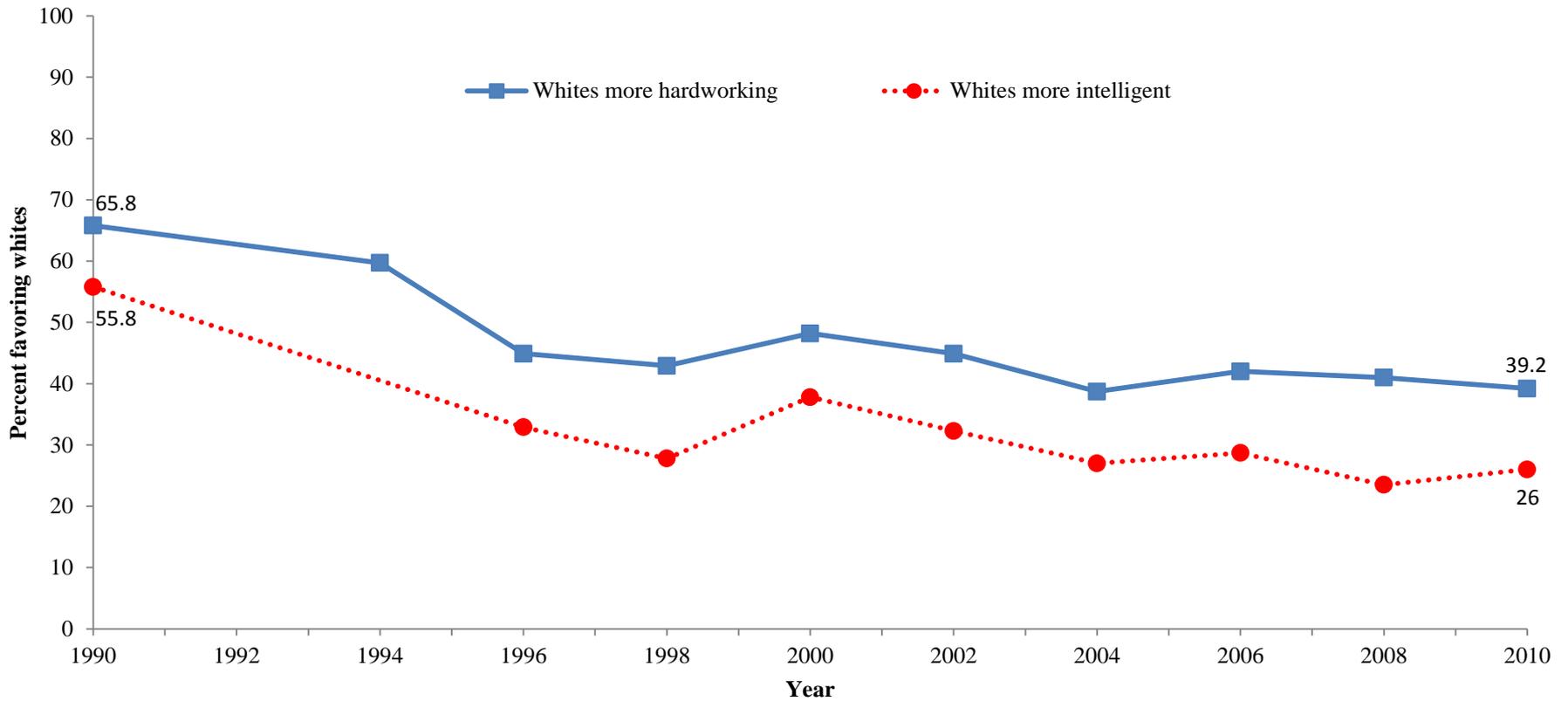


Figure 11 Whites’ ratings of whites’ industriousness ^a and intelligence ^b in comparison ^c to blacks

^a “The second set of characteristics asks if people in the group tend to be hard-working or if they tend to be lazy. Where would you rate whites in general on this scale? Blacks?”

^b “Do people in these groups tend to be unintelligent or tend to be intelligent? Where would you rate whites in general on this scale? Blacks?”

^c The figure plots percentages of whites who rated whites higher than blacks on a given trait (industriousness or intelligence). Seven percent of whites rated blacks as more hardworking than whites, and six percent rated blacks as more intelligent.

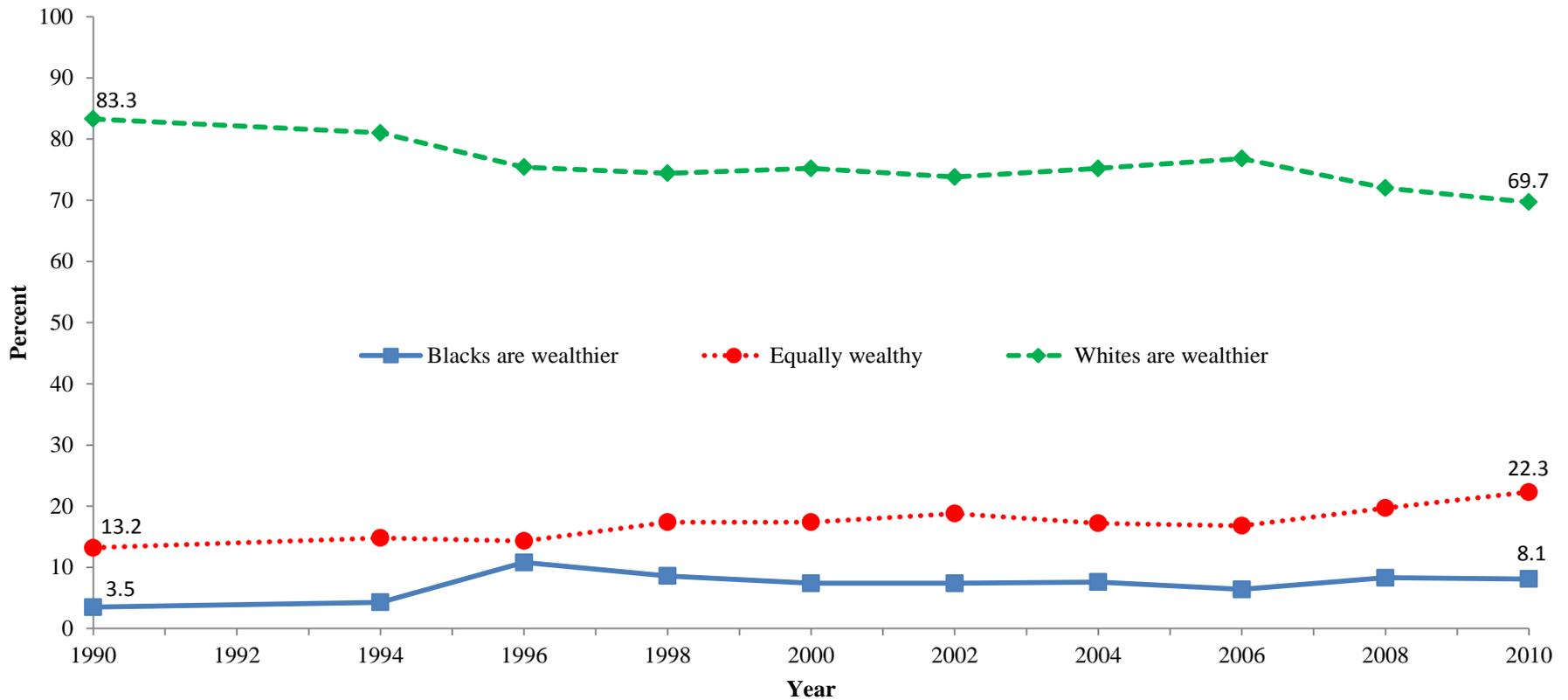
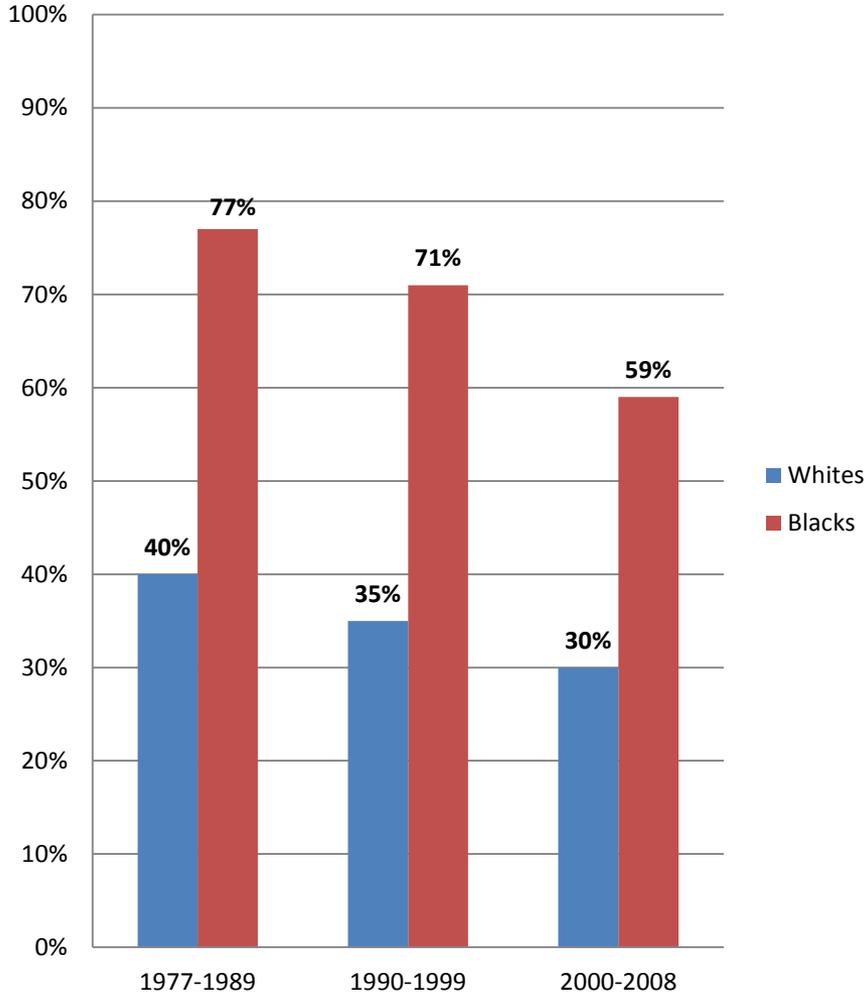


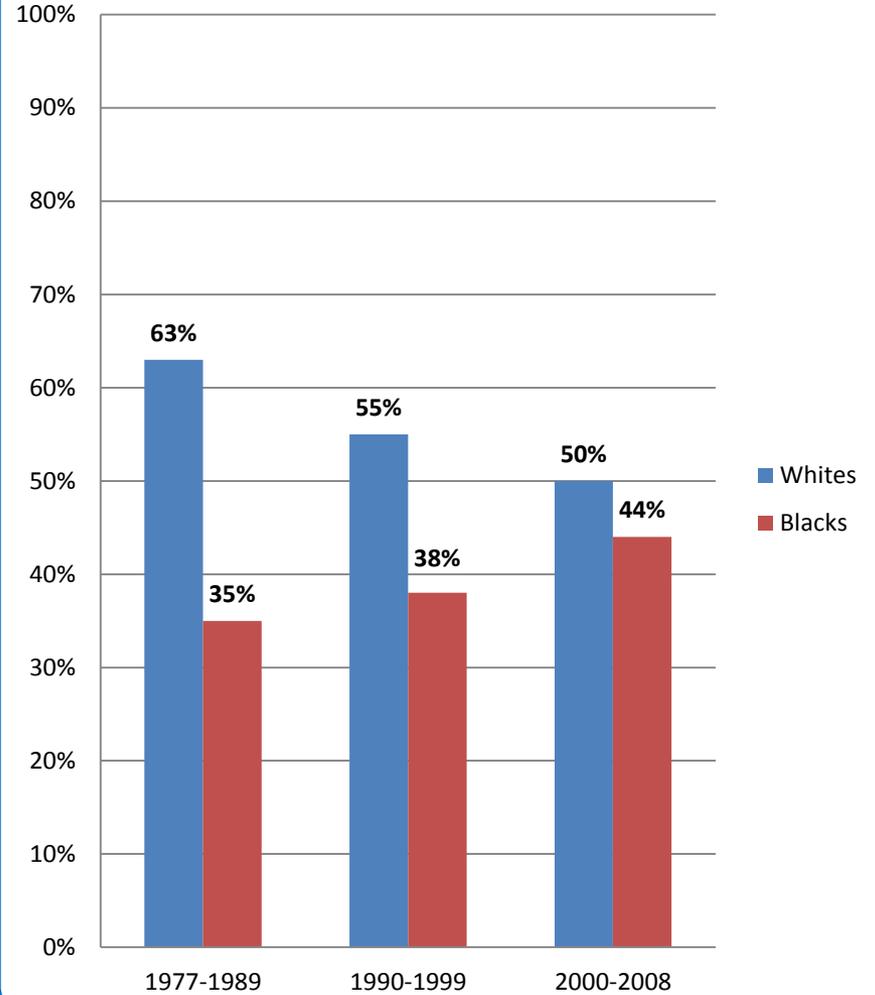
Figure 12 Whites' ratings of whites' wealth in comparison to blacks^a

^a "Now I have some questions about different groups in our society. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the characteristics of people in a group can be rated. In the first statement a score of 1 means that you think almost all of the people in that group are "rich." A score of 7 means that you think almost everyone in the group are "poor." A score of 4 means you think that the group is not towards one end or another, and of course you may choose any number in between that comes closest to where you think people in the group stand. Where would you rate whites in general on this scale? Blacks?" The figure plots the percentages of whites who rate blacks higher than whites on the 1-7 wealth scale, who rate the two groups equally, and who rate whites higher than blacks.

Percent Attributing Black-White Inequality to Racial Discrimination



Percent Attributing Black White Inequality to Lack of Motivation and Will Power



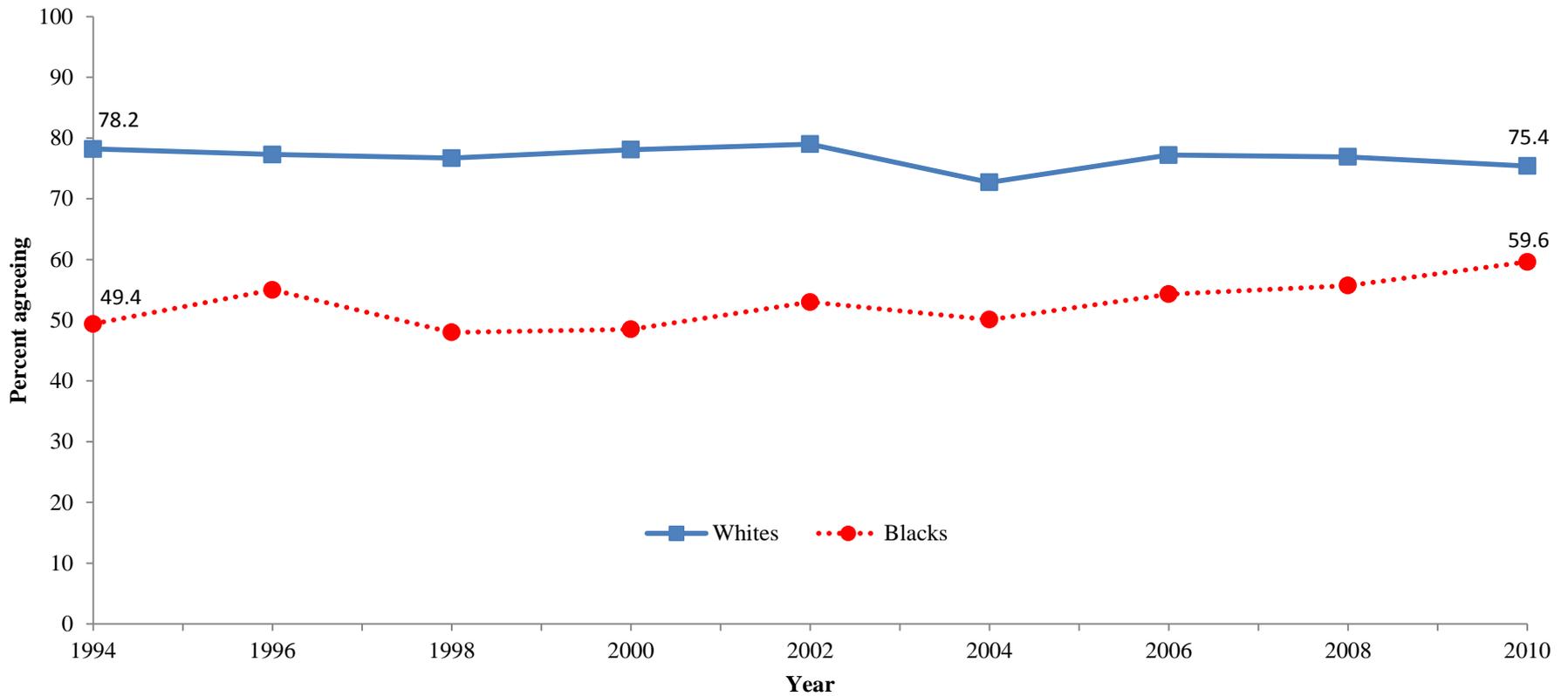


Figure 15 Belief that blacks should overcome prejudice without special favors ^a

^a “Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with the following statement: Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.” (“agree strongly” and “agree” somewhat coded as agree.)

Conclusions about White Attitudes

1. Normative Change
2. Racial Social Distance Preferences and Hierarchy
3. Weak Support for Government/Societal Obligations to Reduce Inequality
4. Negative Stereotypes Persist
5. Accounts of Inequality More Cultural
6. Affective Distance
7. High Collective Racial Resentment Social Distance Preferences and Hierarchy

Conclusions about Black Attitudes

1. Always Rejected Jim Crow/ Affirmed Principle of Equality, Non- discrimination, and Integration
2. Trend away from Structural-Discrimination Based Accounts of Racial Inequality to Culture Based Accounts
3. Slight Trend Away from Support for Government/Societal Obligation to Reduce Racial Inequality
4. Affective Distance from Whites

“But the responsibility of the historian or sociologist who studies racism is not to moralize and condemn but to understand this malignancy so that it can be more effectively treated, just as a medical researcher studying cancer does not moralize about it but searches for knowledge that might point the way to a cure.”

-George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*

“The legacy of the past racism directed at blacks in the United States is more like a bacillus that we have failed to destroy, a live germ that not only continues to make some of us ill but retains the capacity to generate new strains of a disease for which we have no certain cure.”

-George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*