

An Analysis of Public Sector Employment, Race, Education, and Women's Wages in the 1980s

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Abstract. This essay examines the role that U.S. public-sector employment played in shaping access to jobs and wage levels among Black and White non-Hispanic women between 1980 and 1990. Comparing Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC) microdata, government shares in jobs and deflated, calendar-year wages (in 2000 dollars) are compared between education categories (High School or less, some college/associate's degree, Bachelor or more). Three empirical patterns organize the findings. First, public jobs provided a stable wage floor: low-tail percentiles (p10–p25) were higher and dispersion typically lower in the public sector, especially among non-BA Black women. First, as Black women remained disproportionately focused on government jobs, public-sector attachment declined across the decade, with steeper drops among Black women and lower convergence with White women. Third, sectoral wage trends diverged: among other White women, private medians increased as compared to the public sector by 1990, while among college/AA-attending Black women, the public median rose while the private median leveled off, supporting the sheltering from low-tail risk that underpins the public sector. The decade-to-decade comparison between median growth—the public up while the private median earnings were generally flat—a testament to the stabilizing impact that the public sector has on earnings in the presence of wider changes. A very brief mechanism discussion connects these results to pay systems in the civil service, transparency, unionization, and changing fiscal/enforcement environments.

Keywords: Public sector employments, race and gender wage disparities, black women in the labor forces, affirmative action, wage inequality.

1. Introduction

Job opportunities have significantly expanded for African American women in the years after the Civil Rights Movement, and a considerable amount of these new employment opportunities were provided by public-sector employment. This paper investigates the employment and wage status of Black women in the public sector and private sector from 1972 to 2002 relative to White non-Hispanic women. This paper is intended to inquire into this specific research question: How did the public sector contribute to economic opportunities for Black women in the post-Civil Rights era, and to what extent did it help narrow racial disparities in female employment and earnings? This research question is important because public-sector employment was regarded as a crucial ladder of

social mobility for many African Americans in the late twentieth century, especially in metropolitan areas with relatively large black populations. Understanding these changes through a year-by-year comparative framework would provide insights into the legacy of the Civil Rights legislation and policies, as well as the status of racial equality in the American labor market.

This study focuses on 1980-1990, which covers a fairly transformative period in American economic history. Landmark laws regarding equal rights in the workplace, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, outlawed employment discrimination based on color, religion, sex, or national origin, which further extended to jobs provided by all levels of the government. Meanwhile, Federal Executive Order 11246, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was also taking an active role in affirmative action for government contractors. These measures open doors for Black Women, an intersectional group who have long been excluded from occupations with high status, especially in those public Agencies. As a result, by the late 20th century, an employed Black woman was more likely than a White woman to work in the public sector. Reagan's Union-busting campaign, his fiscal conservatism, and his distaste for Affirmative Action have made further significant transformations in this period.

This paper uses microdata from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) for 1980-1990 to document these historical trends in detail. These two outcomes will be specifically analyzed. First, access to public-sector employment, measured by the share of workers in government. Second, statistics on real wage levels adjusted in 2000 dollars for Black and White women. The analysis will also include an analysis of the comparison between Black and White women at different educational levels to better understand which specific demographic group will be more affected.

This paper will be organized into the following sections. The first part summarizes the influence of civil rights laws and labor policies on black women's employment from 1980 to 1990, covering relevant literature; The third part explains the CPS data and methods used in the empirical study; The fourth part presents and discusses the evolution of the employment rate and wages of black and white women in the public sector from 1980 to 1990; The fifth part summarizes the findings and the enlightenment to understand the economic progress in the post-civil rights era. Its innovation lies in revealing the public sector as a carrier of equal rights for the first time with typical national facts, and analyzing the situation of different education levels. The precise timing and magnitude of Black women's public sector employment will be evaluated.

2. Historical background & historiography

The U.S. Public sector was historically an avenue for women's employment advancement, especially for African American women. Before the 1960s, African American women were mainly constrained to low-status jobs, usually domestic services, and clerical, professional, and administrative jobs were not usually open for African American women[1]. After the mid-1960s, the public sector started to offer new opportunities to this demographic group due to various civil rights legislation. Great Society programs in education, health, and social services expanded government hiring, along activists' efforts increased the participation of African Americans in those jobs. Other empirical data also illustrated decadal changes that have granted more equal employment opportunities for Black women. In 1960, one-third of all employed Black women were private household workers, while only 3% of white women worked in this industry; fewer than 20% of Black women with a high school diploma held clerical jobs, while about half of white women did. By 1980, less than 8% of black women remained in domestic services, and representation in clerical office work had more than tripled [2]. The Black-white occupational dissimilarity index decreased

about 30% from 1960 to 1980, indicating a more equalized occupational distribution of white women and African American women in the post-Civil Rights era [3]. Despite public-sector hiring as the driver for these changes, unions also played a role in this transformation: evidence illustrated that unions substantially narrowed Black-White wage gaps. In addition, Black women have performed higher unionization rates relative to white women [4]. Other works also show how Unionism helped build an antiracist, feminist environment for African American females in university workplaces [5]. The convergence of Civil Rights legislation, affirmative actions in the public sector, and Unionism significantly expanded opportunities for Black women by the late 1970s.

However, this trend was overturned in the 1980s. the administration's conservative agenda posed new challenges to women's public sector employment, especially to Black women. The platform of the new administration largely focused on reducing the size of the federal government, cutting domestic spending, and repealing affirmative action and related regulations. The use of numerically based goals and timetables for past discrimination was retrieved [6]; a Department of Justice report even claims Affirmative Action as fundamentally unjust [7]. The budget cuts halted expending social programs and federal aid to cities; Federal agencies themselves faced hiring freezes and budget cuts in the field of education and social services. The burden of these cuts was not evenly applied across all ethnicities and genders in the public sector. As many budget cuts severely affect public sector employment in social services and clerical work, women are more likely to be affected by these layoffs because they are more concentrated in these fields [8]. Meanwhile, the Federal government was a less aggressive actor in affirmative action enforcement. As president, Reagan himself was skeptical of affirmative action programs; his administration pulled back from the affirmative action commitment of the prior era. For instance, he reduced funding for the EEOC and appointed officials who opposed broad affirmative remedies. One practice taken by the Reagan Administration is making a distinction between "victims" and "non-victims" of employment discrimination, which only the latter are "entitled to relief under Title VII", in which it transferred a massive social phenomenon onto individual victims [9]. It ultimately resulted in a contraction in the public employment opportunities for African American Women that had widened in previous decades. Whereas the 1970s witnessed growth in opportunities for Black women, the 1980s saw the growth stagnate, or even reverse.

A fairly rich body of literature in economics, sociology, and history has reviewed the importance of public-sector employment as a driver for gender and racial equality. Black women have been consistently overrepresented in the public sector employment, and public sector employment was a crucial pathway for Black women into stable, middle-class work. By the late twentieth century, it was also well established that a Black women was more likely to work in a government job than a white woman in which 54 percent of black women in the labor force are in the private for profit sector, while a larger proportion of while women worked in this sector [10]; Another literature also noted that about half of employed black women worked in the "government or state-related jobs", which provided more opportunities for black women [11]. Contemporary labor force data illustrated continuity of this imbalance: 22% of Black women were employed in the public sector, while white women only composed 15-18% [12]. This gap reflects historical access in which the public sector is a "shelter" for African Americans to take refuge from discrimination in the private sector. This was largely concluded to provide greater access to higher education, and affirmative action hiring enabled African women to work in occupations that they were deemed "unqualified" for.[13] Researchers have also delved into sectoral pay trends and job quality, and they found that public-sector employment generally worked as a role for reducing gender and racial wage disparities.

Research suggested that the local government was performing as a better “model employer” relative to the Federal occupations in providing fair wages for women and Black workers [14]. Federal occupations also helped to narrow the male-female pay gap from 1976 to 1992 [15]. For the extent of male-female wage gaps among those who have attended higher degrees, it was found that there is a gradual decrease of female college graduates average pay rising from 72% to 89% of men’s from 1983 to 2003 [16]. An increasing number of women are found to be working in administrative and professional occupations in the federal civil service relative to men, which implies potential salary and representative increase for women with higher education or a college degree in public sector employment. Another piece of literature gave mixed results for sexual and gender discrimination in the public and private sector, with the government sector performing well in wage discrimination against blacks; However, there is no significant discrimination found in the private sector against women in the field of electronic engineers [17]. Another factor that affects such wage gap is from better unionization in the public sector. Research concluded that public sector unionization reduced wage differential between male and female workers through legal means [18].

3. Data, measurement, and research design

This study relies on microdata from the CPS-ASEC, covering the years 1980 to 1990. This data source would work as an authoritative source for labor market statistics in the United States.

This research will focus on Black and White non-Hispanic women aged 25-54. Such a combination is meant to provide a stable working-age sample, which could potentially capture the labor market attachment and minimize possible age-related differences in employment behaviors. The research scope is limited to the wages and salaries of workers in public or private sectors, excluding self-employed individuals, members of the armed forces, and unpaid domestic workers. These restrictions ensure a consistent and reflective comparison of the extent of wage and employment in the core labor market experiences, as they respond to the question about the extent to which public sector employment serves as a social mobility ladder.

The primary empirical contribution of this study would be mainly defined by these two measures: First, the Sectoral Employment Classification by proportion, and second, wage level specific comparison by education, wage, and sector. For the former, this research will distinguish public and private sector employment by CPS variables, indicating the classification of workers. The definition of public-sector employees will be based on the definition provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which includes employment made by “the federal, state, and local” government ownerships, instead of the funding source. This research will cross-validate these classifications using CPS documentation and harmonize its classifications over time to ensure the definition of public sector employment is consistent from 1980 to 1990. The main comparison will fall into comparisons of employment shares between the public and private sectors. This comparative lens will be further consolidated by an educational level comparison among Black and White females in both public and private sectors. In specifically the educational stratification, existing statistics conventionally reported separately for three mutually exclusive education categories that map to CPS pre-1992 coding: HS or Less, Some college/AA, and BA or more.

For the latter part of this research, Annual wages will be captured by the CPS variable INCWAGE, representing respondents’ total wage and salary income in the previous calendar year. All nominal wages reported will be deflated to 2000 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) provided by the BLS, ensuring an accurate comparison across the decade. Therefore, the real wage yielded figures could be directly comparable across years. This

result will be presented as the mean annual real wage upon sectoral employment, race, and education. All measures are constructed by CPS-ASEC with explicit, stable definitions.

4. Findings

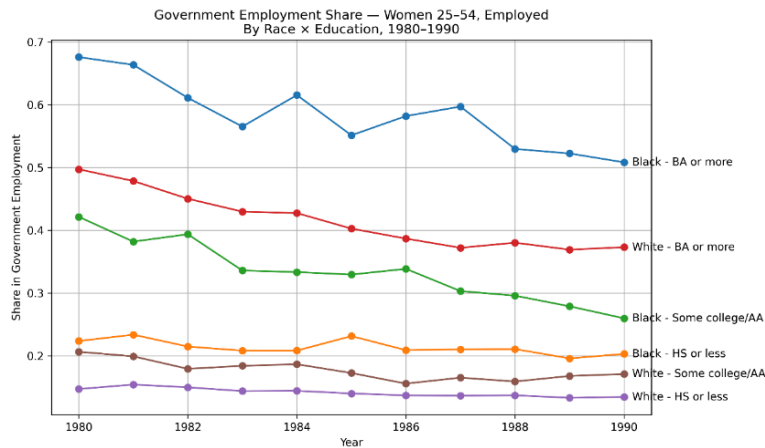


Figure 1. Government employment share by race x education, 1980-1990

As shown in Figure 1, due to policy and economic changes, the 1980s saw significant changes in the number of Black and female workers. In 1980, as in the previous five years, the proportion of Black women in government was significantly higher than that of White women. Throughout the decade, approximately one-third of prime-age Black women in employment were employed in the public sector, compared to approximately 25% of white women. The legacy of civil rights and affirmative action policies from the late 1960s to the 1970s, which allowed women and minorities to work in the civil service, greatly influenced the public sector's role as an equal-opportunity employer. However, these trends started to change in the 1980s when the Reagan administration began to reduce government spending and staffing. Slower growth was caused by federal budget cuts dominated by "small government" ideology, which led to a slower growth in public sector hiring, especially at the federal level, and state/local governments faced fiscal pressures, which hindered employment from its expansion. By 1990, about 27% of Black women and 21% of White women ages 25-54 were government employees, while by 1980, this number was over 30% for Black women. Black women remained over-represented in the public sector, but their advantage had diminished.

This decline has an uneven impact on black women with different educational backgrounds. In the 1980s, women's education level improved. Among the golden-age women, those with four-year college education or above rose from 18.7% in 1980 to 24.5% in 1990, but the increase was mainly driven by white women, and the growth rate of black women's college graduation rate lagged behind; the racial gap persisted. In 1980, 67.6% of black women with bachelor's degrees or above and 42.2% of some black women with university/associate's degrees worked in the public sector, while the corresponding proportions of white women were 49.7% and 20.7%. Black women with high academic qualifications were more likely to be employed in the public sector. From 1980 to 1990, the employment rate of black and white women in the public sector declined, and the decline of black women was even greater. The decline of highly educated people is the most significant: the decline of black bachelor's degree or above is 16.8%, and that of some universities/associate degrees is 16.2%; White bachelor's and above dropped by 12.4%, while some universities/associate degrees

only dropped by 3.55%. Those with high school or below has a smaller decline, with blacks dropping by 2.1% and whites dropping by 1.3%. This shows that the groups that have benefited the most from civil rights legislation and affirmative action have been the hardest hit.

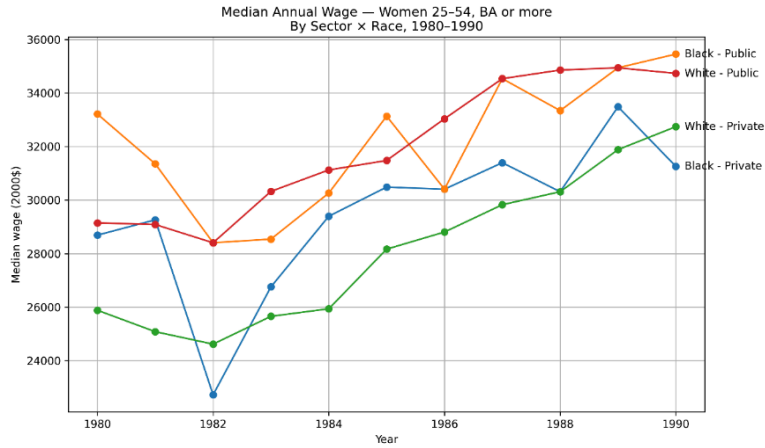


Figure 2. Median annual wage of BA or more by sector x race, 1980-1990.

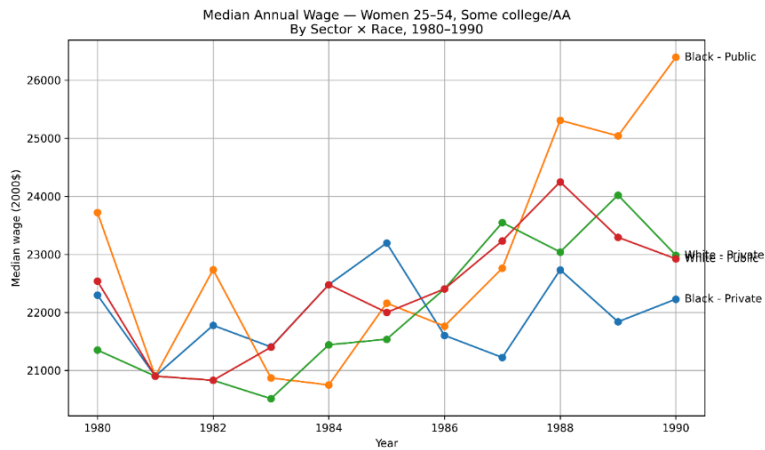


Figure 3. Median annual wage of some college/AA by sector x race, 1980-1990.

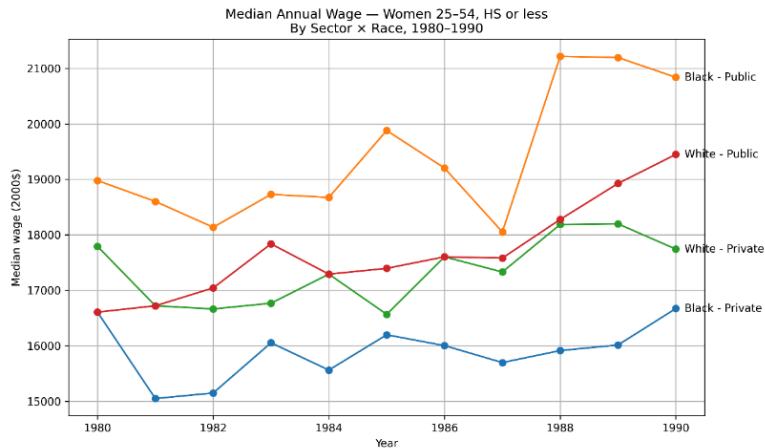


Figure 4. Median annual wage of HS or less by sector x race, 1980-1990.

Table 1. Wage percentiles (p10–p90) by sector, race, and education, 1980 & 1990

Year	sector	race	educ_bin	p10	p25	p50	p75	p90
1980	Private	Black	BA or more	7461.029	16606.42	28688.78	40329.88	52191.62
1980	Public	Black	BA or more	16642.01	24435.17	33212.85	45074.58	52191.62
1980	Private	White	BA or more	5456.396	14234.08	25882.3	36771.37	47921.39
1980	Public	White	BA or more	7911.774	20675	29149.02	38944.43	47921.39
1980	Private	Black	HS or less	4011.637	9489.385	16606.42	23248.99	32026.67
1980	Public	Black	HS or less	7117.038	11861.73	18978.77	27281.98	37456.97
1980	Private	White	HS or less	4270.223	9963.854	17792.6	24715.1	33212.85
1980	Public	White	HS or less	4189.563	8303.211	16606.42	24909.63	33212.85
1980	Private	Black	Some college/AA	6642.569	14234.08	22300.05	29654.33	37957.54
1980	Public	Black	Some college/AA	9558.183	14945.78	23723.46	33212.85	45074.58
1980	Private	White	Some college/AA	5219.162	12098.97	21351.12	29886.82	40329.88
1980	Public	White	Some college/AA	4744.692	12962.5	22537.29	29440.82	37957.54
1990	Private	Black	BA or more	10603.1	19450.13	31259.14	47236.03	63907.57
1990	Public	Black	BA or more	15282.24	27785.9	35453.42	48625.32	56961.09
1990	Private	White	BA or more	9725.065	20839.42	32741.52	46874.81	61128.98
1990	Public	White	BA or more	11114.36	25007.31	34732.37	44457.44	55571.8
1990	Private	Black	HS or less	5557.18	10836.5	16671.54	25007.31	34732.37
1990	Public	Black	HS or less	7557.765	12503.65	20839.42	30564.49	40289.55
1990	Private	White	HS or less	4584.673	10002.92	17742.69	26396.6	35218.63
1990	Public	White	HS or less	5001.462	10558.64	19450.13	27785.9	38900.26
1990	Private	Black	Some college/AA	7641.122	12781.51	22228.72	31953.78	41678.85
1990	Public	Black	Some college/AA	10419.71	16671.54	26396.6	34593.45	44457.44
1990	Private	White	Some college/AA	6668.616	13892.95	22984.5	33415.32	44457.44
1990	Public	White	Some college/AA	5601.637	13337.23	22923.37	33343.08	44457.44

Across the decade, three major characteristics were identified. First, the public sector maintains a wage floor advantage for women throughout the decade, especially for Black women at lower education levels. In most cells, the public median is higher than the private median in both the year of 1980 and 1990, as shown in Table 1. The “floor effect” of such income difference could possibly be associated with civil-service pay scales and union coverage: the lower tail (p10–p25) performs higher in the public sector relative to the private sector, and dispersion of wage level is relatively lower in the public sector, as summarized in Table 1. Second, the Private sector median grows faster for more educated female workers, and its most excellent performers are White women with a BA degree or above, as Figure 2 illustrates. The public-private median gap narrows over the 1980s and also narrows for females (see Figures 2–4). For white women with some college/AA education level, private sector median income even slightly edges past public median in the year 1990, as shown in Figure 3. If this trend was analysed along with upper-tail opportunities in 1990, this research observed a “ceiling effect” in the private sector in general, where upper-tail opportunities (p75–p90) expand more quickly, as reflected in Table 1. Third, for Black women, the public sector jobs perform higher for most education bins. The private median was uncertain throughout the

decade, but the public premium for Black women was preserved and even expanded, especially for HS or less and some college/AA, as Figures 3 and 4 indicate. The wage gap for African Women with a BA or above is narrow, but it happened much more gently than for White BA or above. In addition, wage dispersion in public remains lower than in private (Table 1). These three facts comprise a story of the decadal change over income: public employment continues to “shelter” women at the middle and lower part of the wage distribution, and black women are a bigger beneficiary of such shelter effect. However, private opportunities strengthened for highly educated women, especially white females, making public sector employees with higher education levels a less advantageous demographic group in terms of income. The rest of the section will elaborate on each education group.

For those women who attained a BA or more degree, median wages rose over the decade in both sectors for both Black and White women, as shown in Figure 2. The public means starts above the private throughout the decade for both ethnicities; However, gaps have narrowed (Figure 2). Black women with a BA degree or more witnessed a 6.7% increase in real income in the public sector, while there was a 9.0% increase in the private sector: the public-private median gap narrowed by 7.3% (Figure 2). For white women, the increase in public sector income is more significant, as they witnessed about a 19.1% increase in their real income. It was even more significant in the private sector, with a 26.5% increase; the wage gap has narrowed by about 39% (Figure 2). The dispersion of both private and public sectors among both ethnicities has also witnessed a considerable increase; however, upper-tail growth was stronger in the private sector in general (Table 1). The p10–p90 for White women in the private sector increased by 21% while in the public sector it increased by 11.1%. For Black women, the private sector increased by 19.2% and 17.3% in the public sector. In general, the gain at the upper tail is the main driver for increasing wage dispersion; the public sector is also generally less dispersed than the private, even as the public premium narrows modestly for both ethnicities (Table 1).

Movements are more racially inclusive and diverse for women with some college or AA. By the end of the decade, private-sector medians among White women are slightly higher than public-sector medians, and in some years (as shown in the annual series), the two medians are approximately equal: the White private median increases from \$21,351 (1980) to \$22,984 (1990) (+7.6%), while the public median increases from \$22,537 to \$22,923 (+1.7%), leaving only a \$61 private lead in 1990, as Figure 3 shows. The p10 and p25 near the lower tail show a mixed floor: p10 is higher in both private years (1980: \$5,219 private vs. \$4,745 public; 1990: \$6,669 vs. \$5,602), while p25 moves from a public advantage in 1980 (\$12,963 public vs. \$12,099 private) to a slight private edge by 1990 (\$13,893 vs. \$13,337), patterns summarized in Table 1. However, private earnings gains accumulate over the decade around the media and above (e.g., White private p75 increases from \$29,887 to \$33,415, +11.8%, versus public earnings from \$29,441 to \$33,343, +13.3%, with the median closing the sectoral gap). At some colleges/AA, the public sector still dominates the private median for Black women: \$22,300 → \$22,229 (−0.3%) in private versus \$23,723 → \$26,397 (+11.3%) in public; additionally, the distribution below the median (p10–p25) is significantly more favorable in public employment. At some college/AA, the public sector still dominates the private median for Black women—\$23,723 increased to \$26,397 (+11.3%) in public versus \$22,300 increased to \$22,229 (−0.3%) in private—and the distribution below the median (p10–p25) is significantly more favorable in public employment (1980: p10 \$9,558 public vs \$6,643 private; p25 \$14,946 vs \$14,234; 1990: p10 \$10,420 vs \$7,641; p25 \$16,672 vs \$12,782), as reflected in Figure 3 and Table 1. This combination of competitive medians and stronger floors helps

explain why, despite declining aggregate public employment shares, the public sector continued to be a key wage anchor for Black women with mid-level education.

The public sector employment generally had better income outcomes relative to the private sector employment for employees from both ethnicities. Public median wage witnessed a 9.8% increase through the decade for black women and a 17.1% increase for White women; median wage in private sector employment stayed nearly unchanged, with only a 0.4% increase for Black women and a 0.3% decrease for white women, as Figure 4 indicates. Same as the previous two demographic groups, public dispersion remains less volatile and with higher floors (Table 1). Generally, at lower schooling, the public sector preserved a decent wage floor throughout the 1980s, especially for Black women. Public median continues to be higher for both ethnicities, and the public-private wage gap widens, indicating that government employment was performing as a better buffer exposure to the lower tail of private-sector wages (Figure 4; Table 1).

5. Mechanistic discussion

The patterns in Figures 1–4 and Table 1 reflect an interaction between institutional wage-setting, policy access channels, and market forces. Civil-service grade/step schedules, pay transparency, and collective bargaining compress dispersion, especially at the lower tail, producing the durable “floor effect” for women—and most strongly for Black women with HS or less or some college/AA. These features tie compensation to credentials and tenure rather than discretionary bargaining, stabilizing p10–p25 and muting volatility across the 1980s (Table 1). Occupational composition amplifies this: government employment is concentrated in education, health, and administrative services, where licensure and standardized job ladders anchor wages around the median. Equally important are access mechanisms created in the late 1960s–1970s—Title VII coverage of state and local government and affirmative-action enforcement—which opened pipelines into civil service and teaching for Black women who had previously been excluded.

The 1980s introduce countervailing dynamics. Fiscal retrenchment and hiring freezes at federal and (via grants) state/local levels reduced new entry points and slowed step progression, dampening median growth in the public sector. Seniority-based reductions disproportionately affected recent entrants in BA-level occupations—groups that had gained most from earlier access—helping explain the sharp decline in public-sector employment shares among highly educated Black women in Figure 1. Meanwhile, market returns to education in the private sector rose with deregulation, financialization, and technology adoption, fattening the upper tail and lifting medians for BA-or-more White women faster than in public employment (Figure 2; Table 1). Yet because private-sector wage setting remained more dispersed and less unionized, its lower tail underperformed public benchmarks for most groups, preserving the “shelter” role of government employment for Black women with mid- or lower schooling (Figures 3,4).

Selection makes a difference too. Subject to enduring strains of discrimination in hiring and promotion, Black women congregate into government jobs where process, supervision, and grievance procedures in part compensate for rewards; contingently to access, some educationally well-prepared women—above all White ones—enjoy more private rewards. The result is a tenth of a century in which government institutions continue to compensate the floor while market pressures narrow down or reverse gaps at the ceiling.

6. Conclusion

Encompassing the 1980s, the U.S. public sector continued to function as a wage floor and risk buffer for African American women, especially for those with an education standing below a BA. Employment data shows that the public sector employment sustained a higher p10-p50 outcome and lower dispersion relative to private employment, even though fiscal austerity in this decade slowed public wage growth. Meanwhile, private-sector opportunities for highly educated White women expanded faster than for Black women, narrowing public-private median gaps at the top of the distribution. A dual characteristic was therefore found in this decade: persistence of “shelter effect” for African Women as a demographic group that illustrated volatility in the labor market, alongside a market-driven revaluation of BA-level skills that weakened the relative wage advantage of public employment for the most educated.

Policy conclusions are a direct result. Safeguarding the equalizing function of government employment entailed reliable funding of state and local government services, keeping pay systems transparent, and aggressive enforcement of non-discrimination and affirmative-action commitments. Without these, advances of the 1960s–1970s are lost just where most redistributive. Empirically, this paper’s CPS-ASEC findings address wages and industry attachment; extensions to occupation, union status, benefits, and decomposition studies to differentiate composition from price changes and longer-run continuation of the series into the 1990s–2000s are a subject of recommendation for subsequent studies. The lesson from the past is unambiguous: institutions can push wage distributions toward fairness, but these institutions must not be abandoned lest the forces of the labor market reverse the institutional changes.

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