

Effects of Anti-Black Prejudice and Individualism on Government Support among U.S. College Students

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that, historically, racial prejudice and individualism have been widespread in the U.S. At the same time, Americans are marked by “skeptical altruism,” by which they express opposition to racial inequality yet question the need for government involvement. This paper explores how anti-black prejudice and an individualistic orientation are associated with less support for social welfare programs when these programs are framed in ways to heighten skeptical altruism. This study was designed to explore this association among Americans coming-of-age today in light of increased public awareness around issues of racial and economic inequality in the U.S. in recent years and the current wave of youth activism around related issues. Our findings are based on February 2020 survey data from 353 current college students across three university campuses in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Virginia. Our survey results and subsequent quantitative analyses suggest that anti-black prejudice and individualism are still quite pronounced among young Americans today, and these views continue to associate with lower levels of government support even when other factors are controlled. We discuss these findings and their implications for American society.

INTRODUCTION

Stratification beliefs research explores “what people believe about who gets what and why” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). Stratification beliefs contain “information (veridical or non-veridical) about a phenomenon that an individual uses as a basis both for inferring other information and for action” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). This research has historically been primarily concerned with (a) beliefs about the determinants of social inequalities, (b) the determinants of these beliefs, and (c) how these beliefs impact respondents’ policy preferences (Hunt and Bullock 2016).

Stratification beliefs research suggests that, on average, the American population is “skeptically altruistic” (Eppard et. al. 2020:241). On the one hand, Americans are morally committed to helping the poor, concerned about inequality, and espouse a number of structuralist beliefs and social democratic preferences. At the same time, however, many of these same Americans: demand that government assistance go to only the truly “deserving” (a socially-constructed and culturally-defined category that is particularly narrowly-defined in the U.S. compared to other OECD countries); are deeply suspicious of the morality and deservingness of recipients of government assistance (particularly Black recipients); are skeptical that government can effectively address social problems; prefer (at least in abstract, ideal cultural terms) smaller government and lower taxes; and prefer individualistically-oriented social policies over structurally-oriented ones (see Eppard et. al. 2020 for a detailed analysis of skeptical altruism).

To be clear, Americans have many social democratic tendencies and are able to identify a number of structural failings which contribute to persistent social problems. But when a social problem or policy can be effectively framed by political or public actors in a manner which taps into key components of skeptical altruism in Americans’ minds, support for policies that might

otherwise be robust (given Americans' many social democratic tendencies) can be undermined.

The presence of widespread racial prejudice and individualism, and the manner in which these phenomena can be weaponized in political and public debates, often reduces social policy support in the U.S. As we have explained elsewhere:

Given the weight of the evidence revealing deeply problematic explanations for economic, racial, and gender inequalities among the American public, it might be tempting to imagine that Americans must cruelly disregard those in need. This is not necessarily the case, as the reality is a complicated mixture of competing concerns. Despite their individualistic beliefs, Americans are generally not opposed to government spending targeted at fighting poverty and economic inequality, as well as a number of other inequalities, in abstract 'ideal cultural' terms. . . . Where it gets complicated is that, while Americans care about those in need, their concern is filtered through what we call their 'skeptical altruism'. . . . This skeptical altruism, fueled by dominant individualistic, racist, and sexist beliefs, gets in the way of translating a widespread moral commitment to helping the needy into full-fledged support for European-style social policies. Does it mean *no* support? No, but it does place limits on how far we are willing to go in our generosity and structural orientation. (Eppard, et al. 2020:241)

Racial prejudice and individualism are of course not the only factors limiting the American welfare state. Dysfunctions in the American political system, for instance, play a substantial role in creating a mismatch between American social democratic preferences and policy outcomes (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). But previous research (Alesina, et al. 2001:39) suggests that racial prejudice and individualism are additional factors which play a role in limiting the U.S. welfare state by ensuring that American politicians do not face the degree of sustained pressure that they might otherwise face to develop generous and structurally-oriented social policies to address the many inequalities plaguing American society.¹

¹ As Alberto Alesina and his colleagues found, "Americans redistribute less than Europeans because (1) the majority believes that redistribution favors racial minorities, (2) Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society and that if someone is poor it is their own fault, and (3) the political system is geared towards preventing redistribution" (2001:39).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anti-Black Prejudice

The weight of the evidence suggests the existence of widespread prejudice toward African Americans in the U.S. Experimental studies routinely find patterns of discrimination, for instance, that can only be explained by systemic racism and widespread racial bias. Devah Pager and her colleagues have famously documented the significant hiring discrimination faced by Black job applicants in the U.S.—so significant, in fact, that Black applicants with a clean record fared no better in their employment audit study than White applicants with equivalent credentials *but a felony conviction* (Pager et. al. 2009). Other experimental studies tell a similar story. Depending upon the city and study in question, African Americans are discriminated against in housing and bank lending as much as 70 percent of the time or more (Bonilla-Silva 2014:33-34).

Compared to surveys, experimental studies include a significant amount of racial bias that survey respondents attempt to downplay and/or hide due to social desirability bias (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). Yet despite this, American survey respondents still reveal a significant amount of racial bias. There are far too many examples for the confines of this paper, but what follows are illustrative.

A 2014 survey from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found that Americans were more likely to categorize African Americans as lazy than as hardworking (Howard et. al. 2017:775). Less than half (43%) of Americans say the U.S. needs to go further to give Black Americans equal rights. A minority of Whites (47%) agree that they benefit from advantages that Black Americans do not have (Pew Research Center 2019). Three-quarters of Whites report that race is not an important factor in the availability of the American Dream

(*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015). Fifty-four percent of Whites say that African Americans who cannot get ahead have mostly themselves to blame, with only 35 percent citing discrimination (Pew Research Center 2017). Sixty-two percent of Whites say their race has not had much of an impact on their ability to succeed (Pew Research Center 2016a). Almost three-quarters (71%) of Whites believe the government should play either a minor role (46%) or no role at all (25%) in trying to improve the social and economic position of Black Americans and other minority groups. Most Whites deny widespread discrimination against African Americans in healthcare (77%), while shopping (76%), in education (75%), in housing (73%), in hiring (67%), in dealing with the criminal justice system (53%), and in dealing with police (52%) (Gallup 2020).

How can there be widespread prejudice when a majority of Whites favors affirmative action (57%) and believes racism is widespread against Black Americans (56%) (Gallup 2020)? It is likely that racism bothers Americans in abstract, ideal cultural terms, but that racism is somewhat of an empty term for many. As Feagin explains:

[O]pinion surveys of whites indicate that most publicly support, when given abstract questions, equality of opportunity and equality of treatment and oppose racial discrimination. However, at the same time, the majority do not believe there is major and widespread racial discrimination across this society, and they also do not believe that governments should intervene to secure further racial equality (2014:105).

For many White Americans, racism evokes Jim Crow imagery of the most egregious and overt racist acts. White Americans are often unaware of (or worse, unwilling to acknowledge) important mechanisms which give systemic racism its devastating impact, including less overt but incredibly impactful and insidious problems like neighborhood segregation. If White Americans profess to care about racism in only a very narrow and overt sense, then the only tools left in their intellectual toolkit to explain the massive racial inequalities all around them are decidedly anti-Black in their assumptions.

Studies suggest that various measures of racial prejudice are negatively associated with a number of social policy preferences in the U.S. Luttmer (2001), for instance, demonstrated that support for welfare spending increases when individuals live close to welfare recipients of their own race, but decreases when they live close to recipients of a different race. Relatedly, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) showed that both support for welfare among the population, as well as actual welfare spending, were negatively correlated with the proportion of the state population that was Black in the U.S.

Perhaps the most famous statement on this phenomenon is *Why Americans Hate Welfare* by Gilens (1999). Gilens presented a wealth of evidence showing that support for welfare tended to decrease the more that Americans associated poverty and welfare with Black Americans and the more respondents espoused beliefs about the supposed laziness, immorality, and undeservingness of Black Americans. Gilens explains these findings:

In large measure, Americans hate welfare because they view it as a program that rewards the underserving poor. To understand public opposition to welfare, then, we need to understand the public's perceptions of welfare recipients, and here two important and related factors stand out. First, the American public thinks that most people who receive welfare are black, and second, the public thinks that blacks are less committed to the work ethic than are other Americans. . . white Americans' attitudes towards welfare can only be understood in connection with their beliefs about blacks—especially their judgements about the causes of racial inequality and the extent to which blacks' problems stem from their own lack of effort (1999:3).

Gilens showed that only 35 percent of those who viewed Black Americans as very hard working wanted to cut welfare, and 47 percent wanted spending increased—for those who viewed Black Americans as very lazy, however, 63 percent wanted welfare spending cut and only 15 percent wanted it increased (1999:68-69). Relatedly, Gilens noted that the perceived race of the majority of welfare recipients influenced whether Americans viewed them as lazy (69% say yes if a majority are perceived to be Black, 45% if White), not really in need (64% versus 50%), and

individually to blame for their circumstances (63% versus 40%) (1999:140). Finally, Gilens showed that, for those who believed Black Americans would be just as well off as Whites if they only tried harder, a majority wanted welfare cut. For those who disagreed with this sentiment about Black Americans, only 20 percent wanted welfare cut (Gilens 1999:177).

Individualism

In addition to widespread racial prejudice, there is also widespread individualism in the U.S. Hundreds of survey items and interview questions from numerous studies across a half century confirm that Americans tend to place a disproportionate emphasis on the individual as responsible for their outcomes in life (focusing on the importance of individual ambition, work ethic, choices, etc.), while putting far less emphasis on non-individualistic explanations. This research shows that Americans are some of the most individualistic people in the world (Feagin 1972 & 1975; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Chafel 1997; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007; Hanson and Zogby 2010; Henrich et. al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2012, 2014, & 2016b; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2020; Eppard et. al. 2020).

Two seminal national studies from Feagin (1972 & 1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986)—recognized as the first systematic investigations of American stratification beliefs—found individualistic beliefs to be more popular than structuralist beliefs, and demonstrated the consequences of these beliefs for social policy support.

In Feagin's national survey, 53 percent of Americans gave high importance to individualistic factors in explaining poverty, compared to only 22 percent for structural factors (1972:104). Of the eleven causes of poverty that he provided to respondents, the individualistic

items were the most popular. Most of Feagin's respondents held either skeptical or negative views of welfare recipients, views which were critical of recipients' work ethic, morality, and fertility decisions. Feagin demonstrated a strong association between these beliefs and welfare attitudes: "High scores on the anti-welfare index turned out to be strongly correlated with high scores on the individualistic-factors index" (1972:108).

Kluegel and Smith (1986) came to similar conclusions in their follow-up national survey: a high degree of individualism, support for meritocracy beliefs, individualistic attributions for poverty, and skepticism of welfare recipients. Based on their findings, the authors concluded that, "Adherence to the dominant ideology is, as we proposed, widespread. In each of the groups we have examined the majority express agreement with dominant-ideology beliefs" (Kluegel and Smith 1986:289). Furthermore, these beliefs were clearly associated with social policy preferences, including a negative association (-0.77 regression coefficient) between inegalitarian beliefs and welfare support, a positive association (0.50) between egalitarian beliefs and support for a federal guaranteed jobs program, a positive association (0.47) between a structural view of poverty and welfare support, and a negative association (-0.39) between an individualistic view of poverty and welfare support (Kluegel and Smith 1986:160).

Subsequent research has confirmed these findings. As stratification belief scholars Hunt and Bullock note, the weight of the evidence suggests that "Americans are decidedly individualistic" (2016:95). As one example, a recent survey asked which is more important to achieving the American Dream—between hard work, circumstances of birth, and luck—and found that 61 percent of Americans cited hard work, 28 percent circumstances, and 11 percent luck (*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015).

As Henrich and his colleagues explain, Americans are some of the most individualistic people in the world:

Americans stand out relative to other Westerners on phenomena that are associated with independent self-concepts and individualism. A number of analyses, using a diverse range of methods, reveal that Americans are, on average, the most individualistic people in the world. The observation that the United States is especially individualistic is not new and dates at least as far back as de Tocqueville. The unusually individualistic nature of Americans may be caused by, or reflect, an ideology that particularly stresses the importance of freedom and self-sufficiency, as well as various practices in education and childrearing that may help to inculcate this sense of autonomy (2010:74).

Summarizing a number of studies of non-U.S. countries, Hunt and Bullock make a similar argument: “in contrast to the findings of most U.S.-based studies, the majority of these non-U.S. studies document a stronger endorsement of structuralist than individualistic beliefs” (2016:98).

A recent international survey from the Pew Research Center underscores this point. When respondents in 44 countries were asked whether success in life was determined by forces outside of one’s personal control, 57 percent of Americans disagreed, compared to an average of 38 percent among the other 43 countries (Pew Research Center 2014).

Subsequent studies since Feagin (1972 & 1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986) also confirm the continued association between stratification beliefs and social policy preferences (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Gilens 1999; Hughes and Tuch 1999; Appelbaum 2001; Bullock et. al. 2003; Alesina and Glaeser 2004).

Alesina and Glaeser (2004) found that, among Americans who believed that the government spent too much money fighting poverty, most believed poverty was caused by laziness (88%) and that there was a chance to escape poverty (88%). Among those who believed that the government spent too little fighting poverty, far fewer believed that poverty was caused

by laziness (35%) and that there was a chance to escape poverty (55%) (Alesina and Glaeser 2004:189). Similarly, Appelbaum's (2001) survey demonstrated that:

When the recipients of aid are seen as not responsible for their poverty, more generous aid policies may be recommended and widely accepted. On the other hand, if the recipients of aid are judged to be responsible for their poverty, then more restrictive policies that offer less direct aid and require poor people to find a way to lift themselves out of poverty may be considered appropriate (438).

And results from a survey distributed to college students by Bullock and her colleagues (2003) showed that structural attributions for poverty, dissatisfaction with income inequality, and attributing wealth to privilege predicted support for progressive welfare policies, while individualistic attributions for poverty and wealth predicted support for restrictive welfare policies.

It should be noted that the degree of popularity of individualistic stratification beliefs in the U.S. does vary based on a variety of respondent characteristics. These include personality characteristics, race, ethnicity, income, gender, religiosity or religious affiliation, political orientation, educational attainment, occupation, degree and type of contact with the poor, and local community characteristics. As Bullock notes, "groups with greater power tend to be more individualistic and less structural in their understanding of poverty and wealth than less powerful groups" (2013:53). Structuralism is also more popular during times of social and/or economic strain, and when respondents are assessing groups which evoke a high degree of sympathy (such as poor children) rather than a low degree (such as Black welfare recipients) (Lee et. al. 1990; Hunt 1996; Wilson 1996; Gilens 1999; Hunt and Bullock 2016).

METHODS

Four research questions inform this project. The first is the degree to which current American college students espouse racially-prejudiced beliefs. Second, the degree to which college students express individualistic beliefs. Third, the degree of support college students espouse for the social welfare functions of government. And finally, the degree to which racial prejudice and individualism are associated with government support.

With prior IRB approval at all three institutions, we distributed our stratification beliefs survey in multiple introductory sociology courses across three university campuses located in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia in February 2020. These sites were not selected randomly but as a matter of access and gatekeeping, as we had a number of professional contacts at all three institutions. One of the institutions was a public regional university with an undergraduate enrollment between 5,000-6,000 students. One of the institutions was a small public university with between 1,500-2,000 undergraduates. And one of the institutions was a small private university with between 1,500-2,000 undergraduates. None of the institutions were selective, with acceptance rates at all three between 80-90 percent. We received a total of 353 completed Qualtrics surveys. Participation was voluntary, with no associated rewards or course credit. Each survey took about 15-20 minutes to complete.

Our questionnaire examined participants' stratification beliefs in the areas of agency, opportunity, meritocracy, poverty attribution, racial inequality, gender inequality, and government support (see Appendix for specific survey question wording, as we paraphrase throughout the article for space). In addition, there was a set of demographic questions, including gender, race/ethnicity, social class, history of government assistance receipt, religiosity, and political orientation.

The instructors confirmed that our sample consisted of overwhelmingly traditional age (18-22) college students. Our sample was 74 percent non-Hispanic White, ten percent African American, six percent other, four percent Hispanic/Latino, four percent two or more races/ethnicities, and two percent Asian American. Fifty-eight percent were female, 41 percent male, and one percent other. Three percent of our participants self-identified as poor, 13 percent working class, 18 percent lower-middle class, 44 percent middle-middle class, 22 percent upper-middle class, and one percent wealthy. About a third (31%) had a history (themselves and/or their parents) of using some form of government assistance (such as Medicaid, SNAP, WIC, housing assistance, etc.). Our sample consisted of 56 percent Republican-leaning participants and 44 percent Democrat-leaning. Nineteen percent self-identified as very religious, 42 percent somewhat religious, 24 percent not very religious, and 16 percent not at all religious (see Table 1).

Survey responses were analyzed using quantitative methods, including frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, bivariate correlations, and multiple regression.

RESULTS

Responses to questions regarding racial inequality were mixed. Eighty-three percent of White participants agreed that racial inequality was mostly the fault of forces beyond the control of African Americans, and 53 percent identified racial bias in the criminal justice system as a problem. However, only 32 percent of Whites identified hiring discrimination as a problem, and only 29 percent identified racial inequalities in school quality as a problem.

Our sample was very individualistic. Strong majorities espoused beliefs in meritocracy, widespread agency and opportunity, the efficacy of hard work/smart choices/ambition, the ability to succeed despite a disadvantaged background, and a skeptical/negative view of the poor (see Tables 2 and 3). Only about half (51%) of our participants believed educational inequalities based on income were unjust, while less than half (43%) believed healthcare inequalities based on income were unjust. The most popular causes of American poverty were ones that placed blame on either poor families (most popular cause), poor individuals (lack of effort/laziness was the second most popular cause, followed by poor choices), or some mixture of families and

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	% of sample
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
Non-Hispanic White	74%
African American	10%
Other	6%
Hispanic/Latino	4%
Two or more	4%
Asian American	2%
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	58%
Male	41%
Other	1%
<i>Social class</i>	
Poor	3%
Working	13%
Lower middle	18%
Middle middle	44%
Upper middle	22%
Wealthy	1%
<i>Welfare receipt</i>	
Yes	31%
No	69%
<i>Political preference</i>	
Democrat-leaning	44%
Republican-leaning	56%
<i>Religiosity</i>	
Very	19%
Somewhat	42%
Not very	24%
Not at all	16%

Table 2. Beliefs about Agency, Meritocracy, and Government.

Belief	% agreement
Despite the fact that some Americans may face barriers to success that others do not, most could succeed, despite these barriers, if they really tried.	87%
Factors beyond the control of women are mostly to blame for gender inequality.	87%
Most Americans get back from life what they put into it—success or failure generally matches how much effort they put into life and how smart their choices are.	84%
The differences between American adults (income, wealth, career, etc.) are due mostly to the choices people make for themselves and things they personally control.	78%
With ambition, hard work, and smart choices, most Americans can succeed, even if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds.	78%
Most Americans are free to make their own decisions and free to choose the life they want to live.	77%
60% or more of Americans’ outcomes in life are the result of their efforts and choices.	73%
America is the land of opportunity where most people who work hard end up succeeding.	73%
Most Americans can get a college degree if they want to.	72%
Adults should have to pass drug tests in order for their family to receive SNAP benefits.	71%
Government assistance programs have a mostly positive impact on society.	70%
Higher-income Americans should pay higher taxes than middle- and lower-income Americans.	66%
Adults should have to work in the paid workforce in order for their family to receive SNAP benefits.	62%
70% or more of Americans’ outcomes in life are the result of their efforts and choices.	59%
It is unfair that Americans with more money can afford better education than those with less money.	51%
Support for national government single-payer healthcare	46%
SNAP should be expanded.	46%
It is unfair that Americans with more money can afford better healthcare than those with less money.	43%
It is the responsibility of the American government to reduce income inequality.	38%

Table 3. Beliefs about the Causes of American Poverty.

Causes of poverty	Rank (most to least important)	% who ranked cause #1 or #2
Bad family upbringing	1	41%
Lack of effort or laziness	2	39%
Poor choices	3	30%
Poor morals and/or values	4	13%
Racism	5	25%
Poor quality schools	6	14%
Low intelligence	7	6%
Not enough good jobs	8	11%
Sexism	9	13%
Bad genes	10	4%
Bad luck	11	3%

Note: In order to understand the rankings, note that #1 was the most important, and #11 the least important, meaning #1 had the lowest mean ranking, while #11 had the highest mean ranking.

individuals (poor morals/values was the fourth most popular cause). We believe our innovative survey question, which asks participants to rank poverty causes from most to least important, is an improvement over questions asked in some other surveys. Many other surveys ask participants simply whether a cause is important or not, without explicitly discussing its importance relative to other causes.

Support for government was mixed and skepticism of recipients of government assistance was widespread. Majorities supported progressive taxation (66%) and believed government assistance had a mostly positive impact on society (70%). Only a minority of participants, however, believed it was the government's responsibility to reduce income inequality (38%), supported the expansion of SNAP (46%), and supported national single-payer government healthcare (46%). Majorities also believed that adults should have to pass drug tests (71%) and work in the paid workforce (62%) in order for themselves *and their families* to receive SNAP benefits (see Table 2).

Our results suggest that both racial prejudice and individualism influence participants' degree of government support. There were substantial and statistically-significant gaps between high- and low-prejudice individuals in SNAP expansion support (53 percentage point gap), support for single-payer healthcare (48 points), support for SNAP drug tests (45 points) and work requirements (39 points), belief about the government's role in reducing income inequality (37 points), support for progressive taxation (37 points), and feelings toward government assistance (24 points) (see Table 4).

There were similar statistically-significant gaps between strongly- and weakly-individualistic individuals in support for single-payer healthcare (67 percentage point gap), belief about the government's role in reducing income inequality (57 points), SNAP expansion support

(54 points), support for SNAP drug tests (54 points), support for progressive taxation (50 points), support for SNAP work requirements (34 points), and feelings toward government assistance (27 points) (see Table 4).

The strongest statistically-significant correlate of government support was individualism (-0.60), followed by Republican political preference (-0.59), racial prejudice (-0.55), sexism (-0.26), and welfare receipt (0.22) (see Table 5 and Figure 1).

In a regression model, racial prejudice, individualism, and Republican political preference continued to associate with government support even when we controlled for race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and religiosity (none of these control variables were statistically significant). Our model accounted for 54 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (see Table 6).

DISCUSSION

Previous research suggests that racial prejudice is widespread in the U.S., and our survey results align with these findings. Such a conclusion may seem incongruent with the fact that a strong majority of participants cited factors beyond the control of African Americans for racial inequality, and a majority cited racial bias in the criminal justice system as a problem. Yet a

Table 4. Association between Racial Prejudice/Individualism and Government Support.

Government/social policy belief	% agreement
<i>SNAP should be expanded</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	27%
Low-prejudice individuals	80%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	35%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	89%
<i>Government assistance has a mostly positive impact on society</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	57%
Low-prejudice individuals	81%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	62%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	89%
<i>Government is responsible for reducing income inequality</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	25%
Low-prejudice individuals	62%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	26%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	83%
<i>Adults need to pass drug tests to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	90%
Low-prejudice individuals	45%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	82%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	28%
<i>Adults need to work in the paid work force to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	81%
Low-prejudice individuals	42%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	73%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	39%
<i>High-income Americans should pay higher taxes than middle- and low-income Americans</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	51%
Low-prejudice individuals	88%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	50%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	100%
<i>U.S. should adopt government single-payer healthcare system</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	29%
Low-prejudice individuals	77%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	33%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	100%

Note: All group differences reported here are statistically significant below .05.

Table 5. Correlates of Government Support.

Variable	Correlation
Individualism	-0.604***
Republican political preference	-0.593***
Racial prejudice	-0.552***
Sexism	-0.257***
Welfare receipt	0.220***

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 6. Linear Regression Model Predicting Government Support.

Variable	B	Std. error of B	Beta
Black	1.271	0.758	0.088
Other race	0.919	0.624	0.070
Female	-0.417	0.462	-0.042
Social class	-0.012	0.242	-0.002
Religiosity	0.494	0.253	0.093
Racial prejudice	-0.188	0.075	-0.162*
Republican political preference	-1.783	0.302	-0.355***
Individualism	-0.218	0.042	-0.337***

Note: Model r square = 0.538, p < .001. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 1. Individualism and Government Support.



Note: $r = -0.604$, $p < .001$.

minority identified two very important mechanisms of racism in the U.S.: school inequalities and widespread hiring discrimination. As Ibram Kendi notes, “When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination” (2016:11). Professing to be concerned with racism is an empty gesture if you cannot (or will not) identify the mechanisms which constitute the system of American racism. This is akin to professing to believe in the reality of climate change while rejecting the science of its causes. In the absence of being able (or willing) to identify important mechanisms which cause racial inequality, one is left with very little in their intellectual toolkit to explain this inequality without resorting to explanations which downplay or ignore structural factors and indict African Americans themselves. Our results suggest that our participants likely hold a number of prejudiced assumptions about African Americans, even while agreeing that racism is a problem in abstract terms.

Previous research also suggests that individualism is widespread in the U.S., and our results align with these findings as well. A strong majority of our sample believed that Americans possessed a very high degree of agency regardless of background, opportunity was widespread in the U.S., American society was a meritocracy, and that success surely followed for anybody who made smart choices, worked hard, and had the proper amount of ambition. The most popular causes of poverty were ones which blamed families, laziness, poor choices, and poor morals and values. There was not widespread concern that educational and healthcare inequalities were unjust, and there was little support for the government playing an active role in reducing income inequality.

The most popular belief, espoused by 87 percent of participants, was that even when disadvantaged Americans faced unjust social barriers that others did not, they could *still*

overcome those barriers if they simply tried hard enough. This is a substantial degree of individualism, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the requirements of true agency and the workings of the American stratification system.

Our sample was truly “skeptically altruistic” (Eppard et. al. 2020), as previous research suggests they would be having grown up in the U.S. That is, our participants expressed a moral commitment to helping disadvantaged groups (e.g., their support for progressive taxation and a positive view of government assistance), while also being skeptical of recipients of government assistance and demanding individualistically-oriented social policies (e.g., their support for SNAP drug tests and work requirements for adults *and their families*, family/individual attribution for poverty, rejection of single-payer healthcare and SNAP expansion, and rejection of government reduction of income inequality), and being skeptical of African Americans. Our participants may support a government role in addressing social inequalities, but they are clearly most interested in helping those deemed truly “deserving,” and possess a narrow view of who qualifies for such empathy.

Our findings align with previous research which found that racial prejudice and individualism are negatively associated with government support. Both racial prejudice and individualism were strongly negatively correlated with government support among our sample, and remained associated even after applying a variety of controls in a multiple regression model.

Our study suggests that in the U.S., racial prejudice and individualism function as a form of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Symbolic violence refers to the ways in which dominant ideologies can contribute to the creation, maintenance, and/or perpetuation of social inequalities. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power

relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). Elaborating on the meaning of symbolic violence, Schubert explains that:

[Symbolic violence] is *everywhere* in that we all live in symbolic systems that, in the process of classifying and categorizing, impose hierarchies and ways of being and knowing the world that unevenly distribute suffering and limit even the ways in which we can imagine the possibility of an alternative world. It is *nowhere* because, in its gentleness and its subtleness, we fail to recognize its very existence, let alone the way it is at the root of much of violence and suffering. . . . If [social] worlds are constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways (2008:195-196).

Americans learn justifications for inequalities from a variety of socialization agents.

Other plausible (and perhaps more accurate) explanations are not as likely to be learned, internalized, and recognized as legitimate. This leads to the misrecognition of the causes of social inequalities, the perpetuation of racism and individualism, and the undermining of social policy support.

Brady’s institutionalized power relations theory, which he outlines in *Rich Democracies, Poor People* (2009), helps us to understand the policy implications of the symbolic violence of racial prejudice and individualism. Brady’s theory holds that the interests and ideologies of different groups in society impact the egalitarian coalitions that come together to pressure the political system to institutionalize equality. The higher the degree of leftist politics (defined as leftist organizations and institutions, including political parties and labor unions, voter turnout in elections, and proportion of elected representatives who are women) that these coalitions help to institutionalize, the more generous the welfare state. The generosity and design of social welfare policies are ultimately what determine the extent of economic security in wealthy societies. The success or failure of social welfare policies then feeds back, influencing interests and ideologies. As Brady argues, “social equality results from the reciprocal relationships among welfare states, ideologies, and interests” (2009:8). He goes on to summarize his theory:

Ideologies and interests manifest in latent coalitions for egalitarianism. These latent coalitions influence Leftist collective political actors and welfare generosity, which itself is partly driven by Leftist politics. Leftist politics and welfare generosity shape poverty. Finally, the levels of poverty and welfare generosity feed back into ideologies and interests. Variations in the power of latent coalitions for egalitarianism, the Leftist politics that are the manifestation of these coalitions, and what they are able to enact via the welfare state shape the amount of poverty in society (Brady 2009:13-14).

While our study is limited by its reliance on a sample that is not random or nationally-representative, it nonetheless suggests that we have a long way to go in battling ideologies of racism and individualism in American society, even among those coming-of-age today. These ideologies continue to function as forms of symbolic violence, causing Americans to misrecognize possible structural and/or non-individualistic origins of social inequalities in the U.S. As a result of this misrecognition, politicians are likely to avoid higher levels of sustained pressure to develop more robust and structurally-oriented social policies to combat inequalities based on race, income and wealth, and gender, to name but a few.

Americans may have many structuralist beliefs and social democratic tendencies, but it seems that widespread racial prejudice and individualism are still powerful as well, and if activated by political and public discourse, can undermine support for a variety of social policies and government functions in the U.S.

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APPENDIX

Individualism Index Questions

What percentage of Americans' outcomes in life is the result of the amount of effort that they put into life and the choices that they make?

- Less than 50%
- Exactly 50%
- Between 51% and 59%
- Between 60% and 69%
- Between 70% and 79%
- Between 80% and 89%
- Between 90% and 100%

Which of the following statements do you agree with MORE:

- The differences between American adults -- differences in income, wealth, career, and other important life outcomes -- are due mostly to the choices people make for themselves, they are due mostly to things individual people control.
- The differences between American adults -- differences in income, wealth, career, and other important life outcomes -- are NOT due mostly to the choices people make for themselves, they are due mostly to things individual people DO NOT control.

Would you say in the United States that most adults get back from life what they put into it? Meaning that most people's level of success or failure in life generally matches how much effort they put into life and how smart their choices are?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Despite the fact that some Americans may face extra barriers to success that others do not, do you think most Americans could succeed, despite these barriers, if they really put their mind to it?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you believe most Americans are free to make their own decisions and free to choose the life they want to live?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Could most Americans get a college degree if they really wanted to?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Would you consider America to be the land of opportunity where most people who work hard succeed?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you consider it fair that Americans with more money can afford better healthcare than those with less money?

- It is very fair
- It is somewhat fair
- It is neither fair nor unfair
- It is somewhat unfair
- It is very unfair

Do you consider it fair that Americans with more money can afford better education than those with less money?

- It is very fair
- It is somewhat fair
- It is neither fair nor unfair
- It is somewhat unfair
- It is very unfair

The following are an alphabetical list of causes of poverty in the United States. Please decide which one you think causes the most poverty in the United States and rank that #1. The next most important cause will be ranked #2, and so on until we get to the cause you think is least important, which will be #11.*

- _____ Bad family upbringing
- _____ Bad genes
- _____ Bad luck
- _____ Lack of effort or laziness
- _____ Low intelligence
- _____ Not enough good jobs
- _____ Poor choices
- _____ Poor morals and/or values
- _____ Poor quality schools
- _____ Racism
- _____ Sexism

**(for this question, responses were included in the individualism index if they were a #1 for effort/laziness or choices)*

Do you agree with the statement, “With ambition, hard work, and smart choices, most Americans can succeed, even if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds”

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

How positive or negative do you feel about socialism?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

Demographic Questions

How religious would you consider yourself?

- Very
- Somewhat
- Not very
- Not at all

How strongly do you believe in the scientific theory of human evolution?

- Very strongly
- Somewhat strongly
- Not sure if I do or do not believe
- I somewhat doubt it
- I don't believe it at all

Please provide your race/ethnicity.

- African American/Black
- Asian American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Non-Hispanic White
- Two or more races/ethnicities
- Other

Please provide your political preference.

- I almost always prefer Republicans over Democrats
- I mostly prefer Republicans over Democrats.
- I mostly prefer Democrats over Republicans.
- I almost always prefer Democrats over Republicans.

How do you feel about President Trump?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

How do you feel about former President Obama?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

Please provide your social class.

- Lower class/poor
- Working class
- Lower middle class
- Middle class
- Upper middle class
- Upper class/wealthy

Have you or your parents ever used a social welfare program at any point, even for a month (such as SNAP/food stamps, Medicaid, WIC, housing assistance, or another program)?

- Yes
- No

Please provide your gender

- Female
- Male
- Other

Government Support Index Questions

SNAP, also known as the food stamp program, provides nutritional support for low-wage working families, low-income seniors, and people with disabilities in the U.S. A family of four would receive about \$450 a month. The federal government spends about \$70 billion a year on SNAP. The SNAP program covers around 40 million people. Do you support expanding the SNAP/food stamp program to cover more people and provide more benefits, even if it means an increase in your taxes per year?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Would you say that overall, social welfare programs targeting the poor in the U.S. (such as food stamps, Medicaid, WIC, or Section 8 government housing) have a mostly positive or mostly negative impact on American society?

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: it is the responsibility of the American government to reduce the differences in income between the rich and the poor.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you think adults should have to pass a drug test in order to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you think adults should have to work in the paid workforce to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you agree or disagree that high income Americans should pay higher taxes than middle income and lower income Americans in order to help pay for government programs targeting poverty and inequality?

- Yes they should pay much higher taxes
- Yes they should pay somewhat higher taxes
- No they should pay the same taxes
- No they should pay somewhat lower taxes
- No they should pay much lower taxes

Would you support a future healthcare system in the U.S. where (1) the federal government provided healthcare coverage to all Americans, (2) you paid the same amount for your coverage as before but through taxes instead of premiums, and (3) the new system outlawed the existence of private health insurance companies, making healthcare completely government-run in the U.S.?

- I strongly support such a plan
- I somewhat support such a plan
- I neither support nor oppose such a plan
- I somewhat oppose such a plan
- I strongly oppose such a plan

Racial Prejudice Questions

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In most of the United States, African Americans are given an equal opportunity to be hired for the same jobs as Whites with similar qualifications.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In most of the United States, African American children are given an equal opportunity to attend schools that are similar in quality to those attended by White children?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In most of the United States, African Americans are treated in a similarly fair manner by the criminal justice system compared to how Whites are treated.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

African American families in the U.S. have about 10% of the wealth of White families. African Americans are also more likely to be poor, more likely to be unemployed, less likely to own their own home, and less likely to graduate from college. In your opinion, what is the major reason why we have these inequalities in the U.S. between African Americans and Whites?

- It is almost completely the fault of African Americans
- It is mostly the fault of African Americans
- It is mostly the fault of racism and other social problems beyond the control of African Americans
- It is almost completely the fault of racism and other social problems beyond the control of African Americans

How concerned are you about the negative impacts of undocumented immigration in the U.S.?

- Very concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Not sure if I am concerned or not
- Not very concerned
- Not concerned at all

Gender Inequality Question

Women in the United States earn less, are less likely to have the most prestigious and well-paying jobs, are less likely to run businesses, and are less likely to be elected to government positions compared to men. In your opinion, what is the major reason for these inequalities?

- It is almost completely the fault of women themselves
- It is mostly the fault of women themselves
- It is mostly the fault of factors beyond the control of women
- It is almost completely the fault of factors beyond the control of women