

# A Matter of Solidarity: Racial Redistribution and the Economic Limits of Racial Sympathy

Tarah Williams  and Andrew J. Bloeser 

Department of Political Science, Allegheny College, USA

**Correspondence:** Andrew J. Bloeser ([abloeser@allegheny.edu](mailto:abloeser@allegheny.edu))

**Submitted:** 15 September 2023 **Accepted:** 14 December 2023 **Published:** 29 February 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Who Wants To Share? Attitudes Towards Horizontal Redistribution Across the Globe” edited by Frances Stewart (University of Oxford), Arnim Langer (KU Leuven), and Line Kuppens (University of Amsterdam), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i414>

## Abstract

The goal of horizontal redistribution is to provide economic resources to groups that have experienced discrimination and exploitation. In the United States, horizontal redistribution based on race remains controversial, particularly among white Americans. Not surprisingly, many white Americans oppose racial redistribution policies in some cases because of resentments they have toward racial outgroups. But this is not the only way that racial attitudes shape policy support. Chudy (2021) demonstrates that racial sympathy, or white distress over the misfortune of racial outgroups, can increase support for racially redistributive policies. However, supporting horizontal redistribution may be easier for individuals who are more economically secure, even when they are racially sympathetic. In this study, we explore whether the influence of racial sympathy is conditional on economic position. We expect that the influence of racial sympathy will be strongest among individuals who have higher incomes, as they are less concerned with competition over resources. Using the 2013 CCES, we use a newly developed measure of racial sympathy (Chudy, 2021) to study white Americans' support for policies designed to provide resources to black Americans. Consistent with expectations, we find that whites with higher levels of racial sympathy have higher levels of support for such policies, but that this pattern is stronger among whites who are more affluent. For white Americans of lesser means, the relationship between racial sympathy and support for racial redistribution is weaker, likely because of concerns for their own relative economic status.

## Keywords

American politics; economic position; group position theory; horizontal redistribution; racial sympathy

## 1. Introduction

In America, economic hardship is a widely shared experience. For many Americans, income has not kept pace with the increased costs of daily life. Consumer debt has increased over the past twenty years, even among Americans who are in the “middle class.” For many Americans, and especially those with lower incomes, concerns about how they will pay for housing and health care expenses have become a fact of life (Kirzinger et al., 2022; Schaeffer, 2022). Some even express concerns about their ability to pay for unexpected expenses in the event of an emergency (Hacker, 2019; see also Melcher, 2023).

Yet Americans are not equally likely to experience these sorts of economic hardships. Black Americans, in particular, are more likely to experience economic adversity than Americans of other racial groups (Lin & Harris, 2008; Thompson & Suarez, 2019). The reasons for this are well-known. Throughout America’s history, black Americans have endured discriminatory and exploitative economic policies that began with slavery and continued with Jim Crow, redlining, gentrification, and predatory lending (Haney López, 2014; Rothstein, 2017; K.-Y. Taylor, 2019).

Race-targeted policies, as a form of horizontal redistribution, provide one approach to addressing this long-standing problem. As the term itself suggests, race-targeted policies aim to improve access to resources, education, employment, and entrepreneurship for individuals who belong to historically marginalized racial groups. Of course, such policies have proven controversial because they intentionally provide no direct benefits to America’s historically dominant racial group, the nation’s white population. The question, concerning race-targeted policies, is whether—and under what conditions—white Americans will support such policies. Undoubtedly, America’s racial history has cast a long shadow and a considerable body of research finds that many whites oppose race-targeted policies. Even so, America’s racial history does not predetermine the racial attitudes of all white Americans nor does it automatically preclude their support for race-targeted policies (Castiglia, 2002; McAdam, 2003; Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). Pioneering research on racial sympathy provides important insight into when support for such policies is likely to emerge. This research demonstrates that many whites recognize the persistence of racial inequalities and express “distress over black misfortune” (Chudy, 2021, p. 122). Just as importantly, this research demonstrates that whites with higher levels of racial sympathy are more inclined to support race-targeted policies that address economic disparities.

Taken at first glance, this research on racial sympathy suggests that, when white Americans feel distress about the circumstances of black Americans, support for race-targeted policies will follow. This conclusion, however, would be premature, as it does not take into consideration another way that America’s racial history might undermine support for race-targeted policies. Scholars have noted that, across many generations, white Americans with lower incomes might be particularly opposed to race-targeted policies that benefit black Americans because they are more likely to perceive a threat to their own opportunities, resources, and status (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Katznelson, 2005; Roediger, 2022). Consistent with group position theory, even when lower-income whites have high levels of racial sympathy, they may still oppose racial redistribution for reasons connected to their own material self-interest.

In this study, we examine this possibility by focusing on the attitudes of white Americans using a nationally representative sample. We conclude that the link between racial sympathy and white support for racial

redistribution depends heavily on a person's economic position. We find that whites with high levels of racial sympathy can be found, at roughly equal proportions, across the income spectrum. But we also find that the relationship between racial sympathy and support for race-targeted policies is weaker among less affluent whites. We argue that this finding reflects the importance of racial sympathy and also brings into view its limitations. Although racial sympathy can lead to support for policies that help black Americans, this appears more likely to happen when white Americans have greater economic stability. This, in turn, implies that building support for racial redistribution will remain difficult so long as economic hardship persists among a significant proportion of white Americans.

## 2. A Matter of Solidarity: The Potential and Limitations of Racial Sympathy

The basic premise of race-targeted policies is that “concerted action is required to tackle systemic racial gaps in everything from income and wealth to employment rates, poverty rates, and educational achievement” (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016, p. 1). Although this concerted action could potentially take a number of forms, government action has a distinctive political justification. In a democracy, public policy reflects the prevailing sentiment of citizens about what problems deserve attention and resources. By this logic, race-targeted policies, as a democratic form of “concerted action,” signal both widespread recognition of persistent racial disparities *and* a public commitment to allocating resources toward reducing such disparities (Thomas, 2002, p. 232). The creation of such policies, however, requires something profound. It requires members of historically dominant racial groups to demonstrate what democratic theorists have termed “political solidarity” with racial groups that have experienced systemic injustice.

Political solidarity, by definition, refers to “the ability of individuals to engage in relations of trust and obligation with fellow members of a political community *whom they see as inherently ‘other’ in some way*” (Hooker, 2009, pp. 1–2, emphasis added; see also Rorty, 1989). The emphasis on “otherness” in this definition is crucial. Solidarity, on this account, requires citizens to recognize that members of the same community or nation have experienced different life circumstances and different kinds of problems. It also requires citizens to develop a willingness to help those who are different than themselves in some significant way (Allen, 2004; Hooker, 2009) when they have experienced undue hardships (Allen, 2004; Nussbaum, 2013). Importantly, for such help to constitute solidarity, the individual or group providing the help must do so even when they will not directly gain (or perhaps even sacrifice) if a policy goal is achieved. Solidarity is not reducible to pursuing a mutually beneficial goal or convergent interest (contra Bell, 1980; Strand & Mirkay, 2022). It is motivated instead by sympathy—a feeling of distress about the circumstances of others (Hooker, 2009; Nussbaum, 2013).

In the case of race-targeted policies that would benefit black Americans, the presence of such sympathy among white Americans may be indispensable. Although racial sympathy does not appear to influence white Americans' support for “race-neutral” forms of redistribution (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sniderman & Carmines, 1999), it seems to matter significantly for policies that specifically benefit black Americans (Chudy, 2021, p. 131). Given that black Americans constitute approximately 13 percent of the American electorate and also remain a minority in the United States Congress (Schaeffer, 2023), this has clear implications for national-level policy. For race-targeted policies to be enacted at the national level, substantial amounts of white support, and thus a substantial amount of white sympathy for black Americans is a practical necessity. In light of this, two questions become important to consider: In the first place, to what extent do white Americans sympathize

with black Americans? Secondly, under what circumstances does the sympathy of white Americans translate into support for race-targeted policies?

To date, however, these matters have received relatively little consideration by scholars interested in racial attitudes and their political consequences. Scholarly concerns about racial attitudes have instead focused on the persistence and consequences of racial antipathy. In the context of American politics, a considerable amount of research has examined the scope of racial resentment and has found that a significant number of white Americans continue to believe that black Americans lack work ethic and are undeserving of assistance (DeSante, 2013; Enders, 2021; Enders & Scott, 2019). There is also evidence that such attitudes are increasingly pervasive. In some areas of the country, the proportion of citizens holding this view appears to be increasing over the past few decades (Watts Smith et al., 2020). Other research also finds that white Americans with higher levels of racial resentment—unsurprisingly—oppose race-targeted policies that would improve the economic conditions of black Americans (Kam & Burge, 2019; Sears et al., 2004). Without question, this research identifies an important challenge to horizontal redistribution across racial lines. However, if we also want to understand racial attitudes that might facilitate racial redistribution, this focus on racial resentment is not sufficient.

As Chudy (2021, p. 123) argues, “racial sympathy is not merely the opposite of racial prejudice.” Prejudice refers to a feeling of disdain for others and, in addressing racial disparities, reducing prejudice remains an important goal. Nonetheless, the reduction of prejudice, by itself, is unlikely to translate into support for policies that can reduce racial disparities. A person might lack feelings of disdain toward others but not feel any sense of distress about their circumstances. They may instead feel indifferent to the circumstances of others and indifference is unlikely to motivate support for race-targeted policies. Accordingly, to understand what makes support for race-targeted policies more likely, we must instead consider whether white Americans, in particular, actively feel sympathy, for black Americans.

In her path-breaking research, Chudy (2021) undertakes precisely this sort of inquiry. Notably, she finds that most white Americans have a moderate tendency toward racial sympathy. When asked to consider scenarios describing the discriminatory treatment of black Americans, most white Americans express some degree of distress (p. 127). Just as importantly, Chudy also finds that white Americans with higher levels of racial sympathy are more inclined to support policies like affirmative action and policies that provide resources specifically to businesses in black neighborhoods, black schools, and black students (p. 130). This is consistent with previous scholarship that finds that white Americans with lower levels of racial resentment are more likely to support race-targeted policies specifically aimed to assist black Americans (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; M. C. Taylor & Mateyka, 2011), but it also adds an important insight. It is not merely the absence of racial prejudice but the presence of racial sympathy that promotes support for racial redistribution.

Even so, this understanding of racial sympathy among white Americans has an important limitation. It implicitly conceptualizes white Americans as a monolithic group and overlooks an important implication of race-targeted policies that may divide even white Americans who feel a sense of racial sympathy. America, after all, is divided not only by economic disparities between racial groups but also by economic disparities within racial groups. Some white Americans are relatively affluent. Others have lower incomes (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014; Kocchar & Cilluffo, 2018). Although race-targeted policies aim to close racial economic disparities and create a more level economic playing field, in practice, white Americans will experience the consequences of a leveled

playing field in different ways. One might wonder if white Americans with lower incomes, therefore, will experience a sense of threat from the prospect of policies that would help black Americans. One might also wonder if that sense of threat makes whites with lower incomes less likely to support race-targeted policies, even when they are racially sympathetic. There is reason to believe this will be the case.

### 3. Taking Economic Position Into Account

Racial redistribution is ultimately about the allocation of economic resources and opportunities and race-targeted policies are ultimately about improving the economic circumstances of Americans who are not white (Maye, 2022; Nelson, 2019; Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). This raises the possibility that some white Americans—namely, those with lower incomes—may be less likely to translate their racial sympathy into support for race-targeted policies. Simply put, the consequences of improving the economic fortunes of others may look very different depending on one's own financial circumstances.

Group position theory helps explain why this is likely to occur. Group position theory begins with the notion that individuals understand that societies contain multiple groups and finite resources. It posits that individuals will feel threatened by developments that benefit groups other than their own and will, in turn, oppose those developments and even develop prejudicial attitudes toward out-groups they find threatening. One notable implication of this theory pertains to historically dominant groups who become concerned about their own relative position in society. Since these individuals are more likely to perceive themselves as having something to lose, they are particularly susceptible to feelings of threat even when no clear evidence of a threat is present (Bobo, 1998, 1999; Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996).

Importantly, group position theory can help us think about how white Americans' support for race-targeted policies might be shaped by experiences related both to their race and their economic position. Although white Americans are generally less likely to think about their own race on a consistent basis, situations that call attention to the function of race in society can nonetheless prime them to think about themselves as a member of a racial group. Race-targeted policies, which explicitly direct benefits to non-white racial groups, can serve as one such prime (Bobo, 1998; Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Wetts & Willer, 2018). When this prime is activated, whites may act as "opportunity hoarders" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015) by becoming hostile to policies they believe will impose costs on them for the benefit of others (Gilens, 1999; Pearson-Merkowitz & Lang, 2020).

Likewise, group position theory implies that lower-income whites will be especially inclined to oppose race-targeted policies. In a relative sense, they may feel the most threatened because their own economic circumstances are less secure. This implication is supported by evidence. Among whites, lower socioeconomic status is generally correlated with greater out-group prejudice (Carvacho et al., 2013; Manstead, 2018) and less support for race-based policies (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; M. C. Taylor & Mateyka, 2011; see also Hines & Rios, 2021). Taken together, this research demonstrates that when lower-income whites consider their economic position relative to black Americans, the potential opposition towards race-targeted policies increases.

Although, to date, group position theory has focused on explaining experiences of resentment, there is also reason to believe that relative economic position may constrain the influence of racial sympathy. It is certainly notable that whites with higher levels of racial sympathy are more likely to support racial

redistribution (Chudy, 2021), yet it may also be the case that the effect of sympathy depends upon the material conditions of those who feel this emotion. Consistent with group position theory, it is plausible that racially sympathetic whites with higher incomes feel at liberty to support policies that would help racial out-groups. They may feel secure in the resources they possess, less threatened by racial out-groups, and, consequently, may be willing to support allocating resources to a racial out-group when that out-group has their sympathy. They may have the luxury, so to speak, of adopting a position consistent with their sensibilities on racial issues.

Lower-income whites, by contrast, may not feel that they have that same luxury because they are more likely to be in direct competition with black Americans for resources like school funding, scholarships, business loans, and employment. Accordingly, when racially sympathetic whites have lower incomes, their sense of financial security may be lower and their sense of competition with others, including racial others, may be greater. Although many lower-income whites may genuinely feel sympathy toward black Americans, their own financial circumstances may dampen their support for economic policies that place the needs of others ahead of their own. In counterpoint to earlier research, it may not always be the case that lower-income whites oppose racial redistribution because of resentment. Instead, it may be that economic conditions disrupt the move from racial sympathy to support for race-targeted policies. This gives rise to the following hypothesis:

H1: The influence of racial sympathy will be smaller among lower-income white Americans (as compared to those with higher incomes).

Corroboration for this hypothesis would indicate that support for race-targeted policies has two important conditions. First, consistent with previous research, for individuals to support such policies, they may need to develop racial sympathy (Chudy, 2021; see also Hooker, 2009). When whites lack that sympathy, they are unlikely to see the need for policies designed to specifically benefit black Americans. Second, the development of racial sympathy, by itself, may generally be insufficient to generate support for race-targeted economic redistribution. Even among whites who have higher levels of racial sympathy, it may be easier to move from sympathy to support for people who feel relatively secure in their own financial circumstances.

## 4. Data and Method

Racial sympathy is still an emerging concept and is not yet included in major surveys. For this reason, few existing datasets include this measure. Therefore, to test our hypotheses, we rely on the dataset that initially demonstrated the influence and conceptual validity of racial sympathy—the 2013 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES; Chudy, 2021). In addition to providing a nationally representative US sample, the CCES also contains measures of racial sympathy, income, and support for horizontal distribution. For our analysis, we focus exclusively on the attitudes of white Americans.

### 4.1. Horizontal Redistribution

To examine support for horizontal redistribution, we focus on four race-targeted policies: subsidies for businesses in black neighborhoods, support for funding for schools in black neighborhoods, scholarships for black students, and affirmative action in employment and education. Each question asks about support or opposition towards these policies. For businesses, schools, and scholarships, respondents selected their

response from a 5-item Likert scale, ranging from *strongly favor* to *strongly oppose*, with a middle option, *neither favor nor oppose*. The affirmative action item asked respondents for their level of support on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly support* to *strongly oppose* with no middle option. Notably, support is not overwhelming for any of these items. Most items center on the middle point on the scale, with the exception of affirmative action where strong opposition is the modal response and the average falls at 0.39 on a 0 to 1 point scale.

Unfortunately for our purposes, three of the questions about race-targeted policies on the CCES were part of a randomized experiment where some were asked about “poor” businesses, schools, and scholarships, and some were asked about “black” businesses, schools, and scholarships. Given our focus on horizontal redistribution, we focus only on the versions of the questions that explicitly mention race. This decreases our sample sizes relative to other studies relying on CCES data to the low 320s for these questions, whereas nearly twice as many respondents answered the affirmative action question. Analysis of the vertical redistribution questions can be found in Table A4 of the Supplementary File.

#### **4.2. Racial Sympathy and Economic Position**

As referenced above, we rely on the 2013 CCES because it includes a distinct measure of racial sympathy. This measure of racial sympathy includes responses to four different vignettes, each “depicting an instance of black suffering” in the present day (Chudy, 2021, p. 126). Two vignettes describe discrimination in hiring (one towards an individual and one towards a group), one describes discrimination in policing, and the final vignette focuses on discrimination faced by a black neighborhood in public service provision. This emphasis on present-day discrimination in the measure of racial sympathy is important for our purposes. Although the rationale for race-targeted policies is that they are necessary for addressing both past and present conditions of discrimination, there is reason to believe that sympathy for present hardships may be especially consequential. Even if people felt bad for past suffering, they may not believe a present-day policy is necessary. Concern with current suffering, however, may be closely related to beliefs about whether new policies are needed to address the challenges black Americans are currently facing. A full description of the measures is included in Table A1 in the Supplementary File. After reading each vignette, respondents express their sympathy for the plight of the individual in the vignette, ranging from *I do not feel any sympathy* to feeling *a great deal of sympathy* (Chronbach’s alpha: 0.74).

Because our interest is in how the influence of racial sympathy might vary by material circumstances, we also require a measure of income. We use the income measure that the CCES includes: “Thinking back over the last year, what was your family’s annual income?” This measure includes 13 different options ranging from “less than \$10,000” to “\$250,000 or more.” It also provides a decent amount of variation, and even though it cannot completely capture the material circumstances of an individual (including things like wealth or debt), it is well-suited for our inquiry.

In addition to these primary measures, we include a measure of ideology and some demographic questions, including age, gender, and education. We use the same measure of ideology as Chudy (2021), a composite of three questions about the role of government (Chronbach’s alpha: 0.81). As with much work on racial attitudes, questions often arise about whether policy support results from racial attitudes or a commitment to limited government (DeSante, 2013; Enders, 2021). This measure helps us tailor our approach to account



for this possibility. We also account for other correlates of policy attitudes. Those who are older have become less supportive of government distribution (Ashok et al., 2015), women are more supportive of redistributive policies compared to men (H. E. Bullock & Reppond, 2017; Condon & Wichowsky, 2020), and those with higher levels of education more strongly oppose redistribution (J. G. Bullock, 2021). We rescaled all variables in the models to range between 0 and 1. We also tested for multicollinearity in our models by examining the variance inflation factor scores. Our tests indicate multicollinearity is not a concern in our models.

For ease of interpretation, we report ordinary least squares models below. This is also consistent with the modeling approach used by Chudy (2021) in her original study of the relationship between racial sympathy and support for race-targeted policies. However, given the ordinal structure of our dependent variables, we also verify the robustness of these findings with ordinal logistic regression models in our Supplementary File. Each model predicts support for a horizontally redistributive policy. For each policy, we first model the direct effects of all variables. Then, the second column under each policy reports the models that include an interactive term for racial sympathy and economic position. This enables us to assess whether economic position changes the influence of racial sympathy on policy attitudes. All models reported in the main text and in the Supplementary File use survey weights that incorporate demographic information about the United States population to improve the accuracy of estimates.

## 5. Does the Influence of Racial Sympathy Depend on Economic Position?

At question in this study is whether the influence of racial sympathy on support for racial redistribution depends on an individual's relative economic position. Group position theory suggests that it will and that racial sympathy will have less influence on the attitudes of lower-income whites. Of course, to examine whether this pattern emerges, there must be sufficient numbers of racially sympathetic individuals across the income scale to generate reliable findings. Accordingly, we first turn to the levels of racial sympathy that exist across income categories.

As a simple test, we divide the income scale into three broad categories: high (those with incomes above \$70,000), medium (those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$70,000), and low (those with incomes below \$30,000). Both the mean and median income fell between \$40,000 and \$50,000, making them comparable measures of central tendency. The high, medium, and low income categories were derived by adding and subtracting one-half of one standard deviation around the mean income. Using this method, we find that levels of racial sympathy across these categories are very similar. For the high, medium, and low-income groups, the average levels of racial sympathy (on a 0 to 1 scale) are 0.655, 0.637, and 0.641, respectively. This allows us to make reasonable inferences about the influence of racial sympathy across the range of income and know that differences in the distribution of racial sympathy are not driving our results. This similarity across income categories is also substantively important in its own right. Lower-income Americans are no less inclined to feel distress for the circumstances of black Americans than their more affluent peers. What remains to be seen is whether their economic position is conducive to channeling racial sympathy into support for racial redistribution.

Table 1 presents our main findings. It is clear that a number of factors influence support for race-targeted policies. Unsurprisingly, support for limited government has a strong negative relationship to support for horizontal redistribution. For those seeking less government, race-based redistribution is counter to their



**Table 1.** Predicting support for horizontal redistribution by racial sympathy and income.

|                          | Black business    |                   | Black schools      |                    | Black scholarships |                    | Affirmative action |                    |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Racial sympathy          | 0.34***<br>(0.07) | 0.14<br>(0.11)    | 0.34***<br>(0.07)  | 0.11<br>(0.12)     | 0.46***<br>(.07)   | 0.32**<br>(0.12)   | 0.23***<br>(0.05)  | 0.16*<br>(0.08)    |
| Income                   | 0.08<br>(0.06)    | -0.30+<br>(0.16)  | 0.08<br>(0.06)     | -0.34+<br>(0.18)   | 0.09<br>(0.07)     | -0.16<br>(0.18)    | 0.00<br>(0.05)     | -0.13<br>(0.12)    |
| Limited government       | -0.11**<br>(0.03) | -0.10**<br>(0.03) | -0.25***<br>(0.04) | -0.24***<br>(0.04) | -0.18***<br>(0.04) | -0.18***<br>(0.04) | -0.30***<br>(0.03) | -0.29***<br>(0.03) |
| Age                      | -0.00<br>(0.06)   | -0.00<br>(0.06)   | -0.16*<br>(0.07)   | -0.16<br>(0.06)    | -0.15*<br>(0.03)   | -0.14*<br>(0.07)   | -0.16***<br>(0.05) | -0.16***<br>(0.05) |
| Female                   | -0.08**<br>(0.03) | -0.08**<br>(0.03) | -0.05<br>(0.03)    | -0.05<br>(0.03)    | -0.06+<br>(0.03)   | -0.06+<br>(0.03)   | -0.03<br>(0.02)    | -0.03<br>(0.02)    |
| Education                | 0.15**<br>(0.05)  | 0.14**<br>(0.05)  | 0.07<br>(0.06)     | 0.07<br>(0.05)     | 0.16**<br>(0.06)   | 0.15**<br>(0.06)   | -0.00<br>(0.04)    | 0.00<br>(0.04)     |
| Racial sympathy X income |                   | 0.57*<br>(0.23)   |                    | 0.64*<br>(0.25)    |                    | 0.38<br>(0.25)     |                    | 0.22<br>(0.17)     |
| Constant                 | 0.22***<br>(0.06) | 0.35***<br>(0.08) | 0.46***<br>(0.07)  | 0.61***<br>(0.09)  | 0.27***<br>(0.07)  | 0.36***<br>(0.09)  | 0.43***<br>(0.05)  | 0.47***<br>(0.06)  |
| Adj. R2                  | 0.20              | 0.22              | 0.27               | 0.28               | 0.29               | 0.29               | 0.26               | 0.26               |
| N                        | 322               | 322               | 323                | 323                | 323                | 323                | 640                | 640                |

Notes: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; + $p < 0.1$ ; estimated ordinary least squares models using survey weights; standard errors are in parentheses.

preferences, regardless of whether that policy is to support businesses in black neighborhoods, schools, scholars, or hires. Education is positively related to all four of our dependent variables, though statistically significant for only two models. Women, when controlling for the other factors in the model, are less supportive of horizontally redistributive policies compared to men (but this effect only reaches traditional levels of statistical significance for the models predicting support for black businesses). This contrasts with our prediction for gender, but it is worth noting that there are gender differences in some of our model's other constituent terms—namely support for limited government, racial sympathy, and income. The effect of age is negative across all models but significant for only two of the policies, scholarships for black students and affirmative action.

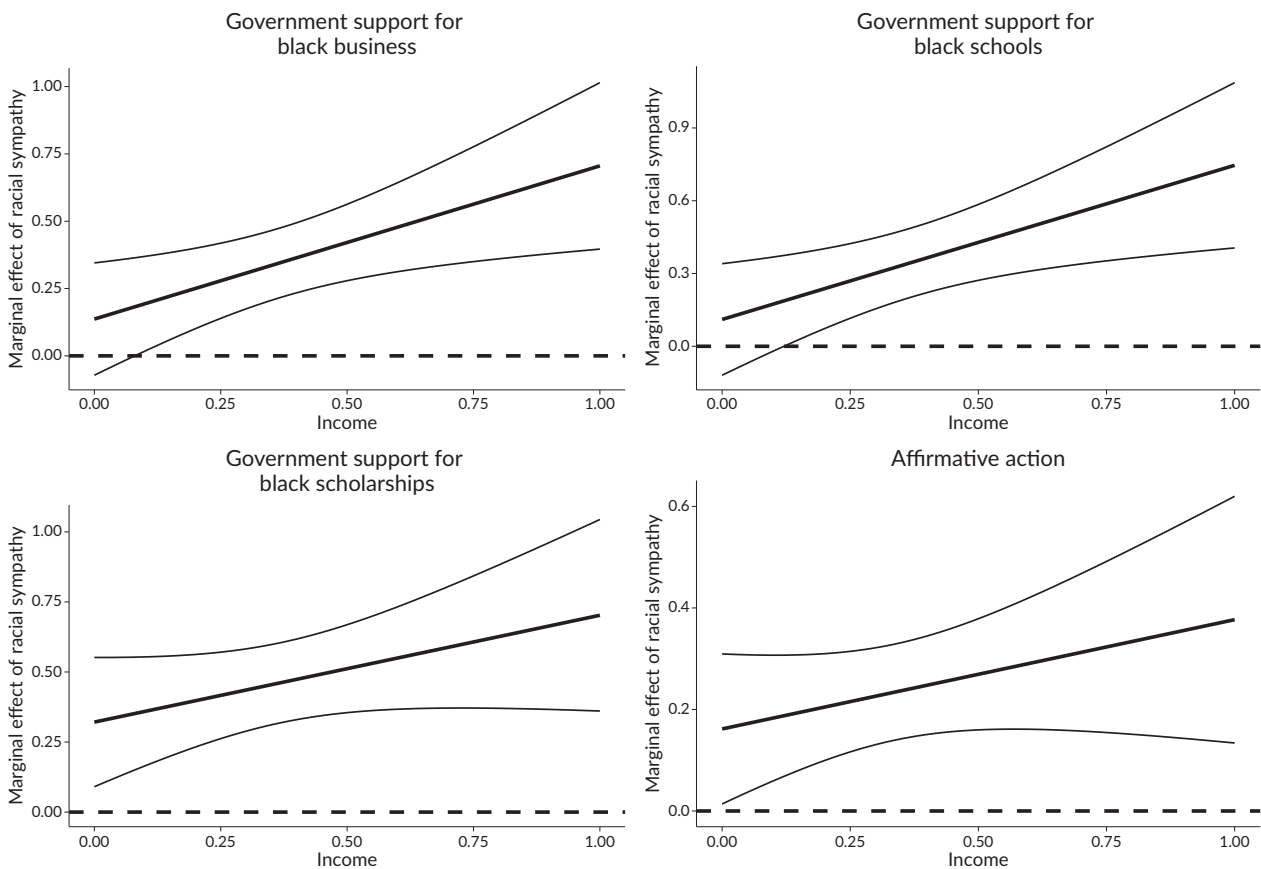
Most importantly given the focus of this study, the direct effect of racial sympathy comports with expectations. In each of the direct models, the influence of racial sympathy on policy support is positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Meanwhile, the base models suggest no direct effect of income on racial redistribution attitudes. Yet to more thoroughly understand how racial sympathy and income contribute to attitudes toward race-targeted policy, we must consider how these factors can work in combination.

We now turn to the relationship of greatest interest: whether the influence of racial sympathy is weaker for lower-income whites. As expected, we find that the interaction term representing the influence of racial sympathy conditional on income is positive and significant in predicting support for funding that benefits businesses and schools in black neighborhoods. The expected interaction of sympathy and income is also positive in the models of support for scholarships for black students and for affirmative action, however, the

interactions do not reach standard levels of statistical significance. A coarse emphasis on statistical significance, however, would obscure the consistency with which the effect of racial sympathy differs by income level. With this in mind, we report the average marginal effect of racial sympathy for respondents across the income scale on support for each race-targeted policy included in this study. This enables us to illustrate whether the effect of racial sympathy differs from 0 (or *no effect*) for respondents with different levels of income and also enables us to illustrate whether the influence of racial sympathy is weaker for those with lower incomes.

Figure 1 presents the marginal effect of racial sympathy across the income scale with respect to each of the four different redistributive policies we consider: subsidies for businesses in black neighborhoods, funding for black schools, scholarships for black students, and affirmative action. For those with lower incomes, the marginal effect of racial sympathy on their preferences for each form of race-targeted policy is smaller, relative to those who are higher on the income scale.

The direction of these findings is consistent with the expectation of group position theory, which anticipates that, as an individual experiences more economic vulnerability, their inclination to support other groups will decline—even when they have sympathy for those groups. Most notably, for two policies—support for businesses in black neighborhoods and support for black schools—the effect of racial sympathy cannot be



**Figure 1.** Marginal effect of racial sympathy on horizontal redistribution by income. Notes: Figures show the marginal effect of racial sympathy on support for horizontal policy redistribution across the income distribution; lighter lines indicate confidence intervals; marginal effects are based on the estimates in Table 1.

statistically differentiated from zero for whites with the lowest levels of income. These white Americans are among the least inclined to support race-targeted policies, even when they are racially sympathetic. By contrast, among whites with higher incomes, racial sympathy is more likely to correspond with support for race-targeted policies. Where economic security is greater, sympathy is more likely to translate into support for historically marginalized groups.

However, although these findings corroborate the expectation of group position theory, it warrants noting that the influence of racial sympathy is not completely limited to those with higher incomes. Racial sympathy does matter for lower-income whites, albeit to a lesser degree. Among whites with lower incomes, there is a difference in policy attitudes among those who have greater racial sympathy and those who lack it. This influence of racial sympathy on support for race-targeted policy declines as income declines, but even among relatively low-income citizens, racial sympathy has some effect across all four policies we examine.

It is clearly not impossible for lower-income whites to translate racial sympathy into policy support. This speaks to the power of racial sympathy to generate support for policies that will help others without providing any material benefit to the individual. Nonetheless, the influence of racial sympathy is notably lower at the lower end of the income scale, a pattern that attests to the importance of the material conditions that individuals experience. As hypothesized, expressing support for policies that help a sympathetic group appears to be easiest when one's own material resources provide greater security.

## 6. Conclusion

It is hardly news that America's history of systemic racial discrimination has contributed to enduring economic disparities between white and black Americans (Katznelson, 2005; Roediger, 2022; Rothstein, 2017; K.-Y. Taylor, 2019). Race-targeted policies that aim to horizontally redistribute resources to black Americans provide one means of addressing this long-standing problem. Yet building the political will necessary to enact such policies, or even to sustain existing policies, remains difficult. Any forward progress requires substantial support from Americans who are white, and white Americans have tended to oppose horizontal redistribution across racial lines (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; M. C. Taylor & Mateyka, 2011; Wetts & Willer, 2018). Accordingly, for those interested in this form of horizontal redistribution, one unavoidable question is how to promote racial solidarity among white Americans (Allen, 2004; Hooker, 2009).

As previous research suggests, the challenge of promoting racial solidarity and the racial sympathy that undergirds it, while difficult, is not impossible. At least when measured in 2013 on the CCES, most white Americans had an inclination toward racial sympathy. Just as importantly, racially sympathetic whites were more likely to support a variety of race-targeted policies (Chudy, 2021). While we do not believe that these findings are unique to 2013, it warrants noting that the data underlying these findings were collected before the emergence of Donald Trump and his uniquely explicit racial politics (Sides et al., 2019). It is possible that the proportion of white Americans expressing racial sympathy has declined in the years since 2013. It is also possible that the influence of racial sympathy on attitudes about racial redistribution may have declined among some whites during these years.

While we cannot definitively rule out this possibility, it is important to note that racial attitudes associated with the election of Donald Trump were already reflected in public opinion before his rise. During the

Obama presidency, race was chronically accessible in the minds of many Americans (Luttig & Callaghan, 2016). Additionally, evidence from this same period indicates that some white Americans were becoming more accepting of hostile rhetoric toward racial minorities (Valentino et al., 2018). This suggests that, relative to 2013, levels of racial sympathy and the influence of racial sympathy on support for race-targeted policies may be similar today. Ultimately, further research is needed to determine whether this is the case. Nonetheless, evidence from the 2013 CCES signals that racial sympathy has existed among many white Americans in recent history and, when it has, this sympathy makes support for racial redistribution more likely.

Our findings echo this insight but also demonstrate how the influence of racial sympathy can be constrained. Consistent with the logic of group position theory, we find that the influence of racial sympathy is smaller among whites with lower incomes who, on material grounds, may find it more difficult to support policies that benefit others. Consequently, the economic challenges of lower-income whites appear to suppress the level of support that whites, as a majority racial group, will provide for horizontal racial redistribution.

This poses a notable challenge for addressing racialized economic disparities in the American context. It also reveals an important pre-condition for developing greater feelings of solidarity across racial lines. It may be critically important to cultivate racial sympathy among whites, but ultimately, that is not enough. Our findings suggest that unless the material position of lower-income white Americans improves, their support for the allocation of resources to other racial groups will remain unlikely. Simply put, political solidarity across racial lines may first require creating the material conditions that enable solidarity to flourish. That, in turn, may require attention to both the economic disparities that exist between racial groups and the economic hardships that people in all racial groups—including many white Americans—continue to face. Feelings of sympathy and expressions of solidarity may be possible, but they are also fragile.

### Acknowledgments

We thank the editors and staff of *Social Inclusion* and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on this project. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to Dr. Arnim Langer, Dr. Frances Stewart, and Dr. Line Kuppens for their encouragement and constructive feedback in the early stages of this research. Finally, we thank Dr. Jennifer Chudy for developing the concept of racial sympathy and making her data publicly available.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

### References

- Allen, D. S. (2004). *Talking to strangers: Anxieties of citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ashok, V., Kuziemko, I., & Washington, E. (2015). *Support for redistribution in an age of rising inequality: New stylized facts and some tentative explanations*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Bell, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533.

- Bobo, L. (1998). Race, interests, and beliefs about affirmative action: Unanswered questions and new directions. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41(7), 985–1003.
- Bobo, L. (1999). Prejudice as group position: Microfoundations of a sociological approach to racism and race relations. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 445–472.
- Bobo, L., & Kluegel, J. R. (1993). Opposition to race-targeting: Self-interest, stratification ideology, or racial attitudes? *American Sociological Review*, 58(4), 443–464.
- Bobo, L., & Zubrinsky, C. L. (1996). Attitudes on residential integration: Perceived status differences, mere in-group preference, or racial prejudice? *Social Forces*, 74(3), 883–909.
- Bullock, H. E., & Reppond, H. A. (2017). Economic inequality and the gendered politics of redistribution. In A. Bos & M. Schneider (Eds.), *The political psychology of women in US politics* (pp. 73–92). Routledge.
- Bullock, J. G. (2021). Education and attitudes toward redistribution in the United States. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51(3), 1230–1250.
- Carvacho, H., Zick, A., Haye, A., González, R., Manzi, J., Kocik, C., & Bertl, M. (2013). On the relation between social class and prejudice: The roles of education, income, and ideological attitudes. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(4), 272–285.
- Castiglia, C. (2002). Abolition's racial interiors and the making of white civic depth. *American Literary History*, 14(1), 32–59.
- Chudy, J. (2021). Racial sympathy and its political consequences. *The Journal of Politics*, 83(1), 122–136.
- Condon, M., & Wichowsky, A. (2020). Inequality in the social mind: Social comparison and support for redistribution. *The Journal of Politics*, 82(1), 149–161.
- DeNavas-Walt, C., & Proctor, B. D. (2014). *Income and poverty in the United States: 2013*. United States Census Bureau.
- DeSante, C. D. (2013). Working twice as hard to get half as far: Race, work ethic, and America's deserving poor. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(2), 342–356.
- Enders, A. M. (2021). A matter of principle? On the relationship between racial resentment and ideology. *Political Behavior*, 43, 561–584.
- Enders, A. M., & Scott, J. S. (2019). The increasing racialization of american electoral politics, 1988–2016. *American Politics Research*, 47(2), 275–303.
- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hacker, J. S. (2019). *The great risk shift: The new economic insecurity and the decline of the American Dream*. Oxford University Press.
- Haney López, I. (2014). *Dog whistle politics: How racial coded politics have reinvented racism and wrecked the middle class*. Oxford University Press.
- Hines, B., & Rios, K. (2021). Shared disadvantage as a determinant of the relationship between white Americans' socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic prejudice. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 51(6), 910–923.
- Hooker, J. (2009). *Race and the politics of solidarity*. Oxford University Press.
- Kam, C. D., & Burge, C. D. (2019). TRENDS: Racial resentment and public opinion across the racial divide. *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(4), 767–784.
- Katznelson, I. (2005). *When affirmative action was white: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America*. Norton.
- Kinder, D. R., & Sanders, L. M. (1996). *Divided by color: Racial politics and democratic ideals*. University of Chicago Press.

- Kirzinger, A., Kearney, A., Stokes, M., Hamel, L., & Brodie, M. (2022). *Economic concerns and health policy, the ACA, and views of long-term care facilities*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/health-costs/poll-finding/kff-health-tracking-poll-march-2022>
- Kocchar, R., & Cilluffo, A. (2018). *Income distributions of whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians in the U.S., 1970 and 2016*. Pew Research Center.
- Lewis, A., & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the best intentions: How racial inequality thrives in good schools*. Oxford University Press.
- Lin, A. C., & Harris, D. R. (Eds.). (2008). *The colors of poverty: Why racial and ethnic disparities persist*. SAGE.
- Luttig, M. D., & Callaghan, T. H. (2016). Is President Obama's race chronically accessible? Racial priming in the 2012 presidential election. *Political Communication*, 33(4), 628–650.
- Manstead, A. S. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57(2), 267–291.
- Maye, A. (2022). *Advancing anti-racist economic research and policy: The myth of race-neutral policy*. Economic Policy Institute.
- McAdam, D. (2003). Recruits to civil rights activism. In J. Goodwin & J. M. Jasper (Eds.), *The social movements reader: Cases and concepts* (pp. 65–75). Blackwell Publishing.
- Melcher, C. R. (2023). Economic self-interest and Americans' redistributive, class, and racial attitudes: The case of economic insecurity. *Political Behavior*, 45(1), 175–196.
- Nelson, E. (2019). *The case for race-conscious affirmative action*. Economic Policy Institute.
- Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Political emotions*. Harvard University Press.
- Pearson-Merkowitz, S., & Lang, C. (2020). Smart growth at the ballot box: Understanding voting on affordable housing and land management referendums. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(6), 1848–1875.
- Roediger, D. R. (2022). *The wages of whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class* (4th ed.). Verso Books.
- Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright Publishing.
- Sawhill, I. V., & Reeves, R. V. (2016). The case for “race-conscious” policies. Brookings Institute.
- Sawyer, J., & Gampa, A. (2018). Implicit and explicit racial attitudes changed during Black Lives Matter. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(7), 1039–1059.
- Schaeffer, K. (2022). *Key facts about housing affordability in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/23/key-facts-about-housing-affordability-in-the-u-s>
- Schaeffer, K. (2023). *U.S. Congress continues to grow in racial, ethnic diversity*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/01/09/u-s-congress-continues-to-grow-in-racial-ethnic-diversity>
- Sears, D. O., Van Laar, C., Carrillo, M., & Kosterman, R. (2004). Is it really racism? The origins of white Americans' opposition to race-targeted policies. *Political Psychology*, 61(1), 358–378.
- Sides, J., Tesler, M., & Vavreck, L. (2019). *Identity crisis: The 2016 presidential campaign and the battle for the meaning of America*. Princeton University Press.
- Sniderman, P. M., & Carmines, E. G. (1999). *Reaching beyond race*. Harvard University Press.
- Strand, P. J., & Mirkay, N. A. (2022). Interest convergence and the racial wealth gap: Defusing racism's divide-and-conquer via universal basic income. *Kentucky Law Journal*, 2022(693). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4027042](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4027042)
- Taylor, K.-Y. (2019). *Race for profit: How banks and the real estate industry undermined black homeownership*. UNC Press Books.

- Taylor, M. C., & Mateyka, P. J. (2011). Community influences on white racial attitudes: What matters and why? *Sociological Quarterly*, 52(2), 220–243.
- Thomas, K. (2002). Racial justice: Moral or political? *National Black Law Journal*, 17, 222–246.
- Thompson, J. P., & Suarez, G. A. (2019). *Accounting for racial wealth disparities in the United States* (Working Paper No. 19–13). Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.
- Valentino, N. A., Neuner, F. G., & Vandebroek, L. M. (2018). The changing norms of political rhetoric and the end of racial priming. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(3), 757–771.
- Watts Smith, C., Kreitzer, R. J., & Suo, F. (2020). The dynamics of racial resentment across the 50 states. *Perspectives on Politics*, 18(2), 527–538.
- Wetts, R., & Willer, R. (2018). Privilege on the precipice: Perceived racial status threats lead white Americans to oppose welfare programs. *Social Forces*, 97(2), 793–822.

### About the Authors



**Tarah Williams** is an assistant professor of political science at Allegheny College. Her research interests include political behavior, political psychology, and the way that racial and gender prejudice shapes American political life.



**Andrew J. Bloeser** is an associate professor of political science at Allegheny College and the director of the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation. His research focuses on the influence of race and social class on policy attitudes and citizens' commitments to democratic norms.