

Inequality in Black and White

Public Opinion and Inequality in the United States



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In this chapter, the task force focuses on the beliefs and opinions that Americans have about inequality. Specifically, we examine the commitment to egalitarianism as a norm and how this commitment varies across groups defined by race, class, ideology, and political party. Additionally, we examine support for governmental efforts to reduce income inequality across racial groups, and the extent to which attitudes about equality in the abstract are shaped by attitudes about equality for different class and racial groups. Lastly, we focus on levels of racial group identity, how this concept can be measured, and whether it varies over time and across different groups.

How are Americans' values and views of inequality shaped by understandings of economic inequality and of racial inequality?

Since 1984, the American National Election Studies (ANES) has sought to measure support for the value of egalitarianism. The battery, originally designed by Stanley Feldman, consists of six items incorporating the concepts of equal opportunity, concerns about the pace of equal rights, whether the failure to provide equal opportunity is a big problem, whether equality should be a societal goal, and whether the pursuit of equality would lead to fewer problems in this country.¹ One of the virtues of this scale is that it is not designed to capture egalitarianism on any specific dimension, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or ethnicity. Instead, it refers to equality more broadly, and hence ostensibly measures egalitarianism as an abstract value. The Cronbach's alpha on this six-item scale approaches or exceeds conventional thresholds for coherent attitudinal scales. For example, the alpha on the egalitarianism scale was .78 in the 2012 ANES survey, which had 5,914 respondents (2,054 in the face-to-face component of the study and 3,860 in the Internet component). This statistic varied considerably across the two survey modes,

with an alpha of .82 in the Internet survey but an alpha of only .68 in the face-to-face survey.² It is not clear why this discrepancy appears but the answer may partly lie in the fact that the two samples are not equivalent, with the face-to-face sample having a higher response rate (38% versus 2%) and fewer, but a more representative number of, college graduates.

More troubling than the different alphas across survey modes is the different alphas across racial, ethnic, and class groups. For example, focusing on the face-to-face study, the alpha on the egalitarian scale is .70 for whites, .54 for African Americans, and .62 for Latinos.³ In the case of class, respondents in the face-to-face study who graduated from college report an alpha of .79 on the egalitarianism scale compared to noncollege graduates who report a score of only .64. Overall, this suggests that the egalitarianism scale is less than optimal especially for African Americans, Latinos, and respondents who have not graduated from college. Yet, although the scale is less than ideal for disadvantaged groups the measure appears sufficiently coherent—especially when analyzing the weighted data—that we can, at a minimum, draw some preliminary conclusions.

Regarding this task force's discussions, if we accept that the ANES measure is an imperfect, but adequate, construct of the value of egalitarianism, how is it related to attitudes about economic inequality and racial inequality? One way to assess this relationship is to regress the egalitarianism scale on measures assessing support for class and racial equality, controlling for standing demographic and political variables. These results are shown in table 1.⁴

In the first column (Model 1) of table 1, the association between attitudes on income inequality and support for the egalitarianism scale is determined.⁵ These analyses control for standard demographic variables such as age, race, ethnicity, and education as well as political predispositions such as partisanship and ideology. The most noteworthy result in the Model 1 is that attitudes on income inequality are significantly related to the broader egalitarian scale. The magnitude of the association is of moderate size: moving from low to high on the income inequality measure results in a 12-percentage point increase in support for egalitarianism in the abstract. Interestingly, none of the

Table 1: The Impact of Attitudes on Class, Race, and Ethnic Equality on Egalitarianism

	MODEL 1 (EGALITARIANISM)	MODEL 2 (EGALITARIANISM)	MODEL 3 (EGALITARIANISM)
REDUCE INCOME DIFFERENCES	.12*** (.02)	–	–
AID TO BLACKS	–	.14*** (.02)	–
OPPOSITION TO IMMIGRATION	–	–	-.08** (.02)
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	.13*** (.02)	.15*** (.02)	.15*** (.02)
IDEOLOGY	.14*** (.03)	.15* (.07)	.16*** (.03)
FEMALE	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
AGE	-.01 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	.00 (.12)
INCOME	-.03 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	-.04 (.02)
EDUCATION	.04 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)
BLACK	.05** (.02)	.04 (.02)	.06** (.02)
LATINO	-.03* (.01)	-.03* (.02)	-.03* (.02)
INTERCEPT	.43*** (.03)	.42*** (.03)	.53** (.03)
R SQUARED	.27	.30	.25
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES	1598	1394	1577

Notes: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 for two-tailed test. All variables coded 0-1; higher values of partisanship indicate the Democratic end of the scale.

class-oriented demographic measures (e.g., education and income) are statistically significantly related to the egalitarian scale. However, the effects of race and ethnicity are significant although in the case of Latinos negative and somewhat counterintuitive. Finally, and not surprisingly, ideology and party identification are also correlated with the egalitarianism scale.

The second column of table 1 (Model 2) shows similar analyses, except that the measure of income inequality is replaced with a question assessing levels of support for governmental efforts to assist African Americans.⁶ Again, we find that this more focused measure is significantly associated with the broader egalitarianism scale. The effect size is roughly equivalent to that of attitudes on income inequality. With the exception of Latino ethnicity, none of the demographic control variables meet conventional levels of statistical significance.

In Model 3, we substitute attitudes on immigration for the aid to blacks question. Having previously assessed the association between attitudes about class or race and egalitarianism, we now turn to nativist-oriented expressions

of equality. The relevant measure in Model 3 assesses respondents’ preferred level of immigration into the United States.⁷ Predictably, we find a significant, and negative, association between attitudes about immigration and the egalitarianism scale. The magnitude of this effect, however, is noticeably weaker relative to income and racial inequality. This finding suggests that the broader egalitarianism scale is more likely to reflect class and racial sentiments rather than nativist considerations.

Do minorities and whites have a different conceptualization of the relationship between egalitarianism, and class and racial equality? If so, how?

The analyses presented in table 1 were also separately run for whites, African Americans, and Latinos (results not shown).⁸ These findings did not differ substantially across groups in the

case of attitudes on reducing income inequality (Model 1). The relevant coefficients for whites and Latinos were .12 and .15, respectively. In both cases the results were highly significant. Among blacks, the results were somewhat weaker (.07), but still statistically significant. Thus, the impact of class considerations on egalitarianism is roughly equivalent across racial and ethnic groups.

Larger differences emerge when examining the association between racial considerations and egalitarianism across groups. The results in Model 2, with respect to the aid to blacks question, are largely driven by whites and Latinos. Specifically, the relevant coefficient for whites (.18) and Latinos (.13) are large and highly significant, whereas the effect among blacks (.08) is much weaker and falls short of statistical significance. Race—or at least attitudes about African Americans—is clearly implicated in views about egalitarianism among whites and Latinos, but not among blacks.

Group differences are even sharper when examining the relationship between immigration attitudes and egalitarianism. In summary, attitudes about immigration

are linked to egalitarian values only among whites. When replicating the analysis in Model 3 for white respondents only, the relevant coefficient is moderately strong and highly significant (.10; $p = .001$). Among blacks (.03) and Latinos (-.04); however, the results are considerably smaller and fall well short of statistical significance. The obvious conclusion here is that anti-immigrant sentiments play some role in reducing support for egalitarianism—but only among white Americans.

Does the public have a stance on whether class inequalities are caused by racial inequalities or vice-versa? What is the relationship between white’s attitudes about economic inequality and their views of minorities?

This first question alludes to perceptions of the origins of class inequality. The ANES did not ask any questions on this subject in 2012. Other high-quality surveys likely did contain some items gauging these opinions (e.g., the General Social Survey), but unfortunately that data is not evaluated in this chapter. The second question involves the relationship between attitudes about racial inequality and attitudes about class inequality. This matter is addressed by regressing attitudes on reducing income inequality on the aid to blacks or immigration questions, controlling for standard demographic and political variables. These results are presented in table 2. In the first column (Model 1), we focus on attitudes about government efforts to address the unique challenges of African Americans. Among whites in the 2012 ANES, attitudes regarding this issue are strongly associated with attitudes on reducing income inequality. The coefficient on this variable is statistically significant and rivals that of partisanship in its magnitude.

The results for the immigration question (see table 2, Model 2) are much less powerful. Here opposition to immigration is *not* significantly associated with attitudes on reducing income inequality. We remain cautious in interpreting this result, however, as it does not necessarily mean that white attitudes about Latinos are unrelated to attitudes on income inequality. Additional analyses show that, for example, perceptions that Latinos possess too much influence in American

society are significantly associated with white opposition to government efforts to reduce income inequality.⁹ Thus, opposition to immigration per se appears to be unrelated to anti-egalitarianism; this is not necessarily the case for negative attitudes about Latinos.

Are minorities more concerned about economic inequality than whites?

Another question raised by the task force involves racial and ethnic differences regarding levels of concern about economic inequality. The 2012 ANES asked a few questions about this issue with generally consistent results across the different indicators. The most straightforward question yields the sharpest group differences (see endnote #5), as shown in figure 1.¹⁰ As with previous analyses, these results are coded onto a 0–1 scale. Higher values indicate greater support for governmental efforts to reduce income differences. Clearly, both blacks and Latinos are considerably more positive about these efforts than are whites. These differences are both substantively and statistically significant.¹¹

Table 2: The Impact of Support for Aid to Blacks and Immigration Attitudes on Support for Reducing Income Inequality

(White Respondents)		
	MODEL 1 (INCOME INEQUALITY)	MODEL 2 (INCOME INEQUALITY)
AID TO BLACKS	.17** (.05)	–
OPPOSITION TO IMMIGRATION	–	.05 (.05)
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	.19*** (.06)	.23*** (.05)
IDEOLOGY	.24*** (.07)	.23*** (.07)
FEMALE	.04 (.02)	.02 (.02)
AGE	-.17*** (.05)	-.18*** (.04)
INCOME	-.08 (.04)	-.10* (.04)
EDUCATION	-.12** (.02)	-.10* (.04)
INTERCEPT	.25*** (.05)	.27*** (.06)
R SQUARED	.26	.24
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES	641	709

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for two-tailed test. All variables coded 0-1; higher values of partisanship indicate the Democratic end of the scale.

Is there any evidence to support recent claims that Americans are shedding their commitments to racial and ethnic identities?

This last question asks about overtime change in Americans’ commitment to their racial and ethnic identity. Unfortunately, this information has not been collected for all racial groups over an extended period of time. Much of the early literature on racial identity focused on African Americans, and here we do have some information going back to the 1980s.¹² Specifically, respondents are asked “Do you think that what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” If the respondent answers in the affirmative, they are then asked whether this will affect them a lot, some, or not very much. The

ANES has asked this question of black respondents since 2004, with the 2008 and 2012 time series being especially useful because of the minority oversamples. The question was initially asked in the 1984 National Black Election Study (NBES). Results for this question drawn from 1984 NBES, and the 2008, and 2012 ANES are presented in figure 2.

By this metric, at least, it would seem that levels of racial identity among blacks has declined since 1984. Indeed, if the 2008 respondents are only compared to 2012 respondents, there would appear to be a noticeable decline. It is unclear how to assess these results, but it is appropriate to resist over interpreting them. This is primarily because 1984 and 2008 were unusual years—both featured a

dramatic run for the presidency by an African American candidate (Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama, respectively). Of course, this is also true of 2012, but President Obama was running as an incumbent in this election cycle and we could argue that the movement-like atmosphere was far more muted relative to the other times examined in figure 2. Fortunately, additional measures of racial and ethnic group identity are included in the 2012 ANES, and these measures were asked of all respondents (see figure 3). Specifically respondents were asked, “How important is being [RESPONDENT RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP] to your identity? Is it extremely important, very important, moderately important, a little important, or not at all

Figure 1: Mean Levels of Support for Governmental Efforts to Reduce Income Inequality by Race

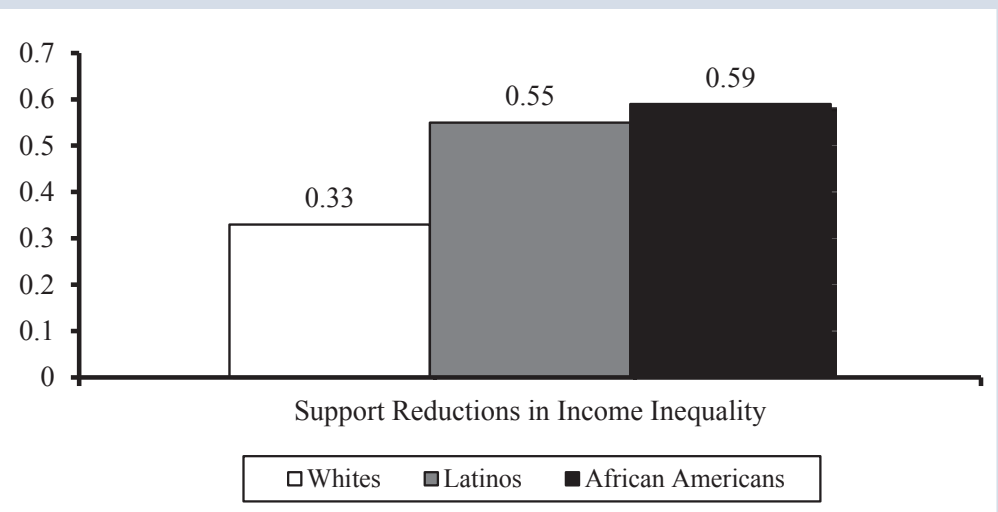


Figure 2: Mean Levels of Link Fate Attitudes among African Americans by Year

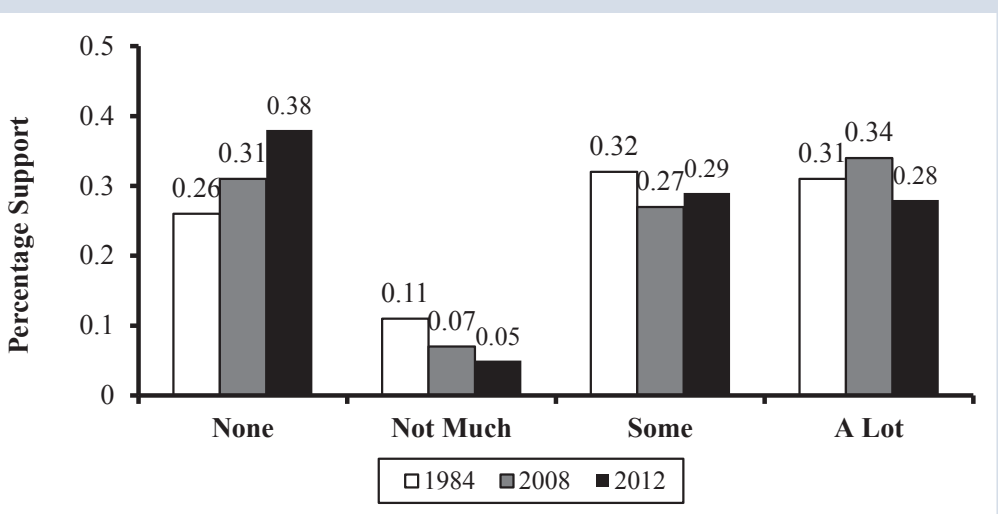
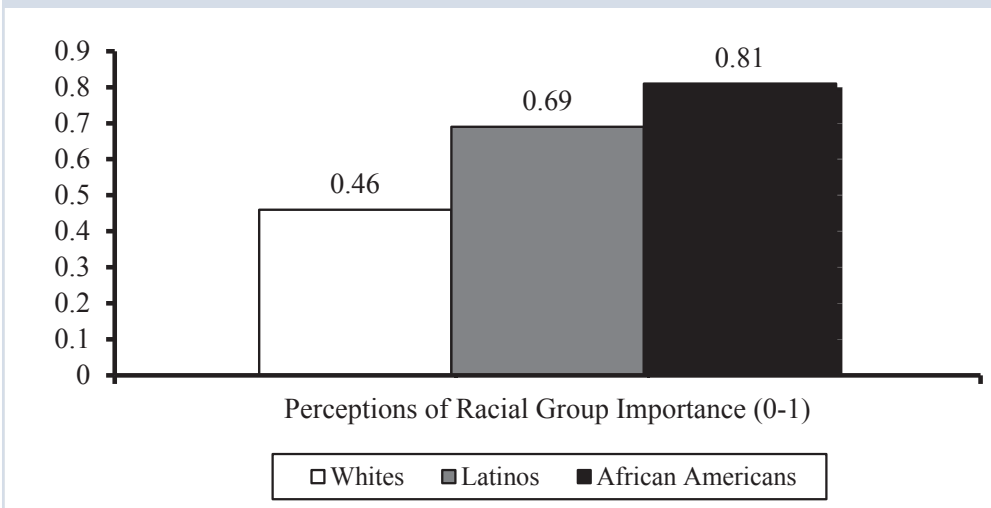


Figure 3: Mean Levels of Racial Group Importance by Race



(source: 2012 ANES)

important?” Although we have no overtime data for this item, it seems clear that Americans continue to place some value on this identity, albeit with important differences across groups. For example, the modal response (61%) for African Americans to this question was “extremely important.” Less than 10% provided a response of “a little important” or “not at all important.” Identity importance was far weaker among whites, although it is worth emphasizing that a nontrivial fraction of these respondents also valued their racial identity. For example, the modal response among whites (25%) was “moderately important,” with another 20% indicating that it is “very important” and 14% indicating that it is “extremely important.” Lastly, among Latinos the modal response (31%) was “very important,” with less than 20% indicating that this identity was of little or no importance to them. ■

NOTES

1. All of these questions use an agree-disagree answer format. Each of the six items is presented as follows: “Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.” “We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country.” “One of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance.” “This country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are.” “It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others.” And, finally, “If people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems.”
2. Even an alpha of .68 borders on acceptable as most researchers consider anything at or above .7 to be more than sufficient.
3. Racial differences are much smaller on the Internet, with whites reporting an alpha of .82 on the egalitarianism scale, and African Americans and Latinos reporting scores of .75 and .73, respectively.
4. Because of the greater confidence we have in the face-to-face interviews, only results from this mode will be presented in this chapter. All variables are coded onto a 0–1 scale.

5. This question was asked in an agree-disagree format with respondents addressing the following prompt: “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” The variable is recoded such that higher values indicate greater support for government efforts to reduce income inequality.

6. This question is asked as follows: “Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. (Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point 1.) Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. (Suppose these people are at the other end of the scale at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.” This variable is recorded onto a 0–1 scale such that higher values indicate greater support for governmental efforts to assist African Americans.

7. In this question respondents are asked, “Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to the United States to live should be increased a lot, increased a little, left the same as it is now, decreased a little, or decreased a lot” [the order of response options were randomized across respondents]. Results are coded such that higher values indicate greater opposition to immigration.

8. Both blacks and Latinos were oversampled in the 2012 ANES. Unfortunately, there were insufficient numbers of Asian Americans or Native Americans to analyze results for these groups separately.
9. The relevant coefficient here is $-.08$ ($p = .05$). Similar analyses among African Americans fail to find any relationship between attitudes about Latino influence and support for efforts to address income inequality.
10. Three additional questions were also asked on this subject. One asked whether income differences between the rich and the poor have increased over the last 20 years. A second question asked whether changes in income inequality are a good thing or bad thing. And the final question asked whether the respondent favored government efforts to make this difference smaller. Somewhat surprisingly, on average whites (.72) were more likely than Latinos (.66) and blacks (.62) to regard increasing inequality as “bad.” It is possible that many respondents were confused by all the information (a chart was provided depicting over time changes in income inequality) accompanying this question and this might account for the counterintuitive results. On the question of government efforts to address income inequality, differences among white (.47), Latino (.62), and African Americans (.57) were more consistent with results shown in figure 1.
11. Some of the white opposition to reducing income differences is due to the role that government might play in this endeavor. However, even when controlling for attitudes on the role of government—which reduces racial differences by about half—white support for reducing income differences is significantly lower relative to minorities.
12. Data on linked fate attitudes among blacks in 1984 is drawn from the National Black Election Study (Jackson, Gurin, and Hatchett 1984).

REFERENCES

- The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2012 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers].
- Jackson, James S., Patricia Gurin, and Shirley J. Hatchett. 1989. National Black Election Study, 1984. ICPSR08938-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor]. <http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR08938.v1>.

