# Group Status and Social Dominance in American Politics

by

Edgar V. Cook II

Department of Political Science
Duke University

Defense Date: April 11, 2025

Approved:

John Aldrich, Co-Advisor

Christopher Johnston, Co-Advisor

D. Sunshine Hillygus

Laura Stoker

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Political Science in The Graduate School of Duke University
2024

ABSTRACT

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# Abstract

This dissertation argues that concerns about declining social status and a desire to preserve ingroup dominance significantly shape contemporary political attitudes and behaviors in the United States. Building upon Social Dominance Theory, I demonstrate that historically dominant groups respond defensively to perceived status threats arising from demographic, cultural, and economic shifts. In Chapter 1, I lay the theoretical foundation, connecting group-based status anxieties to social dominance-oriented attitudes and contemporary political cleavages. Chapter 2 examines how the belief in a just world reflects social dominance motives, acting as a status-legitimizing ideology that rationalizes racial and other inequalities, facilitating resistance to redistributive policies and reinforcing racial resentment. Chapter 3 provides evidence that geographical variation in historical slavery rates continue to influence contemporary ideology through the cultural transmission of status-legitimizing beliefs among White Southerners, revealing the role of historical status hierarchies in shaping and perpetuating white status-legitimizing ideologies and beliefs in the Southern United States. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the MAGA movement, showing that Social Dominance Orientation and perceived threats to dominant-group status—not traditional conservatism—primarily drive populist and anti-democratic attitudes associated with support for Donald Trump. Collectively, my findings highlight the central role of status anxieties in fueling polarization, right-wing populism, and democratic backsliding.

# Dedication

To my parents, Brenda and Stephen Cook, who have always supported me in pursuing my passions, wherever they led, and whose love of learning and natural curiosity about the world have shaped and inspired my own.

And to Megan, whose steadfast love, encouragement, and patience carried me through the long hours and late nights. I could not have made it through these last few years of grad school without you.

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# Acknowledgements

I'm especially grateful to Kyle Beardsley and Kathy Ivanov, who made it possible for me to begin graduate school at all. The summer before I started at Duke, I experienced a sudden and severe escalation of chronic joint and muscle pain. I arrived in Durham unable to drive, carry things, or even open doors on my own. Unsure of what was happening and embarrassed by my physical limitations, I called Kyle to tell him that I couldn't attend. Rather than treating this as a problem, he responded with patience and reassurance. He and Kathy arranged practical accommodations—including dictation software and a typing assistant—so I could begin coursework while seeking a diagnosis. Midway through my first year, I was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic autoimmune disorder. With proper treatment, things slowly improved. Kathy consistently checked in and made sure I had what I needed to continue. I wouldn't have made it through that first year without their support, and I remain deeply grateful.

I've also had the good fortune of working with a group of generous and thoughtful advisors. Laura Stoker first introduced me to political psychology as an undergraduate at Berkeley, and her mentorship has shaped much of how I think about research. From early brainstorming sessions to late-stage edits, Laura has always pushed me to clarify my thinking and raise my standards. I've learned a great deal from her close attention to argument and evidence.

At Duke, I've been lucky to learn from John Aldrich, Christopher Johnston, and Sunshine Hillygus. Each has been generous with their time, advice, and feedback. They've supported my work in a variety of ways—through funding, survey space, and

many conversations that helped me refine ideas and stay on track. I've benefited not only from their expertise, but also from their trust and encouragement as I developed an independent research agenda.

I'm grateful to everyone—faculty, staff, colleagues, friends, and family—who has supported me along the way. Completing this dissertation has taken more time, effort, and help than I anticipated at the outset. I've learned a great deal not only about research and writing, but about persistence, adaptation, and the value of steady support. Thank you.

# 1. Introduction: Group Status and Social Dominance in American Politics

Understanding the ideological roots of political behavior in the United States requires an examination of how status concerns shape the beliefs and actions of dominant social groups. Social dominance theory (SDT) and related theoretical frameworks in political psychology highlight how the desire to maintain social hierarchies influences the political ideologies and behavior of culturally dominant groups. My dissertation investigates these dynamics across three empirical studies, each exploring a facet of how social dominance and status anxieties among members of culturally dominant groups impact political attitudes and behavior in the United States.

The second chapter of my dissertation examines the relationship between the belief in a just world (BJW) and racial resentment (RR), finding that, among White Americans, the association between BJW and RR is more reflective of a desire for group dominance than a general need to view the world as fair and just. Analyzing two large survey datasets, the BJW emerges not as a benign, generalized psychological need but as an ideology that serves to legitimize racial (and other) status hierarchies, aligning with SDT's emphasis on dominance-seeking motives as a powerful factor shaping intergroup attitudes and ideological justifications for group-based inequality.

The third chapter expands on this theme by analyzing the historical and cultural legacy of slavery in the US South. Here, the data reveal a clear association between historical variation in the size of slave populations across the South and modern-day White Southerners' attachment to "status-legitimizing" ideologies. Specifically, White residents of counties with high historical slavery rates exhibit heightened levels of racial pride, beliefs in the legitimacy of group-based inequalities, and prejudice toward a diverse array of racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups. This chapter draws on SDT to illustrate how the entrenched racial hierarchies formed during

slavery have been culturally transmitted, fostering ideologies that continue to justify and protect White Southerners' dominant group status.

In Chapter 4, "The Political Psychology of the MAGA Movement," I examine the underlying psychological drivers of support for the MAGA movement within the Republican party, emphasizing the role of perceived status threats and social dominance orientation (SDO) among MAGA Republicans. Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and an original survey conducted via the Prolific survey platform, I demonstrate that support for the MAGA movement is significantly associated with heightened social dominance motives, perceived group-based status threats, and anti-institutional attitudes—distinct from traditional conservatism or authoritarianism. This chapter ties into my dissertation's broader argument, underscoring the central role of status anxieties and dominance motives in shaping contemporary political ideologies, behaviors, and movements in American politics. It illustrates how threats to the status of historically dominant groups can drive right-wing populist mobilization, ideological polarization, and democratic backsliding.

Across these chapters, my dissertation underscores how a focus on social dominance orientation enriches our understanding of political behavior by highlighting the ways in which status anxieties and dominance motives undergird intergroup attitudes and ideological commitments in the US. By emphasizing the implications of SDT, the dual-process model of prejudice, and motivated social cognition, this work situates status maintenance as a central driver of political ideology and behavior, offering important insights into the role of dominance-related beliefs in American politics.

## *1.1 Theoretical Background: Authoritarianism, Social Dominance, and the Roots of Prejudice and Political Ideology*

Political psychology's exploration of prejudice and intergroup resentment has its roots in research on authoritarianism and social dominance, aiming to explain the ideological and

psychological mechanisms driving discriminatory attitudes and bolstering group-based hierarchies. The field has evolved to identify two primary dimensions of personality and ideology[1] that motivate prejudice: authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Duckitt 2015). Each dimension speaks to a unique pathway to prejudice and group conflict. My dissertation engages with these traditions, proposing that the social dominance dimension, particularly among dominant groups in American society, plays a central role in shaping contemporary political behavior.

Early foundational work in political psychology began with research by Adorno, Frankel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford on the "authoritarian personality" (Adorno et al. 2019), which sought to understand the psychological underpinnings of prejudice in the aftermath of the rise of fascism and the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno and his collaborators theorized that individuals with authoritarian personalities displayed an inherent susceptibility to prejudice, submission to authority, and rigid conformity to social norms. Their seminal 1950 study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, posited that these traits were underpinned by personality structures that encouraged blind obedience to authority and hostility toward outgroups, driven by an underlying need to maintain personal and social order through authoritarian means. The authoritarian personality, according to Adorno et al., was a fertile ground for prejudice, particularly among those drawn to political ideologies that reinforced rigid social hierarchies and enforced conformity to traditional norms. Their theory laid the groundwork for future scholarship on the psychological factors behind ideological conformity and prejudice.

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[1] Scholars have long debated whether constructs such as social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) should be understood as stable personality traits or as ideological values shaped by social context. Duckitt (Duckitt 2015) highlights that while early research often treated these dimensions as deep-seated personality predispositions, more recent perspectives suggest they are better viewed as socio-political attitudes reflecting both enduring psychological needs and contextual influences. For instance, RWA reflects a desire for order and security in the face of perceived threats, while SDO captures a competitive orientation toward intergroup relations that favors hierarchy. These orientations, while relatively stable, are influenced by social conditions, cultural norms, and individual experiences. In this dissertation, I adopt the perspective that SDO functions as an ideological variable, albeit one that is relatively stable and deeply ingrained. This approach aligns with research suggesting that SDO reflects a combination of individual dispositions and situational factors, such as group membership and status concerns.
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Building on Adorno's work, scholars like Bob Altemeyer (Altemeyer 1981; 2004) and John Duckitt (Duckitt 1989; Duckitt et al. 2010; Duckitt 2015; Osborne et al. 2023) advanced the study of authoritarianism by refocusing theory and research on what they labeled "right-wing authoritarianism" (RWA), eschewing the Freudian, psychoanalytic argument offered by Adorno and his collaborators, and developing new, more internally reliable scales to measure the construct. This new framework posits that authoritarianism reflects a combination of submission to authority, aggression toward outgroups, and adherence to conventional social values. Research on RWA has shown that individuals high in authoritarianism are often more likely to display prejudiced attitudes toward outgroups, and to be motivated by a desire to protect established social order and minimize perceived threats. Scholars such as Stanley Feldman and Karen Stenner (1997), Marc Hetherington (Hetherington and Suhay 2011), and Jonathan Weiler (Hetherington and Weiler 2009) have expanded on this perspective by exploring how authoritarian tendencies interact with political and social conditions, suggesting that threats to social stability amplify authoritarian responses, fueling support for leaders and ideologies that promise to restore order. This literature provides convincing evidence that RWA is associated with prejudice rooted in a desire to conform to a perceived social consensus, as well as in a motivation to avoid outgroup-based threats to social cohesion. Consequently, it has remained a prominent framework for understanding political behavior in relation to conservatism and intergroup prejudice.

While research on authoritarianism has been instrumental in explaining prejudice and conservatism, more recent scholarship has identified a second predisposition, labeled social dominance orientation (SDO), that is also related to outgroup prejudice and right-wing politics. Early research by Felicia Pratto and Jim Sidanius (2001) on Social Dominance Theory (SDT) brought this dimension to the fore, arguing that individuals' orientations toward social dominance—specifically, their preferences for hierarchical social structures that favor high-status groups—are an essential motivator of intergroup attitudes and beliefs. SDT proposes that

societies are inherently hierarchical, and members of dominant groups exhibit higher levels of social dominance orientation, reflecting a desire to maintain their group's privileged status. High scorers are more likely to support policies that uphold existing inequalities and to exhibit prejudice against lower-status groups, which legitimizes and reinforces these hierarchies.

SDT's framework identifies SDO as distinct from authoritarianism, revealing that some individuals' prejudice is rooted in a competitive, hierarchical worldview, rather than a desire for conformity and stability. Pratto and Sidanius highlighted that those high in SDO view social interactions as zero-sum, where one group's gains imply losses for another, fueling hostility toward outgroups perceived as threats to social hierarchies and the privileges of dominant-group membership. This theoretical advancement allowed political psychologists to better explain prejudiced attitudes and behaviors that authoritarianism alone could not fully account for, particularly regarding individuals who advocate for policies that consolidate social advantages for dominant groups. SDT underscores the role of dominance motives in fostering prejudice and highlights that prejudice in these individuals is not merely a byproduct of social conformity but is instead actively driven by the pursuit of group-based status and dominance.

The dual-process model of prejudice, proposed by Duckitt and Sibley (2009), further elaborates on these distinctions by positing that RWA and SDO operate as separate but complementary pathways to prejudice and right-wing political attitudes. This model suggests that authoritarian personalities gravitate toward prejudice through a desire for social stability and conformity, while socially dominant individuals exhibit prejudice due to a competitive desire to assert and maintain group-based privileges and social hierarchies. According to the dual-process model, RWA is typically rooted in a worldview that perceives society as a dangerous and threatening place, whereas SDO stems from a view of society as a competitive jungle, where groups are engaged in an ongoing struggle for resources and status. This distinction between stability-oriented authoritarianism and competition-oriented social dominance enriches our

understanding of the complex motivations behind prejudice, capturing the dual roles of conformity and competition in shaping intergroup attitudes and ideological commitment.

Motivated social cognition theory also contributes to this understanding by categorizing the psychological needs that motivate ideological orientations (Jost et al. 2003). This framework posits that individuals' psychological desire for stability, certainty, and control often lead them to adopt ideologies that satisfy these psychological needs. For authoritarian individuals, this may mean favoring conservative, hierarchical structures that protect the social order. In contrast, individuals high in SDO are motivated by dominance and power, leading them to endorse ideologies that legitimize inequality and group-based dominance. This dual motivational approach to social cognition aligns well with the dual-process model of prejudice, as it shows how different psychological needs can shape distinct ideological commitments. This dynamic is particularly relevant in understanding contemporary political polarization, where both authoritarian and social dominance motives are evident in the ideological positions of competing factions.

Within this context, my dissertation's exploration of social dominance and status anxieties among White Americans offers insight into how the competitive, dominance-driven dimension of political psychology plays a formative role in American politics today. Each chapter of the dissertation engages with this second dimension by examining how status maintenance concerns and social dominance motives shape political beliefs, particularly among dominant groups. My approach illuminates the complex relationship between ideology and intergroup resentment, revealing how the drive to uphold social hierarchies underlies various ideological commitments and political behaviors. By investigating the influence of social dominance motives on political behavior, this dissertation advances our understanding of how intergroup dynamics, status anxieties, and dominance motives shape contemporary American politics, expanding on the insights of SDT and the dual-process model of prejudice.

# 2. Re-examining the Relationship Between the Belief in a Just World and Racial Resentment

## *2.1 Summary*

Previous research has consistently found a strong correlation between the Belief in a Just World (BJW) and racial resentment (RR), but the reasons underlying this relationship remain contested in social and political psychology. Just World Theory (JWT) argues that both BJW and RR arise from a psychological need to see the world as inherently fair. In contrast, Social Dominance Theory (SDT) views these beliefs as ideological rationalizations, reflecting an underlying desire among dominant groups to maintain their privileged position and justify existing social hierarchies. This chapter adjudicates between these competing perspectives using two empirical approaches: first, a representative AmeriSpeak survey of U.S. adults in the Southern United States (N=2,468); second, a survey experiment with a national online sample of U.S. adults (N=1,710). Results strongly support the predictions of SDT over JWT. Specifically, the AmeriSpeak survey reveals that White respondents exhibit significantly higher levels of BJW, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and RR compared to non-Whites. Further, BJW and SDO are more strongly linked to racial resentment and perceptions of zero-sum racial competition among Whites. Additionally, the survey experiment shows that Whites with high BJW scores express increased racial resentment and endorse colorblind racial ideologies more strongly when racial inequality is framed as solvable, contrary to JWT's predictions about how individuals who strongly believe in a just world should respond to solvable injustice.

## *2.2 Introduction*

Over recent decades, extensive research in social and political psychology has examined the complex relationships between ideological beliefs and racial prejudice (Adorno 2019; Kinder and Sears 1981a; Altemeyer 1983; Sidanius and Pratto 2001b; Jost and Banaji 1994; Sniderman et al. 1991; Jost and Thompson 2000; Duckitt et al. 2002; Feldman and Huddy 2005; Duckitt and

Sibley 2010a; Carmines, Sniderman, and Easter 2011; Davis and Wilson 2021; 2022). One particularly noteworthy finding is the robust correlation between Belief in a Just World (BJW) and Racial Resentment (RR)—two influential constructs that have historically been studied in separate literatures. BJW refers to the extent to which individuals believe the world is inherently fair, and that people typically "get what they deserve." RR, by contrast, captures attitudes that attribute the socioeconomic disadvantages experienced by Black Americans to their own perceived shortcomings. While the strong association between these two beliefs is empirically well-established, there is ongoing debate regarding its theoretical underpinnings.

This chapter addresses these competing theoretical explanations by focusing on two prominent frameworks: Just World Theory (JWT) and Social Dominance Theory (SDT). JWT argues that the BJW arises from a fundamental psychological need to perceive the world as fair, motivating individuals to rationalize and accept existing social inequalities that are perceived to be immutable. Conversely, SDT proposes that both the BJW and RR serve as ideological tools used by members of dominant groups to justify and preserve their privileged status within established social hierarchies.

## *2.3 Theoretical Background*

### 2.3.1 Racial Resentment and the Belief in a Just World

Racial Resentment (RR), often referred to as symbolic racism, is a form of contemporary racial prejudice that blends negative racial attitudes with moral judgments rooted in traditional American values, such as individual responsibility. As articulated by Kinder and Sanders (1996), RR captures perceptions that African Americans violate these values by allegedly receiving undeserved special treatment and by failing to achieve socioeconomic success due to insufficient personal effort. Measures of RR consistently predict opposition to policies aimed at addressing racial inequalities, including affirmative action and desegregation initiatives (Kinder and Sears 1981a; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears and Henry 2003; Smith, Kreitzer, and Suo 2020).

Following the Civil Rights Movement, explicit forms of racism rooted in biological conceptions of racial inferiority gave way to subtler, more socially acceptable expressions of racial bias, of which RR is a prominent example (Sears and Henry 2003). However, scholars continue to debate whether RR primarily reflects genuine racial animus or merely ideological commitments associated with "principled conservatism," a worldview emphasizing personal responsibility and limited government intervention (Feldman and Huddy 2005; Sniderman et al. 1991; Carmines, Sniderman, and Easter 2011). Extending this debate, recent research has proposed that RR may instead represent a just-world rationalization, whereby individuals high in RR blame minority groups for their disadvantaged socioeconomic positions in order to uphold their belief that society is inherently fair and meritocratic (Davis and Wilson 2021; 2022). Supporting this interpretation, surveys consistently show a positive correlation between Belief in a Just World (BJW) and RR. Similarly, research on color-blind racism (CBR)—a conceptually related measure capturing skepticism toward claims of racial discrimination against Black Americans—has also found strong correlations with BJW (Neville et al. 2000). Despite these findings, the precise theoretical interpretation of this relationship remains contested.

### 2.3.2 Belief in a Just World

The Belief in a Just World (BJW) refers to the view that individuals receive the outcomes they deserve, and that the world operates according to principles of fairness and justice. According to Just World Theory (JWT; Lerner 1977; 2003; Lerner and Simmons 1966), this belief functions as a psychological coping mechanism, enabling people to rationalize and make sense of unresolved injustices or inequalities. By perceiving the world as predictable and fair, individuals gain a greater sense of control, motivating them to engage in goal-oriented behaviors and long-term planning (Lerner and Simmons 1966; Lerner and Montada 1998; Bal and van den Bos 2012a).

However, strong adherence to the BJW can also encourage victim-blaming, particularly when individuals confront situations in which victims suffer without justice, perpetrators remain unpunished, or the sources of harm are ambiguous or systemic. Under these conditions, attributing victims' misfortunes to their personal failings or actions rather than external factors becomes psychologically easier and morally preferable (Jensen and Petersen 2017).

Previous studies have documented the link between BJW and victim-blaming across diverse contexts, including sexual assault and domestic violence (Grubb and Turner 2012; Suarez and Gadalla 2010), poverty and unemployment (Furnham and Gunter 1984; Furnham 2003; Major et al. 2002), health conditions such as HIV/AIDS and obesity (Crandall 1994; Herek 1996), as well as accidents and climate change-related events (Burger 1981; Feinberg and Willer 2011). Within the JWT framework, racial resentment (RR) can similarly be understood as a specialized form of just-world rationalization. The RR scale explicitly captures attitudes attributing racial inequalities to the perceived personal shortcomings of Black Americans, effectively shifting blame away from broader structural and systemic causes (Davis and Wilson 2021).

### 2.3.3 Social Dominance Orientation

Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius and Pratto 2001b) argues that societies are structured around group-based hierarchies, with dominant groups preserving their status through the adoption of "status-legitimizing" ideologies (Sidanius et al. 2001). According to the SDT perspective, status-legitimizing ideologies are sets of beliefs and values that serve to justify and *perpetuate* social hierarchies. These ideologies consist of beliefs and values that justify and reinforce social inequalities by portraying hierarchical arrangements as natural, inevitable, or morally justified. By rationalizing the uneven distribution of power and resources, status-legitimizing ideologies enable dominant groups to maintain their privileged positions in society.

According to SDT, the belief in a just world (BJW)—alongside ideologies such as meritocracy, the Protestant Work Ethic, Individualism, and Social Darwinism—functions as a status-legitimizing ideology. These belief systems emphasize that individuals and groups receive outcomes commensurate with their efforts or inherent abilities, effectively blaming members of disadvantaged groups for their lower social status and reduced access to resources. SDT proposes that these ideological beliefs are driven by an underlying preference for social dominance among members of dominant groups, which the theory conceptualizes as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) (Pratto et al. 1994). SDO measures individuals' preference for hierarchical social arrangements and the dominance of high-status groups over those of lower status. Individuals high in SDO perceive social hierarchies as desirable and natural, whereas those lower in SDO favor equality and social justice (Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin 2006a).

Since its inception, the measurement of SDO has evolved considerably. Currently, the dominant measurement tool is the SDO7 scale (Ho et al. 2015). The short-form SDO7 consists of eight items that capture two distinct dimensions of social dominance orientation: support for group-based dominance (SDOD) and opposition to group equality (SDOE).

### 2.3.4 Just World Theory vs. Social Dominance Theory

Both Just World Theory (JWT) and Social Dominance Theory (SDT) offer frameworks to explain the connection between Belief in a Just World (BJW) and racial resentment (RR). At a broad level, both theories anticipate that BJW should correlate negatively with acknowledgment of discrimination against historically disadvantaged groups—including African Americans. However, JWT and SDT diverge substantially in explaining why this relationship occurs and whether and how the BJW functions differently among dominant versus subordinate groups in society. JWT conceptualizes BJW as a deep-seated psychological need to perceive the world as fair—independent of group interests or status dynamics. According to JWT, BJW should not differ significantly between dominant and subordinate groups, nor should it target skepticism

selectively; rather, it should produce a generalized skepticism toward claims of unfair treatment, regardless of which groups make these claims.

In contrast, SDT views the BJW as a status-legitimizing ideology primarily employed by dominant groups to rationalize and uphold existing social hierarchies. Thus, SDT explicitly predicts that dominant groups—such as White Americans—will exhibit higher levels of BJW and strategically use it to discount or deny claims of discrimination made specifically by subordinate groups. According to SDT, BJW should also show a significantly stronger association with RR and related racial attitudes among dominant group members, as the BJW serves to maintain inequalities in resources and social status between groups.

Furthermore, SDT suggests BJW is closely related to Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and zero-sum perceptions of intergroup competition, reflecting an underlying motivation among dominant group members to preserve group-based hierarchies. From this perspective, BJW is not merely correlated with dominance motives but is itself a manifestation of these deeper hierarchical motivations. Therefore, BJW and SDO should display very similar patterns of relationships with RR and other racial attitudes—providing a key empirical distinction between SDT and JWT.

In summary, JWT describes BJW as a generalized psychological motive to perceive fairness, leading individuals to adopt broad skepticism toward any claims of discrimination. SDT, in contrast, argues that BJW selectively legitimizes existing hierarchies among dominant groups, producing targeted skepticism toward discrimination claims made by disadvantaged groups. These competing theoretical predictions clarify why BJW and RR are empirically related: according to JWT, individuals high in BJW rationalize racial disparities as fair outcomes consistent with a just society, whereas SDT suggests these rationalizations specifically serve dominant groups' underlying interests in preserving group-based inequalities. The analyses

presented in this chapter explicitly test these competing predictions to determine which theoretical framework provides the more accurate explanation of the BJW-RR relationship..

### 2.3.5 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses explicitly test whether Social Dominance Theory (SDT) or Just World Theory (JWT) better explains the observed relationship between Belief in a Just World (BJW) and racial resentment (RR):

Hypothesis 1 (Group Differences in BJW, SDO, and RR): White Americans will exhibit significantly higher levels of BJW, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and RR compared to non-White Americans. This hypothesis tests SDT's prediction that BJW and RR function as ideologies that dominant racial groups adopt to justify existing social hierarchies, rather than JWT's prediction that BJW represents a universal psychological need for fairness unrelated to group status.

Hypothesis 2 (Selective Skepticism of Discrimination): Among White Americans, individuals high in BJW will show greater skepticism toward claims of discrimination made by historically subordinate racial groups (e.g., Black Americans) compared to similar claims made by dominant racial groups (e.g., White Americans). This prediction aligns specifically with SDT, which views BJW as an ideology strategically employed by dominant groups to legitimize their privileged status and discount subordinate groups' grievances, rather than JWT's prediction that BJW leads to generalized skepticism about discrimination, regardless of group status.

Hypothesis 3 (BJW and RR Association Across Groups): The positive relationship between BJW and RR will be significantly stronger among White Americans compared to non-White Americans. This hypothesis tests SDT's expectation that BJW serves primarily as a status-maintaining ideology for dominant groups, rather than JWT's claim that BJW is a universal psychological orientation toward fairness.

Hypothesis 4 (BJW, RR, and Zero-Sum Intergroup Competition): Among White Americans, both BJW and RR will correlate more strongly with perceptions of zero-sum intergroup competition than among non-White Americans. SDT predicts this pattern because it argues BJW and RR reflect underlying anxieties about dominant group status and competition from subordinate groups. JWT, in contrast, does not clearly predict this pattern, as it treats BJW as unrelated to competitive group-based motives.

Hypothesis 5 (Association with SDO): Among White Americans, BJW and RR will both correlate strongly with SDO. This hypothesis explicitly tests SDT's proposition that BJW and RR are manifestations of an underlying dominance orientation that motivates individuals to support existing group hierarchies. JWT, which sees BJW as unrelated to group dominance motives, does not predict these strong correlations.

Collectively, these hypotheses explicitly test the divergent micro-foundations underlying JWT and SDT to clarify the nature of the positive association between BJW and RR. Understanding why BJW and RR are correlated requires examining whether this relationship stems primarily from a general psychological motive to perceive universal fairness, as JWT suggests, or from dominance-oriented motives tied to group status concerns, as proposed by SDT. Testing the micro-level predictions of these theories is crucial because it allows me to identify the specific psychological processes driving the relationship between BJW and RR, thereby enabling a deeper theoretical understanding of the relationship between ideology and racial prejudice.

## *2.4 AmeriSpeak Analysis*

I test the above hypotheses with two datasets: an AmeriSpeak panel study of adult US citizens living in the Southern United States (N=2,468), and a national online survey experiment conducted among adult residents of the U.S. through the online survey vendor Lucid (N=1,710). The AmeriSpeak study allows me to examine the cross-sectional relationships between BJW, RR, and SDO across racial groups, while the survey experiment tests how high-BJW individuals

respond to different framings of racial inequality (the survey experiment and its theoretical motivation are described in more detail in section 2.6).

### 2.4.1 AmeriSpeak Data

The AmeriSpeak data come from a survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, designed to be representative of adults in the Southern United States and including weights to correct for any demographic discrepancies. The survey focused on adult U.S. citizens living in the American South (encompassing the former states of the Confederacy) and was fielded between July 6 and July 30, 2020. The AmeriSpeak panel includes 9,394 sample units, with a final completion of 2,879 interviews. Data were weighted to ensure alignment with national benchmarks, including income, education, race/ethnicity, and age. The design effect for the survey was 2.38, indicating adjustments for the complex sampling design. The margin of error for key survey estimates is ±2.82 percentage points. Additional information on the weighting targets and sample composition are available in Appendix A.

### 2.4.2 AmeriSpeak Measures

My analysis of the AmeriSpeak data draws on several classic measures of ideological beliefs and racial attitudes. Most measures are composed of two to four items averaged together, with all ideological and racial variables rescaled to range from zero to one. A score of one represents strong support or agreement with the construct, while a score of zero indicates low support or opposition. For instance, in the case of the RR variable, a score of one indicates complete support for the idea that Black Americans are too blame for their lower socioeconomic status relative to Whites, while a score of zero reflects total opposition to this belief and support for the idea that Black Americans' socioeconomic position in society is the result of slavery and discrimination. Below, I describe each measure used in the analysis in detail.

#### 2.4.2.1 Belief in a Just World (BJW)

The Belief in a Just World (BJW) captures the extent to which individuals believe that the world is fair and people get what they deserve in life. The measure I employ is based on Lerner's (1993) Global Belief in a Just World scale, one of the most widely used and validated scales in the literature. Respondents rated their agreement with four items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The items include: "I basically feel that the world is a fair place"; "I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves"; "I feel that people get what they deserve"; and "I feel that people earn the punishments and rewards that they get." The reliability of the scale is satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71.

#### 2.4.2.2 Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is measured using the short version of the SDO-7 scale, which is split into two subscales: SDOD (Social Dominance Orientation - Dominance) and SDOE (Social Dominance Orientation - Anti-Egalitarianism). SDOD measures a general preference for group-based dominance, while SDOE captures opposition to equality among groups in society.

The SDOD scale is comprised of four items: "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on bottom"; "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups"; "No one group should dominate in society" (reverse coded); and "Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top" (reverse coded). The Cronbach's alpha for SDOD is 0.68.

For SDOE, the items include: "We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups"; "We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed"; "Group equality should not be our primary goal" (reverse coded); and "It is unjust to try to make groups

equal" (reverse coded). The reliability of the SDOE scale is higher, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75.

#### 2.4.2.4 Racial Resentment (RR)

RR is measured using the classic scale introduced by Sears and McConahay (1973) and Kinder and Sears (1981), which consists of four agree-disagree statements measuring attitudes and beliefs about Black Americans. The items include: "Irish, Italians, Jews, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors"; "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class" (reverse coded); "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve" (reverse coded); and "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as Whites." These items were averaged together and rescaled to range from 0 (low RR) to 1 (high RR). The scale has high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

#### 2.4.2.5 Skepticism of Discrimination

Skepticism of discrimination is measured by asking respondents to rate the current level of discrimination against both White and Black Americans using a five-point scale ranging from "none" to "a great deal." These items are reverse-coded so that a score of zero reflects the belief that no discrimination exists, while a score of one represents the belief that a great deal of discrimination exists. These measures capture attitudes toward perceived discrimination against both high-(White Americans) and low-status (Black Americans) groups. I analyze each measure separately.

#### 2.4.2.6 Perceptions of Zero-Sum Competition with Racial Outgroups

I also include two measures of zero-sum competition with racial/ethnic outgroups to test whether the BJW and related ideological measures are more strongly associated among White

Americans with perceived competition for jobs and political influence with racial/ethnic outgroups.

The questions asked respondents to agree or disagree with two statements, asked of either White or Black respondents, and regarding perceptions of economic and political competition with racial/ethnic outgroups: "More good jobs for White/Hispanic/Black people means fewer good jobs for members of other groups"; "The more influence White/Black/Hispanic people have in politics, the less influence members of other groups will have in politics."

White respondents were asked these two questions about Black and Hispanic Americans, separately, and the responses to the four questions were averaged together and rescaled to range from 0 (no concern about jobs and political influence of other groups) to 1 (view the world as a zero-sum competition with other groups). The Cronbach's alpha is 091. Similarly, Black respondents were asked the two questions about White and Hispanic Americans, and responses to the four questions were again averaged together and rescaled from 0 to 1. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.59.

#### 2.4.2.7 Sociodemographic Variables

In addition to ideological and racial beliefs/attitudes, I include analyses of the sociodemographic correlates of RR and status-legitimizing ideologies, looking at average differences between groups on these variables, and including these demographic traits as covariates in regression analyses. The demographic variables used include race (White vs non-White), sex (male vs. female), income (six categories ranging from <$24,000 annually to more than $150,000 per year), and education (five ordinal categories ranging from less than a high school degree to holding a post-graduate degree).

### 2.4.3 AmeriSpeak Results

#### 2.4.3.1 Differences in Average Levels of BJW, SDO, and RR Across Groups

I examine differences in rates of adoption of the BJW, SDO, and RR across key sociodemographic groups in Table 1. Social Dominance Theory (SDT) predicts that the BJW, SDO, and racial resentment (RR) will be significantly higher among White Americans, as these beliefs function as status-legitimizing ideologies that reflect stronger preferences among members of culturally dominant groups for maintaining existing group-inequalities (Hypothesis 1). Consistent with this prediction, T-tests reveal that White Americans score significantly higher on the BJW ($M = 0.46$) compared to Non-White Respondents ($M = 0.40$, $t(2836) = 5.93$, $p < 0.001$), as well as on SDOE ($M = 0.38$ vs. $M = 0.31$, $t(2819) = 6.84$, $p < 0.001$) and RR ($M = 0.53$ vs. $M = 0.36$, $t(2833) = 10.96$, $p < 0.001$). These findings favor SDT over JWT, which would not anticipate meaningful differences across dominant and subordinate groups in scores on the BJW.

SDT's expectation that high-status groups more strongly endorse status-legitimizing beliefs is further supported by additional analyses of differences rates of these beliefs between genders. Specifically, men—historically a higher-status group—reported significantly higher BJW ($M = 0.45$ vs. $M = 0.42$, $t(2836) = -2.84$, $p < 0.01$) and SDOE scores ($M = 0.37$ vs. $M = 0.33$, $t(2819) = -3.54$, $p < 0.001$) compared to women.

These group differences strongly align with SDT’s prediction that BJW, like SDO, functions as a status-legitimizing belief that is especially prominent among dominant groups, distinguishing this result from JWT’s universal fairness prediction.

**Table 1: Averages Scores on Ideological Variables by Race, Gender, Income, and Education**

| Group | BJW | SDOD | SDOE | Lim. Gov. | Ind. | Egal. | RR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-White | .40 | .28 | .31 | .3 | .44 | .45 | .36 |
| White | .46 | .27 | .38 | .5 | .55 | .41 | .53 |
| Women | .42 | .27 | .33 | .37 | .50 | .44 | .43 |
| Men | .45 | .28 | .37 | .47 | .51 | .42 | .44 |
| Overall | .43 | .28 | .35 | .42 | .50 | .43 | .46 |

*Note:* This table presents the average scores for ideological, racial, and gender-based variables among the full sample and across different sociodemographic categories based on race and gender among adult residents of the US South. These measures provide insight into group-based differences in ideological beliefs and perceptions of inequality. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***$p$ < 0.001.

**2.4.3.2 The BJW and Skepticism Toward Discrimination**

SDT further predicts that individuals high in BJW will be selectively skeptical of claims of discrimination made by historically disadvantaged groups, viewing these claims as threats to existing power hierarchies, while simultaneously acknowledging discrimination against their own dominant groups (Hypothesis 2). Consistent with this prediction (see Table 2), the BJW was negatively associated with perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans (B = -0.57, SE = 0.22, p < 0.05) and positively associated with perceptions of discrimination against White Americans (B = 0.31, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001). These results highlight selective skepticism consistent with SDT's assertions and challenge JWT's predictions of generalized skepticism toward all discrimination claims among those who endorse the BJW.

The findings regarding both SDO dimensions (SDOD and SDOE) further reinforce the predictions of SDT. SDOD exhibited a non-significant negative association with perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans (B = -0.33, SE = 0.21), but a significant positive association with discrimination against White Americans (B = 0.29, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001). SDOE similarly showed selective skepticism, being negatively related to discrimination perceptions toward Blacks (B = -0.44, SE = 0.20, p < 0.05) and positively related to perceptions of

discrimination against Whites (B = 0.37, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001). RR strongly predicted reduced perceptions of discrimination toward Blacks (B = -0.71, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001) and increased perceptions toward Whites (B = 0.47, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001), further aligning with SDT's claims, in that the BJW, RR, and SDO all behave similarly, and are more strongly associated with skepticism of claims of discrimination made by members of historically disadvantaged groups. JWT cannot readily account for this pattern of selective skepticism tied explicitly to group membership. Instead, the selective skepticism toward discrimination claims among BJW-endorsing respondents strongly supports SDT's predictions, clearly differentiating it from JWT's expectation of generalized skepticism.

**Table 2: Perceptions of Discrimination Against Black and White Americans Regressed on Ideological Variables**

| Variable | Perceptions of Discrimination Against Blacks (Estimate, SE) | Perceptions of Discrimination Against Whites (Estimate, SE) | N (Skepticism Blacks) | N (Skepticism Whites) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BJW | -0.57* (0.22) | 0.31*** (0.04) | 2838 | 2812 |
| SDOD | -0.33 (0.21) | 0.29*** (0.04) | 2840 | 2813 |
| SDOE | -0.44* (0.20) | 0.37*** (0.04) | 2821 | 2795 |
| Racial Resent. | -0.71*** (0.17) | 0.40*** (0.03) | 2835 | 2808 |

*Note***:** Table entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Positive coefficients indicate a higher perception of discrimination, while negative coefficients indicate a lower perception of discrimination. Models control for race, gender, income, and education. Missing cases were handled with pairwise deletion using the svyglm() function in R. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***$p$ < 0.001. All models are OLS regressions with standard errors adjusted for survey design.

#### 2.4.3.3 BJW and Racial Resentment

JWT further posits that the strength and direction of the relationship between BJW and RR should be consistent across social groups. Conversely, according to SDT (Hypothesis 3), the BJW should be more strongly associated with RR among White respondents, as the BJW

functions explicitly as a status-legitimizing belief among dominant groups. Results in Table 3 strongly support this hypothesis, showing a significant positive association between BJW and RR among White respondents (B = 0.79, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$) and a notably weaker relationship among Black respondents (B = 0.44 SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that the BJW operates differently depending on group membership, supporting SDT's claim that it serves as a status-legitimizing ideology. These results mirror those assessing the strength of the relationship between RR and SDOD and SDOE, where the relationship between both subscales of SDO are stronger among White respondents than among Black respondents.

**Table 3: Racial Resentment Regressed on BJW and SDO**

| Variable | Full Sample Estimate (SE) | White Resp. Estimate (SE) | Black Resp. Estimate (SE) | N (Full) | N (White Resp.) | N (Black Resp.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BJW | 0.71*** (0.03) | 0.79*** (0.05) | 0.44*** (0.04) | 2810 | 1484 | 787 |
| SDOD | 0.53*** (0.03) | 0.60*** (0.04) | 0.47*** (0.05) | 2806 | 1482 | 786 |
| SDOE | 0.71*** (0.03) | 0.75*** (0.04) | 0.51*** (0.05) | 2790 | 1474 | 785 |

*Note*: Data are weighted survey estimates of models regressing RR on BJW, SDOD, and SDOE. Models control for respondent race (in the full sample), gender, age, income, and education. Separate models are estimated for White and Black respondents to examine racial group differences in the association between ideological beliefs and racial resentment. Standard errors are presented in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.001$.

#### 2.4.3.4: BJW and Zero-Sum Perceptions of Competition

JWT suggests that the BJW will not be associated with zero-sum perceptions of competition with racial outgroups, reflecting its proposed psychological function satisfying existential rather than group-based needs and motives. In contrast, SDT (Hypothesis 3) predicts that the BJW will be more strongly linked to zero-sum beliefs among dominant groups (White Americans), who are more likely to endorse group-based status hierarchies and to perceive subordinate social groups as a threat to their dominant status.

Table 4 presents results of models regressing perceptions of zero-sum competition with racial outgroups on the BJW (row 1), and the dominance (row 2) and anti-egalitarian (row 3) subdimensions of SDO, controlling for sociodemographic variables. The results align with Hypothesis 3. Among White respondents, the BJW (Estimate = 0.47, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$) and both SDO dimensions (SDOD: Estimate = 0.60, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$; SDOE: 0.44, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$) are positively and significantly associated with perceptions of zero-sum competition with racial outgroups.

**Table 4: Measures of Zero-Sum Competition Regressed on BJW and SDO**

| Predictor Variable | Zero-Sum Comp. (White Resp.) | Zero-Sum Comp. (Black Resp.) |
|---|---|---|
| BJW | 0.47***<br>(0.04) | -0.16*<br>(0.08) |
| SDOD | 0.60***<br>(0.04) | 0.12*<br>(0.05) |
| SDOE | 0.44***<br>(0.04) | 0.10*<br>(0.05) |
| Observations | 1476 | 775 |

*Note***:** Results of six. separate weighted regression models predicting perceptions of zero-sum competition with racial/ethnic outgroups among White and Black respondents. The dependent variable is measured separately as perceptions of zero-sum competition with non-White and non-Black groups. Independent variables include Belief in a Just World (BJW), Social Dominance Orientation Dominance (SDOD), and Social Dominance Orientation Anti-Egalitarianism (SDOE), each controlled for gender, age, income, and education. Standard errors are presented in parentheses. The sample sizes for each group are reported alongside each model. Significance levels: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Conversely, the BJW demonstrates a weak, negative association with zero-sum perceptions among Black respondents (Estimate = -0.16, SE = 0.08, $p < 0.05$). Although both the dominance and anti-egalitarian subdimensions of SDO retain a positive and statistically significant association with zero-sum perceptions among Black respondents (SDOD: Estimate = 0.12, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.05$; SDOE: Estimate = 0.10, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.05$), the strength of these associations is markedly weaker than it is among White respondents.

Overall, these results support the hypothesis that status-legitimizing beliefs are associated with higher levels of perceived intergroup competition among members of dominant groups in society (in this case, White Americans). This pattern is consistent with SDT's assertion that dominant groups are more likely to perceive outgroups as a threat and to endorse ideologies like the BJW to justify the existing social hierarchies.

#### 2.4.3.5 BJW, RR, and SDO

Finally, SDT predicts the BJW and RR will similarly be more strongly associated with SDO among White respondents (Hypothesis 5). Consistent with SDT, in Table 3, both subdimensions of SDO exhibit a significantly stronger association with RR among White respondents (SDOD: Estimate = 0.60, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$; SDOE: Estimate = 0.75, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$) than Black respondents (SDOD: Estimate = 0.47, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$; SDOE: Estimate = 0.51, SE = 0.05, $p < 0.001$). However, in Table 5, the combined index of SDO appears to predict scores on the BJW equally well among White and Black respondents.

**Table 5: The BJW Regressed on SDO**

| SDO Subdimension | White (SDOD) Estimate (SE) | White (SDOE) Estimate (SE) | Black (SDOD) Estimate (SE) | Black (SDOE) Estimate (SE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coefficients | 0.38*** (0.03) | 0.38*** (0.03) | 0.35*** (0.05) | 0.34*** (0.05) |
| Observations | 1,487 | 1,478 | 788 | 787 |

*Note:* Data are weighted survey estimates, regressing Belief in a Just World (BJW) on the Dominance (SDOD) and Anti-Egalitarianism (SDOE) subdimensions of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Models control for gender, age, income, and education. Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

To further examine whether race moderates the strength of the relationship between SDO and the BJW, I include an interaction term between the race (White vs. Black) and both subdimensions of SDO in models predicting BJW scores in Table 6 and depicted in Figure 1. The interaction terms between SDO (both SDOD and SDOE) and being White are not statistically

significant (SDOD x White: B = 0.04, SE = 0.06, p = 0.46; SDOE x White: B = 0.04, SE = 0.06, p = 0.45). This suggests that while the BJW is generally associated with SDO, the strength of this association does not differ significantly by race. This finding does not align with Hypothesis 5, which predicted a stronger association among White respondents due to heightened status-related concerns.

**Table 6: Predicting the BJW as a Function of SDO and Race**

| Predictor | SDOD Model Coefficient (SE) | SDOE Model Coefficient (SE) |
|---|---|---|
| SDOD | 0.33*** (0.05) | |
| SDOE | | 0.33*** (0.05) |
| White | 0.10*** (0.02) | 0.06*** (0.02) |
| SDOD x White | 0.04 (0.06) | |
| SDOE x White | | 0.04 (0.06) |
| Observations | 2,275 | 2,265 |

*Note:* This table presents the results of two separate regression models predicting the Belief in a Just World (BJW) as a function of the two subdimensions of Social Dominance Orientation (SDOD and SDOE), race (White vs. Black), and their interaction. The SDOD model indicates a significant positive main effect of SDOD and being White, but the interaction between SDOD and White is not statistically significant. Similarly, the SDOE model shows significant positive main effects of SDOE and being White, with no significant interaction effect. These results suggest that the relationship between the subdimensions of SDO and BJW is robust across racial groups, with notable differences in baseline levels of BJW by race. Standard errors are reported in parentheses, and significance levels are denoted by asterisks. Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

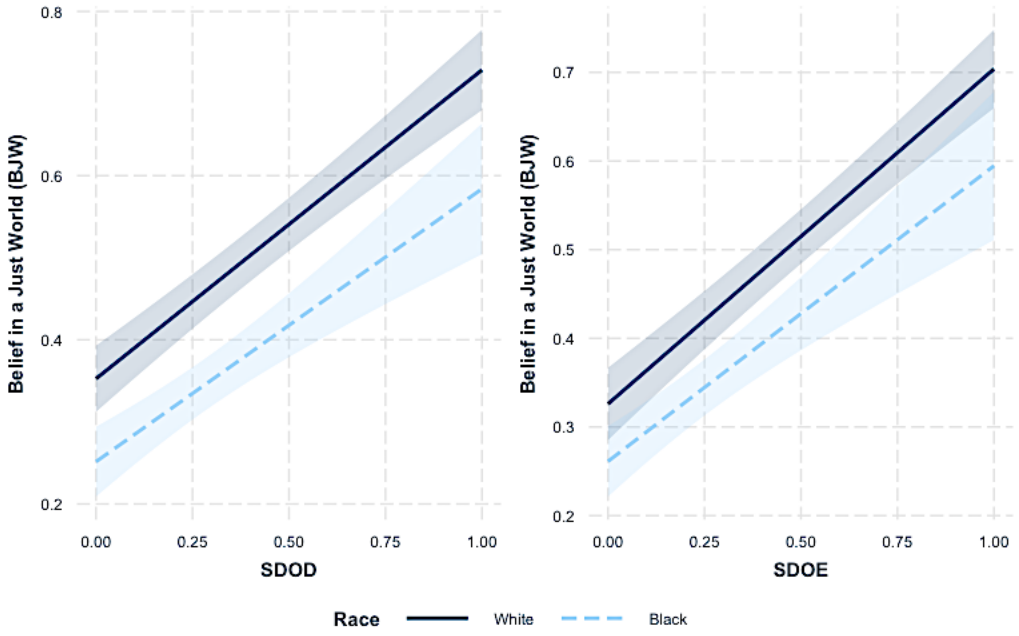


**Figure 1: Interaction of Race and SDO on BJW**

*Note:* This figure illustrates the interaction between race (White vs. Black) and the two subdimensions of Social Dominance Orientation (SDOD and SDOE) in predicting the Belief in a Just World (BJW). The left panel shows the interaction effect of SDOD, while the right panel shows the interaction effect of SDOE. Each plot displays regression lines for White and Black respondents, with shaded confidence intervals around the lines representing 95% confidence intervals. Survey weights were incorporated using the Survey Package in R.

### 2.4.4 Discussion

The findings from the AmeriSpeak analysis provide robust evidence supporting the predictions of Social Dominance Theory (SDT) while disconfirming key assumptions of Just World Theory (JWT) regarding the nature of the relationship between the BJW and RR. Hypotheses derived from JWT posit that the Belief in a Just World (BJW) functions as a general psychological need to perceive the world as fair and just, independent of group status or social dominance concerns. Contrary to these predictions, the results indicate that the BJW operates as a status-legitimizing ideology, aligning more closely with the theoretical framework of SDT.

First, consistent with Hypothesis 1, White Americans reported significantly higher levels of the BJW, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and Racial Resentment (RR) compared to

non-White respondents. This finding suggests that the BJW operates much like SDO, and that dominant social groups are more likely to endorse ideologies that justify and maintain existing hierarchies. The results further disconfirm JWT's prediction that there are no significant differences in average rates of adoption of the BJW across high- and low-status groups.

Second, the analyses addressing Hypothesis 2 reveal that high-BJW is associated with selective skepticism toward claims of discrimination against high- and low-status groups. The BJW was negatively associated with perceptions of discrimination against Black Americans and positively associated with perceptions of discrimination against White Americans. These patterns align with SDT's assertion that high-BJW individuals rationalize the status quo by challenging claims that threaten the legitimacy of the existing social hierarchy, thereby disconfirming JWT's expectation of the BJW being associated with generalized skepticism across groups.

Additionally, the results in Table 3 support Hypothesis 3, which predicts that the relationship between the BJW and RR will be stronger among White Americans. This is demonstrated by the significantly stronger relationship between BJW and RR among White respondents than among Black respondents, providing further evidence that the BJW functions as a status-maintenance mechanism for dominant groups.

The AmeriSpeak results also confirm Hypothesis 4, which posits that BJW and RR will be more strongly associated with perceptions of zero-sum competition among dominant groups. Among White respondents, the BJW and both subdimensions of SDO were positively associated with zero-sum beliefs, reflecting heightened status concerns. Conversely, BJW was weakly and negatively associated with zero-sum perceptions among Black respondents, indicating that these beliefs serve different functions for dominant and subordinate groups.

Lastly, Hypothesis 5 predicted a stronger relationship between the BJW and SDO among White respondents, and it was generally not supported. The results indicate that the association between the BJW and SDO is robust across racial groups, suggesting that while BJW operates as

a status-legitimizing ideology, its relationship with broader dominance orientations may not differ significantly by group status.

Overall, the AmeriSpeak findings affirm SDT's view that the BJW functions as a status-legitimizing ideology among culturally dominant groups and is tied to the maintenance of group-based hierarchies. The results undermine JWT's portrayal of BJW as a general psychological need to perceive the world as fair and just, and instead suggest that just-world beliefs are shaped by and serve the interests of dominant social groups. These insights contribute to our broader understanding of the ideological mechanisms that sustain social hierarchies and underscore the importance of examining status-related motivations in the study of political ideology and social attitudes.

## *2.5 Survey Experiment*

The AmeriSpeak analysis provides robust evidence supporting Social Dominance Theory's (SDT) claim that the Belief in a Just World (BJW) functions as a status-legitimizing ideology, rather than a general psychological need as posited by Just World Theory (JWT). However, these findings are based on cross-sectional data, which limits their ability to disentangle causal mechanisms. To address this limitation, I conducted a survey experiment to test competing predictions of JWT and SDT regarding how high-BJW individuals ought to respond to narratives that portray racial inequality as either remediable or intractable.

### 2.5.1 Theoretical Motivation

JWT and SDT make divergent predictions about how individuals who subscribe to the BJW react to information about social injustices. According to JWT, high-BJW individuals should rationalize social inequalities to maintain their perception of a just world—especially when they believe the social injustice cannot be rectified; however, they should welcome credible information suggesting that instances of social injustice—in this case, racial inequality—can be remedied. Thus, JWT predicts that high-BJW individuals exposed to narratives framing racial

inequality as solvable will be less likely to blame African Americans for their lower socioeconomic status, scoring lower on measures of racial resentment (RR) and color-blind racial attitudes (CBR).

In contrast, SDT argues that just-world beliefs serve as status-legitimizing ideologies that justify and perpetuate the higher status of dominant groups in society, reflecting a heightened "dominance orientation" and attachment to ingroup status and privileges among members of dominant groups (such as White Americans). From this perspective, high-BJW individuals should react defensively to narratives suggesting that racial inequality is solvable, as these narratives suggest the existing racial hierarchy might be threatened. SDT therefore predicts that high-BJW individuals will exhibit *increased* RR and CBR when exposed to solvable narratives, as a defensive strategy to discourage attempts to bolster racial equality and rationalize the existing racial status quo as natural and just.

#### 2.5.1.1 Hypotheses

The diverging predictions of SDT are operationalized in Hypothesis 6:

- Hypothesis 6 (BJW and defensive reactions to solvable racial narratives): High-BJW individuals will express higher RR and CBR when exposed to solvable narratives about racial inequality relative to either a control condition where they receive no information about the solvability or a narratives that describe racial inequality as unsolvable.

### 2.5.2 Study Design

The experiment was conducted in January 2023 using a national online sample of U.S. adults (N = 2,434) obtained through Lucid. The sample was quota-matched to approximate the U.S. population in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, age, and education. After data cleaning, the analysis focuses on White respondents (n = 1,710). The composition of the White sample is described in Table 15 in Appendix A.

#### 2.5.2.1 Experimental Conditions and Narrative Texts

The experiment was designed to manipulate respondents' exposure to narratives about the solvability of racial inequality across four experimental conditions. The design of the survey experiment was as follows: Respondents first completed seven questions measuring the BJW. Respondents were then randomly assigned to either a control condition or to read one of three treatment vignettes. The vignettes presented factual information about racial inequality in the U.S. but varied in their concluding message about the solvability of these inequalities. Each narrative was crafted to test the theoretical predictions of JWT and SDT regarding how high-BJW individuals ought to respond to different framings of the solvability of racial inequality. The treatment texts are provided in full in Appendix section A. All three versions of the op-ed are identical except for the last paragraph, where I vary whether racial inequality is described as intractable or solvable.

1. Control Condition: Respondents received no narrative and proceeded directly to the survey measures of RR and CBR. This condition serves as a baseline for comparing the effects of the experimental treatments.
2. No Mention of Solvability Condition: Respondents in this condition read a neutral narrative emphasizing awareness of racial inequality. The text focused on describing the persistence of racial disparities without suggesting whether these disparities could be resolved. This condition allows for examining whether simply acknowledging racial inequality influences attitudes compared to the control condition.
3. Unsolvable Condition: Respondents read a narrative emphasizing the systemic and entrenched nature of racial inequality, suggesting that significant reductions are unlikely. This condition directly tests JWT's prediction that high-BJW individuals will be more likely to blame Black Americans for their lower socioeconomic status—and thus express lower levels of RR and CBR—when presented with evidence that racial inequality is unsolvable.

4. Solvable Condition: Respondents read a narrative framing racial inequality as solvable, highlighting actionable steps such as policy reforms in education and criminal justice. This condition probes SDT's prediction that high-BJW individuals, especially from dominant groups, will react defensively to solvable narratives that imply potential disruptions to the status quo..

After reading the narrative (or in the control condition, proceeding directly), respondents completed a battery of questions measuring RR and CBR. These dependent variables were designed to assess attitudes toward racial inequality and support for race-neutral explanations for racial disparities, respectively. The ideological and racial variables used in the analysis are described in the next section.

#### 2.5.2.2 Measures

1. Belief in a Just World (BJW) was assessed using the same scale as in the AmeriSpeak analysis, with seven items capturing agreement with statements about fairness and justice (Cronbach's alpha = .85).
2. Racial Resentment (RR) was measured using the classic four-item RR scale developed by Sears and Kinder, rescaled to range from 0 (low RR) to 1 (high RR) (Cronbach's alpha = .84).
3. Color-Blind Racism (CBR) was assessed using two items from the CoBRAS scale (Neville et al. 2000), capturing skepticism about the ongoing relevance of racism ("Racial discrimination against Black Americans is still common and widespread"; " Racism may have been a problem in the past, but it is no longer an important problem today."; Cronbach's alpha = .74).

#### 2.5.2.4 Modeling Approach

The analysis uses ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to estimate the effects of experimental conditions on RR and CBR. Two regression models were applied to each outcome

variable. The first model included a factor variable for treatment condition and a variable controlling for party identification, while the second model interacted BJW with treatment conditions, hypothesizing that BJW would moderate responses to solvable narratives of racial inequality. Party identification is included as a control variable due to its strong correlation with racial attitudes (Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022).

#### 2.5.2.3 Interpretation of Results

The experimental findings, reported in Table 7, strongly support Hypothesis 6, aligning with SDT's predictions over those of JWT. Specifically, when racial inequality was framed as solvable, high-BJW individuals expressed significantly higher levels of RR and CBR. In Model 2, which includes the interaction between BJW and treatment condition, the "Solvable" condition interacted positively and significantly with BJW in predicting RR (Estimate = 0.185, SE = 0.086, $p < 0.05$).

Similarly, the interaction between BJW and the "Solvable" condition was positive and significant in predicting CBR in Model 4 (Estimate = 0.264, SE = 0.094, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that high-BJW individuals' colorblind racial attitudes are similarly influenced by a perceived threat to social status. The interaction of BJW and the Solvable condition in predicting RR and CBR are depicted in Figure 2. Conversely, the "Unsolvable" condition showed no significant interaction effect with BJW on either RR or CBR.

**Table 7: Effects of Experimental Treatments on Racial Resentment and Color-blind Racism, with Interactions by Belief in a Just World**

| Variable | RR Model 1 | RR Model 2 | COBRA Model 3 | COBRA Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.354*** | 0.253*** | 0.203*** | 0.136*** |
| | (0.015) | (0.031) | (0.016) | (0.034) |
| BJW (0-1) | | 0.236*** | | 0.160** |
| | | (0.059) | | (0.065) |
| **Treatment Conditions** | | | | |
| No Mention of Solvability | -0.049** | -0.079* | -0.016 | -0.06 |
| | (0.017) | (0.042) | (0.018) | (0.046) |
| Unsolvable | -0.02 | -0.03 | 0.002 | -0.064 |
| | (0.017) | (0.043) | (0.019) | (0.047) |
| Solvable | -0.014 | -0.104** | 0.018 | -0.109** |
| | (0.017) | (0.044) | (0.019) | (0.048) |
| Party ID (0-1) | 0.384*** | 0.366*** | 0.354*** | 0.339*** |
| | (0.017) | (0.017) | (0.018) | (0.018) |
| **BJW x Treatment Interactions** | | | | |
| BJW x No Mention of Solvability | | 0.065 | | 0.094 |
| | | (0.083) | | (0.091) |
| BJW x Unsolvable | | 0.019 | | 0.137 |
| | | (0.084) | | (0.092) |
| BJW x Solvable | | 0.185** | | 0.264*** |
| | | (0.086) | | (0.094) |
| Observations | 1,708 | 1,705 | 1,709 | 1,706 |
| $R^2$ | 0.234 | 0.279 | 0.178 | 0.216 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.232 | 0.276 | 0.176 | 0.213 |

*Note:* This table reports the results from four regression models estimating the effects of experimental treatments on racial resentment (RR) and COBRA attitudes, with and without interactions with belief in a just world (BJW). In each model, the experimental condition is coded as a factor variable (reference group: Control condition) with three treatments: "No Mention of Solvability," "Unsolvable," and "Solvable." Model 1 includes only the experimental conditions and party identification as predictors for RR. Model 2 adds an interaction between BJW and each treatment condition. Similarly, Model 3 includes the experimental conditions and party identification for COBRA, while Model 4 includes the interaction between BJW and treatment conditions. Party ID is rescaled from 0 to 1 to account for its correlation with racial attitudes. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

This pattern suggests that framing racial inequality as solvable activates a defensive reaction among high-BJW individuals, consistent with SDT's view that high-BJW individuals may react to perceived threats to the status hierarchy by expressing heightened racial resentment and colorblind attitudes. Moreover, these findings contradict JWT, which anticipated that high-

BJW respondents would react *positively* to information suggesting that racial inequality could be ameliorated. Instead, the results affirm SDT's proposition that BJW operates as a status-legitimizing ideology rather than as a universal need for justice, underscoring that high-BJW individuals' racial attitudes may be shaped more by concerns about maintaining existing group inequalities than by a desire for fairness across group boundaries.

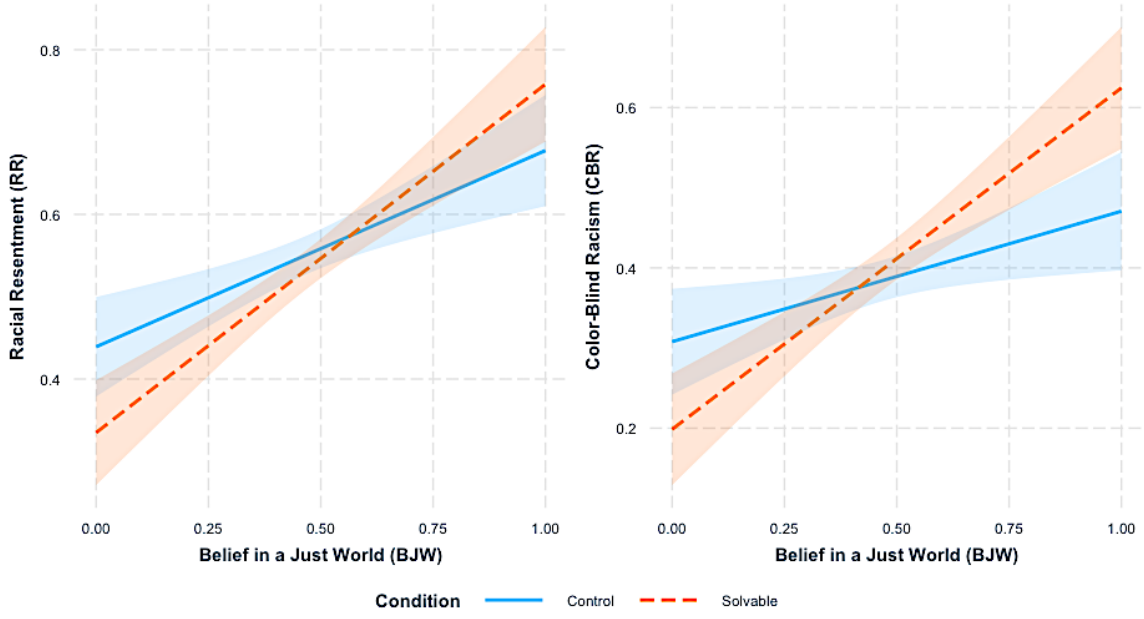


**Figure 2: Interaction of BJW with Experimental Condition**

*Note:* This figure displays the interaction effects of BJW and experimental conditions (Control and Solvable) on Racial Resentment (RR, left panel) and Color-Blind Racism (CBR, right panel). The BJW is represented on the x-axis, and the y-axis indicates the scale of the outcome variable. The solid blue line represents the Control condition, while the dotted red line represents the Solvable condition. Shaded areas around the lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The figure illustrates how the relationship between BJW and the outcomes varies by experimental condition, with notable divergence in predicted values between the Control and Solvable conditions as BJW increases.

### 2.5.3 Discussion of Experimental Results

The results of the Lucid survey experiment complement and extend the findings from the AmeriSpeak analyses, providing further insight into the mechanisms underlying the relationship between the BJW and RR. The experimental results reveal that high-BJW individuals are particularly sensitive to the framing of racial inequality as solvable, with the solvable framing

eliciting greater RR. This suggests that individuals high in BJW feel more threatened by solutions to inequality than by the persistence of inequality itself, consistent with SDT's assertion that dominance motives drive support for status-quo hierarchies.

These experimental findings reinforce the patterns observed in the AmeriSpeak data, where BJW was more strongly linked to perceptions of zero-sum competition and skepticism toward claims of discrimination against Black Americans. In both studies, the evidence strongly supports SDT's contention that ideologies like the BJW function to protect and rationalize group dominance among members of culturally dominant groups like White Americans. In contrast, JWT's framing of BJW as a general psychological need to perceive the world as fair and just is not supported by these results, as the data reveal that BJW is highly contingent on social context and group membership.

Together, these findings illustrate the nature of BJW as a status-legitimizing belief system. The AmeriSpeak results highlight how BJW aligns with SDO and facilitates selective skepticism toward claims of racial injustice, particularly when those claims challenge the legitimacy of the existing racial hierarchy. The experimental results go further, demonstrating that high-BJW individuals respond to threats to the racial status quo—in particular, the solvability of racial inequality—with greater resistance, revealing the motivational core of BJW's relationship to RR. Both studies underscore that this relationship likely reflects not just a general psychological need to perceive the world as just, as posited by JWT, but a deeper alignment with the competitive, anti-egalitarian worldview characterized by social dominance orientation. Together, these findings illustrate how the BJW operates as a status-legitimizing ideology that rationalizes and reinforces existing racial hierarchies in American society.

## *2.6 Conclusion*

The analyses in this chapter offer a compelling view of how status-related concerns drive ideological beliefs and racial attitudes among White Americans. Rather than a general need to see

the world as fair, the relationship between the Belief in a Just World (BJW) and Racial Resentment (RR) appears rooted in motivations to uphold social hierarchies and maintain the privileges of dominant groups. This interpretation aligns more closely with Social Dominance Theory (SDT) than with Just World Theory (JWT), underscoring that BJW functions as a status-legitimizing ideology, particularly within culturally dominant groups.

Through both survey data from the AmeriSpeak panel and an experimental framework, this study finds that White Americans exhibit higher levels of BJW, RR, and SDO, and these relationships are interrelated in ways that align closely with SDT's predictions. BJW's strong correlation with Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and skepticism about discrimination against Black Americans highlights how just-world beliefs serve as a justification to reinforce societal structures that maintain existing inequalities. Notably, the experimental results show that high-BJW respondents react defensively when racial inequality is framed as solvable—aligning with SDT's premise that challenges to status hierarchies elicit a protective response among those who subscribe to the BJW. This finding undercuts JWT's claim that high-BJW individuals should respond positively to messages that promote social justice and fairness, suggesting instead that BJW in this context serves more as a mechanism to rationalize hierarchy than to promote equity.

The results from this chapter underscore the centrality of status-related dominance motivations in the relationship between BJW and racial resentment. By demonstrating that BJW operates as a status-legitimizing ideology within dominant groups, this chapter contributes to the broader themes of this dissertation, which emphasize the importance of social dominance orientation and status threat in understanding political psychology and behavior in American politics. These findings suggest that, particularly in racially stratified societies, ideologies like BJW and RR play a significant role in supporting hierarchies and motivating intergroup resentments—an observation that informs the subsequent chapters' focus on status dynamics in American political ideology and behavior.

# 3. Slavery and the Cultural Persistence of Status-Legitimizing Ideologies in the South

## *3.1 Summary*

This chapter explores how historical exposure to slavery continues to shape contemporary racial attitudes and ideological beliefs among White Southerners. Building upon social dominance theory and group position theory, I argue that chattel slavery entrenched enduring "status-legitimizing" ideologies among White populations in the South, especially in regions heavily dependent on enslaved labor. These ideologies fostered a belief in White superiority and provided ideological justifications for racial inequality and the subjugation of non-White populations. Consequently, these ideologies have continued to perpetuate prejudice toward African Americans *as well as* other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities long after slavery's abolition. Using cotton suitability as an instrumental variable to measure historical slavery prevalence, I demonstrate that Whites residing in Southern counties with historically larger slave populations exhibit stronger racial pride, greater acceptance of group-based inequality, and heightened prejudice toward a broad set of minority groups today. These findings underscore how historical systems of economic exploitation can sustain ideological justifications for prejudice and discrimination in contemporary society.

## *3.2 Introduction*

How has the historical legacy of slavery shaped contemporary political ideology in the U.S. South? Despite widespread scholarly acknowledgment of slavery's lasting influence on American politics and culture, empirical studies explicitly connecting historical slavery rates to contemporary racial attitudes and ideological beliefs remain limited. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how deeply rooted historical inequalities can foster ideologies that perpetuate group-based prejudice and inequality. V.O. Key (2024) famously identified the Southern Black Belt—encompassing regions of the South that were historically more dependent

on slave labor—as the epicenter of Southern political power, highlighting slavery's foundational role in regional political structures. Similarly, historians emphasize the uniquely oppressive character of American chattel slavery, particularly its brutal denial of basic rights, as distinguishing the United States as a uniquely racialized "slave society" (Berlin 1998; Stampp 1956; 1965; Stampp 1965).

Beyond its direct political implications, slavery profoundly shaped the development of race as a concept in America. Audrey Smedley (Smedley 1998; Smedley and Smedley 2005; Smedley 2018) argues that the modern concept of race in the U.S. emerged specifically to justify and legitimize the enslavement of Africans and the subjugation of Native Americans, anchoring racial hierarchies in perceived biological differences. Isabel Wilkerson (2020) similarly highlights that America's entrenched racial caste system originated from slavery, rigidly defining social status and group boundaries based upon inherited racial membership. While scholars have extensively documented these historical and theoretical links, only a handful of recent studies have examined how variations in historical exposure to slavery shape contemporary support for status-legitimizing, racial ideologies.

To provide additional empirical clarity on this issue, I use geographic variation in cotton suitability as an instrumental variable for historical slavery rates to estimate slavery's enduring ideological consequences. Specifically, I analyze whether White Southerners residing in counties with historically higher enslaved populations continue to embrace stronger "status-legitimizing" beliefs—ideologies centered on White superiority, racial pride, and acceptance of hierarchical inequalities. My analysis extends prior research by demonstrating that historical slavery not only influences anti-Black prejudice but also encourages broader ethnocentric and supremacist attitudes toward multiple racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups. By doing so, this chapter highlights the overlooked ways historical structures such as slavery continue to sustain

ideological foundations for prejudice and group-based discrimination today, providing critical support for group position theory (GPT) and social dominance theory (SDT).

## *3.3 Racial Resentment and the Political Legacy of Slavery*

Within the discipline of political science, the impact of slavery on American politics and public opinion has gained renewed attention with the publication of *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics* by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (hereafter, ABS; 2018). In their 2018 book and 2016 article (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016), the authors find that White Southerners who currently live in counties that had larger slave populations prior to the Civil War are significantly more likely to express racial resentment and negative affect toward Blacks. These findings remain robust after controlling for a number of alternative explanations, including current levels of socioeconomic inequality between Blacks and Whites, the current proportion of residents who are Black across counties, and variation in economic recovery rates post-Reconstruction. In addition to controlling for contemporary factors, the authors use variation in the suitability of different climates for growing cotton as an instrument for county variation in exposure to 1860 slavery rates, which further strengthens their results. ABS conclude that the robustness of their findings provides strong evidence that contemporary Southern attitudes toward Blacks are in part a residual effect of the racist norms and institutions that arose in high-slavery regions during the Jim Crow era.

ABS attribute their results to a path-dependent process that began with the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of the slave population. Following the end of the war, White elites in the Black Belt sought to maintain control over the local Black labor force and keep recently enfranchised Black voters from undermining White political control in the South. In order to accomplish this, ABS argue that White elites actively created and promulgated a set of racist beliefs and institutions to shore up White support for the oppression of former slaves. ABS argue this process ultimately led Whites in high-slavery areas to adopt racially conservative

attitudes toward Blacks, which were then subsequently passed down across generations through family socialization.

ABS's findings are striking, but there are reasons to doubt both their theoretical account and the scope of their results. Their explanation for why slavery led to racial prejudice against African Americans draws primarily on the theory of symbolic racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears and Henry 2003) and Gordon Allport's classical model of prejudice (Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew 1954) . Within these frameworks, racial prejudice is viewed as a stable and socially learned set of predispositions, which is *largely unaffected by* racial identities or other intergroup dynamics (Kinder and Sears 1981b; Jardina 2019a).

The theoretical lens ABS adopt leads them to focus exclusively on slavery's relationship with anti-black prejudice while ignoring possible ties to broader intergroup attitudes and beliefs. If racial prejudice is a stable, socially learned set of beliefs and attitudes, unaffected by other intergroups attitudes—as the theory of symbolic racism suggests—then we might expect slavery rates to only predict attitudes toward Blacks, since this is the group that Whites in high-slavery counties originally developed prejudice toward. This theoretical expectation is reflected in the measures ABS use to capture racial attitudes among White Southerners, which include measures of anti-Black racial resentment and feeling thermometer ratings of Whites and Blacks. They do not explore whether slavery rates predict Whites' attitudes toward other outgroups, including Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic/religious minorities —leaving a gap in both their theory and findings. Yet, as I explain below, there are reasons to expect a broader set of downstream consequences for intergroup prejudice, racial identity, and general ethnocentrism.[2]

[2] The number of placebo tests that ABS use to test their claims is also limited—they show that slavery rates are uncorrelated with attitudes toward gay marriage, abortion, and environmental regulations and argue that this suggests the effect of slavery was limited to prejudice toward African Americans.

## *3.4 The Caste System, White Supremacy, and Status Threat*

Historical accounts of slavery and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as well as the broader literature on intergroup processes suggest that slavery would have shaped White Southerners' attitudes in ways that ABS did not fully explore – particularly with regard to the strength of White Southerners' attachment to their racial identity, their sense of racial pride, their adoption of status-legitimizing ideologies, and their attitudes toward immigrants and other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. As noted by several historical accounts of the development of slavery in the US, the cotton-based plantation economy led to the creation of a strictly enforced caste system, which codified racial differences between Blacks and Whites based on skin color and explicitly celebrated White racial superiority (Berlin 1998; Smedley 2018; Wilkerson 2020).

I argue that the racial caste system in the South, particularly in areas where slavery became more deeply entrenched due to the cotton industry, likely shaped both the strength of Whites' racial identification and sense of superiority as well as their understanding of their own status vis-à-vis other minority groups. I derive these expectations directly from social dominance theory (SDT) and group position theory (GPT). Both theories stipulate that individuals have "social identity needs," in that they derive self-esteem and meaning from their group memberships. Dominant group members, because they benefit from the privileges and status afforded to them by their membership in a high-status group, are incentivized to develop a strong attachment to their ingroup and to seek to preserve their social advantage (Levin and Sidanius 1999; Sidanius and Pratto 2001c; Tajfel 1979; Blumer 1958; L. Bobo and Hutchings 1996). This heightened attachment to their ingroup's dominant status further leads dominant groups to embrace ideologies (e.g., meritocracy, social Darwinism, cultural superiority) that justify their group's privileged position. This ideological support in-turn strengthens their group identity by reinforcing the view that their dominance is deserved or natural.

Building on these theoretical predictions, I derive several general expectations about the effect slavery had on White Southerner's political and racial worldview. Whites living in regions that were more dependent upon slavery economically, and which thus had larger slave populations, would have been more likely to develop feelings of racial superiority and entitlement. This heightened sense of White superiority would have entailed, among other things, a stronger identification with and pride in being White, stronger endorsement of stereotypes and legitimizing ideologies that justified Whites' superiority, and a greater propensity for perceiving other racial and ethnic minorities as potential threats to their status atop the racial hierarchy. According to this view, the concept of White superiority consists of more than the belief that Blacks are inferior, but also includes the continuous assertion of White superiority over all other racial and ethnic minorities, as well as the promulgation of status-legitimizing beliefs that justify Whites' political, economic, and cultural dominance in the South. In the face of demographic and/or legal changes that granted non-White minorities access to the same rights, privileges, and social standing as Whites, White Southerners in formerly high-slave counties should have been more likely to perceive these minority groups as a potential threat to their exclusive privileges and status.

The history of White supremacy and the KKK in the South supports this view. While the KKK originally arose in response to the emancipation and enfranchisement of former slaves during the period of Southern Reconstruction, the organization's rebirth in the 1920s framed the movement around protecting White Christian dominance and Southern culture from the growing population of Jews, Catholics, European immigrants, and African Americans (Maxwell and Shields 2019; Smedley and Smedley 2005; Isenberg 2017). The KKK was not a fringe movement either; at its height in the 1920s, it had as many as 5 million registered, card-carrying members. The 1915 film that prompted its resurgence, *The Birth of a Nation*, was celebrated nationally and even screened by President Woodrow Wilson in the White House (Maxwell and Shields 2019).

Over time, Jewish and Catholic immigrants were incorporated into the dominant White caste, underscoring the importance of skin color and phenotypic characteristics in determining membership in dominant and subordinate racial castes in the US (Wilkerson 2020; Smedley and Smedley 2005). Yet the ethnocentrism and attachment to White superiority that characterized the rebirth of the KKK in the 1920s carried over to resentments toward new immigrant and minority groups who were perceived as a threat to White Anglo-Saxon dominance over the following decades (Wilkerson 2020).

In addition to the historical accounts detailed above, my hypotheses derive from prominent theories in social psychology connecting status hierarchies to the development of status-legitimizing ideologies. I draw heavily on group position theory (Blumer 1958; L. D. Bobo 1999) and social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto 2001b) as well as recent work on the power of White identity (Jardina 2019a).

According to group position theory (GPT), members of a dominant racial caste should be more likely to view themselves as superior to subordinate and/or low-status groups, which should further entail a heightened perception of differences between groups and a higher likelihood of viewing minorities as a threat to the dominant group's status, wealth, and privileges (Blumer 1958; L. D. Bobo 1999; L. Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Importantly, GPT allows for the possibility that prejudice and resentment toward racial minorities can arise from *perceptions* of threats to the dominant group's status, rather than actual threats to material resources or physical safety posed by minority-group members living in close proximity with members of the dominant group (Blumer 1958; Jardina 2019). GPT thus departs in important ways from realistic group conflict theory (Bobo and Hutchings 1996), which predicts that prejudice and animosity will arise in response to actual conflicts over tangible, material resources between majority and minority groups (Blalock 1967). Instead, GPT posits that the perception that a subordinate group poses a threat to the dominant groups' status and privileges is enough to trigger resentments among

dominant group members toward the subordinate group (Blumer 1958; L. Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Tying GPT back to the historical legacy of slavery, GPT would predict that White Southerners in high-slavery regions should perceive immigrants and racial minorities as a threat to their status, regardless of whether there are any immigrants or racial minorities living in their immediate vicinity.

GPT also shares many similarities with social dominance theory (SDT). According to Sidanius and Pratto (2001), the progenitors of SDT, societies universally exhibit three kinds of status-based hierarchies based on (1) age, (2) gender, and (3) socially constructed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, or class. Sidanius and Pratto contend that members of dominant social groups will be more likely to express a preference for group domination and endorse ideologies that justify the existing social hierarchy. Preferences for group domination are typically measured with survey items from the social dominance orientation scale (hereafter SDO), which is thought to reflect an ideological preference for group domination and group-based inequality (Pratto et al. 1994) . Decades of research have found that SDO predicts prejudice toward racial minorities among members of dominant racial groups, and that this relationship is typically mediated by measures of ideologies that justify racial inequality, such as colorblind racism, the belief in a just world, and the Protestant work ethic (Sidanius and Pratto 2001b; Ho et al. 2015; Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin 2006b; Sidanius, Devereux, and Pratto 1992; Sidanius et al. 1994; 2004; 1991).

Both GPT and SDT suggest that the racial caste system created by chattel slavery and the plantation economy would have imbued Whites in high-slavery regions with a stronger sense of racial superiority, a greater preference for group domination, an attachment to status-legitimizing and system-justifying ideologies, and a propensity to express prejudice and resentment toward Blacks *as well as* other minority groups that threaten their privileges, status, and power.

More recent work by Ashley Jardina (2019) suggests that many Whites in the US possess a strong attachment to White racial identity, which influences their political behavior independently of racial resentment and prejudice. Jardina's work also builds on GPT to argue that voters who possess a strong sense of White identity and solidarity will respond to perceived threats to their groups' status and privileges by voting for candidates and policies that protect their interests. In the case of slavery and contemporary political attitudes, it should also be the case that the caste system in high-slavery regions of the South similarly imbued Whites with a strong sense of White identity and a preference to protect their racial groups' status and privileges.

## *3.5 Theorizing the Cultural Transmission of Status-Legitimizing Beliefs*

The crux of my argument, based on the social psychological micro foundations of GPT and SDT, is that status-legitimizing beliefs would have had persistent psychological, economic, and political utility for White Southerners in high-slavery regions both before and after the civil war, in that these beliefs would have provided Whites with (1) a feeling of self-esteem based on membership in a dominant, high-status group, (2) a justification for profiting off of the economic exploitation of Black laborers, and (3) a justification for segregation and laws that bolstered and maintained these exclusive privileges for Whites. I argue that so long as these beliefs continue to have net positive utility for Whites, they will continue to be passed down through socialization by parents and other members of the White community (Bisin and Verdier 2023).

In regions where slavery was more demographically prevalent and economically indispensable, the system of racial caste was not only more deeply institutionalized but also more psychologically entrenched. High-slavery areas relied on the labor of enslaved people to sustain key sectors of the economy—particularly plantation agriculture—which necessitated a clear, enforceable, and rigid racial hierarchy to maintain social and economic order. In these contexts, White identity and racial superiority were heavily emphasized and culturally reinforced to

legitimate the coercive control of a large Black laboring class. The presence of a numerically substantial enslaved population made the perceived threat to White dominance more salient, thereby intensifying the ideological justifications for racial inequality. As a result, the norms, beliefs, and institutions that sustained racial hierarchy became more deeply woven into the social fabric of these regions. This heightened salience of caste distinctions in high-slavery areas laid the foundation for more durable transmission of status-legitimizing ideologies across generations. Consequently, White residents of these areas were more likely to internalize beliefs that justified group-based inequality and to perceive racial and ethnic outgroups as threats to their social status, long after the formal abolition of slavery.

### 3.5.1 Hypotheses

Based on the social psychological micro foundations of GPT and SDT outlined above, I derive five hypotheses for how slavery shaped White ideology in the South:

1. White Identity and Racial Consciousness Hypothesis: Whites currently living in counties that had larger slave populations prior to the Civil War will exhibit a stronger sense of White racial identity and racial pride, and heightened feelings of racial consciousness and linked fate.
2. Status-legitimizing Belief Hypothesis: Whites living in counties with larger historical slave populations will exhibit stronger status-legitimizing beliefs that justify and rationalize group-based social hierarchies, as reflected by measures of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and the Belief in a Just World (BJW).
3. Perceived Threat Hypothesis: Whites living in counties that had larger slave populations prior to the Civil War will be more likely to perceive minority groups and immigrants as a threat to their economic and political power, in line with group position theory.
4. Ethnocentrism and Outgroup Prejudice Hypothesis: County level historical slavery rates will be positively associated with heightened ethnocentrism among White populations,

manifesting in increased prejudice not only against African Americans but also other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

## *3.6 Data and Measures*

### 3.6.1 Data

My analysis relies on a combination of historical and contemporary data to examine the relationship between historical rates of slavery and present-day attitudes among White Southerners. The primary independent variable of interest is the historical prevalence of slavery at the county level, which I measure using data from the 1860 U.S. Census, the last census conducted before the Civil War. To align these historical county boundaries with modern counties defined by the 2010 U.S. Census, I employ an area-weighting procedure. Area weighting reallocates data from historical geographic units to contemporary ones based on the proportional overlap between areas. This method ensures comparability across time and allows me to analyze the relationship between historical and contemporary variables within consistent geographic boundaries. The procedure follows best practices outlined by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016) and Saporito et al. (2007), who have demonstrated the utility of areal interpolation methods in linking historical census data to modern spatial units. By harmonizing these boundaries, I mitigate the risks of spatial misalignment and ensure that historical data can be meaningfully related to contemporary outcomes.

In addition to measuring historical rates of slavery, I use cotton suitability as an instrumental variable to address concerns about endogeneity and possible confounding influences on my statistical relationship of interest. Cotton suitability serves as a plausibly exogenous predictor of historical slavery prevalence, as counties with greater agricultural suitability for cotton cultivation were more likely to adopt and rely heavily on enslaved labor during the antebellum period. Cotton suitability is measured using soil and climate data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) that captures the geographic and

environmental conditions most conducive to cotton production. The dataset used for this purpose is drawn from agricultural surveys and environmental analyses, which quantify cotton-growing potential across counties. This measure is advantageous because it reflects underlying environmental factors that influenced agricultural production, rather than contemporaneous social, cultural, or political conditions. By leveraging variation in cotton suitability, the instrument isolates the causal effect of slavery on contemporary attitudes, independent of other confounding influences.

### 3.6.2 Addressing Potential Confounds

A key concern in identifying the causal relationship between historical rates of slavery and contemporary attitudes among White Southerners is the potential for confounding variables that obscure or distort this relationship. One major issue is the role of economic inequality and persistent structural disadvantages. The South, even before the Civil War, was characterized by extreme economic inequality. Indeed, historical slavery profoundly shaped economic hierarchies in the South, concentrating wealth and land in the hands of a few and leaving enduring disparities (O'Connell 2012; Nunn 2008). These economic structures, established during the antebellum period, may have persisted through generations, influencing social and economic opportunities. The lingering effects of these inequalities might independently shape contemporary attitudes toward race, complicating efforts to disentangle the direct impact of slavery.

Additionally, rural and urban differences present another challenge. Counties with larger historical slave populations tend to be more rural today (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018). Rural areas often differ markedly from urban ones in terms of social norms, political dynamics, and exposure to racial diversity, all of which might influence racial attitudes (Rodden 2019; Cramer 2016). These distinctions mean that rurality itself might act as a confounding factor in the observed relationship between historical slavery and contemporary attitudes.

The geographic distribution of contemporary Black populations also poses a possible confounding influence. Counties that had a higher prevalence of slavery historically often have larger Black populations today (Key 1949; Glaser 1994; O'Connell 2012). This demographic reality might amplify perceptions of racial threat among White residents, potentially shaping attitudes in ways that are not directly attributable to historical slavery and the caste system but rather to present-day racial dynamics.

Historical migration patterns further complicate interpretation. After the Civil War and during the Great Migration, patterns of migration may have resulted in geographic sorting, concentrating specific political or racial attitudes in certain counties (Tolnay and Beck 1992; Boustan 2016). These migration patterns might have preserved, lessened, or intensified racial ideologies within some areas, potentially undercutting or reinforcing the observed relationships between historical conditions and contemporary beliefs.

Finally, the impact of Civil War destruction and Reconstruction policies cannot be ignored. Counties that experienced greater devastation during the Civil War or more aggressive Reconstruction efforts may exhibit distinct social and political dynamics that continue to shape local attitudes (Wright 1997). For example, areas that faced punitive Reconstruction measures, or that struggled to recover economically following the end of the Civil War, might have developed stronger local norms of resistance to racial equality, thereby independently influencing the attitudes of White residents today.

By using cotton suitability as an instrumental variable, this study aims to address these and other potential confounding factors. Cotton suitability offers a plausibly exogenous predictor of historical rates of slavery, as counties more suited to growing cotton were more likely to rely heavily on enslaved labor. The instrument leverages variation in slavery prevalence that is rooted in agricultural and environmental factors, rather than economic factors or the cultural or political predispositions of counties. This approach strengthens the argument that the relationships

identified in this analysis reflect the causal effects of historical slavery rates and the caste system, rather than the influence of omitted confounders.

In additional to using geographical variation in cotton suitability as an instrumental variable, I include a number of covariates in my analyses to account for possible confounders identified in past work by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016). Geographic controls in both models include the log of county area, latitude and latitude$^2$, longitude and longitude$^2$, a measure of the ruggedness of the terrain, and a measure of access to steamboat navigable rivers. In the instrumental variable model, geographic and environmental controls are included in both the first and second stage regression.

Economic controls in the baseline model include a Gini coefficient measuring levels of land inequality between Whites in 1860, a measure of the proportion of farms in the county that are under 50 acres in 1860, an estimate of the value of farmland per capita in 1860, a measure of the total improved acres of farmland in the county since the last census in 1860, and a dummy variable indicating whether there was access to a railway in 1860. I also include a county level variable from the 1940 census measuring the number of tractors per acre of farmland. These covariates are the same as those used by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (ABS) in the baseline models reported in their 2016 paper. Like ABS, I include the measure of tractors per acre of farmland to control for varying rates of economic recovery after the Civil War across Southern counties (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016). All 1860 variables included as covariates come from the 1860 census.

Demographic controls in the baseline model include age, gender, income, and education. Both the baseline and instrumental variable models (in the second stage equation) include fixed effects for states. All model results are reported using robust standard errors (calculated using the Sandwich package in R). Survey weights are applied to responses using the survey package in R (Lumley 2004) to ensure estimates generalize to the overall White population in the South.

### 3.6.3 Modeling Approach

I now turn to the models I use to test my hypotheses. For each of my hypotheses, I present tables reporting the coefficients for the county-level measure of 1860 slavery rates as a predictor of status-legitimizing attitudes and beliefs. For each dependent variable, I report the results of two models: (1) a baseline model that regresses the outcome on 1860 slavery rates while controlling for geographic and economic features of counties in 1860, 1940, and the present day, as well as demographic characteristics of respondents; and (2) an instrumental variable model employing cotton suitability as an instrument for slavery rates while controlling for geographic features of individual counties.

### 3.6.4 Measures of Status-Legitimizing Beliefs and Attitudes

To measure feelings of White racial pride and consciousness, I rely on indices of White identity strength and White racial consciousness developed by Jardina (2019), building on prior work on Black racial identity strength and feelings of racially linked fate (Dawson 1995; Sniderman and Piazza 2002). White identity strength measures the extent to which being White is central to an individual's identity and whether they express pride in being White. It is based on four items: (1) "To what extent would you say White people in this country have a lot to be proud of?" (five-point scale from "A great deal" to "Never"); (2) "How much would you say White people in this country have a lot in common with one another?" (five-point scale from "A great deal" to "None at all"); (3) "When talking about White people, how often do you say 'we' instead of 'they'?" (five-point scale from "All of the time" to "Never"); and (4) "How important is being White to your identity?" Respondents' answers to these items were averaged, then rescaled to range from 0 (no White identity) to 1 (strong White identity). The resulting scale demonstrates acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.68).

White racial consciousness refers to the extent to which White individuals perceive their personal outcomes as tied to the fate of other White people and feel that Whites face collective threats. I measure this construct using two survey items. The first asks respondents: "How likely is it that White people in this country are unable to find a job because employers are hiring people from other racial or ethnic groups instead?" The second asks: "How important is it that White people work together to change laws that are unfair to Whites?" Responses to both items were recorded on five-point scales, ranging from 1 ("Not at all likely/important") to 5 ("Extremely likely/important"). I averaged the two items, then rescaled the resulting measure to range from 0 (low racial consciousness/insecurity) to 1 (high racial consciousness/insecurity). The two items are moderately correlated, $r(1473) = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$.

To measure preferences for group dominance and attitudes toward group-based inequality, I use two subscales from the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) framework: the Dominance (SDO-D) and Anti-egalitarianism (SDO-E) subscales (Ho et al. 2015) (Ho et al. 2015). Each subscale is based on the average of four items rated on seven-point Likert scales ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The Dominance subscale captures preferences for group dominance and beliefs in the legitimacy of group hierarchies. Example items include: "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others on the bottom" and "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups." The Anti-egalitarianism subscale reflects opposition to group equality, with items such as: "It is unjust to try to make groups equal" and "Group equality should not be our primary goal." Items expressing support for equality were reverse coded. Scores for each subscale were then averaged and rescaled to range from 0 (low SDO) to 1 (high SDO). The resulting measures demonstrate acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.68 for SDO-D and 0.75 for SDO-E.The third variable is a measure of the belief in a just world (Lipkus 1991), which averages together agree-disagree ratings of four statements concerning the extent to which the world is fair and people get what they deserve in

life. The statements the measure is composed of include “I feel that people earn the punishments and rewards they get”; “I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves”; “I feel that people get what they deserve”; and “I basically feel that the world is a fair place”. Responses to the four items were averaged together, and then the resulting variable was rescaled to range from 0 (no belief in a just world) to 1 (high belief in a just world). The Cronbach’s alpha for the measure is 0.77.

To measure perceived threats from immigrants and racial minorities, I utilize a set of questions that ask the extent to which White respondents believe Blacks and Hispanics take jobs and political influence away from other groups, and whether they believe “the changing ethnic makeup of the United States” threatens the American way of life. The first set of questions measure perceptions that racial minorities threaten access to jobs for other groups by asking respondents how strongly they agree or disagree that “more good jobs for Black/Hispanic people means fewer good jobs for members of other groups.” The second set of questions measure perceptions that racial minorities threaten other groups’ political power by asking respondents how strongly they agree or disagree that “the more political influence Black/Hispanic people have in politics, the less influence members of other groups will have in politics.” I combine the questions about economic and political competition with Blacks and Hispanics into two measures of zero-sum competition with either Blacks or Hispanics, rescaled to range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of competition. The Pearson correlation for the measure concerning Blacks is $r(1488) = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$, and the correlation between the two items concerning competition with Hispanics is $r(1484) = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$. The third variable is comprised of a question asking respondents how worried they are that “the changing ethnic makeup of the US will make it harder to maintain the American way of life” on a five-point scale ranging from “Not at all worried” to “Extremely worried.” Responses were recoded to range from

0 to 1, with 1 indicating that respondents are “Extremely worried” and 0 indicating that they are “Not at all worried.”

To measure overall feelings towards racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, I utilize a series of feeling thermometer ratings of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Muslims. I created measures of feeling thermometer differences in which I subtracted ratings Blacks and Hispanics from thermometer ratings of Whites. I then rescaled the results to range from -1 to 1, with 1 indicating that the respondent gave Whites the highest possible rating and the outgroup the lowest possible rating, and -1 indicating that they gave Whites the lowest possible rating and the outgroup the highest possible rating. To measure attitudes toward Muslims, I recoded feeling thermometer ratings of Muslims to range from a negative rating of 0 to a positive rating of 1.

To test whether Whites in high-slavery counties are more likely to endorse negative stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities, I use a series of questions asking respondents to rate how intelligent, law-abiding, and hard-working Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics are on a scale from 1 (positive stereotype) to 7 (negative stereotype). I subtracted scores on each of these three measures for Blacks and Hispanics from ratings of Whites in order to create a difference score indicating how much more or less intelligent/law-abiding/hard-working respondents believe Whites are compared to Blacks and Hispanics.

To examine attitudes toward immigrants/immigration, I averaged together responses to two questions, the first asking respondents to rate how much they agree or disagree that “immigrants take jobs from people who were born in the United States” on a scale from 1 = strongly agree, to 5 = strongly disagree, and the second question asking respondents whether they think “the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now,” with five response options ranging from 1 = “Increased a lot” to 5 = “Decreased a lot.” I reverse-scaled the first question tro range from 5 = “Strongly agree” to 1 = “Strongly disagree” and then averaged the

two questions together, such that higher scores indicate stronger support for anti-immigration policies. I rescaled the resulting variable to range from 0 to 1.

Lastly, I look at measures of perceived discrimination against Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics to test whether Whites in high-slavery counties are more likely to adopt "colorblind" attitudes about the existence of discrimination against minority groups. The questions I draw on asked respondents to rate how much discrimination different groups in society (Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics) experience on five-point scales ranging from 1 = "None" to 5 = "A great deal." I created two difference measures comparing perceptions of discrimination against Whites to perceptions of discrimination against Black and Hispanic Americans. To do this, I subtracted ratings of discrimination against Blacks and Hispanics from ratings of discrimination against Whites. I recoded these two variables to range from -1 to 1, with values greater than zero indicating that the respondent believes Whites are discriminated against more than the reference group, zero indicating no difference in rates of discrimination against Whites and the reference group, and less than zero indicating higher rates of discrimination against the reference group compared to Whites.

## *3.7 Results*

This section evaluates the four hypotheses presented earlier in the chapter. The results are based on the models reported in Tables 1–4. To begin, it is important to clarify the scaling of the *pslave* variable used in the baseline and instrumental variable (IV) models. In the baseline models, *pslave* measures the proportion of enslaved individuals in a county in 1860, which ranges from 0 to 1. However, in the second stage of the IV models, *pslave* is replaced by predicted values derived from the first stage, which are subsequently rescaled to range between 0 and 1. This rescaling allows for interpretability of the IV coefficients: a one-unit change in predicted *pslave* corresponds to moving from the minimum to the maximum predicted historical reliance on slavery.

*Hypothesis 1: White Identity and Racial Consciousness*

Hypothesis 1 states that Whites currently living in counties with larger historical slave populations will exhibit stronger racial identity, pride, and consciousness. Table 8 provides robust support for this hypothesis. In the IV models, White racial consciousness is significantly higher in counties with greater historical reliance on enslaved labor ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.01$). A one-unit increase in predicted *pslave* is associated with a 0.24-unit increase in racial consciousness. Similarly, White identity strength increases significantly in the IV model ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.01$), further supporting this hypothesis. These findings suggest that historical slavery rates continue to influence the strength of contemporary White racial identification in the South, fostering stronger group consciousness and white racial pride.

**Table 8: Attachment to White Status and Status-Legitimizing Beliefs**

| Outcome | Model Type | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| **White Racial Consciousness** | Baseline | 0.186* | 0.089 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.240** | 0.07 |
| **White Identity Strength** | Baseline | 0.101 | 0.075 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.155** | 0.057 |
| **SDO Dominance** | Baseline | -0.035 | 0.066 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.133** | 0.048 |
| **SDO Egalitarianism** | Baseline | -0.065 | 0.077 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.021 | 0.056 |
| **Belief in a Just World (BJW)** | Baseline | -0.101 | 0.067 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.025 | 0.055 |

*Note*: This table presents the coefficients and standard errors for the relationship between the proportion of the population enslaved in 1860 and various contemporary racial attitudes and beliefs among White

respondents. Two types of models are shown: baseline models, which use survey-weighted regressions with robust standard errors to estimate the direct association between the independent variable and the outcome variable while controlling for a wide range of demographic, geographic, and historical covariates, and instrumental variable (IV) models, which address potential endogeneity in the independent variable by using imputed cotton suitability as an instrument for the proportion of the population enslaved in 1860. In the IV models, the predicted values of the proportion enslaved from the first-stage regression have been rescaled to range between 0 and 1 for interpretability. Significance levels are denoted as *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, and + for marginal significance ($0.05 \leq p < 0.10$). Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity, and the models include state fixed effects to account for unobserved regional factors. The coefficients represent the estimated change in the outcome variable associated with a one-unit increase in the independent variable, holding other factors constant.

*Hypothesis 2: Status-Legitimizing Beliefs*

Hypothesis 2 predicts that Whites in counties with greater historical slavery rates will endorse stronger status-legitimizing beliefs, such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and the Belief in a Just World (BJW). Table 8 provides mixed support for this hypothesis. While the dominance dimension of SDO is significant in the IV model ($\beta = 0.133$, $p < 0.01$), the anti-egalitarianism dimension is not. This suggests that Whites in high-slavery counties are more likely to endorse group-based dominance but not necessarily reject egalitarianism outright.

The results for the BJW are not significant in either the baseline or IV models, indicating that belief in a fair and just world—often used to rationalize inequalities—may not be directly shaped by historical slavery rates. Overall, these results partially confirm Hypothesis 2, as SDO dominance aligns with expectations, but BJW does not.

*Hypothesis 3: Perceived Threat*

Hypothesis 3 states that Whites in counties with greater historical slave populations will perceive minority groups and immigrants as threats to their economic and political power. Table 9 strongly supports this hypothesis. Whites in historically high-slavery counties report heightened perceptions of demographic change threat in both the baseline ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.01$) and instrumental variable models ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < 0.01$). A one-unit increase in predicted *pslave* corresponds to a 0.23-unit increase in perceived threat from demographic changes ($p < 0.01$), highlighting concerns over diminishing White political and cultural dominance.

In addition, Whites report greater perceived zero-sum competition with both Black and Hispanic groups. In the IV models, competition with Blacks increases significantly ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$), as does competition with Hispanics ($\beta = 0.212$, $p < 0.01$). Anti-immigration sentiment is also marginally significant in both the baseline ($\beta = 0.175$, $p < 0.10$) and the IV model ($\beta = 0.146$, $p < 0.10$). This suggests that Whites in counties with a legacy of slavery extend their perceived threat beyond African Americans to include other immigrant populations, viewing these demographic changes as an additional challenge to their group position.

**Table 9: Perceptions of Threat from Outgroups and Social Change**

| Outcome | Model Type | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Demographic Change Threat** | Baseline | 0.323** | 0.107 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.233** | 0.084 |
| **Anti-Immigration Sentiment** | Baseline | 0.175$^{+}$ | 0.093 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.146$^{+}$ | 0.075 |
| **Zero-Sum Competition with Blacks** | Baseline | 0.200* | 0.089 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.286*** | 0.071 |
| **Zero-Sum Competition with Hispanics** | Baseline | 0.247** | 0.09 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.212** | 0.074 |

*Note*: Table presents coefficients and standard errors for baseline and instrumental variable (IV) models. Baseline models estimate the direct association between historical slavery prevalence (1860) and contemporary racial attitudes among White respondents. Instrumental variable models use cotton suitability as an instrument for historical slavery rates to address endogeneity concerns. Baseline models include the percentage of enslaved population in 1860 (`pslave1860`) as the main independent variable, alongside controls for historical, geographic, and demographic variables. Instrumental variable (IV) models use the predicted percentage of enslaved population (`predicted_pslave1860_scaled`), derived from a first-stage regression on historical cotton suitability. This variable has been rescaled to a range of [0, 1]. Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. Statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, + $p < 0.10$ (marginal).

*Hypothesis 4: Ethnocentrism and Outgroup Prejudice*

Hypothesis 4 posits that historical slavery will be associated with heightened ethnocentrism and prejudice against African Americans and other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. The results regarding measures of ethnocentrism and stereotyping of racial and ethnic outgroups provide weak evidence for this hypothesis.

Table 10 shows that feeling thermometer ratings, though in the expected direction, are not statistically significant, with the exception of thermometer ratings of Muslims, for which pslave is significantly associated with thermometer ratings in the baseline model ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.01$), and marginally significant in the IV model ($\beta = 0.125$, $p < 0.10$). These results suggest that ethnocentric attitudes in historically slave-reliant counties extend beyond African Americans to include other marginalized groups.

The results for stereotypes weakly support hypothesis 4. The IV models indicate marginally significant associations with both the anti-Black stereotype index ($\beta = 0.093$, $p < 0.10$) and the anti-Hispanic stereotype index ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.10$). This suggests that the legacy of slavery may foster subtle forms of prejudice, manifesting in stereotypical attitudes toward racial minorities.

**Table 10: White Ethnocentrism and Outgroup Prejudice**

| Outcome | Model Type | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| **White-Black FT Diff.** | Baseline | 0.056 | 0.067 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.092 | 0.057 |
| **White-Hispanic FT Diff.** | Baseline | 0.148* | 0.071 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.086 | 0.058 |
| **FT Ratings of Muslims** | Baseline | 0.242** | 0.090 |
| | Instrumental Variable | $0.125^{+}$ | 0.069 |
| **Index of Anti-Black Stereotypes** | Baseline | 0.023 | 0.076 |
| | Instrumental Variable | $0.093^{+}$ | 0.054 |
| **Index of Anti-Hispanic Stereotypes** | Baseline | -0.037 | 0.062 |
| | Instrumental Variable | $0.085^{+}$ | 0.047 |

*Note*: Table presents coefficients and standard errors for baseline and instrumental variable (IV) models. Baseline models estimate the direct association between historical slavery prevalence (1860) and contemporary racial attitudes among White respondents. Instrumental variable models use cotton suitability as an instrument for historical slavery rates to address endogeneity concerns. Baseline models include the percentage of enslaved population in 1860 (`pslave1860`) as the main independent variable, alongside controls for historical, geographic, and demographic variables. Instrumental variable (IV) models use the predicted percentage of enslaved population (`predicted_pslave1860_scaled`), derived from a first-stage regression on historical cotton suitability. This variable has been rescaled to a range of [0, 1]. Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. Statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, + $p < 0.10$ (marginal).

Table 11 highlights an additional dimension of racial attitudes: perceptions of discrimination. In the instrumental variable model, Whites in high-slavery counties are significantly more likely to perceive discrimination against their own group relative to Blacks ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.05$) and Hispanics ($\beta = 0.212$, $p < 0.05$). This aligns with contemporary patterns of color-blind racism, where Whites downplay systemic discrimination against minority groups while asserting grievances about their own perceived disadvantage.

**Table 11: Perceptions of Discrimination Against High- vs. Low-Status Groups**

| Outcome | Model | Coefficient | Standard Error (SE) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **White-Black Discrimination** | Baseline | 0.228 | 0.151 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.244* | 0.117 |
| **White-Hispanic Discrimination** | Baseline | 0.076 | 0.138 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.212* | 0.105 |
| **Men-Women Discrimination** | Baseline | -0.186 | 0.131 |
| | Instrumental Variable | 0.116 | 0.1 |

*Note*: Table presents coefficients and standard errors for baseline and instrumental variable (IV) models. Baseline models estimate the direct association between historical slavery prevalence (1860) and contemporary racial attitudes among White respondents. Instrumental variable models use cotton suitability as an instrument for historical slavery rates to address endogeneity concerns. Baseline models include the percentage of enslaved population in 1860 (`pslave1860`) as the main independent variable, alongside controls for historical, geographic, and demographic variables. Instrumental variable (IV) models use the predicted percentage of enslaved population (`predicted_pslave1860_scaled`), derived from a first-stage regression on historical cotton suitability. This variable has been rescaled to a range of [0, 1]. Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. Statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, + $p < 0.10$ (marginal).

In summary, the results across Tables 8 – 1a confirm all four hypotheses to varying degrees. Whites in counties with greater historical reliance on slavery exhibit heightened racial identity and consciousness (Hypothesis 1), endorse dominance-oriented, status-legitimizing beliefs (Hypothesis 2), perceive significant threats from minority groups and immigrants (Hypothesis 3), and demonstrate ethnocentric attitudes and prejudice toward outgroups (Hypothesis 4). The IV models, which rescale *pslave* for interpretability, underscore the magnitude of these effects, showing that moving from the minimum to maximum historical reliance on enslaved labor is associated with meaningful increases in group-based attitudes and beliefs. These findings illustrate how the legacy of slavery continues to shape contemporary racial attitudes in the United States.

## *3.8 Discussion*

The findings in this chapter underscore the profound and lasting influence of historical forces—in this case, the legacy of slavery—on modern day political ideology and intergroup attitudes. By linking historical economic and social exploitation to modern psychological orientations and political beliefs, this study highlights how deeply entrenched systems of group-based hierarchy and domination can shape individuals' worldviews across generations, long after the original legal instantiations of these systems have faded away. These results suggest that contemporary status-legitimizing ideologies are not simply the product of present-day conditions but often reflect the enduring cultural and structural legacies of historical caste systems.

The results reveal several important patterns consistent with the study's hypotheses. Whites living in counties with larger historical slave populations exhibit stronger racial identity and heightened racial consciousness (Hypothesis 1), and in line with *status-legitimizing beliefs* (Hypothesis 2), these individuals are more likely to endorse Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Regarding *perceived threat* (Hypothesis 3), results show that Whites in historically high-slavery counties perceive greater economic and political competition from Black and Hispanic groups and report higher levels of anti-immigration sentiment and concerns over demographic change. Finally, consistent with the *ethnocentrism and outgroup prejudice hypothesis* (Hypothesis 4), Whites in these counties exhibit negative feeling thermometer ratings of Muslims, as well as heightened endorsement of anti-Black and anti-Hispanic stereotypes.

This analysis extends and refines previous work by Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016) on the path-dependent effects of slavery. While their work demonstrated that historical slavery shaped attitudes toward African Americans, this study reveals a much broader ideological impact. My results suggest that slavery's legacy extends beyond attitudes toward a single group, also influencing how Whites perceive themselves, their racial ingroup, and other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. By incorporating insights from social dominance theory and group position

theory, this chapter provides a more expansive theoretical lens to understand how systems of domination and exploitation give rise to deeply internalized and culturally enduring beliefs that justify group hierarchies.

Social dominance theory, in particular, with its focus on the psychological characteristics of caste systems, proves particularly well-suited for understanding these patterns. SDT argues that dominant groups develop ideologies and psychological orientations to rationalize and maintain their hierarchical position. This study confirms that historical systems of exploitation fostered stronger attachments to ingroup status and status-legitimizing beliefs, such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). These attitudes allow members of dominant groups to perceive group-based inequalities as natural, desirable, or justified—attitudes that help sustain intergroup hierarchies over time. Group position theory further complements these insights by providing a framework to explain why dominant groups, (like White Southerners) in historically exploitative regions are more likely to perceive outgroups as a threat to their power, status, and resources.

While the results in this chapter largely support the theoretical expectations laid out earlier, it is important to acknowledge where findings diverged from initial hypotheses. Most notably, the belief in a just world (BJW)—a key status-legitimizing ideology—did not exhibit a statistically significant association with historical slavery rates in either the baseline or instrumental variable models. This null finding suggests that BJW may be less directly shaped by historical legacies of caste than other dominance-oriented beliefs such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and could reflect either measurement limitations or a more diffuse cultural basis. Similarly, the anti-egalitarian subdimension of SDO showed no significant association with slavery exposure, indicating that historical slavery may more strongly foster attitudes of group-based dominance than outright rejection of egalitarian values. These departures from expectation highlight the complexity of ideological inheritance and suggest that different facets of status-legitimizing belief systems may respond differently to historical context. Recognizing these

inconsistencies not only strengthens the credibility of the analysis but also points to promising directions for future research on the conditional persistence of hierarchical ideologies. Despite these exceptions, the overall pattern of results aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks laid out in this chapter, particularly Social Dominance Theory and Group Position Theory, which together illuminate how historical status hierarchies continue to shape contemporary political psychology.

By emphasizing these theoretical frameworks, this chapter contributes to a growing body of literature that links historical systems of exploitation to enduring patterns of political and ideological behavior. While not all outcomes aligned precisely with initial expectations, the broader constellation of findings supports the central claim that historical exposure to slavery continues to shape contemporary status beliefs and intergroup attitudes among White Southerners. In particular, the strong and consistent associations between slavery prevalence and both racial prejudice and dominance-oriented ideologies underscore the long shadow of caste in the American South. These results reinforce the utility of Social Dominance Theory and Group Position Theory in explaining the durability of hierarchical attitudes rooted in regional histories of racial exploitation.

In sum, this chapter demonstrates how the legacy of slavery shaped not only economic and political structures but also the ideological foundations of intergroup relations. By integrating historical analysis with theories of social dominance and group competition, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the long-term cultural and psychological impacts of hierarchical systems.

## *3.9 Conclusion*

This chapter makes significant contributions to both political science and political psychology by illustrating the enduring ideological consequences of historical slavery in the United States. While previous studies have focused on the persistence of racial resentment or

attitudes toward African Americans, my analysis demonstrates that slavery's legacy has broader implications for ideology, status concerns, and intergroup attitudes. By adopting a theoretical lens rooted in social dominance theory and group position theory, the present study highlights the mechanisms through which historical systems of domination foster psychological and ideological frameworks that justify and sustain hierarchies over time.

For political science, the findings underscore the importance of integrating historical perspectives into the study of contemporary political attitudes and behaviors. The persistence of White racial consciousness, status-legitimizing beliefs, and perceptions of competition with racial outgroups reflects the enduring power of historical systems of exploitation in shaping political ideologies. These insights offer a deeper understanding of regional variations in intergroup attitudes, political preferences, and identity politics in the United States.

For political psychology, this study expands the application of social dominance theory by demonstrating that historical structural inequalities—such as those institutionalized through slavery—serve as foundational drivers of dominance-oriented ideologies. It further highlights how group position theory can explain the persistence of perceived outgroup threat, particularly in contexts where dominant group status is historically linked to economic exploitation and political power. Importantly, the study shows that these ideological frameworks are not static, innate products of *personality*, but remain responsive to historical and environmental conditions.

By connecting historical legacies to contemporary intergroup attitudes, this chapter also raises important questions for future research. How do other forms of historical exploitation—such as colonialism or land dispossession—shape contemporary political and psychological attitudes in different contexts? To what extent can dominant group ideologies adapt or change when confronted with shifting economic and demographic conditions? These questions point to the need for further interdisciplinary work that bridges history, political science, and psychology to understand the long-term impacts of hierarchical social systems.

Ultimately, this chapter reveals that the past is deeply embedded in the present. Historical systems of economic and racial domination not only shaped structural inequalities but also produced enduring cultural and ideological frameworks that continue to influence how individuals perceive themselves, their ingroup, and other racial, ethnic, and religious groups. By adopting a historical and theoretical lens, this study advances our understanding of the persistence of intergroup divisions and the mechanisms that sustain social hierarchies in contemporary society.

# 4. The Political Psychology of the MAGA Movement

## *4.1 Summary*

The rise of the MAGA movement in recent years has reshaped American politics and has amplified specific ideological stances and social attitudes, particularly those surrounding issues of race, gender, immigration, and national identity. This chapter explores how MAGA supporters, as a faction within the broader conservative landscape, exhibit behaviors and beliefs characteristic of high levels of social dominance orientation and heightened status anxiety. These factors are crucial for understanding the movement's appeal and the motivations behind its members' support for policies that reinforce social hierarchies. By examining MAGA supporters through the lens of social dominance theory and status anxiety, this analysis illuminates how contemporary political movements mobilize concerns over status preservation and group dominance, further solidifying the role of these psychological motives in shaping political behavior in the United States.

## *4.2 MAGA's Empirical and Normative Importance*

Over the past decade, the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement has evolved from a campaign slogan into one of the most consequential forces in contemporary American politics. First galvanized by Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, the movement has garnered intense loyalty from a sizable segment of Republican voters, shaping the party's primaries, policy positions, and public discourse around race, gender, religion, immigration, and national identity (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2017; Tesler 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Jardina 2019b; Glick 2019; Blum and Parker 2021; Deckman 2022). Although some of its signature policy stances—like opposition to illegal immigration and abortion—are not new, the *intensity* and *breadth* of the movement's cultural backlash has taken many scholars by surprise (Edsall 2022a). Polls indicate that a substantial fraction of self-identified Republicans—typically ranging from one-quarter to a little less than half—now explicitly label themselves as "MAGA

Republicans" (Bump 2022; Blake 2023; Pfannenstiel 2023), underscoring the faction's mass base and its ability to influence candidate selection and policy debates.

The empirical significance of the MAGA movement is thus hard to overstate. Its supporters were pivotal in Trump's nomination and electoral victories, and they have continued to play a disproportionate role in GOP politics—evident in the compliance of mainstream Republicans with the movement's policy demands and its rhetorical style. Moreover, the movement has exhibited a resilience that has surprised many political observers, raising questions about why such an ostensibly extreme faction can maintain a powerful hold on the party (Edsall 2022b). Indeed, from Trump-endorsed primary challenges to the widespread acceptance of election fraud narratives, MAGA Republicans have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to reshape the GOP from within.

Understanding this movement carries clear normative implications for American democracy. Observers note that the MAGA faction has embraced an aggressive form of right-wing populism (Edsall 2022a), at times coupled with rhetoric—and more recently, overtly unconstitutional presidential directives—that question basic electoral procedures and constitutional precedents (Ellmers 2021; Vought 2022; Smith-Schoenwalder and Mannweiler 2025), challenging longstanding democratic norms (Edsall 2025; Goldsmith and Bauer 2025). Such attitudes have led to heightened concerns about political violence (Bensinger and Frenkel 2022; Egwuonwu and Uribe 2024), erosion of trust in institutions (Kanno-Youngs and Shear 2022), and increasing polarization, with potential consequences for governance and democratic stability. Critics warn that the movement's dedication to strong, charismatic leadership—particularly Donald Trump's brand of norm-defying politics—pushes the bounds of acceptable democratic discourse, fueling anxieties about democratic backsliding (Mickey, Levitisky, and Way 2017; Kaufman and Haggard 2019; Grumbach 2023).

From a political psychology standpoint, MAGA supporters present an intriguing puzzle. Their patterns of behavior often defy conventional accounts of conservatism that highlight deference to legitimate authority or moral traditionalism. Instead, their beliefs and attitudes—particularly around race, gender, Christian nationalism, democracy, citizenship, and a host of other cultural issues—suggest a combative, often paranoid, worldview oriented around group competition and the legitimation and aggressive perpetuation of traditional *status* hierarchies (Parker 2021; Parker and Lavine 2024; Edsall 2024; 2025). For scholars seeking to explain rising right-wing populist movements across Western democracies, as well as the resilience of Trump's coalition within the Republican Party, analyzing the MAGA faction provides a critical test case of how status anxiety and dominance-oriented concerns can powerfully motivate political engagement and identity.

This chapter places the MAGA movement at the center of inquiry, arguing that status-based concerns and a desire for group dominance—as articulated by Social Dominance Theory and the Dual Process Model of Ideology—hold the key to understanding why this faction exhibits such unusually strong ideological commitment to extreme right-wing narratives, commitment to Donald Trump, and heightened engagement in politics. Studying MAGA Republicans thus allows us to refine theories of conservative ideology, party factionalism, and the psychology of status threat, while offering a unique lens through which to examine the broader implications of populist and authoritarian-leaning movements in modern democracies.

## *4.3 Theoretical Puzzle*

Scholars of conservative politics have traditionally emphasized "Right-Wing Authoritarianism" (RWA) as a key psychological mechanism driving attitudes and behaviors on the political right (Altemeyer 1981; Feldman and Stenner 1997; M. J. Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Duckitt 2015). RWA emphasizes values such as social conformity, submission to authority, and enforcement of conventional norms and established traditions. The notion of the GOP as the

"party of law and order" seemed to fit these accounts, suggesting that conservative voters were bound by an urge to preserve social cohesion, respect established authorities, and defend tradition.

Yet, the MAGA movement presents a distinctive challenge to this narrative. A string of recent publications has established that the 2016 and subsequent elections have seen the emergence of a new brand of GOP activism fueled by cultural and identity concerns (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2017; 2018; Tesler 2018; Mason 2018; Jardina 2019b; Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022). In explaining the ascendancy of Trump and his base within the Republican party, these scholars find that cultural identity and "in-group vs. outgroup" attitudes are central. Moreover, Trump's campaign rhetoric—ranging from strong outgroup derogation to anti-elite and anti-democratic populism—does not so much invoke moral rigidity or deference to established authority, as it does a competitive worldview that views politics as a zero-sum struggle between "real Americans" and political and social outgroups perceived to be threatening the country's greatness (Edsall 2025). Far from seeking order and discipline under traditional institutions, many MAGA supporters celebrate Trump's iconoclasm and willingness to subvert established norms—even at the expense of conventional party leadership or longstanding constitutional practices (Edsall 2022a; Blake 2023; Petersen, Osmundsen, and Arceneaux 2023; Edsall 2025).

This apparent paradox—of a deeply conservative faction that not only embraces populist insurgency but also challenges institutional authorities and traditions—points to a theoretical puzzle: Why do we observe such high levels of outgroup hostility, social disruption, skepticism toward conventional institutions, and threats to democratic norms from a movement that self-identifies as "conservative"? Although MAGA Republicans do indeed score high on moral or religious dimensions in some respects (e.g., higher religiosity and strong pro-life commitments;

Blake 2023), they appear far more mobilized by status-based grievances and a desire for group dominance than by a simple desire for social conformity or moral order.

This observation aligns with Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius and Pratto 2001; hereafter, SDO) and the Dual Process Model of Ideology and Prejudice (Duckitt and Sibley 2009; 2010b), which distinguish Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) from Authoritarianism as two separate psychological pathways to right-wing ideology and prejudice. While RWA is rooted in the desire for collective security, order, and stability, SDO is driven by a desire for social dominance, and grounded in a competitive worldview that emphasizes hierarchies and the maintenance of in-group dominance (Sibley and Duckitt 2013). Trump's rhetoric—focusing on "winning," disparaging outgroups, and reversing perceived losses in status among "real Americans"—appears to tap directly into SDO. The MAGA base, in turn, frequently endorses punitive, reactionary policies and attitudes (e.g., support for immigration camps, harsh policing, and the January 6 attack on the capital building) consistent with a dominance-oriented psychology rather than a purely authoritarian emphasis on social cohesion and respect for authority.

Thus, the empirical puzzle is whether MAGA Republicans can be fully understood through standard conservative authoritarianism or if they require a focus on SDO and status threat to capture their distinct brand of politics. If status and dominance concerns—rather than fear of disorder—motivate the core elements of MAGA's worldview, we might expect MAGA Republicans to stand out among other conservatives on measures of prejudice and resentment toward outgroups, negative reactions to demographic change, and support for confrontational, anti-democratic politics. We might further anticipate that traditional measures of authoritarianism will fail to account for some of the more hierarchy-focused or status-preserving attitudes of MAGA Republicans.

In the sections that follow, this chapter develops an SDO-centric explanation of the MAGA movement's psychology and empirically examines whether MAGA supporters are indeed more strongly driven by social dominance concerns than by traditionalism and right-wing authoritarian tendencies. By leveraging both national survey data (ANES) and additional psychological measures from an online survey fielded on Prolific, I probe a wide swath of survey data to assess the degree to which status anxiety and the desire for social dominance—not merely moral or religious traditionalism—animate the MAGA coalition's political behavior and ideological extremity. I argue that MAGA is best understood as a manifestation of social dominance motives—a competitive worldview emphasizing the legitimacy of group-based hierarchies, maintenance of ingroup status, and keeping outgroups in their place—rather than the typical authoritarian worldview of RWA. Through this lens, the MAGA movement becomes a crucial case for understanding how hierarchy-enhancing motives can motivate a durable, vocal, and potentially transformative faction within American conservatism.

## *4.4 Previous Literature*

Much of the existing work on Donald Trump's base suggests a complex interplay of racial resentment (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019), anti-immigrant sentiment (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018), nativism (Parker and Lavine 2024), sexism (Glick 2019; Deckman 2022), Islamophobia (Tesler 2018), and discontent with demographic changes (Mutz 2018). However, analyses often treat these multitudinous factors as separate axes—"racial resentment," "nativism," and "gender attitudes"—without explaining why those forms of prejudice co-occur so strongly among Trump's staunchest supporters. Although some research has linked Trump support to white vulnerability and status threat (Mutz 2018; Jardina 2019; Parker and Lavine 2024), there remains a theoretical gap in systematically examining the role of social dominance orientation (SDO)—as an overarching worldview—in unifying these seemingly disparate hostilities. By conceptualizing these attitudes as manifestations of a single, hierarchy-focused worldview,

scholars can better account for why MAGA Republicans are so distinctly motivated by hostility to "outsiders," whether defined by race, gender, religion, or immigrant status.

Existing theories of conservative politics often foreground right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as the chief psychological disposition shaping policy preferences, moral traditionalism, and deference to hierarchical social structures. However, the MAGA movement's blend of anti-establishment rhetoric, confrontational identity politics, and explicit challenges to conventional democratic norms points to a different psychological dynamic: a deep-seated concern for maintaining ingroup status and desire for social dominance, rather than an overriding focus on order and compliance with traditional authorities. Put simply, if RWA centers on moral cohesion and obedience, MAGA centers on competitive hierarchy, wherein culturally dominant in-groups (e.g., White Americans, men, evangelical Christians) are perceived to be under threat from progressive social change, leading to a backlash politics aligned with SDT and DPM.

Hence, the central claim of this study is that social dominance orientation (SDO)—which reflects a preference for ingroup dominance and an acceptance of intergroup hierarchies—better characterizes the attitudinal and behavioral profile of MAGA Republicans than traditional measures of RWA. Specifically, MAGA supporters demonstrate greater concern for perceived status loss, hostility toward out-groups seen as diluting White, heterosexual, Christian privileges and cultural dominance, and a confrontational political style that challenges rather than reinforces many established norms. Rather than seeking social stability and moral conformity per se, they aim to reverse perceived declines in their group's standing, often embracing conflictual strategies that run counter to classic conservative emphases on rule-following and respect for institutional continuity. Unlike conventional "law-and-order" conservatism, MAGA's guiding thread is an aggressive defense of *dominant groups* who feel their once-taken-for-granted position is slipping (Parker and Barreto 2014; Parker 2021; Parker and Lavine 2024). Thus, I hypothesize that SDO

and perceived status threat better capture the MAGA worldview than purely authoritarian or small-government impulses.

## *4.5 Core Argument and Research Questions*

In order to test the claim that MAGA Republicans are defined by a generalized worldview of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and heightened sensitivity to threats facing historically dominant groups, I draw on two complementary data sources. First, I use the 2022 American National Election Studies (ANES) Pilot Study to compare MAGA Republicans and non-MAGA Republicans on a broad set of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures, paying special attention to how strongly MAGA supporters endorse race- and gender-related hierarchies, as well as anti-institutional or anti-democratic views. Second, I employ a standalone online survey conducted via the Prolific platform, which allows me to examine more granular, domain-specific perceptions of status loss (e.g., changing racial demographics, declines in Christian identification, shifts in women's workforce participation) alongside established measures of right-wing worldviews such as SDO and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). Taken together, these two data sources offer a detailed examination of whether MAGA supporters indeed exhibit a dominant-group-protective psychology and orientation, or whether other aspects of conservative ideology more fully explain their attitudes and behaviors. The hypotheses outlined below flow directly from this theoretical framing and the dual data approach.

### 4.5.1 Hypotheses for the ANES: Comparing MAGA vs. Non-MAGA Republicans

Drawing on my core argument that MAGA adherents are motivated by social dominance concerns and status anxieties rather than by a conventional authoritarian preference for stability and order, I anticipate that MAGA Republicans will exhibit distinctive attitudes and behaviors compared to non-MAGA Republicans in the ANES pilot data. First, because dominance motives prioritize preserving (or regaining) the privileged position of historically dominant groups, I

expect MAGA Republicans to show exhibit heightened prejudice and discriminatory attitudes toward historically *subordinated* groups in the racial, ethnic, religious, and gender domains. For instance, in the racial domain, MAGA Republicans should exhibit higher levels of racial resentment, be more likely to attribute racial inequality to the personal shortcomings of minority groups, and discount structural or policy-based explanations for inequality. They should similarly display more negative attitudes toward immigration, either by rating illegal immigration as a more pressing concern or by expressing harsher emotions (e.g., anger, outrage) toward immigrants. This expectation does not necessarily differ from that of a traditional RWA interpretation; but it is a key first step in establishing whether MAGA reflects an SDO-oriented worldview.

Second, because the MAGA movement appears preoccupied with defending heteronormative roles for men and women, I hypothesize that MAGA Republicans will hold more conservative views on gender, reflected in lower thermometer ratings of feminists, higher levels of anti-abortion sentiment, and greater opposition to transgender policies. In addition, because MAGA politicians and pundits often frame immigration and changes to the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. as an attack on the "American way of life," I predict they will be more likely to perceive Whites as collectively disadvantaged and to see ongoing demographic shifts as fundamentally eroding core national values. Third, given the movement's frequent challenges to democratic norms and institutions (perhaps best epitomized by the January 6$^{th}$ attack on Congress), I predict MAGA Republicans will express less trust in elections, democracy, and mainstream experts, coupled with stronger endorsement of conspiratorial beliefs (e.g., stolen-election narratives). Because these competitive dominance motives also intensify factional identity, I further expect MAGA Republicans to display stronger partisan or ideological extremity—identifying as "strong Republicans" or "extremely conservative" more often—and to

exhibit greater political intolerance (e.g., restricting out-groups' rights to protest) than non-MAGA Republicans.

Finally, to the extent that threat and dominance motives energize political action, I expect MAGA Republicans to show higher political engagement overall—manifested in greater interest, turnout, activism, and heated political disagreements—compared to non-MAGA Republicans. In sum, across the ANES measures, MAGA Republicans should score consistently higher on indices related to (1) racial resentment and racial threat perceptions, (2) anti-immigration attitudes, (3) concerns over the effects of changing racial demographics on the American way of life, (4) traditional gender norms and anti-trans/anti-abortion positions, (5) skepticism of democracy and conspiratorial thinking, and (6) partisan/ideological extremity, political intolerance, and political engagement.

There is, admittedly, some overlap with regard to the implications of the above attitudes for whether MAGA support is driven by SDO or RWA. Although some might argue that Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) alone could drive these attitudes—given RWA's emphasis on social order, traditional social norms, and hostility towards outgroups who are perceived as violating these norms and traditions—I expect Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and status threat concerns to be the more central mechanisms for two key reasons. First, MAGA rhetoric routinely emphasizes "winners" vs. "losers" and zero-sum, dominance-oriented conflict, rather than straightforward calls for obedience to conventional authorities (a hallmark of RWA). Second, much of the hostility exhibited by MAGA Republicans involves threats to perceived group status (e.g., due to demographic changes), which is more consistent with a social-dominance framework than a mere quest for moral order. As a result, measures of perceived group competition and negative reactions to changing racial and ethnic demographics will be especially helpful in distinguishing SDO from RWA related motives. Generally, MAGA

Republicans should display especially negative attitudes when group hierarchy is challenged—patterns best captured by SDO rather than RWA.

If the MAGA worldview is best characterized by Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)—rather than by classic Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)—we should observe distinctly higher levels of hostility and distrust toward established authorities and mainstream institutions. RWA generally predicts respect for conventional authorities and an emphasis on moral order; SDO predicts a willingness to challenge any institution or norm that undermines the dominant group's status.

### 4.5.2 Hypotheses for the Prolific Survey: Status Threat and Conservative Worldview Measures

Turning to the Prolific survey analysis, I hypothesize that domain-specific perceptions of status loss—pertaining to demographic shifts, Christianity's decline, the changing role of women, the rise of the foreign-born population, and the drop in manufacturing employment—will strongly and positively predict MAGA identification. This expectation builds on Parker and Lavine's (2024) emphasis on status threat, but extends it by examining how multiple real-world changes jointly shape attitudes about "people like me" losing social position. Participants who perceive these changes as especially threatening should be more apt to embrace the MAGA label.

Beyond these domain-specific threat items, I also hypothesize that Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) will be a robust predictor of MAGA support, reflecting the movement's focus on defending traditional hierarchies and ingroup supremacy. Although Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) may also correlate with MAGA, I anticipate that in combined models, SDO and status threat will remain more potent, indicating that competitive dominance motives overshadow a mere preference for moral order or conventional authority. Measures of limited-government preferences and moral traditionalism may show some alignment with MAGA, but I predict they will be secondary once I control for SDO and the domain-specific threat variables.

Taken together, then, the Prolific survey tests whether "hierarchical slippage" (as indicated by negative perceptions of multiple demographic or cultural shifts) and an overarching dominance worldview (SDO) more directly undergird MAGA support than do standard Republican tenets such as small-government ideology, traditionalism, or RWA. A positive association between domain-specific threat and MAGA, alongside a robust role for SDO in multivariate models, would strongly confirm that status anxiety and social dominance represent the motivational core of the movement, rather than conventional "law-and-order" authoritarian impulses.

## *4.6 ANES Data and Results*

### 4.6.1 ANES Methods

#### 4.6.1.1 Data Source and Sample

To examine how MAGA Republicans differ from other Republicans in their demographic profiles, policy attitudes, and political behaviors, I draw on the 2022 American National Election Studies (ANES) Pilot Study. The Pilot Study, conducted online in November 2022, is a nationally representative sample designed to pilot new questions for upcoming waves of the ANES panel survey. The data is drawn from an online, opt-in survey panel managed by YouGov, and utilizes quotas, sample matching, and post-stratification weights to match the characteristics of the US adult population. From this dataset, I identify respondents who either initially identified as Republican in the standard ANES party identification battery or indicated that they were independent but "closer" to the Republican Party (i.e., Republican "leaners"). Among these Republican or Republican-leaning respondents, a forced-choice item asked whether they would describe themselves as "more of a supporter of the MAGA movement" or "more of a supporter of the Republican Party generally." Any respondent selecting the MAGA option is coded as a "MAGA Republican," with the rest in the "non-MAGA Republican" category. This approach yields a comparison group that differs only in self-reported MAGA identity.

#### 4.6.1.2 Measures of Key Constructs

I draw on a diverse array of questions from the 2022 ANES Pilot to illuminate potential differences consistent with a social dominance worldview and elevated status threat among MAGA Republicans. First, the survey includes a battery on race and racial attitudes, which includes a four-item racial resentment index, a question asking whether racism is still a serious problem in the United States, three questions asking whether cultural, biological, or policy related causes contribute to racial inequality (combined into an index and rescaled so that higher scores indicate a stronger dispositional rather than structural attribution for inequality), and feeling thermometer ratings of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. The Pilot also includes items assessing support for racial stereotypes pertaining to Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, with separate items asking respondents to rate each group on their perceived laziness and intelligence; these ratings are combined into stereotype indices (rescaled 0–1) capturing the extent of negative beliefs about those outgroups.

Additionally, the ANES Pilot gauges whether respondents believe White Americans benefit from advantages or are instead disadvantaged in contemporary American society through a branching question that first asks if being White "doesn't matter," "provides advantages," or "provides disadvantages," followed by an intensity question ("a lot" vs. "a little"). These responses are coded to a 0–1 scale such that higher values indicate greater perceived White disadvantage (or lower perceived White advantage). Alongside this, respondents were asked how they felt about changing racial demographics of US society, based on Census estimates, which project that White Americans will become a minority group by 2045, with a five-point scale asking whether these demographic trends are perceived positively or negatively. To capture *immigration attitudes*, the Pilot asks about emotional reactions to immigrants (e.g., anger, outrage) and the perceived importance of limiting illegal immigration. These items are combined into an Anti-Immigration Index ranging from 0 (least anti-immigrant) to 1 (most anti-immigrant).

Gender attitudes are captured by a feeling thermometer measure of feminists, an anti-abortion index combining two questions about abortion policy and the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, and an anti-transgender index, which combines (a) support or opposition to transgender people's bathroom access and (b) feeling thermometer ratings of transgender people. Higher scores indicate more conservative or anti-trans positions.

The Pilot further includes a battery of questions gauging trust in experts, satisfaction with democracy, perceptions of election integrity, and conspiratorial beliefs. The Trust in Experts Index is constructed from four items asking how much respondents trust expert opinion from medical doctors, public health experts, climate scientists, and economists. Each component is scaled from 0 (no trust) to 1 (high trust) and then averaged ($\alpha \approx 0.88$). Attitudes toward other traditional authority figures are captured by feeling thermometer ratings of the FBI, teachers, and the Supreme Court. These ratings, which ask respondents to rate the extent to which the feel cold/negative or warm/positive toward the group or institution in question, are measured on a zero to one hundred continuous scale and have been rescaled for the current analysis to range from 0 (extremely negative evaluation) to 1 (extremely positive evaluation.

The Satisfaction with Democracy measure combines two items—(1) general perceptions of how healthy the U.S. democratic system is and (2) overall satisfaction with the way democracy works—each rescaled from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 1 (highly satisfied), then averaged ($\alpha \approx 0.84$). A related Election Integrity Index merges questions about how accurately votes are counted and how confident respondents are in the integrity of the electoral process, rescaled from 0 (lowest trust) to 1 (highest trust) and averaged ($\alpha \approx 0.90$). A January 6 index aggregates attitudes toward the Capitol riot, including whether it was justified, the severity of punishments, and thermometer ratings of rioters.

Finally, the Pilot features standard questions on partisan and ideological identification, including strength of Republican Party identification (leaner, weak, or strong) and self-reported

ideological identification (from extremely liberal to extremely conservative). In addition, a battery measures political engagement, including interest in politics, validated turnout, and a variety of campaign participation activities, as well as items tapping political tolerance. The Political Tolerance Index is derived from two survey items: whether respondents support firing members of their least-liked group from their jobs and whether they favor restricting that group's right to hold public rallies. These items are each coded so that 0 represents the least tolerant stance, 1 represents the most tolerant stance, and then averaged. A related set of questions captures political aggression (e.g., heated political disagreements) and willingness to impose sanctions on perceived out-groups, such as punishing medical professionals who perform abortions. This combination of variables provides a multifaceted view of how MAGA Republicans and non-MAGA Republicans vary on matters of race, gender, democracy, and broader cultural conflict.

#### 4.6.1.3 Analytic Approach

All analyses are weighted according to the ANES recommendation. I first classify respondents into MAGA Republicans and non-MAGA Republicans. For each measure—demographics, racial attitudes, immigration views, gender ideology, conspiracy beliefs, and so on—I generate group means or proportions (rescaled where necessary from 0 to 1) and compare the two groups using t-tests or chi-square tests, depending on the variable's nature. Figures display the mean differences with 95 percent confidence intervals. Where possible, the text highlights the statistical significance (p-values) noted within each figure's description.

Since I conduct a relatively large number of item-by-item significance tests in the ANES analysis, I also employ a multiple test correction to guard against inflating the Type I error rate (i.e., false positives), which I report after discussing the main results. Specifically, after obtaining the raw p-values for each measure, I apply the Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) procedure to control the false discovery rate. This approach provides a more reasonable threshold for significance

when many correlated outcomes are tested simultaneously, ensuring that reported differences reflect robust patterns rather than chance fluctuations.

## 4.6.2 ANES Results

### 4.6.2.1 Demographic Profiles

Figure 3 demonstrates that MAGA Republicans diverge in certain basic demographic characteristics related to race, gender, and religious identification: they are substantially more likely to be male (64.5% versus 44.4%, $p < .001$), married (66.8% versus 54.8%, $p < .01$), and born-again Christians (54.3% versus 37.6%, $p < .001$) than non-MAGA Republicans. Although the difference in White identification is not statistically significant (81.4% versus 75.4%, $p = .23$), a notably large majority of MAGA supporters are White. These patterns are consistent with the notion that MAGA supporters are drawn predominantly from members of historically dominant groups in American society.

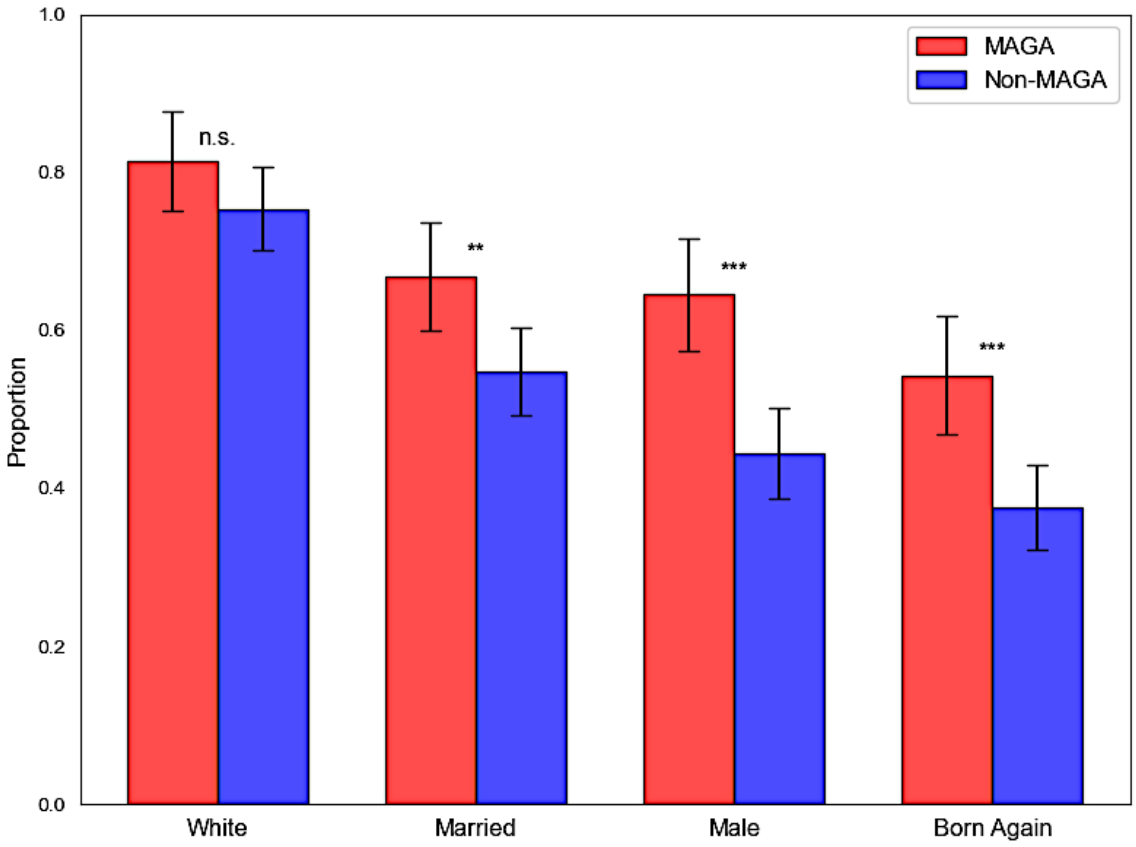


**Figure 3: Key Demographic Characteristics of MAGA Republicans**

**Note:** This figure presents the demographic composition of MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, displaying the proportion of respondents who identify as White, married, male, and born-again Christian. MAGA Republicans are significantly more likely to be male ($p < .001$), born-again Christian ($p < .001$), and married ($p < .01$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Differences in racial composition between the two groups are not statistically significant, but it is notable that a large majority of MAGA Republicans are White (non-Hispanic). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

#### 4.6.2.2 Racial Attitudes, Perceptions of White Disadvantage, and Immigration Views

Figure 4 shows that MAGA Republicans register higher racial resentment (0.80 versus 0.67, $p < .001$), more strongly attribute Black disadvantage to personal failings, and rate racism as less serious. These attitudes align with Social Dominance Theory's claim that maintaining hierarchical group relationships involves dismissing claims of structural discrimination through blaming inequality on the personal failings and demeanor of subordinated groups.

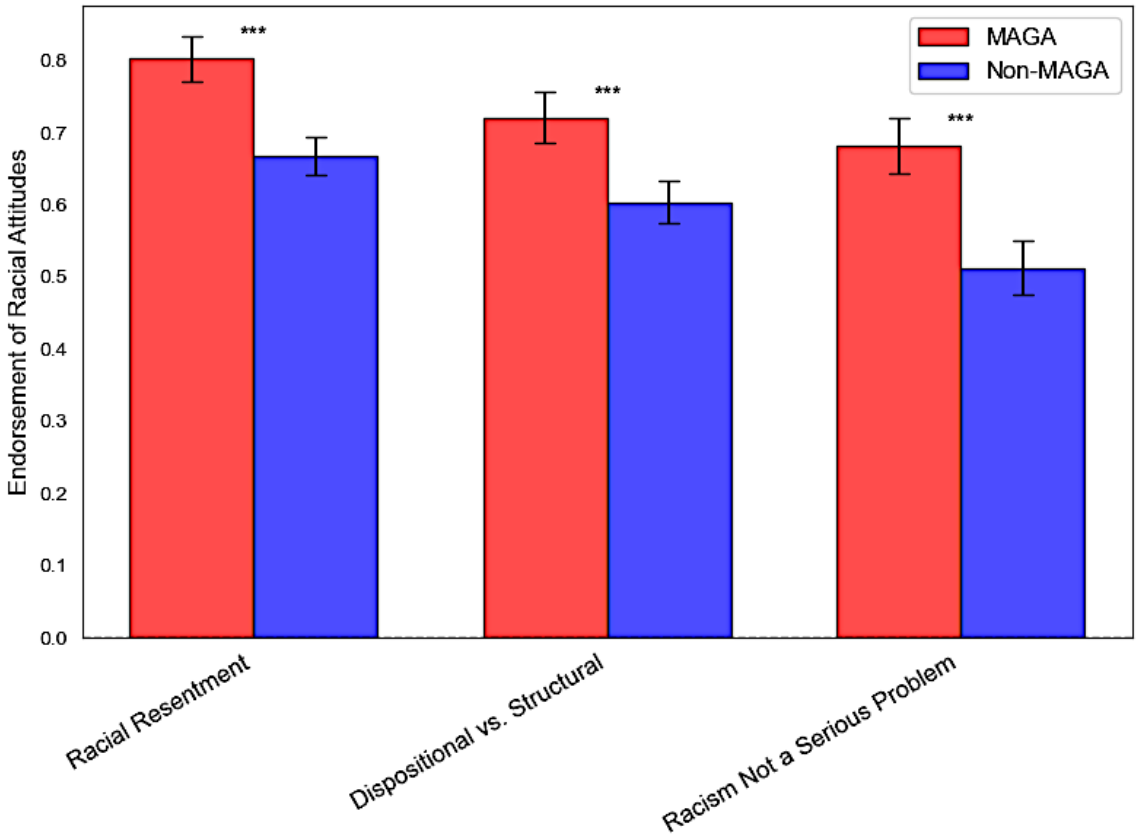


**Figure 4: Racial Resentment and Rationalizations of Racial Inequality**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in racial attitudes between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, including racial resentment, beliefs about dispositional vs. structural explanations for racial and ethnic inequality, and perceptions of racism as a serious problem. Higher values indicate stronger endorsement of racial resentment, greater attribution of racial inequality to dispositional rather than structural factors, and a lower perception that racism is a serious problem. MAGA Republicans exhibit significantly higher levels of racial resentment, are more likely to attribute racial inequality to dispositional rather than structural causes and are more likely to believe that racism is not a serious problem ($p < .001$ for all). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5 elaborates on this theme by comparing how MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans perceive White advantage or disadvantage (means of 0.50 vs. 0.46, $p < .05$) and whether America's changing racial makeup is threatening (MAGA Republicans score 0.64 versus 0.59, $p < .05$ on negativity toward demographic change). MAGA Republicans also endorse stricter anti-immigration positions, reflected in an Anti-Immigration Index mean of 0.60 versus 0.51 ($p < .001$).

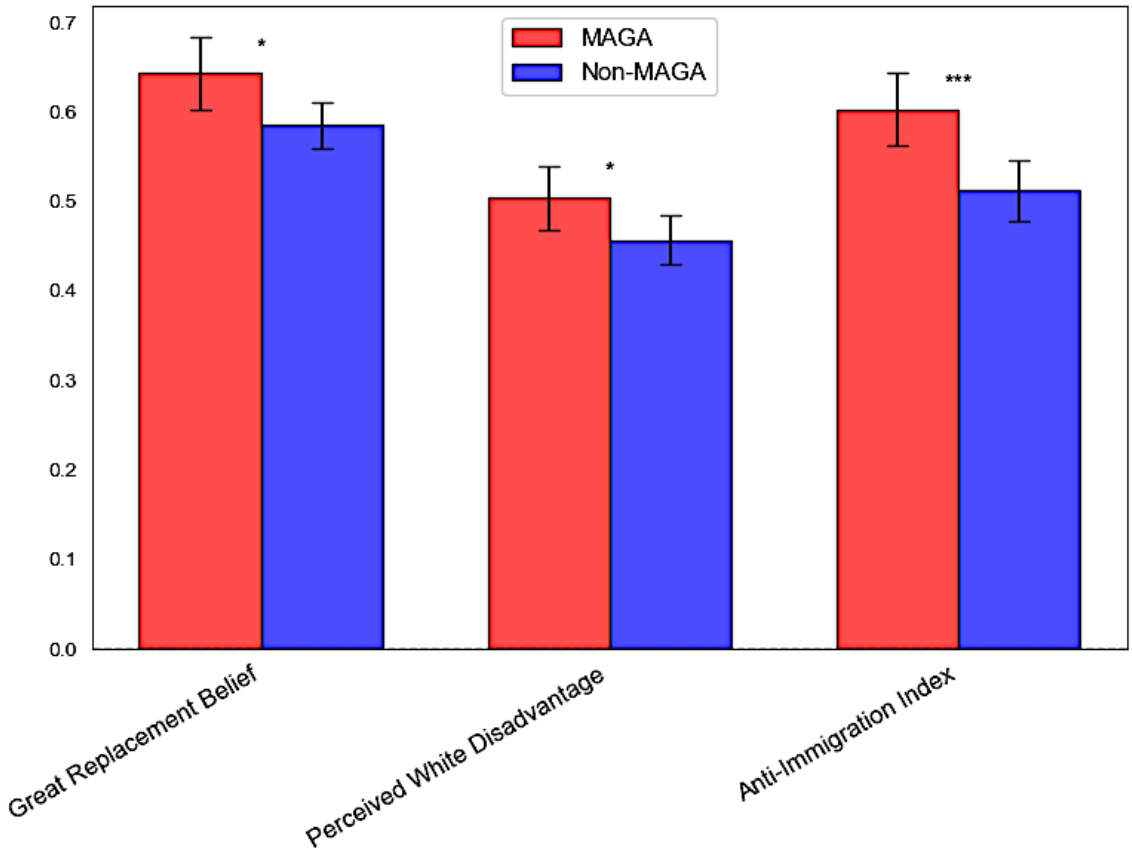


**Figure 5: Racial Threat Perceptions and Opposition to Immigration**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in perceptions of immigration and demographic threat between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans. The Great Replacement Belief variable measures respondents' reactions to demographic projections showing that Whites will become a minority in the U.S., with values scaled from 0 to 1 (where 1 = Very Negative and 0 = Very Positive). The Perceived White Advantage variable is derived from a branching question measuring whether respondents believe being White in America comes with advantages or disadvantages, ranging from 0 (many advantages) to 1 (many disadvantages). The Anti-Immigration Index is an additive measure constructed by averaging three components: (1) the importance of illegal immigration as a national issue, and two items from the immigrant emotions battery, which measured respondents' feelings of anger and outrage toward immigrants. Each component was scaled from 0 (most pro-immigration) to 1 (most anti-immigration) before being averaged into the final index ($\alpha = 0.80$). MAGA Republicans exhibit significantly greater concern about demographic changes ($p < .05$), are more likely to believe that being White provides fewer advantages ($p < .05$) and express significantly stronger anti-immigration attitudes ($p < .001$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Contrary to my predictions, however, no statistically significant differences in levels of stereotypes toward Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans emerge between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans (Figure 6).

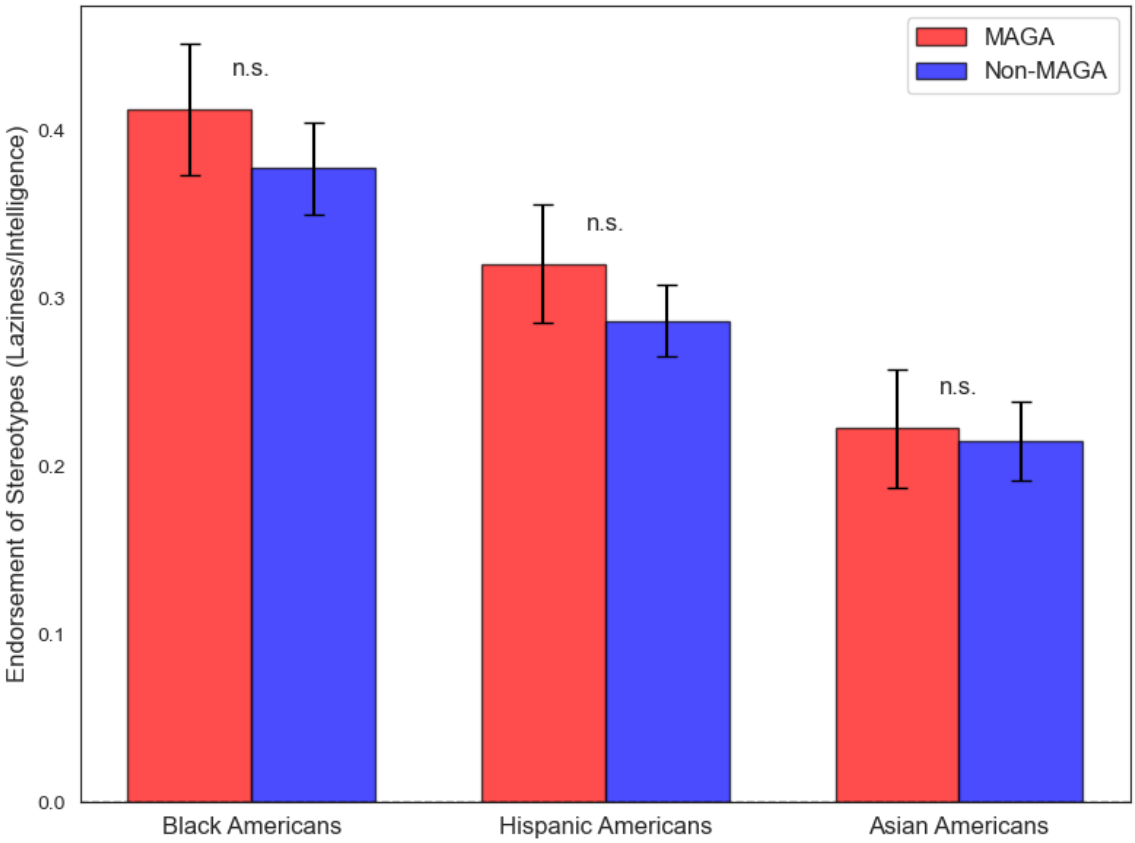


**Figure 6: Racial Stereotype Indices**

*Note:* This figure presents the endorsement of racial stereotypes related to laziness and intelligence among MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans for Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. Higher values indicate stronger endorsement of these stereotypes. No statistically significant differences were found between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans in their ratings of any racial or ethnic group. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

In Figure 7, measures feeling thermometer differences show that while MAGA Republicans display no statistically significant gap in White–Black or White–Hispanic preferences compared to non-MAGA Republicans, they do exhibit a clearer preference for men over women (0.00 vs. –0.07 on the men–women thermometer difference, $p < .01$). This underscores the sense that MAGA Republicans prioritize defending traditional hierarchies not just around race but also around gender.

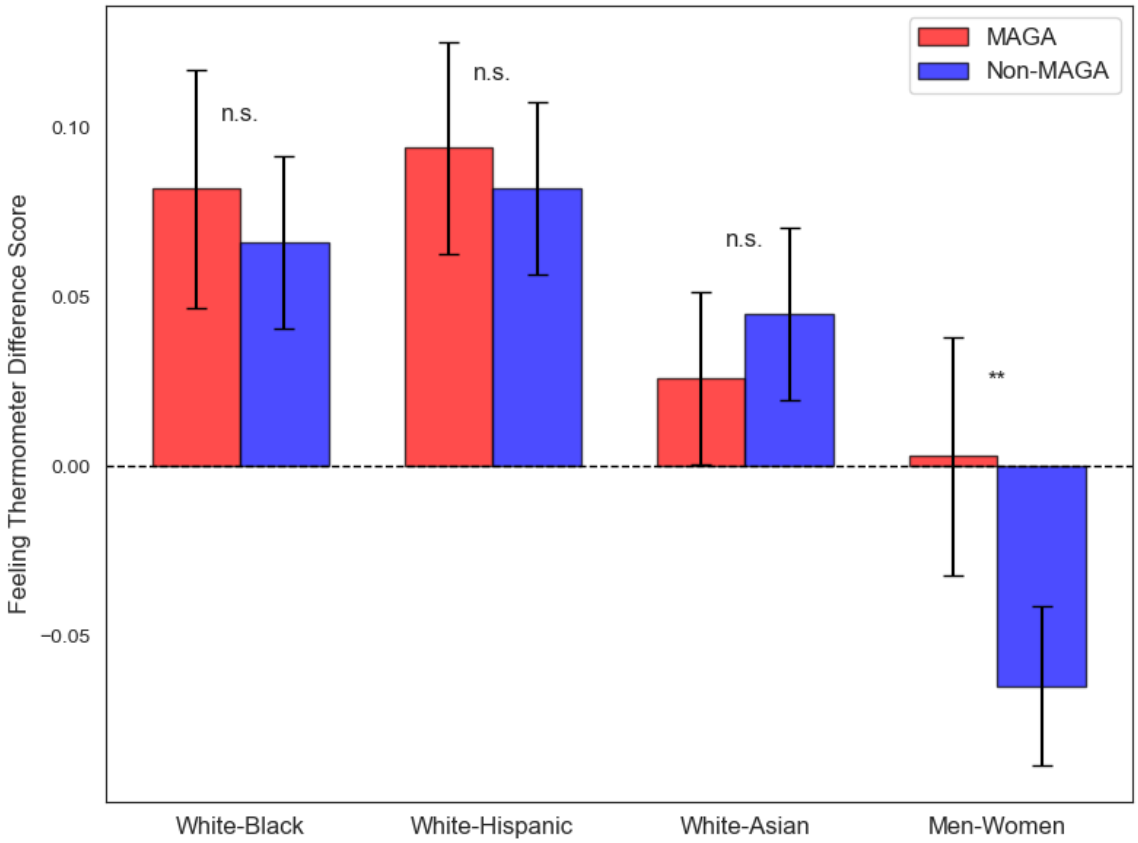


**Figure 7: Feeling Thermometer Differences**

*Note:* This figure presents the differences in feeling thermometer ratings between Whites and other racial/ethnic groups (Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans) and between men and women among MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans. Higher values indicate a greater preference for Whites over racial minorities and for men over women. Feeling thermometer difference scores are scaled from -1 to 1, where positive values indicate a preference for the first group (e.g., Whites or men) and negative values indicate a preference for the second group (e.g., Black Americans or women). MAGA Republicans exhibit significantly greater preference for men over women ($p < .01$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Differences in preferences for Whites over other racial and ethnic minorities are not statistically significant. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

#### 4.6.2.3 Gender Attitudes

Figure 8 highlights that MAGA Republicans are less favorable toward feminists on feeling thermometer ratings, (0.29 vs. 0.38, $p < .001$), exhibit more anti-abortion views (0.68 vs. 0.50, $p < .001$), and are more strongly anti-trans (0.80 vs. 0.72, $p < .001$) than other Republicans. From a dominance-perspective, these stances reinforce the notion that MAGA Republicans

harbor more antagonism toward groups perceived as challenging long-standing male or cisgender privileges.

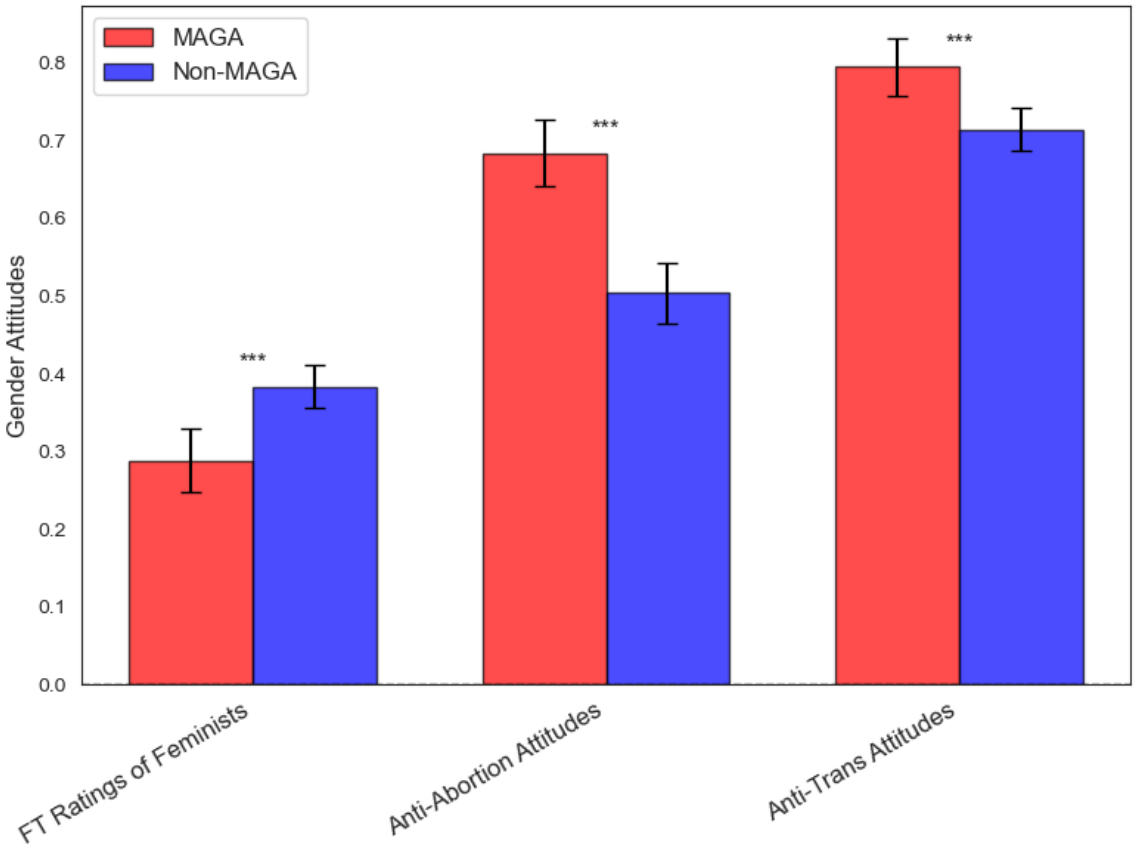


**Figure 8: Gender Attitudes**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in gender-related attitudes between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, including feeling thermometer ratings of feminists, anti-abortion attitudes, and anti-transgender attitudes. Feeling thermometer ratings of feminists are scaled from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate more favorable evaluations. The Anti-Abortion Index combines responses from two measures: (1) a standard ANES 4-point question on abortion policy, ranging from a total ban to unrestricted access, and (2) a question on the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. Each component was rescaled from 0 (most pro-abortion) to 1 (most anti-abortion) and then averaged ($\alpha = 0.78$). The Anti-Trans Index combines (1) attitudes toward transgender individuals using public bathrooms that align with their gender identity (asked in two different versions), and (2) a feeling thermometer rating of transgender people. Each measure was rescaled from 0 (most supportive of transgender rights) to 1 (most opposed to transgender rights) and then averaged ($\alpha = 0.76$). MAGA Republicans exhibit significantly lower feeling thermometer ratings of feminists ($p < .001$) and significantly higher levels of anti-abortion ($p < .001$), and anti-transgender attitudes ($p < .001$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

#### 4.6.2.4 Democracy, Conspiratorial Thinking, and Institutional Trust

Turning to democracy-related attitudes, Figure 9 shows that MAGA Republicans report lower satisfaction with democracy (0.29 vs. 0.37, $p < .01$), more pronounced doubts about

election integrity (0.25 vs. 0.45, $p < .001$), and notably higher positivity toward the January 6 riot (0.71 vs. 0.48, $p < .001$). This inclination to challenge electoral results or justify the Capitol assault fits with the idea that a competitive, dominance-oriented mindset can override standard conservative respect for institutional continuity.

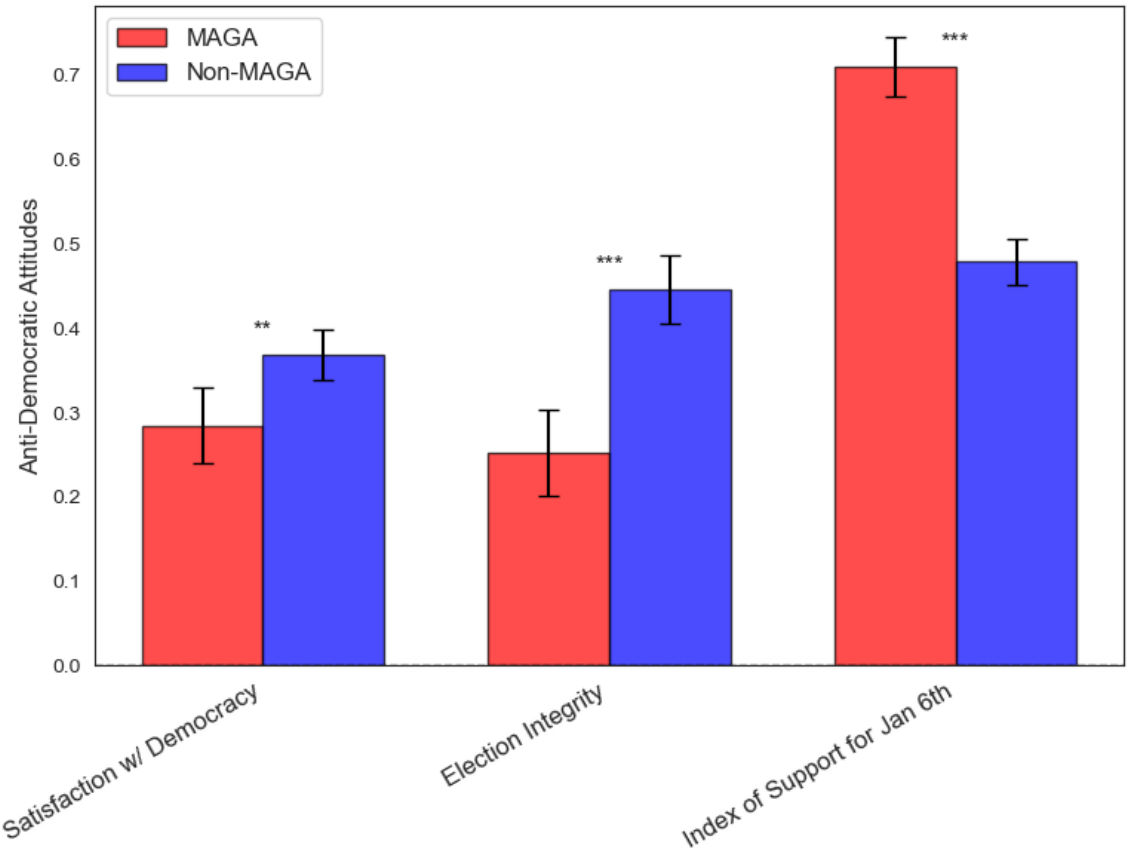


**Figure 9: Anti-Democratic Attitudes**

**Note:** This figure presents differences in anti-democratic sentiment between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, including satisfaction with democracy, beliefs about election integrity, and attitudes toward the January 6th insurrection. The Satisfaction with Democracy Index is constructed from two questions: (1) respondents' general perceptions of the health of the U.S. democratic system and (2) their satisfaction with how democracy is functioning in the country. Responses were rescaled from 0 (least satisfied) to 1 (most satisfied), and the two components were averaged ($\alpha = 0.84$). The Election Integrity Index is an additive measure that combines (1) respondents' confidence in how accurately votes are counted and (2) their confidence in the integrity of the U.S. election system. Both measures were rescaled from 0 (lowest trust) to 1 (highest trust) before averaging into the final index ($\alpha = 0.90$). The January 6th Index assesses respondents' attitudes toward the Capitol riot and its participants. It combines three components: (1) whether respondents viewed the attack as a justif ied protest or a criminal act, (2) evaluations of whether legal punishments for rioters were too harsh or too lenient, and (3) feeling thermometer ratings toward individuals involved in the riot. Each component was rescaled from 0 (most negative perception of the riot) to 1 (most positive perception of the riot) and then averaged ($\alpha = 0.85$). MAGA Republicans report significantly lower satisfaction with democracy ($p < .01$) and lower trust in election integrity ($p < .001$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Conversely, MAGA Republicans score significantly higher on the

January 6th Index ($p < .001$), reflecting more positive attitudes toward the insurrection and its participants. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Consistent with the broader pattern of distrust toward mainstream institutions observed in the preceding sections, in Figure 10, we see that MAGA Republicans register significantly lower feeling thermometer ratings of both the FBI and teachers compared to non-MAGA Republicans, underscoring the heightened antagonism toward authorities perceived as liberal or aligned with the political establishment. Notably, however, MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans do not differ meaningfully in their favorability toward the Supreme Court. This exception likely reflects the Court's strongly conservative majority and its history of handing down rulings viewed as advantageous or sympathetic to Donald Trump's administration, which may position it as less of a threat—and thus less of a target of distrust—among MAGA supporters. Taken together, these results reinforce the hypothesis that MAGA Republicans show greater hostility toward "traditional authority" figures and institutions primarily when they sense those institutions are challenging the in-group's status or interests, rather than simply rejecting all conventional authority across the board.

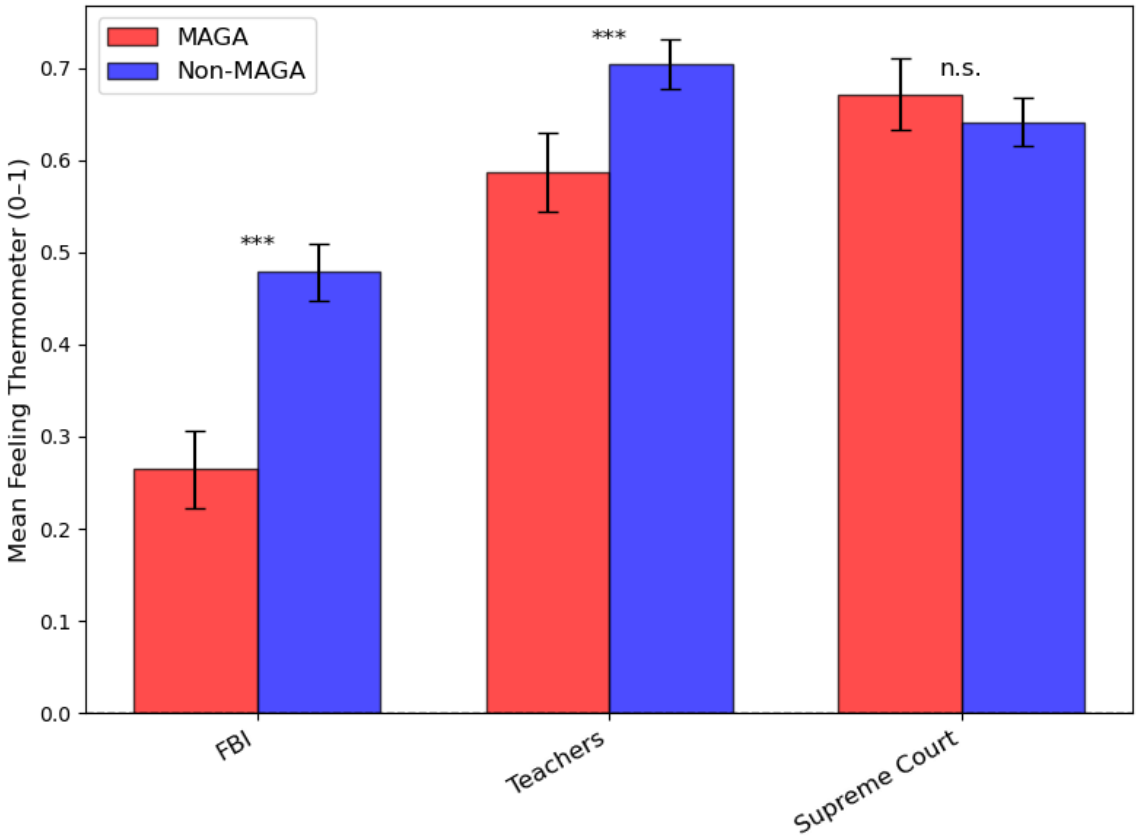


**Figure 10: Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Traditional Institutional Authorities**

*Note*: This figure displays differences in feeling thermometer ratings between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans for the FBI, teachers, and the Supreme Court. Each scale is rescaled from 0 (most negative) to 1 (most positive). Bars represent weighted means with 95% confidence intervals. Significance markers indicate the results of design-based t-tests for each measure.

Figure 11 further displays how MAGA supporters exhibit stronger conspiratorial beliefs about 2020 election theft (0.92 vs. 0.61 proportion believing it was stolen, $p < .001$), lower trust in experts (0.31 vs. 0.44, $p < .001$), and greater skepticism about climate change (0.86 vs. 0.62, $p < .001$). Again, these patterns match a tendency to reject mainstream knowledge sources that may be perceived as aligned with out-groups or a liberal establishment.

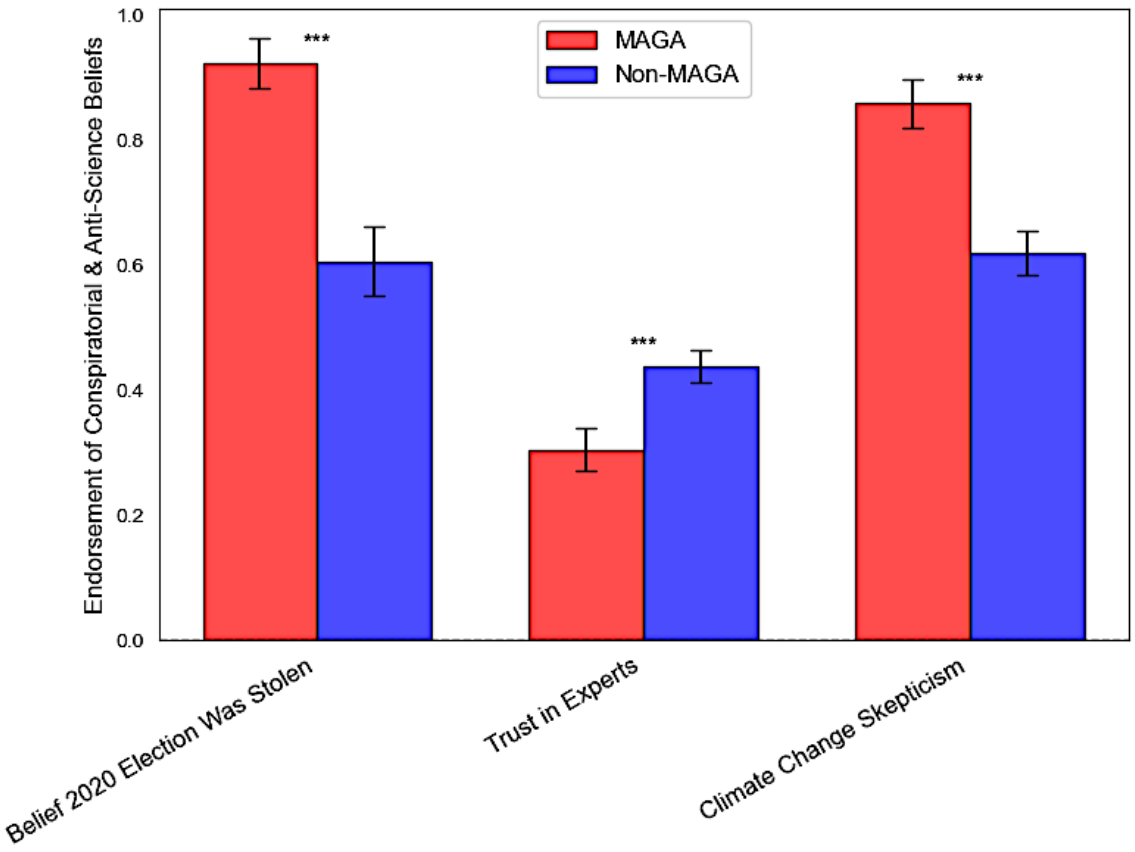


**Figure 11: Conspiratorial Beliefs, Anti-Intellectualism, and Science Skepticism**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in conspiratorial thinking, anti-intellectualism, and science skepticism between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans. The Belief That the 2020 Election Was Stolen variable is a binary measure indicating whether respondents believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump. Responses were rescaled so that 1 = Believe the election was stolen, and 0 = Do not believe the election was stolen. The Trust in Experts Index is an additive measure constructed from four questions assessing respondents' trust in expert opinions across medical doctors, public health experts, climate scientists, and economists. Responses ranged from completely trust to not at all trust and were rescaled from 0 (lowest trust) to 1 (highest trust) before being averaged ($\alpha = 0.88$). The Climate Change Skepticism Index is based on a single-item measure assessing respondents' beliefs about climate change's impact on severe weather events. Responses were rescaled from 0 (believe climate change has a great deal of impact) to 1 (believe climate change has no impact at all). MAGA Republicans are significantly more likely to believe the 2020 election was stolen ($p < .001$), express lower trust in experts ($p < .001$), and exhibit higher levels of climate change skepticism ($p < .001$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

#### 4.6.2.5 Partisan and Ideological Extremity, Political Intolerance, and Engagement

Figure 12 confirms that MAGA Republicans hold more extreme partisan and ideological self-placements, being much more likely to call themselves "Strong Republicans" (53.5% vs. 41.3%, $p < .01$) or "Extremely Conservative" (37.1% vs. 9.1%, $p < .001$). This intensifies the

notion that they are a faction forging its own coherent identity, rather than moderate Republicans seeking common ground.

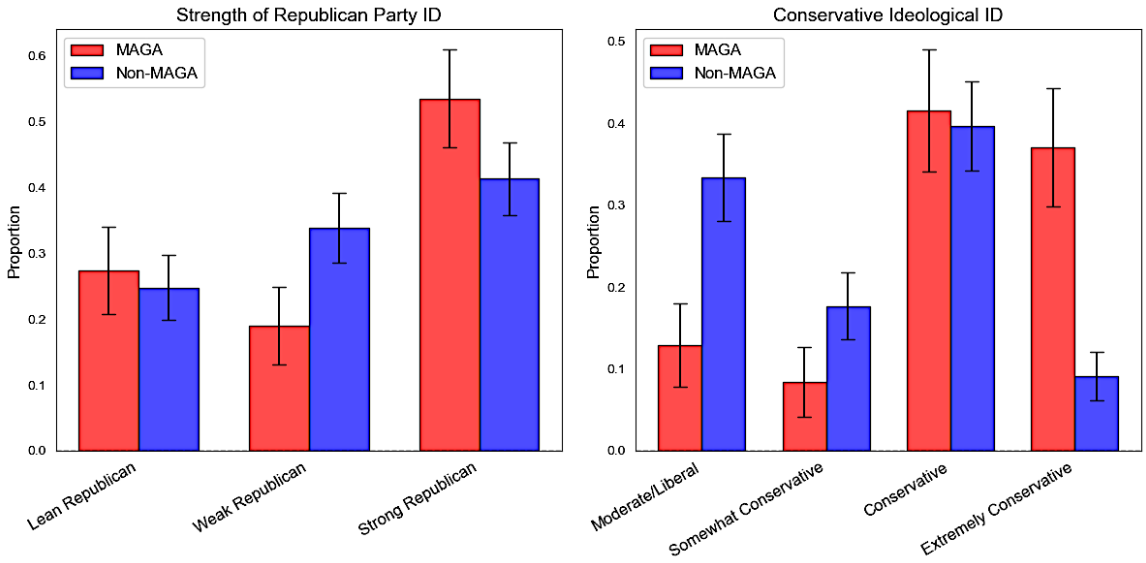


**Figure 12: Partisan and Ideological Extremity**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in political extremity between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, measured by strength of Republican Party identification and conservative ideological identification. The Strength of Republican Party Identification variable categorizes respondents as Lean Republican, Weak Republican, or Strong Republican, with proportions representing the share of each group identifying at each level. The Conservative Ideological Identification variable classifies respondents as Moderate/Liberal, Somewhat Conservative, Conservative, or Extremely Conservative, based on their self-reported ideological placement. MAGA Republicans are significantly more likely to identify as Strong Republicans ($p < .001$) compared to non-MAGA Republicans. Similarly, MAGA Republicans are significantly more likely to describe themselves as Extremely Conservative ($p < .001$), while differences in other ideological categories are mixed. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

As displayed in Figure 13, MAGA Republicans report significantly higher affective polarization scores (mean 0.59 vs. 0.44, $p < .001$), signifying stronger partisan hostilities and warmer evaluations of the GOP relative to Democrats. They also express greater favorability toward Donald Trump, with mean feeling thermometer ratings of 0.85 versus 0.62 ($p < .001$). These results underscore that MAGA Republicans are not just more conservative but more vehemently aligned against political out-groups, and they exhibit a markedly heightened personal loyalty to Trump. Together, these dynamics amplify the narrative that MAGA supporters hold a distinct, strongly partisan identity founded on aggressively defending the in-group against

perceived challengers—whether they be Democratic elites, mainstream Republicans, or other social out-groups.

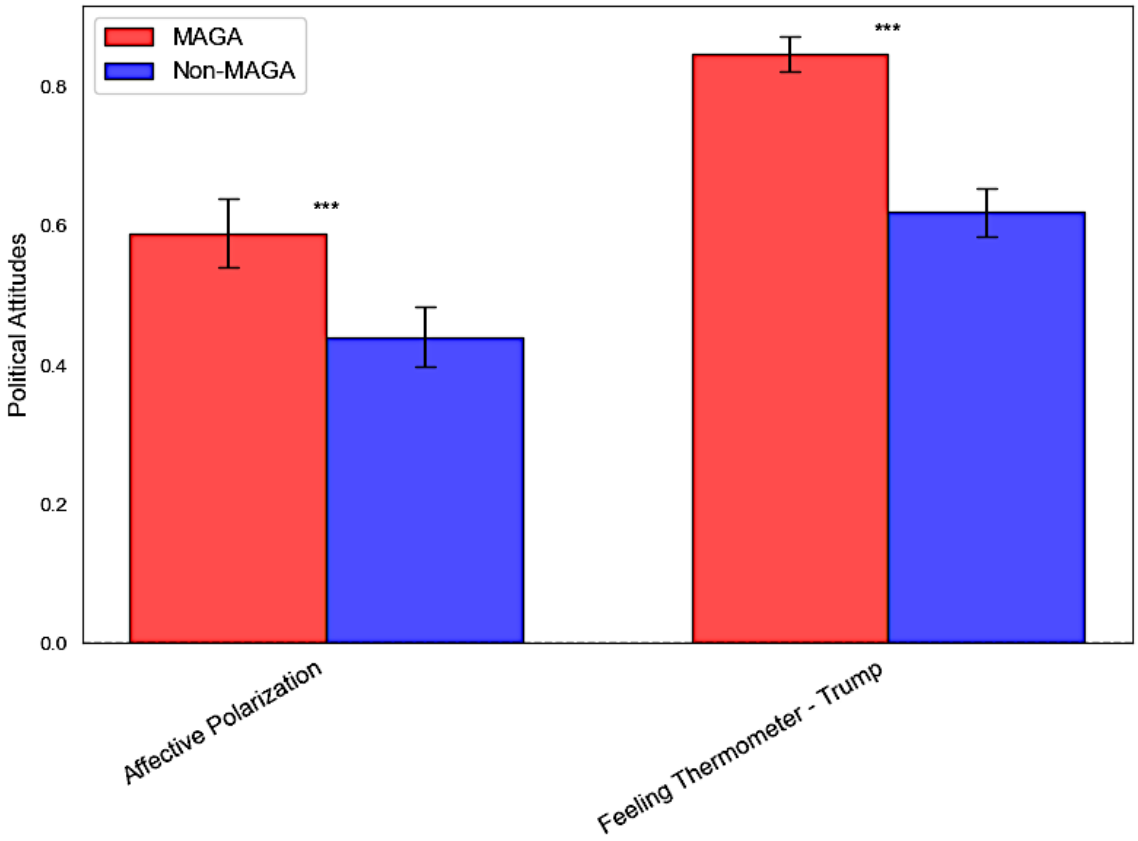


**Figure 13: Negative Partisanship and Enthusiasm for Trump**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in affective polarization and Trump favorability between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans. The Affective Polarization measure assesses partisan hostility, capturing the extent to which respondents rate their own party favorably and the opposing party unfavorably. This measure is scaled from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate stronger partisan animosity. The Feeling Thermometer Rating of Trump measures respondents' favorability toward Donald Trump, based on a standard 0 to 100 feeling thermometer scale, which was rescaled from 0 to 1 for comparability. Higher values indicate more favorable evaluations of Trump. MAGA Republicans exhibit significantly higher levels of affective polarization ($p < .001$) and rate Trump significantly more favorably than non-MAGA Republicans ($p < .001$). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Echoing these trends, Figure 14 reveals that MAGA supporters report a higher rate of heated political disagreements (0.31 vs. 0.22, $p < .001$) and lower political tolerance (0.39 vs. 0.45, $p < .05$). They are also significantly more likely to say they support punishing abortion providers (0.73 vs. 0.53, $p < .001$). These findings resonate with a social dominance worldview

wherein maintaining in-group power often entails restricting the rights or autonomy of perceived adversaries.

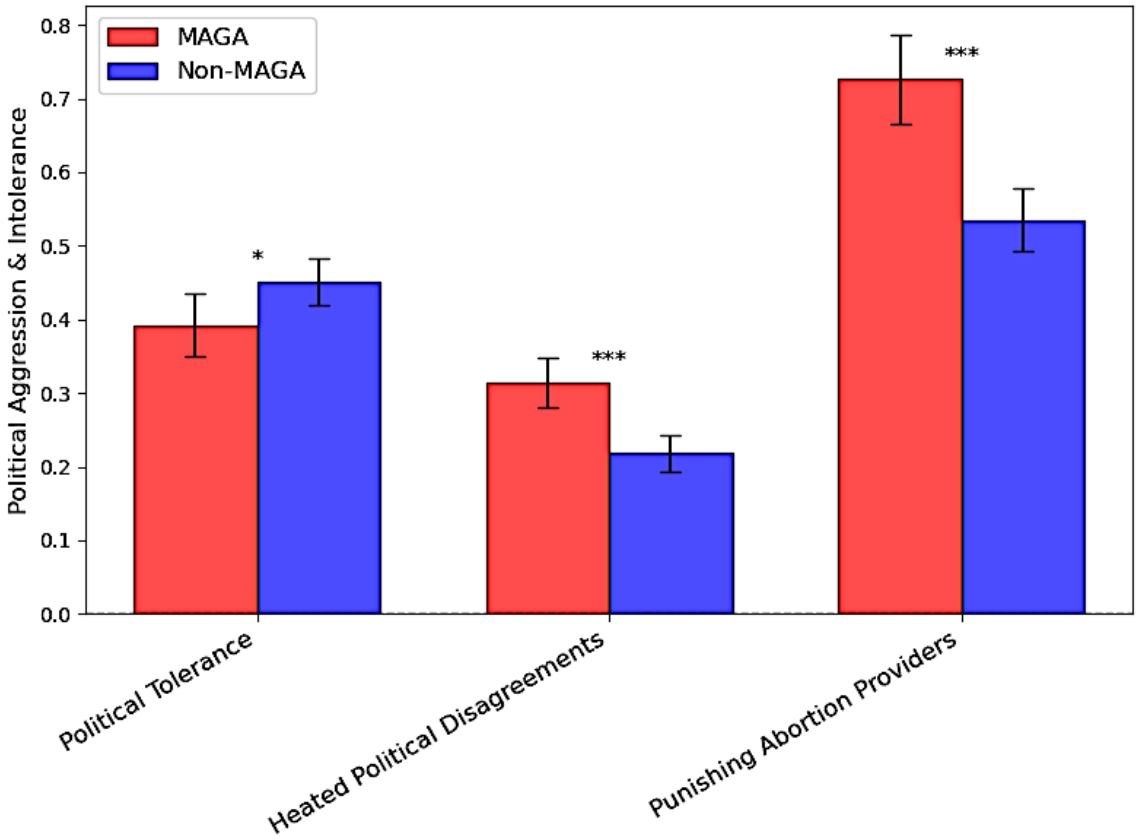


**Figure 14: Political Intolerance**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in political aggression and intolerance between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans, including measures of political tolerance, self-reported engagement in heated political disagreements, and support for punishing abortion providers. The Political Tolerance Index is constructed from two survey items measuring whether respondents support restricting the right of their least-liked group to protest and whether they favor firing members of that group from their jobs. Responses were rescaled from 0 (most intolerant) to 1 (most tolerant) before being averaged. The Heated Political Disagreements variable measures the frequency of engaging in politically charged conflicts, both in-person and on social media. Responses were rescaled from 0 (never) to 1 (always engaging in heated disputes). The Punishing Abortion Providers measure assesses support for legal penalties for medical professionals who perform abortions, with responses rescaled from 0 (strongest opposition to punishment) to 1 (strongest support for punishment). MAGA Republicans report significantly greater engagement in heated political disagreements ($p < .001$) and are significantly more likely to support punishing medical professionals who perform abortions ($p < .001$). Additionally, MAGA Republicans exhibit higher levels of political intolerance ($p < .05$), favoring greater restrictions on the political rights of their least-liked political groups. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance levels: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Finally, Figure 15 illustrates how MAGA Republicans also show higher interest in politics (0.85 vs. 0.69, $p < .001$), greater turnout in past elections (e.g., 0.88 vs. 0.68 in 2020 voting, $p < .001$), and higher engagement in campaign activities (0.29 vs. 0.13, $p < .001$). This evidence implies that heightened status threat correlates with more intense involvement in partisan conflict—consistent with the hypothesis that a sense of cultural slippage motivates people to become more vocal and active.

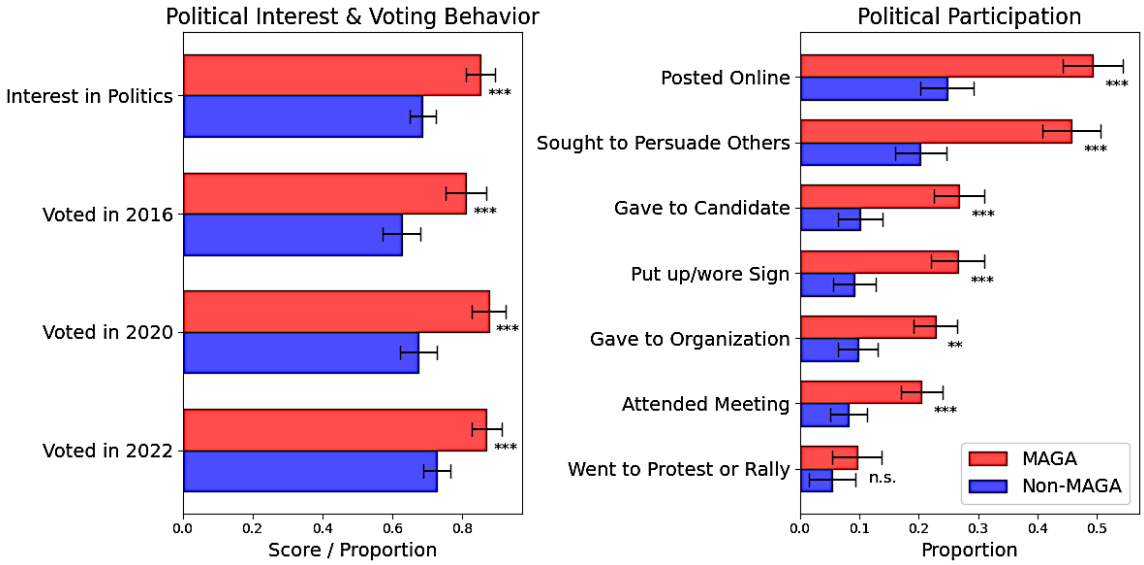


**Figure 15: Interest in Politics and Political Activism**

*Note:* This figure presents differences in political interest, voting behavior, and other forms of political engagement between MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans. The Political Interest Index measures respondents' self-reported level of interest in politics, ranging from 0 (least interested) to 1 (most interested). Voting behavior is reported as a proportion, indicating whether respondents voted in the 2016, 2020, and 2022 elections (1 = voted, 0 = did not vote). The Political Participation Index includes a range of political activities beyond voting, including attending meetings, donating to candidates or organizations, participating in protests, posting about politics online, and attempting to persuade others. Each activity is measured as a binary indicator (1 = engaged, 0 = not engaged), and results are displayed as proportions. MAGA Republicans report significantly higher political interest ($p < .001$) and are more likely to have voted in past elections ($p < .001$). Additionally, they engage in higher levels of political participation across nearly all non-voting activities, including significantly greater political donations, online engagement, and persuasion efforts ($p < .001$). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance levels: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

### 4.6.3 Adjusting the Results to Account for Multiple Comparisons

To confirm that the significant differences reported above are not merely artifacts of multiple testing, I applied the Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) procedure to adjust the raw p-values

across measures. Most of the items that showed conventional significance (i.e., $p < .05$) remain significant even after the BH correction, underscoring the robustness of these group differences. One exception is the measure of perceived White disadvantage (whpriv01), which narrowly fails to meet the BH-adjusted threshold, but that is still marginally significant under this specification. A complete table of raw and BH-adjusted p-values appears in Appendix B.

### 4.6.4 Synthesis of ANES Findings

In sum, the ANES Pilot data paint a consistent portrait: MAGA Republicans stand apart from other Republicans across myriad domains central to Social Dominance Theory. They express higher racial resentment, greater negative emotionality toward immigrants, stronger anti-feminist and anti-trans stances, stronger skepticism toward democratic institutions and traditional authority figures, and higher partisan and ideological extremity. They also exhibit more conspiratorial thinking and hold a more combative orientation toward political out-groups, underscoring the extent to which MAGA Republicans express hostile, prejudicial attitudes toward numerous historically subordinate groups in American society, and validating the notion that status concerns and ingroup dominance motives appear to animate the MAGA worldview.

Collectively, these differences strongly align with the hypothesis that MAGA adherents are not merely standard conservatives but are more deeply driven by hierarchical group-dominance motives and a competitive worldview, distinguishing them from the broader GOP. It is particularly telling that MAGA Republicans also score lower on measures of institutional confidence (Election Integrity Index, Trust in Experts, and feeling thermometer ratings of the FBI and teachers) and are more receptive to conspiratorial claims that challenge the legitimacy of these institutions and experts. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with a purely authoritarian inclination toward social order, because RWA usually fosters deference to police, courts, and other conventional authorities. Instead, these ANES measures—especially positivity toward the January 6 riot, skepticism of elections, and negative views of the FBI, experts, and teachers—

bolster the idea that MAGA Republicans prioritize preserving in-group status at the expense of mainstream authority structures whenever they perceive a threat.

## *4.7 Prolific Survey Data and Results*

### 4.7.1 Methods

#### 4.7.1.1 Data Source and Sample

To explore the relationship between domain-specific perceptions of status loss and MAGA identification, in tandem with measures of right-wing psychological orientations, I draw on an original online survey administered via Prolific. The sample was collected in 2024, with quotas based on race, gender, and education to approximate the adult U.S. population and a total sample of 2,500 U.S. adults. The Prolific survey incorporates a richer array of psychological and ideological constructs unavailable in the ANES dataset. Our analyses focus on two overlapping samples: (1) Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents ($N \approx 741$), and (2) the full sample of ~2,500 respondents.

#### 4.7.1.2 Measures and Questionnaire

The Prolific questionnaire assesses MAGA support in two ways. First, in a binary measure mirroring our ANES approach, Republican respondents indicate whether they regard themselves as "more of a supporter of the MAGA movement" (coded 1) or "more of a supporter of the Republican Party generally" (coded 0). Second, all participants, regardless of partisanship, rate how strongly they support or oppose the MAGA movement on a five-point scale, which I recode into a 0–1 continuous metric. Taken together, these measures enable comparisons of outright MAGA identifiers to non-MAGA Republicans, as well as examinations of varying intensities of MAGA sentiment among the broader population.

##### 4.7.1.2.1 Domain-Specific Status Threat

Building on our theoretical framework, I introduce a domain-specific status threat index that disaggregates perceived threats into five distinct arenas: (1) changing racial demographics,

(2) increases in the size of the foreign-born population, (3) women's expanded representation in the college-educated workforce, (4) declining Christian affiliation, and (5) the loss of manufacturing jobs. Each item asks whether these changes have had a positive or negative impact on "the social status of people like you," with a five-point rating scale, recoded to a 0 (very positive) – 1 (very negative) scale (higher values reflecting more threat). Averaging these five components yields a composite index ($\alpha \approx 0.73$) that provides clearer insight into how the cumulative impact of social and economic changes on perceptions of social status influence support for the MAGA movement. The exact question text and wording is presented in Appendix C.

Compared to Parker and Lavine's (2024) single broad item referencing the erosion of the "American way of life," this domain-specific approach enables a more nuanced test of which *particular* shifts (e.g., racial demographics, women's workforce prominence, Christian decline) drive MAGA sympathies. It thus extends the literature on status threat by clarifying the real-world domains in which MAGA supporters feel most acutely status threatened.

#### 4.7.1.2.2 Measures of Conservative Worldviews

The Prolific survey further expands upon the ANES analysis by measuring several key dimensions of conservative ideology:

- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), composed of eight items capturing acceptance of group-based hierarchies (e.g., "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom"; "Some groups are simply inferior to other groups"). All items used five-point Likert rating scales (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) and were rescaled to 0–1, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of group hierarchy ($\alpha \approx 0.85$).
- Authoritarianism (RWA). RWA was measured via the standard four-item child-rearing battery often used by the ANES, asking respondents to choose which quality (e.g.,

obedience vs. self-reliance) is more important for children to have. These items were averaged together and rescaled to 0–1. Whereas SDO emphasizes dominance and power motives, RWA emphasizes social conformity, obedience, and enforcement of conventional norms ($\alpha \approx 0.77$).

- Limited Government. Three binary forced-choice items assessed preference for smaller, less interventionist government. For each question, respondents chose which statement (e.g., "The less government, the better" vs. "There are more things that government should be doing") came closer to their personal views. Responses were combined into an index and rescaled 0–1, with higher values indicating stronger support for limited government ($\alpha \approx 0.80$).
- Traditionalism. A four-item scale indexed respondents' preference for preserving longstanding customs over adopting changes. Sample items include "If you start trying to change things very much, you usually make them worse." Items were evaluated using five-point, agree-disagree Likert scales, averaged together, and rescaled 0 -1 ($\alpha \approx 0.70$). Higher scores indicate greater preference for traditionalism and aversion to rapid social change.

By including these measures, the Prolific study provides a more nuanced view of how different ideological elements, beyond simple partisanship, predict MAGA alignment.

#### 4.7.1.3 Analytic Strategy

To evaluate the strength of the relationship between the status threat and worldview measures with MAGA support in the Prolific survey, the analysis that follows employs two types of regression models: logistic models for the binary measure of MAGA support (among Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents only) and OLS models with the continuous 0–1 measure of MAGA support as the DV (among both Republicans and the full sample). Tables 12 and 13 each display separate sets of results but follow parallel modeling structures. Table 12

focuses on domain-specific status threat, while Table 13 examines conservative worldview measures.

Table 12 presents three columns, corresponding to (1) the binary logistic models among Republican respondents, (2) the OLS models for the continuous outcome among Republicans, and (3) the OLS model for the continuous outcome among the full sample. Each row in Table 1 represents a different status threat predictor—either one of five specific domains (e.g., changing racial composition, foreign-born population) or the combined domain-general threat measure. For each predictor, a separate regression was estimated, regressing MAGA support on that threat item alone while controlling for demographics, ideology, and partisanship (strength of Republican identification for the GOP-only model, and a continuous party measure for the full-sample model). The row labeled "Combined Measure" reports results from a model using an aggregate index that averages across the five threat domains. Standard errors are displayed in parentheses, while marginal effects in terms of predicted probabilities (for logistic regressions) or OLS coefficients (for linear regressions) are reported, depending on the outcome.

Table 13 follows a similar pattern but analyzes distinct dimensions of conservative ideology as predictors of MAGA support. It again includes both binary logistic and continuous OLS specifications, but this time the key predictors are Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), limited government preferences, and traditionalism. The table displays individual-predictor models, where each worldview measure is entered separately, and combined models, in which all of these measures appear together. As in Table 12, demographic and ideological controls are held constant, and the difference between Republican-only and full-sample columns reflects whether the outcome is a binary measure of explicit MAGA identity within the GOP or a continuous 0–1 measure of MAGA support among all respondents. Marginal effects (in percentage-point terms) appear for the logistic models, whereas OLS coefficients are presented for the continuous models.

In all cases, the Republicans-only models distinguish those who explicitly identify with the MAGA movement from those who identify more generally as Republicans, whereas the full-sample models capture more nuanced degrees of MAGA support across the political spectrum. The coefficients (or marginal effects) reflect each variable's net association with MAGA support, controlling for partisanship, ideology, demographic characteristics, and other included predictors. Standard errors are shown in parentheses for clarity, and statistical significance thresholds (*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001) are consistent across all models.

## 4.7.2 Results

### 4.7.2.1 Domain-Specific Status Threat Predicting MAGA Support

Looking first at the binary measure of MAGA support among Republicans, concern over the increasing size of the foreign-born population emerges as the single strongest predictor. Those who feel the most negatively affected by increases in the size of the foreign-born population are thirty six percentage points more likely to identify as a MAGA supporter ($p < .001$) than those who feel most positively impacted. Increasing racial diversity and the decline of manufacturing are the second strongest predictors, each with average marginal effects of 0.30 ($p < .01$), while the gender divide in education is somewhat weaker (AME = 0.20, SE = 0.04, $p < .01$). The decline of Christianity is the weakest of the five items in this specification (AME = 0.17, SE = 0.03, $p < .05$).

Turning next to the continuous measure of MAGA support, the individual OLS models reveal that concern about the foreign-born population again proves most influential (B = 0.19, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$), with concern about declining manufacturing next (B = 0.15, SE = 0.05, $p < .01$), followed closely by increasing racial diversity (B = 0.14, SE = 0.05, $p < .01$). Anxiety over the gender divide in education carries a smaller effect (B = 0.11, SE = 0.04, $p < .05$), and the decline of Christianity (B = 0.09, SE = 0.05, $p > .05$) does not reach statistical significance.

In the full-sample OLS models, the foreign-born status threat item remains the strongest single predictor (B = 0.18, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$), followed closely by increasing racial diversity (B = 0.17, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$). Interestingly, the gender divide in education (B = 0.15, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$) and the decline of Christianity (B = 0.14, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$) both exhibit relatively similar, heightened magnitudes compared to the Republican subsample, whereas the decline of manufacturing remains significant but has the smallest coefficient (B = 0.09, SE = 0.03, $p < .01$). Lastly, the combined status threat measure exerts a consistent and substantial effect across all three specifications, amounting to an increase of 0.64 (SE = 0.06, $p < .001$) in the predicted probability of identifying as MAGA supporter on the binary measure among Republicans, and a 0.33 coefficient (SE = 0.07, $p < .001$) for the continuous measure OLS models among both Republicans and the full sample. These results indicate that perceptions of status erosion across racial, nativist, religious, gender, and economic dimensions all robustly predict MAGA identification, with perceptions regarding immigration and racial diversity emerging as the most decisive among the domain-specific items.

**Table 12: Perceptions of Status Loss and Support for the MAGA Movement**

| | Republicans | | Full Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| Predictors | Binary Measure | Continuous Measure | Continuous Measure |
| Foreign-born Population | 0.36***<br>(0.06) | 0.19***<br>(0.04) | 0.18***<br>(0.02) |
| Increasing Racial Diversity | 0.30***<br>(0.06) | 0.14**<br>(0.05) | 0.17***<br>(0.02) |
| Decline of Manufacturing | 0.30**<br>(0.06) | 0.15**<br>(0.05) | 0.09**<br>(0.03) |
| Gender Divide in Education | 0.20**<br>(0.04) | 0.11*<br>(0.04) | 0.15***<br>(0.03) |
| Decline of Christianity | 0.17*<br>(0.03) | 0.09<br>(0.05) | 0.14***<br>(0.02) |
| Combined Measure | 0.64***<br>(0.06) | 0.33***<br>(0.07) | 0.33***<br>(0.07) |

*Note:* This table summarizes the relationship between status threat variables and support for the MAGA movement, measured using binary and five-point rating scales. The marginal effects and coefficients reported come from separate models in which MAGA support has been regressed on each predictor separately while controlling for partisanship, ideology, and demographics. The binary measure of MAGA support was modeled using logistic regression, and marginal effects in terms of predicted probabilities are reported. The five-point scale measure of MAGA support (rescaled to range from 0 to 1) was modeled using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Results are presented separately for the sample of self-identified Republicans and the full general population. Models conducted among Republicans control for ideological identification (rescaled 0 - 1), strength of Republican identification (lean, not very strong, and strong), race, gender, income, education, and identification as a born-again Christian. Models conducted among the full sample control for the same variables, with the exception of strength of party identification, which has been replaced by a continuous measure of party identification, rescaled 0 - 1. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Statistical significance is indicated by stars: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

#### 4.7.2.2 Conservative Worldviews

Turning now to Table 13: In the individual models (column 1) where the binary MAGA support measure is used as the DV, SDO emerges as the strongest predictor of MAGA support. Moving from the lowest to highest SDO score corresponds to a 29-percentage-point increase in the probability of identifying as a MAGA supporter (SE = 0.06, p < .001). Limited government also exerts a positive association with MAGA support (AME = 0.17, SE = 0.03, p < .001), whereas Authoritarianism and traditionalism do not achieve statistical significance. In the

combined model that includes all four worldview measures simultaneously (column 2), SDO remains significant (AME = 0.25, SE = 0.06, $p < .01$) but declines slightly in magnitude, while limited government (AME = 0.13, SE = 0.03, $p < .01$) maintains a positive relationship with MAGA affiliation. Both RWA and traditionalism remain nonsignificant.

Turning to columns 3 and 4, which present individual and combined models predicting responses to the continuous MAGA support model among Republicans: SDO again stands out as the strongest single predictor in the individual models (B = 0.15, SE = 0.05, $p < .001$), although RWA (B = 0.12, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$) also emerges as significant—unlike in the binary model—implying that authoritarians may predict more granular increases in MAGA support when support is measured on a continuum. The coefficient on limited-government preferences is not significant, while traditionalism (B = 0.03, SE = 0.01, $p < .05$) exhibits a weak albeit significant relationship with MAGA support in the individual model. When all four measures are compared in the combined model, SDO remains significant though slightly smaller in magnitude (B = 0.12, SE = 0.05, $p < .05$), exhibiting an association with MAGA support similar in magnitude to RWA (0.12, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$). Limited government and traditionalism, however, remain small and insignificant in this fully specified model.

Lastly, columns 5 and 6 in Table 13 show how each worldview variable relates to MAGA support in the full sample. In the individual models, SDO once again posts the largest coefficient (B = 0.34, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$), followed by Authoritarianism (B = 0.24, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$). Limited government (0.08, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$) and traditionalism (0.09, SE = 0.01, $p < .001$) are both statistically significant, but their magnitudes are notably lower than SDO or RWA. In the combined model, SDO remains a robust predictor (B = 0.23, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$), as does RWA (B =0.19, SE = 0.02, $p < .001$), albeit of a slightly smaller magnitude. The coefficients for limited government (B = 0.06, SE = 0.01, $p < .001$) and traditionalism (B = 0.05, SE = 0.01, $p < .001$) remain significant although somewhat smaller in magnitude.

**Table 13: Measures of Right-Wing Worldviews and Support for the MAGA Movement**

| Predictors | Binary Measure | | Continuous Measure | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Republicans | | Republicans | | Full Sample | |
| | Individual Models | Combined Model | Individual Models | Combined Model | Individual Models | Combined Model |
| SDO | 0.29*** | 0.25** | 0.15*** | 0.12* | 0.34*** | 0.23*** |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Auth | -0.03 | -0.03 | 0.12*** | 0.12*** | 0.24*** | 0.19*** |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Lim Gov | 0.17*** | 0.13** | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.08*** | 0.06*** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.02) | (0.01) |
| Trad | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.03* | 0.01 | 0.09*** | 0.05*** |
| | (0.01) | (0.00) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) |

*Note:* This table summarizes the results of models regressing MAGA support on key worldview variables. The binary measure models (columns 1 and 2) estimate the probability of identifying as a MAGA supporter (1 = MAGA supporter, 0 = not a supporter). These models report average marginal effects expressed in terms of probabilities. The continuous measure models (columns 3 through 6) estimate support for the MAGA movement measured on a 0-1 scale. These models report regression coefficients. Columns 1 and 3 present individual models that regress MAGA support on each worldview variable separately. Columns 2 and 4 present combined models that include all worldview predictors simultaneously for the Republican subsample. Columns 5 and 6 report individual and combined models, respectively, for the full sample. All predictors reported in the table have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Models conducted among Republicans control for ideological identification (rescaled 0 - 1), strength of Republican identification (lean, not very strong, and strong), race, gender, income, education, and identification as a born-again Christian. Models conducted among the full sample control for the same variables, with the exception of strength of party identification, which has been replaced by a continuous measure of party identification, rescaled 0 - 1. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Statistical significance levels: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

### 4.7.3 Synthesis of Prolific Findings

Overall, the Prolific survey reveals that perceived "hierarchical slippage"—as indexed by negative reactions to five real-world transformations to US society—and Social Dominance Orientation both stand out as powerful predictors of MAGA identity. These patterns mirror and extend Parker & Lavine's broad "status threat" measure, showing that multiple social changes compound the sense of loss fueling MAGA identification. While Right-Wing Authoritarianism, traditionalism, and limited-government ideals do hold some explanatory power, they pale in comparison to SDO and status threat when all models are considered together.

In short, the Prolific data strongly support the idea that MAGA Republicans are driven by a competitive, dominance-oriented psychology and heightened anxieties over whether historically

favored groups—Whites, native-born Americans, Christians, men, blue-collar Americans—are losing their rightful position in society. These findings provide further evidence that "Make America Great Again" resonates precisely because it promises to restore traditional ingroup status and supremacy in the face of perceived demographic and cultural declines, thus validating the importance of social dominance motives in the current Republican factional landscape.

## *4.8 Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the political psychology of the MAGA movement is driven primarily by the interplay of perceived status threat and a pronounced social-dominance-oriented worldview. My analyses, which incorporate both ANES and Prolific survey data, consistently show that Republicans who identify with and support the MAGA movement exhibit high levels of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and a heightened sensitivity to demographic, cultural, and economic changes that they perceive as undermining the relative status of their ingroups. These findings deepen our understanding of the psychological and ideological roots of MAGA support: rather than reflecting merely a conventional or authoritarian brand of conservatism, the movement is driven by anxieties about preserving or reasserting hierarchical social arrangements. In particular, concerns over rising immigration and shifting racial demographics emerge as especially salient triggers of this status-oriented backlash.

My contribution builds on and extends existing work in political science by empirically specifying how multiple dimensions of perceived status loss—ranging from the decline of Christian identification to changes in women's workforce participation—combine with SDO to shape a distinct faction of conservatives within the Republican Party. This emphasis on status threat and dominance motivations advances our knowledge of how modern right-wing populist movements align themselves against perceived cultural and demographic currents, and it sheds light on ongoing realignments within American conservatism. Furthermore, by highlighting the potency of status-oriented attitudes, I offer a framework for understanding why support for

Donald Trump and the MAGA movement persists, and what it portends for democratic stability and partisan polarization. My findings thus contribute to a broader discourse in political science by demonstrating that group-status anxieties and competitive dominance motives lie at the heart of the MAGA phenomenon, playing a central role in fueling its commitments, rhetoric, and policy preferences—even against longstanding norms within the Republican coalition and American Democracy more broadly.

Importantly, each of the key ANES variables I examined—particularly election distrust, conspiratorial beliefs, broad outgroup hostility, and the acceptance of norm-breaking—fits SDO's emphasis on defending dominance across domains better than RWA's push for moral unity and respect for rightful authority. Where Right-Wing Authoritarians typically rally around established institutions to preserve social cohesion, MAGA Republicans reject or undercut those institutions (and party leaders) whenever they perceive a threat to their group's status—most starkly visible in the positive attitudes about the January 6 insurrection. This clear discrepancy underscores that a zero-sum, status-protective posture informs MAGA supporters' worldview, rather than a conventional authoritarian impulse for law and order.

Finally, I view my findings on the MAGA movement as part of a larger trajectory running throughout this dissertation, which demonstrates how status concerns and hierarchy-enhancing beliefs shape contemporary American politics. In earlier chapters, I showed that beliefs such as the just-world perspective operate in practice as status-legitimizing ideologies, especially among historically dominant groups, and that the legacy of slavery itself has contributed to a culturally ingrained preference for group dominance in the U.S. South. My work on the MAGA faction adds an important new dimension to these themes, revealing how a competitive, social-dominance-oriented worldview aligns with deep-seated anxieties about lost status and national identity. By situating the MAGA movement within this broader picture, I reinforce the central argument of my dissertation: that persistent drives to defend or reassert hierarchy unify a wide

swath of American political attitudes—from just-world rationalizations to the legacy of slavery and onward to today's populist movements.

# 5: Conclusion: The Role of Dominance Motives in Driving Political Behavior and Democratic Backsliding

## *5.1 Restatement of Main Argument*

My dissertation has argued that concerns about ingroup status and social dominance motives among members of historically dominant groups significantly influence political ideology, behavior, and movements in contemporary American society. Throughout this project, I have demonstrated that, to fully understand American political development and contemporary political behaviors, I must give explicit attention to status anxieties and motivations to preserve group-based hierarchies. By emphasizing the psychological and historical dimensions of group-based dominance, my dissertation provides a more nuanced and comprehensive account of political polarization, ideological commitments, and the dynamics of democratic stability.

## *5.2 Summary and Synthesis of Dissertation Chapters*

Chapter 1 (Introduction) laid the theoretical groundwork by situating my argument within the frameworks of Social Dominance Theory (SDT) and the Dual Process Model (DPM) of Ideology and Prejudice, emphasizing that the motivation among members of historically dominant groups to reestablish and maintain social dominance over historically subordinated groups operates as a distinct psychological pathway to the formation of right-wing ideologies and political movements. Moreover, I argued that this dimension of conservative political psychology differs in important ways from traditional accounts of right-wing authoritarianism, moral traditionalism, and fiscal conservatism, and has too often been overlooked. Yet, contemporary political developments in the Republican party are perhaps better explained by the social dominance dimension of political psychology than these other accounts. Thus, the introduction highlighted how status-oriented concerns provide an essential explanatory lens for understanding contemporary political attitudes and behaviors, thus setting a cohesive framework for the empirical chapters that followed.

In Chapter 2 (Belief in a Just World and Racial Resentment), I demonstrated empirically that belief in a just world (BJW) function primarily as a status-legitimizing ideology, rather than a general psychological need as traditionally posited by Just World Theory (JWT). Specifically, BJW is more strongly related to racial prejudice and animosity toward racial minorities among White Americans (i.e., the dominant racial group in American society), and thus acts as a *status-legitimizing* ideology that justifies existing racial inequalities, thereby reinforcing racial resentment and reducing support for redistributive social policies. These findings lend robust support to SDT's core tenets by showing how dominant-group members rationalize hierarchical structures in ways that protect their privileged positions.

Chapter 3 (Slavery and Status-Legitimizing Ideologies) extended my argument about the core role of dominance motives in American politics by providing historical context. In this chapter, I demonstrated that historical geographic variation in slavery rates across the Southern United States continues to shape contemporary social dominance orientation (SDO) and the endorsement of White status-legitimizing beliefs among White Southerners. This chapter's findings underscore the enduring significance of historical status hierarchies, revealing how past structures of racial domination persistently influence contemporary ideological orientations and attitudes—even extending to prejudice and feeling of threat toward other ethnic and religious minorities who were not present in the South at the time that slavery and the racial caste system proliferated.

Finally, in Chapter 4 (MAGA Movement), I applied these theoretical insights to understand the rise and appeal of the MAGA movement within contemporary American politics.

My analysis demonstrated that support for the MAGA movement appears to be driven by heightened Social Dominance Orientation and perceived threats to dominant-group status among a subset of conservative-identifying Republicans, rather than by traditional authoritarian or conservative ideological commitments. These results underscore the unique explanatory power of

status-oriented motivations in accounting for MAGA Republicans' distinctive political attitudes, including their endorsement of right-wing populism, political intolerance, and anti-democratic sentiments. Specifically, MAGA Republicans were significantly more likely to endorse conspiratorial beliefs about the 2020 election, exhibit hostility toward traditionally respected institutions (such as the FBI and educators), and express aggressive political intolerance toward groups perceived as threatening their status. While Republicans generally expressed positive regard for the Supreme Court—a conservative-dominated institution favorable to Trump—MAGA supporters notably demonstrated hostility toward other traditional authority figures, underscoring that their dominant worldview takes precedence over conventional conservative deference to authority and institutions.

## *5.3 Contribution to Political Science*

### 5.3.1 American Politics

My dissertation contributes significantly to political science by articulating a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework for understanding how group-based status anxieties and social dominance motives influence contemporary political cleavages, ideological polarization, and democratic stability. By integrating historical context with psychological theories, my work underscores the importance of considering both historical antecedents and psychological processes when analyzing the dynamics of American politics.

### 5.3.2 Political Psychology

My findings advance political psychology, particularly Social Dominance Theory, by empirically connecting historical status hierarchies and contemporary status anxieties to specific political behaviors and ideological attitudes. Additionally, this work contributes to the dual-process model of prejudice by highlighting the central role of social dominance motives—distinct from authoritarianism—in shaping contemporary political attitudes, particularly those involving hierarchical and exclusionary beliefs.

### 5.3.3 Political Behavior and Democratic Stability

By illustrating how perceived status threats and dominance motives fuel populist and anti-democratic attitudes within the MAGA movement, my dissertation advances our understanding of the psychological roots of democratic backsliding. It provides empirical evidence of how concerns over ingroup dominance can mobilize political factions that challenge democratic norms and institutions, emphasizing the importance of recognizing these dynamics when analyzing threats to democratic stability.

### 5.3.4 Integration with Broader Literature

My dissertation's findings speak broadly to existing literature in political science. Regarding authoritarianism, my work clarifies important conceptual distinctions between Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), providing evidence that dominance motives operate independently and distinctly from authoritarianism. Furthermore, my results enrich current discussions of status threat by linking perceptions of declining group status directly to multiple intergroup domains and illuminating how these meta perceptions relate to contemporary ideological extremity and polarization, thus building on the contributions of scholars such as Mutz, Jardina, Parker and Levine.

My work also informs the literature on political ideologies by illuminating how the interplay between racial attitudes, perceived status threat, and ideological commitments shapes political behavior. Finally, by examining the roots of democratic backsliding through the lens of status anxieties, my dissertation connects social psychology to political science, contributing to an understanding of how populist and anti-democratic movements emerge and sustain themselves in contemporary democracies.

## *5.4 Limitations of Research*

While my dissertation provides robust theoretical and empirical contributions, it also has limitations. The analyses primarily rely on observational, cross-sectional survey data,

constraining my ability to make definitive causal claims. Furthermore, the complexity of psychological constructs such as SDO and BJW poses measurement challenges, potentially affecting the precision of empirical analyses. Additionally, the geographic and temporal specificity of my data may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the contexts studied.

## *5.5 Directions for Future Research*

Future research should extend these findings through longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causality and temporal stability of status-oriented beliefs. Scholars could also examine how other forms of historical inequality (such as colonialism or land dispossession) shape contemporary political behavior, extending this analytical framework beyond the American South. Additionally, investigating how status anxieties interact with broader economic or cultural shifts to predict democratic attitudes in different national contexts could further enrich understanding of populist and authoritarian movements globally.

## *5.6 Concluding Statement*

Ultimately, my dissertation highlights the pressing need to consider status-related concerns and dominance motivations in contemporary political analysis. Recognizing that perceived threats to historically dominant groups can significantly impact ideological orientations, political mobilization, and democratic stability, this research underscores the urgency of addressing status anxieties to better understand—and potentially mitigate—polarization and democratic erosion. By foregrounding the psychological and historical roots of contemporary political dynamics, my dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations about the future resilience of democratic institutions in the United States and beyond.

# Appendix A

**Table 14: Demographic Composition of the AmeriSpeak Sample**

| Demographic | Category | Unweighted (%) | Weighted (%) | Benchmark (%) | Difference (pp) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Household Income** | Less than $30,000 | 22.8 | 25.6 | 17.5 | 8.1 |
| | $30,000 to $74,999 | 41.8 | 40.7 | 33.1 | 7.6 |
| | $75,000 to $124,999 | 23.0 | 22.0 | 24.6 | -2.6 |
| | $125,000 Plus | 12.4 | 11.6 | 24.9 | -13.3 |
| **Member Age** | 18–34 | 26.8 | 28.4 | 29.1 | -0.7 |
| | 35–49 | 17.4 | 24.4 | 24.8 | -0.4 |
| | 50–64 | 28.5 | 25.3 | 24.7 | 0.6 |
| | 65+ | 27.3 | 21.9 | 21.4 | 0.5 |
| **Member Race/Ethnicity** | White | 52.7 | 58.0 | 56.9 | 1.1 |
| | Black | 28.1 | 19.4 | 18.8 | 0.6 |
| | Hispanic | 13.2 | 16.6 | 18.5 | -1.9 |
| | Asian/Pacific Islander | 2.4 | 2.1 | 4.0 | -1.9 |
| | Others | 3.7 | 3.9 | 1.9 | 2.0 |
| **Member Education** | Less than High School | 3.1 | 9.0 | 11.0 | -2.0 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High School Equivalent | 14.2 | 28.8 | 29.3 | -0.5 |
| | Some College/Associate Degree | 37.1 | 28.7 | 27.5 | 1.2 |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 26.5 | 20.1 | 21.1 | -1.0 |
| | Graduate Degree | 19.1 | 13.4 | 11.0 | 2.4 |
| **Household Ownership** | Owner Occupied | 68.4 | 72.0 | 67.5 | 4.5 |
| | Renter/Other | 31.6 | 28.0 | 32.5 | -4.5 |
| **Children in House** | At least one child <18 | 24.3 | 29.9 | 33.5 | -3.6 |
| | No children <18 | 75.7 | 70.1 | 66.5 | 3.6 |
| **Household Marital Status** | Currently Married | 49.8 | 50.0 | 52.5 | -2.5 |
| | Currently Single | 50.2 | 50.0 | 47.5 | 2.5 |
| **Sex** | Male | 48.9 | 47.3 | 47.7 | -0.4 |
| | Female | 51.1 | 52.7 | 52.3 | 0.4 |

*Note:* This table compares the weighted and unweighted demographic distributions of respondents to the benchmark data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), along with the differences between weighted survey responses and CPS benchmarks. The benchmark data are drawn from the February 2020 Census Bureau Current Population Survey. The difference (pp) column shows the difference between weighted survey responses and benchmark values.

**Table 15: Demographic Composition of the Lucid Sample**

| Demographic Category | Response Option | N | Proportion (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Female | 880 | 51.46% |
| | Male | 822 | 48.07% |
| | Something else | 8 | 0.47% |
| **Education** | Some high school or less | 54 | 3.16% |
| | High school graduate | 440 | 25.73% |
| | Other vocational training | 76 | 4.44% |
| | Associate's degree | 200 | 11.70% |
| | Bachelor's degree | 437 | 25.56% |
| | Master's or professional degree | 136 | 7.95% |
| | Doctorate degree | 18 | 1.05% |
| | Some high school or less | 54 | 3.16% |
| **Ideology** | Extremely liberal | 140 | 8.19% |
| | Liberal | 193 | 11.29% |
| | Slightly liberal | 120 | 7.02% |
| | Moderate; middle of the road | 587 | 34.33% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Slightly conservative | 194 | 11.35% |
| | Conservative | 289 | 16.90% |
| | Extremely conservative | 186 | 10.88% |
| **Party** | Democrat | 628 | 36.73% |
| | Independent | 239 | 13.98% |
| | Republican | 750 | 43.86% |
| | Other | 93 | 5.44% |

*Note:* This table presents demographic characteristics of White respondents from a Lucid convenience sample collected in the United States. Sample proportions are based on valid responses within each category and may not sum exactly to 100% due to rounding. Lucid samples are non-probability and opt-in; thus, results are not nationally representative, and caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings to broader populations.

## Lucid Experiment Treatment Text

The racial inequality vignettes for the Lucid experiment each began with four paragraphs describing factual information about the extent of racial inequality between Black and White Americans in the U.S. In the first treatment vignette, respondents were given a concluding paragraph that argued Americans should stay informed about racial inequality in the U.S. In the second and third treatments, an additional paragraph was included, arguing either that racial inequality is unsolvable or solvable.

*Main Body of Text*

Recent media attention to the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police officers has sparked a national conversation about the state of race relations in the US. This national reckoning is long overdue. The US has had a long history of racial inequality and discrimination dating back hundreds of years, and significant racial inequalities between Black and White Americans still persist to this day.

Before the Civil War, roughly three million Black Americans were enslaved in the United States. And up until the 1960s, Black Americans were forcibly segregated from the white population in much of the country: They had to live in separate neighborhoods, eat in separate restaurants, drink from separate water fountains, and were barred from attending schools with White children.

These discriminatory practices have led to severe and persistent inequalities between Black and White Americans. For instance, the median Black family holds just $24,000 in household wealth, while the median White family holds nearly nine times that amount, with $189,000 in savings and property. African Americans also earn $10,000 less each year on average compared to White Americans, even within the same career.

Black Americans are also incarcerated at significantly higher rates than White Americans, often receiving harsher sentences than White defendants for the same crimes. Indeed, nearly one in five Black men will end up spending time in prison at some point in their lives—a shockingly high rate of incarceration that has further compounded the difficulty Black men face in obtaining good jobs and providing for their families.

*First Ending: No Mention of Solvability*

Despite these grim statistics, it's more important than ever that we educate ourselves about these inequalities and confront our nation’s history of racism and discrimination against Black Americans.

*Second Ending: Racial Inequality Unsolvable*

Because discriminatory practices and racial inequality are so deeply entrenched in the legal and education systems in the US, many prominent scholars argue that current levels of racial inequality are unlikely to change anytime soon. It will require a massive federal effort to close gaps in income and education between Black and White Americans. And given the current state of political gridlock in Congress, the likelihood of bipartisan support for bills aimed at advancing racial equality is exceedingly low. Despite this bleak picture, it's more important than ever that we educate ourselves about these inequalities and confront our nation’s history of racism and discrimination against Black Americans.

*Third Ending: Racial Inequality Solvable*

The good news is that there is much we can do to end racial discrimination and reverse current levels of racial inequality. By providing equal funding to predominantly Black, low-income schools, we can help close the racial achievement gap in education. By enforcing affirmative action policies and prosecuting cases of blatant discrimination, we can help Black Americans achieve equal pay and equal access to higher-paying jobs. And by enacting criminal justice reforms, such as overturning punitive three-strikes policies that unfairly target Black communities, we can put an end to the mass incarceration of Black Americans in the US. Last but not least, we can help fight racial inequality in our communities by educating ourselves about the United States’ legacy of racial discrimination and advocating for those who have been unfairly discriminated against.

# Appendix B

**Table 16: BH-adjusted P-Values for the ANES Analysis**

| Measure | Raw p-value | BH-adjusted p-vale | Significant at p<.05 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positivity Toward Jan 6 | 2.2e-16 | 5.94e-15 | Yes |
| FBI Thermometer | 6.98e-15 | 9.42e-14 | Yes |
| Believe 2020 Election Stolen | 5.83e-11 | 5.25e-10 | Yes |
| Racial Resentment | 3.17e-10 | 2.14e-09 | Yes |
| Anti-Abortion Index | 1.78e-09 | 9.62e-09 | Yes |
| Election Integrity | 1.7e-08 | 7.67e-08 | Yes |
| Racism Not a Serious Problem | 2.02e-07 | 7.78e-07 | Yes |
| Teachers Thermometer | 5.93e-06 | 2e-05 | Yes |
| Gender (Male vs Female) | 2.73e-05 | 8.19e-05 | Yes |
| Dispositional Explanation for Inequality | 3e-05 | 8.19e-05 | Yes |
| Feeling Therm. of Feminists | 0.000187 | 0.000505 | Yes |
| Born-Again Christian | 0.000476 | 0.00117 | Yes |
| Anti-Immigration Index | 0.000629 | 0.00141 | Yes |
| Anti-Trans Attitudes | 0.000768 | 0.0016 | Yes |
| Thermo Diff: Men-Women | 0.00148 | 0.00286 | Yes |
| Satisfaction w/ Democracy | 0.00229 | 0.00412 | Yes |
| Married | 0.01 | 0.0169 | Yes |
| Neg. View of Changing Racial Demographics | 0.0209 | 0.0331 | Yes |
| Political Tolerance | 0.0283 | 0.0441 | Yes |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| White Disadvantage Perception | 0.0413 | 0.0619 | No |

**Note:** This table reports the item-level p-values before and after a Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) multiple comparisons adjustment for the ANES analysis. The "Raw p-value" column lists the uncorrected results for each measure, while the "BH-adjusted p-value" column shows which of those remain significant once the false discovery rate is controlled. Items marked "Yes" in the final column are significant at $p<.05$ under the BH criterion, whereas the "White Disadvantage Perception" item narrowly loses significance (i.e., labeled "No").

# Appendix C

To assess perceived group-based status threat across key domains of demographic and cultural change, respondents were presented with a battery of items measuring the perceived impact of large-scale societal shifts on the social status of "people like yourself." Each item included a factual preamble drawn from reputable data sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Pew Research Center, followed by a question about perceived status consequences. These domain-specific measures were included in the models presented in Table 12 to test how support for the MAGA movement relates to subjective perceptions of social status decline.

*Introduction Prompt*

"Over the last several decades, the United States has undergone a number of large demographic, social, and economic changes. We are curious to know how people feel about these changes and the extent to which you believe these changes have affected you personally."

Each subsequent question used the following 5-point scale:

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive

- Neither positive nor negative
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

Responses were rescaled from 0 (Very positive) to 1 (Very negative) for analysis.

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1. Racial Demographic Change

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2018, 2020)

"The racial makeup of America is changing, with the U.S. Census Bureau estimating that white people will become a minority by 2045.

Do you feel that the changing racial makeup of the United States has had a positive or negative effect on the social status of people like you?"

---

2. Immigration Growth

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2020)

"According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of immigrants living in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last five decades. Immigrants today account for 13.7% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.8%) in 1970.

Do you feel that the increasing size of the foreign-born population in the United States has had a positive or negative effect on the social status of people like you?"

---

3. Gender Composition of the Workforce

Source: U.S. Department of Education; U.S. Census Bureau (2019)

"According to recent estimates by the U.S. Department of Education, women have now overtaken men in higher education and account for more than half (51%) of the college-educated workforce in the U.S.

Do you feel that the changing gender makeup of the workforce in the U.S. has had a positive or negative effect on the social status of people like you?"

---

4. Decline in Christian Affiliation

Source: Pew Research Center (2021)

"According to Pew Research Center, only 67 percent of Americans identified as Christian in 2021, down from 90 percent in 1990.

Do you feel that the changing religious makeup of the United States has had a positive or negative effect on the social status of people like you?"

---

5. Manufacturing Job Decline

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020)

"According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of Americans working in manufacturing has declined over the last forty years, with roughly 7.5 million manufacturing jobs lost since 1980.

Do you feel that the decline of manufacturing jobs in the United States has had a positive or negative effect on the social status of people like you?"

---

These items enable a multidimensional analysis of status threat perceptions, capturing concerns about racial, gender, religious, and economic change. Their inclusion allows for

testing whether support for the MAGA movement is shaped by perceived group-based decline in social standing across these identity domains.

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