

**Ill-Conceived, Unfair, or Racist?**

**The Effects of Charges in Policy Debates on Citizens' Opinions**

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## **Abstract**

Using an original survey experiment, we explore how white Americans' evaluations of policy arguments change depending on the rhetoric used to criticize the policy. Using vignettes about a city council meeting, we compare the effects of different charges used by critics of a policy: inefficiency, unfairness, and racism. We find that respondents use political rhetoric as a strong ideological cue: charges of unfairness and racism make respondents perceive policy critics as more liberal and policy supporters as more conservative. The effects of charges on argument evaluations are moderated by partisanship and racial attitudes: Democrats and respondents with pro-egalitarian attitudes find rhetoric about unfairness and racism more convincing while for Republicans and those with anti-egalitarian attitudes the effect is opposite. At the same time, there are no significant treatment effects on the respondents' support for the policy itself or readiness to engage in political action.

*Keywords:* ideological cues, policy evaluations, political rhetoric, racial attitudes

Belief in the prominence and severity of institutional racism is on the rise among white liberals in the United States. The most recent evidence suggests that dispositions such as racial sympathy (Chudy 2021), white guilt (Chudy, Piston, and Shipper 2019), and outgroup empathy (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021), are present among a non-trivial share of white Americans and affect their political attitudes and behaviors.

At the same time, few studies in the discipline explore political rhetoric that might resonate with these pro-egalitarian predispositions. Historically, the literature on racial priming has explored how implicit race cues can be used to mobilize voters harboring prejudicial attitudes (Hutchings and Jardina 2009). Recent contributions that study explicit racial appeals also focus on how they can be weaponized by right-wing actors (Newman et al. 2020; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2020; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018). Even though there are studies of counter-mobilization in response to explicit racial appeals (Banks and Hicks 2019; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015), no investigations exist of how charges of racism can be employed in seemingly racially-neutral policy arguments, especially in local context.

In this paper, we explore the effects of racism charges in policy arguments on white Americans' opinions. Our design has three innovative aspects. First, we study how such charges can be used in a policy debate initially framed in racially neutral terms rather than in response to racial rhetoric coming from the political right. Second, we compare the effects of charges to the more common left-wing rhetoric that emphasizes income inequality and calls for general fairness. Third, we deliberately focus on local political issues rather than on well-known political figures or national political controversies.

We carry out an original survey-experimental study on a diverse sample of non-Hispanic whites in the United States. The experiment presents respondents with a hypothetical story about

a policy debate taking place in an unnamed locality, in which the policy criticism emphasizes efficiency, fairness, or racism. We find that respondents use rhetoric as an ideological cue: when a policy is criticized for being unfair or racist, its supporters are seen as more conservative and critics are seen as more liberal. We also show that when the charges of unfairness or racism are used against the policy, respondents diverge in evaluations of the arguments by partisanship and racial attitudes. At the same time, participants across experimental conditions do not differ in their support for the policy or in their readiness to engage in local politics.

### **Pro-Egalitarian Racial Attitudes and Policy Opinions**

Research on political consequences of whites' racial attitudes has typically emphasized the support for anti-egalitarian policies among those with high levels of racial prejudice. More recently, studies have investigated psychological motivations behind the support for pro-racial equality policies among whites. One of them is white collective guilt: perception of individual responsibility for racial inequality that is associated with greater support for affirmative action and income redistribution (Chudy, Piston, and Shipper 2019). Another such motivation is racial sympathy, affective reactions towards group inequality and experiences of African Americans, that predicts support for pro-black policies among whites (Chudy 2021).

One more psychological orientation that may lead individuals to support policies directly benefiting members of racial and ethnic outgroups is empathy, which is often understood through interpersonal and dyadic relationships. However, recent work demonstrates that a group-based approach to empathy, specifically perspective-taking and compassion towards ethnic outgroups, is also politically relevant for many citizens (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021).

### **Mobilizing Pro-Egalitarian Racial Attitudes**

A critical assumption present in the racial priming literature is that a large share of whites still

harbor prejudice towards African Americans and other marginalized groups (Hutchings and Jardina 2009), and that this prejudice has political implications. Implicit race cues in political messaging can activate this prejudice and translate it into support for candidates opposing progressive policies (Mendelberg 2001). However, the evidence on the political importance of positive racial attitudes reviewed above suggests that political actors on the left can employ rhetoric about race to mobilize the racially liberal segments of the electorate. One such rhetorical tool is charges of racism: when such charges are employed against racial appeals, they mobilize liberals in opposition to a politician using such appeals (Banks and Hicks 2019).

At the same time, the findings so far are limited to a specific situation when a national-level political figure is using racial campaign appeals. Therefore, a number of questions still remain. What are the political effects of racism charges when they are used in a context of a policy argument rather than an electoral campaign? How does the effectiveness of racism charges compare to more traditional arguments used by the political left, such as the ones about fairness and income equality?

Existing literature does not provide grounds for strong expectations regarding potential effects of racism charges against a policy proposal. If charges mobilize racial liberals without affecting racial conservatives, support for the policy should drop in response to such charges. However, if charges of racism provoke a heightened racial identification among whites (Jardina 2019), support for the policy may increase as a result. Overall, respondents' reaction to racial rhetoric should be moderated by their racial attitudes: racial liberals should react to racism charges by decreasing their support for the policy whereas among racial conservatives such support can increase as a form of backlash.

## **Data and Method**

We recruited participants in December 2019 using Lucid, an online data collection platform used frequently for market research. Lucid samples are known to correspond to national probability samples by a number of important benchmarks (Coppock and McClellan 2019). A total of 688 non-Hispanic white respondents completed the survey. The mean age was 45.1 years, 51.6% of respondents were female, 35.1% of respondents reported having a college degree or higher, and the median income was between \$35,000 and \$39,999. In terms of political affiliation, 37.0% of respondents were Democrats, 28.9% were Republicans, and 34.1% were independents.

Respondents' demographic data, including partisanship, were provided by the Lucid panel.

The first part of the survey consisted several important measures of both racial and generalized egalitarianism: group empathy (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021), ethnocentrism (Bizumic and Duckit 2012), social dominance orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996), interpersonal empathy (Davis 1983), and symbolic ideology. These batteries are listed here in the order they appeared in the survey.

Then, each respondent was randomly assigned to read a vignette describing an argument regarding a policy proposal being discussed at a city council (see Figure 1 for a sample vignette). The policy proposal was randomly chosen from one of three areas for which local governments are usually responsible: public transit, urban redevelopment, and school integration. Vignettes included comments from both supporters and critics of the policy. Supporters' arguments were held constant by policy area and featured potential policy benefits stated in racially neutral terms. Critics' arguments, in turn, were assigned to one of three conditions: efficiency ("ill-conceived," reference to the overall effect), fairness ("unfair," reference to the effect on the poor), or racism ("racist," reference to the effect on minority populations) rhetoric. Policy area and critics' rhetoric were randomized independently thus yielding a three-by-three design (nine conditions

total). To minimize the potential effect of implicit ideological cues in the treatment (city councils in the United States are often controlled by the Democratic Party), both sides of the argument were labelled as Democrats and the city council was described as having a progressive majority.

The following is an excerpt from a story about a city council meeting. Please read the paragraph carefully, and answer the questions following to the best of your ability:

After many complaints from residents about traffic congestion and parking shortages, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves improvement of public transit through expansion of the city's tram system. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved traffic and incentivized newcomers to move in. Critics of the proposal among council's Democrats are calling the plan "ill-conceived," claiming that the new routes will be too far from many neighborhoods, so that their residents will be effectively excluded from using the tram.

**Figure 1.** Experimental vignette example: efficiency condition, public transit

After reading the treatment, participants answered a series of items that served as the dependent variables in our analyses. First, they assessed the ideology of the supporters and critics of the policy described in the vignette on the standard scale from 1 = *Extremely liberal* to 7 = *Extremely conservative*. Second, respondents were asked to provide a rating of whether the supporters or the critics were more convincing in their argument on a scale from 0 = *Supporters more convincing* to 10 = *Critics more convincing*. Third, they expressed their own personal level of support for the policy on a scale from 1 = *Strongly oppose* to 7 = *Strongly support*. Last, participants indicated in which of the seven forms of political actions, from voting to direct protest, they would participate if a council member in their city voted on the policy in the vignette in a way that disagreed with their personal stance on the issue. For full survey items and all experimental vignettes, see Online Appendix.

## Results

We start from estimating the average treatment effects with results presented in Table 1.

Invoking fairness or racism rhetoric affects how respondents perceive the ideology of supporters and critics of the policy. When policy is debated exclusively in terms of efficiency (control condition), its supporters are seen as significantly more liberal than critics. But when critics use unfairness or racism charges against the policy, it leads respondents to see supporters as more conservative and critics as more liberal—compared to the efficiency condition. There are no significant direct treatment effects on evaluation of policy arguments, policy support, or willingness to engage in political action.

**Table 1.** Experimental results: means across conditions and estimated treatment effects for all dependent variables

	Scale	Mean			Effect	
		Efficiency	Fairness	Racism	Fairness	Racism
Ideology guess	1–7					
Supporters		3.71	4.06	3.85	0.35*	0.15
Critics		4.51	4.06	4.10	-0.45**	-0.41**
Difference		-0.80	-0.01	-0.27	0.80***	0.53*
Critics convincing	0–10	5.10	5.09	4.98	-0.01	-0.12
Policy support	1–7	3.60	3.69	3.67	0.09	0.07
Participation intent	0–7	1.92	1.88	1.81	-0.04	-0.10
					(0.13)	(0.13)

*Note.* Effect = named condition mean minus efficiency condition mean. Ideological difference = supporters' ideology minus critics' ideology. Standard errors in parentheses (effects only)

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (effects only)

We also test whether assessments of councilmembers' ideology are driven by any particular policy area. To do so, we estimate treatment effects independently for public transit, urban redevelopment, and school integration vignettes. Results are presented in Table 2. Despite a decrease in statistical power due to splitting the sample, the effects of critics invoking pro-equality rhetoric show up in the public transit and urban redevelopment conditions. In the school

integration condition, all effects are not significant and very close to zero—likely, due to the fact that this particular policy area is already highly ideologically and racially charged.

**Table 2.** Experimental results: means across conditions and estimated treatment effects on ideological assessment of policy supporters and critics by vignette policy area

	Mean			Effect	
	Efficiency	Fairness	Racism	Fairness	Racism
Supporters' ideology					
Public transit	3.67	4.22	3.82	0.56*	0.16
				(0.26)	(0.26)
Urban redevelopment	3.82	4.30	4.04	0.48*	0.22
				(0.23)	(0.23)
School integration	3.61	3.65	3.70	0.04	0.09
				(0.26)	(0.26)
Critics' ideology					
Public transit	4.47	4.00	4.01	-0.47	-0.46
				(0.28)	(0.28)
Urban redevelopment	4.54	4.00	3.91	-0.54*	-0.63*
				(0.25)	(0.25)
School integration	4.52	4.17	4.36	-0.35	-0.16
				(0.24)	(0.24)
Ideological difference					
Public transit	-0.80	0.24	-0.21	1.04*	0.60
				(0.41)	(0.41)
Urban redevelopment	-0.71	0.30	0.13	1.02**	0.85*
				(0.37)	(0.37)
School integration	-0.91	-0.56	-0.74	0.35	0.17
				(0.35)	(0.36)

*Note.* Effect = named condition mean minus efficiency condition mean. Ideological difference = supporters' ideology minus critics' ideology. Standard errors in parentheses (effects only). Ideology scale: 1–7

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (effects only)

Next, we compare treatment effects on argument evaluations and policy support for Democrats and Republicans (leaners included as partisans, true independents excluded). Results are presented in Table 3. Treatments do not change respondents' evaluations of the policy itself, even when the sample is split by party. However, they change how partisans evaluate the two sides in the argument: when critics of the policy invoke fairness or racism rhetoric, Democrats find their arguments more convincing and Republicans less convincing. Interestingly, positive change among Democrats is most pronounced in the fairness condition whereas backlash among Republicans is strongest in the racism condition.

**Table 3.** Experimental results: means across conditions and estimated treatment effects on argument evaluation and policy opinion by respondents' party

	Scale	Mean			Effect	
		Efficiency	Fairness	Racism	Fairness	Racism
Critics convincing	0–10					
Democrats		4.28	5.02	4.90	0.75* (0.37)	0.62 (0.38)
Republicans		5.97	5.63	5.21	<b>-0.34</b> (0.35)	<b>-0.76*</b> (0.34)
Policy support	1–7					
Democrats		3.43	3.65	3.33	0.22 (0.24)	<b>-0.10</b> (0.25)
Republicans		3.75	3.65	3.83	<b>-0.11</b> (0.25)	0.08 (0.24)

*Note.* Effect = named condition mean minus efficiency condition mean. Standard errors in parentheses (effects only)  
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (effects only)

Finally, we explore potential moderators of treatment effects on argument evaluations: group empathy, ethnocentrism, social dominance orientation, racial resentment, interpersonal empathy, and symbolic ideology. Results are presented in Table 4 (interactions are estimated in separate regression models). Ethnocentrism, racial resentment, and symbolic ideology moderate the effects of both fairness and racism treatments. Group empathy, social dominance orientation, and interpersonal empathy moderate only the effect of the fairness treatment.

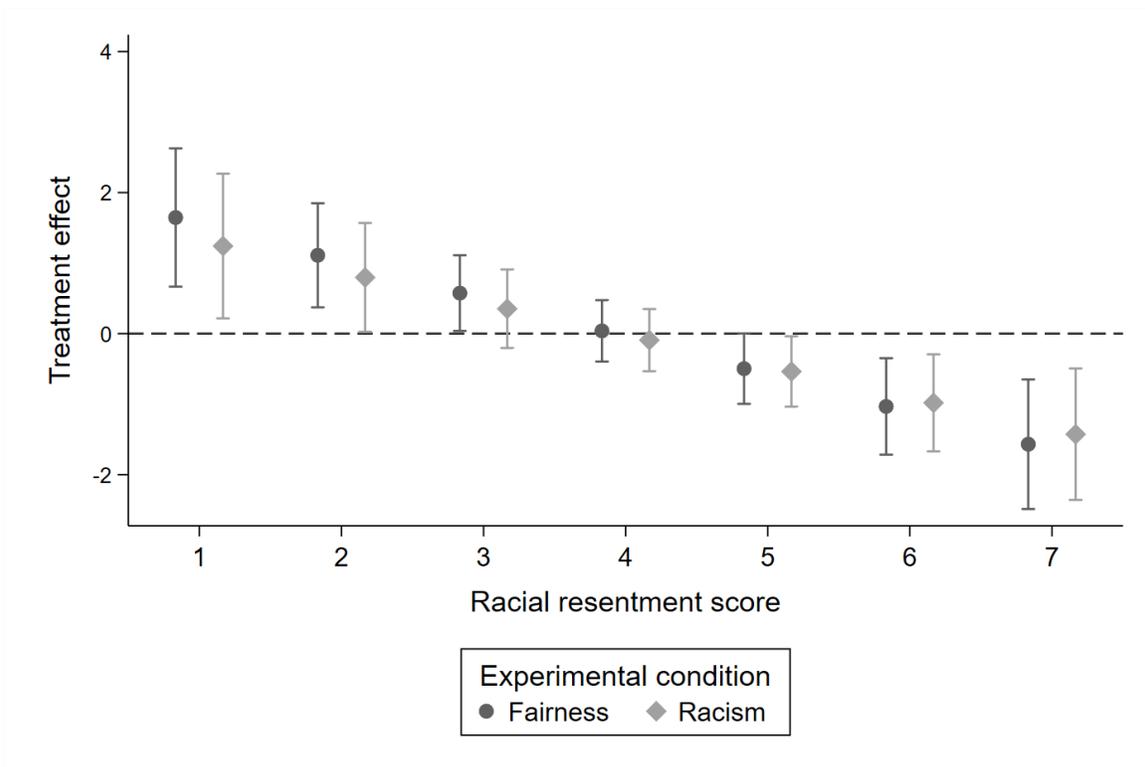
**Table 4.** Estimated interactive effects of experimental treatments on argument evaluation

	Fairness	Racism
Empathy: group	0.48* (0.19)	<b>-0.02</b> (0.20)
Ethnocentrism	<b>-0.39*</b> (0.17)	<b>-0.48**</b> (0.17)
Social dominance orientation	<b>-0.49**</b> (0.17)	<b>-0.33</b> (0.18)
Racial resentment	<b>-0.54***</b> (0.14)	<b>-0.44**</b> (0.15)
Empathy: interpersonal	0.61** (0.20)	0.19 (0.21)
Symbolic ideology	<b>-0.30*</b> (0.13)	<b>-0.42**</b> (0.14)

*Note.* Entries = regression coefficients for the interaction terms of experimental treatments with the corresponding moderators. Baseline = efficiency condition. Argument evaluation scale: 0–10. Moderators' scale: 1–7

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The interaction between the strongest moderator, racial resentment, and the treatments is presented in Figure 2. When critics use either fairness or racism rhetoric, evaluations of their arguments improve among respondents with the lowest levels of racial resentment and worsen among those with the highest levels of racial resentment. Among those with average levels of racial resentment, treatments have no effect on argument evaluations.



**Figure 2.** Estimated treatment effects on argument evaluation by respondents' racial resentment scores  
*Note.* Treatment effect = named condition marginal mean minus efficiency condition marginal mean. Argument evaluation scale: 0–10. Racial resentment scale: 1–7

## Conclusion

A non-trivial share of the white population in the United States holds sympathetic attitudes and feelings towards racially marginalized groups, as well as believing that U.S. society is systemically unjust. Broadly, these attitudes have been found to have political consequences (Chudy 2021; Chudy, Piston, and Shipper 2019; Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021). In

particular, recent findings indicate racial liberals can be mobilized against candidates using racial rhetoric in a political campaign by levying the charges of racism (Banks and Hicks 2019). Here, we extend this line of research by exploring the political effects of racism charges in the context of a local policy argument.

Our results suggest that respondents mainly use charges of racism as an ideological cue. When critics use either unfairness or racism charges against policies, they are perceived as more politically liberal compared to when they use charges of policy inefficiency. Rhetoric used by policy critics impacts perceived ideology of their opponents, even though policy supporters' arguments are kept constant across the experimental conditions. As a result, unfairness and racism charges result in respondents estimating the policy debate in our treatments as more ideologically polarized—an effect that parallels the current U.S. political climate. This effect is found despite treatments uniformly describing both supporters and critics as Democrats. However, rhetorical cues in the school integration treatment, a policy area that is already highly politicized and racialized, are not significant.

We show that respondents' partisanship and racial attitudes condition the effects of rhetoric on policy evaluation. Democrats tend to side with critics over supporters in the unfairness condition, whereas Republicans move in the opposite direction in the racism condition. Also, respondents with pro-egalitarian attitudes react to both unfairness and racism charges by siding with the policy critics whereas those with anti-egalitarian attitudes respond to these charges by siding with policy supporters.

We do not find direct effects of charges' content on respondents' policy support or readiness to participate in local politics. There are several potential explanations for this. Under current political polarization, policy positions can be simply too difficult to move. Respondents'

willingness to participate may also be stronger if vignettes feature their own localities. At the same time, the null effect on policy preferences and behavior can be genuine: for instance, white millennials, while opposing racism and bigotry as individual acts, demonstrate stagnating attitudes towards racially progressive policies (DeSante and Smith 2020).

Our results demonstrate that ostensibly non-racial (unfairness) and explicitly racial (racism) charges have mostly similar effects across the analyses. This is in contrast to a recent study that reports significant backlash against framing policy arguments in racial terms (English and Kalla 2021). The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear. It is possible that the effect of pro-egalitarian racial rhetoric depends on whether it is used to support or oppose a policy. Another possibility is that, since poverty in the United States is racialized (Gilens 1999), mentioning it in our treatments still primes racial considerations.

Results of our study also allow sketching some prospects for future research. For instance, our treatments hold the partisanship of policy supporters and critics constant as well as do not mention their race or ethnicity. An obvious extension, therefore, is to see whether racism charges credibility is affected by coming from a politician of color as well as by that politician's partisanship. Additionally, our treatments explore the effects of racism charges on citizens' evaluations of policy proposals. It will be interesting to see how similar charges affect support for the status quo and readiness to act against it—especially in the light of current developments in American politics.

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## Online Appendix

### Group empathy

“The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each statement, indicate how well it describes you.”

1. When I'm upset at someone from another racial or ethnic group, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes" for a while.
2. Before criticizing somebody from another racial or ethnic group, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other person's" point of view, particularly someone from another race or ethnicity.
4. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to the arguments of people, particularly those of other racial or ethnic groups.
5. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people from another racial or ethnic group who are less fortunate than me.
6. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person towards people of other racial or ethnic groups.
7. The misfortunes of people from other racial or ethnic groups do not usually disturb me a great deal.
8. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for people of other racial or ethnic groups when they are having problems.

Respondents were randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).

Statement order randomized.

Answers coded from 1 = *Describes me extremely poorly* to 7 = *Describes me extremely well*.

### **Ethnocentrism**

“Below are items that relate to different cultures and ethnic groups. Work quickly and record your first reaction to each item. There are no right or wrong answers. Please indicate the degree to which you disagree or agree with each item.”

1. In most cases, I like people from my culture more than I like others.
2. I don't think I have any particular preference for my own cultural or ethnic group over others.
3. The world would be a much better place if all other cultures and ethnic groups modelled themselves on my culture.
4. The values, way of life, and customs of most other cultures are probably just as good as those of my own.
5. Our culture would be much better off if we could keep people from different cultures out.
6. I like the idea of a society in which people from completely different cultures, ethnic groups, and backgrounds mix together freely.
7. We need to do what's best for our own people, and stop worrying so much about what the effect might be on other peoples.
8. We should always show consideration for the welfare of people from other cultural or ethnic groups even if, by doing this, we may lose some advantage over them.

Respondents were randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).

Statement order randomized.

Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

### **Social dominance orientation (SDO)**

“Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with each idea below. You can work quickly; your first feeling is generally best.”

1. An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom.
2. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
3. No one group should dominate in society.
4. Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top.
5. Group equality should not be our primary goal.
6. It is unjust to try to make groups equal.
7. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.
8. We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.

Respondents were randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).

Statement order randomized.

Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly oppose* to 7 = *Strongly favor*.

### **Racial resentment**

“Below are several statements regarding position of blacks in American society. For each one, we would like to know how strongly you agree or disagree.”

- Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
- 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.

- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

Statement order randomized.

Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

### **Interpersonal empathy**

“The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each statement, indicate how well it describes you.”

1. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes" for a while.
2. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other person's" point of view.
4. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.
5. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people who are less fortunate than me.
6. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
7. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
8. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for people when they are having problems.

Respondents were randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8).

Statement order randomized.

Answers coded from 1 = *Describes me extremely poorly* to 7 = *Describes me extremely well*.

### **Symbolic ideology**

“We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to

extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?”

Answers coded from 1 = *Extremely liberal* to 7 = *Extremely conservative*.

**Vignette: intro**

“The following is an excerpt from a story about a city council meeting. Please read the paragraph carefully, and answer the questions following to the best of your ability:”

This intro was the same for all vignettes.

**Vignette: public transit, efficiency**

“After many complaints from residents about traffic congestion and parking shortages, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves improvement of public transit through expansion of the city’s tram system. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved traffic and incentivized newcomers to move in. Critics of the proposal among council’s Democrats are calling the plan ‘ill-conceived,’ claiming that the new routes will be too far from many neighborhoods, so that their residents will be effectively excluded from using the tram.”

**Vignette: public transit, fairness**

“After many complaints from residents about traffic congestion and parking shortages, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves improvement of public transit through expansion of the city’s tram system. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved traffic and incentivized

newcomers to move in. Critics of the proposal among council's Democrats are calling the plan 'unfair,' claiming that the new routes will be too far from many low-income neighborhoods, so that their residents will be effectively excluded from using the tram."

**Vignette: public transit, racism**

"After many complaints from residents about traffic congestion and parking shortages, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves improvement of public transit through expansion of the city's tram system. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved traffic and incentivized newcomers to move in. Critics of the proposal among council's Democrats are calling the plan 'racist,' claiming that the new routes will be too far from many minority neighborhoods, so that their residents will be effectively excluded from using the tram."

**Vignette: urban redevelopment, efficiency**

"After many complaints from residents about failing infrastructure and high crime rates, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves a massive redevelopment of major city buildings, public spaces, and roads. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved crime rates and incentivized newcomers to move in. Critics of the proposal among council's Democrats are calling the plan 'ill-conceived,' claiming that current residents of the renovated neighborhoods will have to move due to rising housing costs."

**Vignette: urban redevelopment, fairness**

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**Vignette: school integration, efficiency**

“After many complaints from residents about achievement gaps in the school system, the city council announced a new policy proposal at its most recent meeting. The plan involves an effort

to reduce educational inequality through a busing system and district rezoning. However, the proposal divided the progressive majority in the council that is firmly controlled by Democrats. Democratic council members who support the policy argue that the project is worth the costs, citing information about how similar changes in other cities improved community cohesion and led to better education outcomes. Critics of the proposal among council's Democrats are calling the plan 'ill-conceived,' claiming that the changes will negatively impact students by placing them in unfamiliar and potentially unwelcoming environments."

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### **Ideology guess**

“Given information from the story, where would you place supporters and critics of the proposed policy on a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative?”

- Supporters of the policy
- Critics of the policy

Answers coded from 1 = *Extremely liberal* to 7 = *Extremely conservative*.

### **Argument evaluation**

“Do you find supporters or critics of the policy more convincing? For your answer, use the rating scale from 0 to 10. Ratings close to 0 mean that you find supporters of the policy much more convincing. Ratings close to 10 mean that you find critics of the policy much more convincing. Ratings close to 5 mean that you find supporters and critics of the policy approximately equally convincing.”

### **Policy support**

“Would you personally support or oppose the policy?”

Answers coded from 1 = *Strongly oppose* to 7 = *Strongly support*.

### **Political action**

“Imagine that a council member in your city voted on this policy in a way that disagreed with your stance on the issue. Which of the following would you be willing to do to voice your

opinion?”

- Vote in the next council election
- Work for a challenger candidate
- Donate to a challenger candidate
- Talk to people in your community
- Contact your council member
- Sign a petition
- Participate in a protest

Item order randomized.

Responses coded from 0 = *No action chosen* to 7 = *All actions chosen*.