

## **The Political Consequences of White Sympathy and Guilt**

**Key words:** racial attitudes, racial inequality, prejudice, sympathy, guilt

**Overview:** A long, vibrant tradition of political science research has examined the pernicious effects of racial prejudice on vote choice (Hutchings 2009; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012), turnout (Krupnikov and Piston 2015; Pasek et al. 2009), and policy opinion (n.b., Huddy and Feldman 2009). However, despite the valuable contributions this scholarship has made in helping us understand the impact of *negative* racial attitudes, we know very little about the nature, extent, or political consequences of *positive* racial attitudes. To be sure, recent scholarship (Tesler 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010) has begun to address the possibility that some whites hold politically consequential racial attitudes that lead them to support blacks. However, existing work has not developed strong theoretical foundations about such attitudes and typically relies on the racial resentment battery, a controversial scale (n.b., Huddy and Feldman 2009; Sniderman, Carmines, and Easter 2011), to measure them. The questions proposed here are designed to address these limitations. They measure two distinct types of racial attitudes, sympathy toward blacks and guilt about racial inequality. Our pilot studies indicate that these measures have high validity, and they powerfully predict evaluations of Obama as well as a wide range of policy opinions.

**Theory: Sympathy, Guilt, and their Influence on Political Preferences:** We use the terms “sympathy” and “guilt” differently from how they are used in everyday language. These terms are commonly intended to refer to transitory emotions that individuals may feel for a variety of reasons. In contrast, we use the terms as shorthand to refer to “white sympathy for blacks” and “guilt about racial inequality”: stable, long-standing affective components of some whites’ attitudes toward blacks. Our argument is that when some whites think of blacks, sympathy and

guilt surface in enduring and meaningful ways; in turn, these attitudes shape public opinion on policies that are perceived to benefit blacks.

“Sympathy,” an affective reaction to the perceived misfortune of an individual or group, consists of three components: sympathy, compassion, and empathy or “perspective-taking” (Iyer et al. 2003). Although the terminology for these three components varies across studies, the research of Iyer and colleagues (2003) suggests that they represent a single, coherent, emotional dimension; we will refer to this tri-part concept as “sympathy.” Guilt, in contrast, involves acceptance of responsibility for violating a moral standard (Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz, 1994). Those who feel guilt direct their focus toward the in-group, and specifically the wrongdoing of the in-group, in perpetuating the out-group’s suffering. This differs from sympathy’s exclusive attention on the undesirable conditions of the out-group. Consequentially, the two attitudes are independent but related: sympathy does not necessitate guilt and vice versa, but both require perceptions that the out-group is suffering misfortune. For example, it is possible for a white person to feel sympathy for blacks because she believes blacks to be disproportionately poor without feeling guilt, if she does not believe that whites are responsible for black poverty.

Sympathy and guilt represent *not* a simple inversion of prejudice but attitudes on separate dimensions. Consider, for example, the commonly held negative stereotypes that blacks are lazy and unintelligent (Hutchings 2009). Rejection of these stereotypes does not necessarily indicate the presence of sympathy for blacks or guilt about racial inequality. One could view blacks as hard working and intelligent but still be indifferent to their suffering. Similarly, the absence of sympathy toward blacks or guilt about racial inequality does not logically imply subscription to a negative stereotype about blacks.

Although white sympathy and guilt lie on separate dimensions from standard conceptualizations of racial prejudice, we nonetheless expect these attitudes to have a similarly powerful influence on policy opinion and vote choice. This is because public opinion about both policies and candidates is often “group-centric” (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Nelson and Kinder 1996): centered on attitudes toward social groups affected by the policy or candidate.

In the case of sympathy and guilt, we expect both to motivate political helping behaviors: sympathy does so in order to alleviate blacks’ misfortune, and guilt does so to make restitution for whites’ wrongdoing. As a consequence, we expect sympathy and guilt to lead some whites to support black candidates, candidates from parties perceived to represent black interests, or policies perceived to benefit blacks because all are understood as tools to correct this misfortune. Furthermore, since sympathy and guilt are conceptually distinct, we expect them to have independent effects on white policy opinion. That said, we expect that guilt will be both less common and more powerful than sympathy. It is less common because guilt is unsettling, involving negative emotions directed toward one’s own group, therefore creating incentives to avoid feeling guilt when possible. It is a more powerful motivator for the same reason (Barkan 2000).

**Pilot Study:** To test our hypotheses about the nature, antecedents, and political consequences of pro-black attitudes, we primarily analyze two datasets: a survey of a national sample conducted through YouGov in early 2013 and a study of a convenience sample conducted through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk platform in the summer of 2012. The YouGov study was conducted on a national sample of 595 white adults, and The Mechanical Turk study relies on a convenience sample of 1,024 white adults. The key advantage of the YouGov study is that it has

a more diverse sample, including weights; the lower cost of the Mechanical Turk study, meanwhile, enables us to use a more extensive set of control variables, including standard measures of racial prejudice. The questions we propose can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Questions Measuring Feelings of White Sympathy and Guilt**

<p>Sympathy Questions: [Response options: Very Strongly, Somewhat Strongly, Slightly Strongly, Not All That Strongly, Not At All] “When you think about racial discrimination against BLACKS, how strongly do you feel each of the following?”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. “Compassion for them”</li><li>2. “Sympathy for them”</li><li>3. “Empathy for them”</li></ol> <p>Guilt Questions: “Please indicate whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with each of the following statements”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4. [Association with whites] “When I learn about racism, I feel guilt due to my association with the white race”</li><li>5. [White privilege] “I feel guilty about the privileges and benefits I receive as a white American”</li><li>6. [Racial Inequality] “I do not feel guilty about social inequality between white and black Americans (i.e., slavery, poverty).”</li></ol> <p>[Response options: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Slightly Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree]</p>
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The distribution of responses to these questions in the YouGov study indicates that substantial proportions of the white respondents report feeling sympathetic emotions toward blacks: for example, while fewer than 20% of whites report that they feel sympathy “not at all” when they think of racial discrimination against blacks; the remainder report feeling some level of sympathy, including 17% who say they feel this “very strongly” and another 23% who say they feel this “somewhat strongly.” Guilt appears to be less common. Only 17% of white respondents in the YouGov study report agreement with the statement that they feel guilt about their “association with the white race,” while a majority, 53%, “strongly disagree” with that statement. Similarly, only 13% report agreement that they feel guilt due to “white privilege,”

while 56% “strongly disagree.” This pattern, in which emotions related to sympathy are more commonly reported than guilt, is also found in the Mechanical Turk study (results available from the authors upon request), although in general the distribution of responses is somewhat more pro-black among the Mechanical Turk sample. This is consistent with our expectation that guilt about racial inequality is less common than white sympathy for blacks; the negative, inward-focused emotion of guilt is more psychologically costly.

Next, the sympathy questions are combined into one index and the guilt questions are combined into another (the questions are weighted equally in both cases). The indices demonstrate high internal consistency: the Cronbach’s alpha for the index of emotions related to sympathy ranges from 0.93 (YouGov) to 0.92 (Mechanical Turk), while the Cronbach’s alpha for the guilt index ranges from 0.80 (YouGov) to 0.82 (Mechanical Turk). Furthermore, and again consistent with expectations, the sympathy and guilt indices are moderately associated with each other: the Pearson’s correlation ranges from 0.45 (YouGov) to 0.41 (Mechanical Turk). (There is not room to report the result of factor analyses here; these indicate that the three sympathy questions load onto one dimension and the three guilt questions load onto another, consistent with the argument that these two sets of questions tap into two independent concepts.

To assess convergent validity, we examine correlates of sympathy and guilt in a series of ordinary least squares regressions (table of coefficient estimates not presented here). Given our argument that prejudice against blacks inhibits sympathy for blacks and guilt about racial inequality, we expect prejudice to be negatively related to pro-black attitudes. Moreover, given the differing racial agendas of the two parties (e.g., Valentino and Sears 2005), we expect Republicans and conservatives to be less likely to hold pro-black attitudes. The results are consistent with these expectations: old-fashioned racism (opposition to interracial marriage; see

Tesler 2013), Republican partisanship, and self-identification as conservative are negatively associated with sympathy for blacks and guilt. In order to assess the extent to which such pressures inflate self-reports of pro-black attitudes, we also examine the effects of trait propensity to act in accordance with social desirability pressures (Berinsky and Lavine 2012). In all four cases self-monitoring is positively associated with reported pro-black attitudes; however, only one of the four coefficients is statistically significant. Finally, demographics do not have consistent predictive power; pro-black attitudes can be found across the social strata of respondents in both studies.

We now turn our attention to the possibility that pro-black attitudes influence policy opinion among whites. We examine both “explicitly racial” policies, those that specifically name blacks as beneficiaries, and “implicitly racial” policies, those that are ostensibly nonracial but have been shown to be linked to blacks in the public mind (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004 for a review). A series of ordinary least squares regression models are estimated in which the dependent variables are questions measuring policy opinion. The independent variables of interest are sympathy for blacks and guilt. The models differ somewhat across the studies: in the analyses of the YouGov sample, the controls consist of partisanship, ideology, and demographics: age, gender, marital status, region, and class identity. In the analyses of the Mechanical Turk sample, the controls are racial resentment, old-fashioned racism, partisanship, and demographics: age, gender, education, and income. The coefficient estimates are presented in Table 2; coefficients on control variables are suppressed.

**Table 2. Pro-Black Attitudes and Policy Opinion**  
*2a. YouGov Study*

	Welfare	Obamacare	Help Needy	Reduce Inequality
Sympathetic Emotions	0.09** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)
Guilt	0.24*** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.05)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)
Party ID (Republican)	-0.23*** (0.05)	-0.55*** (0.05)	-0.25*** (0.05)	-0.36*** (0.05)
Constant	0.56*** (0.07)	0.85*** (0.06)	0.59*** (0.06)	0.88*** (0.07)
N	585	586	586	586
R-squared	0.41	0.60	0.49	0.52

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.10$  (two-tailed); cell entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). All variables are coded from 0 to 1. The column headings indicate the dependent variables, which are questions about policy opinion. Coefficients on the following control variables are suppressed: ideology, age, gender, marital status, region, education, and class identity. White respondents only; all analyses are weighted for national representativeness.

*2b. Mechanical Turk Study*

	Aff. Action for Blacks	Govt. Aid to Blacks	Welfare	Death Penalty
Sympathetic Emotions	0.12*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)	-0.07 (0.05)
White Guilt	0.25*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.05 (0.05)
Old-fashioned racism	-0.28*** (0.04)	-0.42*** (0.03)	-0.38*** (0.04)	0.45*** (0.05)
Racial resentment	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.07* (0.04)
Party ID (Republican)	-0.09*** (0.03)	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.20*** (0.03)	0.21*** (0.04)
Constant	0.52*** (0.04)	0.62*** (0.03)	0.71*** (0.04)	0.17*** (0.05)
N	968	968	969	969
R-squared	0.36	0.50	0.38	0.24

Coefficients on the following control variables are suppressed: age, gender, education, and income. For other notes see Table 2a.

We begin with the two explicitly racial policies, affirmative action for blacks and government aid to blacks. After controls, sympathy and guilt have independent, strong positive associations with support for these policies. In all cases, the coefficient estimates are statistically

significant, and the magnitude of the effects is large, ranging from about one-seventh to about one-third of the scale. These findings are consistent with the expectation that pro-black attitudes bolster white support for policies intended to aid African Americans. We now turn to three ostensibly nonracial policies: health care policy, welfare, and the death penalty. While none of these policies exclusively affects blacks, prejudice against blacks has been shown to be associated with opinion about these policies. Similarly, we see a strong set of associations between pro-black attitudes and opinion about implicitly racial policy. With a couple of exceptions, the coefficients are in the expected direction and statistically significant: those whites high on sympathy and guilt are more likely to support welfare and Obamacare, and less likely to support the death penalty. Again the coefficients have substantively meaningful magnitudes, ranging from nearly one-tenth to over one-quarter of the scale.

Finally, we examine public opinion about two policy programs related to the economy that might plausibly be considered to be related to race: government actions to help the needy and government efforts to reduce inequality. In our view, to the extent that poverty is associated with blackness in political thinking, it is plausible that pro-black attitudes lead some people to support efforts to help the poor. Indeed, both sympathy and guilt appear to have independent effects, leading to support for these policy programs: all four coefficients are in the expected direction, three are statistically significant, and all of the statistically significant coefficients have meaningful magnitudes, ranging from over one-ninth to over one-quarter of the scale.

Finally, does Obama benefit from pro-black attitudes? While scholars agree that *negative* attitudes toward blacks hurt Obama, fewer studies provide evidence that *positive* attitudes toward blacks bolster support for Obama (e.g., Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010), and these studies typically rely on the controversial racial resentment scale. We now examine

associations in the YouGov sample between pro-black attitudes and evaluations of the 2012 presidential candidates. A series of ordinary least squares regression models are estimated in which the dependent variables are feeling thermometers for Obama and Romney. The independent variables of interest are sympathy for blacks and guilt, and the controls include partisanship, ideology, and demographics: age, gender, marital status, region, and class identity. The coefficient estimates are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Pro-Black Attitudes and White Evaluations of 2012 Presidential Candidates**  
(*YouGov Study*)

	Obama	Romney
Sympathetic Emotions	0.13*** (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)
Guilt	0.17*** (0.06)	-0.08 (0.05)
Party ID (Republican)	-0.56*** (0.06)	0.47*** (0.04)
Ideology (Conservative)	-0.34*** (0.07)	0.32*** (0.06)
Constant	0.78*** (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)
N	529	556
R-squared	0.59	0.52

*The column headings indicate the dependent variables, which are feeling thermometer scores. Coefficients on control variables are suppressed. For other notes see Table 2a.*

**Conclusion:** These results indicate that pro-black attitudes are powerfully associated with a wide range of political preferences, including evaluations of Obama, even after controlling for standard measures of racial prejudice. These consistent results, combined with the favorable results of the analysis of the validity of these measures, suggest that these pro-black attitudes constitute a cornerstone of American political attitudes and can be invoked across a diversity of policy considerations.

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