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2014 in Black & White: A Measure of Social Policy Attitudes

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2014 in Black & White: A Measure of Social Policy Attitudes

Femi Stoltz

Attitudes

Introduction

In American society, various social and antipoverty policies remain highly controversial among American voters. As one might expect, the relevance of race in relation to such policies can also be quite controversial. Incorporated within this research is an investigation of political attitudes and policy preferences of American voters. Using affirmative action and state welfare spending as dependent variables, I gauge the effects of respondents' race and party identification on policy preferences and other behavior patterns. This measure of attitudes will contribute to a further understanding of race, social and antipoverty policies, and the ways in which these variables interact within the American political system.

Both affirmative action and welfare spending are hot-button political topics among both white and black Americans, though not necessarily for the same reasons. Affirmative action programs tend to lack the support of white voters, as a vast majority of white Americans believe that preferential treatment of minorities is unfair to whites (Swain, 2006). In opposition, as beneficiaries, black voters are more likely to be supportive of such policies. Overall, blacks also tend to be more favorable of redistributive programs than whites; this means that there exists a higher likelihood that black voters will be supportive of social initiatives that include efforts such as increasing state welfare spending than will white voters (Swain, 2006).

Literature Review

Affirmative Action

There are many Americans who agree that hiring and other personnel actions should be based exclusively on individuals' qualifications or merit relevant to the given position (Nigro & Kellough, 2013). This could perhaps be one reason why affirmative action policies themselves help to embody racist assumptions about minorities (MacDonald, 1993). When policies become entangled with race, individuals may begin to feel more strongly about those policies, as individual opinions on race are typically more tenaciously held, along with being more difficult to alter (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

Policies which provide for preference in hiring and recruitment practices often lead to racial resentment as non-beneficiaries feel cheated and thus lose motivation (Heilman, 1996). Additionally, the fact that affirmative action gives priority to race over class has only seemed to exacerbate white racism (Kahlenberg, 1995). That is to say that there is a strong belief among whites that if affirmative action policies should exist, the policies should be based on class or income, rather than race or ethnicity (Kahlenberg, 1995). Inevitably, this leaves room for resentment to fester among whites who feel that they are being unduly disadvantaged by the policies.

Other studies regarding the general public's support for affirmative action have found that whites oppose affirmative action policies designed to benefit blacks more than they do affirmative action policies designed to benefit women and individuals with physical or mental disabilities (Wilkins & Wenger, 2014). Despite the fact that a majority of whites endorse racial equality in principle, they do not support public policies in which their main premise is to reduce racial inequality (Banks & Valentino). Support for federal efforts to improve the socioeconomic status of blacks is already lackluster to begin with, but when a policy explicitly provides for special "breaks" for black Americans, white support crumbles (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Whites typically lack support for such policies and are reluctant to support measures to provide more resources to blacks due to resentment (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

H1) White Americans will be less supportive affirmative action policies

Black Americans seem to be attached to affirmative action programs and feel that the policies have been somewhat beneficial to blacks (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). However, blacks also believe that they continue to be discriminated against, and they also largely do not believe that they would be hired or promoted while an equally qualified white person is denied a position or promotion (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Given this interpretation of their current conditions, blacks are more supportive of government policies to reduce racial inequities and otherwise enhance opportunities for blacks in America (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Additionally, as blacks believe that racism still impedes the process of finding work in America, they are more likely to support government regulation of discriminatory practices in the hiring and promotion processes (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

Prior to the implementation of affirmative action programs, the black middle class was much smaller, consisting of insignificant numbers of businessmen and other professionals (Steinberg, 1996). However, the number of black Americans now living in the middle class has since risen, an increase that can be directly attributed to the implementation of affirmative action policies (Steinberg, 1996). As black Americans wish to see a continued rise in the number of black business professionals, it is logical that they support government initiatives that will assist in increasing that number. Black voters are more supportive of these types of procedures because they feel that the policies are directly related to their race (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

H2) Black Americans will be more likely to support affirmative action policies

State Welfare Spending

Welfare policies remain quite controversial among American voters today as well. A major reason for this controversy stems from the “stereotype of blacks being lazy [which] has a long history in American culture and is [still] implicated in both media portrayals and public attitudes toward poverty and government antipoverty policy” in American society today (Gilens, 173). Welfare policy remains heavily

associated with blacks, despite the fact that most welfare recipients are not black (Gilens). Americans do not like the idea of able-bodied individuals getting assistance from the government when they could be working, and since welfare remains linked to blacks, the policies continue to be frowned upon by a large number of white Americans.

Many whites accept the racist assumption of blacks being lazy due to the fact that they believe that the American economic system is fair. In this belief, the fact blacks remain far behind whites on nearly all wealth indicators is assumed to be due to their work ethic or lack thereof (Gilens, 2000). White Americans specifically perceive blacks as being the most significant minority group among welfare recipients, and their attitudes toward welfare are far more strongly influenced by negative perceptions of blacks than by perceptions of other ethnic groups in the U.S. (Gilens, 2000). This assumption of blacks being lazy also appeals to whites’ justification of the remaining economic advantages that whites have in American society today.

Whites’ opposition to welfare and other social policies also plays an important role in how politicians work toward addressing these issues. For example, when party leaders believe that their support of social policies designed to integrate blacks into American society will lead to a loss of votes among key white voters, their support for the social policy at hand diminishes (Frymer, 2010). Party leaders have an incentive to appeal solely to the majority group of whites, thus keeping the minority group in a position in which they are denied effective access to power and other forms of fundamental decision-making (Frymer, 2010). Instead of creating a nonracial political system, our current system legitimates an agenda that is reflective of the preferences of white voters (Frymer, 2010). This means that the association of certain policies with minorities will also be associated with a lack of support from white voters.

H3) White Americans will not be supportive of increased state welfare spending

Unemployment disproportionately affects blacks in America, with labor statistics frequently showing the black unemployment rate

to be as much as triple the rate of their white counterparts (Swain, 2006). With the disparate number of black Americans living under such conditions, blacks will be more likely to be supportive of social policies designed to help individuals who live at or below the poverty line in America. Minority groups tend to hold more supportive views of government assistance and redistributive policies than do whites (Bowler & Segura, 2011). Additionally, citizens' personal experiences with welfare tend to affect their political attitudes and behavior (Dalton & Klingemann, 2009). As many blacks remain fiscally disadvantaged, their support for antipoverty policies could be due to an association with their own past or present experiences, or even the personalization of the experiences of someone they know. In any event, blacks tend to hold consistently liberal positions with regards to redistributive policies (Bowler & Segura, 2011).

As blacks fall behind whites with regards to access to wealth across a variety of indicators, it makes sense that black voters would be supportive of policies which may ultimately contribute to the overall well-being of black Americans. Additionally, it should also be noted that black and white Americans have yet more differences when gauging whether the economic situation of blacks has changed in America, whether there exist more opportunities for blacks, and whether racism in America has declined (Swain, 2006). Furthermore, blacks tend to feel that the government is morally obligated to provide entitlement programs and are thus more supportive of a government-ensured standard of living (Swain, 2006).

H4) Black voters will be more supportive of increased state welfare spending

Research Methods

To assess attitudes toward controversial policies, I use the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to apply a variety of statistical analyses to a national stratified sample of respondents. The CCES is administered by YouGov/Polimetrix and consists of two waves during election years. During the pre-election wave, administered late September to late October, voters answer two thirds of the questionnaire questions. Respondents are asked

multiple questions about their demographics, political attitudes, assessment of roll call voting choices, and other political information during this phase. During the post-election wave, voters answer the remainder of the questions from the questionnaire, which mainly focus on the outcome of the recently passed election. This post-election wave occurs in November. Additional surveys collected in non-election years consist of a single wave, occurring in the early fall. ("Cooperative Congressional Election Study," 2015).

With access to CCES data, I ran crosstabs using my dependent and independent variables of interest to assess the statistical significance of specific relationships. In the case of affirmative action, respondents were given a 4-point Likert scale with options ranging from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose" and asked to rate how they felt about affirmative action policies (see Table 1 - AA). In addition to using race as an independent variable, race was also cross-tabulated with party identification for further assessment (see Table 2 - AA/PID). With regards to state welfare spending, participants were given a 5-point Likert scale, in which they were able to choose from options ranging from "greatly increase" to "greatly decrease," and were asked what they felt their state should do about their state's current welfare spending budget (see Table 3 - SWS). Additionally, I again took into account both race and party identification, to assess the roles and relevance of each of these independent variables relevant to the dependent variable, state welfare spending (see Table 4 - SWS/PID).

Findings

Affirmative Action Policies

With regards to affirmative action (AA) policies, I assessed responses from respondents who identified as white (N=1,827) and respondents who identified as black (N=314). After weighting the data, I found race to be a statistically significant factor ($p < 0.001$) in Americans' support for AA policies. 29% of white respondents stated that they were supportive of AA policies while the remaining 71% said they opposed such policies. In opposition, 87% of black respondents supported AA policies, while only 13% opposed the

policies. This means that there does, in fact, exist a higher likelihood that white Americans will express opposition to AA policies and practices. On the other hand, it also means that there exists a higher likelihood that black Americans will be supportive of such policies. A brief explanation for the variation in support for AA policies between the two races is that black voters associate such policies with their race while white voters do not, leading to resentment from the non-beneficiaries, white voters (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

When party identification of white voters is taken into account, there still exists a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$). Of white Democrats, 51% were supportive of AA policies; 24% of white Independents were supportive of the policies; and only 17% of white Republicans reported that they supported AA policies. Essentially, it is notable that party affiliation is also an indicator of whether white Americans will be supportive of AA practices. I found that whites that associate themselves with the Democratic Party are the most likely to be supportive of AA, with just over half of respondents being in support of AA policies. Meanwhile, I found support from both white Independents and white Republicans to be lackluster, with less than a quarter of respondents supporting AA in either case.

Party ID was nearly a statistically significant factor in blacks' support for AA policies ($p = 0.17$) as well. Taking into account party ID of black respondents, I found that 85% of black Democrats were supportive of AA policies, 94% of black independents supported such policies, and 96% of black Republicans reported that they supported AA. As suspected, black voters showed more overall support for AA practices. However, it was surprising to find that blacks who identified as Republicans and Independents were the most supportive of AA policies, being more supportive than black Democrats by 9-11%. This finding is contrary to what I found among white voters when assessing attitudes toward AA and taking party ID into account.

State Welfare Spending

In assessing attitudes on state welfare spending, I again

evaluate responses from white and black voters ($N = 2,178$). I found that there exists a statistically significant relationship between race and attitudes toward state welfare spending ($p < 0.001$). Of white voters, 19% stated that they believe their state should increase welfare spending; 34% said their state's welfare spending should remain the same; and, 47% believed that their state should decrease welfare spending. With nearly half of white respondents believing that their state should opt to decrease state welfare spending, there is room to speculate that the distaste for welfare spending is largely due to their belief that lazy, undeserving, and presumably black welfare recipients are the only individuals benefitting from an increase in state welfare spending.

With regards to welfare spending, 56% of black voters said that their state should increase welfare spending; 33% reported that they felt their state's welfare spending should remain be maintained as it currently is, and only 10% felt that welfare spending should decrease. In this instance, over half of all black respondents would like to see their state of residence increase its welfare spending. The higher level of support from black voters could again be due to the association of such policies with their race and the belief that an increase in welfare spending in their state could contribute to an increased standard of living for black Americans who are in need of assistance (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

When taking party identification of white voters into account, I found that party ID also plays a significant role in attitudes toward welfare policy as well ($p < 0.001$). Of white Democrats, 35% said they felt state welfare spending should increase, 46% believed that it should be maintained as it is presently, and 19% said they thought welfare spending should decrease. Of white Independents, 18% believed welfare spending should increase, 34% felt it should stay the same, and 48% said it should decrease. Of white Republicans, just 8% said state welfare spending should increase, 22% reported that it should be maintained as it presently is, and 70% believed that it should be decreased. As previous research has revealed in the past, I too have found that both conservatism and identification with the Republican Party contribute to opposition to welfare policies (Gilens, 2000).

There was a nearly significant relationship between party ID and attitudes toward welfare spending for black voters as well ($p < 0.10$). Of black Democrats, 57% believed that their state should increase welfare spending, 33% believed it should be maintained, and only 10% felt it should be decreased. Of black Independents, 42% said they felt that state welfare spending should increase, 47% thought it should be maintained, and 12% thought it should decrease. Of black Republicans, 74% said they believed state welfare spending should increase, 11% said the current spending should be maintained, and 14% said their state should decrease welfare spending. Again, to my surprise, I found black Republicans to be more supportive of a social policy that is largely associated with the Democratic Party. However, overall, blacks are more supportive of increased welfare spending than are whites, regardless of political party identification.

Implications & Conclusion

After having conducted the necessary research to assess my hypotheses, I found that all four of my hypothesis have held true. With regards to H1, I have found that white voters are indeed less supportive of affirmative action policies, though white Democrats are somewhat more supportive of such practices. In assessing H2, I have also found that black voters are more supportive of affirmative action policies. Moving on to H3, I have found a lack of support for increased state welfare spending among white Americans. Finally, I have also found that black Americans are more supportive of increasing state welfare spending in their respective states of residence.

One potential flaw in this research is the fact that I did not take into consideration the geographic location of respondents. While I am not certain if respondents' state or region of residence would have been a statistically significant indicator as to their feelings regarding the two dependent variables, one could argue about likelihood of support variation from state to state, or region to region. Additionally, I did not formulate hypotheses about the role of party identification relevant to my dependent variables of study, though I believe that my findings with regards to party ID are consistent with

what current researchers of race and politics would have expected to find with regards to the responses of white voters. In opposition, some of my findings are contrary to what I expected to find when assessing the responses of black voters and taking their party identification into consideration. With regards to both affirmative action and state welfare spending, I found black Republicans to be more supportive than black Democrats, a phenomena that I was unable to investigate further, and thus am unable to explain.

I have found that as of the 2014 midterm election, there still exist stark differences with how black and white Americans view different social policies, including affirmative action and state welfare spending. As each group views the policies differently, it is not a surprise that these controversial social policies have varied support among white and black voters, as well as along partisan lines. Whether individuals support or oppose such policies, it remains imperative that researchers continue to measure and understand the reasoning behind such attitudes. While individuals may have their minds firmly made up as to how they feel with regards to race or social policies, current research and relevant literature can often be the only way for individuals of one group to encounter the reasoning behind the feelings and perspectives of individuals who belong to the other group.

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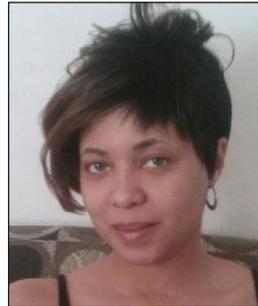
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About the Author



Femi Stoltz is a graduating senior majoring in Political Science and minoring in Civic Education and Community Leadership. During the time she took off between completing high school and beginning college, Femi became heavily involved in civic engagement. As a mother and full-time honors student, she remains dedicated to community service. Femi is a former AmeriCorps Student Leader in Service and continues to devote herself to encouraging others to become politically and civically engaged. Femi's research was conducted during the summer of 2015 with the guidance of her mentor, Dr. Melinda Tarsi (Political Science) and funding support from the Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research. She presented her research findings at BSU's 2016 Student Arts & Research Symposium and the 2016 Massachusetts Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference at UMass-Amherst. Femi intends to pursue further research on educational policy, political polarization, and antipoverty policies. Femi expects to pursue graduate school immediately after completion of her baccalaureate program and plans to use her knowledge of public administration and political science to assist disenfranchised citizens in the greater community.

Table 1 - AA

Affirmative Action	White	Black
Strongly support	7%	48%
Somewhat support	22%	39%
Somewhat oppose	26%	10%
Strongly oppose	45%	4%
	N=1,827	N=314

N= 2,492

p<0.001

*weighted data

Table 1 - AA/PID

Affirmative Action	White			Black		
	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Strongly Support	15%	3%	4%	52%	16%	43%
Somewhat support	36%	14%	20%	33%	80%	51%
Somewhat oppose	29%	22%	26%	11%	4%	4%
Strongly oppose	21%	61%	50%	4%	0%	3%
	p < 0.001			p= 0.17		

Table 1 - SWS

State Welfare Spending	White	Black
Greatly increase	6%	23%
Slightly increase	13%	33%
Maintain	34%	33%
Slightly Decrease	23%	6%
Greatly Decrease	24%	4%

N= 2,178 p= <0.001 *weighted data

Table 1 - SWS/PID

Welfare*	White			Black		
	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Greatly increase	13%	3%	4%	19%	8%	21%
Slightly Increase	22%	5%	14%	38%	66%	21%
Maintain	46%	22%	34%	33%	11%	47%
Slightly Decrease	13%	30%	25%	5%	5%	10%
Greatly decrease	6%	40%	23%	5%	9%	2%
	p<0.001			p<0.10		