

ABSTRACT

Literature: In Martin Gilens’ book, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, he argues that public opinion for welfare programs varies based on the public’s perception of who the poor are and why they are poor—expressing public opinion’s differing affinity for the “deserving” and “undeserving.” He specifically posits that perceptions of racial minority groups affect how Americans view the U.S. welfare system.

Problem: The existing literature proposes various explanations for why Americans tend to be opposed to government assistance programs, but none test the magnitude of the impact any specific factor has on opposition to welfare.

Research Question: what are the group dynamics that determine opposition to welfare policy in the United States? Is race in fact a predominant determinant? Do different group dynamics affect opinion toward various types of welfare assistance programs differently?

Hypotheses:
(1) Participants will be less likely to support welfare policies when they believe they benefit racial minorities
(2) Participants will be more likely to support welfare policies when they benefit members of their own racial/ethnic group over those not of their ingroup

Findings: I do not find evidence to support Gilens’ and others’ claims that race is a dominant factor in how individuals determine who is deserving of welfare assistance and general support for welfare policies. In fact, for the overall sample, participants were generally more likely to choose profiles of welfare recipients who were identified as ‘Black or African American’ and ‘Native American’ than profiles listed as ‘White or Caucasian’.

Table 1. Example of set of welfare candidate profiles seen by respondents in the second part of the survey.

	Person A	Person B
Age	25 years old	45 years old
Gender	Female	Male
Marital Status	Married, but separated	Single
Race/ethnicity	White/Caucasian	Black/African American
Location of residence	Massachusetts	Texas
Circumstance surrounding need for welfare assistance	Requires assistance for young children	Unemployed for 1 year
Type of assistance desired	Food stamps	Housing voucher

METHODOLOGY & DATA

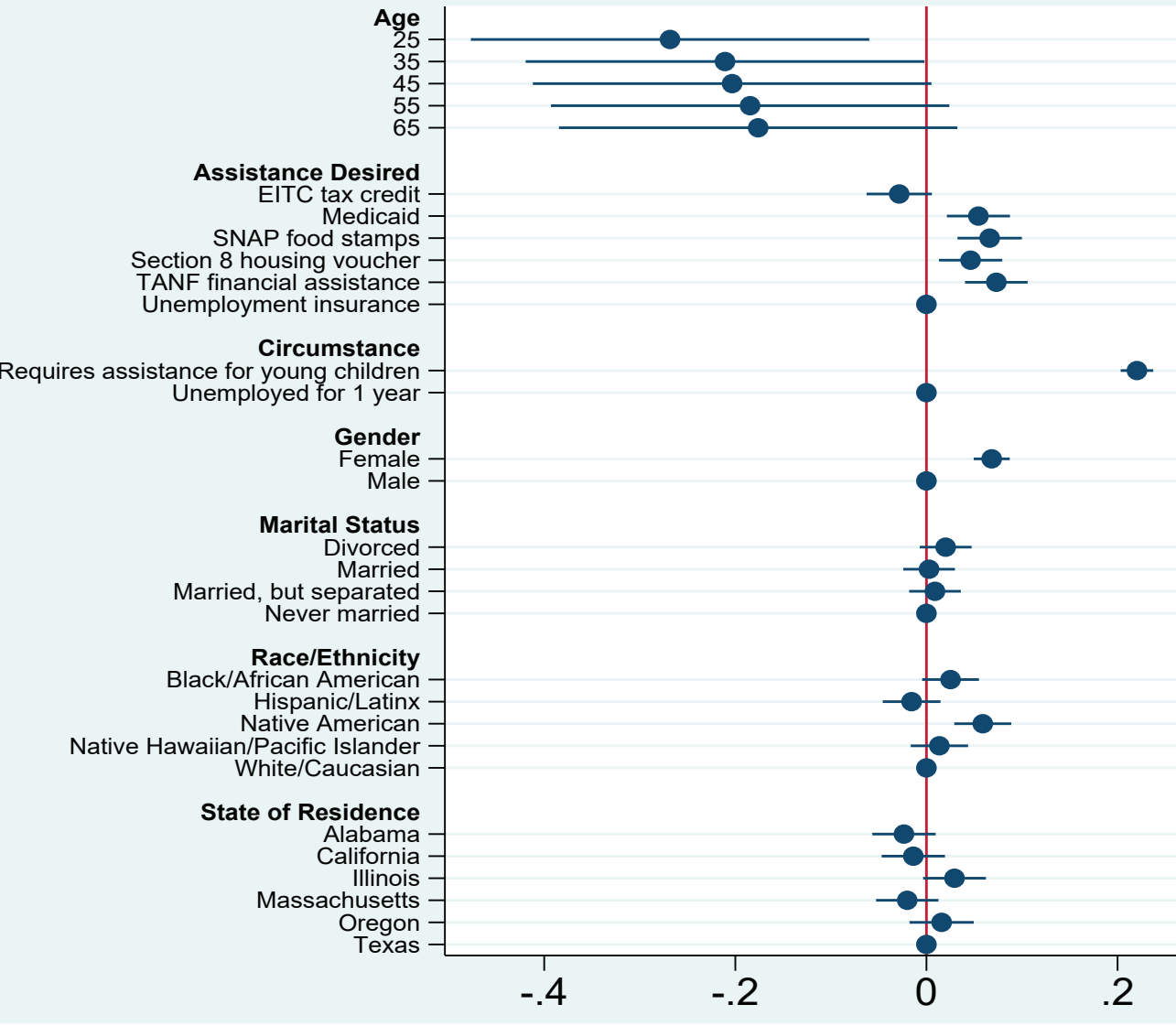
I conducted a survey experiment to analyze public attitudes toward randomly generated welfare candidate profiles. Conducted through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, gauged 992 participants’ views on current issues in the United States, and views about the characteristics of welfare recipients through a conjoint survey experiment.

Conjoint Experiment: For my conjoint survey experiment, I used an application to randomly generate welfare recipient profiles as seen in Table 1 above for each participant. Participants were instructed to choose either which candidate (Person A or B) they would like to support. The conjoint method is unique in its ability to randomizing the characteristics of the profiles that survey participants’ see, and prevents social desirability bias. This experiment component was then followed by questions measuring participants’ feelings about issues of economic inequality, racial inequality, representation in government, and preference for the role of the federal government; as well as general participant demographic characteristics.

Regressions: I organized survey data by each profile that each participant saw, giving me 10 observations per participant (for a total of 9,920 observations of profiles chosen and not chosen). Each profile that was chosen was coded as “1” and the profiles that were not chosen out of a set were coded as “0”. This allowed me to run logistic regressions to calculate the probability of any profile being chosen by participants with each characteristic I specified. I then compared the probabilities of different profile features to determine whether participants had significant bias against profiles for being listed with certain characteristics.

$$"chosen" = \beta_0 + \beta_1(age_1 = 25) + \beta_2(age_2 = 35) + \beta_3(age_3 = 45) + \beta_4(age_4 = 55) + \dots + \varepsilon$$

Figure 1. Probabilities of individual characteristics being supported for welfare for the entire survey sample.



MAIN FINDINGS

- Hypothesis (1): Not supported
- Participants were overall more 2.5% likely to choose a Black/African American welfare candidate over White/Caucasian, as well as 6% more likely to choose a Native American welfare candidate (see Figure 1)
- Hypothesis (2): Mixed evidence - weak support
- White participants selected against Hispanic and Latinx individuals for welfare programs (-4%) and positively select Native American profiles (+4%), in comparison to white profiles (see Figure 2 - Whites).
 - Non-white participants were more likely to select a welfare candidate who was also identified as belonging to a racial minority (+11.2% for Black/African American, +5.8% for Hispanic/Latinx candidates) (see Figure 2 - Non-whites)
 - Black/African American participants were 11.8% more likely to choose profiles identified as Black/African American (see Figure 3)
 - No significant effect of Hispanic/Latinx participants likelihood of choosing Hispanic/Latinx profiles.

Figure 2. Probabilities of individual characteristics being supported for welfare, by white vs non-white participants

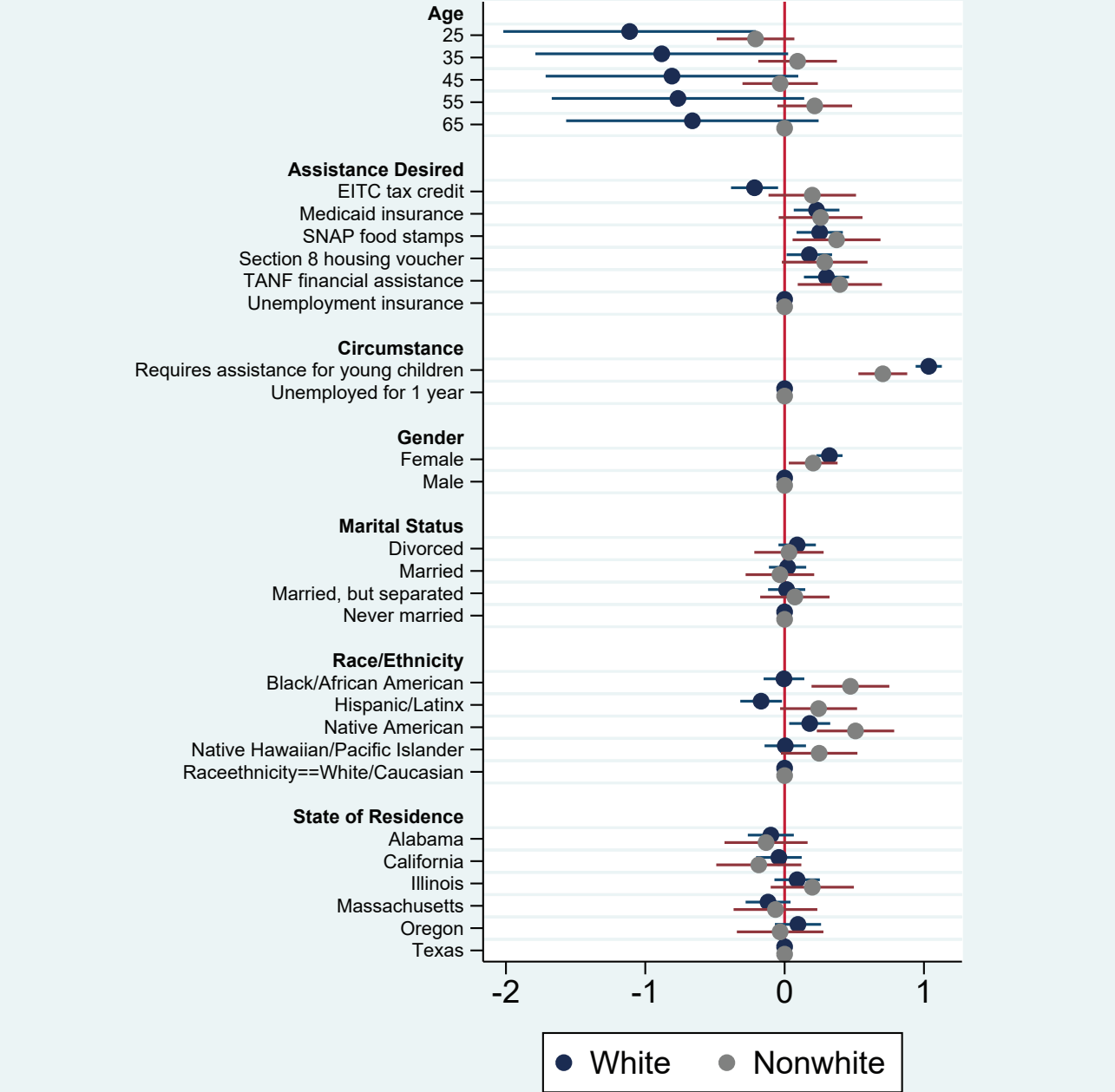
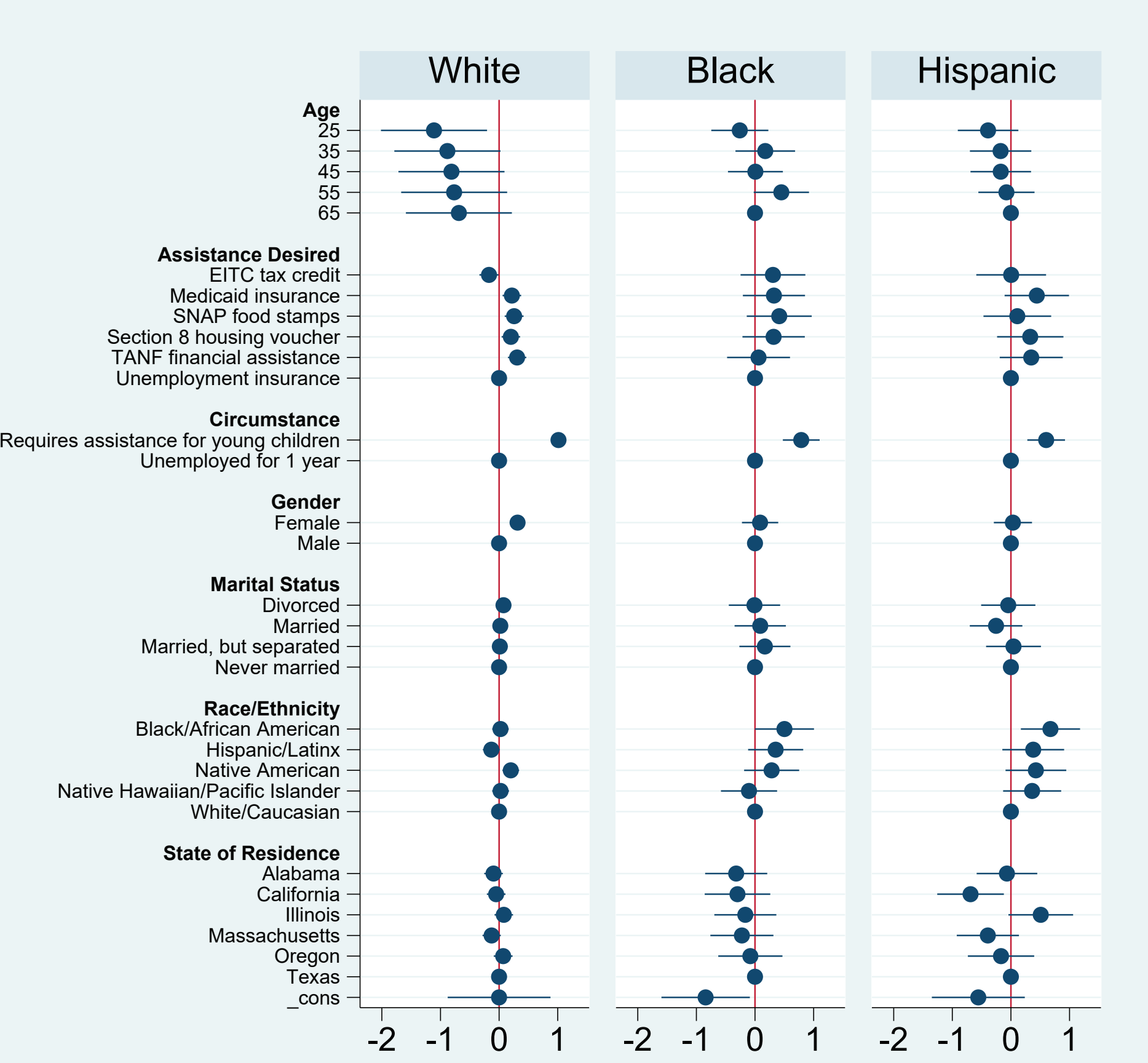


Figure 3. Probabilities of individual characteristics being supported for welfare, by participant race.



OTHER INTERESTING RESULTS

- Participants were 5.4% more likely to support a welfare candidate if their profile showed their desired Assistance program as Medicaid, 6.6% more likely if the profile showed SNAP, 4.6% more likely if the profile showed Section 8 Housing, and 7.3% more likely if the profile showed TANF (EITC made a profile more likely to not be chosen)
- Democrat participants were more likely to support most types of welfare programs, while Republicans were not statistically likely to support any specific program more than the average survey participant.
- Survey participants who desired a small role for the federal government were significantly less likely to choose a Black/African American welfare candidate over a white one.
- Participants who felt least represented by federal government were more likely to support Black/African American welfare candidates over white ones.

CONCLUSIONS & CONTRIBUTION

Although race may play a partial role in perceptions of welfare deservingness by members of the American public, there is no evidence to conclude that racial bias is the strongest or even one of the strongest factors that affects how Americans view welfare and those who receive government assistance.

While there are select instances of race having an effect on how certain groups of individuals determine welfare deservingness of potential beneficiaries, the general effects of perceptions about the government seem to complicate the race effect and may indicate that racial biases themselves are not necessarily a dominant factor on their own.

The evidence presented in this study contradicts the current literature, namely Gilens’ 1999 book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, suggesting that racial/ethnic biases are not the primary motivator for negative support of the American welfare state.