

An Exploration of the Activation of Sympathy in Relation to Economic Inequality and the Poor

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Abstract

As economic inequality in the United States continues to increase, the ways in which Americans cope with and conceptualize the issue itself as well as the disadvantaged groups affected by it have become increasingly salient features of their political attitudes. While important research has been done, particularly by Bartels (2009), showing that Americans share widespread consensus that economic inequality is a negative feature of American society and that Americans do not harbor any innate antipathy towards the poor, more work needs to be done to understand what activates Americans' sympathy for the poor. This study, building on Burden and Klobstad's (2005) assessment into the effects of cognitive and affective priming, seeks to understand how issue and subgroup framing alters political expression. I find that the use of the word "feel" in survey questions—as opposed to the word "think"—makes respondents more likely to hold poor subgroups less accountable for their economic circumstances. However, this differential outcome does not manifest when applied to policy-based questions. This indicates that invoking person- or group-based arguments along with affective signifiers shows the best promise for activating sympathy for the poor among Americans.

Hypotheses

H₁: Respondents will, on average, show greater sympathy for the economically disadvantaged when the questions are framed affectively rather than cognitively.

H₂: Respondents will, on average, hold poor black Americans more accountable for their economic fate when the question is asked before a corresponding question about poor white Americans.

H₃: Respondents will correctly answer factual questions at higher rates when the questions are framed cognitively rather than affectively.

Method

Table 1: List of Experimental Survey Questions

1. How do you [think/feel] the level of economic inequality in the United States has changed over the past fifty years?
2. "Welfare fraud" describes when individuals misuse welfare benefits. How big of a problem do you [think/feel] welfare fraud is in the United States today?
3. How much do you [think/feel] poor black Americans are to blame for their economic fate?*
4. How much do you [think/feel] poor white Americans are to blame for their economic fate?*
5. Do you [think/feel] the government should do more or less than it currently does to address economic inequality?
6. Do you [think/feel] the federal government should do more or less than it currently does to provide healthcare for those who can't afford it?
* Indicates the two questions subject to random experimental ordering

Results

Sample

Table 2: Demographic Breakdown of the Sample with Consideration of Attrition

	Sample		U.S. Population* N=323,127,513
	(1) Question 1 957	(2) Question 6 931	
Race			
% White	69.07	68.74	76.9
% Black	11.70	11.82	13.3
% Asian	3.76	3.87	5.7
% Native American	0.94	0.97	1.3
% Hispanic	13.58	13.75	17.8**
% Other	0.94	0.86	2.6***
Gender			
% Female	49.84	50.48	50.80
% Male	50.16	49.52	49.20
Income			
% Low (\$0-30,000)	21.73	21.70	40.2
% Middle (\$30,001-75,000)	41.27	40.81	39.4
% High (\$75,001+)	36.99	37.49	20.4

* Data on the U.S. population is sourced from the United States Census Bureau for the year 2016.
 ** The U.S. Census Bureau defines this category as "Hispanic or Latino," and respondents are not unintentionally primed, as they are here, to conceptualize this identity as totally distinct from other racial categories.
 *** The U.S. Census Bureau defines this category as "Two or More Races," which respondents may have interpreted differently than the category of "Other" used here.

Table 3: Effects of First Treatment Dimension on Attitudes Towards the Economic Culpability of Poor Racial Subgroups

	Effects of First Treatment Dimension		
	(1) Poor whites	(2) Poor blacks	(3) Difference
Think	2.420 (.044)	2.489 (.045)	-0.069
Feel	2.611 (.044)	2.630 (.046)	-0.019
Difference	-0.191** p=0.0022	-0.141* p=0.0275	-0.050

* Statistical significance at p < 0.05
 ** Statistical significance at p < 0.005
 Standard errors reported in parentheses.
 Scale of 1 ("A great deal" of responsibility for economic fate) to 4 ("None at all").

Table 4: Effects of Second Treatment Dimension on Attitudes Towards the Economic Culpability of Poor Racial Subgroups

	Second Treatment Dimension		Difference
	(1) Poor whites	(2) Poor blacks	
White first	2.572 (.044)	2.530 (.045)	0.042
Black first	2.459 (.045)	2.589 (.045)	-0.130
Difference	0.113 †	-0.060 ‡	

† p = 0.070
 ‡ p = 0.349
 Standard errors reported in parentheses.
 Scale of 1 ("A great deal" of responsibility for economic fate) to 4 ("None at all").

Table A1: Effects of Second Treatment Dimension on Attitudes Towards Poor Racial Subgroups, Split by First Treatment Dimension (See Table 4)

	Poor whites		Poor blacks	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Think	Feel	Think	Feel
White first	2.502 (.062)	2.643 (.061)	2.481 (.063)	2.579 (.063)
Black first	2.338 (.061)	2.579 (.062)	2.498 (.063)	2.681 (.065)
Difference	0.165*	0.063	-0.017	-0.102

* Statistical significance at only p < 0.1

Table 5: Effects of the First Treatment Dimension on Policy-Based Survey Questions

	Fact-Based		Opinion-Based	
	(1) Δ inequality	(2) Welfare fraud	(3) Fight inequality	(4) Healthcare
	Scale	Scale	Scale	Scale
Think	2.788 (.071)	1.857 (.042)	2.620 (.068)	2.406 (.075)
Feel	2.950 (.077)	1.876 (.042)	2.510 (.074)	2.400 (.074)
Difference	-0.162 †	-0.020 ‡	.110 §	.006
Average	2.868	1.866	2.565	2.403

† p = 0.121
 ‡ p = 0.743
 § p = 0.272
 || p = 0.957

Findings

1. Limited support for H1. Respondents did exhibit greater sympathy for the poor in response to subgroup-based questions but not policy-based questions.
2. Rejection of H2: This analysis did not find that question-order priming impacted responses to questions about poor racial subgroups.
3. Rejection of H3: Cognitive or affective framing did not impact responses to factual questions at a statistically significant level.

Conclusions

- Policymakers and elites may find it challenging to achieve success at mobilizing public sympathy for policy proposals that do not invoke pertinent groups of people, even if those policies are intended to help those people. This isn't to say that mass support for issues is generated out of subgroup appeal, but that reliance on sympathy as an energizing influence is intractable in purely policy-oriented discussions.
- Respondents here were more susceptible to affective framing when asked questions that pertained to particular groups of people, in this case economically disadvantaged racial subgroups. However, policy-based questions did not result in statistically significant, or even directionally expected, divergences in attitudinal expression based on cognitive versus affective priming.

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