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# RACE, JUSTICE, AND PUBLIC OPINION UNDERSTANDING THE CONTINUING AMERICAN DILEMMA

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I have never learned in all the fifty-six years of my life to keep my mouth shut when something arises which offends either my sense of justice and fair play or violates the principles of democracy. . . .

— Jesse Daniel Ames<sup>1</sup> (1935)

## Introduction

Preparing for this introductory essay of the special issue on “Race, Justice, and Public Opinion” led us to the archives of *Public Opinion Quarterly*. We searched for *POQ*’s first published work focused centrally on race and found “Editorial Treatment of Lynchings” by Jessie Daniel Ames, published more than eight decades ago in 1938 (vol. 2, no. 1), *POQ*’s second year in existence. Ames was the director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation’s (CIC) Women’s Committee, and during her time in that position she founded (in 1930) the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). At the time, the editors of *POQ* (“Quarterly”), DeWitt Clinton Poole, Harwood Childs, and Datus C. Smith Jr., were expressly

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1. Papers of Jessie Daniel Ames while head of the CIC and ASWPL, including personal correspondence, speeches, publications, and association records from 1930 to 1944, are held as part of the Southern Historical Collection archives in the Wilson Library, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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interested in contributing “to the study of the nature and work of public opinion in the contemporary world.” Ames’s work on racial justice was ahead of its time in terms of theory and method, as she personally visited the scenes of more than 20 lynchings, interviewing the people who attended them, including newspaper editors, and collecting editorials from local papers and the dailies in the states in which the lynchings took place. Rather than focusing on the hate inherent in lynching another human being, she sought explanations for why seemingly neutral observers of injustice tolerated such acts. We were struck by the prowess of Ames’s approach, and marveled at how neatly her work fit with *POQ*’s stated purposes at the time and the goals of our special issue some 84 years later. The Ames article is reprinted and appears as the final article in this special issue.

Ames discovered that newspaper editors who regularly attended lynchings and published stories detailing the events appeared to walk a tightrope: distance themselves from violent mobs that did not represent the paper’s views but also give credence to the lynchings committed by their neighbors and associates, casting the acts as laudable efforts by people simply trying to protect their way of life. Today, social scientists might use terms like moral disengagement (Bandura 2002), system justification (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004), legitimizing beliefs (Glaser 2005), social dominance (Sidanius et al. 2004), and motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990) to describe the editors’ thinking, and their willingness to present such arguments to the public, thereby shaping popular opinions. In essence, while editors despised the violence of lynching, they did not appear to despise the violence of the lynchers.

Ames noted the contradiction, and identified a pattern whereby editors seemed to couch their opinions about, and acceptance of, racial violence in their beliefs about justice. To editors, who mostly abhorred lynching, the lynchers were “just” in their actions to maintain law and order. Citing a statistical majority who felt this way, Ames explained that editors themselves are “caught in the general atmosphere of a given trade territory, [where the editors of the papers] do not reflect their own ideas but those of the people upon whose goodwill their papers depend for revenue” (1938, p. 78). Perhaps unknowingly, the editors enabled and rationalized actions they seemingly did not personally support. This allowed editors to absolve themselves of responsibility because they were not doing the harm, they were simply reporting the facts as they saw them.

As scholars of race and public opinion, we noted the irony of these points as resonant with a more contemporary and common mantra articulated by leaders and everyday people alike who are seeking to justify their rational points in the context of racial commentary: “I’m not a racist, but . . .” (e.g., Blum 2019; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Davis and Wilson 2022). Among its contributions, Ames’s (1938) research highlighted two related and relevant points. First, there are racial explanations for racial inequality

and injustice that are not *only* grounded in racism and prejudice. This does not mean hate is not part of the equation. Instead, it points to how individuals may be complicit in the maintenance of injustice without understanding why. Second, it was clear the majority of editors interviewed by Ames believed in the rules, norms, and practices of a system that in their opinion did not need adjustment. This provided editors with a way to detangle lynchings from the lynchers. It was clear to Ames, and clear to us as readers of her article, that it does not matter if one has racial hatred or not: an exclusive focus on hatred toward groups as the driving force may overlook other system and situational factors in the political mind that influence opinions about race.

Ames (1938) pointed to the Scottsboro case as capturing a new way—at the time—to justify lynchings: delays in court procedure, the uncertainty of punishment, and loopholes in the law. In short, official justice was not working as it should. The details of the Scottsboro case are tragic and far too great to document (see Kennedy 1997), but in short, nine black males ranging from 12 to 20 years old (the “Scottsboro boys”) were falsely accused of raping two White women. After 16 trials, two US Supreme Court reversals, as many as four series of death sentences, and prison terms ranging from 6 to nearly 17 years, even objective editors seemed to disregard that the Scottsboro males were denied a semblance of justice. Instead, they gave great weight to mob opinion about what was just and what rules should determine justice. Ames’s work reveals that the reliance on justice can rationalize the violent treatment of victims, while at the same time intensify support for an informal system where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Therefore, justice may exist as the connector between thinking about racial groups, rationalization for how they are treated, and the (un)willingness to undertake actions that might lead to change. That is, for some, a just system does not need changing, and a status quo way of life should be protected at all costs, even if it means disregarding democratic rights and liberties.

The epigraph of our essay not only characterizes Ames, but we believe it also characterizes *POQ*, its original editors, its mission, and attempts to continue to study and understand the contemporary world. Ames and the *POQ* enterprise equally shared a commitment to democracy through public comment and free expression, evidence-supported knowledge, and empowering truth and justice.

## **Race, Justice, and Public Opinion Today**

The research by Ames grounded us as editors to seek research touching upon what she saw some 84 years ago: that racism and prejudice are only one part of the story of public opinion and race. Because public opinion is an expression of public will, and public institutions are created to help serve the public will through government, it should not be surprising that the distribution of

resources in society, including equal treatment, will be influenced by the extent to which one is perceived as deserving or not of what they receive—even considering entitlement or meeting and surpassing stated criteria. Conceptually, to balance the scales of justice, good actions should be rewarded and bad actions should be punished; the deserving should be compensated, and the undeserving should be denied. Injustices occur when outcomes are viewed as disproportionate with inputs, and therefore it is likely that racial justices will be pursued politically in a host of ways by both victims and perpetrators of racial discrimination, racism, and prejudice. Justice becomes the motivating factor, albeit one that is interpreted subjectively, making the problem more complex.

This special issue of *POQ* arose from the outpouring of racial injustices that were playing out in the media and in real life during the year of 2020. Among the most public were the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by Minneapolis and Louisville police officers, respectively. Floyd died over a potential counterfeit \$20 bill, and Taylor died—as she slept in bed—because of information negligence in executing a no-knock warrant arrest. In another instance, Ahmaud Arbery was pursued, assaulted, and killed as he exercised on a road in Georgia. Arbery was targeted because his killers wanted to question and intimidate him related to trespassing issues. Floyd, Taylor, Arbery, and other victims did not deserve the fates they received; their unfortunate outcomes were not proportionate to their actions, regardless of who they were as individuals. Their deaths are clear examples of racial injustice.

Constant instances of racial profiling and excessive use of force; calls to police and authorities for minor disagreements that lead to embarrassing detentions and punishments; rampant dismissiveness of claims by racial-ethnic minorities that racial biases harm their life opportunities; and clear and apparent double standards in treatment only scratch the surface of contemporary life for many. There are far too many instances to list in our short set of pages, but it is clear that 2020 was a year of intense racial injustice.<sup>2</sup> When approached by the *POQ* editors about constructing a call for submissions, we sought to provoke questions about how these events and others can exist in a democratic society whose Constitution begins with an unamended purpose of establishing justice to ensure its domestic tranquility, but also faces a dilemma about how to maintain both in a setting of demographic shifts that threaten to redefine the power landscape in America.

As we consider race and public opinion, there is little doubt that hate, through prejudice and racism, is a force in politics. During 2020 alone, there

2. Readers may find helpful perspectives from reports of 2020 racial injustices in terms of public opinion (e.g., [Pew Research Center 2020](#)), health equity (e.g., [Centers for Disease Control 2022](#)), wealth and prosperity (e.g., [National Community Research Coalition 2021](#)), criminal justice (e.g., [Nellis 2022](#)), and education (e.g., [Taylor et al. 2020](#)).

were over 8,000 single hate-crime incidents involving over 11,000 victims; 62 percent of those incidents were due to race, ethnicity, and ancestry—a 13 percent uptick. And, as the world faced a pandemic that disproportionately hit African American, Latino, and Native American communities,<sup>3</sup> Asians in the United States experienced a 73 percent increase in hate crimes, many unprovoked and violent. In 2021, the Federal Bureau of Investigation elevated civil rights violations to its highest-level national threat priorities list, signaling a tangible scaled-up commitment of money and resources to address the problem.<sup>4</sup> Thus, hate continues to stunt progress on solving the American dilemma; but hate itself is not the only problem.

In addition to scholarly curiosity, the attention to racism, prejudice, and intolerance in public opinion literature exists because they are antithetical to society's moral commitments to justice. Justice, in turn, is ostensibly embedded in America's constitutional fabric: equitable and fair treatment without bias; equality of opportunity and voice in pursuit of prosperity; protection from undeserved harm; and liberty and due process for everyone. It should follow that any actions, policies, or thoughts that inhibit these principles from reaching their full promise will likely produce injustice, as much as, if not more than, hate. And so, we sought public opinion research that would create fresh perspectives on how to understand and interpret contemporary racial injustices.

The past 50 years of public opinion and racial attitudes research have provided an array of conceptual tools for understanding contemporary race relations. However, 2020, as well as political phenomena covering the Obama and Trump presidencies, have drawn attention to the comparative absence of an understanding of the ways in which justice and perceptions of justice animate how the public thinks about race today—including measuring justice directly through scales, or indirectly through values and support for distributive, procedural, and interactional principles like equity, impartiality, or decency and appreciation, respectively. Arguably, America's racial angst is of public concern because it produces injustices that are antithetical to the purported democratic values we tend to celebrate. Therefore, we sought to engage a broad and robust understanding of how justice (or injustice) perceptions, and their determinants, color public opinion about racial populations, social issues, and life outcomes and experiences.

## **Justice**

Justice is an international idea, but it is a core moral foundation of American democracy, attested by the preamble to the US Constitution where “the

3. APM Research Lab report: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

4. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/hate-crimes-and-civil-rights-elevated-to-top-national-threat-priority-063021>.

people” are charged with its protection. In spirit, referencing justice in the preamble of the Constitution reinforces America’s ostensible commitment to basic fairness and equity in human relations. It highlights America’s intention to allow for equal rights and liberties and ameliorate the circumstances where they do not exist. Accordingly, Rawls (1971) has referred to justice as “the first virtue of social institutions,” whereby “in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled.” However, from politics to pandemics, race appears to affect which voices have more or less influence, and which voices receive more or less attention in social, economic, political, and interpersonal relations.

Thus, the absence of racial justice in the many facets of American public life counters the nation’s commitment to equity and domestic ease, and its similar absence in the public opinion research literature stunts our scholarly progress toward understanding the full nature of America’s racial dilemma. As Gibson (2008, p. 701) notes in his work on public opinion and justice, “justice judgements matter . . . and [are] perhaps even the most important criterion in the calculus of public opinion formation . . . [because] one does not have to be party to a dispute to care about the fairness of its outcomes—people care about injustices done to others.” Injustices draw our attention, beliefs, and emotions, direct our behavior, and motivate us to change. As such, if we are still seeing racial injustices occur, we are called to investigate the extent to which the public views the events as injustices, the recipients as deserving of better treatment, their identities (or racial group) as relevant, and, ultimately, whether the status quo is in need of change. More apt for public opinion, the question is: Are scholars and practitioners of survey research and polling doing enough to understand and include the voices and relevant material of those who disproportionately face ongoing injustices? As such, and against the 2020 backdrop, this special issue examines the landscape of racial justice (and injustice) in America through theoretical and empirical examinations of public opinion.

We attempted to direct attention to social and psychological motivations for behaviors that move democracy closer to, or farther from, its promise. Such motives include perceived threats, apathy toward victims, judgments about deservingness for equal treatment, resentment resulting from perceived injustices, prosocial behavior and ameliorative policies, and individual self-enhancing beliefs and identity connections. We pursued works and scholars that would contribute to the diversity and inclusion goals of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Brodie 2016). For readers interested in a summary of the articles in the special issue, we offer a review of each one in the subsequent section.

## Special Issue Content

### RACIAL BYSTANDING: ASSESSING ANTI-RACISM ACTION ORIENTATION

[Davis and Wilson \(2022\)](#) provide one of the first national public opinion studies drawing attention to the distinction between *non-racists*, individuals who oppose racism, and *anti-racists*, those who both oppose and act to produce policies, programs, and outcomes that bring about racial justice and equality. They build an “antiracism action orientation” measure that taps the motivation to play an active role in eliminating racism by directly confronting racial prejudice. They argue that the motivation toward anti-racism is shaped by more than just positive and negative attitudes about racial groups (e.g., racial affect) and includes non-racial judgments about threats to the status quo and whether confronting racial inequality is too costly and therefore undeserving of the risks of action. Their findings suggest that the bar for real and permanent change, especially on matters of race, is much higher than one might suspect. For example, among Whites with the highest racial resentment scores, White Democrats, liberals, and those who agree that White privilege exists, all have statistically lower levels of anti-racism action orientation than White Republicans, conservatives, and those who disagree that White privilege exists.

### PURSUING JUSTICE: MOBILIZING NATIVE AMERICAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

[Sanchez and Foxworth \(2022\)](#) fill a deep void in the race and public opinion literature with their research on a large Native American sample from a 2020 election night public opinion survey. The survey included 1,300 self-identified Native American voters, which claims to serve as the largest sample of 2020 Native American voters. Sanchez and Foxworth theorize that because of past and present injustices, Native Americans, particularly those on tribal lands, were motivated toward candidates and actions that would bring about change on the most salient issues affecting their community. In the midst of unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 health pandemic and a social movement challenging structural racism to advance justice, the authors argue that Native Americans reached a motivational tipping point that would lead them to higher than average turnout. They find that in 2020, perceptions of racial discrimination (i.e., injustice) and the COVID-19 health pandemic affect voting preferences and participation in political events like rallies and protests. They also provoke new areas of research with the finding that living on or near tribal lands and tribal affiliation are consequential factors for Native American political behavior. Sanchez and Foxworth do a great service for researchers and local, state, and national leaders seeking starting points for understanding Native American citizens and their pursuits for justice through politics.



## RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF POLICE VIOLENCE

We have mentioned the US Constitution's preamble to establish justice, and the article by [Israel-Trummel and Streeter \(2022\)](#) seeks to identify how group identities impact who deserves restorative justice when justice is seemingly violated by public institutions themselves. Through a novel survey experiment, the authors randomized the race and gender of victims of excessive force by police (i.e., police violence) to assess how individual respondents judge the victims' deservingness of compensation—a form of restorative justice. Their experiments reveal the entanglement of race in these judgments: both the race of the subject, the race of the perpetrators—as well as the impact of gender. A crucial finding for Israel-Trummel and Streeter's research, and the special issue, is that White respondents' perceptions of deservingness are conditioned by who is viewed as being responsible for the beating—the detainee or the police—and whether the detainee was involved in a crime; facts that tend to assign responsibility for outcomes and therefore point to key questions of whether the beating was justified or not. Yet, regardless of perceived fault or criminal involvement, Black respondents are more likely than White respondents to award a compensation settlement to victims. Israel-Trummel and Streeter's article suggests that commitments to justice are more robust among Blacks than Whites.

## STRIVING TO SENTENCE BASED ON THE CONTENT OF THEIR CHARACTER

[Doherty et al. \(2022\)](#) seek to assess what information the public uses to assess and determine justice through criminal sentencing. The authors note the exceptional punitiveness of sentencing in the United States, and the persistent racial inequalities that should amplify justice concerns, especially with clear evidence that Black Americans are more likely to be incarcerated, sentenced to death, and serve longer average sentences than Whites. They probe the notion that policymakers' desires to respond to public demands for safer communities through more punitive policies are racialized, as substantial evidence finds that racial attitudes affect public opinion about criminal justice outcomes. They posit that, if racialized, the public opinion that leaders follow may not only encourage punitive criminal justice policies, but also maintain practices that exacerbate racial injustices and inequalities. Using an online conjoint experiment, Doherty and colleagues tested whether the race of a defendant would cause individuals to suggest more or less punitive sentences. Because social desirability is always a concern with explicit racial cues like skin color, the authors randomly assigned a distinctively "Black" or "White" sounding name to predict the effects of race. After controlling for other known correlates of sentence length (e.g., seriousness of the crime, prior history of offending, age, employment, probation status at the time of offense), Doherty et al. find

that sentence length is significantly impacted by the seriousness of the crime and prior criminal history. However, they do not find a significant overall difference between the sentences participants suggest for Black and White defendants. The authors assuaged this counterintuitive finding with a number of limitations and suggested more work should follow. However, the value in the study is that it applies additional methods (e.g., conjoint experiments) and develops new concepts (e.g., names and other cultural stereotypes) for determining how the public administers and thinks about justice.

#### DESERVING OF APOLOGY: REPARATIONS AS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

[Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes \(2022\)](#) examine how identification with, and pride in, one's racial group can disrupt forms of symbolic reparations that acknowledge racial injustices. While existing studies of attitudes toward reparations emphasize racial differences in support, or focus on the impact of attitudes about the recipient group, these authors explore if expressed levels of in-group racial attachment, not just self-reported identification with a group, motivates individuals to view racial injustices toward an out-group as deserving of public acknowledgment and repair. The article elaborates on the ways that White and Black people's racial pride might shape support or opposition for addressing racial injustices through reparations. Using cross-sectional data, Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes find that increases in pride and agreement with myths of Black Americans' undeservingness result in opposition to symbolic reparations among White Americans, while increases in pride result in support among Black Americans and Latinx Americans. The findings from Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes point to the inwardly directed motivations for maintaining the racial order of American society and show that even simple public apologies and acknowledgments for well-documented wrongs of the past may threaten (or enhance) how Whites (or Blacks) think and feel about themselves. Their research also pushes our understanding of public opinion about reparations in new and fruitful directions that will provide nuance and complexity in what are likely to be increasingly present public debates on the issue.

#### POLARIZED DEMOCRACY: RACIAL INEQUALITY IN BLUE AND RED

While many social researchers have tracked trends in the many dimensions of racial attitudes over time, fewer efforts focus specifically on trends in attitudes toward racial policies that could be viewed as tools in the effort to secure racial justice. For decades, White and Black support for racial policies seeking to address inequality were largely stagnant. Blacks and Whites were deeply divided in their level of support, and mostly things stayed the same even while other domains of racial attitudes were changing ([Schuman et al.](#)

1997; Moberg et al. 2019; Krysan 2021).<sup>5</sup> But recently, there have been changes in racial policy attitudes, and Jardina and Ollerenshaw (2022) provide a valuable contribution through their examination of how these patterns track across the partisan divide, and in comparison to measures of racial resentment and stereotypes. Through examination of the combination of partisanship and the Black-White divide, they observe that in 2020, the Black-White divide on some racial policy attitudes had virtually disappeared when looking only at White Democrats. However, White Republicans express consistently conservative racial attitudes over time and remain deeply opposed to policies that bring about amelioration for racial groups. Jardina and Ollerenshaw conclude that partisans today appear more polarized on matters of race and racism than at any point in the last three decades. Such a statement signals a growing threat to democracy that is occurring through parties more so than the public. While Jardina and Ollerenshaw do not explicitly refer to justice in their article, their assessment of public opinion on government's public policy efforts to bring about racial equality—efforts which are created and operate through the legitimate institutions of the United States—points directly to parties, primarily Republicans, as both advancing and sustaining racial inequality. What we do not know is the extent to which there are changes in the party membership driving these effects. That is, do the partisan (or even racial) samples in the data points of the trends consist of roughly the same political actors, inclusive of new ones, or void of old ones?

## Conclusion

In 1997, *Public Opinion Quarterly* produced its first special issue on the topic of race, “Race, Public Opinion, and the Social Sphere” (Bobo 1997).<sup>6</sup> The issue was edited by 2020 AAPOR awardee, and Harvard professor of sociology and Afro-American studies, Lawrence Bobo. According to Google Scholar counts, the nine articles in that special issue, plus Bobo's introductory essay, have been cited over 2,700 times. Such exposure signals the importance of examining the confluence of race and public opinion, and why it should continue. We hope that the results of our efforts have produced a curated set of provocative articles that will match *POQ*'s first special issue on race, and capture the spirit in Ames's (1938) article.

5. Also see <https://igpa.uillinois.edu/programs/racial-attitudes-2021> for a website that regularly updates the data reported in Schuman et al.'s *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (1997).

6. Later, *POQ* published an online virtual issue, “Coloring Public Opinion,” edited by David C. Wilson, that curated and provided access to existing articles in the journal on race—none of which were a part of the 1997 special issue. This virtual issue can be found at [https://academic.oup.com/poq/pages/coloring\\_public\\_opinion](https://academic.oup.com/poq/pages/coloring_public_opinion).

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