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Race & Political Trust:
Justice as a Unifying Influence
on Political Trust

Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes & David C. Wilson

Americans' trust in government is lower than ever. However, while all groups have seen a decline in trust since the 1960s, the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites in this period has varied not only in size but also in direction. At times, racial and ethnic minorities have actually had higher rates of trust than Whites, contradicting the broad assumptions in research about race and political trust. Explanations of the causes of trust in government that emphasize institutional experience and early socialization would not predict this outcome. We propose that an underutilized component in the study of race and political trust is perceived justice. On one hand, racial and ethnic minorities' sensitivity to institutional injustice often leads to lower rates of trust. On the other hand, when racial and ethnic minorities perceive there are greater opportunities for racial progress, which signal that widespread harm can be repaired, their political trust tends to increase, sometimes to levels that exceed those for Whites. The interplay between political realities that shape perceived justice as well as political hope for racial progress likely creates the variable longitudinal patterns of racial and ethnic differences in trust.

Few would debate the importance of public trust in government for a well-functioning democracy. The social contract establishing the terms by which individuals agree to be governed requires that the government and its leaders work on their behalf, and do so without taking advantage of citizens, residents, and visitors by way of corruption, waste, deceit, or mistreatment. Since most people hold government and its related institutions responsible for their safety and social and economic well-being, confidence in political institutions, actors, and practices should be both high and stable for a well-functioning democracy.[1]

Sadly, Americans' trust in government is lower than ever. The decline in political trust has spanned more than fifty years and caused widespread concern.[2] Indeed, a distrusting public endangers democratic stability. When individuals have little trust in government, they are less likely to follow social and political rules, and more likely to engage in confrontational or even violent political actions.[3]

The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, is a case in point. Low trust in government has also led to low compliance with public health measures and is the main contributing factor to the skyrocketing numbers of positive cases and deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.[4]

Still, while all groups have seen a decline in trust since the 1960s, the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites has varied not only in size but also in direction.[5] Given the history of discrimination against communities of color in the United States, it may come as a surprise that racial-ethnic minorities are sometimes more trusting of the government than White Americans. To understand this phenomenon, we provide a brief review of what we know about race and political trust – recognizing that minority groups have different experiences in America – and explore the gaps in what we do not know or should know more about.

It is puzzling that racial and ethnic minority groups do not always trust the government less than Whites. Explanations for public trust in government that emphasize either institutional performance or cultural experiences would not predict this variance. In the former instance, racial and ethnic minorities' trust is thought to reflect their lower political status and experiences of institutional mistreatment. In the latter view, racial and ethnic minorities' trust reflects civic values and behaviors, as well as group identity. Both theories would predict that trust in government should be lower for racial minorities than for Whites. Alternatively, we propose that perceptions of justice underlie varied levels of political trust and distrust among racial and ethnic minorities, but also have the power to explain racial gaps in political trust. That is, stronger beliefs about justice (for example, ratings on how fairly or unfairly government operates) could mediate, at least partially, the relationship between racial and ethnic status and political trust.

Specifically, political trust calculations at least involve an experiential component resulting from public action, and a moral component appraising the quality and results of that action.[6] High trust accompanies a general expectation that a person or institution "can be relied upon to do what they say" and therefore do "what is right."[7] Indeed, in measuring political trust, the American National Election Studies (ANES) asks respondents, "How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to *do what is right*?"[8] People tend to view authorities more positively when they perceive them as trying to do what is best, and as acting with benevolence and care.[9] It is true that people expect government to function well and do so with a degree of economic proficiency. This aligns well with the experiential components of trust. However, the moral component that underlies "what is right" means that political institutions should abide by the agreed-upon rules, and when individuals perceive that political institutions are not meeting this principle, they will likely conclude that the government is not *deserving* of their trust. Societies use laws to provide order and structure, safety and security, and cultural direction and faith, but laws cannot accomplish any of these unless they attend to justice. History shows

that people will reject and rebel against their governments when laws are unjust. This perhaps explains contemporary protests proclaiming passionately that Black Lives Matter, or that there was unpunished election fraud in 2020. In short, people expect an efficient and effective government, but also one that is just.[10]

A just government is particularly relevant to racial and ethnic minorities because they witness and perceive the justice and injustice meted out by political institutions differently than Whites.[11] On one hand, racial and ethnic minorities have good reasons to be skeptical about the extent of a just government. Relative to Whites, ethnic and racial minorities have poorer health and limited access to health care, lower wealth, more hostile interactions with law enforcement, and less descriptive political representation – representation that mirrors the politically relevant traits of its constituency – at the state and federal levels.[12] While progress over time exists, these lingering disparities can lead racial and ethnic minorities to wonder, "Who is looking out for us?" This would normally signal an intractable problem for political trust among communities of color. On the other hand, when racial and ethnic minorities perceive there are greater opportunities for their progress, which signal that harms can be repaired, their political trust tends to increase, sometimes to levels exceeding those for Whites.[13] The key to this line of thinking is starting from the expectation of a just civic experience through individual values, rather than theorizing that institutional trust is solely a reaction to government performance.

Diverse racial and ethnic minorities cannot be simply reduced to one minority group. Perceptions of injustice and racially progressive politics that may ignite hope are often group-specific.[14] For example, there are good reasons to expect that Black Americans should be especially and acutely sensitive to issues of justice, given the historic injustice of chattel slavery, as well as long-standing racial bias that permeated institutional practices and federal policy (for example, the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment).[15]

The ANES began measuring trust in government in 1958. The same basic questions have been asked for over several decades: *Do you trust in the federal government to do what is right? Is the government pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or is it run for the benefit of all the people? Do people in government waste a lot of the money that we pay in taxes? Are a lot of the people running the government crooked?* Using the ANES's trust in government index based on responses to these questions, Figure 1 provides a visualization of trust differences over time for four racial groups – Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and Native American – as relative to Whites.[16] The figure shows that the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites has varied over time, not only in size but also in direction. For example, a pattern emerges wherein Black and White Americans switch positions repeatedly. The pattern for Native Americans is extremely

Figure 1

Racial Gaps in Political Trust, American National Election Studies (ANES), 1958–2020
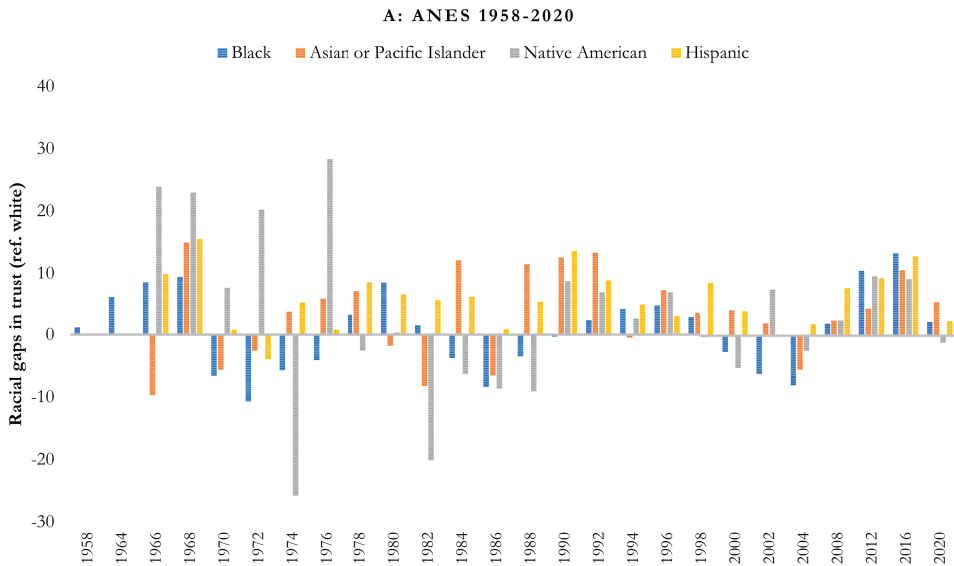
The deviations of the bars from the mid-point of zero indicate higher and lower levels of trust relative to White respondents. Results are from the authors' analyses of data from the ANES (1958–2020). Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, and Hispanic respondents were not included in studies conducted before 1966. The index ranges from 0 to 100. Higher scores indicate higher levels of trust.

variable, likely reflecting the volatility of a small sample size. Latino and Asian Americans often demonstrate the highest trust levels across all the groups.

The U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) has asked about confidence in political institutions since 1973.[17] Their question reads : *I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?* The item list includes the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. Using an index created from these questions, Figure 2 visualizes the racial differences in political trust across self-identified race categories over time, including Black, Other (neither White nor Black), and White (reference group). Regardless of how political trust is measured, trust is not always lower among racial and ethnic minorities compared with the White majority group.

Figure 2
Racial Gaps in Political Trust, General Social Survey (GSS), 1973–2021
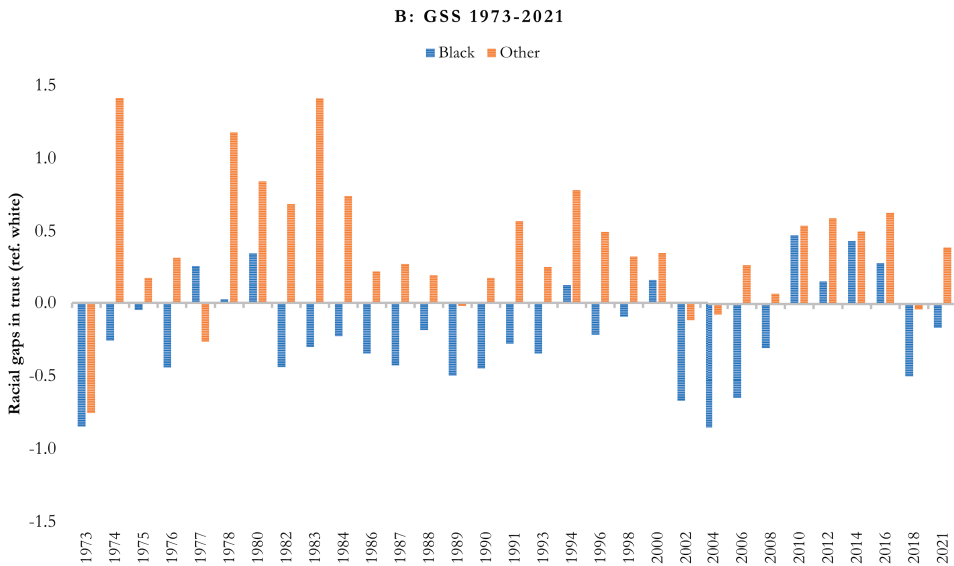
Authors' analyses of data from the General Social Survey (1973–2021). Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions: the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust.

We also find a similarly varied pattern when reviewing the literature on race and trust in government in the United States. Table 1 provides a curation of the existing studies that examine the differences in political trust across racial groups. Some publications show that Blacks are equally or more trusting than Whites, others find that Blacks are less trusting than Whites, and yet others note inconsistent racial gaps over time.[18] Studies also find that Latinos tend to be more trusting of government than other racial/ethnic groups, including White Americans.[19] Among those studies that include Asian and Native Americans, both groups show comparable levels of trust to White Americans, but higher than Black Americans.[20]

How do we make sense of these variable patterns? Scholars have largely explained the race and political trust association through two general theories of political trust: one tied to institutional behavior (that is, performance and representation), and another tied to cultural experiences (that is, political socialization).[21] The dominant institutional theory highlights the role of government performance

Table 1
Studies on Race and Political Trust in the United States

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Aberbach and Walker	1970	1965 Detroit Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in local and federal government	Blacks less trusting
Miller	1974	Center for Political Studies, 1964–1970	Black, White	ANES items	Varied : Blacks more trusting, 1964–1966 ; less trusting, 1968–1970
Abney and Hutch-eson	1981	City of Atlanta surveys, 1970–1976	Black, White	ANES trust in city government	Context : Election of a Black mayor appears to increase Black Atlantans' trust
Howell and Fagan	1988	1984 New Orleans Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in government in city hall	Blacks more trusting
Bobo and Gilliam	1990	1987 GSS	Black, White	Confidence in government	Blacks less trusting
Emig et al.	1996	1994 Mobile, Alabama Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in local government	Blacks more trusting
Miller and Hoffmann	1998	1987 GSS	Black, White	ANES trust in the federal government	Blacks less trusting
Michelson	2001	1999 survey of Latino population in Chicago and 1998 ANES	Latino, Black, White ; immigrant and native-born	ANES items	Latinos more trust-ing than Blacks and Whites ; immigrants more trusting
Michelson	2003	Latino National Political Survey, 1989–1990	Latino, immigrant, and native-born	ANES trust in government	Latino immigrants more trusting, but their trust declines with the length of stay

Table 1, continued

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Rahn and Rudolph	2005	2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey	Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Native American	ANES trust in local government	Blacks and Native Americans less trusting; Asians and Latinos show no differences
Avery	2006	2000 National Annenberg Election Survey	Black, White	ANES trust in federal government	Blacks less trusting, but small racial differences
Wenzel	2006	2002 Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas Survey and ANES	Latino, Black, White	ANES items: trust in local and federal government	Latinos more trusting
Mac-Donald and Stokes	2006	2001 Social Capital Benchmark Survey	Black, White	Trust in local police	Blacks less trusting
Grabb et al.	2009	1999–2002 World Values Surveys	Non-White, White	Confidence in specific institutions (the police, the civil service, the federal government, and political parties)	Non-Whites more trusting
Avery	2009	1996 National Black Election Study; 2007 Race and Trust Survey	Black, White	ANES items	Blacks less trusting
Perrin and Smolek	2009	2001–2002 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health	Black, Native, Asian/ Pacific Islander, White	Trust in the federal government, my state government, and my local government	Blacks less trusting, Native Americans no difference, and Asians more trusting

Table 1, continued

Author(s)	Year	Data	Race/ Ethnicity	Political Trust	Trust Gap (relative to White group)
Abrajano and Alvarez	2010	ANES, 1964–2002	Black, Latino, White	ANES items	Latinos more trusting than other groups
Wilkes	2015	ANES, 1958–2012	Black, White	ANES items	Varied over time
Reinhardt	2015	2006 internet survey	Black, non-Black	Trust in local, state, and federal government	Blacks less trusting
Michelson	2016	2005–2006 Latino National Election Study, Latino Immigrant National Election Study, and ANES	Latino, White	ANES items	Latinos more trusting than Whites ; becoming more trusting
Koch	2019	2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey	Asian, Hispanic, African, Native, White	ANES items	Native Americans and Asians show no differences ; Hispanics and African Americans less trusting
Cao and Wu	2019	Meta review of 35 empirical studies	Black, White	Trust in the police	Blacks less trusting, but the gap is small
Heideman	2020	2007 and 2011 Urban Mayoral Elections Study	Black, Hispanic, White	ANES trust in city government	Blacks less trusting ; Hispanic or Latino residents show no differences
Rosenthal	2020	2016 ANES	Black, White	ANES items	Blacks more trusting
Bech	2021	2016–2017 survey experiments	Latino, White	Trust in political leaders and institutions	Context : political rhetoric influences political trust among Latino Americans and White Americans differently

Source : Information compiled by the authors.[22]

in generating trust. This theory predicts that group membership should have little impact on trust in government – as long as citizens, regardless of race, experience the same political performance and the same quality of political leaders and political institutions.

For the institutional model, significant racial-ethnic differences in political trust can only be explained by assuming different groups have different experiences.[23] Individuals place greater trust in the government and political institutions when they perceive that institutions and leaders of government are meeting their needs.[24] Individuals show lower levels of political trust when they perceive their own interests are not being served.[25] Their evaluations make appraisals of trust more personal and likely reflect how individuals perceive the government as politically responsive rather than objectively well-performing.[26] Thus, racial differences in institutional trust are attributed to the extent to which government serves racial groups or their political interests.

Two institutional models follow this line of thinking. First, the political reality model posits that racial minorities' lower status in the power structure affects their trust in the government. Negative experiences due to systemic oppression create a political reality of social exclusion and discrimination in which governments treat racial and ethnic minorities less favorably and with less devotion to their interests compared with their White counterparts.[27] These experiences create a culture of doubt and cynicism about government agents' ability, much less their desire, to respond to the problems that racial and ethnic minorities face. Second, the political empowerment thesis links minority trust in government to political representation. Empirical studies show that greater descriptive representation for racial and ethnic minorities leads to increased legitimacy for governmental institutions among racial minorities.[28] Lower rates of descriptive representation for racial minorities cues the likelihood that racial discrimination influences the representative selection process, leading to a lessened ability to influence one's political reality, let alone believe that political power is truly feasible. Less descriptive representation also fuels the perception that the political system is less responsive and less accessible to the members of minority groups.

In contrast to the institutional theory, the cultural theory views political trust as originating from outside the political sphere. Conceptualized as part of political culture, trust in government is rooted in the shared values and cultural norms of one's communities and how these communities are received by society more generally.[29] Individuals learn their views on government early on from their family, friends, neighbors, and local institutions. For example, racial and ethnic minorities' perceptions about the prevalence of systemic racism, historical discriminatory practices carried out by the U.S. government, and denial of equal access to resources, power, and protection under the law all signal the extent to which

they should trust or distrust their governments, and how they should engage in civic life.[30]

The institutional theory views government behavior and performance as essential to understanding racial and ethnic differences in political trust, whereas the cultural theory highlights the important role of social and political positions and historical contexts of various groups. Integrating both theories suggests that trust in government is not just about the group experience of government behavior and performance, but it is also about how the group experience is being influenced by the social and political positions and historical contexts of different groups.[31] Indeed, people learn different ideas about the government and political authorities – including what they should expect, and how they should evaluate them – from their varying social and political positions and historical contexts.

Hence, understanding racial and ethnic differences in trust requires considering how different groups experience various government performances. For example, African Americans experience higher levels of police-stops and incarceration, and this pattern is contextualized against the history of a society that has used police to control, segregate, and denigrate Black people. Because of this history, African Americans do not see stop-and-frisk practices or mass incarceration as indications of government performing well, although many Whites do. In what follows, we suggest how perceptions of justice can offer a ripe area of further theoretical development to explain why racial-ethnic communities will sometimes express higher trust in government than Whites.

Up to this point, researchers have often excluded justice orientations when studying institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities. The literature tying justice and institutional trust has focused mainly on procedural justice : the adherence to principles of fair procedure in the areas of policing, law enforcement, and the courts.[32] This work hypothesizes that when the government treats people with respect and gives them a fair hearing, individuals will accept the outcomes of political decision-making. The consensus from this line of research is that citizens' experiences of respectful treatment at the hands of the political authorities affect their perceptions of legal legitimacy, trust, and behavior regulation.[33] We propose that more work needs to be done on justice perceptions and institutional trust, both in terms of theorizing and expanding beyond procedural matters.

Political philosopher John Rawls identifies justice as "the first virtue of social institutions," remarking, "in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled."[34] Justice offers a distinct scholarly lens for political behavior, but also serves as a motivation for judging what factors deserve attention in scholarship.[35] We define justice as a real or perceived state in which the burdens and benefits of society are decided upon (processed), handed out (distributed), commu-

nicated (interacted), and corrected (restored/repaired) according to agreed upon principles. Table 2 outlines these four primary forms of justice in political decision-making, along with the principles that underlie their character, and provides examples of violations that should produce stronger feelings of injustice.

Justice activates concerns about the violation of principles such as equity, equality, need, transparency, respect, neutrality, and accountability. If we define politics as "who gets what" or as the "authoritative allocation of values," then it becomes clear that justice is fundamental to the embrace of governance and trust in that governance, especially when groups feel they are being shortchanged, without repair, on unequal amounts of resources, and through unfair procedures and negative interactions.[36] Principles of justice – also called norms of justice or justice criteria – come in the form of values, those subjective psychological standards that individuals use to guide their thinking about right and wrong, and ultimately whether we deserve what we get. Motivated by a need for consistency in reasoning, people tend to evaluate government actions as consonant or dissonant with their values. As scholars evaluate existing theories of institutional trust, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, they should examine the extent to which they align with principles or violations of the principles of justice. For example, if one values fairness and objectivity, one will likely evaluate government with those principles in mind.

We propose that a just government is one that adheres to the principles of the local, federal, and state laws it creates, administers, and evaluates. And the laws must reflect basic principles of justice, such as equality. We adopt this conceptualization knowing that adherence can have subjective meaning. Nonetheless, when government is perceived to act in accordance with principles of justice (for example, equitably, consistently, respectfully, and responsibly), trust should increase, and vice versa. Indeed, previous research suggests that perceived institutional injustice matters even more than actual experience of injustice in shaping people's political trust.[37]

To provide empirical support of our claims, we consider how perception of unfair treatment by police may be associated with the levels of political trust across Black, White, and Other groups using the GSS 2018–2021 data. The GSS data include questions about police and law enforcement, asking respondents, "In general, do the police treat Whites better than Blacks (or Latinos), treat them both the same, or treat Blacks (or Latinos) better than Whites?" Figure 3 shows that trust is lower among Blacks and members of other race groups when they perceive "Police treat Whites much better than Blacks (or Latinos)." We see an opposite pattern for Whites: their trust is higher when they perceive that "Police treat Whites better than Blacks (or Latinos)." The finding is consistent with previous research that shows that trust in police is most strongly affected by people's perceptions of whether the police follow fair procedures when exercising their authority.[38] Differ-

Table 2
Principles of Justice and Examples of Violations

Types of Justice	Named Principles	Violations
Distributive Justice The fair distribution of the conditions (burdens and benefits) of goods among diverse populations, which affects individual, group, or societal well-being. Distributive justice is about the receipt or non-receipt of outcomes.	• Equity (Merit) • Equality • Need	• Unfair standards • Discrimination • Doubt/ Prejudice
Procedural (Informational) Justice The quality of decision-making procedures or policies used to allocate outcomes. Procedural justice concerns how decisions are made about the distribution of outcomes. Procedural justice tends to be more about the appraisal of policy rather than personal interactions.	• Consistency • Neutrality (Bias suppression) • Voice (Representation) • Ethics • Decision control • Correctability	• Changing the rules • Favoritism • Exclusion • Cheating • No opportunity • No return policy
Interactional (Interpersonal) Justice The fairness and quality of interpersonal treatment (as opposed to policy) received when procedures are implemented, or outcomes are determined. Interactional justice is about the experiences, relationships, and social practices between individuals and groups.	• Truthfulness (Sincerity) • Respect • Justification • Courtesy • Appropriateness	• Deceit • Yelling/ Name-calling • No explanations • Being ignored/ dismissed • Being vulgar
Restorative Justice Repairing the harm caused by a crime while holding the offender responsible for their actions, by providing an opportunity for the parties directly affected by the crime–victim(s), offender, and community–to identify and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime, and seek a resolution that affords healing, reparation, and reintegration, and prevents future harm. Restorative justice is about acknowledging harm, and the authenticity of efforts to repair damages.	• Repair/Apology • Responsibility • Humility • Dialog • Acceptance	• Festering resentment • Blame • Arrogance • Not addressing the issues • Denial

Source : Information compiled by the authors. For more background on these concepts, see Jason A. Colquitt and Jessica B. Rodell, "Measuring Justice and Fairness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Justice in the Workplace*, ed. Russell S. Cropanzano and Maureen L. Ambrose (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2015), 187–202.

Figure 3
Political Trust and Perception of Police Injustice
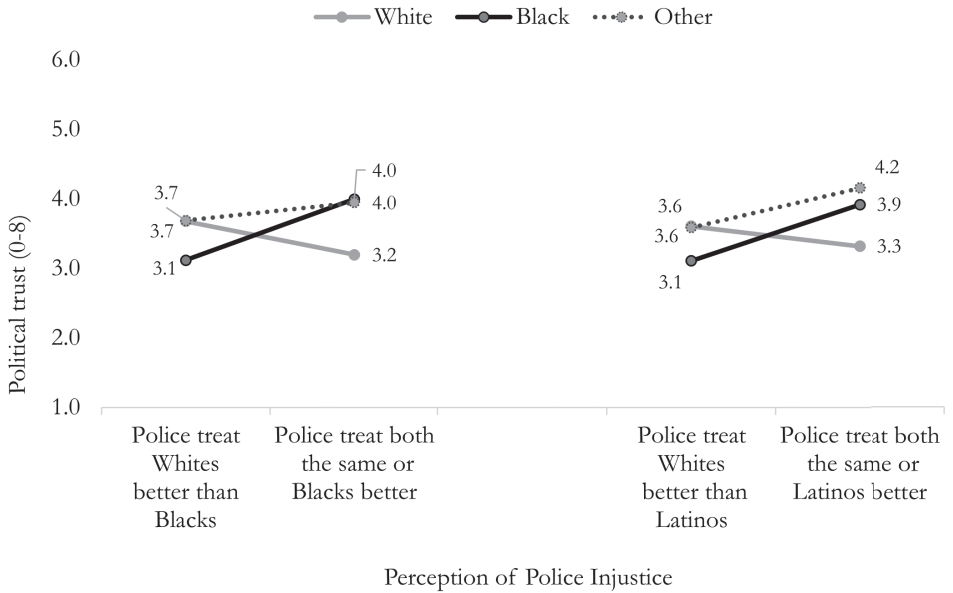
Political trust (see solid black and dotted lines) is higher for Black and Other (non-Black and non-White) Americans when they perceive police treat Blacks (see left comparison) or Latinos (see right one) the same or better than Whites, but political trust is lower for Whites (see gray lines) in those cases. Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions: the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust. Source: Data from the 2021 General Social Survey.

ential perceptions of injustice across racial groups therefore help explain racial and ethnic differences in trust.

Public policy and other government decisions produce *change*, and individuals evaluate these changes through the extent to which they are deserved or not. Most people want to see politics produce fair and deserved outcomes, just procedures, equal treatment, and limits on excess and inappropriate punishments. Yet they also expect that some are more deserving of government policy outcomes than others. In this way, justice reflects a social determination as much as a moral one, because the quality of how one is treated by government may be indicative of one's standing and status as a member (or non-member) of a trusted group. Essentially, there is a principled relationship between one's political identity (for example, race or party), the identity of government leadership (for example, party or ideology),

and policy outcomes (for example, tax breaks and free social services). In situations in which political authorities and individuals share a salient identity, their in-group relationship should lead them to feel that government agencies are more deserving of their trust than not, and vice versa for out-groups.[39] Thus, just governments are those deserving of trust, and identity influences these boundary judgments.[40]

For racial and ethnic minorities, justice principles provide guidance on how to judge the quality of the resources one receives (distributive justice), how one is treated in terms of clear procedures (informational justice) and relationships (interactional justice), and how and whether errors in process or distribution are repaired through restitution (restorative justice). As we have argued, the negative experiences thought to explain lower rates of institutional trust among racial ethnic minorities stem from their clear sense that these institutions do not (or have not) "establish(ed) justice" – let alone "secure(d) the blessings of liberty" – as promised in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.[41] Yet there is some evidence that positive political changes through policies (that is, effectiveness) and elections (that is, representation) can raise democratic spirits and political trust among racial and ethnic minorities.

Recent research suggests that political hope can prime greater collective efficacy and mobilize political participation, and the effect is stronger among racial minorities than among Whites.[42] Changes that engender political hope for racial justice can promote political trust among racial minorities. For example, there was a significant increase nationally in political trust among Blacks between 1964 and 1966. During those years, trust in government was higher among Blacks than among Whites. Many agree that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to high hope among Black Americans that a real change in racial integration, along with a reduction in discrimination, would be forthcoming.[43] Locally, during the 1970 – 1976 period, there was an increase in trust in city government among Black residents even though there was a distinct decline in trust in government among Blacks nationally during the same period. For example, the presence of a Black mayor in Atlanta may have had some positive impact upon political trust among Atlanta's Black population.[44] Greater descriptive representation for minority groups can generate political hope for racial justice, which, in turn, can promote greater political trust among racial and ethnic minorities. This highlights the importance of justice as evidence of legitimacy. Indeed, past studies examining African Americans show that the size and even the direction of the gap in political trust between Black and White Americans varied with the federal government's efforts to ensure racial equality.[45]

We tested this theory of hope, justice, and trust using national survey data. Data from the 2008 ANES show that the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States led to high hopes among Black Americans, and could be the reason why trust in government among Blacks increased significantly since 2008 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
The Election of Barack Obama Affects Political Hope and Trust in Government, 2008 – 2012
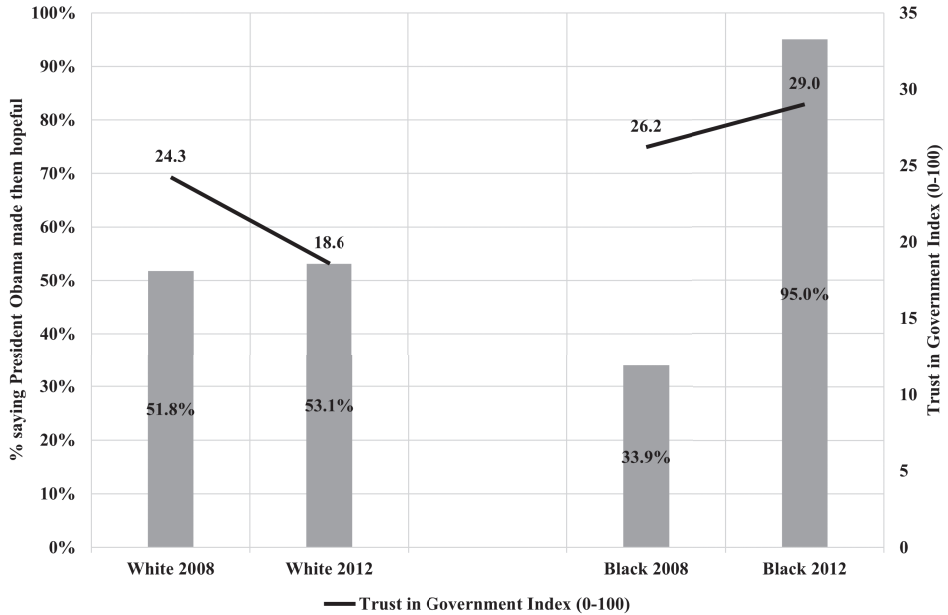
For White Americans (see left pair of bars), Obama's election did not affect political hope, but led to a decrease in political trust. For Black Americans (see right pair of bars), Obama's election increased both political hope and trust in government (see solid black line). Political hope is measured using the question, "Has President Obama made you hopeful?" Response categories include 0="No, haven't felt" and 1="Yes, have felt." Political trust is measured using the ANES trust in government index. Source: The American National Election Studies, 2008 – 2012.

Political hope for racial justice is also the main factor underpinning how race and partisanship interact to shape the racial and ethnic differences in trust. Consequently, the election of Democratic presidents often leads to an increase in both political hope and trust in government among racial and ethnic minorities, especially African Americans.[46] Studies document that racial minorities, especially African and Hispanic Americans, tend to have more trust in government than White Americans when the Democratic Party holds presidential power, including the current Biden administration, as well as during the Obama and Clinton administrations. Conversely, during Republican presidencies – including Reagan, George W. Bush, and Trump – trust in government tends to be higher among Whites than among racial minorities, especially African Americans.[47] It is true that African Americans are more likely to be Democrats, but the Democratic Party has

Figure 5
Perception of Unfair Treatment by the Police and Trust in Government among U.S.-Born and Foreign-Born Black Americans
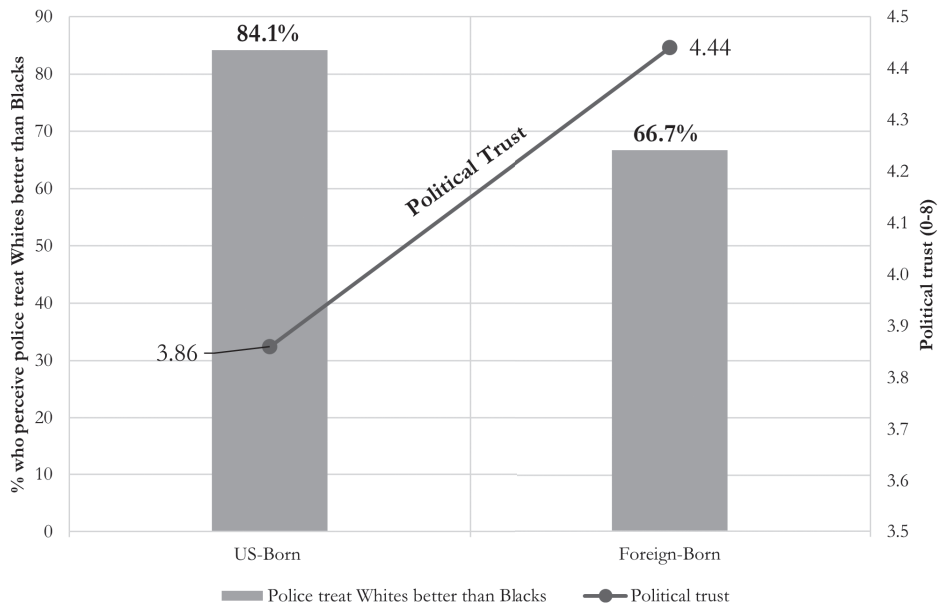
Perception of unfair treatment by the police is based on the question of whether respondents think police treat Whites better than Blacks. U.S.-born Black Americans (on left) are more likely to believe that "police treat Whites better than Blacks" (see bars) and less likely to trust government (see line) than foreign-born Black Americans (on right). Political trust is measured using the combined score of the confidence in four political institutions : the executive branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, Congress, and the military. The score ranges from 0 to 8 with higher scores indicating higher levels of trust. Source : Data from the 2021 General Social Survey.

become the institutional champion of racial justice, promoting and funding policy interventions in addressing racial inequalities and protecting civil rights since the 1960s, whereas the Republican Party has often been more racially intolerant.[48]

Furthermore, the fact that immigrants often show higher trust in government than the native-born is also an effect of political hope. Scholars have argued that foreign-born Latinos have more trust because they hold more optimistic and positive views of government. As immigrants, not only do they perceive the American political system as better, compared with the political system in their country of origin, but they also have high hopes for freedom, democracy, and transparency, and all the ideas that are associated with the "American dream."[49] This pattern also holds for Black Americans. Previous research shows that foreign-born Black Americans

tend to have lower perceptions of institutional injustice than U.S.-born Black Americans.[50] Our analysis of the data from the 2021 GSS yields similar results. Figure 5 shows that Black Americans born in the United States tend to perceive higher levels of unfair police treatment and to have lower levels of political trust than Black Americans who were born outside the country.

Political trust is essential to a well-functioning democracy. Individuals need to believe that the government and its representatives are acting on their behalf and at their behest. This belief requires trust: trust that there will be no waste, trust that there will be no mistreatment, trust that everyone is being treated equally and fairly. Therefore, assuming that the government is functioning as it should, trust is needed for regime stability. The recent rise of Black Lives Matter, the protests at Standing Rock, and the movement to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement all suggest that many Americans do not trust the government. These events suggest that racial discrimination continues to be salient in the lives of many Americans. These movements are not targeting other Americans. They are targeting institutions they perceive to be acting unfairly.

This essay proposes that a key ingredient for explaining political trust, both within and across racial and ethnic minority status, is the notion of perceived justice. Because there is nothing about skin color and physical appearance per se that should affect trust, the presence of a relationship between race and political trust indicates that the political system is perceived to be less responsive, less accessible, and less reliable to do "what is right" for people from communities of color than for White people. As scholars evaluate existing theories of political trust, especially among racial and ethnic minorities, they should examine the extent to which they align with principles or violations of the principles of justice. Dominant explanations of institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities like political realities and low rates of descriptive representation could reflect perceived violations of distributive justice principles. Thus far, however, little attention has been paid to the role of perceptions and evaluations of distributive and procedural justice in shaping racial differences in trust. Political science scholars Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker identify one potential reason few surveys provide direct measures of perceptions of injustice as well as political trust: "since scholars have not [yet] introduced perceptions of process into the major national surveys, we know less about the topic than we should."[51] We propose that more work needs to be done on justice perceptions and institutional trust, both in terms of theorizing and expanding beyond procedural matters.

Perhaps the positive story is that racial minorities still hold the belief that a just future is politically achievable. When there is hope, there is trust. The hope among communities of color for racial justice is so powerful that it can inspire actions that counterbalance the negative effects of the political reality of racial injustice.

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