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Racial Attitudes and Views of Disaster

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Abstract

As disasters become more frequent and costly, understanding attitudes toward government disaster policy becomes critically important. Scholars have explored the racialized nature of specific disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. But studies of general disaster policy preferences have not attended much to race, focusing instead on dimensions like partisanship and perceived deservingness. We use two original national surveys to assess the role of racial attitudes and ethnoracial identification on support for disaster spending. We find that racial attitudes are among the most powerful predictors of disaster spending preferences. They also strongly condition support for racially-targeted reasons justifying disaster spending. We also find that support for disaster spending is highest among Black Americans and lowest among Whites. Racial attitudes account for much of this racial gap, and strongly predict preferences even with controls for political attitudes, experience with disaster, and demographics. Our findings hold across question wordings and time. Racial attitudes are important in understanding general preferences about disaster policy, beyond responses to the specific racialized disasters on which scholars of race and disaster have focused.

Keywords

natural disasters, public health disasters, public opinion, race, racial identity, racial attitudes

Introduction

The frequency and severity of disasters have increased substantially over the past few decades and are likely to remain among the most pressing challenges in the years to come. Governments' efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters will critically shape citizens' lives. As a consequence, understanding public support for government efforts to prevent and mitigate disasters becomes increasingly important.

Existing studies of public attitudes toward disaster policy tend to focus either on specific disasters (and government responses to those disasters), or on support for government spending on disaster policy more broadly. Studies of specific disasters frequently find that race and racial attitudes play central roles in understanding public perceptions (Huddy and Feldman 2006; Stephens-Dougan 2023; White et al. 2007), although the limited range of racial attitude measures in these studies makes it difficult to know what it is about race that may affect disaster views. In contrast, analyses of disaster policy preferences more broadly have neglected race altogether, focusing instead on abstract views of perceived deservingness and the proper role of government, all framed in nonracial terms (Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Bechtel and Mannino 2022; Friedman 2019; Skitka 1999).

In this paper, we ask whether race plays a central role in public support for ongoing government spending to combat disasters. Disaster spending in general is not an obviously racialized issue like crime or welfare (e.g., Gilens 1999; Raychaudhuri et al. 2023), as disasters can and do impact Americans of every ethnic and racial group. And unlike Hurricane Katrina or the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, many disasters are not viewed through a racial lens (e.g., tornadoes in Oklahoma, wildfires on California, Superstorm Sandy in New England, or Hurricane Michael in Florida).

Recent scholarship has begun to document the role that racial attitudes and racial group identification can play in seemingly nonracial policies, such as military interventions, student debt relief, government-subsidized health care, and Social Security (Green-Riley and Leber 2023; SoRelle and Laws 2023; Tesler 2016; Winter 2006). Building on this

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literature, we hypothesize that race affects disaster policy preferences through individuals' ethnoracial group identities, and through their attitudes toward those racial groups—Black and Latinx Americans—that are most strongly associated with, and most disproportionately impacted by, disasters.

To test these expectations, we conducted two large, national non-probability, online surveys in 2021 and 2023. We ask about support for disaster spending generally, not about one specific disaster. We measure a wide array of racial and nonracial political attitudes, as well as respondents' experience with disasters. And we explore the impact of racial attitudes on racialized reasons for supporting disaster spending. Finally, we examine the role of racial attitudes in explaining ethnoracial differences in support for disaster spending.

Consistent with our hypotheses, we find that racial attitudes are indeed among the most powerful predictors of disaster spending preferences. Racial attitudes help explain both the variation in Americans' support for disaster spending and the substantially lower support for disaster spending among White than among Black Americans. Negative attitudes toward Blacks strongly and consistently predict lower support for disaster spending among non-Black, non-Latinx Americans, even when we account for partisanship, preferences for more government spending, trust in various institutions, and a general tendency to blame victims. This finding is robust across time, question wording, and a host of demographic and attitudinal controls. Racial attitudes also shape evaluations of racialized reasons for supporting government spending to combat disasters.

This study advances the literature on the role of race in policy domains that are not on their face about race. Such disparate issues as war, personal debt, retirement programs, and health care all can implicate views about race. We find that disaster is another of these issues. Much like these policy areas, race shapes preferences for or against government policy that disproportionately affects minorities or implicates racialized views of merit, labor, and justice.

Most experts agree that the United States under-invests in disaster prevention and preparation (Healy and Malhotra 2009). As disasters become still more costly, there is an urgent need to understand the foundation of public attitudes toward disaster spending—not only in response to specific (sometimes strongly racialized) disasters, but as a general willingness to increase government spending to address current and future disasters. The racial lens through which many Americans formulate these general preferences about disaster may complicate government efforts to effectively combat these harmful events.

Literature

Racial Attitudes

Race may influence disaster policy by tying views of ethnoracial groups to support for government efforts to

address disasters. Racial sentiments and stereotypes of minority groups may combine with racialized coverage of specific disasters to make racial attitudes a central influence on Americans' general disaster policy preferences.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, for example, the media showed the vastly disproportionate effects of the disaster on African Americans, and moreover, soon began to describe the victims using tropes of long-standing negative sentiments about the character of Black Americans. As Tierney et al. (2006) put it, “initial media coverage of Katrina’s devastating impacts was quickly replaced by reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals.” Hurricane Katrina was perhaps the worst disaster to affect an American city (Huddy and Feldman 2006) and became an emblem of ineffective government for years after (Atkeson and Maestas 2012).

Hurricane Katrina was not the only disaster to feature racialized impacts or negative tropes about racialized victims, as we discuss below. The accumulation of specific racialized disasters over time may build an association in the minds of many White Americans between government disaster spending and undeserved or disproportionate benefits for minorities.

Such negative racial associations may exist for public health as well as environmental disasters. Historically, contagious disease epidemics are often blamed on stigmatized populations defined by class or race, and public health policies addressing an epidemic may further marginalize the implicated racial group (Markel 1995).

Most previous studies of broad disaster preferences (as opposed to views about specific disasters) have not focused on race or racial attitudes, but on perceptions of fairness, deservingness, and the proper role of government (Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Bechtel and Mannino 2022; Friedman 2019; Skitka 1999). Friedman (2019), for example, found that preferences about which risks government should prioritize (e.g., terrorist attacks over climate change) are driven foremost by abstract, general fairness beliefs (“which of these risks is more unfair to the people it harms”), followed by abstract perceptions of victims' responsibility and the appropriate role of government.

These findings regarding disaster policy preferences are consistent with a broad literature on the importance of attributions in shaping political preferences. Attribution theory points to beliefs about the causes of behaviors or events as central in understanding judgments about blame and responsibility. Across a wide range of policy areas, attributions of cause and effect, and of responsibility for the solution, are strong predictors of how much government should do to intervene and assist (Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Gross 2008; Iyengar 1991). How much people blame victims of disaster for putting themselves in

harm's way may therefore affect their support for government spending to address disaster.

While existing studies of disaster policy views underscore the importance of beliefs about fairness, blame, and harm, they largely leave open the question of what impact may be exercised by *racial* judgments about responsibility, deservingness, and suffering. We theorize that racialized beliefs and attitudes have an independent effect above and beyond abstract, general notions and sentiments about whether disaster victims should rely on themselves, how much sympathy they deserve, and the proper role of government. Moreover, the connection between racial views and disaster policy preferences may extend beyond specific racialized disasters, and apply more generally to how Americans think about the role of government in addressing disaster.

In general, Americans' ideas about who is responsible for inequalities in American society, and how much sympathy those on the bottom of the hierarchy deserve, are often intertwined with racial attitudes, and these racialized attitudes tend to influence policy views. For example, negative attitudes toward Black Americans generate cynicism toward welfare recipients and opposition to welfare spending (Gilens 1999), and weaken support for drug treatment policies when users are portrayed as predominantly African American (Raychaudhuri et al. 2023). Further, racialized opinion does not only arise in policy domains that have been explicitly racialized. For example, support for social security is racialized, even though this policy area has not been explicitly cast in racial terms, because it implicates racialized views of responsibility and deservingness (Winter 2006). Along similar lines, the perceived risks of global warming or pollution are related to a "hierarchical worldview" (Kahan et al. 2007) that consists in part of racial resentment.¹ Likewise, racial resentment predicts concern about climate change and pro-environment beliefs, even when accounting for party and demographics (Chanin 2018).² In other words, racialized beliefs and attitudes about risk and responsibility may matter for policy preferences in a variety of policy domains.

If attitudes toward ethnoracial minority groups shape Americans' disaster policy preferences, what sorts of attitudes are most likely to matter? Racial attitudes include beliefs about who works hard, who deserves sympathy, whether historically disadvantaged racial groups are responsible for their current plight, and how much help they should receive from the government (Kinder and Sanders 1997). Such racially-specific attitudes may affect support for robust government policy to address disasters, above and beyond the effect of general blame attributions.

A wide range of studies support this notion. The perception that ethnoracial minorities may be especially exposed to disasters, are more likely to receive disaster

aid, or are not deserving of aid may weaken White Americans' support for policies to address the disaster—at least among those with negative views of racial outgroups. For example, exposure to information about the disparate impact of COVID-19 on Black Americans made White Americans who score higher on racial stereotypes less supportive of shelter-in-place orders (Stephens-Dougan 2023). Similarly, racial resentment predicted donations to a clean-water organization addressing the racially-disparate water pollution crisis in Flint, Michigan (Dietz et al. 2018); empathy toward ethnoracial outgroups predicted support for assistance to the Puerto Rican victims of Hurricane Maria (Sirin et al. 2021, 182); and White Americans who feel close to White people donated less to Katrina victims when those victims were portrayed as mostly Black versus mostly White (Fong and Luttmner 2009). All these studies of support for policies to address a specific disaster are consistent with studies showing that disaster victims' race and ethnicity can influence perceptions of responsibility and deservingness for that disaster (Ben-Porath and Shaker 2010; Rivera-Burgos 2023; Willison et al. 2022).

Numerous studies, then, reveal the impact of racial attitudes on Americans' responses to specific disasters. But we know little about racial attitude effects on general disaster spending preferences. We hypothesize that racial attitudes are associated with those preferences, building on studies showing that racial attitudes are implicated in broader orientations toward social problems that implicate racialized ideas of responsibility and deservingness.

Ethnoracial Group Identification

If negative attitudes toward ethnoracial minorities depress support for disaster spending, as we hypothesize, we should also find that opposition to disaster spending is higher among White Americans, who tend to hold more negative views of ethnoracial minority groups, and lowest among Black Americans, who would have the least negative views of such groups. As we elaborate below, the connection between race and disaster views may have been reinforced by racial disparities in experience with disaster, or by media coverage of salient racialized disasters.

Race shapes the lived experiences of disaster. Research shows that natural disasters affect people of color more severely. For example, the extent of property damage and the speed of rebuilding from Hurricanes Andrew and Ike depended on race, ethnicity, and income (Peacock et al. 2014). Studies show that people of color, and areas where they disproportionately reside, receive less relief from government, even after accounting for the extent and nature of the damage (Emrich et al. 2022). FEMA relief money is distributed such that Whites' wealth increases

after a disaster while non-White residents of the same affected areas become poorer (Flavelle 2021).

If disaster risk and severity are greater for people of color, they may especially need—and support—increased government disaster spending. Indeed, racially disadvantaged groups may turn to politics to implement policy preferences shaped by the experience of disaster. For example, Hurricane Katrina increased African American turnout in the next presidential election (Marsh 2022).

Disadvantaged ethnoracial groups are not only disproportionately affected by disaster events; they are disproportionately exposed to various chronic environmental health and safety risks, including air pollution, toxic chemicals, and infectious diseases (Ard 2015; Liu et al. 2021; Tai et al. 2020). These environmental inequities are reflected in ethnoracial groups' policy preferences and political views. Whittaker et al. (2005), for example, compared White, Black, and Latinx respondents' views of toxic waste and pollution. They found that Whites are less concerned about these environmental hazards than Latinxs and Blacks. In addition, Latinx Americans expressed more support than Whites and Blacks for government protection of the environment and expressed more concern about toxic waste. These results are in line with theories arguing that Black and Latinx Americans are more supportive of government efforts to address environmental threats because they are more likely to experience the harms from these threats.

Beyond actual experiences of disaster exposure and victimization, media coverage often highlights the impact of disasters on ethnoracial communities, as discussed above. Consistent with news coverage of the disparate impact of Hurricane Katrina, public opinion about that disaster diverged sharply by race, with Black Americans expressing much more emotional engagement, stronger negative assessments of the government's response, more support for government rebuilding efforts, and more sympathetic attitudes toward victims (Atkeson and Maestas 2012; Huddy and Feldman 2006; White et al. 2007).

While Katrina left a lasting stamp on public views of government's handling of disaster (Atkeson and Maestas 2012), it was not alone in showing the calamitous consequences of specific disasters for Black and Brown communities. Coverage of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the overwhelmingly Latinx island of Puerto Rico in 2017, and of the drinking water crisis in the predominantly Black city of Flint, Michigan in 2014 (Bisgin et al. 2023; Kempton 2020) further underscored the particular vulnerability of ethnoracial minorities to disasters.

In sum, previous research on attitudes toward disaster policy suggests a central role for race. However, past work that focuses on race tends to address particular disasters,

while research on disaster policy preferences more generally has largely neglected race.

In the current paper, we build on this literature in four ways. First, we address Americans' broad support for government spending on disaster prevention and relief, not tying our analyses to specific events or crises. Second, our original surveys include an expansive collection of variables that can help explain why race matters to disaster support. Third, we collect a rich array of racial attitude measures that allow us to assess not only whether racial attitudes play an important role in understanding disaster politics, but which racial attitudes are most consequential. Finally, we test the robustness of our findings across alternative question wordings, time periods, and types of disaster aid, unlike most studies in the literature.

Data and Measures

We used Bovitz-Forthright to recruit two national non-probability samples. Our 2021 survey had 2667 respondents, and our 2023 follow-up survey had 2104.³ Details of the sampling, weighting, and quality checks can be found in Supplemental Material Section 3. We report results based on the combined 2021 and 2023 sample when they have identical questions. Full question wordings, response options, and codings are in Tables A.15 and A.16 of the Supplemental Material. Our pooled sample includes 2919 White, 550 Black, 821 Latinx, 211 Asian American, 250 Other, and 20 Missing race respondents.⁴ We test registered hypotheses and additional un-registered hypotheses, noting them as such.⁵

Our predictors are re-scaled to range between 0 and 1, where 1 is the least sympathetic to victims or to a non-White group, unless otherwise noted. Regressions use ordinary least squares. In figures showing group means, we display 83% confidence intervals, equivalent to a 0.05 two-tailed *p*-value for a difference of means (Goldstein and Healy 1995).

Our main dependent variable is *disaster spending*: "Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that spending much more might require a tax increase to pay for it." The spending area we address in this paper is "Natural and public health disasters." Responses are: much more, somewhat more, same, somewhat less, much less. We re-scale responses to range from 0 ("much less") to 1 ("much more").⁶

Racial Attitude Measures

We measured five types of racial attitudes in our 2023 survey, reflecting five different theoretical orientations potentially relevant to disaster policy preferences.

Black Work Stereotype. According to some theories of racial attitudes, non-Black Americans often perceive Black Americans as having a weaker commitment to work and personal responsibility (Kinder and Sanders 1997), and these perceptions shape preferences on race-related policies (e.g., Gilens 1999). Our measure is the difference between ratings of Whites and Blacks on a seven-point scale from “Lazy” to “Hardworking.”

Anti-Black Prejudice. This measure taps negative stereotypes of Black Americans more broadly, averaging the perceived differences between Blacks and Whites (on a seven-point scale) in laziness, proclivity to violence, and intelligence.

Racial Sympathy. This measure taps distress over Black misfortune, a “sympathy-driven desire to help” African Americans (Chudy 2020; Raychaudhuri et al. 2023). We code it so higher values are less sympathetic and label it “racial unsympathy” for comparison with the other racial attitudes.

Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is a general prejudice tapping “us versus them” thinking about social identity outgroups (Kinder and Kam 2010). Our measure averages the perceived difference between the respondent’s ethnoracial out-groups and in-group (on a seven-point scale) on laziness, proclivity to violence, and intelligence (see Supplemental Material Section 5).⁷

Racial Resentment. Racial resentment reflects beliefs about how much opportunity is available to everyone in American society regardless of their race, and moralized sentiments about Black Americans’ personal responsibility and hard work (Kam and Burge 2017; Kinder and Sanders 1997) (see Supplemental Material Section 5).⁸

Nonracial Attitude Measures

Blame. We average three items on a five-point Likert scale reflecting views that disaster victims (1) are not to blame because there is nothing they can do to prevent disasters, (2) are partly to blame, especially if they did not take precautions, and (3) need to take responsibility for themselves even if they are harmed by disasters.

Trust in Experts. How much do ordinary people need the help of experts to understand complicated things like science and health, on a five-point scale from “Not at all” to “A great deal.” This variable, and the other trust variables below, are recoded to a three-point scale.⁹ See Supplemental Material Table A.15 for details.

Trust in Government. How often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right, on a five-point scale from “Always” to “Never.”

Trust in Schools and Media. How well does the following statement describe your view: “Much of what people hear in schools and the media are lies designed to keep people from learning the real truth about those in power,” on a five-point scale from “Not at all” to “Extremely well.”

Size of Government. Which statement comes closer to your view: “The less government, the better,” (1) or “There are more things that government should be doing” (0).

Ethnoracial Identity

Ethnoracial Identity. Ethnoracial categories are based on responses to two questions: “Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?” (yes or no), and “What is your race? Select all that apply.” (White, Black or African American, American Indian or Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other, Missing/Prefer not to say). Respondents who answer yes to the Latinx ethnicity question are coded as Latinx. Non-Latinx respondents selecting only “Asian” or “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander” are coded as Asian; those selecting only “White,” “Black or African American,” or “Prefer not to say” are coded as White, Black, or Missing, respectively. All others, including those who select multiple races, are coded as “Other.”

Demographic and Other Measures

Disaster Exposure. We asked respondents if they or any close friends or relatives “have been severely ill from COVID-19” or “experienced serious damage to personal property or health because of a wildfire, storm, or other natural disaster” (Yes or No). If they answered “Yes” to either we coded them as exposed (1, 0 otherwise).¹⁰

Other Measures. We use standard measures of age, gender, income, and education, and the traditional partisanship question coded with dummy indicators (Democrat, Independent, Republican).

Analysis

Attitudes Among Non-Black, Non-Latinx Respondents

We first explore whether racial attitudes are associated with support for disaster spending among respondents who are not Black and not Latinx.¹¹ We regress disaster spending support on each of the five racial attitudes, one at

a time. We control for demographics and party identification. As hypothesized, each racial attitude predicts lower support for disaster spending (Figure 1; full results are in Supplemental Material Table A.5). Even when controlling on party identification, the racial attitude coefficients are precise and large, in each case exceeding the difference between Republicans and Democrats (Supplemental Material Table A.5).¹²

Next, to evaluate which of these racial attitudes have the strongest independent effects, we regressed support for disaster spending on all of them in one model, controlling for demographics. To ensure these effects are not an artifact of partisan identification or a general tendency to blame disaster victims, we also controlled for these variables.¹³

Figure 2 shows the estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for each of the racial attitudes (details in Supplemental Material Table A.6). Racial resentment and racial unsympathy each have strong, precise, and independent effects. In contrast, the stereotype of Black laziness and the other two stereotype-based measures have no discernible independent effects. These findings suggest that the racial attitudes that predict disaster spending among non-Black and non-Latinx Americans do not originate in stereotypes or overall outgroup antipathy. Rather, they lie in the absence of sympathy for Black Americans and a concern about their perceived unfair advantages.

Consistent with previous studies of broad disaster policy views (see, e.g., Friedman 2019), we find that partisan identification, and beliefs about the blameworthiness of disaster victims, are also strong predictors (Supplemental Material Table A.6). Racial attitudes are not the only factor. That said, Republicans and Democrats differ less than those who are most and least sympathetic or resentful toward Black Americans. And racial attitudes matter even after controlling for partisanship and for the tendency to blame disaster victims.

To be sure, this model lacks controls for some potentially powerful nonracial attitudes. To further probe the robustness of the racial attitude effects, we leverage the rich measures of nonracial variables in our 2021 survey.¹⁴ These nonracial controls are fairly comprehensive: demographics, party identification, a preference for less government, trust in government, trust in schools and media, trust in experts, and personal exposure to natural disasters or Covid.¹⁵

Regressing disaster support on racial resentment and this host of attitudinal, experiential, and demographic controls makes clear the centrality of racial attitudes in accounting for disaster policy preferences (Table 1).¹⁶ The size of the racial resentment effect is about 13 points, and precisely estimated.¹⁷ This is a

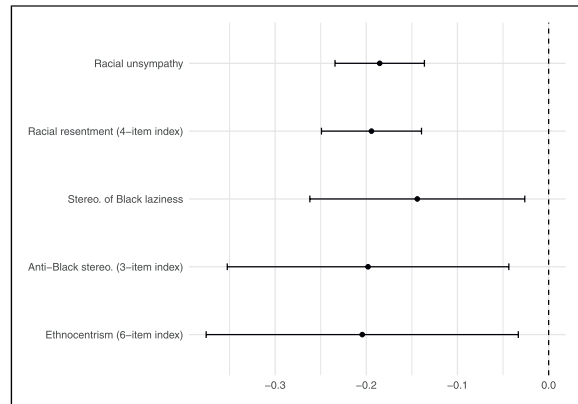


Figure 1. Associations of racial attitudes with disaster spending support from five separate models, controlling for demographics and partisan identification. OLS regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. Non-Black and non-Latinx respondents. 2023 survey, $N = 1423$ to 1430. Details in Supplemental Material Table A.5.

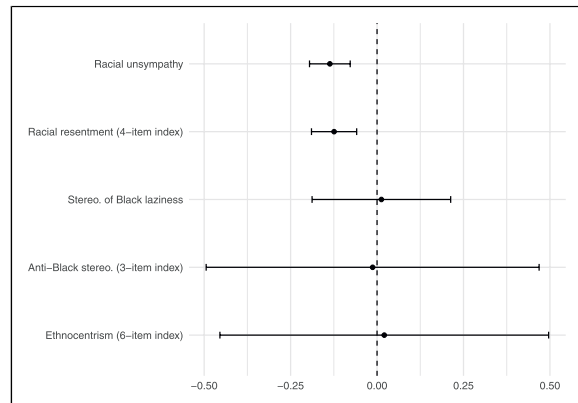


Figure 2. Associations of racial attitudes with disaster spending support from a single model, controlling for demographics, partisan identification, and blame. OLS regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. Non-Black and non-Latinx respondents only. 2023 survey, $N = 1254$. Details in Supplemental Material Table A.6.

conservative estimate of the impact of racial attitudes, as some nonracial attitudes are likely shaped, in part, by racial views. At least since the 1960s, when the Democratic party and an activist federal government became strongly associated with racial justice for Black Americans, Americans' partisan identification and preferences on the size of government have been linked with their racial attitudes (Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). Consequently, the coefficient on racial resentment in this model is an underestimate of the full impact of racial attitudes on disaster support, since some of that impact is captured by those variables.

In sum, racial resentment and racial sympathy have strong, consistent, independent effects on disaster policy

Table 1. Association of Racial Resentment, Partisan Identification, and Non-racial Attitude Measures With Disaster Spending Support.

	More on Disasters
Racial resent. (3-item index)	-0.130*** (0.025)
Less gov. is better	-0.076*** (0.014)
Trust in gov.: Moderate	-0.005 (0.017)
Trust in gov.: Low	-0.058*** (0.017)
Believe in need for experts: Moderate	-0.041** (0.013)
Believe in need for experts: Low	-0.091*** (0.018)
Trust in schools and media: Moderate	-0.003 (0.014)
Trust in schools and media: Low	0.004 (0.017)
Exposure: Covid	0.029* (0.014)
Exposure: Disaster	0.040 (0.025)
Exposure: Both	0.050*** (0.018)
Party: Independent	-0.027 (0.014)
Party: Republican	-0.015 (0.017)
Constant	0.876*** (0.023)
Demographics	Yes
Observations	1893
R ²	0.213
Adjusted R ²	0.205
Residual Std. Error	0.214

Note. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

preferences. These effects hold even when we control for many predictors that are not overtly racial. Prior studies of broad disaster views have emphasized the role of partisanship and nonracial blame attributions. Our findings show that racial attitudes matter above and beyond the effects of such nonracial views.

Racialized Reasons

As an additional test of the role of racial attitudes, we assess respondents' evaluations of racialized reasons to support or oppose disaster spending. We hypothesized that respondents with more negative racial attitudes will judge a reason that focuses on benefits to minorities or immigrants as less compelling than more universal

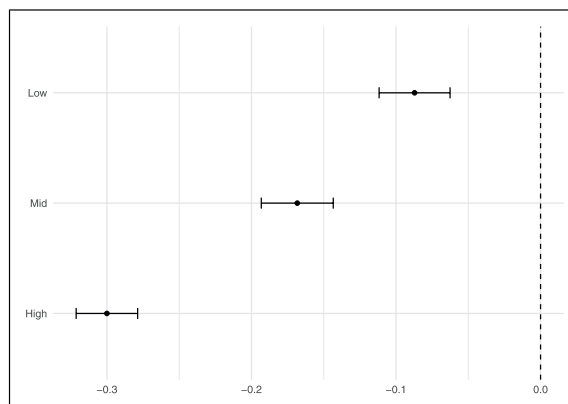


Figure 3. Difference in predictive power of a racialized reason for disaster support relative to non-racialized reasons, by level of racial resentment. OLS regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. Non-Black and non-Latinx respondents only. 2021 survey, N = 2078. Details in Supplemental Material Table A.13.

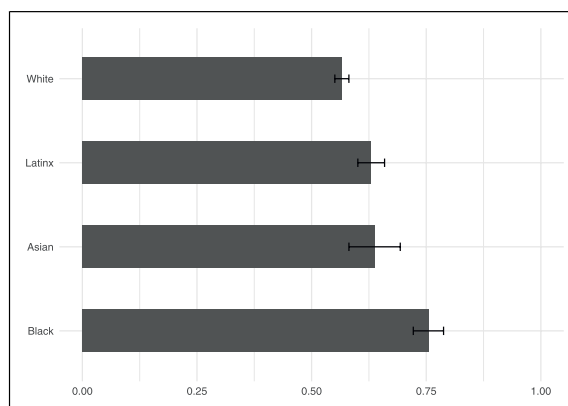


Figure 4. Percent of each ethnoracial group favoring increased spending on natural and public health disasters, with 83% confidence intervals. Combined surveys, N = 4771.

reasons.¹⁸ The racialized reason for disaster spending asserted that a lot of the assistance “will go to immigrants or minorities, who are often hardest hit.”

To test the hypothesis, we regressed the persuasiveness of a reason on a dummy variable indicating whether the reason is racialized; a discrete measure of racial resentment; an interaction between them; and a set of control variables (see Supplemental Material Section 6 for more details). Standard errors were clustered by respondent. We analyze non-Black and non-Latinx respondents in survey 1.

As expected, the impact of the racialized reason is strongly moderated by racial resentment (Figure 3, Supplemental Material Table A.13).¹⁹ The racialized reason reduces persuasiveness by 30 points among

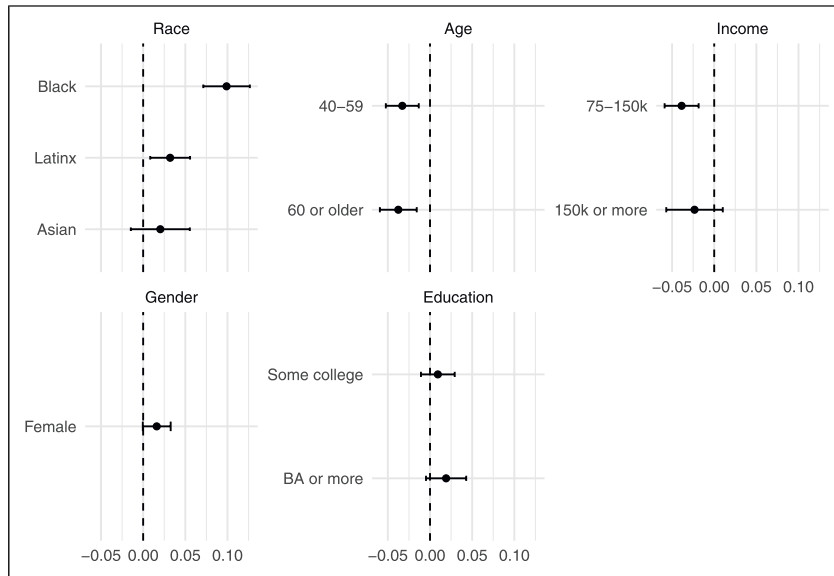


Figure 5. OLS regression coefficients and standard errors from a single model of disaster support regressed on demographics and ethnographic categories. Other and Missing race and Other gender not shown. Combined surveys, $N = 4765$. Details in [Supplemental Material Table A.1](#), column 2.

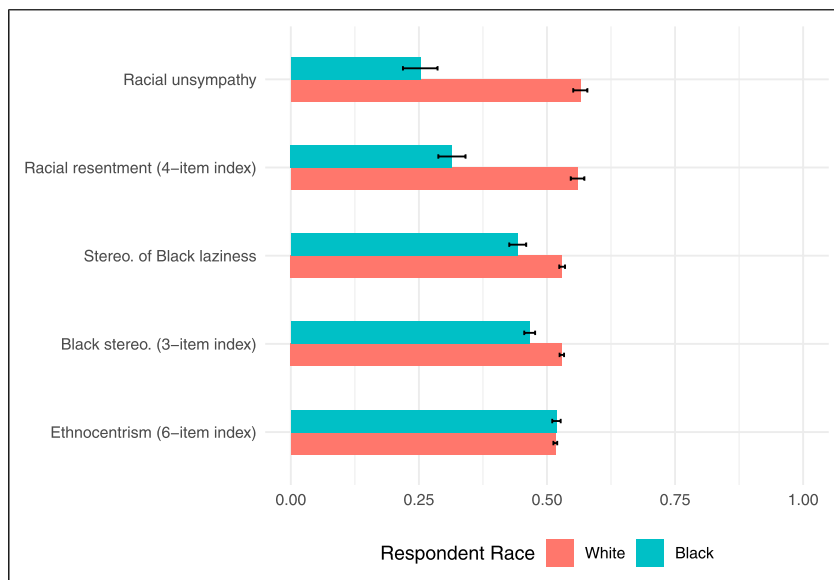


Figure 6. Black and White respondents’ mean scores on racial attitude measures, with 83% confidence intervals. 2023 survey, $N = 2104$.

those high in racial resentment, but only 9 points among those low in racial resentment, with the effect on those with middle levels of resentment falling in between. That is, when we highlight the racial composition of the beneficiaries, this reduces support for more spending especially among those with high racial resentment. These results further highlight the importance of racial attitudes for general disaster policy preferences.

Racial Identity

Americans’ disaster policy preferences may also differ across respondents with different ethnographic identities. [Figure 4](#) displays the percent of each ethnographic group that supports increased spending on disasters. As hypothesized,²⁰ Black respondents have a uniquely high level of support (75.5%). White respondents are the least supportive (56.6%), with Asian and Latinx respondents in between. We refer to this finding as “the Black-White gap.”

Table 2. Racial Attitudes Explain Much of the Black-White Gap in Disaster Spending Support.

	More on Disasters					
	2021	2021	2021	2023	2023	2023
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Race: Black	0.108*** (0.019)	0.056** (0.018)	0.043* (0.018)	0.091*** (0.021)	0.051* (0.021)	0.026 (0.021)
Race: Latinx	0.036* (0.017)	0.027 (0.016)	0.007 (0.016)	0.030 (0.017)	0.023 (0.017)	0.019 (0.017)
Race: Asian	0.020 (0.022)	0.009 (0.025)	-0.022 (0.024)	0.012 (0.030)	0.001 (0.030)	-0.003 (0.029)
Race: Other	-0.019 (0.036)	-0.031 (0.032)	-0.034 (0.028)	-0.017 (0.028)	-0.033 (0.028)	-0.027 (0.027)
Race: Missing	-0.053 (0.058)	-0.040 (0.055)	-0.056 (0.054)			
Racial resent. (3-item index)		-0.237*** (0.019)	-0.137*** (0.021)		-0.204*** (0.021)	-0.135*** (0.023)
Party: Independent			-0.027* (0.012)			-0.067*** (0.014)
Party: Republican			-0.021 (0.015)			-0.090*** (0.017)
Less gov. is better			-0.071*** (0.012)			
Trust in gov.: Moderate			-0.018 (0.015)			
Trust in gov.: Low			-0.062*** (0.014)			
Believe in need for experts: Moderate			-0.038*** (0.011)			
Believe in need for experts: Low			-0.088*** (0.016)			
Trust in schools and media: Moderate			-0.010 (0.012)			
Trust in schools and media: Low			0.001 (0.015)			
Exposure: Covid			0.030* (0.012)			
Exposure: Disaster			0.034 (0.021)			
Exposure: Both			0.030 (0.015)			
Blame victims (3-item index)						-0.153*** (0.028)
Constant	0.708*** (0.015)	0.823*** (0.017)	0.888*** (0.021)	0.675*** (0.019)	0.788*** (0.019)	0.873*** (0.021)
Demographics included	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2667	2662	2657	2098	2098	2097
R ²	0.044	0.132	0.209	0.027	0.085	0.123
Adjusted R ²	0.039	0.128	0.202	0.022	0.080	0.116
Residual Std. Error	0.232	0.221	0.210	0.236	0.228	0.224

Note. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Not only is the Black-White gap the largest among the ethnoracial groups, it is much larger than nearly any other demographic gap. Figure 5 displays marginal effects from regressing disaster spending on race and four other demographics: income, gender, age, and education. The Black-White gap is ten points, and highly precise. The other demographic categories in the figure all have much smaller effects.²¹

The greater support for disaster spending among Blacks than Whites is not only large in magnitude. It is highly robust. The Black-White gap persists across time, appearing at similar levels during the height of Covid in 2021 and after Covid had substantially declined in 2023 (Supplemental Material Table A.2, model 3). The gap also remains essentially unchanged whether respondents are asked about spending on natural disasters, public health disasters, or natural and public health disasters (Supplemental Material Table A.3), and for spending on disaster prevention or disaster relief (Supplemental Material Table A.4, models 1 and 2).²²

Next, we consider the role of racial attitudes in the Black-White gap. Above, we showed that racial attitudes are associated with support for disaster spending among mostly White (non-Black and non-Latinx) respondents. Figure 6 shows that White and Black Americans differ considerably in their mean racial attitudes. Black respondents score much lower than White respondents on all racial attitudes except for ethnocentrism. The difference is especially large on racial resentment and racial sympathy.²³

To assess whether these attitudinal differences explain the Black-White gap in disaster spending preferences, we first estimate the size of the Black-White gap in the presence of demographic controls. We do so separately in each survey year, for robustness (columns (1) and (4) of Table 2). We then add racial resentment (the only racial attitude measured in both surveys). This model is in columns (2) and (5) of Table 2. Finally, we add controls for party identification and other political attitudes (columns (3) and (6) of Table 2).²⁴

As hypothesized, the addition of racial attitudes diminishes the size of the Black-White gap.²⁵ In the 2021 survey, racial resentment reduces the Black-White gap from 0.108 to 0.056 (a 48% reduction). Further, racial resentment remains a strong predictor (the strongest predictor) even when party identification and a host of other controls are included. The results are similar in the 2023 survey: racial resentment reduces the Black-White gap from 0.091 to 0.051 (a 44% reduction), and remains a strong predictor even when party identification and victim blame are included.²⁶

Finally, as a robustness check, we use decomposition analysis to assess the extent to which White Americans' support for disaster spending would change if they shared Black Americans' demographic, experiential, and

attitudinal, characteristics (Supplemental Material Table A.8).²⁷ Using the same variables included in model (3) of Table 2, we find that racial resentment accounts for almost half of the predicted 7.2 point increase in White support for disaster spending.²⁸ This analysis replicates our finding about the importance of racial attitudes in understanding the Black-White gap.²⁹

In sum, Black Americans express much stronger support for disaster spending than White Americans. Racial attitudes are an important factor in explaining this gap. Lower support for disaster spending among White than among Black Americans is partly shaped by a lack of sympathy for Black Americans and by the insistence that Blacks should “work their way up” without “special favors.” Views and sentiments about Black Americans matter for disaster preferences.

Conclusion

Studies of public opinion about disaster spending have mostly focused on factors other than race. This study asked whether race shapes these preferences. And, in contrast with prior studies of *specific* highly racialized disasters, this study investigated the association of race with views of disaster spending in *general*.

We find that race is indeed associated with a general preference for disaster spending—not only for spending on a particularly racialized disaster. Black Americans are much more supportive than White Americans. This difference is larger than the difference between White and either Latinx or Asian American respondents, and it is larger than the effect of other demographics.

This pattern resembles findings for another ostensibly nonracial policy domain: war. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not heavily portrayed as taking a disproportionate toll on African Americans, yet they expressed much less support for these wars than White Americans did (Green-Riley and Leber 2023). In that study, the gap is primarily explained by party identification and concern over casualties. We similarly find that party identification matters for the Black-White gap in disaster support. However, we also find that racial attitudes matter at least as much, a proposition not commonly tested in other studies of ostensibly nonracial policy domains.

Not only does the Black-White gap in disaster preferences rest in large measure on Whites' lower sympathy and higher resentment toward Black Americans; those same racial attitudes also predict disaster preferences among Whites. These racial attitude effects among White respondents hold even after controlling for a host of alternative explanations: demographics, partisanship, a preference for limited government, distrust in various institutions, a tendency to blame disaster victims, and

personal exposure to disaster. To be sure, the general tendency to blame disaster victims for their situation also matters for Whites' disaster spending preferences, about as much as racial attitudes do. But notably, racial attitudes matter even when controlling for general blame. In sum, while many Americans believe that public spending is too high, that government cannot be trusted, or that disaster assistance is not sufficiently deserved, and while many Americans have been exposed to disaster, these beliefs and experiences—in their nonracial, general forms—typically do not shape disaster policy preferences as much as racial attitudes do.

Overall, then, disaster policy has the hallmarks of a racialized policy domain. This paper contributes to the literature on disaster policy and the literature on racial identity and racial attitudes by drawing a stronger link between them, and by shedding light on *which* racial attitudes matter most. Future work can further probe the source of that relationship. Our findings suggest the source does not lie in personal exposure to disaster or broad views about government. Nor is it simply a reflection of racial differences in partisan attachments. One possibility worth exploring is whether this association arose from the accumulation of salient racialized disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

This paper also contributes to the broader scholarship on the role of race in public opinion. Recent studies have begun to demonstrate that Black and White Americans tend to differ on a host of political issues even when those issues are not heavily racialized in public discourse (SoRelle and Laws 2023). In addition, scholars have documented a much broader range of policy domains where racial attitudes matter. However, the attitudinal bases of these racial patterns are only beginning to receive scholarly attention (Green-Riley and Leber 2023). An important direction for future research is to explore how the media, public discourse, and political debates bring views about race into play on ostensibly nonracial issues.

Finally, our results carry implications for disaster policy support. As disasters grow in impact, the government's role in addressing them will become all the more important. As long as the majority racial group remains relatively unenthusiastic about this role, disaster policy will remain sub-optimal. The consequences of inadequate spending will fall particularly on the least privileged members of society, but will also harm society at large.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

The Institutional Review Board at Princeton University approved our survey (13,792) on April 15, 2021. Respondents gave written consent before answering questions.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. This worldview also consists of symbolic sexism, anti-LGBT sentiment, and social dominance orientation.
2. This pattern replicates with biological racism, confirming it is not the result of nonracial, general attitudes about government.
3. We also searched for questions about support for disaster spending in the American National Election Survey, the General Social Survey, and the Cooperative Election Study. We found no instances where respondents were asked such questions and were also asked about racial attitudes.
4. The distribution in each survey is in [Supplemental Material Section 3](#).
5. Our registered hypotheses for the 2021 survey are at https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=YTP_9X8. Here, we test H12a and H12b, as tests for all other hypotheses are reported elsewhere. Our registered hypotheses for the 2023 survey are at https://osf.io/7yztm/?view_only=6aa8c0e8a5f6418f9ae429d09e2f897b. Replication materials are on the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3POXAW>.
6. The 2023 survey randomly assigned respondents to one of three disaster types: "natural disasters," "public health disasters," or "natural and public health disasters." As shown

later, we find no meaningful differences, so we pool these responses.

7. In contrast with Anti-Black prejudice, ethnocentrism is measured separately for White, Black, and Latinx Americans.
8. We mainly use a continuous measure on the 0-to-1 scale. See [Supplemental Material Section 5](#) for details about a discrete measure.
9. Pooling the bottom two for low, and the top two for high.
10. In some models and robustness checks, we use dummy variables to control for exposure to Covid, natural disasters, or both.
11. We exclude Latinx respondents in this section because we expected that they would support disaster spending more than White Americans and because some of our measures of racial attitudes (namely, of Whites' ethnocentrism) reflects respondents' attitudes towards Latinx as well as Black Americans.
12. See H23a, H24a, H25a, H26a, and H27a.
13. See H23b, H24b, H25b, H26b, and H27b and the Analytic Methods section of the 2023 pre-analysis plan regarding multivariate specifications.
14. This test is exploratory and was not registered.
15. In the 2021 survey, our only measure of racial attitudes is racial resentment. Since racial resentment and racial sympathy are the two racial attitude measures that have strong independent associations with disaster support ([Figure 2](#)), we do not consider our reliance on racial resentment in this analysis to be problematic.
16. Coefficients for demographic controls are not included here, but are in the replication file.
17. The effect of racial resentment is similar in 2021 and 2023, and exists across disaster types (public health and natural disasters) and spending types (prevention and relief) (H32, [Table A.9](#); H31, [Table A.10](#) column 3; H27a, [Table A.11](#) in the [Supplemental Material](#)).
18. See H12b. In our 2021 survey, we asked respondents to rate the persuasiveness of various reasons for favoring disaster prevention spending or disaster relief spending. We ignore the distinction between spending types here.
19. See H12b.
20. See Racial Identity section of the 2023 pre-analysis plan.
21. Other gender is the only variable with a larger or similar effect ([Supplemental Material Table A.1](#), column 2).
22. See H38, H36, and H37 of the 2023 pre-analysis plan; the comparison of prevention and relief questions was not preregistered, but see H34 and H35 for similar tests.
23. See H33.
24. Coefficients for demographic controls other than racial identity are not included here, but are in the replication file.
25. See H34.
26. To test whether this effect is specific to racial resentment, we repeat this analysis with alternative measures of racial attitudes. We use those that showed the largest Black-White

differences in [Figure 6](#). Racial unsympathy produces results similar to racial resentment. The stereotype of Black laziness does not ([Supplemental Material Table A.7](#)).

27. This robustness check was not registered.
28. Preferences about the size of government are the next most important factor.
29. Finally, in an additional unregistered analysis, we interacted a discrete measure of racial resentment (see [Supplemental Material Section 5](#)) with the indicator variable "Black," using the combined survey (Black and White respondents only). The interaction of high resentment and "Black" is 0.09 ($p < .05$), which erases most of the main effect of high racial resentment (-0.15 , $p < .001$). High racial resentment is not a strong predictor of Black respondents' disaster spending preferences.

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