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# **Americans' Explanations for Racial Disparities Across Three Decades (1985-2016): Are the Views of African Americans and Whites Converging?**

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Abstract

Despite the promises of the Civil Rights Movement last century, African Americans continue to experience less socioeconomic success than their White peers. Research has found that explanations for this racial gap differ by race, with Whites more likely to adhere to individualistic explanations and African Americans more likely to agree with structural causes. We use color-blind racism, standpoint theory, and a presidential administration timeline to frame an examination of three decades (1985-2016) of General Social Survey data on explanations for racial differences. We find that among all Americans regardless of race, agreement with both person-blame and system-blame explanations has declined over time. We also find that the gap between African Americans and Whites in agreement with these explanations is closing over time, including trends that suggest African Americans may now be more supportive of some person-blame explanations for racial disparities than are Whites.

Keywords: Attitudes, Color-Blind Racism, Inequality, Race, Standpoint Theory

Despite advances since the mid-twentieth century, African Americans continue to experience less socioeconomic success than their White counterparts (Ard 2015, Au 2013, O'Connell 2012). Meanwhile, Americans' explanations for the persistence of these racial disparities have shifted over time (Hunt 2004, 2007, Smith 2014, Taylor and Merino 2011). Hunt (2007), for example, found that African Americans were more likely than White Americans to support structural explanations for racial disparities, specifically racial discrimination and less access to education. Yet there also appears to be growing support for more personal explanations within the African American community. These trends are important to examine not only as a social barometer, but also because of their relation to racially-sensitive public policy designed to address those disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2001, Kinder and Mendelberg 2000, Kluegel 1990, Sears and Henry 2003, Tuch and Hughes 2011).

In the present study, we examine trends in Whites' and African Americans' explanations for racial disparities, from 1985 to 2016, using data from the General Social Survey. We extend prior research on attitudes toward racial differences in three important ways. First, we include an additional decade of data beyond recent studies – through first half of Obama's presidential term – to determine if African American and Whites continue to associate different societal outcomes with personal or person-blame explanations versus structural or system-blame explanations. Second, we separate the three-decade period into presidential administrations – including the additional data from George W. Bush's second term and the majority of Barack Obama's presidency – to examine the effects of eras of presidential leadership and political climate on these associations. Third, we extend the theoretical consideration of these changes through the lens of color-blind racism and standpoint theory to explain how group identity and ideology influence explanations for racial disparities in the United States.

## **Background**

Historically, African Americans and Whites have viewed the causes of racial disparities differently. Feagin (1972) was among the first to investigate what factors Americans attribute to societal stratification, identifying individual and structural beliefs as the two key categories of explanation<sup>2</sup>. Individualistic (i.e., person-blame) explanations blame the disadvantaged themselves through personal shortcomings. Research has since expanded upon the individualist definition to distinguish between traditional individualistic, involving genetic shortcomings such as intelligence, and motivationally individualistic, involving assumptions such as a lack of will (Kluegel 1990). The structuralist (i.e., system-blame) explanations, in contrast, attribute disadvantage to mistreatment through social institutions (Feagin 1972).

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<sup>2</sup> Fatalist explanations were the third category Feagin identified, but this concept lacks statistical confirmation and has received minimal academic attention.

Adherence, to person-blame or system-blame explanations is reinforced through socialization, especially within families and at school (Guimond, Begin and Palmer 1989, Hunt 2004). Many Whites believe – simultaneously and paradoxically – that discrimination continues to limit life outcomes *and* that African Americans experience equal opportunity (Kim 2002, Schuman and Krysan 1999, Welch and Sigelman 2011). In this view, discrimination and equality maintain balance; as equality increases, discrimination must be decreasing, leading to the assumption that discrimination cannot still be a major influence in the U.S. today. The decline in Whites who believe inequality persists because of discrimination began as early as the 1970s (Hunt 2007),

causing many Whites to be less supportive of programs designed to help African Americans (Hunt and Wilson 2009, Tuch and Hughes 2011).

Following civil rights victories in the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans have been increasingly likely to blame individuals for major societal disparities (Hunt 1996, 2004, 2007). The African American elite and the growth of the African American middle class are thought to be directing the ideological shift toward person-blame explanations (Shelton and Greene 2012, Smith 2014, Welch and Sigelman 2011). For example, African American political leaders in post-Civil Rights Movement era tend to deemphasize structural racism as a cause for racial differences in lieu of an orientation that highlights economic rather than racial discrimination. The question remains to what extent African American and Whites remain divided in their adherence to person-blame and system-blame explanations, particularly in an era following monumental historical events such as Hurricane Katrina and the election of the first African American president.

### ***Theoretical Considerations***

There are multiple theoretical lenses on race that may explain why African Americans and White Americans have seen racial disparities differently, but also why divisions in these attitudes may be shrinking over time. Overt racisms have been obstructed by a changing moral compass in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century due to the Civil Rights Movement, yet racism still exists. To a large extent overt racism have been socially suppressed, giving rise to a more covert form – *color-blind racism* (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Quillian 2006). In addition, *standpoint theory* asserts that people who are socially and structurally underprivileged have distinct experiences and perspectives from the privileged group (Collins 1990, Wood 2005). Both may work to encourage *internalized racism* and consequent manifestations of external perceptions of race and race-related outcomes (Biggs 2009, Guyll, Madon, Prieto and Scherr 2010).

### **Color-Blind Racism**

Color-blind racism is a post-civil rights ideological alternative to overt racism that claims race is no longer a structural determinant for success or failure in the United States. Influenced by the post-Civil Rights Era, social hostility toward overt forms of racism grew. Rather than disappearing, racism adapted, becoming partially rooted in the argument that race is no longer explicitly tied to inequality (Alexander 2012, Bonilla-Silva 2003, Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick 2004, Tuch and Hughes 2011). Research using the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) has revealed several correlates of color-blind racism, including a denial of White privilege, unawareness of institutional racism, less favorable attitudes toward race-sensitive social policy, and fear of other racial groups (Neville et al. 2000, Spanierman and Heppner 2004, Tuch and Hughes 2011, Wing Sue 2004).

Color-blind logic is rooted in the framing of race-sensitive issues as unfair to Whites and in the belief that cultural deficits cause racial inequality, such as African Americans lacking a proper work ethic (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011, Omi and Winant 2015). As Bonilla-Silva (2003) suggest, this form of racism has a rational foundation rooted in a racialized social system that benefits Whites. Therefore, the occurrence of color-blind racism is not simply an individual attribute, but an encouraged stance in the United States. Color-blind racism has flourished in the United States, despite contradictory evidence that African Americans continue to experience worse social and institutional situations than their White counterparts (Ard 2015, Au 2013, Howell and Timberlake 2014, O'Connell 2012, Wing Sue 2004). Through color-blind racism, the dominant group maintains the status quo by continuing to use racist ideology to rationalize their own racial interests, making it easier to dismiss these major problems. Societal adoption of color-blind ideology suggests that adherence to structural explanations for racial differences

should decline over time, while individualistic explanations would increase in prominence, particularly for White Americans.

### **Standpoint Theory**

According to standpoint theory, institutional power dynamics are key to understanding social attitudes and behaviors. Because power is unevenly distributed in society, it results in different social standpoints for different groups. These varied perspectives are not biologically determined but are entirely social and learned via a group's unique social situation, shaping collective experiences and understanding of life (Kinefuchi and Orbe 2008, Wood 2005).

While color-blindness maintains that race is no longer a factor influencing social inequality, standpoint theory argues that the lives of the socially underprivileged are structurally distinct from those that are privileged. The shared life experiences of the dominant group positions differ from those in less dominant groups, resulting in a different understanding of social reality based on group membership (Kinefuchi and Orbe 2008). As institutions continue to perpetuate inequality, those who are disadvantaged develop a deeper understanding of institutional influences regarding inequality (Wood 2005). Marginalized groups are often credited with holding more accurate standpoints, primarily because those privileged through major institutions have a vested interest in ignoring their oppressive nature (Collins 1990). Groups with less institutional privilege are also more likely to seek out a political understanding of their oppression.

In addition to their own standpoint, marginalized groups are more likely to understand the social position of dominant groups, as a survival-skill that helps them to navigate their social reality. To survive and achieve goals within society, groups with less power must have awareness of more privileged standpoints. Akin to W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness ([1903] 1999), this often means being excluded from the dominant group but involved enough to allow for understanding of their inferior social role. Standpoints of those in power are normalized by society, making the perspective of marginalized groups easier to criticize and misunderstand; those in the mainstream are not required to think critically about their own standpoints or consider the standpoints of others (Collins 1990). Taken on its own, standpoint theory suggests there should still be a large gap between African Americans and Whites in explanations for racial disparities, with African Americans much more likely to support system-blame perspectives in particular.

### **Internalized Racism**

Together, privileged standpoints and color-blind racism encourage the treatment of oppressed groups in ways that reinforce their perceptions, contributing to internalization of harmful messages. Specifically, internalized racism occurs when disadvantaged groups accept and reinforce negative images and stereotypic beliefs (Chavous et al. 2003, Harper 2006). Privileged standpoints push forth often-biased perceptions of "othered" groups, while the budding legacy of color-blindness allows the denial of racism to interrupt the expression of oppressed standpoints that our society needs for accuracy and empathy. Research has consistently shown that individuals who believe racial stereotypes often shape their interactions to make their expectations a reality (Guyl, Madon, Prieto and Scherr 2010, Hill 2000).

Internalized racism works to create and maintain social inequality by silently fueling discrimination and hindering the societal success of oppressed groups (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). It is psychologically damaging, as it requires belief in one's own inferiority and endorsement of harmful ideologies (Massey and Owens 2014). When racism about one's own group is internalized, it becomes easier to align with person-blame explanations for racial disparities, especially among successful individuals with higher socioeconomic status. For African Americans in middle and upper classes, explanations for inequality has shifted from racism to

personal and cultural deficits (Pew Research Center 2016, Shelton and Greene 2012). If internalized racism is in fact increasing among African Americans, we would expect increasing agreement with person-blame explanations for racial disparities over time.

### ***The Influence of Time and Presidential Administrations***

Past presidents and their administrations have influenced public policy based on their beliefs about disadvantages among African Americans (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011, McAndrews 2001, Murphy 2009, Tripp 1992). For the purposes of this study, changes in the political party in power in the White House may lend some explanatory power, as outlined below. Presidential era is also a non-arbitrary way to divide time into discrete segments to simplify statistical analyses and findings.

From 1985 through 1992, Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. represented the Republican Party in the White House. Reagan's presidency was marked with an anti-Black agenda (a common example being the heavily criticized "War on Drugs"), resulting in harmful consequences for the African American community (Franklin and Moss 1988, Tripp 1992). George H. W. Bush was seen by many to be a continuation of the Reagan administration vis-à-vis civil rights policy, or at least inconsistent in his commitment to civil rights (McAndrews 2001). Early in his presidency, Bush appointed Clarence Thomas (a conservative African American) to the Supreme Court and refused to stop the awarding of college scholarships based on race. Paradoxically, he reduced funding for civil rights enforcement programs, failed to improve civil rights legislation, and remained mostly silent during the Los Angeles riots in 1992 (McAndrews 2001). Despite political mistreatment, African American political participation steadily increased in the 1980s, partially reflected by the increase of African American elected officials (Franklin and Moss 1988).

The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 brought an executive partisan shift within the United States. However, rather than using his position to attempt to heal the racial divide, his presidency had a marked avoidance of race, except in response to major events like the L.A. riots or the church burnings in the 1990s (Murphy 2009). Contradictory acts in Clinton's administration – like continuing affirmative action programs while also implementing his three-strikes and mandatory minimum sentencing policy – called for a color-blind approach to race, but became one of the contributors to the gross overrepresentation of people of color behind bars we see today (Murphy 2009).

George W. Bush's administration held a consistently low approval rating among African Americans, reaching an all-time low of 2% in 2005, the lowest of any president in modern history (Medhurst 2010). With thousands of African American voters disenfranchised from his 2000 election through voter intimidation, some argued that Bush's administration functioned without regard to African Americans. In response, Bush felt little obligation to the African American community, refusing meetings with the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP, and other organizations (Giroux 2006). In his only speech about the atrocity of American slavery he blamed "bad people" for the American slave trade, not the American government and its institutions (Wing Sue 2004). In the months following Hurricane Katrina, Bush and his administration were accused of a slow response because the people affected were predominantly poor people of color (Medhurst 2010). Bush's lack of attention to race relations in the U.S. may have influenced a similar lack of engagement in thinking about racial injustice in the American people.

In 2008, Barack Obama was the first African American President elect in U.S. history. His election had an immediate influence in American thought regarding racial equality. Shortly after his election, Gallup found that 71% of Americans found Obama's win to be one of the most important advancements for African Americans in the last 100 years (Welch and Sigelman 2011). African Americans overwhelmingly supported Obama through his campaign and presidency because of a shared standpoint based on shared political identity and interests (e.g.

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slavery, segregation, and discrimination) and an effort to achieve an equal political representation (Abrajano and Burnett 2012, Hunt and Wilson 2009). Despite Obama's popular support, his presidential sentiment regarding race was compatible with color-blindness. Published shortly before beginning his presidential campaign, *The Audacity of Hope* includes his critique of African American values as a contributing to their collective social and political situations (Obama 2006). In addresses to the American people, he implied that racism was neutral by uplifting feelings of racial discrimination among working- and middle-class Whites (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011). Research has confirmed that Obama's election is not indicative of post-racism (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011, Welch and Sigelman 2011). In 2008, Gallup found that among White voters, Obama supporters were only slightly less prejudiced than McCain supporters (Newport 2008), and Obama's election may have renewed overt racism and racial resentment (Tesler 2013). Overall, given the more consistent policies of Bush II and Obama, and Americans' more polarized reaction to the two along racial lines, we might expect trends in explanations for racial difference to have stabilized in the two most recent presidential eras compared to the preceding two.

### ***Other Relevant Factors***

To isolate the effects of race and time in our statistical analyses, we also take into account multiple time-variant social factors that are potentially related to race and the likelihood of adhering to person-blame or system-blame explanations. In particular, we control for gender, age, socioeconomic status, political ideology, religious affiliation, and geographic region, as prior research shows being male, older, less educated, wealthier, more conservative, religiously affiliated, and Southern is associated with favoring individualistic explanations for racial disparities over structural explanations (Guimond, Begin and Palmer 1989, Hunt 2007, 2016, Pew Research Center 2016, Schuman and Krysan 1999, Tesler 2013).

### **Research Questions**

The theoretical perspectives of race in the United States discussed above help justify a continued examination of White and African American differences between person-blame and system-blame perspectives. Certainly, the extent to which the trends described in previous research continue through the latter half of the Bush II presidency and into the Obama era is an open question. In extending prior work and examining the influence of more recent years, our study asks the following three questions:

RQ 1: Are there aggregate differences between Whites and African Americans in explanations for racial differences across the last three decades, net other factors?

RQ 2: Have Americans' levels of agreement with explanations for racial differences changed over the past three decades, net other factors?

RQ 3: Have Whites' and African Americans' levels of agreement with explanations for racial differences diverged or converged over the past three decades, net other factors?

### **Method**

The data were drawn from the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey that has been conducted annually or biannually by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) since 1972. Data obtained by the GSS include demographic information, social attitudes, and opinions regarding a wide variety of topics. We limited the data set to 1) the years 1985-2016; 2) White and African American respondents only; and 3) respondents with complete data on all four of the GSS questions that addressed racial differences for the following reasons: First, the racial differences questions were asked only once prior to 1985, in 1977, but were not given to African American respondents. Second, to ensure stable estimates of our dependent variables



in each year, we decided to limit our sample to white and African American respondents only. The race variable used historically by the GSS is a simple three-category distinction: "white," "black," or "other race." The percentage of respondents who identified as "other race" averaged about 6.8% across the years of our study, but was under 3% in the mid-1980s, and never reached 7% in a given year until 2004. Lastly, because our research questions involved comparisons across the four questions on racial differences, it was important to include only respondents with complete data on these variables. Across all the study years, the racial differences questions were given to 58.9% of respondents, with between 94 and 96.5% of those respondents providing valid answers to all four questions. . With these limitations, the number of respondents used in our analysis was still substantial ( $N = 22,836$ ).

### **Dependent Variables**

Each of the four dependent variables<sup>3</sup> was measured as respondents' agreement (*yes* = 1) or disagreement (*no* = 0) for specific reasons for socioeconomic differences between African Americans and Whites. Each question started, "On the average African Americans have worse jobs, income and housing than white people." The second half of these four questions asked if these differences are caused either by two different systemic inequalities (*discrimination* and *chance for education*) or by two different personal shortcomings among African Americans (*less ability to learn* and *lack of motivation*). We categorized discrimination and chance for education as "system-blame" explanations and less ability to learn and lack of motivation as "person-blame" explanations.

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<sup>3</sup>On the average African Americans have worse jobs, income and housing than White people. Do you think these differences...

*Discrimination* (RACDIF1): ...are mainly due to discrimination?

*Chance for Education* (RACDIF3): ...are because most African Americans don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?

*Less Ability to Learn* (RACDIF2): ...are because most African Americans have less in-born ability to learn?

*Lack of Motivation* (RACDIF4): ...are because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty?

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### **Independent Variables**

Race and time were the central predictors in this study. As discussed above, race was measured as a simple dichotomy with *African American* = 1 (and white = 0). Time was broken down into four discrete eras that aligned with the political party of the American president at that time: 1985-1992 (Republican; Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush), 1993-2000 (Democrat; Bill Clinton), 2001-2008 (Republican; George W. Bush), and 2009-2016 (Democrat; Barack Obama; reference group). We also created interaction terms between time and race, resulting in four dummy variables: *African American x 1985-1992*; *African American x 1993-2000*; *African American x 2001-2008*, and *African American x 2009-2016* (reference group). The purpose of these interaction terms is explained below in the analytic strategy section of the paper.

### **Control Variables**

Age was an interval variable measured in years. Gender was coded as *female* = 1 (and male = 0). Education was measured as a set of dummy variables reflecting the highest degree the respondents had earned: *less than high school degree*, *high school degree*, *some college but no degree*, and *bachelor's degree or more* (reference group). *Income* was measured in thousands of dollars and adjusted for inflation to 1980 dollars. *Politically liberal* was an ordinal variable with responses ranging from 1 = "extremely conservative" to 7 = "extremely liberal."

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Religious affiliation was measured as a set of four dummy variables: *Protestant*, *Catholic*, *other religion*, and *no religion* (reference group). Lastly, geographic region was measured as the *South*<sup>4</sup> (= 1) compared to the rest of the United States (= 0).

To answer our first research question (RQ 1), we relied on comparisons shown in Figure 1 in addition to a series of multiple logistic regression models (Table 2). These regression models tested whether the effects of race on the outcomes were statistically significant and hold net of control variables, including time. In other words, the regression tables allow the reader to determine whether the results shown in the figures are generalizable to Whites and African Americans in population and whether those trends are largely unchanged when other factors are considered. RQ2 was addressed through a combination of a line graph (Figure 2) and the same multiple logistic regression models presented in Table 2. We examined the basic trends across time for all four explanations for racial differences for all respondents in Figure 2 and also tested whether the effects of time were significant net of the control variables in Table 2. We then looked at both system-blame (Figure 3a) and person-blame (Figure 3b) explanations separately by race to address RQ3. Interaction terms between time and race were created and shown in Table 3, which addresses whether the "effect" of race (i.e., the gap in agreement between Whites and African Americans) differs across time periods, allowing us to determine whether African Americans' and Whites' explanations for racial differences are *converging* or *diverging* over time.

Missing data were minimal (less than .3%) for most of the control variables, with the exception of political views (2.9%) and income (9.6%). In order to use as many cases as possible, we substituted the mean for missing cases on interval and ordinal variables and used dummy missing indicators for categorical variables. A comparison of the results of this strategy to simple listwise deletion produced nearly identical results (available upon request).

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<sup>4</sup>The South includes the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

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**Results**

The means and standard deviations for all variables used in the study, aggregated across all study years, are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ALL VARIABLES IN THE STUDY

| Variable              | Full Sample |       | Whites |       | African Americans |       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|--------|-------|-------------------|-------|
|                       | M           | SD    | M      | SD    | M                 | SD    |
| Discrimination        | .39         | .49   | .35    | .48   | .66               | .47   |
| Chance for education  | .49         | .50   | .47    | .50   | .58               | .49   |
| Less Ability to learn | .13         | .33   | .13    | .33   | .13               | .34   |
| Lack of motivation    | .51         | .50   | .53    | .50   | .41               | .49   |
| African American      | .15         | .36   | .00    | .00   | 1.00              | .00   |
| 1985-1992             | .28         | .45   | .29    | .45   | .22               | .41   |
| 1993-2000             | .31         | .46   | .31    | .46   | .31               | .46   |
| 2001-2008             | .18         | .39   | .18    | .39   | .19               | .40   |
| 2009-2016             | .23         | .42   | .22    | .41   | .27               | .45   |
| Female                | .56         | .50   | .55    | .50   | .63               | .48   |
| Age                   | 46.40       | 17.34 | 46.93  | 17.50 | 43.43             | 16.08 |
| Less than HS          | .15         | .36   | .14    | .35   | .23               | .42   |
| High school           | .53         | .50   | .53    | .50   | .55               | .50   |
| Some college          | .07         | .25   | .07    | .25   | .08               | .26   |
| College degree        | .25         | .43   | .27    | .44   | .14               | .35   |
| Income (\$1000s)      | 32.74       | 30.77 | 34.70  | 31.65 | 21.38             | 21.87 |
| Politically liberal   | 3.88        | 1.40  | 3.84   | 1.40  | 4.13              | 1.42  |
| Protestant            | .59         | .49   | .55    | .50   | .78               | .41   |
| Catholic              | .23         | .42   | .26    | .44   | .08               | .26   |
| Other religion        | .05         | .21   | .05    | .21   | .04               | .19   |
| No religion           | .13         | .34   | .14    | .35   | .10               | .31   |
| South                 | .37         | .48   | .34    | .47   | .54               | .50   |
| <i>N</i>              | 22,836      |       | 19,399 |       | 3,437             |       |

*Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson*

*RQ 1: Are there aggregate differences between Whites and African Americans in explanations for racial differences across the last three decades, net other factors?*

Figure 1 shows the proportions of respondents who agreed with each explanation for racial differences, aggregated across all study years. The first set of bars applied to all respondents, and revealed that Americans most strongly attributed racial differences in jobs, income, and housing to a lack of motivation among African Americans, followed by diminished chances at education, then discrimination, and finally, less ability to learn. These levels of agreement were analyzed separately by race in the next two sets of bars. Since Whites comprised about 85% of the sample, the pattern for Whites was similar to that for all respondents, with lack of motivation and chance for education as the top explanations. In contrast, African Americans agreed most with the system-blame explanations, with discrimination seen as the leading cause for the racial differences noted, followed closely by chance for education. The person-blame explanations, lack of motivation and particularly less ability to learn, received much lower levels of agreement among African Americans.

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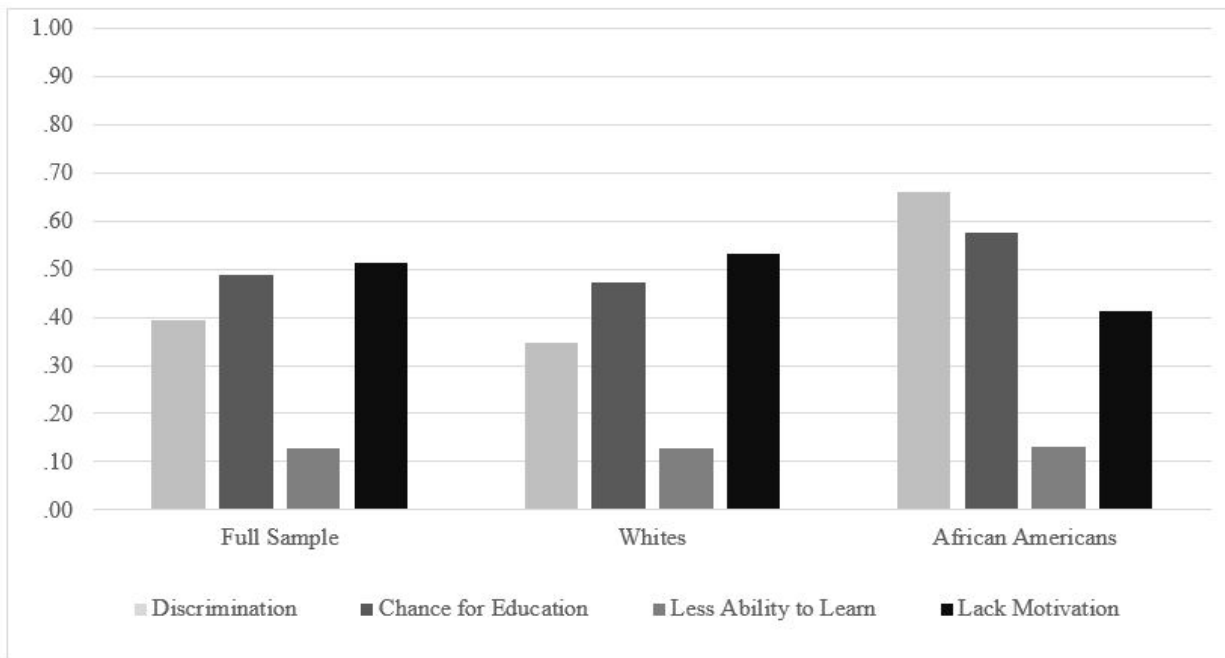


Figure 1: Proportion of Agreement with Explanations for Racial Differences, All Years Combined (1985-2016)

Notes: N=22,836. All proportions for explanations within groups (Full Sample, Whites, and African Americans) are significantly from each other at  $p < .001$ .

Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson

The logistic regression models presented in Table 2 largely confirmed the differences between Whites and African Americans in levels of agreement suggested in Figure 1. The coefficients for African American in the first two logistic regression models (discrimination and chance for education) revealed that African Americans were more likely than Whites to agree with system-blame explanations. In fact, African-American respondents were over four times more likely to agree that discrimination and nearly twice as likely to agree that the chance for education are causes of racial differences, net of the control variables. The control variables operated in the expected directions across both models, as female, more educated, and more politically liberal respondents more likely to agree with the system-blame outcomes. Being older, affiliating with Catholic or Protestant religions (compared to no religion), or living in the Southern states was associated with lower levels of agreement that chance for education or discrimination caused racial differences.

The last two models in Table 2 show somewhat mixed findings for the person-blame explanations. In contrast to the system-blame results, there was no significant difference between African Americans and Whites in agreement that less ability to learn was an explanation for racial differences. African American respondents were, however, nearly half as likely to agree with a lack of motivation as an explanation for racial differences. Again, the direction of the effects of the control variables were as expected, with male, older, less educated, religiously affiliated, and Southern respondents more likely to support person-blame explanations for racial differences.

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Racial Difference Explanations on Time and Race

| Discrimination<br>Predictor | Chance for Education |     |      | Less Ability to Learn |     |      | Lack of Motivation |     |      |           |     |      |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|-----|------|-----------------------|-----|------|--------------------|-----|------|-----------|-----|------|
|                             | b                    | SE  | OR   | b                     | SE  | OR   | b                  | SE  | OR   |           |     |      |
| African American            | 1.41***              | .04 | 4.09 | .67***                | .04 | 1.95 | -.05               | .06 | .95  | -.64***   | .04 | .53  |
| 1985-1992 <sup>a</sup>      | .38***               | .04 | 1.46 | .48***                | .04 | 1.62 | .85***             | .06 | 2.34 | .45***    | .04 | 1.57 |
| 1993-2000 <sup>a</sup>      | .16***               | .04 | 1.18 | .14***                | .04 | 1.15 | .36***             | .06 | 1.43 | .12**     | .04 | 1.13 |
| 2001-2008 <sup>a</sup>      | -.05                 | .05 | .95  | -.02                  | .04 | .98  | .13                | .07 | 1.14 | .15**     | .04 | 1.16 |
| Female                      | .21***               | .03 | 1.24 | .15***                | .03 | 1.17 | -.14**             | .04 | .87  | -.12***   | .03 | .89  |
| Age                         | .00***               | .00 | 1.00 | .01***                | .00 | 1.01 | .02***             | .00 | 1.02 | .01***    | .00 | 1.01 |
| Less than HS <sup>b</sup>   | -.11*                | .05 | .90  | -.95***               | .05 | .39  | 1.73***            | .08 | 5.66 | 1.10**    | .05 | 3.01 |
| High school <sup>b</sup>    | -.29***              | .04 | .75  | -.76***               | .04 | .47  | 1.16***            | .08 | 3.18 | .80***    | .04 | 2.23 |
| Some college <sup>b</sup>   | -.37***              | .06 | .69  | -.65***               | .06 | .52  | .71***             | .12 | 2.03 | .65***    | .06 | 1.92 |
| Income (\$1000)             | -.00***              | .00 | 1.00 | .00***                | .00 | 1.00 | -.01***            | .00 | 1.00 | -.00***   | .00 | 1.00 |
| Politically liberal         | .23***               | .01 | 1.26 | .17***                | .01 | 1.19 | -.05**             | .02 | .95  | -.18***   | .01 | .84  |
| Protestant <sup>c</sup>     | -.28***              | .05 | .75  | -.28***               | .04 | .76  | .14                | .08 | 1.15 | .31***    | .05 | 1.36 |
| Catholic <sup>c</sup>       | -.27***              | .05 | .76  | -.30***               | .05 | .74  | .37***             | .08 | 1.44 | .30***    | .05 | 1.36 |
| Other religion <sup>c</sup> | .02                  | .08 | 1.02 | .02                   | .08 | 1.02 | .22                | .13 | 1.25 | .11       | .08 | 1.12 |
| South                       | -.42***              | .03 | .66  | -.48***               | .03 | .62  | .40***             | .04 | 1.50 | .40***    | .03 | 1.49 |
| Intercept                   | -1.32***             | .09 | .27  | -.43***               | .08 | .65  | -4.49***           | .15 | .01  | -.68***   | .08 | .51  |
| -2 Log likelihood           | 28,236.57            |     |      | 29,853.96             |     |      | 17,121.42          |     |      | 29,422.00 |     |      |

Notes: N=22,836. Reference categories: 2009-2016<sup>a</sup>, College degree<sup>b</sup>, No religion<sup>c</sup>. \*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. p<.001 (two-tailed).  
Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson

RQ 2: Have Americans’ Levels of Agreement with Explanations for Racial Differences Changed over the Past Three Decades, Net of Other Factors?

Figure 2 shows the changes in agreement for each explanation for racial differences from 1985-2016 among all respondents. Both system-blame variables, discrimination and chance for education, had a nearly identical pattern: a slow decline by about 10 percentage points throughout the entire 1990s before essentially stabilizing in the early 2000s, but then followed by a major uptick in 2016 that erases nearly all the previous decline. A similar pattern was found for the person-blame variables, as both lack of motivation and less ability to learn slowly declined by about 15 percentage points across the course study years. But different from the system-blame explanations, most of the decrease in agreement with the person-blame variables occurred in early to mid-1990s, with less substantial change after 1995 and no uptick in 2016.

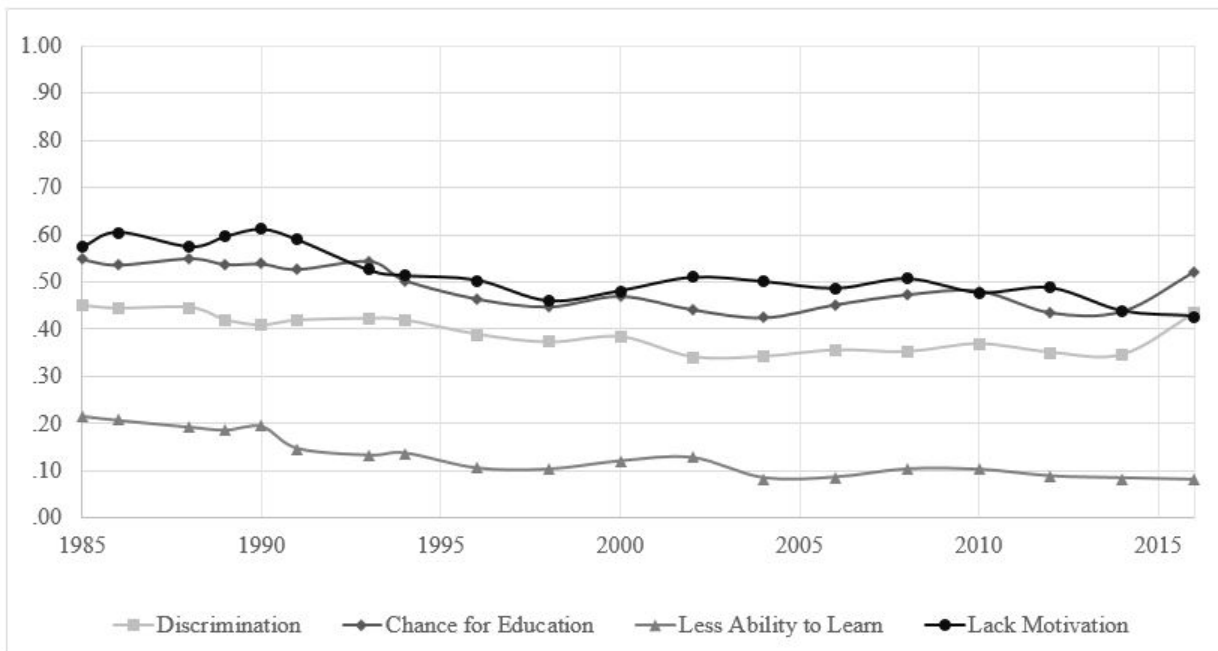


Figure 2: Proportion of Agreement with All Explanations for Racial Differences by Year (1985-2016), Full Sample Notes: N=22,836.

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*Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson*

The logistic regression models presented in Table 2 also address the question of whether the patterns over time seen in Figure 2 remain after controlling for relevant factors. The two system-blame outcomes, discrimination and chance for education, showed similar patterns; Americans in 1985-1992 and 1993-2000 were significantly more likely to agree with both system-blame variables than in the reference period, 2009-2016. In contrast, the coefficients for 2001-2008 were small and non-significant, indicating little change in overall agreement on discrimination and chance for education from that period to the reference period. Turning next to the person-blame explanations for racial differences in Table 2, the time period coefficients for both outcomes confirmed the patterns shown in Figure 2; respondents in both 1985-1992 and 1993-2000 were significantly more likely to agree that African Americans' lower ability to learn and lack of motivation explained racial differences than they were in 2009-2016. For lack of motivation (but not for less ability to learn), there was also a significant positive coefficient for the 2001-2008 period, reflecting a slight decline in agreement with this explanation throughout the 2010s; in contrast, the odds of Americans agreeing with less ability to learn had already declined substantially by the end of the 2000s.

*RQ 3: Have Whites' and African Americans' Levels of Agreement with Explanations for Racial Differences Diverged or Converged over the Past Three Decades, Net of Other Factors?*

Figure 3a shows that agreement with system-blame explanations seemed to converge over time between African Americans and Whites. While a sizable racial gap still remained in agreement about discrimination as an explanation, it is substantially closer in 2016 than it was at its height of nearly 50 percentage points in mid-1990s. The gap between African Americans and Whites on agreement with chance for education has nearly closed, after being nearly 20 points apart in the early years of the study. The interaction terms near the bottom of Table 3 confirmed that the convergence seen in Figure 3A was statistically significant for both discrimination and education; net of controls, the gap between African Americans and Whites in 1985-1992 and 1993-2000 was significantly larger than it was in 2009-2016. Further, the non-significant interaction term for 2001-2008 suggests that the gap between African Americans and Whites was no bigger in that era than in 2009-2016.

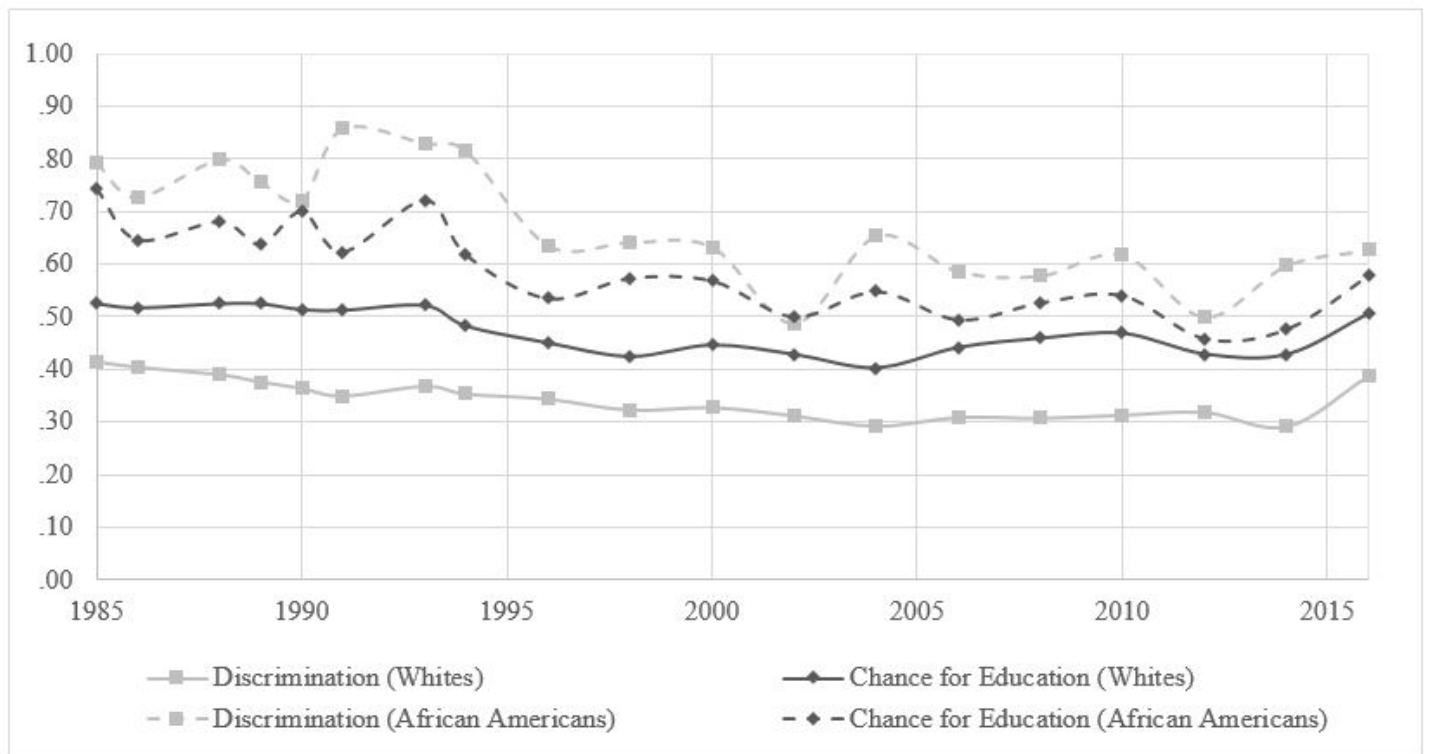


Figure 3a: Proportion of Agreement with System-Blame Explanations for Racial Differences by Year and Race (1985-2016)  
Notes: N=22,836.

Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson

Table 3: Logistic Regression of Racial Difference Explanations on Time, Race, and Time by Race Interaction

| Predictor                 | Discrimination |     |      | Chance for Education |     |      | Less Ability to Learn |     |      | Lack of Motivation |     |      |
|---------------------------|----------------|-----|------|----------------------|-----|------|-----------------------|-----|------|--------------------|-----|------|
|                           | b              | SE  | OR   | b                    | SE  | OR   | b                     | SE  | OR   | b                  | SE  | OR   |
| African American          | 1.17***        | .08 | 3.22 | .47***               | .08 | 1.60 | .61***                | .12 | 1.84 | -.13               | .08 | .88  |
| 1985-1992 <sup>a</sup>    | .30***         | .05 | 1.35 | .42***               | .04 | 1.53 | 1.06***               | .07 | 2.88 | .61***             | .04 | 1.84 |
| 1993-2000 <sup>a</sup>    | .09*           | .04 | 1.10 | .09*                 | .05 | 1.10 | .52***                | .07 | 1.69 | .24***             | .04 | 1.27 |
| 2001-2008 <sup>a</sup>    | -.06           | .05 | .94  | -.05                 | .05 | .95  | .23**                 | .08 | 1.26 | .20***             | .05 | 1.22 |
| AA*1985-1992 <sup>b</sup> | .54***         | .12 | 1.71 | .39**                | .11 | 1.48 | -1.21***              | .16 | .30  | -1.06***           | .11 | .35  |
| AA*1993-2000 <sup>b</sup> | .39***         | .11 | 1.48 | .27**                | .10 | 1.32 | -.78***               | .16 | .46  | -.69***            | .10 | .50  |
| AA*2001-2008 <sup>b</sup> | .02            | .12 | 1.03 | .15                  | .12 | 1.16 | -.41*                 | .18 | .66  | -.28*              | .12 | .76  |
| Intercept                 | -1.34***       | .09 | .26  | -.39***              | .08 | .68  | -4.65***              | .16 | .01  | -.77***            | .09 | .46  |
| -2 Log likelihood         | 28,206.76      |     |      | 29,840.25            |     |      | 15,532.76             |     |      | 29,317.32          |     |      |

Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson

The changes in person-blame explanations by race, shown in Figure 3b, did not follow the same pattern as those for the system-blame explanations. The gap between African Americans' and Whites' agreement with lack of motivation as a cause of racial differences was reduced from a high of over 20 percentage points in 1985 to a very small gap in which African Americans actually scored slightly *higher* on agreement than Whites in 2016. Further, this convergence was due just as much to African Americans' *increasing* agreement with the explanation as it was to Whites' *decreasing* agreement. The interaction terms in the third model of Table 3 confirmed that the racial convergence across all time periods was statistically significant, as the "effect" of being African American becomes significantly weaker over time. Less ability to learn as a cause of racial differences shows an even more interesting pattern, as the racial difference in agreement has clearly reversed over time; while Whites were slightly more likely to agree with this explanation in the late-1980s, a decrease in their agreement combined with sustained higher level of African-American respondents' agreement reveals that African Americans became more likely to agree than Whites by the early 2000s. The interaction terms in the last model of Table 3 confirmed that only in the most recent period (2009-2016) is the higher level of agreement for African Americans statistically significant.

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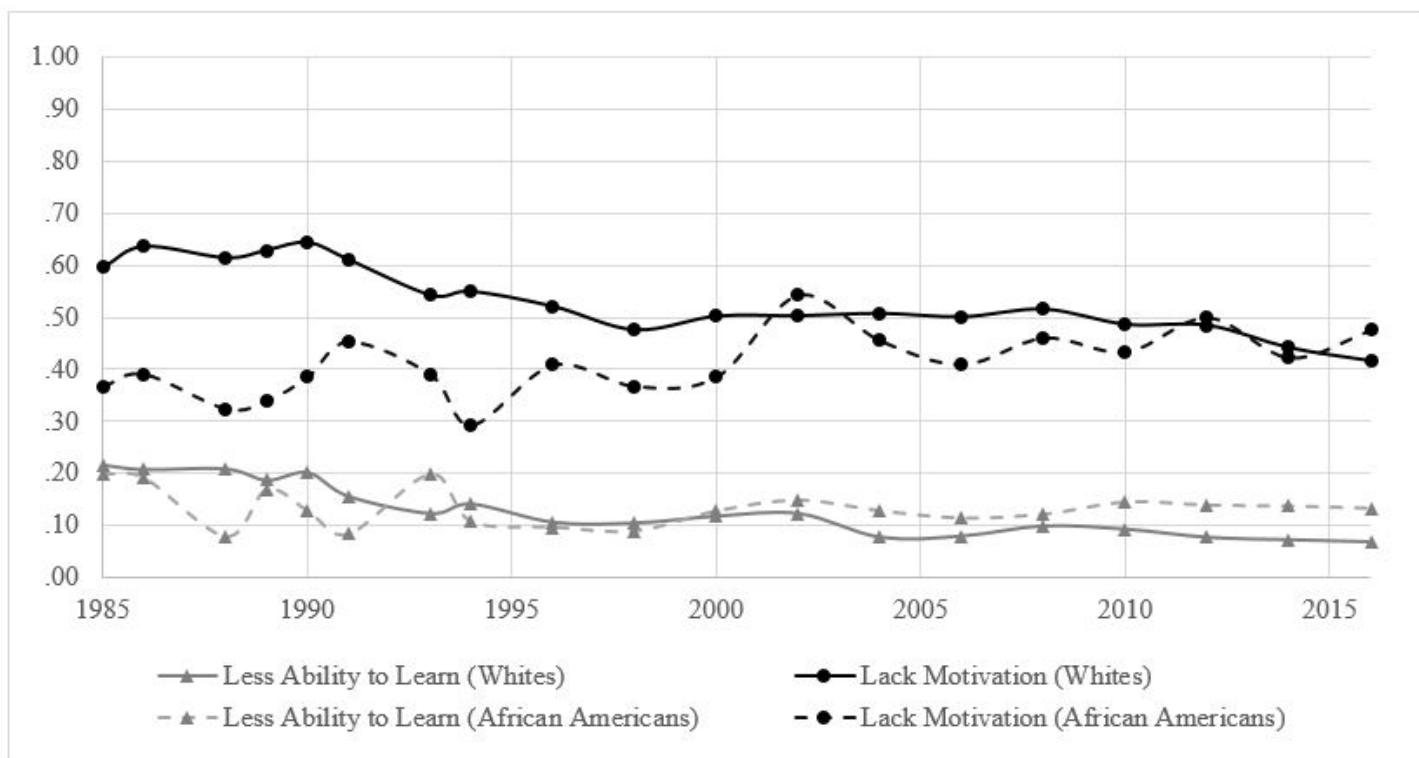


Figure 3b: Proportion of Agreement with Person-Blame Explanations for Racial Differences by Year and Race (1985-2016)  
Notes: N=22,836.

Source: Brown, Hawkins and Anderson

In summary, aggregated over the last three decades, Americans were more likely to agree with some explanations for racial differences than others, and these “rankings” of explanations differ by race. Further, agreement with each of these explanations has decreased among all Americans from 1985 to 2016. Compared to Whites, African Americans were more likely to agree with the system-blame explanations and less likely to agree with lack of motivation, after taking other relevant factors into account, although this gap has decreased substantially or disappeared over time. Less ability to learn shows an even more dramatic pattern, as African Americans were significantly more likely to agree with this explanation in the most recent time period than were Whites.

## Discussion

Our research builds on prior work that addresses the factors Americans believe perpetuate employment, income, and housing gaps between African Americans and Whites in the United States. Specific to this study, we use standpoint theory, color-blind racism, and a presidential timeline as guiding frameworks. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Hunt 2007), Americans’ support for all four explanations for racial differences has slowly and steadily declined from the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s, with some slight fluctuations.

With additional data through 2016, we show that these trends were largely stable between the Bush II presidency and the Obama presidency. Lack of motivation is a minor exception to this pattern, as support continued for this explanation continued to decline through Obama’s second term. It may be surprising that there was relatively little change in support for these explanations following the election of the first African American president. The countervailing forces of continued social pressure against overt forms of racism and the increasing racially charged resistance to Obama’s policies may have resulted in little change to support for person-blame explanations. At the same time, one might expect that the increasing prominence of color-blind racism combined with the rise of an African American to the highest



office in the land would result in further declines in system-blame support (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011). Instead, there is an interesting and substantial uptick in support for system-blame explanations between 2014 and 2016. Whether this is a random fluctuation or the start of a new change in Americans' understanding of barriers to success for African Americans remains to be seen.

The patterns for White explanations for racial differences largely mirror those described above, possibly because some White Americans may be concluding that none of the four GSS measures adequately explain disadvantage among African Americans. Recent research has largely invalidated person-blame explanations, while at the same time color-blind racism allows individuals to believe that system-blame explanations are less influential (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Quillian 2006). Many Whites may be influenced by these messages. Standpoint theory also supports this idea, as Whites are able to decide whether to expend mental energy considering these issues, while African Americans' lived experiences require them to seek real explanations (Wood 2005). Our data support these arguments, with the exception of the very recent increase in support for structural explanations. Toward the end of Obama's presidency, some White Americans may be coming to understand a dream of a "post-racial" America has not been realized, highlighting recent high profile and racially charged events such as police shootings of unarmed African American men (Black Lives Matter 2016).

Consistent with standpoint theory, we find that when all years are aggregated and examined by race, African Americans are more likely to support institutional explanations for racial differences. Yet, Hunt (2007) noted a conservative shift among African Americans that we further verify with our data, as the gap between Whites' and African Americans' agreement with system-blame explanations continues to close, while agreement with person-blame explanations has actually seen statistical convergence (*lack of motivation*) and even statistical reversal (*less ability to learn*). Possibilities for this include middle-class African Americans identifying more with their socioeconomic rather than racial status and a shifting understanding of discrimination. We agree that both ideas are possible, but also suggest that color-blind racism and racially dominant standpoints have contributed to internalized racism among African Americans, specifically those in the middle class. The African American middle class may look to others who have not achieved the same level of success and attribute it to low motivation or learning difficulties (Shelton and Greene 2012, Welch and Sigelman 2011, West 2001). Recent studies support this, with wealthier African Americans attributing more structural explanations for poverty, while their explanations for racial inequality have become more individualistic (Shelton and Greene 2012). Yet, these increases in person-blame explanations hold after controlling for education and income, suggesting that internalized racism may be prevalent among some African Americans.

This study is not without limitations. Race was limited to "black" and "white" in part because the third race category in the GSS ("other race") made up a small proportion of the overall sample (less than 4%) for a majority of the study years. Future research should seek to include the attitudes of other racial groups to get a better understanding of what our country believes as a nation. Additionally, future research should also examine why *less ability to learn* is rising among African Americans. Specifically, are stereotypic and self-deprecating beliefs among African Americans that their racial group is experiencing less job, income, housing (and potentially other) successes because of an inability to learn to the same aptitude as Whites, and if so, what is behind these beliefs? If these opinions continue to rise among African Americans, consequences could include increased internalized racism among some African Americans and a self-fulfilling prophecy of lowered levels of education (Chavous et al. 2003, Massey and Owens 2014). Further, more advantaged African Americans may begin to downplay their own racial identity and adhere to color-blind ideology. Either phenomena would likely result in diminished support for race-sensitive policy among African Americans.

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We also suggest that future statistical analysis includes a color-blindness scale and/or levels of support for race-sensitive policy. Since we have a better understanding of how color-blind racism influenced our findings and that color-blindness is linked with less favorable attitudes toward race-sensitive policy (Bonilla-Silva 2001, Sears and Henry 2003, Tuch and Hughes 2011), it is important that subsequent research follow these two factors closely to best understand their relationship in our current political environment. Lastly, we suggest that future investigation follows the current trends through the end of Obama's presidency and the campaign and presidency of the current president, Donald J. Trump. Trump's tumultuous campaign was grounded in both traditional and new racist ideology. We are anxious to understand how his rhetoric has influenced racial standpoints and Americans' understanding of the causes of differences between African American and White social success. The present study clearly shows that these explanations change in dynamic and sometimes surprising ways over time.

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