

BLACK AND WHITE BEYOND THE WATER'S EDGE:^{*}

Racial Gaps in Foreign Policy Preferences

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Forthcoming in the *American Journal of Political Science*

July 8, 2026

ABSTRACT: Historically, research on racial differences in American political attitudes has focused heavily on domestic politics. Recent work indicates that Black and White Americans often hold differing views on the use of force abroad and free trade; however, this article shows that racial gaps on international affairs are not confined to the realm of security or economics. Leveraging a unique dataset of 1,504 foreign policy questions from nearly 19,000 Americans surveyed from 1975–2018, we show that Black attitudes toward foreign policy are shaped by four political priorities: securing political rights and freedoms, skepticism about the exercise of state power, equitable access to resources, and solidarity with marginalized groups. Racial gaps in foreign policy attitudes exist well beyond issues explored in previous scholarship, and they persist even when controlling for partisan polarization. Race shapes the way that citizens think about the world and America's role in it.

VERIFICATION MATERIALS: The materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the American Journal of Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/C6KQCP>.

^{*}We're grateful for the support of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and to Michael Cerny, A.J. Dilts, Max Kuhelj Bugarcic, Kimani Panthier, Kay Rollins, Thomas Tait, and Darlene Uzoigwe for research assistance, and to audiences at Notre Dame's Race and International Relations Workshop, Princeton's International Relations Faculty Colloquium, and Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation, as well as Zoltán Búzás, Austin Carson, Andrew Moravcsik, Scott Sagan, and Jim Vreeland for helpful feedback.

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In April 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. captured national attention when he moved beyond his bailiwick of domestic civil rights to deliver a speech about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In his hour-long oratory, entitled “Beyond Vietnam,” King not only criticized the war, but also laid out an expansive foreign policy agenda embracing democratic rights, assistance to the global poor, and concern for oppressed people overseas (King 1967). Declaring that “a positive thrust for democracy” could prevent communism and counteract insecurity, King linked civil rights at home to the rights of those abroad. He also called for a revolution of values that would “look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth,” bringing medical aid to those injured in Vietnam and economic justice to developing nations more broadly. Sentiments similar to those articulated by King have echoed in Black American political rhetoric and action across many decades (Henry 2000; Shell 2023): in the antiwar stance of Rev. Jesse Jackson against the Gulf War, in the pro-democratic protests headlined by TransAfrica and many Black celebrities to halt apartheid in South Africa, in the 2017 charity benefits featuring Black celebrities like Jay-Z, Stevie Wonder, and Beyonce to support hurricane and earthquake relief in Puerto Rico and Mexico, in the advocacy of Black Lives Matter activists for indigenous movements around the globe.

How do Black Americans’ foreign policy preferences differ from those of White Americans? After having paid relatively little attention to questions of race in IR (Freeman, Kim and Lake 2022; Búzás 2013), scholars of public opinion in foreign policy have begun to document racial gaps in attitudes toward several key international issues, including support for the use of force (Green-Riley and Leber 2023; Nincic and Nincic 2002) and views toward international trade (Mutz, Mansfield and Kim 2021; Lobo and Brutger 2025). This emergent literature has made important inroads exploring racial gaps in specific foreign policy issues, and constitutes a major departure from the predominant approach in this literature, which tends to focus on how racial prejudice or ethnocentrism affect majority group members’ foreign policy preferences (e.g. Kam and Kinder 2007; Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Baker 2015; Andrews, Leblang and Pandya 2018; Green 2021; Carson, Min and Van Nuys 2024; Rathbun, Parker

and [Pomeroy 2025](#); [Zucker 2025](#); [Ebner 2025](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2026](#)), rather than exploring the distinctive foreign policy attitudes of racialized groups themselves. However, we don't have a good sense of how racial gaps manifest across the broader constellation of foreign policy questions, and we lack a holistic, integrative theory of Black Americans' public opinion toward foreign affairs. Which foreign policy issues show the largest and smallest racial gaps between Black and White Americans? How should we explain racial divergences in foreign policy preferences theoretically?

In this article, we seek to build bridges between the study of race and ethnic politics (REP) and public opinion about foreign policy in International Relations (IR) by investigating Black-White racial gaps across a broader spectrum of foreign policy issues simultaneously. We argue that themes in Black politics apply beyond domestic issues and extend into the international realm, leading to racial gaps between Black and White Americans on a wide range of foreign affairs questions. We base this argument on research in REP positing that Black and White individuals have fundamentally different relationships to politics based on their social experiences ([Dawson 1995](#); [Hutchings and Valentino 2004](#); [White and Laird 2020](#); [Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek 2021](#); [Wamble et al. 2022](#)). We find that Black-White racial gaps are shaped by touchstones in Black political thought regarding rights and freedoms, skepticism about the exercise of state power, equitable access to resources, and solidarity with marginalized groups. We also show that these gaps are characterized by marked geographic differences. Race shapes both how Americans want to engage with the world, and where they want the engagement to take place. In documenting that pronounced racial gaps persist across a wider range of foreign policy issues than has traditionally been explored, our findings broaden our understanding of polarization in the IR literature beyond the partisan dimensions in which it is typically studied ([Tama 2024](#); [Myrick 2025](#)), and in showing that these gaps vary systematically based on a set of four themes in Black political thought, they broaden our understanding of the study of REP beyond the domestic political contexts in which it is typically investigated.

The discussion that follows has four parts. We begin by connecting IR scholarship on the bottom-up origins of public opinion about foreign policy with American politics research on race and ethnic politics, arguing that Black Americans evaluate foreign policy questions through the same political lens that previous research has found to be operative on domestic political questions. Black Americans, we suggest, will tend to be significantly more supportive than White Americans of foreign policy questions that resonate with four key themes in Black political thought (rights and freedoms, skepticism about the exercise of state power, equitable access to resources, and solidarity with other marginalized groups), while Black and White Americans will be less likely to diverge on issues that are less clearly connected to these themes. Second, we introduce our data and methods, drawing on a dataset of 1,504 foreign policy questions asked to 1,975 Black and 16,511 White Americans in nationally representative samples of the American public from 1975–2018. The longitudinal scope (from mid-way through the Cold War, to mid-way through the first Trump administration) and sheer range of foreign policy questions included (from whether the CIA should be put on a tighter leash, to support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership) allow us to study racial gaps in foreign policy attitudes at unusual breadth and granularity. Third, we present our analysis, first focusing on directional racial gaps (the foreign policies that Black Americans support more than White Americans, and vice versa), before turning to absolute racial gaps (the foreign policies where Black and White Americans disagree the most). Overall, we find that Black Americans support a foreign policy agenda that is less focused on exercising military might, and more focused on sharing resources with less advantaged nations, contributing to global public goods, and leveling the playing field for other disadvantaged groups. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for theories of public opinion in foreign policy, and race in political behavior more generally.

Race, Political Attitudes, and International Relations

Bottom-Up Models of Public Opinion in Foreign Policy

The study of public opinion in foreign policy approaches the origins of foreign policy attitudes from two different directions ([Kertzer 2023](#)). Top-down models of public opinion, emphasizing the remoteness of foreign policy events to most citizens' daily lives, are pessimistic both about how much the public knows about foreign policy, and how much it cares. They view foreign policy attitudes as largely weak and unstructured, and argue the structure that does exist is produced through cues from partisan political elites, transmitted through the mass media ([Zaller 1992](#); [Berinsky 2009](#)). In these models, the American public swallows what party leaders feed them: the public will be on the same page on foreign policy issues when Democratic and Republican leaders in Washington are united, and will disagree when divided.

In contrast, bottom-up models of public opinion argue that foreign policy attitudes are much more structured than elite-driven theories suggest ([Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017](#)). Foreign policy attitudes often cluster together into a small number of ideological orientations or postures ([Wittkopf 1990](#); [Holsti 2004](#)), which tend to be relatively stable across time ([Murray 1996](#)). For example, some individuals are systematically more supportive of the use of force than others; some individuals are generally predisposed to want the United States to work together with other countries to solve global problems, and so on. There are a variety of arguments about the origins of these orientations, from neurobiological explanations to sociological ones ([Hatemi and McDermott 2012](#)), but most relevant for our purposes are models that root foreign policy preferences in the same core values that guide our own judgment and behavior in our daily lives ([Kertzer et al. 2014](#); [Rathbun et al. 2016](#)). Individuals who support capital punishment, for example, were the chief supporters of both Iraq Wars ([Liberman 2006](#)); individuals who favor economic redistribution at home tend to also champion foreign aid abroad ([Prather 2024](#)); and individuals who think it's unfair

when workers receive bonuses not based on their contribution tend to be the most concerned about free-riding in alliances (Powers et al. 2022). The central intuition in this literature is that individuals “take foreign policy personally” (Rathbun et al. 2016), expressing foreign policy views that blur the lines between interpersonal experiences and international ones. Our interest here is in exploring how racial identity functions in foreign policy in much the same way.

Racial Identities in Foreign Affairs

An enormous literature in political science shows that racial identity orders the social experiences of individuals in both large and small ways, permeating the political behaviors and attitudes of those for whom it is a salient political identity. Within the domain of political behavior, scholars have shown that race can inform whether voters turnout to vote (Hajnal and Trounstein 2005; Philpot, Shaw and McGowen 2009; Fraga 2018), for whom they vote (Tate 2004; Wallace 2014; Casellas and Wallace 2015), and which political party they support (Alvarez and Bedolla 2003; Kuo, Malhotra and Mo 2017; White and Laird 2020; Wamble 2024). Though there is a growing body of scholarship examining a variety of politically underrepresented groups, most work on race in political behavior focuses on Black political behavior in domestic politics, largely due to the long history of Black and White racial dynamics that scholars have at their disposal. It is from this paradigm that we enter into the conversation about how Black and White individuals’ foreign policy attitudes differ.

Within Black political behavior and thought, much of the literature indicates that Black people use their racial experiences to inform their political actions. Common experiences of discrimination, in particular, shape political values, strengthen communal kinship, and cultivate a strong level of group consciousness (Gurin, Hatchett and Jackson 1990; Tate 1994; Dawson 1995; Shelby 2002). This consciousness permeates many facets of their political understanding, from political ideology (Dawson 2001; Harris-Perry 2010), to partisan affiliation

([White and Laird 2020](#)), to preferences for policies and politicians ([Dawson 1995](#); [Tate 2004](#); [Wamble 2024](#)). Although most existing research that investigates this racialized lens has focused on the context of Black Americans’ domestic political attitudes, there is nothing in this theoretical framework that limits its applicability to the domestic realm. We contend that the reach and implications of this important political framework can and should be explored in a broader, more globalized context. The discrimination that Black people face is neither unique to them nor to the United States. Black Americans recognize this and have historically drawn parallels between their experiences and those of individuals abroad. These parallels assist in Black Americans’ capacity for being “other-regarding”— for caring about the welfare of similarly affected people in other parts of the world ([Kennard 2021](#)).

Black Americans express unique perspectives on international matters. For example, experiences of oppression and discrimination at home have shaped their views on the international corollaries of domestic issues (such as civil rights or rights to self-determination) in ways that have distinguished the perspectives of Black diplomats from others ([Vitalis 2016](#)). Black Americans have a complicated relationship with the U.S. military: they are both overrepresented among enlisted officers and quite often less enthusiastic about military action overseas ([Green-Riley and Leber 2023](#)). Additionally, Black Americans share ancestral descent from the African continent, making up part of a larger African diaspora that spans the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and beyond. Reminders of this ancestry appear in back-to-your-roots-focused celebrations such as Kwanzaa, in references to Africa by Black elites such as W.E.B. DuBois or Malcolm X, and in allusions to “the Motherland” made in popular Black culture. This connection to Africa can impact the ways that Black politicians vote on contemporary U.S.-Africa relations ([Demessie and Henderson 2021](#)). At certain historical moments, this connection has also produced pan-African and Black nationalist movements that have shaped Black visions of the international realm ([Getachew 2019](#)). These perspectives, for the most part, are not shared with White Americans.

These divergent racial perspectives are manifested in racial gaps in attitudes toward

foreign affairs. While previous work has documented such gaps in individual issue areas like trade or military force, scholars have yet to consider differences across a fuller range of international topics. The question is: how should this be done? It is perhaps prudent to start with a handful of themes in Black political thought that might also structure attitudes toward foreign affairs.

Four Relevant Themes in Black Political Thought

Our theory is grounded in the idea that most Black Americans experience racial discrimination in a way that foregrounds race as the primary lens through which they view their social and political world. Dawson (1995) presents this idea as a premise for the Black Utility Heuristic, wherein Black Americans consider how policies will affect the entire racial group when forming their political preferences. Our theory considers how Black Americans view foreign policies, which only rarely impact the domestic Black ingroup directly, but may rest on similar principles as policies that do.

Our approach first requires us to identify core values in Black politics. While there is no single canonical typology of Black values that can encapsulate all Black political thought, Black political movements and theories have consistently converged around four key themes: 1) political rights, 2) condemnation of state violence, 3) distributive justice, and 4) expanding gains of the struggle beyond the bounds of Black America. As we show in Online Appendix B (pp. 9-11), these themes recur through a broad range of Black political ideologies across historical time periods.

Our innovation lies in tracing the ways that these four themes intersect with foreign policy issues. We map concerns about political rights onto questions of international rights and freedoms, condemnation of state violence at home onto skepticism toward the use of state power abroad, the desire to promote distributive justice in the U.S. context onto a vision of equitable access to resources globally, and the expansion of the struggle of Black Americans onto solidarity with other marginalized groups overseas. We call these areas of overlap

“touchpoints,” as they represent places where Black politics intersects with foreign policy. In other words, we argue that Black political thought lends itself to viewing international politics through a racial lens, and we expect these “touchpoint” issues to be more affected by that perspective than others. In many cases, these touchpoints are apparent in Black political movements, such as the international advocacy of Dr. King or in the rallies and fundraisers discussed above. Thus, our theory aligns with the idea that Black political projects at home have often extended into what [Getachew \(2019\)](#) calls “worldmaking,” a vision of how to transform the dynamics of power within international relations.

Rights and Freedoms

The goals of equality, equity, and liberty for all put forth by the prevailing American doctrine are things that Black people have been striving to bring to bear, not only for themselves, but for the sake of a more perfect union throughout their history in the United States. Abolitionist and civil rights leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. frequently invoked democratic ideals that, when juxtaposed with the persistent discrimination Black people faced, suggest that these movements for justice for the Black community were undergirded by belief in the ideals, but not the reality, of American democracy. The work of not just these leaders, but many individuals engaged in the abolitionist and civil rights movements, was to assist, through their own liberation, in bringing the United States closer to the very goals that the Constitution puts forth. To that end, we expect that Black people will resonate with other populations, policies, and platforms in international contexts that mirror – even in part – their own quest for equality and liberation in the United States.

The historic and contemporary experiences of Black Americans have deeply affected their relationship with the United States and its political system, leading to drastically different affective and behavioral outcomes relative to White Americans ([Citrin, Wong and Duff 2001](#); [Schildkraut 2014](#)). This gap manifests in Black voters’ very low levels of political trust in both institutions and leaders ([Nunnally 2012](#)). Motivated by a historical memory of struggles for

freedom from slavery and for political suffrage, Black political movements across American history have often sought greater rights and freedoms. The pursuit of political rights reflects the centrality of enfranchisement and civil liberties to Black politics (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; Pinderhughes 1987).

Past research has shown that Black Americans have historically exhibited higher mistrust in government and supported political reform in U.S. institutions (Avery 2009). New research confirms that these patterns are not a figment of the past. In recent protest movements Black Americans have been overrepresented among protesters (Chenoweth et al. 2022). Beyond protests, Black Americans show strong support for progressive issues across multiple domains: they have played a pivotal role in union mobilization and labor movements (Frymer 2011), are more supportive of policies aimed at gender equality (Dehingia et al. 2023), and Representatives with large Black constituencies are more supportive of civil rights-related legislation (Schuit and Rogowski 2017).

Racial discrimination has colored Black Americans' views of international engagement. An example can be found during the Second World War in particular, when many Black soldiers returned from the war with the belief that they would be seen more positively after serving the country. They were instead met with the reality that, despite fighting for the United States, they still faced the horrors of Jim Crow upon their return (Parker 2009). The dichotomy Black individuals navigate between their identification as Americans and their struggle to gain equity within the United States creates an experiential chasm between them and their White counterparts.

How might this experience translate into foreign policy attitudes? Most directly, attitudes about democratic rights and freedoms may align with attitudes about the importance of democracy promotion and support for international political reform. If this is the case, then they may also predict attitudes toward policies involving authoritarian, communist, or otherwise antidemocratic countries.

Skepticism about the Exercise of State Power

Black individuals' belief in the ideals of democracy does not negate their skepticism and lack of trust about the role of the state in their own subjugation or that of others around the world. Having experienced state sanctioned violence in many forms, Black people believe in and continue to fight for the ideals of democracy not yet brought to fruition. This reality is made clear in the actions of many Black service members who, throughout American history, fought battles on American soil and abroad under the auspices of enforcing these ideals, only to return home to face segregation and discrimination based on their race.

Concern about state violence emerges from collective experiences with surveillance, policing, and incarceration ([Dawson 1995](#); [Weaver 2007](#); [Forman Jr. 2017](#)). Previous scholarship shows that Black Americans' relationship with the socio-political system is marked by persistent racialized subjugation. Black Americans are often more likely than people of other races to experience punitive policies through policing, judicial sentencing, and incarceration ([Weaver and Lerman 2010](#); [Clark et al. 2023](#)). Negative encounters with the state, such as frequent police stops, impact the political behaviors and perceptions of Black people ([Walker 2020](#); [Jefferson, Neuner and Pasek 2021](#)). Unpleasant experiences with law enforcement in many Black communities have bred uneasiness surrounding the coercive capacity of the state.

Often the goals of Black political actors focus on improving the ability of those in the Black community to live without fear of harm—including harm from state institutions. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement draws from other racial justice movements that have centered physical protection of Black bodies ([Nunnally 2020](#)). Similarly, previous research on Black war attitudes indicates that they are also shaped by a concern for loss of life. Black individuals are less supportive of the use of force because of concerns about casualties in a U.S. military with a disproportionately high number of Black servicemembers ([Green-Riley and Leber 2023](#)). Concern for Black servicemembers might similarly shape Black attitudes on other security issues.

Skepticism toward the exercise of U.S. power may also affect Black Americans' attitudes

on other foreign policy issues, such as counterterrorism or espionage. Negative experiences with the government can create hesitancy to rely on officials to address community needs. To illustrate, [Ramirez \(2015\)](#) highlights the conflict between Black Americans' concerns about local crime on the one hand and willingness to support government policies aimed at addressing it on the other. Such dilemmas may also arise when considering policies regarding counterterrorism or espionage, which often involve stereotypes and tactics that resemble harmful encounters between the government and Black communities ([Sides and Gross 2013](#); [Martin 2018](#)).

Equitable Access to Resources

In the domestic context, the racial experiences of Black Americans lead them to favor more equitable access to resources within the country. Demands for distributive justice mirror persistent patterns of exclusion from wealth and opportunity ([Katznelson 2005](#); [Hamilton and Darity Jr. 2010](#)). Black Americans express more positive attitudes toward welfare recipients compared to Americans of other races ([Garand, Xu and Davis 2017](#)). This difference is accentuated by disdain for redistribution among certain groups of White Americans, who become increasingly opposed to welfare when they believe that a larger proportion of welfare recipients are Black ([Akesson et al. 2022](#)); indeed, many scholars argue that racial differences between socioeconomic groups can disrupt middle-class support for the poor ([Alesina and Glaeser 2004](#); [Gilens 2009](#)). [Guisinger \(2017\)](#) demonstrates that racialized tropes about the beneficiaries of protectionism influence White American trade preferences. [Milner and Tingley \(2011\)](#) show that ideological views on domestic economic issues shape foreign policy attitudes about aid and trade. Thus, it is likely that the relative receptivity of Black Americans to redistributive economic policies at home may spill over into attitudes toward aid and trade, as well.

Environmental resources have also historically been seen as important to the ability of Black people to thrive. Black Americans have long been concerned about the harmful

environmental effects of industry on their communities, and Black activists began incorporating environmentalism into conceptions of civil rights as early as the 1980s ([Bullard and Wright 1987](#); [Arp and Kenny 1996](#)). In line with this legacy, Black Americans express greater support for environmental protection and greater concern about environmental problems than White Americans ([Adeola 2004](#)). Given these trends, we might expect Black Americans to be more concerned about international environmental issues as well.

Solidarity with Other Marginalized Groups

It is important to acknowledge that the connectivity created by shared discrimination extends beyond the bounds of Black American identity. If, as [Dawson \(1995\)](#) asserts, discrimination serves as the main linkage among Black people, then these connections should transcend boundaries and borders, linking Black Americans with others—Black or otherwise—who experience types of discrimination with which Black Americans can connect. This resonance is not limited to traditional forms of discrimination, such as police brutality, but can also be found in areas such as systemic injustice and other forms of oppression. Taking an expansive view of struggle draws on a long tradition of Pan-Africanism and diasporic identification that links domestic struggles with global movements for liberation ([Morris 1984](#); [Walters 1993](#); [Tillery 2011](#); [Wilson and Ellis 2014](#)).

Scholars have found that Black Americans and Black immigrants to the U.S. tend to feel closer to one another when considering similar experiences of racialized discrimination ([Smith 2014](#); [Butterfield 2004](#)). Research suggests that these shared experiences foster group-based empathy for others who, though outside the racial group or even the country, have also endured subjugation based on identity in ways that resonate with Black Americans ([Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2021](#)). These domestic experiences that distinguish Black and White Americans also shape their global perspectives and outlooks on issues like immigration. For example, previous research shows that Black legislators vote against restrictive immigration policies more often than White legislators, especially when these policies relate to common

civil rights issues, like voter ID regulations or policing (Browne, Reingold and Kronberg 2018).

In addition, we might also expect that Black Americans identify with citizens of African nations given their shared race and historical connection to the continent. Berinsky (2009, 134–135) notes that racial identity and attitudes were strongly associated with support for sanctions against South Africa’s apartheid regime in the 1980s. Others, including Richardson (1993) and Smith and Seltzer (2000), have found that Black Americans display solidarity with other Black populations worldwide. Additionally, Demessie and Henderson (2021) find that Black legislators are significantly more likely to be active on U.S.-Africa policy issues in Congress. It seems logical, then, that Black Americans overall would be more supportive of policies aimed at improving the lives of Africans.

Methods

To assess racial gaps between Black and White Americans in foreign policy, we utilize a dataset of 1,504 historical polling questions on foreign policy issues fielded by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) on 1,975 Black and 16,511 White Americans. They were collected in twelve waves of nationally representative samples of the American public from 1975–2018.¹ As Tables 1–2 below show, the data offer a rich treasure trove of questions that range widely across both topic and time, from whether the CIA should be put on a tighter leash, to the merits of nuclear disarmament, to the perceived effects of foreign policy on conditions at home. We then coded the substantive topics and question formats for each of these 1,504 questions, using a coding scheme described in greater detail below.

There are multiple ways to operationalize racial gaps, but we use two different approaches here, both of which measure the extent to which Black and White respondents disagree with one another on a given foreign policy question, in slightly different ways. The first is what we refer to as a *directional gap*, operationalized as $g_i = \bar{x}_{b,i} - \bar{x}_{w,i}$, where $\bar{x}_{b,i}$ indicates

¹See Online Appendix A (p. 1) for a discussion of the data.

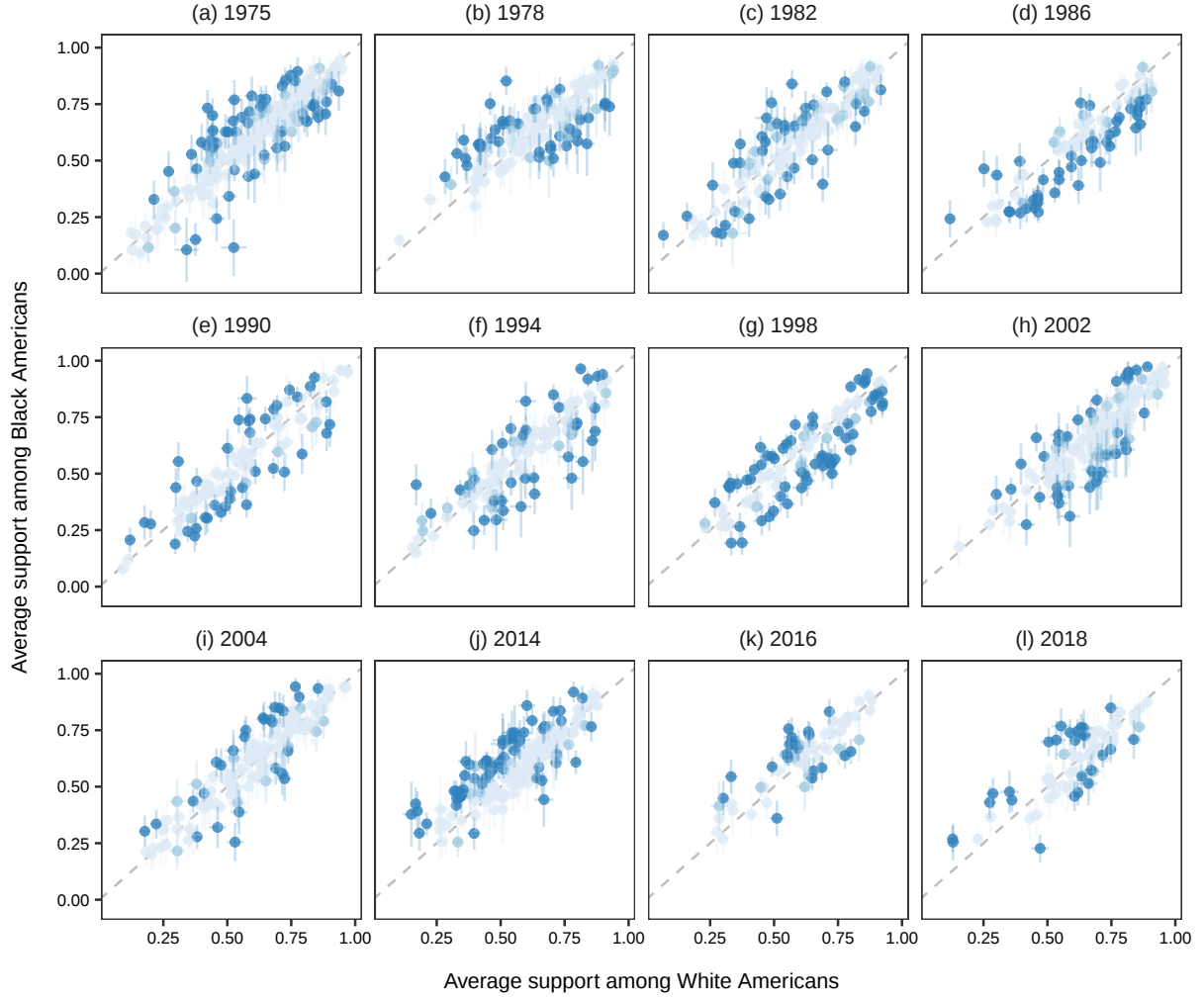
the average response to question i from Black respondents, and $\bar{x}_{w,i}$ indicates the average response to question i from White respondents.² For example, on questions measuring support for the use of force (scaled such that positive values indicate greater support), a positive directional gap means that Black respondents are on average more supportive of the use of force than White respondents are, while a negative directional gap means Black respondents are less supportive than White respondents. The second is what we refer to as an *absolute gap*, $g_i = |\bar{x}_{b,i} - \bar{x}_{w,i}|$, which captures how much Black and White respondents disagree with one another on question i , focusing on the magnitude of the disagreement, rather than the direction. Each quantity of interest offers a different set of advantages. The directional gap measure is perhaps the most intuitive (and mirrors existing research studying racial or gender gaps— e.g. [Green-Riley and Leber 2023](#); [Eichenberg 2016](#)), but at the aggregate level it is only interpretable for items that can be scaled along a single dimension. The absolute gap measure is less intuitive, but allows for analysis of all items simultaneously, letting us model in a multivariate fashion what question-level characteristics are associated with larger or smaller gaps.³

To illustrate our quantities of interest, Figure 1 presents a series of scatterplots where each point represents a different polling question fielded from 1975–2018. Each point’s x-axis location denotes the average response to the policy question among White Americans, and y-axis location denotes the average response among Black Americans. Each point is accompanied by 95% confidence intervals, which are typically taller than they are wide, reflecting the fact that there are fewer racial minorities than majority-group members in the sample. The scatterplots thus illustrate the distinction between our absolute and directional gap measures. The proximity to the dashed diagonal line denotes the *absolute gap*: points closer to the dashed diagonal indicate greater agreement on the question between the two groups (and thus a smaller absolute gap); the further from the diagonal, the greater the

²To facilitate meaningful comparisons of racial gaps across items, we rescale all items so their response options range from 0 to 1.

³See Online Appendix C (pp. 9, 12) for further discussion of this measurement strategy.

Figure 1: Variation in racial gaps across foreign policy questions



Notes: Each point represents a different polling question; the point's location on the x-axis denotes the average response for the policy among White Americans, and the location on the y-axis denotes the average response for the policy among Black Americans (with 95% confidence intervals for each). The points shaded in blue indicate issues where the racial gap is statistically significant even after controlling for the false discovery rate using the Benjamini-Hochberg correction. The plot

thus shows considerable variation in racial gaps across polling questions in any given year, with some issues displaying substantial and significant racial gaps, and others displaying relatively modest differences.

disagreement (and thus a larger absolute gap). The vertical location of the dots relative to the diagonal denotes the *directional gap*, with dots above the line indicating more support among Black respondents than White respondents, and dots below the line indicating less support for Black respondents than White respondents. To assess statistical significance while avoiding multiple comparison problems, we control the false discovery rate using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure; polling questions where the racial gap is statistically significant after this adjustment are shaded in blue.

Figure 1 therefore shows that racial gaps in foreign policy vary dramatically across questions, with some questions (in blue) displaying substantively and statistically significant gaps, and others (the light grey dots clustered along the diagonal line) displaying statistically insignificant gaps. Even when controlling for the false discovery rate, approximately one third of the polling questions in our data feature statistically significant gaps. The important question, then, is: how we can explain this variation in the magnitude of racial gaps in foreign policy issues theoretically? In the analysis that follows, we begin by comparing directional gaps on specific subsets of foreign policy questions, documenting widespread racial polarization across many policy issues. We then turn to absolute gaps, which allow us to explain variation in racial gaps across the full dataset and in a multivariate fashion. Finally, we examine how racial gaps in foreign policy attitudes vary over time and across different geographic areas.

Results I: Directional Gaps

To structure our analysis, we organize our data according to the four touchpoints in Black political thought identified above. We begin by culling our larger dataset to identify questions about twenty-four foreign policy areas that recur throughout our data, each of which maps onto one of the touchpoints. For rights and freedoms, we focus on human rights, democracy promotion, and anti-communism; for the exercise of state power, we turn to

espionage, counterterrorism policy, and a wide range of security issues; for equitable access to resources, we examine support for foreign aid, trade, and the environment; for solidarity with other marginalized groups, we study attitudes towards immigration. Example questions for each of these issues are shown in Tables 1 - 3 alongside the racial gap measure associated with that item. For each of the specific foreign policy issues, we retain questions that can be scaled in the same direction (e.g. so that higher values indicate greater support for, or endorsement of, the latent variable), identifying a total of 815 of the 1,504 questions in the full dataset that meet these criteria.

Table 1: Example survey questions: rights and freedoms

Issue	Survey Item	Year	Gap
Human Rights: Support for human rights	Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Promoting and defending human rights in other countries	2014	0.061
Political ideology: perceived threat of communism	If Latin American countries were to become communist, do you think this would be a threat to the United States, or not?	1975	-0.035
Political ideology: Support for cooperating with communist regimes	If there is some advantage to the United States in it, do you feel it is justified or not for us to back socialist governments that respect the basic political rights of their people?	1975	-0.088
Political ideology: Support for cooperating with dictatorships	I am going to read some statements about international affairs and U.S. foreign policy. For each, tell me if you tend to agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with the statement: The United States may have to support some military dictators because they are friendly towards us and opposed to the Communists.	1982	0.065
Political ideology: Support for spreading democracy	Do you think that a country, without UN approval, should or should not have the right to use military force for each of the following purposes: To restore by force a democratic government that has been overthrown	2004	0.008

Figure 2 presents directional gaps for foreign policy issues relating to rights and freedoms. The random effects meta-analysis shows that Black respondents express significantly more support for human rights issues than White respondents do, suggesting that the prioritization of rights and freedoms is not just a characteristic of Black domestic politics, but also spills over into foreign policy. Black respondents are also significantly more supportive of democracy promotion activities abroad than White respondents are, denoting a premium on promoting democratic values through U.S. foreign policy. The meta-analysis indicates that

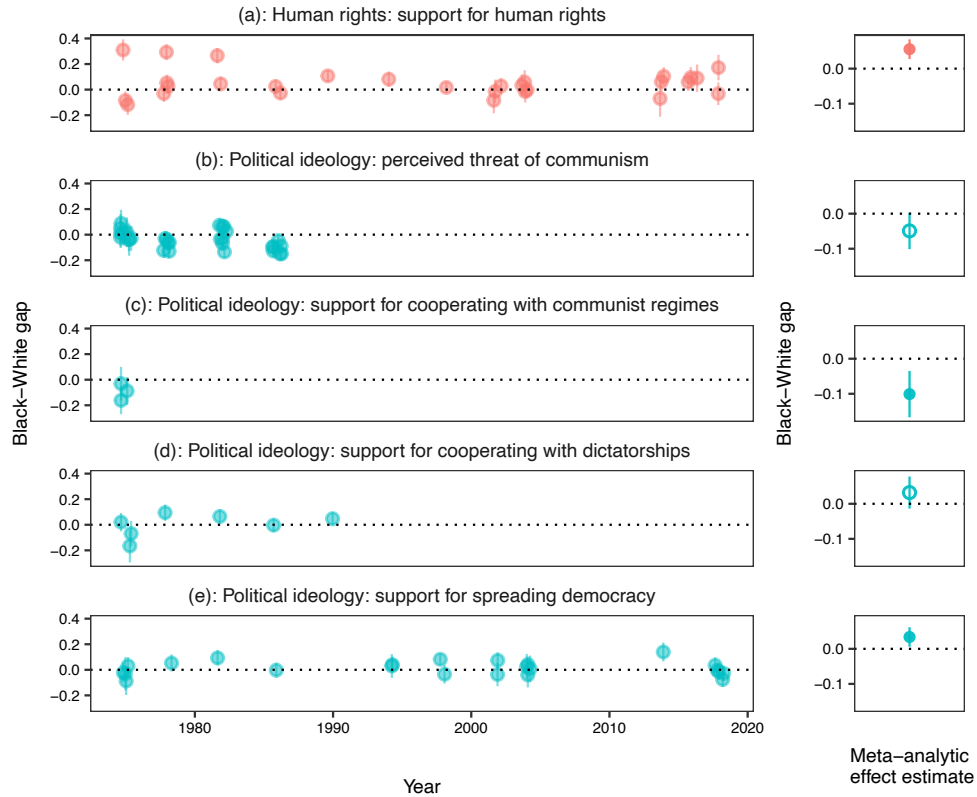
Table 2: Example survey questions: skepticism about state power

Issue	Survey Item	Year	Gap
Espionage: Support for espionage	How would you rate the job the CIA is doing as the chief foreign intelligence agency of the U.S. government— excellent, pretty good, only fair or poor?	1978	0.028
Security: Maintaining U.S. military superiority	Now I am going to read a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please say whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Maintaining superior military power worldwide	2004	−0.009
Security: Support for military bases	Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places? Turkey	2014	−0.077
Security: Support for nuclear arms control	Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States have been the subject of disagreement for some time. Please tell me if you would favor or oppose the following types of relationships with the Soviet Union: Negotiating arms control agreements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union	1982	−0.026
Security: Support for the use of force	Here are some positions about the possible use of nuclear weapons by the United States. Which one comes closest to yours? 1) The U.S. should never use nuclear weapons under any circumstances. 2) The U.S. should only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack. 3) In certain circumstances, the U.S. should use nuclear weapons even if it has not suffered a nuclear attack.	2004	−0.047
Terrorism: Perceived threat of terrorism	I am going to read a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please say whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Combating international terrorism	2004	−0.026
Terrorism: Prioritization of counterterrorism over civil liberties	In order to combat international terrorism, please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following measures: Restricting immigration into the U.S.	2002	−0.018
Terrorism: Support for counterterrorism cooperation	In order to combat international terrorism, please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following measures: Working through the UN to strengthen international laws against terrorism and to make sure UN members enforce them	2004	0.032
Terrorism: Support for use of force against terrorism	In order to combat international terrorism, please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following measures: U.S. air strikes against terrorist training camps and other facilities	2004	−0.086

Table 3: Example survey questions: resources and solidarity

Issue	Survey Item	Year	Gap
Environment: Support for the environment	Based on what you know, do you think the U.S. should or should not participate in the following treaties and agreements? A new international treaty to address climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions	2014	0.080
Foreign Aid: Belief aid prevents communism	Do you feel U.S. economic aid to other countries generally: Helps prevent the spread of communism?	1978	0.090
Foreign Aid: Belief in efficacy of economic aid	Do you feel U.S. economic aid to other countries generally helps our national security?	1982	0.001
Foreign Aid: Belief in efficacy of military aid	Do you think that giving military aid to other countries generally: Helps the national security of other countries?	1978	0.031
Foreign Aid: Combatting hunger	I am going to read a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please say whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Combatting world hunger	1982	0.057
Foreign Aid: Raising global standard of living	I am going to read a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please say whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Helping to improve the standard of living of less developed nations	1982	0.071
Foreign Aid: Support for economic aid	As I read some types of foreign aid, tell me whether you favor or oppose them: Aid that helps needy countries develop their economies	2002	0.022
Foreign Aid: Support for military aid	Do you support or oppose the United States taking each of the following actions with respect to Syria? Sending arms and supplies to anti-government groups in Syria	2016	0.024
Trade: Support for international trade	In general, do you think that Japan practices fair trade or unfair trade with the United States?	1994	0.032
Immigration: Support for immigration	Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: Controlling and reducing illegal immigration	2014	-0.090

Figure 2: The Black-White directional gap: rights and freedoms



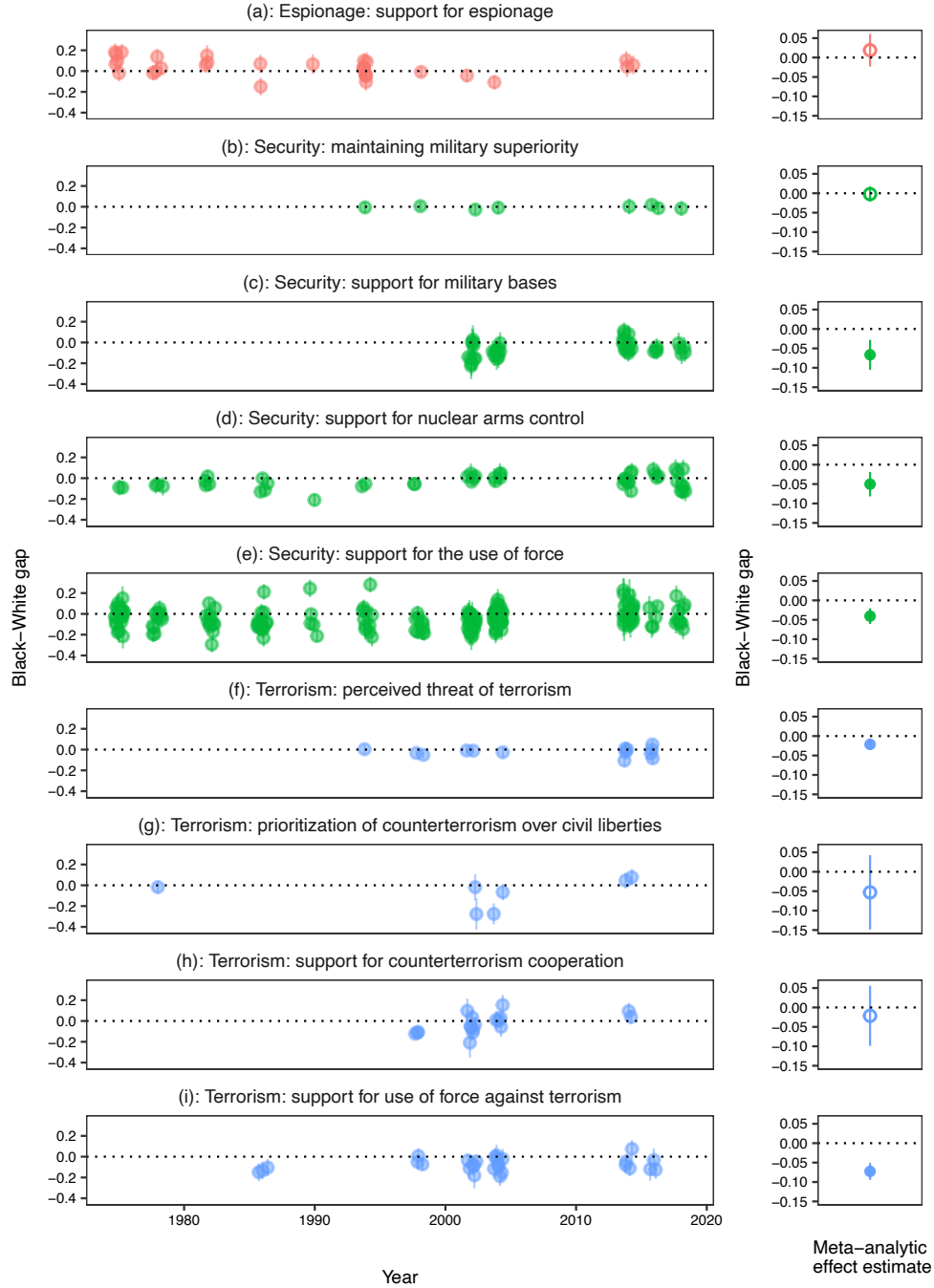
Notes: In left-hand panels, each point represents the difference between Black and White attitudes on a given polling question relating to rights and freedoms; the right-hand panels depict meta-analytic estimates of the directional gap across each subcategory. The plot shows that Black Americans have been significantly more supportive of human rights, significantly less supportive of cooperating with communist regimes, and significantly more supportive of democracy promotion, than White Americans.

Black respondents are less supportive of the U.S. cooperating with communist regimes, as well, though the number of polling questions in this subcategory is relatively small. While the surveys overall show that Black respondents are less likely than White respondents to perceive communism as threatening, this difference narrowly misses statistical significance. However, Black respondents are no more or less likely than White respondents to support cooperation with dictators.

Figure 3 turns to our second touchpoint, concerning skepticism about the exercise of state power. The meta-analysis shows that Black Americans are less likely to support the use of force abroad and are also less supportive of establishing or maintaining military bases overseas. This may reflect the argument provided by [Green-Riley and Leber \(2023\)](#): Black Americans feel that Black soldiers are more likely to be harmed in war. Yet the panel also depicts considerable heterogeneity in racial gaps in attitudes regarding the use of force, indicating that at times, Black Americans are more supportive of military force than White Americans. Of the five biggest outliers in the use of force category, two questions have to do with use of force to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the United States and one deals with whether the U.S. should intervene in the case of a civil war in South Africa. These datapoints convey the bounds of Black war hesitancy: in cases involving issues that have harmed Black communities, such as the drug trade (trafficking of narcotics) and racial discrimination (apartheid), Black support for the use of force increases relative to White support.

Black Americans are less supportive of counterterrorism operations than White Americans. Previous scholarship shows a relationship between race and threat perception ([Búzás 2013](#)). Here, we find that Black Americans perceive terrorism to pose less of a threat, and this difference is statistically significant. Black Americans are also significantly less supportive of the use of force to combat terrorism. Because of the broad time range of our study, we see that this concern about the use of force to fight terrorism is not limited to the George W. Bush-era “War on Terror” period following the 9/11 attacks; it is also present in the 1980s, and during

Figure 3: The Black-White directional gap: skepticism about state power



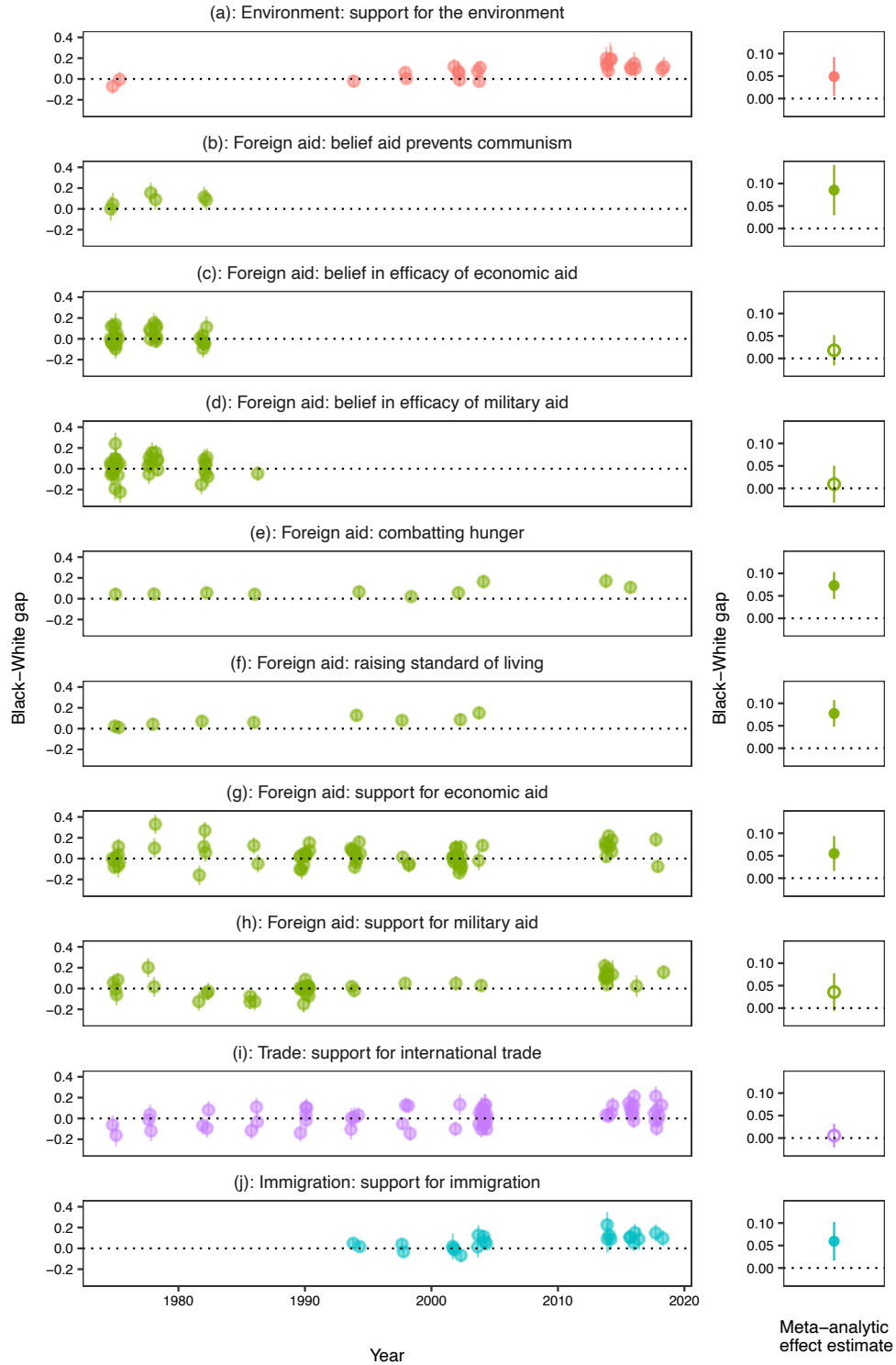
Notes: In left-hand panels, each point represents the difference between Black and White attitudes on a given polling question relating to the exercise of state power; the right-hand panels depict meta-analytic estimates of the directional gap across each subcategory. The plot shows that Black Americans have been significantly less supportive of military bases and the use of force (including in counterterror operations), perceive significantly less threat from terrorism, but are also less supportive of nuclear arms control than White Americans.

the Obama administration and the first Trump administration, perhaps suggesting a concern regarding racist tropes about who should be considered terrorists. This reduced concern about, and support for, counterterrorism does not extend into attitudes about international cooperation on terrorism issues, nor does it extend to systematic differences in how Black and White Americans weigh tradeoffs between counterterrorism and civil liberties. In both cases, the meta-analytic directional racial gap is negative, but not statistically significant.

One surprising finding relates to support for nuclear arms control. It would make sense that a Black population wary of force and foreign basing would be more strongly supportive of nuclear arms control efforts. However, our data show that Black Americans are significantly *less* likely than White Americans to support arms control. One potential explanation is that Black Americans may see agreements that tell other countries what they can and can't have as a type of imperialism: CCGA survey data from 2020 shows that Black respondents are more likely to favor egalitarian options for nuclear proliferation. Given the often-fraught relationship between the CIA and racial minorities in the United States, another surprising finding is the absence of a racial gap on attitudes towards espionage. Finally, there are no significant racial gaps in the perceived importance of maintaining U.S. military superiority. The most pronounced racial gaps on questions about the exercise of state power therefore appear to be on issues involving the coercive use of state power abroad, rather than intelligence-gathering or building up state capacity.

Finally, Figure 4 presents the results for ten issues relating to our two other touchpoints: equitable access to resources and solidarity with other marginalized groups. The findings generally support the idea that the tendency of Black Americans to support redistribution in the domestic context extends into foreign policy. Black Americans are significantly more supportive of foreign economic aid than White Americans are, and appear slightly more supportive of military aid, although the difference here is not statistically significant. Consistent with their support for aid, Black Americans are also significantly more supportive of the U.S. combatting hunger abroad, and initiatives to raise standards of living in developing

Figure 4: The Black-White directional gap: equitable access to resources, and solidarity with other marginalized groups



Notes: In left-hand panels, each point represents the difference between Black and White attitudes on a given polling question relating to equitable access to resources and solidarity with other marginalized groups; the right-hand panels depict meta-analytic estimates of the directional gap across each subcategory. The plot shows that Black Americans have been significantly more supportive of foreign aid, combatting hunger, and raising the global standard of living, are more likely to believe that aid prevents communism, are more concerned about the environment, and are more supportive of immigration, than White Americans.

countries. With both types of aid, however, Black Americans are no more or less likely to believe that aid is an efficacious tool to meet foreign policy goals (except in regard to combatting communism, although the number of polling questions here is small). Interestingly, over the full timespan of the dataset, Black Americans are also no more or less supportive of trade. This finding is particularly interesting given the argument made by [Mutz, Mansfield and Kim \(2021\)](#) that people of color are more supportive of trade than White Americans, confirming that this is very much a recent phenomenon, absent from most of the period covered in the data.

We also find striking directional gaps for environmental issues. Black communities are disproportionately affected by the environmental effects of climate change and related damages ([Elliott and Pais 2006](#); [Emrich et al. 2020](#)). Our analyses show that since the 1990s, Black Americans have been more likely to prioritize environmentalism in foreign policy than have White Americans. Public health research shows that U.S.-based oil and gas wells have been disproportionately sited near Black communities in the U.S. ([Gonzalez et al. 2023](#)), exposing them to hazardous conditions and giving them first-hand knowledge of the harmful environmental effects of oil and gas drilling. Perhaps these experiences also explain why Black respondents prioritize securing energy in foreign policy less than White respondents.⁴

The bottom panel of the figure traces directional racial gaps in support for immigration. Significantly stronger support among Black Americans for immigration may indicate two kinds of solidarity. On the one hand, it may reflect support for Black immigrants due to a shared sense of racial linked fate. On the other hand, it may indicate cross-racial solidarity with other marginalized groups, such as Hispanic and Asian immigrants.

These findings lay bare a Black foreign policy agenda that diverges significantly from that of White Americans. They paint a picture of a Black America that is more enthusiastic about democracy promotion overseas, more supportive of foreign aid, more environmentally conscious, and more pro-immigration than their White counterparts. They also reveal within

⁴See Online Appendix D (pp. 19-20).

Black communities a skepticism toward U.S. military action and less concern about terrorism than is present in White communities.

Results II: Absolute Gaps

The above analysis detected racial gaps across a broader range of foreign policy issues than has been explored by the prior literature, and in a manner consistent with each of our four touchpoints. Black Americans are significantly more supportive of democracy promotion and less supportive of cooperating with communist regimes (in line with the idea of an emphasis on rights and freedoms); consistently less supportive of the use of force and foreign military bases, and generally less supportive of counterterrorism policies (consistent with concerns about the use of state power); and, substantially more supportive of immigration (consistent with solidarity with other marginalized groups). Issues relating to equitable access to resources displayed more mixed findings (with Black Americans expressing greater support for environmental issues, and for foreign aid, but no significant differences in support for trade). There are also surprising findings, such as greater Black opposition to arms control agreements.

Yet these directional gap tests have three drawbacks. First, because directional gaps are only interpretable at the aggregate level for items that can be scaled along a single dimension, these analyses can only be conducted on specific subsets of items at a time—such that the results in Figures 2–4 represent 24 different bivariate meta-analyses, rather than a single multivariate analysis studying all issues at once. We thus might be interested in the extent to which these gaps persist in a multivariate context that controls for multiple issues and question properties simultaneously. For example, we have theoretical reason to believe that Black Americans also see similarities between themselves and citizens of African nations; this type of cross-issue, region-based analysis would not be possible with the directional gap measure above. Second, although Figures 2–4 examine a relatively wide range of issues, they

only include half of the questions in our data, limiting our vantage point on the full range of racial gaps in foreign policy issues. Third, although these findings offer evidence consistent with our four touchpoints, they are missing the counterfactual of issues unrelated to these four touchpoints: we thus don't know whether racial gaps are larger on touchpoint issues than on non-touchpoint ones.

Table 4: Modeling variation in absolute gaps

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Any touchpoint	0.009*** (0.003)		
Rights and freedoms		0.000 (0.006)	0.001 (0.006)
Skepticism about state power		0.009** (0.004)	0.009** (0.004)
Equitable access to resources		0.007* (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Solidarity with other marginalized groups		0.032*** (0.007)	0.033*** (0.007)
Partisan polarization			0.018 (0.015)
Year	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	0.074 (0.211)	0.116 (0.212)	0.145 (0.212)
N	1,504	1,504	1,388
R ²	0.006	0.018	0.020

[†]p < .1; *p < .05; **p < .01

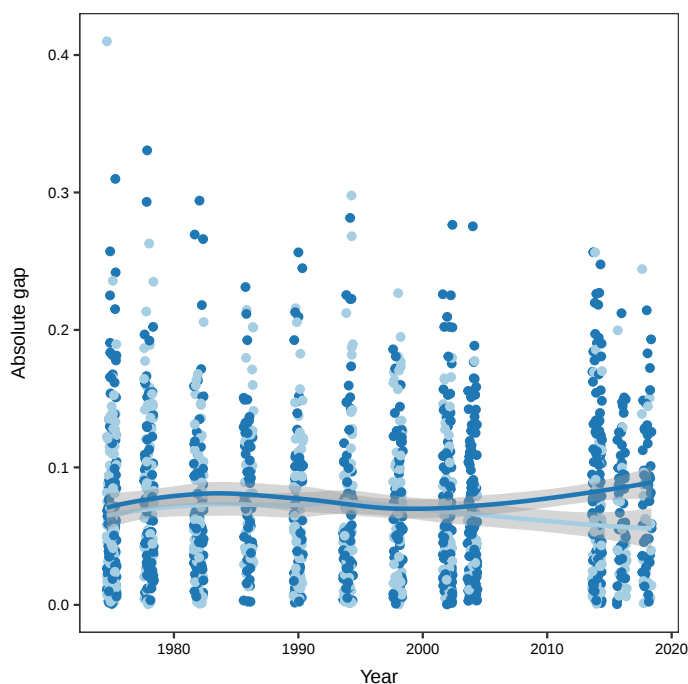
Notes: The table shows that foreign policy questions relating to skepticism about state power, solidarity with other marginalized groups, and to a lesser extent, equitable access to resources, are associated with larger absolute gaps between Black and White Americans.

In our second analysis, we turn to our absolute measure of racial gaps, which focuses on the magnitude of disagreement between Black and White Americans, rather than the direction, allowing us to examine racial gaps across the full range of foreign policy issues simultaneously, and directly test this missing counterfactual. The regression coefficients in our absolute gap analyses measure the size of racial gaps for issues related to our touchpoints compared to the size of racial gaps on other questions. To facilitate this multivariate analysis,

we cull the larger dataset to identify which questions best pertain to each touchpoint, allowing us to take a more expansive view of the four touchpoints explored previously.⁵

We begin with Table 4, the first model of which regresses the absolute gap on a dichotomous variable denoting whether a question implicates any of the four touchpoints. The effect size is modest, but statistically significant: foreign policy questions relating to any of the four touchpoints in Black political thought display larger absolute gaps (indicating Black and White respondents disagree with one another more) than questions that do not tie into these touchpoints. Figure 5 visualizes this effect while disaggregating it temporally, showing that the magnitude of these touchpoint-associated gaps grows over time.

Figure 5: Absolute gaps in touchpoint questions



Notes: Foreign policy questions relating to any of the four touchpoints (in dark blue) display significantly larger racial gaps than foreign policy questions that do not relate to any of the four touchpoints (in light blue); a loess smoother with 95% confidence intervals shows the difference becomes more pronounced over time.

The second model of Table 4 disaggregates the touchpoints, including a separate dichotomous variable denoting questions relating to rights and freedoms, skepticism about state power,

⁵For example, in 2014, respondents were asked to assess the effect of NAFTA on the environment— a question that clearly implicates both trade and climate, even though it is ill-suited for either category in the directional analysis. For a full description of the coding rules for the touchpoints, see Online Appendix 1 (pp. 1-8).

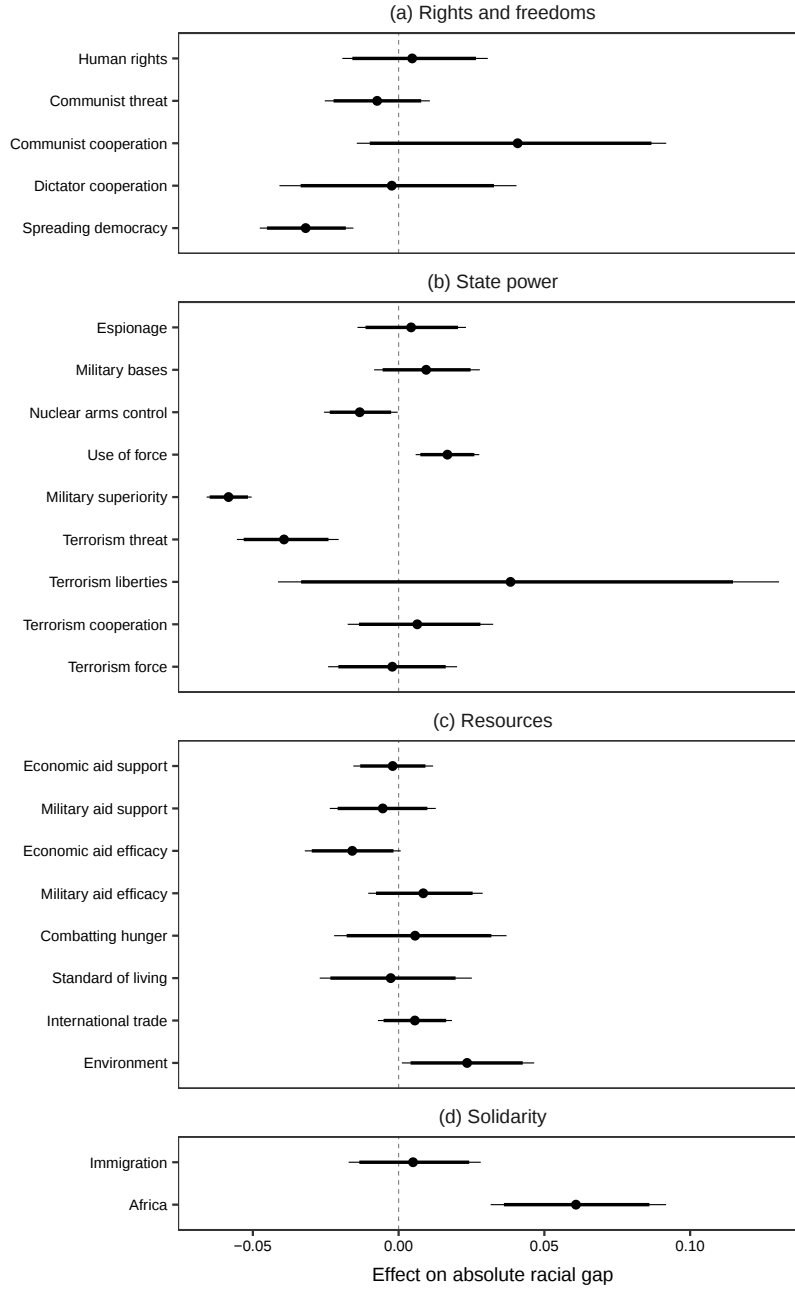
equitable access to resources, and solidarity with other marginalized groups. When we disaggregate these issues, we find that three of the touchpoints display statistically significant results: skepticism about state power, equitable access to resources, and solidarity with other marginalized groups. All three effect sizes are in the theorized direction, indicating that Black and White respondents are significantly more likely to disagree with one another on these types of questions.

One potential alternative explanation of these results might be that instead of capturing racial gaps, the above analysis is capturing partisan polarization: if White voters have become increasingly Republican over time, while Black voters remain Democrats, it may be the case that the issues where we see the largest racial gaps are really the issues where we see the highest levels of partisan polarization. To test this explanation, the third model of Table 4 replicates the previous model, but controlling for the level of partisan polarization displayed by respondents on each question. Crucially, the results remain unchanged. Although one should be mindful about potential post-treatment bias, Online Appendix D (pp. 21-22) shows the results also are robust to controlling for polarization along a host of other demographic characteristics, and that racial gaps for our two largest touchpoints remain statistically significant even in a Democrat-only sample.⁶

Figure 6 further disaggregates these results by presenting a coefficient plot from a regression model regressing the magnitude of the absolute gap on a series of dichotomous variables referring to each of the specific foreign policy issues presented in the directional analysis. Consistent with the regression results in Table 4, we find relatively little evidence that absolute racial gaps are significantly larger in issues relating to rights and freedoms than other issues; if anything, questions regarding democracy promotion display significantly smaller gaps than other issues. We find a broader set of differences in absolute gaps regarding

⁶The sample size is smaller because including the partisan polarization covariate removes 116 polling questions from our data, which were fielded in 1994, a year where no partisanship measure was included in the survey. See Online Appendix D (pp. 12-13) for a supplementary analysis that estimates absolute gaps on a log-odds scale, and Online Appendix D (pp. 23-24) for a supplementary analysis dropping more domestically-oriented questions from the sample, showing that the results remain the same.

Figure 6: Association between issue areas and absolute gaps



Notes: Coefficient estimates from an OLS model regressing the magnitude of absolute gaps on dichotomous variables denoting specific foreign policy themes, grouped here based on their association with each of the four touchpoints. Absolute gaps are relatively larger in areas concerning the use of force, the environment, and (especially) Africa, and are relatively smaller in terms of democracy promotion, nuclear arms control, U.S. military superiority, and threat perceptions of terrorism.

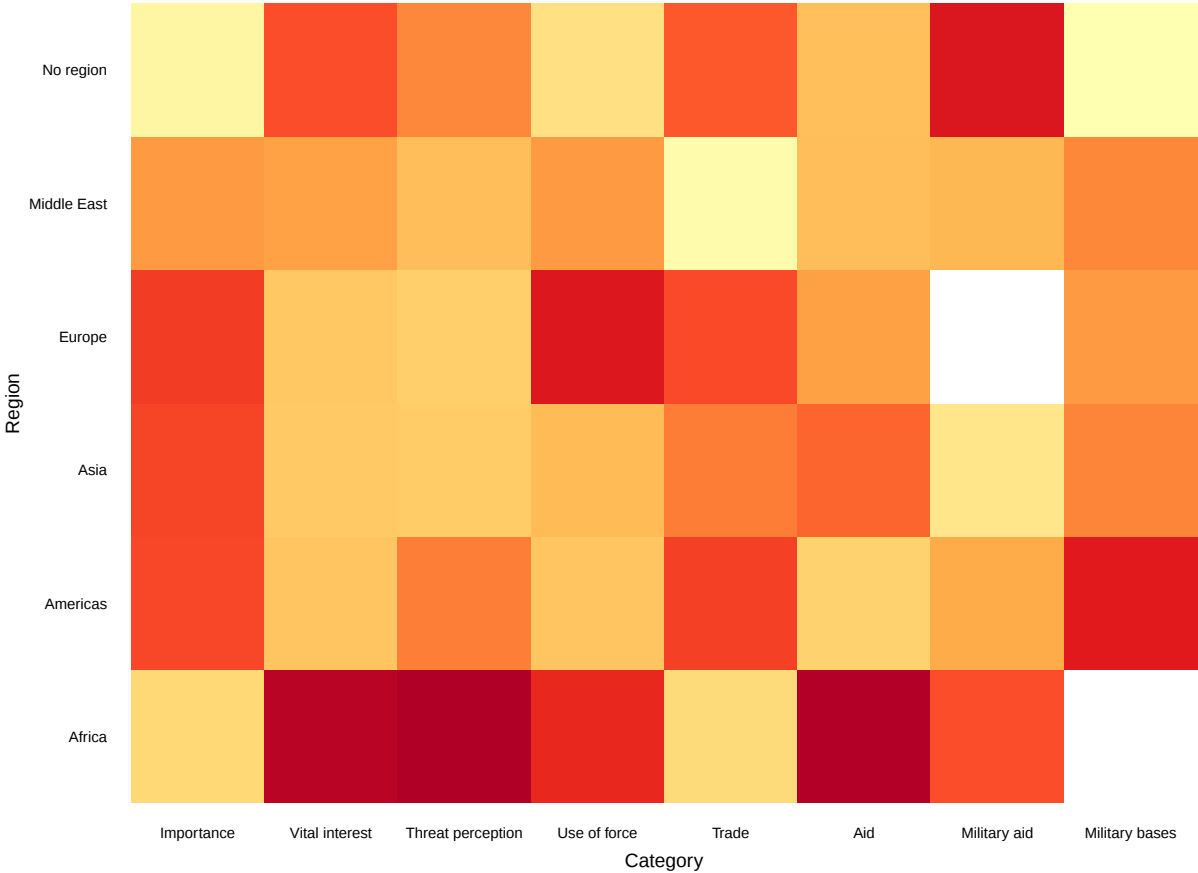
Coefficient estimates for the intercept and year are omitted for presentational purposes.

the exercise of state power. Questions relating to the use of force display significantly larger absolute gaps, while issues relating to the perceived threat of terrorism display significantly smaller gaps, as do nuclear arms control and maintaining military superiority. It is important to note that the different patterns of results from the directional gaps analysis in the previous section can be attributed to a quantity of interest that departs from its predecessor in two different ways: a focus on absolute gaps (rather than directional ones), but also, a different counterfactual. So, for example, the directional analysis showed that Black Americans are more supportive of foreign economic aid than White Americans are; this absolute analysis shows that racial differences in support for foreign aid are not significantly larger than racial differences in support for other issues examined in the data. The one issue area relating to resources that displays significantly larger absolute gaps is the environment.

The largest effect on absolute gaps comes in foreign policy questions relating to Africa, where absolute gaps are significantly larger than they are on other issues. This suggests a potentially distinctive geographic element in Black Americans' foreign policy preferences. We analyze the impact of geography in greater detail in Figure 7, which presents the average absolute gap in the data by geographic region for eight types of questions. Five of these question types relate to specific foreign policy instruments through which the United States engages with other countries (the use of force, trade, economic aid, military aid, and military bases), all of which were featured in the analysis above. The other three involve specific question formats not included in the directional analysis above, but often utilized in our data for questions about specific regions or countries: questions about the importance of certain foreign policy goals (e.g. "How important do you think it is for the U.S. to have good relations with Western Europe?" from 1975), questions about vital interests (e.g. "Tell me whether you feel the U.S. does or does not have a vital interest in Indonesia" from 1998), and questions about threat perception (e.g. "Tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: Civil wars in Africa" from 2002). The heatmap in Figure 7 illustrates the average absolute racial gap

in each question type-region combination in the data, where darker shading indicates larger absolute gaps, and lighter shading indicates smaller absolute gaps; the shading is normalized at the column-level to illustrate how changes in region are associated with changes in absolute gaps within a given question type.

Figure 7: Variation in absolute gaps by geographic focus



Notes: Heatmap of average absolute racial gaps by question type and region. Darker shading indicates larger absolute gaps, while lighter shading indicates smaller absolute gaps, and white boxes denote missing combinations in the data (e.g. there are no questions asked about military bases in African countries, or military aid to Europe).

Figure 7 demonstrates stark racial gaps in foreign policy preferences on geographic lines. Although the effect of economic aid in Figure 6 was not statistically significant, absolute gaps on aid are significantly larger when the recipient country is in Africa than for questions about aid in general ($p < 0.001$), an interesting pattern given Baker’s work on racial paternalism in White Americans’ aid preferences, which might lead us to expect smaller gaps for African

aid recipients.⁷ In regard to the use of force, absolute gaps are largest for questions relating to Africa and Europe. Regressions show that the difference in gap size for the Europe category (compared to questions about the use of force that did not mention any region) are statistically significant, while the difference between Africa and a generic reference category is not. For questions about whether a particular country is of vital interest to the United States, absolute gaps are significantly larger for questions relating to countries in Africa ($p < 0.05$) than for questions relating to Europe; a similar pattern is displayed for questions about threat perceptions, although the difference is not statistically significant. For questions about the importance of particular foreign policies, absolute gaps are significantly larger for questions about Asia ($p < 0.01$) and Europe ($p < 0.01$) than they are for questions about foreign policy importance that do not have a regional focus; furthermore, absolute gaps are larger but not statistically significant for questions about the importance of foreign policies related to the Americas. While there is regional variation displayed in the trade category, none of the regional differences are statistically significant. Meanwhile, there were no questions about military bases in the data that specifically referenced Africa, but these question types do demonstrate significant regional heterogeneity: absolute gaps in regard to military bases were significantly larger for questions about the Americas ($p < 0.067$). McDougall (1997, 38–39) argues that American isolationism is a myth, and is better understood as a geographically-bounded indifference towards European continental balance of power politics. Similarly, we see geographical frictions in racial gaps in foreign policy preferences (explored more granularly in Online Appendix D (pp. 15–19), in which Black and White Americans differ not just in terms of the kinds of policies they want the United States to pursue, but where they want to pursue them.

⁷See Online Appendix D (pp. 15–19).

Conclusion

In this article, we identify a number of issues that distinguish Black from White foreign policy preferences. We argue that for Black and White Americans, racialized patterns of oppression and opportunity, and different touchpoints with global events, have shaped the international issues that they care about, leading to racial gaps across numerous areas of foreign policy. Our findings make several contributions. First, we theoretically bridge the literature on domestic public opinion in REP with scholarship on international policy attitudes. Second, we examine racial differences in foreign policy opinion across numerous policy domains over time, conducting an analysis of an original dataset of 18,486 respondents from 1975–2018 that contains 1,504 individually-matched foreign policy questions fielded on surveys of nationally representative samples of the American public. We hand-code each question into different policy categories to model this variation theoretically, including substantive topics at different levels of granularity and region.

In our first set of analyses, we find greater support among Black respondents for democracy promotion, foreign aid, environmental protection, and immigration; alternatively, we find less support among Black respondents for the use of force and for international counterterrorism efforts. In our multivariate absolute gap analyses, we find that skepticism about the use of state power, solidarity with other marginalized groups, and to a lesser extent, concern for equitable access to resources, represent the three most salient touchpoints that distinguish Black from White attitudes on foreign policy. Even when we account for other factors that may explain the gap, like partisan polarization, these touchpoints remain statistically significant. Breaking these touchpoints down into thematic categories, questions on the use of force, the environment, and Africa show larger gaps than other question types, whereas democracy promotion, nuclear arms control, maintaining military superiority, and the threat of terrorism display significantly smaller racial gaps than other question types.

An important scope condition concerns whether the dynamics we identify are specific to Black life in the United States or reflect a broader global pattern of racial hierarchy

and colonial power relations. The Black American experience emerged from a distinctive trajectory of enslavement, segregation, and incorporation into a liberal democratic state that proclaimed universal ideals while consistently failing to extend them in practice. Whether analogous orientations emerge among racially marginalized populations in other nations remains an important direction for future research.

A related question asks where our findings from 1975-2018 might hold in previous time periods. Although we are limited by survey availability, we have reason to believe that racial gaps in foreign policy are not a new phenomenon ([Green-Riley and Leber 2023](#)). Like the gaps in our study, older gaps varied over time. Evidence indicates that they oftentimes emerged alongside domestic racial tensions. During World War II, the *Pittsburgh Courier* (a historic black newspaper) did not call on readers to denounce the war as our theory might expect, but rather encouraged support for a “Double V”: victory in the war alongside victory in domestic civil rights struggles ([Pittsburgh Courier 1942](#)). However, as domestic racial tensions flared after the war, Black skepticism of both domestic and foreign policy increased ([Wynn 1971](#); [Parker 2009](#)). Similarly, Black-White differences in support for the Vietnam War did not emerge immediately but became distinguishable in 1968 ([Gartner and Segura 2000](#)), following an uptick in domestic racial tensions ([Goodwin 2017](#)).

Our findings, which show racial gaps in foreign policy go beyond partisan divides, suggest the need to further examine the role of racialized experience on foreign policy perspectives. Thus far, the literature in REP has rarely examined in depth how racial considerations shape understandings of international politics. We should step away from viewing racial politics as a purely domestic phenomenon and recognize that it matters beyond the water’s edge. Research linking Black preferences to foreign policy can help to explain historical and contemporary international campaigns by Black activists, covering issues ranging from anti-imperialism and anti-apartheid advocacy to humanitarian aid. Future research should explore the underlying mechanism that leads to these differences by considering how theories on racial attitudes apply beyond the domestic setting. The four key issues in Black politics

outlined in this article provide a crucial start.

Racialized thinking may be activated not only by priming explicitly racial issues ([White 2007](#)) but also by observing oppressive conditions for people across the world. Scholars have also found that being a member of a marginalized social group in the U.S. can lead one to have more group empathy for those who experience oppression or subjugation, even if they are members of an outgroup ([Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2021](#)). In turn, people from marginalized groups, like African Americans, are more likely to consider oppression on a global scale and may be more empathetic to the plight facing outgroup members. Researchers should expand this line of scholarship to bring into view a fuller picture of the persistent racial gaps in foreign policy attitudes. Leveraging experimental-survey methods would be a useful means to pin down the mechanisms at work.

Racial gaps in how Americans view international affairs can have important political implications. Historically, U.S. policy toward Africa has led to racialized debate and political action in the United States ([Treverton and Varley 1988](#); [Meriwether 2008](#)). Our research outlines several other areas where Black Americans display strong and distinct preferences for international interactions, including militarism and environmentalism. It extends previous work on the domestic politics of foreign policy (i.e., [Milner and Tingley 2015](#)), and raises new questions.

First, it raises pressing questions about substantive representation. The question of whether elected officials effectively represent the foreign policy preferences of Black constituencies is important, especially when it comes to decisions about the use of force by a U.S. military in which Black soldiers are overrepresented, or global environmental policies that have local repercussions. Further research should investigate the conditions in which Black voters shape Democratic Party positioning on foreign policy, and whether the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation differs between the foreign versus domestic political domains. Similarly, recent trends in foreign information operations indicate that foreign actors also take advantage of racial divisions in the U.S. This real-world trend warrants

research on whether disinformation campaigns can amplify racial cleavages on domestic or foreign policy topics, especially given previous work showing that racial cues and priming have effects on political behavior ([Mendelberg 2001](#); [Stephens-Dougan 2016](#)).

We intentionally frame this article to focus on touchpoints derived from Black politics and perspectives because of the dearth of international relations research that uses such a frame in the literature. However, issues that resonate *less* with Black communities also drive the racial gap in foreign policy preferences.⁸ Future research might investigate not only the foreign policy areas of most importance, but also the areas of least importance to Black Americans.

We invite future work on the racial divergence in foreign policy using data that allows for the examination of this phenomenon in new ways. This line of research is fruitful and has broader implications for how we understand opinion formation with respect to foreign policy. It offers a clear recognition that racial gaps are not happenstance, and speaks to the role of race in shaping worldviews.

⁸See Online Appendix D (pp. 15-19).

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