

# Multiracial Identity and Political Preferences

**Lauren Davenport**, Stanford University

**Annie Franco**, Stanford University

**Shanto Iyengar**, Stanford University

Increases in racial minority populations are profoundly reshaping the composition of the American electorate, and multiracial identifiers are one of the fastest growing groups. Yet little is known about the political ideology and policy preferences of Americans who identify with more than one race. We address this gap here by examining the political views of the two biggest US multiracial groups—White-Asians and White-Blacks. We also advance prior work by assessing the role that linked fate, racial group closeness, and race salience play in explaining multiracials' political attitudes. Leveraging the largest national political survey of multiracial adults to date, we find that White-Asian and White-Black multiracials are on the whole more progressive than Whites, expressing levels of linked fate and social and racial attitudes that are comparable to those of their minority race. We argue that the growth in these multiracial populations seems most likely to benefit the Democratic Party.

**P**rojected to triple over the next four decades (Pew 2015), the multiracial population is poised to shape the electoral balance of power in the United States. Yet little is known about the political ideology, partisanship, and attitudes associated with multiracial identities. Here we fill these gaps in the literature by leveraging the most comprehensive national political survey of multiracial adults to date. Our study enables us to make better inferences about the political dynamics of identifying with plural racial categories and contributes to research on multiracialism in key ways. First, in contrast to earlier studies that focused on racial issues (Masuoka 2008), we assess how multiracial Americans navigate their dual identities to form party identification, political ideology, and racial and nonracial policy stances. Whereas research has centered around the behavior of White-Black multiracials (e.g., Davenport 2016; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008), we expand beyond this population and also examine

White-Asians.<sup>1</sup> By assessing these two groups—which together account for half of all US multiracials—we evaluate whether the patterns found among White-Blacks translate to White-Asians. Finally, we assess the role of linked fate, racial group closeness, and race salience in explaining multiracials' political attitudes—measures that have heretofore been unexamined.

## THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Historically, hypodescent (the “one-drop rule”) assigned many people of White-Asian and White-Black backgrounds to their minority race and was stringently applied to mixed-race Blacks in particular. The contemporary decision to label oneself with multiple races therefore signals inclusivity, transcends boundaries, and is associated with greater flexibility and less essentialist views (Pauker et al. 2018). We thus hypothesize that multiracial identification is tied to a distinctly liberal political ideology that is reflected in greater support for expansion

Lauren Davenport (lidd@stanford.edu) is an associate professor of political science at Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. Annie Franco (abfranco@fb.com) received her PhD in political science at Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. Shanto Iyengar (siyengar@stanford.edu) is a professor of political science at Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.

Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the JOP Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/714760>. Our study was approved by and conducted in compliance with Stanford University's Institutional Review Board (protocol ID 33285). Support for our study was provided by the Pew Research Center as part of their ongoing work documenting the role of multiracials in America. The analysis and interpretations reported here do not represent the positions or views of the Pew Research Organization.

1. We do not examine other racial/ethnic populations, such as American Indians and Latinos, for reasons discussed in the appendix.

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of cultural freedoms, such as endorsement of women's reproductive rights and gay rights.

Yet multiracials also have a special social and psychological connection to their minority race that is rooted in a mutual history of state-sanctioned discrimination. As a group, Black Americans share the historical experience of slavery and segregation, while Asian Americans have a communal past of being barred from naturalization, and some Asian ethnic groups were subjected to additional formal exclusion (such as via the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese American internment during World War II). These collective experiences and the continued marginalization that Blacks and Asians face influence their political behavior today, such that both groups are more progressive and more likely to support an activist government than Whites (Dawson 1994; Kuo, Malhotra, and Mo 2017; Pew 2012). Although hypodescent no longer legally codifies race, White-Asian and White-Black multiracials often perceive themselves as belonging to an oppressed minority group (Davenport 2018). As a result, we posit that when it comes to support for government social programs and issues that directly relate to communities of color, multiracials draw upon their minority group attachments and express views akin to their minority race.

The strength of this minority group attachment should depend on multiracials' component backgrounds, however. Relative to Blacks, Asians have on average faced less residential segregation, are perceived to be higher in status, are more likely to intermarry with Whites, and are more socially mobile (Lee and Bean 2010). Black Americans politically draw upon racial group norms, internalized beliefs about group solidarity, and the social standing of Blacks as a group, and are staunch Democrats (White and Laird 2020). The disparate legacy of hypodescent is such that White-Blacks share Black Americans' particular history of subjugation in a way that White-Asians do not share that of Asian Americans (Davis 2001), and today, hypodescent more strongly governs perceptions of White-Blacks as minorities than White-Asians (Ho et al. 2011). As a result, we anticipate that on average, multiracial White-Blacks have a stronger sense of minority group consciousness and identity (than White-Asians), which in turn motivates their political attitudes to a greater degree.

### **CATEGORIZING RACE AND ANALYZING MULTIRACIAL RESPONDENTS**

Race is constructed, contextual, and can be delineated in different ways (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Here we use the measure employed on all US federal forms, including the census: self-classification. We categorize people who identify as both White and Asian, or White and Black, as "multiracial" and those who identify with a single race as "monoracial."

Our survey was conducted in February and March 2015 and sampled 720 White-Black and 479 White-Asian respondents from YouGov's Internet panel. We compare multiracials' attitudes to those of their constituent monoracial groups, sampling 800 White, 500 Black, and 488 Asian respondents.<sup>2</sup> Samples were nationally representative by gender, age, and education.

Our dependent variables of interest are party affiliation, ideology, and attitudes on cultural issues (same-sex marriage and abortion), social welfare (the Affordable Care Act and government provision of social services), and police treatment of racial groups. Our primary independent variable of interest is racial self-classification, defined as White-Black, White-Asian, White, Black, or Asian. For the attitudinal variables, we estimate ordered logistic regression models that account for age, education, gender, income, region, salience of religion, relative linked fate, salience of race relative to nonracial identities, and relative racial closeness.<sup>3</sup>

### **RESULTS**

Table 1 presents the linked fate, political partisanship, and ideologies of the five racial groups after weighting the sample to population benchmarks. As hypothesized, despite their self-classification as both White and minority, multiracials are far more likely to feel that their identity is inextricably linked to their minority background than to their White background. Among White-Asians, 70% express linked fate to Asians, compared to 57% who feel the same toward Whites. For White-Blacks, the minority-majority gap in linked fate is even wider; 78% express linked fate to Blacks, relative to 44% toward Whites. Chi-square tests indicate that multiracials' perceptions of linked fate to Whites are significantly lower than that of monoracial Whites, but their linked fate to their respective monoracial minority groups are no different from those expressed by monoracial members of that minority group. In line with our expectations, the racial minority linked fate differential between the two multiracial groups is statistically significant, indicating that White-Blacks more strongly perceive a linked fate with Blacks than White-Asians do with Asians.<sup>4</sup>

2. We exclude South Asians (e.g., Indian and Pakistani) from this study because they differ from East Asians and Southeast Asians in many ways, including path to the United States, social class, and importantly, intermarriage rate. We discuss this further in the appendix. Unfortunately we lack the statistical power to disaggregate analyses by Asian ethnicity here, though given the challenges of sampling both multiracials and Asian Americans—let alone multiracials of particular Asian ethnic backgrounds—our study serves as a useful starting point.

3. Details on the survey methodology and sampling approach, as well as question wording, response coding, and regression estimates are in the appendix.

4. Two-sample *z*-test comparing the proportion of White-Black and White-Asian respondents reporting linked fate with their respective monoracial group results in a *z*-value of 3.05 (*p* = .002).

Table 1. Linked Fate, Partisanship, and Ideology by Racial Identification (%)

	White	White-Black	White-Asian	Black	Asian
Linked fate to Whites	64.5	43.8	56.8	...	
$\chi^2(2) = 66.12, p < .001$					
Linked fate to Blacks	...	77.9	...	76.1	...
$\chi^2(1) = 0.53, p = .47$					
Linked fate to Asians	...	...	70.1	...	69.5
$\chi^2(1) = 0.04, p = .85$					
Republican	30.8	9.4	21.1	7.9	20.5
Independent/other	43.1	40.2	45.6	27.8	38.8
Democrat	26.1	50.4	33.3	64.3	40.7
$\chi^2(8) = 260.42, p < .001$					
Conservative	40.2	20.9	24.0	27.7	27.1
Moderate	41.7	47.5	43.3	47.6	45.0
Liberal	18.1	31.5	32.7	24.7	27.9
$\chi^2(8) = 95.78, p < .001$					
Sorted Democrats	41.5	40.1	52.3	31.0	43.4
$\chi^2(4) = 32.32, p < .001$					

Table 1 also shows that multiracials identify more as Democrats than as Republicans: the Democratic advantage is especially large (41 points) for White-Blacks. In addition, multiracials are more likely to identify as liberal, and less likely to identify as conservative, than all monoracial groups. Moreover, the group that most identifies as both liberal and Democrat—as “sorted” Democrats—is White-Asians. Sorted Democrats are particularly likely to take more extreme left-oriented stances on issues (Iyengar and Westwood 2015); in line with this, we find that White-Asians hold the most liberal cultural views, with two-thirds supporting both same-sex marriage and access to abortion (see table A-1; tables A-1–A-9 are available online). Blacks, the least partisan sorted group,

are also the most conservative on cultural issues, which produces a wide gap between them and White-Blacks, who report considerably greater support for both of these issues (+20 points).

These general patterns in cultural attitudes persist, net of demographic differences. Figure 1, which presents differences in predicted probabilities between each multiracial group and their component monoracial minority group, indicates that White-Asians are about 12 percentage points more supportive of cultural issues than Asians and that White-Blacks are likewise more supportive than Blacks, after accounting for covariates. Figure 2 presents opinion differences between multiracials and Whites; in terms of cultural issues, White-Asians

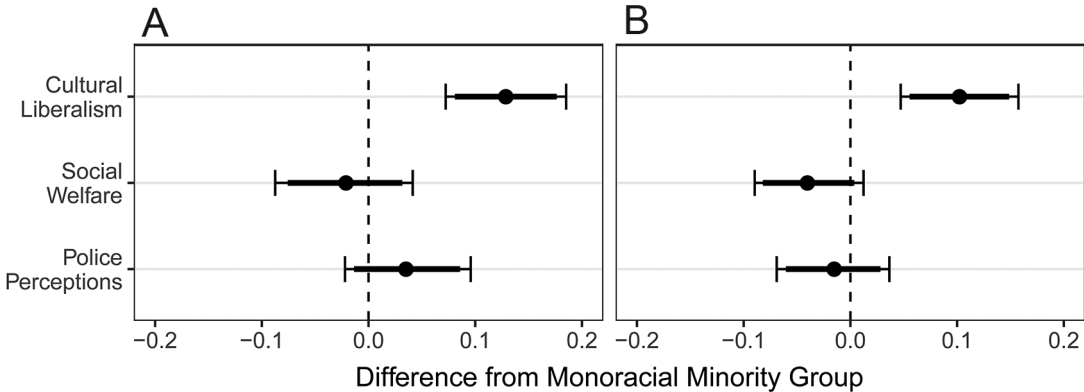


Figure 1. Multiracials’ attitudes, relative to monoracial minority background. A, White-Asian; B, White-Black. Higher values reflect more liberal attitudes. Estimates are predicted probabilities derived from the ordered logistic regressions in tables A-2–A-4. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals; bold segments represent 90% confidence intervals.

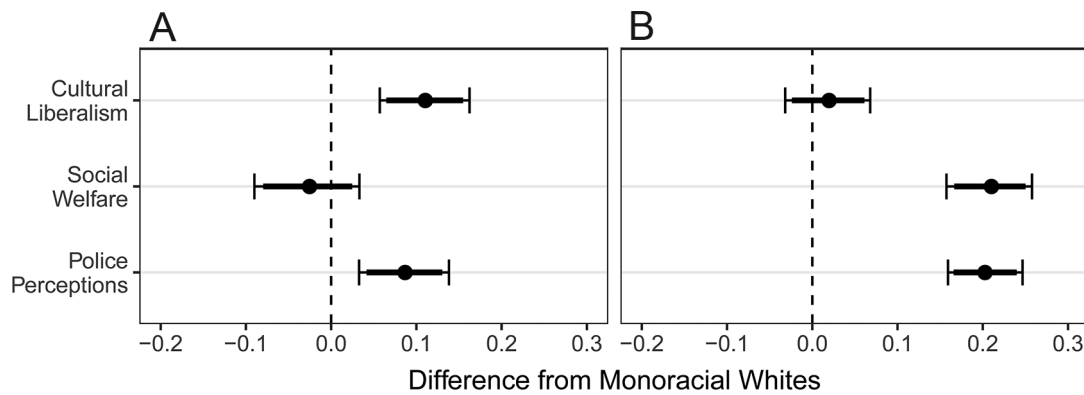


Figure 2. Multiracials' attitudes, relative to monoracial whites. A, White-Asian; B, White-Black. Higher values reflect more liberal attitudes. Estimates are predicted probabilities derived from the ordered logistic regressions in tables A-2–A-4.

are more liberal than Whites, while White-Blacks express attitudes that are comparable to Whites, all else being equal.

Turning to measures of social welfare, we find that whereas majorities of White-Blacks and Blacks express support, just over one-third of White-Asians and Asians, and only about one-quarter of Whites do so (table A-1). Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that after adjusting for potential confounders, White-Asians' social welfare views are comparable to both Asians and Whites, while White-Blacks express views akin to Blacks and vastly more liberal than Whites.

Finally, when it comes to an issue that is pointedly racial in nature—police treatment of racial groups—we find a wide disparity (see table A-1). Whereas half of Whites think the police are doing well treating racial groups equally, White-Blacks and Blacks hold the police in very low regard: 44% and 39%, respectively, believe the police are doing a “poor” job. White-Asians' and Asians' views of the police are more moderate. Figure 1 shows that, after accounting for covariates, multiracials' perceptions of police treatment are comparable to those of their monoracial minority group. Figure 2 attests that multiracials are more liberal than Whites on this issue, and that the gap in opinion between Whites and White-Blacks is particularly large—roughly twice that between Whites and White-Asians.

### EXPLAINING MULTIRACIALS' ATTITUDES

All told, our results support our theoretical expectations that multiracials share views akin to their component minority race on social welfare and policing.<sup>5</sup> That White-Asians express especially liberal attitudes on abortion and same-sex

marriage also supports our hypothesis that multiracial identification is associated with a distinctly progressive outlook on cultural political issues.

Challenging our hypotheses somewhat is the finding that, although White-Blacks are more culturally progressive than Blacks, they share Whites' cultural attitudes. Interestingly, White-Blacks' sense of minority group linked fate significantly predicts more liberal views on these so-called “moral issues”—an effect that is absent among Blacks (see table A-5). This suggests that for people who see themselves as both Black and White, a feeling of minority racial consciousness is associated with more expansive and accepting views that translate beyond issues of race to individual rights and liberties.

As we posited, minority linked fate, minority group closeness, and racial identity salience often predict multiracials' political attitudes. In particular, White-Asians and White-Blacks alike consistently draw upon the belief that their individual prospects are tied to the success of their minority race (see tables A-5–A-7). Minority racial identity and group consciousness are especially meaningful for White-Blacks, who, like Blacks, have traditionally been regarded not as individuals but as members of an oppressed minority group (Davis 2001). White-Blacks' minority linked fate, as well as their minority group closeness and race salience, matter especially for the explicitly racial topic of policing, which is fitting given heavy patrolling of Black neighborhoods, high-profile extrajudicial killings of Black Americans, and activism in this area.

Importantly, “multiracial” is not monolithic. Compared to White-Blacks, White-Asians are more tempered in their perceptions of police racial bias and government social support, are more likely to identify as Republican, and rate higher on linked fate with Whites. Thus on the measures we examine, White-Asians look more like Whites than do White-Blacks—a sign of the closer social proximity between Whites and

5. Given the narrow gap in opinion between Whites and Asians on social welfare, White-Asians also convey similar views as Whites on this set of issues.

Asians (than between Whites and Blacks) and the differing histories and experiences that shape White-Asians' identities and attitudes.

Nonetheless, both multiracial groups are far more inclined to call themselves Democrats than Republicans and identify as liberal at levels that exceed that of their minority race. White-Asians are also especially progressive on cultural issues.<sup>6</sup> And because Asian Americans encounter different kinds of prejudices from those of Blacks, there are some areas, such as immigration, in which the opinion gap between Whites and White-Asians is likely wider than that between Whites and White-Blacks. Future work should examine how multiracial subgroups' distinctive experiences with exclusion and xenophobia politicize their component identities on a broader array of policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today the United States is as divided as ever along partisan and racial lines. This pattern of reinforcing or "sorted" cleavages is known to strengthen animus between in-group and out-group members (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). For Whites, racial identity has become increasingly prominent, fueled by concerns about rising minority populations and perceived threats to Anglo-Saxon American culture (Jardina 2019). We have shown that White-Asian and White-Black multiracials do not seek to "escape" the status deprivation of their minority race by affiliating with and adopting the attitudes of Whites. Politically, these individuals are far more likely to see their fates as linked to minorities and tend to behave as such. Based on the parties' current positions, we contend that expansion in these multiracial populations is most likely to benefit the Democratic Party, which offers an ideological and value-based affinity that resonates with multiracials. If growing numbers of multiracials turn to the Democrats, partisan and racial identities will become ever more intertwined.

We have focused here on White-Asians and White-Blacks, the two largest multiracial subgroups in the United States. But currently one-quarter of US multiracials identify with multiple minority groups, and prior research suggests that such individuals feel especially marginalized and profess a social justice-oriented political identity (Davenport 2018). We thus believe that the inclusion of non-White multiracials would bolster our argument that growth in the multiracial population will benefit

the Democratic Party, though this is a topic that future work should investigate more fully.

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6. These findings thus extend to White-Asians an argument put forth by Davenport (2016), that multiracial identification is associated with a more liberal outlook on issues that affect socially marginalized groups.