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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Racialized Empathy and Attitudes Toward Refugees in the United States

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Abstract

In the United States, the public does not view all refugee groups with equal favorability. Why do individuals express more support for some refugee groups compared to others? We argue that some Americans are more supportive of certain refugee groups when they share a racial identity because it is easier for them to empathize with them. While recent research points to empathy as a useful tool for cultivating supportive attitudes toward refugees and immigrants, the political science literature lacks a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which empathy drives pro-social attitudes toward refugees, specifically with regard to racial dynamics. Does empathy allow people to overcome their racial ingroup preferences, or does it magnify them? With an original web experiment administered to a 50/50 Black and white sample of Americans, we prime half of the sample to associate refugees with their racial ingroup and prime the other half with their racial outgroup. We find that refugee race only affects support for refugees among white individuals with low group empathy. For high-empathy whites and Blacks of all levels of empathy, the race linked to refugees does not condition their support for refugees. Rather, group empathy is a strong, independent explanation for variation in attitudes toward refugees. We also find modest evidence that the positive association between empathy for refugees and support for this group is driven by partisanship, particularly for whites. The direct effect of partisanship on support for refugees is much stronger. This study contributes to research on the dynamics of race, empathy, and attitudes toward refugees.

Keywords: Attitudes toward outgroups; empathy; experiment; race; refugees

Introduction

Refugee crises have become a regular feature of global politics. While the number of refugees has consistently grown in recent years, particular crises attract more attention from the public than others (UNHCR 2023b). People fleeing conflict in Syria gained global attention in 2014–2015 (Unicef et al. 2019), Afghans escaping the Taliban takeover in 2021 dominated headlines (UNHCR 2023a), and since Russia invaded Ukraine in the beginning of 2022, the forced displacement of

Ukrainians has featured prominently in news cycles around the world (UNHCR 2024). The American public has responded with varying degrees of support for resettling refugees affected by such events. Nationally representative public opinion polls reveal that Americans are more supportive of resettling Ukrainian refugees compared to other refugee groups from places like Syria, Afghanistan, and El Salvador and this pattern holds for partisan subgroups (Coninck 2023; Marcelo 2022; Orth 2023; Saad 2022a; Sanders and Frankovic 2024). In this study, we address this question: why do Americans support resettling some refugee groups more than others?

Existing work on attitudes toward refugees highlights perceptions of deservingness rooted in symbolic threat, ethnicity, and a shared "conscience collective" as possible explanations for why Americans express different levels of support for similar kinds of humanitarian migrants (i.e., refugees) (Coninck 2023, 581). We argue that varied support for refugees is due to racial group dynamics that moderate how much empathy Americans feel toward different refugee groups. We engage work that explores the role of racial and ethnic identity in shaping how people experience empathy for foreign-born outgroups (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016) and the growing body of experimental research that has identified empathy as an important mechanism for shifting public opinion to be more inclusive of outgroups, such as immigrants and refugees (Adida et al. 2018; Hartman and Morse 2018; Williamson et al. 2021).

We employ an experimental research design to assess the extent to which racial in and outgroup preferences condition the amount of empathy people experience while forming attitudes about refugees in the United States. We refer to this process as "racialized empathy." Racial identity is a salient, endurable group identity that shapes Americans' political attitudes, preferences, and behaviors (e.g., Hutchings and Valentino 2004). Since the level of group empathy that individuals experience depends on ingroup and outgroup perceptions (e.g., Kurzban et al. 2015), we expect the positive effect of group empathy on support for refugees will be strongest when individuals share the racial identity of a refugee group.

To test our argument, we administer an online survey experiment to a 50/50 sample of self-identified Black and non-Hispanic white Americans. These racial identities are not only salient and contentious in American politics (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010; Tesler 2016), but they also represent the racial background of large groups of resettled refugees in the United States (Ward and Batalova 2023). Furthermore, we build on scholarship that shows that the Black-white paradigm is significant for understanding attitudes about race and immigration in the United States (Carter 2019; Hutchings and Wong 2014). For each racial group of respondents, half are primed to consider their racial ingroup while the other half are primed to consider their outgroup when evaluating their empathy and support for refugees.

We find that the race of the refugee only influences support for refugees among white respondents with low group empathy. For low-empathy whites, being randomly assigned to consider Black refugees is linked with lower refugee support compared to those primed to consider white refugees. For white respondents with higher levels of group empathy, the perceived race of refugees does not meaningfully influence their level of concern regarding economic scarcity, willingness to help, or

policy preferences regarding refugees. Interestingly, for Black respondents of all levels of group empathy, the race associated with refugees does not change how much empathy or support they express for them. In other words, Black respondents do not appear to have racialized preferences in the same way that low-empathy whites do. This "null" finding aligns with existing theories that the drivers of Black public opinion on immigration differ from those of whites. Racialized motivations characterize white public opinion on issues of immigration, while these are less salient to Black Americans who balance concerns related to ingroup solidarity and support for egalitarian politics (Diamond 1998; Carter 2019; Sheares 2023). While support for our conditional hypotheses is mixed, we find that for both Black and white respondents, group empathy plays a decisive, *independent* role in shaping support for refugees.

We also consider the role of partisanship as more than a control variable in the relationship between group empathy and support for refugees. Partisan identity is one of the most powerful predictors of American political attitudes, including those related to immigrant groups. Recent work demonstrates the partisan nature of empathy in shaping political attitudes (Brophy and Mullinix 2023; Simas et al. 2020). Thus, we consider whether partisanship drives differences in group empathy, which, in turn, predicts support for refugees. To address this question, we conduct a mediation analysis and find that partisanship's effect on attitudes toward refugees is partially mediated by group empathy for refugees, but its direct effect is stronger.

Our study contributes to research explaining public opinion about refugees in several ways. First, we utilize the Black-white dynamic to study attitudes about refugees. Most of the work using this paradigm studies attitudes about immigration policy broadly and immigrant groups that do not migrate for explicitly humanitarian reasons (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Carter 2019; Carter and Pérez 2016; Diamond 1998; Hutchings and Wong 2014; Nteta 2013; Marrow et al. 2019; Sheares 2023; Vienrich and Creighton 2018). Our study provides preliminary evidence that Black empathy and public opinion toward refugees are not racialized, while they are for white Americans. Second, our research design differs from previous work on empathy and attitudes about refugees in that we do not solicit situational empathy. Rather, we prime respondents to associate a particular race with refugees and then measure their dispositional empathy for refugees as a group. This allows us to establish a baseline understanding of the amount of empathy respondents experience for refugees in their day-to-day lives. Relatedly, instead of measuring group empathy for outgroup races and ethnicities (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016), we measure group empathy for refugees. This allows us to examine whether race moderates the relationship between group empathy for refugees and support for refugees. Finally, we explicitly theorize about the role of partisanship. We go beyond treating partisan identity as a control variable and examine whether it exists in the same causal chain as race, group empathy, and support for refugees.

Literature Review

Attitudes about Immigrants and Refugees

Existing public opinion literature suggests that people's attitudes about immigrants and refugees are typically not a matter of economic self-interest;[1] rather, they are

rooted in concerns about society and outgroup threat (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Given such patterns, a psychological framework is useful for understanding variation in people's attitudes about refugees. If concerns about the "other" characterize attitudes about immigrants and refugees, then it stands to reason that the psychological processes that determine whom people view as a potentially threatening outgroup are central to understanding this phenomenon.

Scholars have examined the links between psychological factors, such as values and emotions, and attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Araújo et al. 2020; Brader et al. 2008; Davidov et al. 2008, 2020; Paul 2022; Seate and Mastro 2017; Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Verkuyten 2004). In response to reading about immigrants, people experience emotions such as anxiety (e.g., Brader et al. 2008), contempt (e.g., Seate and Mastro 2017), anger (e.g., Verkuyten 2004), sympathy (e.g., Verkuyten 2004), and empathy (e.g., Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016). We engage with research that examines the pro-social effects of empathy on attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Adida et al. 2018; Simonovits et al. 2018; Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016; Williamson et al. 2021). Extant work shows that treatments that trigger empathetic perspective-taking cause individuals to become more supportive of the immigrants and refugees they step into the shoes of (Simonovits et al. 2018; Adida et al. 2018; Hartman and Morse 2018). For example, Adida et al. (2018) find that Americans prompted to do a perspective-taking exercise similar to those used by refugee advocates become more willing to write a letter to the White House on behalf of refugees. However, perspective-taking treatments are limited in their external validity (Sambanis and Simonson 2025).

Dissimilarity between the person making an evaluation about immigrants and the immigrants portrayed can change whether that person makes a positive or negative evaluation of immigrants (Bloom et al. 2015). For example, recent work suggests that racial/ethnic dynamics can shape the extent to which individuals empathize with immigrants in distress. After reading about an immigrant detainee's treatment in a detention center, Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino (2016) show that, compared to whites, Blacks and Latinos have more group empathy for other racial/ethnic groups and thereby exhibit more supportive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. Black respondents were more supportive of all detainees' rights, regardless of their race, whereas white respondents were more supportive of white immigrant detainees compared to racial minority detainees. In a similar study using a measure of group empathy for other racial/ethnic groups, Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos (2016) show that racial minorities, especially Black Americans, have more empathetic responses and supportive policy attitudes toward immigrant detainees than white respondents. Taken together, these studies illustrate that people who are racial/ethnic minorities in the American context have higher levels of racial/ethnic outgroup empathy compared to the dominant racial/ethnic group (i.e., whites). We consider what these findings mean for public opinion about refugees, a group forced to migrate for humanitarian reasons. While refugees experience discrimination and disadvantage like undocumented immigrants, issues of legality are not central to their presence in the United States. Moreover, there is little reason to associate refugees with economic threat as their migration is humanitarian-based.

Existing work suggests that individuals view those who were forced to migrate (i.e., refugees) and voluntary economic immigrants in different ways. Associating migrants with the "refugee" label leads people to become more willing to help refugees and to express paternalistic stereotyping, while voluntary, economic migrants elicit opposition to helping and envy (Wyszynski et al. 2020). Thus, existing evidence suggests that public opinion about refugees should be generally favorable, but does not uncover why Americans do not express similar levels of support for all refugee groups. We consider the role of race in American public opinion to address this puzzle.

Racial Attitudes and Public Opinion about Immigrant Groups

Racial identity and sentiment have long been central to American politics (Jardina and Piston 2019). Americans' psychological attachments to their racial ingroups shape political attitudes and behaviors in powerful ways (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Jardina 2021; Jardina and Piston 2019; Nava 2023). Racial identity and racial attitudes influence policy attitudes (e.g., Hutchings and Valentino 2004), partisanship (e.g., Cuevas-Molina 2023), support for civil liberty expression (e.g., Nava 2023), and even conspiracy theory endorsement (e.g., Jardina and Traugott 2019). For our purposes, we seek to link racial group dynamics with attitudes about refugees.

Race intersects with public opinion about immigrant groups and immigration in several key ways. Individuals exhibit racialized preferences in their immigration attitudes (e.g., Brader et al. 2008). For example, people tend to prefer refugees and immigrants of the same ethnicity as most of the host population (Coninck 2020). Schachter (2016) shows that white Americans are open to relationships with most immigrants, except for Black immigrants. Such work suggests that the race associated with refugees will influence the level of support expressed toward those refugees. Importantly, there is heterogeneity in the extent to which public opinion about immigration is racialized. The bulk of American public opinion about immigration focuses on white attitudes. As this scholarship has expanded to include more studies of the attitudes of racial minorities, it suggests that the foundational underpinnings of immigration may differ by racial group (e.g., Carter 2019; Hutchings and Wong 2014; Vienrich and Creighton 2018).

Preferences for one's racial ingroup tend to be stronger than animus toward a racial outgroup (Tajfel and Turner 2004), suggesting that preference for ingroup members outweighs one's dislike of outgroup members (see Jardina (2021) for a detailed discussion). Black Americans tend to report more supportive attitudes toward immigrants compared to white Americans (Brader et al. 2010; Kinder and Sanders 1996), especially if the immigrants in question are racial/ethnic minorities (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016). At the same time, Black Americans have been documented to express restrictive immigration attitudes (Carter 2019; Nteta 2013) and hold more negative views of immigration compared to Hispanics (Vienrich and Creighton 2018).

We focus on the attitudes of Black and white Americans, following in the footsteps of research that studies these groups to better understand the relationship between race and immigration attitudes in American politics (e.g., Carter 2019;

Hutchings and Wong 2014; Marrow et al. 2019; Nteta 2013; Sheares 2023). We do so for the following reasons. First, Black and white identities are the most longstanding, politically salient racial identities among historically "native-born" groups in the United States (Hutchings and Wong 2014). These groups are consistently at opposite ends of constructed societal hierarchies that uphold white supremacy. Blacks and whites also have a unique relationship in American politics with considerable systemic and formalized oppression against Black Americans that was not experienced in the same magnitude by other racial groups (Sellers et al. 1998).

Historically, immigration has been highly salient for Black Americans. Immigration policy has had a direct impact on African Americans by shaping economic opportunities and signaling Black citizens' status in American society (Diamond 1998; Hutchings and Wong 2014; Carter 2019). Scholars have argued that this positionality leads Black and white Americans to hold distinct frameworks for their immigration views (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Carter 2019; Diamond 1998; Hutchings and Wong 2014; Nteta 2013). As Carter (2019) aptly argues in her book *American While Black*: "The fear of being further marginalized is really at the core of black engagements with immigration ... " (p. 158). The literature suggests that White Americans' attitudes about immigration are substantially racialized, while this does not appear to be the case for Black Americans (Carter 2019; Ostfeld 2017; Marrow et al. 2019; Sheares 2023). Black Americans consider both the group interests of African Americans, which can be threatened by increased immigration, and support for egalitarianism (Carter 2019; Hutchings and Wong 2014). We posit that refugees are less likely to signal group threat to Black individuals as their migration is humanitarian rather than economic in nature.

While we expect to observe a preference for racial ingroups among Black and white individuals, the strength of ingroup preference will likely be weaker for Black individuals compared to white individuals. Although Black and African Americans tend to favor African immigrants over others (Carter 2019), they do not necessarily view each other as co-racial. While non-Black groups tend to view Black individuals as a homogeneous group that engages in politics in a united manner, Black individuals negotiate within-group diversity that can lead to divergences in opinion (Smith 2014). Black immigrants diverge from U.S.-born Blacks in their attitudes on some policies, such as the belief that immigrants steal jobs from Americans and general preferences about the level of immigration in the United States (Capers and Smith 2016; Unnever and Gabbidon 2015). Linked fate leads to support for marginalized Black groups (e.g., undocumented immigrants), but does not apply to every aspect of Black politics (Bunyasi and Smith 2019).

Outgroup vs Ingroup Empathy

Empathy refers to the capacity for sharing and understanding the perspectives and feelings of others (Davis 1983; Zaki 2014). Though it is a matter of some debate among scholars of empathy, the phenomenon contains cognitive, affective, and motivational components (Zaki 2014, 2017). To differentiate these components in simple terms, the cognitive dimension of empathy refers to an individual's ability to take the perspective of another, the affective dimension refers to a person's ability to

feel or experience the state of another, and the motivational dimension refers to the desire for the improvement of the emotional state of another (Zaki 2014).

Empathy is a psychological trait that varies at the individual level (i.e., dispositional empathy) (Davis 1983) and can be operationalized in reference to specific groups (i.e., group empathy). Group empathy measures the level of empathy a person exhibits for a particular group. Like interpersonal empathy, group empathy is a trait, or predisposition, that begins to develop in infancy, grows throughout adolescence and into middle-age adulthood, and moderately declines in old age (O'Brien et al. 2013; Szalavitz and Perry 2011). As Sirin et al. (2017) discuss, group empathy (as opposed to interpersonal empathy) is important for explaining gaps in political and policy attitudes. Independent from trait empathy, situations can elicit empathy (e.g., Batson et al. 2002). While this form of empathy has important implications for political behavior, we focus on the explanatory effects of trait group empathy.

Notably, empathy does not always lead to pro-social effects. In fact, empathy can exacerbate prejudice rather than reduce it (Brophy and Mullinix 2023; Simas et al. 2020). We explore the limitations of the pro-social effects of empathy on attitudes toward refugees by coalescing research on the racial underpinnings of political attitudes with social and developmental psychology's work on group empathy. Experiencing empathy is a costly task for an individual and therefore people tend to "downregulate" empathy to reduce its cost (Kurzban et al. 2015). While scholars of empathy disagree on the extent to which empathy is socially biased (Fowler et al. 2020), evidence suggests that people empathize more with perceived ingroup members than perceived outgroup members because it is an easier task (Behler and Berry 2022; Bruneau et al. 2015; Bruneau et al. 2017; Cikara et al. 2014; Kurzban et al. 2015). The amount of empathy that individuals experience for others depends on the traits and circumstances associated with the person or group.

The results of such patterns are non-trivial. When ingroup empathy is stronger than outgroup empathy, individuals are willing to passively harm other groups (Cikara et al. 2014; Bruneau et al. 2017; Zaki and Cikara 2015). For example, Bruneau et al. (2017) examine the group dynamics between native-born Hungarians and Muslim refugees. They find that as Hungarians' ingroup empathy increases, they become more likely to support anti-refugee policies, less likely to support increases in the number of Muslim refugees allowed to resettle in Hungary, and less likely to sign a pro-refugee petition. As outgroup empathy increases, the opposite pattern occurs. In the American context, racial minorities exhibit more group empathy for other racial/ethnic groups and this predicts their higher levels of support for immigrants of color compared to Anglos (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016). Taken together, research on the effects of group empathy suggests that while higher levels of empathy are typically associated with cross-group support, this relationship can change depending on whether the object of empathy shares a perceived ingroup membership.

Toward a Theory of Racialized Empathy

We argue that the race associated with refugees as a group and the race of the individuals forming opinions about them help to explain variation in group
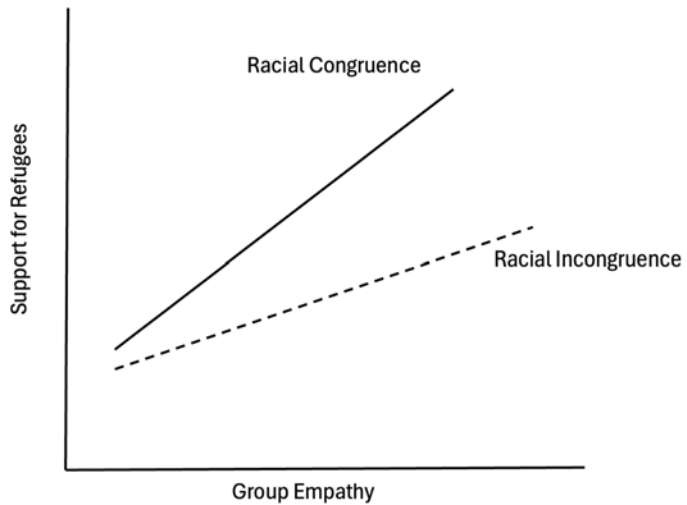
Figure 1. Theory of racialized empathy.

empathy and support for refugees. Given the salient nature of race and ethnicity in American politics (Cuevas-Molina 2023; Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Jardina and Traugott 2019; Jardina and Piston 2019; Nava 2023), we expect that individuals will empathize more with racially congruent refugees compared to racially incongruent refugees because it is less costly psychologically. We define this process of racialized empathy as the upward or downward regulation of empathy toward a group depending on their perceived racial (in)congruence.

Our contention is that "racialized empathy" explains why some Americans are more supportive of refugees compared to others (see H1A and H1B). Since the level of group empathy that individuals experience depends on ingroup and outgroup perceptions (e.g., Kurzban et al. 2015), we expect the positive effect of group empathy on support for refugees will be stronger when individuals share the same race as those in a refugee group. When individuals do not share the race of the refugee group, we expect this will dampen the positive effects of empathy on support for refugees (see Figure 1). We do not believe that respondents will consider racially congruent refugees as *fully* a part of the respondent's ingroup; rather, we consider this ingroup affinity to be on a spectrum. While a refugee may share a racial group with a respondent, we recognize that they do not share a nationality and that this will likely dampen the extent to which the relevant group dynamics will hold true.[2] As discussed previously, we expect that the strength of racial ingroup preference will be weaker for Black individuals compared to white individuals due to within-group diversity (Smith 2014) and the muted role of racial intolerance in their immigration attitudes (Carter 2019).

- **H1A**: Black respondents primed to consider Black refugees will report more supportive attitudes toward refugees compared to those primed to consider white refugees.

- **H1B**: White respondents primed to consider white refugees will report more supportive attitudes toward refugees compared to those primed to consider Black refugees.

Next, we turn to the role of empathy. We expect that the race of the refugee that the respondent is primed to consider will *moderate* the relationship between group empathy and attitudes toward refugees (see H2A and H2B). Existing work shows that low-empathy individuals respond differently to immigrant groups compared to those with high empathy (e.g., Newman et al. 2013). For people with lower group empathy, we hypothesize that racial ingroup preference and racial outgroup aversion will influence support for refugees to a greater degree than among people with higher empathy for refugees.

- **H2A**: Among *Black respondents* with lower group empathy, the negative effect of the *white prime* on support for refugees will be stronger compared to those with higher group empathy.
- **H2B**: Among *white respondents* with lower group empathy, the negative effect of the *Black prime* on support for refugees will be stronger compared to those with higher group empathy.

The racial prime is not designed to elicit empathy or increase an individual's baseline empathy. While the definition of "refugee" connotes distress, since refugees are individuals forced to migrate due to reasons such as violence, we do not prompt respondents to experience empathy for refugees. For example, we do not describe a distressing scenario involving refugees or ask respondents to engage in perspective-taking. Rather, our racial prime simply controls the race that respondents associate with refugees as a group. This design feature allows us to test whether the race associated with refugees as a group moderates the relationship between group empathy, a psychological predisposition, and support for refugees.

Next, we must address a factor that is consistently linked to both racial attitudes and immigration attitudes: partisanship. Partisan identity shapes racial resentment and attitudes for Americans. In fact, recent evidence suggests that Americans shift their racial attitudes to align with their partisan allegiances (Engelhardt 2021). Democrats and Republicans have increasingly taken polarized stances on immigration, including refugee resettlement in the United States (Hartig 2018; Saad 2022b). Given the highly salient nature of partisanship, we think it useful to develop theoretical expectations rather than treating partisanship exclusively as a control variable. We account for partisanship in two ways in our empirical strategy. First, we evaluate whether any racial prime or group empathy effect observed is independent of partisanship. Our expectations are in alignment with existing work, which suggests that group empathy predicts attitudes toward immigrants, independent of partisanship (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016).

Second, we test whether partisanship explains variation in empathy for refugees and thereby variation in support for refugees (see H3). Do individuals more readily experience empathy for refugees because of their partisanship? While there are likely several mechanisms through which partisanship shapes attitudes about refugees, we

evaluate whether group empathy is one of those pathways from party identification to public opinion. Group empathy has been shown to vary based on life experiences (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016). We argue that partisanship leads to different experiences of information and cues about refugees. Generally speaking, left-leaning partisans receive signals to empathize with refugees, while right-leaning partisans are cued to view refugees as a threat (Nassar 2020). Thus, partisanship could lead individuals to feel different levels of empathy for refugees and thereby shape their overall attitudes toward this group. Thus, we test whether partisanship is antecedent to group empathy for refugees.

- **H3**: The negative effect of Republican partisanship on support toward refugees is mediated by low group empathy for refugees.

We expect to observe individuals who identify as Republican to report lower levels of empathy for refugees compared to Democrats. If empathy for refugees is the intervening variable between partisanship and attitudes toward refugees, this would suggest that partisanship plays a role in psychological responses to group dynamics.

Research Design

Data

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a web experiment[3] on a sample of 3,000 respondents from Prolific, a survey platform used by groups such as Stanford, Meta, and Kickstarter. Prolific is a high-quality survey provider with more representative and less professionalized samples than other cost-effective providers, and allows researchers to easily oversample specific demographic groups (Palan and Schitter 2018). Prolific uses population weights to collect representative samples of the population of interest. For this analysis, half of our respondents self-identify as Black and the other half as white. On other demographic factors, such as age, gender, and education level, our sample approaches population representativeness.[4] Due to group empathy's reliance on a clear ingroup preference, we do not include mixed-race individuals, Hispanic whites, or Arab whites. For the Black subsample, we exclude mixed-race individuals as well as Hispanic and Arab Blacks for the same reasons. We also exclude individuals who failed simple attention checks[5] and those who took less than 2 minutes or more than 20 minutes to complete the survey due to likely noncompliance (Harden et al. 2019). This results in a sample size of 1,353 white respondents and 1,332 Black respondents.

Measurement

Respondents were randomly assigned to a racially congruent or incongruent treatment with equal probability. Racial priming was used to cause respondents to consider a specific race while answering subsequent, seemingly unrelated questions (Mendelberg 2008). To maintain a balance between ensuring that the racial prime sufficiently elicits an effect while avoiding social desirability issues, we used an

image-based prime. Extant literature shows that image primes have enough information for a respondent to determine race without issue (Abrajano et al. 2018) and for respondents to determine if the individual is in their racial ingroup or not (Moehler and Conroy-Krutz 2016). Images without explicit, racialized language can still activate racial bias (Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Mendelberg 2008; Valentino et al. 2002; Weisbuch et al. 2009), rendering explicit racial appeals unnecessary.

In fact, existing evidence suggests that subtle racial manipulations are the most successful type of racial prime for eliciting racial considerations in web and laboratory experiments (Hutchings and Jardina 2009). The implicit nature of a subtle race cue is more effective in reducing bias activation compared to explicit cues (Dovidio et al. 1997; Nteta et al. 2016). Additional research has indicated that when a treatment is overtly racialized (even with a treatment that only involves imagery), the respondent may be triggered to engage in self-monitoring where they work to counteract their own negative stereotyping to maintain a positive sense of self or to reduce judgment from others (Dovidio et al. 1997; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Mendelberg 2008; Nteta et al. 2016).

Using published news stories about refugees, we selected two images of a single refugee woman, one from Ukraine and the other from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The woman from Ukraine is white and the woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo is Black. The women in the photos appear to be similar in age, expression, and other attributes.[6] The background of these images has been blurred to reduce any extraneous information and to isolate the primary difference between the photos as the race of the individual shown ensuring proper internal validity. Respondents are told in the prime that the person in the photo is a refugee, but are not told which country the refugee is from or any other personal information. Respondents are given the definition of what it means to be a refugee that reflects the official definition according to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. As shown in Figure 2, the image is the only variation between treatments. The text-based prime remains constant. The combination of the image variation and the racially congruent or incongruent assignment results in four treatment groups (see Table 1).

After the respondent was shown the image with the definition of the term "refugee" they responded to a battery of questions to assess their group empathy for refugees. To measure group empathy for refugees, we utilize the Group Empathy Index (GEI).[7] The GEI adapts a well-established measure of interpersonal empathy, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis 1983). The IRI of one of the top three most commonly used measures of dispositional empathy and has been validated in several other languages (Gilet et al. 2013; Lima and Osório 2021).

While the IRI measures four subscales of empathy, perspective-taking, empathetic concern, personal distress, and fantasy, the GEI only includes measures for perspective-taking and empathetic concern since they are empirically linked to other-oriented behavior (e.g., Bobba and Crocetti 2022; Konrath 2013; Miklikowska 2018). The dimensions of empathy, typically called fantasy and personal distress, are not included as they tend to predict self-oriented outcomes rather than other-oriented ones (Konrath 2013). The GEI and similar measures of dispositional empathy rely on respondent self-reporting as opposed to neural imaging. While a survey-based response is more vulnerable to social desirability bias than a brain scan

The woman in the image below is a refugee. Each year, the United States accepted refugees from all over the world. Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence. Refugees have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinions, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.

Figure 2. Racial prime treatments.

Table 1. Treatment groups

Racially Congruent	Racially Incongruent
White respondents see *White* prime	*White* respondents see *Black* prime
Black respondents see *Black* prime	*Black* respondents see *White* prime

(Cikara and Fiske 2011), the empirical patterns across measurement type typically align (e.g., Lamm et al. 2007; Mathur et al. 2010).

We adjust the GEI to measure group empathy for refugees.[8] We display the exact question wording in Table 2 and note which statements measure perspective-taking and which measure empathetic concern. Response options consist of a 6-point agreement Likert scale where higher values signify higher levels of group empathy. This variable, an additive index, has a range of 14–84 with a mean of 64. Figure 3 visualizes the distribution of this index.

Respondents were then asked a variety of demographic questions, such as their party identification, gender, religion, education level, and age, followed by a question determining their degree of linked fate (or belief that their fate is linked to the fate of others of their same race *in the United States*) (Dawson 1994). There is reason to be skeptical of the extent to which Black Americans view non-American Blacks as co-racial, especially when discussing issues unrelated to racism and racial discrimination (Smith 2014), and linked fate is often used to evaluate whether or not American Blacks view Black immigrants and refugees as co-racial (Bunyasi and Smith 2019). We include this as a control variable to account for variation in the degree to which respondents view refugees as co-racial.

Table 2. Measure of group empathy for refugees

Dimension: Perspective-taking
1) I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both, including for issues involving refugees.
2) I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other person's" point of view, particularly if they are a refugee.
3) When I'm upset with someone who is a refugee, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes" for a while.
4) I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement (including refugees') before I make a decision.
5) I sometimes try to better understand refugees by imagining how things look from their perspective.
6) If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to the arguments of people, particularly refugees.
7) Before criticizing a refugee, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
Dimension: Empathetic concern
8) I often have tender, concerned feelings for refugees who are less fortunate than me.
9) The misfortunes of refugees do not usually disturb me a great deal.
10) I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person toward refugees.
11) When I see someone being treated unfairly because they are a refugee, I sometimes don't feel much pity for them.
12) Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for refugees when they are having problems.
13) When I see someone being taken advantage of because they are a refugee, I feel kind of protective toward them.
14) I am often quite touched by things that I see happen to people due to them being a refugee.

To measure the dependent variable, attitudes toward refugees, we include three conceptual dimensions of support: general attitudes toward refugees (including the belief that refugees should be welcomed to the United States, that they enrich U.S. culture, and that they should have the same rights as U.S. Citizens), action-based questions (how willing the respondent would be to take action to assist refugees in their resettlement, donating money, or calling representatives on their behalf), and economic threat questions (the belief that refugees take jobs from U.S. citizens, that refugees come here to take advantage of welfare programs, or that they are a drain on society). Each of these questions was asked on a scale of agreement on a 6-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Responses to these questions are coded such that a higher value indicates a higher level of support for refugees and are then compiled into an additive index (see Figure 4 for index distribution).[9,10]

To ease our ability to evaluate the relative strength of the substantive effects of these variables, the variables in these analyses were standardized. The independent variables are mean-centered at zero with each unit of change indicating one standard deviation. The dichotomous variables are coded with the categories as zero and one and are named to reflect the satisfied category of these variables.
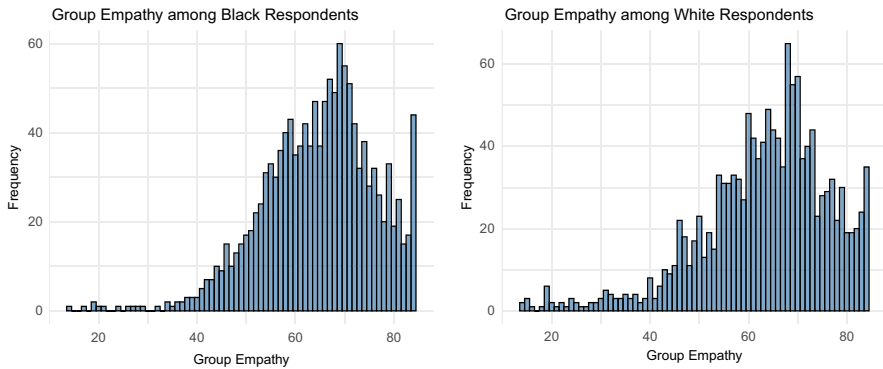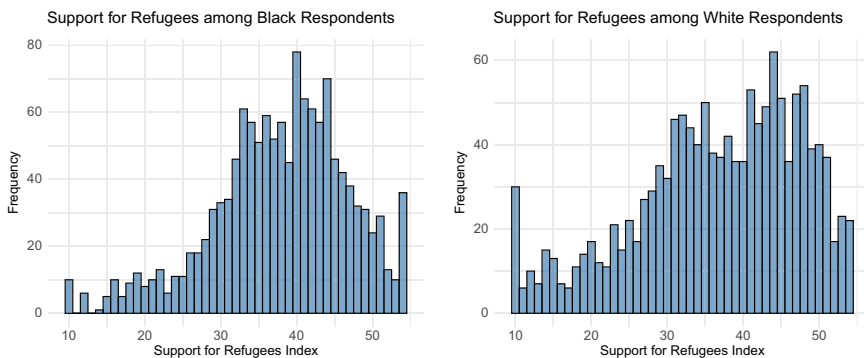
Figure 3. Distribution of group empathy index.

Figure 4. Distribution of support for refugees index.

Main Analysis

We conducted several statistical analyses, including parabolic t-tests, multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with interaction terms, and mediation analysis.[11] For each analysis, we describe the results for white respondents and Black respondents separately. We begin by determining the overall effect of the racial priming treatment on support for refugees using a parabolic t-test (see Table 3). For white respondents, the mean support for refugees when primed with an image of a white refugee is 37.014, while support for refugees when primed with an image of a Black refugee is 36.161. While this does show slightly higher support for white refugees over Black refugees, the difference is not statistically significant ($p = .149$). For Black respondents, mean support for white refugees is 37.598, and mean support for Black refugees is 38.122. Again, while this shows a slight ingroup preference, it does not reach statistical significance ($p = .283$). The results of the t-test indicate that we do not find support for our first two hypotheses (H1A and H1B). Black respondents in this sample are, however, more supportive of refugees (regardless of the race primed) than white respondents ($p < .01$). These results are

Table 3. *T*-test results

Welch Two-Sample T-Test, **White Sample**	
Black Prime	**White Prime**
36.161	37.014
Note: $t = 1.441$, df $= 1351$, p-value $= .149$	
Welch Two-Sample T-Test, **Black Sample**	
Black Prime	**White Prime**
38.122	37.598
Note: $t = -1.074$, df $= 1327.7$, p-value $= .283$	

consistent with previous research showing that racial/ethnic minorities tend to be more supportive of other marginalized groups compared to whites (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin et al. 2017).

As previously discussed, group empathy is expected to have an independent effect on support for refugees that is robust to other controls including partisanship. To test this, we ran two multiple OLS regressions, one for white respondents and the other for Black respondents (see Figure 5 for coefficient plots).

For white respondents, group empathy has a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on support for refugees. For each standard deviation increase in group empathy, support for refugees increases by over 5 points (on an overall scale of 44 points). This effect is robust to all controls. Republican partisanship is associated with a significant reduction in support for refugees, although to a lesser substantive degree than group empathy. Age is negatively associated with support for refugees, while education level is positively associated with support for refugees. Both of these effects are statistically significant. Linked fate with other whites is also significantly associated with a decrease in support for refugees. The racial prime and gender are not significant. It is worth noting that group empathy has, by far, the largest standardized effect on support for refugees. Finally, the adjusted R^2 suggests that this model explains 65% of the variance in support for refugees for white respondents.

For Black respondents, we observe a similar empirical pattern. Group empathy has a very large, positive, and statistically significant effect on support for refugees. Republican partisanship has a significant, negative effect on support for refugees, but to a lesser degree than it did for white respondents. For white respondents, the per-standard deviation decrease in support was 3.758, while for Black respondents, it is 1.410. Age is negatively associated with support for refugees, while education is positively associated. Black women are more supportive of refugees compared to Black men.

Linked fate among Black respondents has the opposite relationship as it did for white respondents, where it significantly improves support for refugees. Black Americans who feel that the fate of all Black individuals within the country influences their own fate (suggesting a stronger connection to their racial ingroup) support refugees more than those with a weaker ingroup connection.[12] One way to interpret this finding is that public opinion about refugees is about majority-minority group politics. Support for marginalized minority groups could hinge on
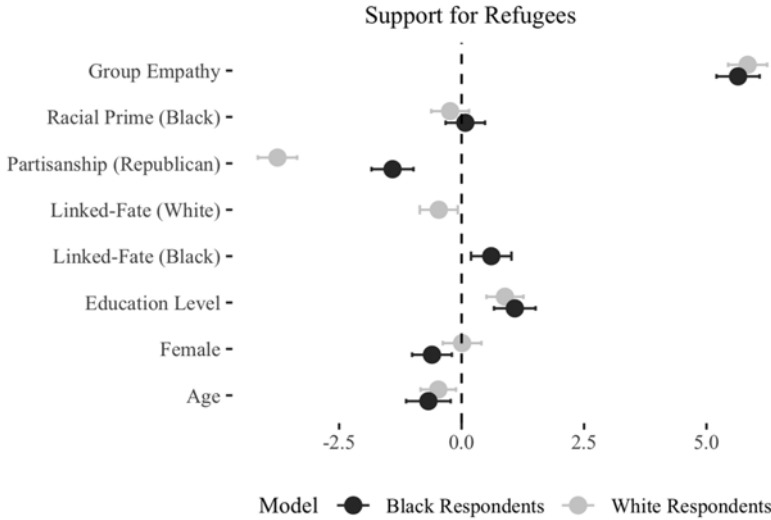
Figure 5. Coefficient plot for baseline models.
Note: Effects are shown per one standard deviation change. Dichotomous variables are shown as the difference between 0 and 1.

both an individual's position within hierarchical, societal structures and their beliefs about their linked fate in relation to other majority or minority groups.

All of the explanatory variables in the OLS regression for Black respondents are statistically significant with the exception of the racial prime. For the Black sample, the adjusted R^2 suggests that 42% of the variation in support for refugees is explained by our model. While our models for each racial sample explain a significant amount of variation in our dependent variable, the model fit is better for white respondents (65%) than it is for Black respondents (42%).

To determine the extent to which the effect of group empathy is conditional on the racial prime, we conducted multiple OLS regressions with interactions. Beginning with white respondents, the interaction between group empathy and racial priming is statistically significant ($p < .05$). While group empathy overall is clearly meaningful, its effect *is* moderated by racial priming as hypothesized: for those with low group empathy, seeing a racially incongruent prime caused a significant reduction in support for refugees, as compared to those who saw a racially congruent prime (see predicted values in Figure 6). For those with higher group empathy, the racial prime had no effect.

We observe a different relationship among Black respondents. As shown in Figure 7, the effect of group empathy on support for refugees is not conditional on the primed race. Group empathy is a strong, positive influence on support for refugees regardless of whether the refugee is racially congruent or incongruent. In sum, while there is a statistically significant ingroup racial bias among white respondents with low empathy, this does not hold true for Black respondents whose support for refugees does not meaningfully change based on the race linked with refugees. This further suggests that "racialized empathy" is a more important explanatory factor for white Americans than for Black Americans.
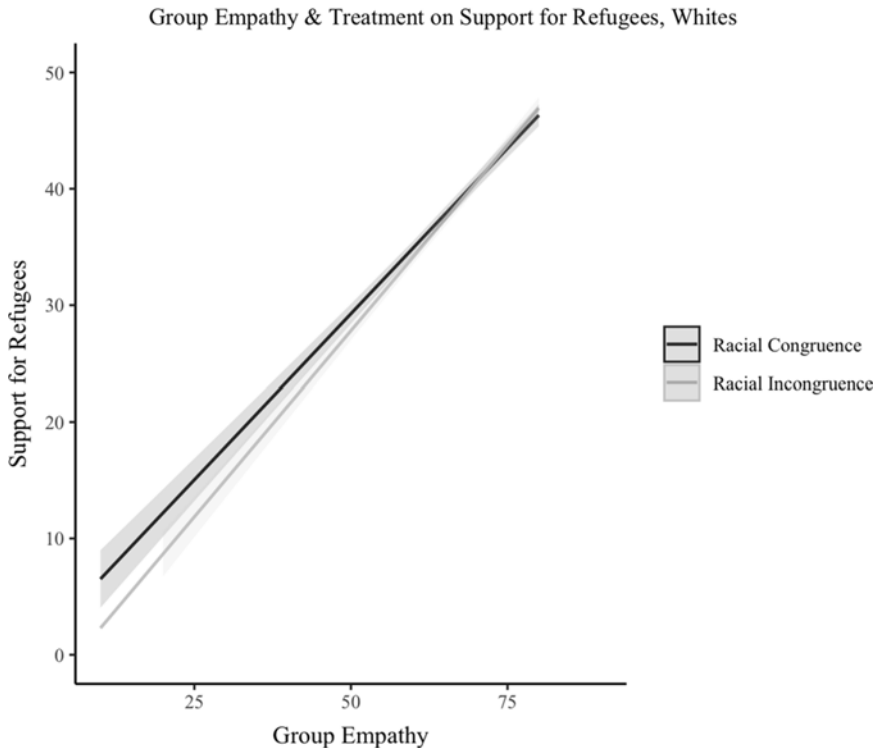
Figure 6. Predicted values of support for refugees, white sample.

Our analysis does not allow us to explicitly test the mechanisms that explain why Black respondents are unaffected by the racial prime, however, we point to two pieces of evidence in the existing literature to make sense of this finding. First, Black Americans' baseline support for immigrants and refugees is high relative to white Americans (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Brader et al. 2010). Existing work on empathetic responses to vulnerable immigrants shows that while Black Americans are generally a little more supportive of racial minority immigrants, they still show support for white immigrants in distressing situations (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016). Our finding aligns with work that argues that Black and white Americans bring different lenses to issues of immigration. The race of immigrant-origin people is not as salient to Black opinion formation as it is for whites (Carter 2019). This is reflected in our data, with Black respondents exhibiting more support for refugees compared to white respondents regardless of the race of the refugee they are primed to consider.[13] Second, Black Americans may not feel a strong enough racial ingroup attachment to Black refugees compared to white refugees because they do not necessarily view African migrants as co-racial (Waters 2022; Unnever and Gabbidon 2015). This characteristic could dampen the ingroup effect that increases support for Black refugees above a generally supportive baseline.
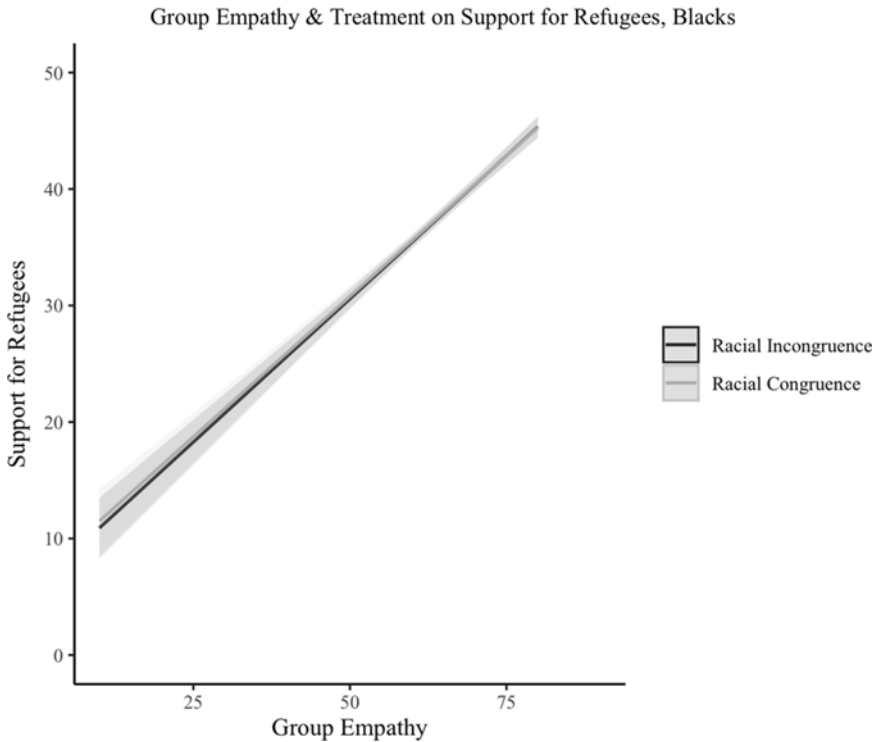
Figure 7. Predicted values of support for refugees, black sample.

Mediation Analysis

While the positive and direct effect of group empathy on support for refugees stands out across model specifications, partisanship also has a clear effect on support for refugees (albeit a stronger predictor of white attitudes). To test whether partisanship explains variation in empathy for refugees (H3), we conduct a mediation analysis where partisan identity is the treatment, group empathy for refugees is the mediator, and support for refugees is the outcome. The traditional framework for causal mediation analysis requires that three conditions are met: 1) The treatment has a statistically significant effect on the outcome in the expected direction, 2) The treatment has a statistically significant effect on the mediator in the expected direction, and 3) When the mediator is included in a model with the treatment and outcome, the effect of the treatment on the outcome is substantially reduced (Baron and Kenny 1986). We use Kosuke Imai and colleagues' strategy for mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2010, 2011).

The results reported in Table 4 suggest that while the effect of partisanship on support for refugees is partially mediated by group empathy, especially for white respondents, this effect is relatively weak compared to the direct effect of partisanship. For both Black and white respondents, the more Republican they are, the less supportive they are of refugees (see columns 1 and 4). These results satisfy

Table 4. Mediation analysis: group empathy partially mediates effect of partisanship on support for refugees

	Support for Refugees	Group Empathy	Support for Refugees	Support for Refugees	Group Empathy	Support for Refugees
			Dependent variable:			
	Black Respondents (Columns 1–3)			*White Respondents (Columns 4–6)*		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Party ID (Higher, Republican)	−1.180***	−.624***	−.883***	−3.656***	−2.894***	−2.282***
	(.147)	(.189)	(.117)	(.128)	(.177)	(.106)
Group Empathy			.476***			.475***
			(.017)			(.015)
Constant	40.129***	65.941***	8.750***	45.118***	70.122***	11.838***
	(.370)	(.477)	(1.148)	(.380)	(.524)	(1.086)
Observations	1,332	1,332	1,332	1,353	1,353	1,353
R2	.046	.008	.404	.376	.166	.643
Adjusted R2	.045	.007	.404	.375	.165	.642

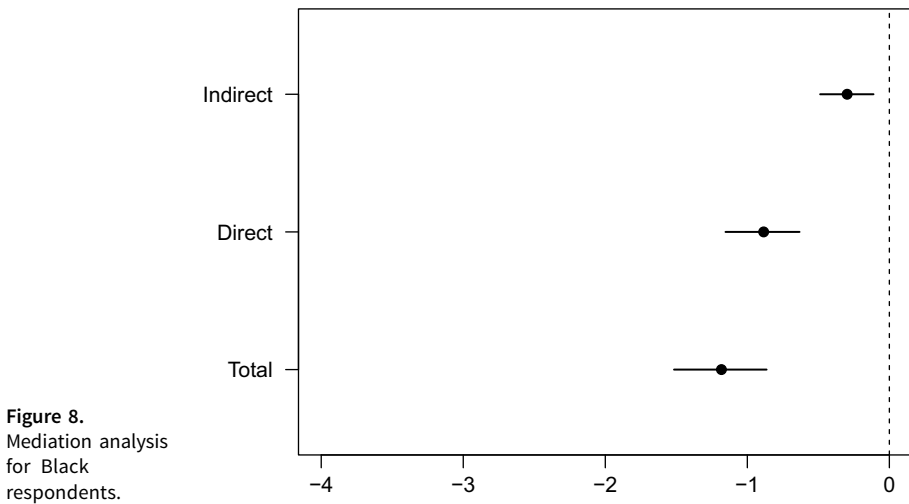Note: *$p<.1$; **$p<.05$; ***$p<.01$; OLS regression.

Figure 8.
Mediation analysis for Black respondents.

the first condition of mediation—the treatment has a statistically significant association with the outcome in the expected direction. We also find support for the second mediation requirement that the treatment (partisanship) has a statistically significant effect on the mediator (group empathy). As shown in columns 2 and 5 in Table 4, increases in the Republican partisanship scale lead to decreases in group empathy for refugees. We find partial support for the third causal mediation condition. When the mediator (group empathy) is introduced to the basic treatment model where partisanship predicts support for refugees, the effect of partisanship decreases (see columns 3 and 6). However, the reduction is minimal for both the white and Black samples, and the effect of partisanship on support for refugees does not reduce in statistical significance.

Next, we turn to the formal mediation analysis. If partisanship affects attitudes toward refugees through group empathy, then the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) would be non-zero and statistically significant and the Average Direct Effect (ADE) would be near zero and either not statistically significant or nearly null. As displayed in Figures 8 and 9, there is some evidence that group empathy for refugees mediates the effect of partisanship on support for refugees. The ACME estimate of the indirect effect is non-zero and statistically significant for both Black and white respondents. The size of the indirect effect estimate is larger for the white sample suggesting group empathy mediates more of the partisanship attitudes toward refugees association compared to the Black sample.

However, the direct effect of partisanship on support for refugees is much larger compared to its indirect effect through group empathy for both racial groups. This suggests that while group empathy could be one of the mechanisms through which partisanship shapes public opinion about refugees, it is not a primary causal mechanism. Further experimental research is required to tease out the roles of partisanship, group empathy, and attitudes toward refugees.
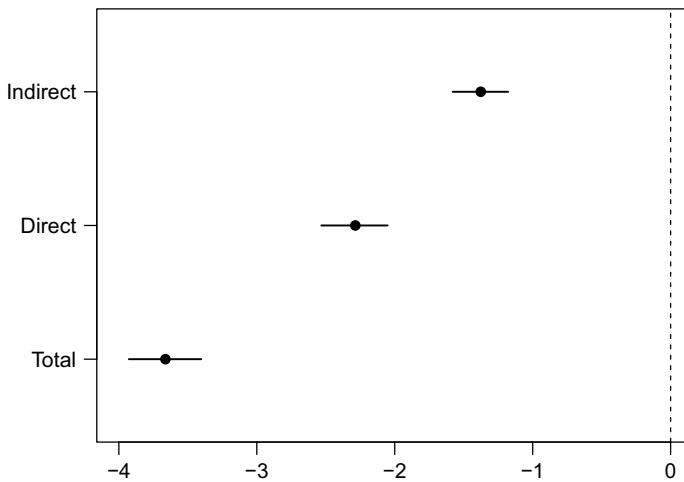
Figure 9. Mediation analysis for white respondents.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study addressed the following research questions: why do some Americans express pro-refugee attitudes, while others do not? Does "racialized empathy" explain variation in support for refugees? Bringing together literature on the racial foundations of American public opinion with work on empathy and attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, this project contributes to scholarship dedicated to identifying the factors that nudge people to become more supportive of outgroups. While important work tests more intensive treatments, like perspective-taking exercises (Adida et al. 2018; Hartman and Morse 2018; Simonovits et al. 2018) and news-like stories (Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016), we use a simple prime to isolate the effect of the race associated with refugees on group empathy and attitudes toward refugees. While every American may not read news stories about refugees or engage in empathy exercises, almost everyone will come across a picture of a refugee in various forms of media. Some Americans may also see refugees in their community. Our goal is to establish a foundational understanding of the ways in which racial dynamics shape processes of group empathy and support for refugees.

We find mixed support for our theoretical expectations. Variation in group empathy for refugees is a strong predictor of support for refugees aligning with evidence of the pro-social effects of empathy on attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Adida et al. 2018; Simonovits et al. 2018; Sirin, Valentino and Villalobos 2016; Sirin, Villalobos and Valentino 2016; Williamson et al. 2021). Americans who express higher levels of group empathy are more accepting of refugees' inclusion in American society, are more willing to help refugees through actions like donation and calling their representative, and report less economic threat compared to those who express lower levels of group empathy. Group empathy's substantive effect overwhelms well-established explanations for immigration attitudes, like partisanship and education.

The race associated with refugees only conditioned the relationship between group empathy and support for refugees among white Americans. White

respondents with low group empathy were significantly more supportive of refugees when primed with an image of a white refugee than when primed with an image of a Black refugee. In contrast, Black respondents with low empathy did not express more support for Black refugees compared to white refugees. While we expected the conditional effect to be weaker for Black respondents due to within-group diversity that leads to divergent attitudes (Smith 2014), we did not expect a null result. Refugee race did not matter for high-empathy respondents of either race.

Our results have implications for scholars of immigration attitudes and practitioners in the migration space. In the global context, forced migration is a prevalent and steadily increasing phenomenon. This issue has increased in politicization and priority in global policy since established Western democracies, like the United States, have begun to experience "refugee crises" that developing countries, like Turkey and Pakistan, have experienced for years (Betts and Collier 2017). As governments decide when and how to incorporate refugees, democracies like the United States must be sensitive to the preferences of their electorates. In such contexts, refugees face a number of challenges, such as hostility from host country members and elites (Tesler 2021). In light of the anti-refugee tendencies of the American public, group empathy is a clear answer to the question of what factors shift people's attitudes in a favorable direction for refugees.

Next, we discuss some of the limitations of our study and opportunities for future research. The first limitation is that we focus on two racial groups and do not engage ethnicity. While we argue that tapping into Black and white racial identity is an important place to begin this work, there remain racial and ethnic identities that are deeply salient to refugee resettlement and should be examined in future research. Second, our study is restricted to a single survey at one point in time. There remains much to be disentangled regarding the temporal ordering of different forms of empathy, partisanship, and attitudes toward refugees. A multi-wave panel would allow for such testing. We also conduct an experiment in which race is the only meaningful difference between the primes shown to the respondent, and thus, some nuance and external validity are lost. In reality, the stories that various media outlets share do not treat all refugee groups as the same except for their race. This reality constrains the external validity of this study.

There is further opportunity to explore the dynamics of group boundaries and the conditions under which empathy for an outgroup member becomes more or less likely. Fouka and Tabellini (2022) argue that social group boundaries can evolve by showing that as Mexican immigration to the United States increases, whites become friendlier to Blacks and their prejudice toward Hispanics increases. Such evidence suggests that group boundaries and inter-group conflict can shift. Therefore, how "easy" it is to experience empathy for outgroups can vary over time. Additionally, our study is somewhat asymmetrical in the extent to which Black and white Americans view non-U.S. racial people as ingroup members. We also cannot assume that respondents view refugees as within their ingroup in the same way they may view co-racial U.S. citizens.

Another avenue of future research is to evaluate the strength of racial identity in shaping the dynamics evaluated in this piece. We do not directly address the salience of racial identity as a mechanism. However, past research has found that racial identity is a meaningful predictor of a variety of political attitudes and behaviors (see

Jardina (2019) for a more detailed discussion). It is reasonable to assume that the strength of one's racial identity may further condition the extent to which "racialized" empathy is or is not employed in evaluations of refugees. We use the images of women in this study which likely increased the overall baseline empathy which respondents felt toward these refugees because people are more threatened by male-presenting refugees than by female-presenting refugees (Yuk and Shin 2024). This design choice also likely reduced the strength of the interaction between empathy and race and its effect on support for refugees (Erisen and Uysal 2024). Future work using images of men would be helpful to further investigate this relationship.

Finally, the applicability of our "racialized empathy" theory can be applied to public opinion more broadly. While we discuss how racial group identity and group empathy work together to inform attitudes toward refugees, our theory and findings have implications for research on social groups related to other identities such as partisanship, sexual orientation, and class. Given our results, particularly those regarding white Americans, group empathy should be considered when exploring the reasons group membership so meaningfully influences public opinion.

Notes

1 Although the consensus in the literature provides more support for cultural and psychological explanations of immigration attitudes, economic interests can play a role in explaining public opinion on this topic. Malhotra et al. (2013) argue that evidence for the association of economic threat and opposition to immigrants/immigration is mixed because this threat becomes salient under certain conditions and does not apply to the entire population at all times.

2 To account for this feature in our research design, we include measures of linked fate (or the belief that what happens to those in one's ingroup will affect the respondent personally) to measure the respondent's belief that all those in the country that are of their same race are part of their ingroup in a meaningful way.

3 This experiment is pre-registered at AsPredicted, pre-registration number 147863, and has received IRB approval at the University of Missouri, IRB approval number 2096734.

4 Please see the supplementary material for full descriptive statistics of this sample.

5 For the full text of the attention checks, please see the supplementary material.

6 For more details on our photo validation, see the supplementary material.

7 To read a full discussion of the validation of this measure, see Sirin et al. (2017).

8 The Cronbach's Alpha of the empathy measure is .93, indicating high internal consistency.

9 The Cronbach's Alpha for this measure is .91, indicating that these questions are internally consistent.

10 This variable takes on values from 0-54 and has a mean of 36.

11 For full set of results and additional analyses, please see the supplementary material.

12 Importantly, we did not ask about Black citizens in the question regarding linked fate. Rather, we asked about all Black individuals in the United States.

13 Black respondents' mean support for refugees is 37.86 while white respondents' mean support is 36.58. This difference is statistically significant at the level of p<.01. For a full table of these results, please see the supplementary material.

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