Measuring Change and Complexity in American Racial Ideologies

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Abstract:
Conventional survey-based research often measures racial attitudes along a linear continuum and attitudinal change is widely conceptualized as the incline and decline of particular racial ideologies. However, this linear conceptualization is as at odds with the fluid, multidimensional, and often contradictory nature of racial ideology. Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, I employ latent class analysis to explore racial attitudes across six theoretically informed dimensions. I find that there are six distinct racial schemas that describe the ideological structure of the U.S. racialized social system. Controlling for sociodemographic and political characteristics, these classes vary significantly in attitudes towards a range of topics including immigration, the Black Lives Matter movement, and affirmative action. Finally, using comparable data from the ANES 2012 and 2016, I find that the attitudinal structure is constant but the most polarized classes, namely what I presently label the white supremacist schema and structural racism counter schema, have grown significantly.

Racial ideologies are multidimensional and dynamic constellations of ideas that reflect the dynamics of real racial relations (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Since the civil rights movements of the 1960s, social scientists documented a significant decline in the Jim Crow racial ideologies that historically characterized the dominant ideological framework around race (Schuman et al. 1997; Mendelberg 2001). In its place, an interdisciplinary mass of scholars have claimed that a "new racism" characterized by its subtle, ostensibly non-racial veil, had emerged to become the hegemonic racial framework in the United States (Gotanda 1991; Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997; Obasogie 2013; Bonilla-Silva 2014). A common assumption in survey-based research is that ideological manifestations of racism are best characterized as a linear continuum from racial liberal to racial conservative (Bobo 1983; Bobo 2001). As such, attitudinal change at the population level is also often conceptualized as the incline and decline of particular racial ideologies.

This linear conceptualization is as at odds with theories of ideology that explicitly describe racial ideologies as fluid, multidimensional, and often contradictory (Levi-Martin 2014, Doane 2014). To fill in this ideological complexity, efforts have been led by qualitative scholars to discern the multifaceted dimensions of racial ideology and the ways in which racial ideology shapes action and perception (Gallagher 2003; Doane 2006; Burke 2012; Wingfield and Feagin 2012; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Mueller 2017). Though these studies contribute the necessary nuances of racial ideology, they are limited in their ability to generalize to the broader population, assess systemic associations with political preferences, and capture attitudinal change at the population level. In contrast, conventional quantitative studies have been largely deficient at capturing the multidimensionality of racial ideologies. However, without contending with both the population-level prevalence and complexity of racial ideologies, the ideological structure of a racialized society remains ambiguous. It also remains unclear how that ideological structure is shaping the racial landscape without systematically assessing the material impact of diverse ideologies on political preferences and accurately depicting attitudinal change over time.

In this article, I explore racial ideology across six dimensions: perceptions of equality as principle, perceptions of group political power, perceptions of group-based discrimination, attitudes towards

diversity, colorblind racial attitudes, and overt racial attitudes. I employ latent class analysis to identify subsets of respondents in a nationally representative survey that are characterized by systematically distinctive patterns of attitudes across the six dimensions. My interpretation is driven by a theoretical framework that views the attitudinal composition of the latent classes as approximating empirical manifestations of ideological schemata (Allen, Dawson, and Brown 1989; DiMaggio 1997; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Bonikowski and Dimaggio 2016; Knight and Brinton 2017). After I characterize the racial ideologies and analyze their sociodemographic correlates, I explore whether class membership is associated independently with a wide range of political issues, net of the impact of sociodemographic measures and partisan identification. Finally, I assess changes in the attitudinal structure and their distributions at four significant time points in recent racial history. 2004, four years before the election of the first African-American president, is the baseline sample. 2008 marks the election of Barack Obama. 2012 was one year before the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. Finally, 2016 is three years after the movement's inception and is also defined by the rise of Donald Trump. Due to the these significant racial events, the 2004-2016 time period is characterized by notable shifts in perceptions of race relations. As such, it is a meaningful time frame to examine attitudinal change over time.

This article builds on and extends the literature of racial ideology in four key ways. First, whereas most survey-based studies on racial attitudes focus on a limited set of beliefs, I simultaneously explore attitudes on six dimensions of racial ideology. This multidimensional approach allows me to harness the ideological complexity that has been excavated in qualitative research and systemize them into distinct racial ideologies that are generalizable to the population. Specifically, a latent class analysis of racial attitudes contrasts with conventional approaches to survey-based racial attitude research that focus on measuring average attitudes among populations. Rather, this method allows measurement of important heterogeneity and multidimensionality in American racial ideologies. My findings suggest that there are six distinctive schemas that characterize the ideological structure of the U.S. racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 1997). I presently label them the resolute colorblind schema, racial liberal schema, white

supremacist schema, racial moderate schema, individualistic race-conscious schema, and the structural racism counter schema. Rather than being transitional ideologies of a linear continuum, I find that attitudes across the dimensions cohere into distinct schemas that organize the domain of race in more complex ways then commonly assumed in survey-based research.

Second, my results both challenge and affirm the theoretical dominance of the colorblind racism framework for understanding race relations in the contemporary United States. A core assumption of the colorblind racism framework is that there is widespread denial, particularly among white-Americans, that race shapes societal and individual outcomes (Bonilla-Silva 2014). However, my results show that over 40% of the total sample including 34% of white respondents fully recognize racial disparities in political power and the existence of group-based discrimination. At the same time, I do find strong empirical support for the hegemony of colorblind racial ideology. A solid 79% of respondents favored individualist explanations over structural explanations for existing racial disparities between white and black Americans. Additionally, my results identify racial counter-frames (Wingfield and Feagin 2012), which allows for a more complete understanding of the racial ideologies operating dialectically to shape the ideological structure of the United States. But the fundamental contribution of this work to the existing colorblind racism literature is to systematically identify varying configurations of racial ideology in the American populate that include but are not limited to colorblind racial ideology.

Third, I demonstrate that class membership predicts attitudes towards a broad range of social and policy topics including immigration, the Black Lives Matter movement, and affirmative action as well as feelings towards the 45th U.S. President, Donald Trump, even after controlling for a wide range of sociodemographic variables and political party identification. The strong predictive power of class memberships evinces the material impact of the racial ideologies in shaping the state's political trajectories. Whereas previous studies have focused on the effect of different measures of racism on political preferences, I argue that understanding the more nuanced ways in which individuals organize their views around race and race relations in the United States is central to understanding their political views. By identifying multidimensional belief structures and their robust associations with political

preferences, this analysis demonstrates that these diverse racial ideologies are materially consequential.

Finally, conventional survey-based approaches often fail to accurately describe the historical trajectory of attitudinal change due to the assumption that attitudes are best characterized as falling along a linear continuum (Knight and Brinton 2017). One perspective is that the arch of ideological change follows a reasonably linear trend bent towards equality as society progresses. Alternatively, a more common theoretical narrative is that there are "waves" of inclines and declines in particular racial ideologies (i.e. a decline in overt racism and subsequent incline in colorblind racism). A third approach largely championed by qualitative and critical scholars is a critique of linear theorization of attitudinal change. Rather, scholars argue that ideologies are borne out of material reality and thus also serve as political tools of intergroup dialectic (Levi-Martin 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Doane 2014). As such, they fluctuate and even emerge in response to social events and context. In my analysis of change and complexity of American racial ideologies, I find evidence in line with this third perspective. Therefore, I argue that ideological change is best conceived of as "constantly contested seas" that are not disciplined into a linear pathway. In my analysis of change between 2012 and 2016, I find a significant increase in the number of Americans that have adopted the most *polarized* schemas namely there are more people in 2016 that adhere to the white supremacist schema and the structural racism counter-schema. This finding does not speak to the question of whether racial attitudes have improved or worsened. Rather, it challenges the utility of the question itself and the answers that can be achieved through measuring racial attitudes as linear phenomena. Such a framework will inevitably provide a segmented story of changes in the diverse and relational racial ideologies that structure outcomes, beliefs, actions, and preferences of Americans. Whereas the two aforementioned schemas are at the heart of the racial dialectic characterizing contemporary U.S. society, they are not alone (Wingfield and Feagin 2014).

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