

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The January 6th Insurrection and the Triggering of African Americans' Racial Resentment

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Abstract

The January 6th insurrection and its aftermath of obfuscation and denial were ostensibly racialized events. Under the guise of election fraud, white supremacists, white nationalists, and paramilitary groups attempted to overthrow established democratic procedures to retain a president who stoked racial antagonisms and racial divisions. African Americans, like many American citizens, watched in fear, anxiety, and foreboding as the groups most committed to their repression violently attacked and ransacked the Capitol.

We examine the extent to which the January 6th insurrection and its aftermath of denial and obfuscation influence African Americans' racial resentment. Our results show how the racialized January 6th events were connected to heightened African Americans' racial resentment. The most compelling result confirms that African Americans' racial resentment stems from beliefs about justice and fairness.

Keywords: African American attitudes toward January 6th; racial resentment; democracy; racial prejudice; justice

Political scientists have yet to explore empirically how the January 6th insurrection and racially expressive events (i.e., Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville) supported by white supremacists, white nationalists, the radical right, and right-wing militia groups affect African Americans. Such an oversight minimizes African Americans' perceptions and emotions and stunts the full understanding of political behavior in the United States. As a result, there are intellectual and empirical gaps regarding how African Americans react to phenomena of political violence, particularly when groups who reflect an existential threat attempt to overthrow the government, thwart established democratic practices and institutions, violently attack the Capitol and law enforcement, and ultimately seek to escape accountability. A great deal is at stake psychologically for many African Americans especially when their most threatening groups exert their power to

violently attack the government with some success. While fear, anxiety, depression, trepidation, apprehensiveness, and a sense of foreboding are likely reactions, the attitudinal and behavioral consequences presented here are more speculative.

African Americans, like many American citizens, observed the January 6th protest rally and brazen attacks on the Capitol with both disbelief and a keen curiosity.¹ The physical assault and violence were deplorable, and with such obvious evidence, it should have been certain that the perpetrators would face punishment. Yet, there was a hint that racialized thinking combined with a nonracial issue—the election—could produce ambiguity about the underlying forces behind the events. The 2020 post-election fraud allegations by President Trump and Republicans implicated malfeasance in a targeted manner.

Districts with large African American and Hispanic populations and large turnout for Democratic candidate Joe Biden (e.g., Atlanta, Georgia; Phoenix, Arizona; Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin) were sued for election fraud, though no systematic election fraud was ever discovered. Many rioters were attracted to the Capitol grounds anticipating the start of a race war (Hawkins and Simon-Roberts 2022; Morrison 2021; Nevius 2021). Banners, flags, and other insignia reflected the presence of various racist hate groups. Two African American women in Georgia were alleged to have engaged in the miscounting of ballots and became the faces of election fraud in right-wing media. But, ultimately, the desire to interrupt the counting of electoral ballots was intended to retain a president who fueled and capitalized off racial divisions and sought to protect the status quo. Moreover, the eventual denial by political commentators and politicians and attempts to minimize the violent overthrow and the challenge to established democratic procedures—and the rioters' attempts to escape accountability—likely compounded African American's perceptions of injustice and racial duplicity.

To put it more concisely, the January 6th events were profoundly emotional and racial, yet few studies have examined the correlates of African Americans' opinions and attitudes related to one of the most tragic days in America's history. The dearth of scholarship in this area is astounding, as African Americans' reactions are perhaps most relevant of all, given that many have fought and died for the voting rights and fair election policies that participants of the insurrection sought to circumvent. The January 6th insurrection challenged established Constitutional processes, the integrity of national elections, the peaceful transition of power, and, more generally, the viability of democratic governance. More importantly for our research, the events of January 6th challenged whether whites are deserving of whatever power they hold in a democracy if they cannot punish those who seek to overthrow standard democratic practices and disregard the rule of law.

Using survey data from a national study of democracy and political attitudes, we examine the extent to which reactions to the January 6th insurrection, measured in different ways, influence African Americans' racial resentment toward whites. After all, African Americans are not passive observers of political events, undaunted by the defense of white power and privilege.

The Political Psychology of African Americans

On January 6, 2021, paramilitary groups, white supremacists, white nationalists, and members of the radical right attacked and plundered the Capitol Building—assaulting police, breaking windows, destroying barricades, and overpowering Capitol police—as Congress met to certify the 2020 electoral votes. Although many rioters and protesters did not appear to be affiliated with hate groups, these individuals were participants and enablers nonetheless. Not since the British attack in the War of 1812 had the Capitol witnessed such violence. Inside, members of Congress and staffers scurried for safety, narrowly escaping angry mobs pillaging and ransacking the floor of the House and congressional offices, including the office of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. Gallows were erected as rioters chanted, “Hang Mike Pence,” whom many thought had the power to reject Electoral College votes supporting President-elect Joe Biden.

Many American citizens, not only African Americans, were likely repulsed by these white supremacists, white nationalists, and paramilitary groups, but African Americans understood and internalized such events in different ways. For African Americans, when white supremacists exert violence and power, the threat is more personal and direct; while whites may be repulsed, their sense of threat is not as personal and emanates indirectly from the challenge to the political order and democratic institutions (Davis 1995). African Americans likely experienced a range of emotions on that day, such as fear, anxiety, threat, anger, frustration, a sense of foreboding, and helplessness (i.e., racial trauma) (Carter 2007; Cénat 2023; Polanco-Roman, Danies, and Anglin 2016). But, beyond the emotional stress and trauma, the January 6th insurrection confirmed to African Americans that white supremacists and white nationalists, enabled by white citizens (Davis and Wilson 2021), will engage in extreme behavior to defend their power and privilege and to thwart African American progress, at the expense of democracy and established democratic practices. Compounding African Americans’ stress and trauma, many whites, after the fact, attempted to thwart justice by justifying, rationalizing, minimizing, and mischaracterizing the event, acting in some cases as if it did not occur.

Racialized encounters and events, such as the January 6th insurrection, trigger a range of emotional reactions, often very intense emotional reactions. The significance, intensity, and frequency of racial events and encounters become defining moments for African Americans who must employ various coping mechanisms to deal with resulting stress.

From a behavioral perspective, African Americans’ political and social attitudes are likely affected by these events. Racial identity, consciousness, and group attachments likely increase as African Americans gravitate toward groups protective of their worldview (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Greenberg et al. 1992). Political and social allegiances, such as partisanship, can be expected to intensify. Political beliefs and values, like political cynicism, distrust, alienation, and system justification (Jost 2020), also respond in predictable ways. More fundamental beliefs like just-world beliefs and justice (Lerner 1980) are affected and shape other attitudes, and ultimately racial resentment increases (Davis and Wilson 2021). Here, we focus specifically on the January 6th implications on Black racial resentment.

Black Racial Resentment

Racial events like the January 6th insurrection reaffirm African Americans' perceptions of the power of white supremacist ideologies and the privileged position of whites. From the racist-based allegations of election fraud and white supremacists' violent attempt to overthrow the government to the lack of accountability for those involved in the planning, African Americans are reminded of how racial threat galvanizes whites to thwart established democratic institutions and practices and ultimately the complicity of ordinary citizens (Davis and Wilson).

Through such events, African Americans learn that society is neither just nor fair in so far that white supremacists, white nationalists, militia groups, and the radical right escape accountability for blatant acts of treason. The January 6th insurrection was criminal, and those involved, rioters and instigators alike, deserve rebuke and punishment, instead of being perceived as patriots protecting election integrity, a point of view based on racial untruths, unsubstantiated claims, and conspiracy theories. Until African Americans' beliefs in justice are restored, their resentment grows and festers.

An individual's beliefs about justice and fairness are core considerations in how they comprehend the world (Gibson 2008). Lerner (1980) argued that people generally believe the world is fair and, consequently, that the moral standings of our actions will determine our outcomes. This viewpoint causes us to believe that those who do good will be rewarded, and those who exhibit negative behaviors will be punished. This is more illusory for African Americans as their experiences with racial discrimination attest that no matter how hard they try, white racial discrimination will make their struggle for equality and justice more difficult. The world, therefore, is not an inherently just place. As long as African Americans are treated unfairly, whites are perceived to benefit unjustly and use racial discrimination to keep them in lower-status positions. The status quo and the political system are perceived to protect and defend whites' power and privilege.

The illusion of justice forms the basis of resentment as African Americans come to view that whites are undeserving of their privilege, which comes from no other reason than being white, and that African Americans in turn are undeserving of their mistreatment and lack of privilege. It is based on a healthy skepticism that people do not often get what they deserve, nor do they often get what they deserve. If the American ethos was indeed true, African Americans would not be in the position they are in, and they would have an opportunity to prosper.

Following this argument, African American resentment intensified out of the January 6th insurrection because the event represented another attempt by whites to repress them and exploit racial antagonisms to defend white power and privilege and to retain a president who fueled racist antagonisms. Davis and Wilson (2021) assert that justice and fairness (beliefs in a just world) are core beliefs, even among African Americans, but, consequently, through their racial experiences and racial group disparities (and events like the January 6th insurrection), they perceive society as unjust and unfair.

Ultimately, African Americans see whites as a group, whether they participated in the attack on the Capital or not, as benefiting undeservingly and unjustly when white supremacists, white nationalists, and the radical right succeed. These groups

are not just fighting for their rights but to protect and even expand whites' power and privilege. Whether they like it or not, all whites benefit from the externalities of white racial prejudice. The January 6th event represents the lengths that many whites, including white supremacists, white nationalists, and the alt-right, will go to defend and protect their racial advantage.

Social Comparison Theory

Beyond the insurrection itself, another component in African Americans' understanding of the insurrection involves how they see the rioters' behavior. Like many other groups, African Americans view their status, disadvantage, and ultimately justice by comparing what might happen to them if they were to behave in a similar fashion. Festinger (1954; 1957) referred to this process as Social Comparison Theory, in which people have an innate drive to compare themselves to others. With African Americans, we argue that their understanding of their status and position involves projecting themselves of their in-group and, based on their prior experiences, what would likely occur. This type of foresight aids them in avoiding dangerous and risky behavior and social situations.

Understanding the racial double standard involves a comparison to others. So, African Americans' sense of justice involves envisioning the likely violent and harsh outcomes for violating the same norms as the white rioters. White rioters—including white supremacists, white nationalists, and radical right groups—were met with little resistance, but, based on prior experience, African Americans imagined a more violent militarized response if they were to commit the same crimes. African Americans conceptualize a racial double standard that affirms their beliefs about justice and just-world beliefs.

Racial Resentment Is Not White Affect (Black Racial Prejudice)

Racial resentment has traditionally been conceptualized as pure and simple racism, including symbolic racism, new racism, or racial prejudice (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1997; Sears et al. 1997). In many instances, black resentment has been erroneously seen as the same construct as white resentment.

In our conceptualization, racial resentment is theoretically (and from a measurement perspective) separate from racism and racial prejudice, though they are highly correlated (Davis and Wilson 2021). This distinction is incredibly important. First, because racial prejudice is grounded in racial hatred (Allport 1954) and racial resentment is grounded in beliefs about justice and deservingness (Davis and Wilson 2021), theoretical explanations are different (though manifestations may be similar). Second, attributing all racial motivations to racial prejudice, even though this is generally the case in the literature, is an overgeneralization. It is known that racial motivations can (and often do) emanate from a variety of sources. If prejudice were the only source, other values like resentment, authoritarianism, social dominance, and system justification would be rendered ineffective (when a voluminous literature suggests otherwise). Lastly, distinguishing racial effect from resentment is important because individuals who are not admittedly racist, such as liberals and Democrats, can (and often do) possess beliefs that have racist

implications (Blum 2002). Thus, negative racial beliefs are not solely a feature of the political right.

In no way do we argue that because of the January 6th insurrection, African Americans became racially prejudiced toward whites. This new conceptualization of racial resentment by Davis and Wilson (2021) permits a more nuanced consideration of how racial intolerance operates. Decades of research on racial attitudes have oversimplified racial prejudice and assumed that intolerance must be steeped in racial hatred and antipathy.

Black Racial Resentment Is Connected to Democratic Norms

Mindful that the American political system has not always lived up to its democratic promise and that such underperformance often results in their mistreatment, African Americans generally possess a firm commitment to democratic principles (Davis 1995). To them, democracy conveys justice, equality, freedom, protection, and dignity, while deviations from those principles have been used to justify their disadvantaged position and mistreatment. Democratic principles and beliefs are therefore internalized and become an integral component of how they and others should be treated.

It is no surprise, then, that deviations from justice, fairness, and equality norms lead to African Americans' racial resentment toward whites. Because democracy is expected to make them whole and equal citizens, resentment festers when norms of supposed justice, fairness, and deservingness are used to justify African Americans' disadvantage and lower status. Whites are perceived as benefitting from racial prejudice and discrimination, which is also inconsistent with their views of democracy—justice, fairness, and equality. In short, among African Americans, a stronger attachment to or belief in the democratic promise may make them more resentful toward whites. Moreover, does the belief in democratic norms produce a more extreme response to the January 6th insurrection among those who are more highly resentful? Thus, we expect that Black racial resentment will be negatively associated with the endorsement and justification of violence within the political system because it does not align with democratic principles that undergird justice.²

Our question parallels other research that treats African Americans' sentiments and emotions as endogenous to political and societal events, namely, recent research by Banks et al. (2019) and Phoenix (2019).

Hypotheses

The January 6th insurrection should heighten African Americans' racial resentment toward whites. Given their heightened awareness of miscarriages of justice, fairness, and support for general democratic norms (Davis 2007), African Americans should perceive the insurrection of white supremacists and white nationalists—and the eventual attempt to whitewash and dismiss it by the media and politicians—as unjust and unfair. Through social comparison, African Americans can imagine a drastically more violent and punitive outcome if they had been the ones to attack the Capitol to disrupt established democratic procedures. White supremacists and white nationalists should be condemned, but those individuals complicit in the January 6th

insurrection should be punished, instead of being praised as patriots. At the same time, however, the identification, arrest, and conviction of those who stormed the Capitol building and attacked law enforcement may restore a sense of justice and fairness and moderate their sense of resentment. Holding those individuals accountable for their behavior has not been covered by the media with the same attention and vigor as the original transgressions of January 6th.

Therefore, we expect aspects of the January 6th insurrection to trigger African Americans' racial resentment, but we can see the potential for their racial resentment to be untriggered as individual insurrectionists are held to account for their crimes.

Data and Measures

We use data from one 2022 and two 2023 surveys of US adults, aged 18 and older, collected as part of the Attitudes toward Democracy Survey project sponsored by the Rooney Center at the University of Notre Dame. The Attitudes toward Democracy Surveys measure and track attitudes and opinions related to democratic institutions and practices over time. The respondents come from the National Opinion Research Center AmeriSpeak[®] probability-based panel. The AmeriSpeak panel consists of randomly selected households recruited to participate in surveys. The sampling frames for the studies are designed using an array of demographic strata (e.g., age, race, gender, education, marital status, number of children under 18, family income, employment status, citizenship, state, and metropolitan area) to match the United States as represented by census data.

The 2022 survey, conducted from October 20 to 26, was conducted in both English and Spanish, and the 2023 surveys, one conducted from June 7 to July 3 (spring) and the other from October (fall), were presented only in English. All surveys were taken via the web and completion times lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. Our working data consist of 534 respondents—193 from the 2022 survey, 174 from the 2023 spring survey, and 167 from the 2023 fall survey—who self-identified as Black/African American across the three studies. We combine the three files when possible given identical question wording to bolster our ability to evaluate statistical results and acknowledge the inferential limitations that come with such a practice.

Dependent Variable

Black racial resentment is measured using five items from the African American resentment toward whites (AATW) scale developed by Davis and Wilson (2021). The AATW scale shows excellent psychometric measurement properties and correlates with other political attitudes and behaviors in magnitudes and directions consistent with theory (Davis and Wilson 2022). Respondents in the Attitudes toward Democracy Surveys indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree with assertive statements on a 7-point Likert scale, with more agreement indicating higher levels of racial resentment. The items include: “I resent when Whites deny the existence of racial discrimination”; “Whites get away with offenses that African Americans would never get away with”; “Whites do not go to great lengths to

Table 1. Black racial resentment – the African American resentment toward whites (AATW) scale responses

	2022			2023 (Spring)			2023 (Fall)		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
RACRESNWA. I resent when whites deny the existence of racial discrimination.	5.43	192	1.66	5.56	174	1.54	5.75	166	1.38
RACRESNWB. Whites get away with offenses that African Americans would never get away with.	5.76	193	1.48	5.78	174	1.52	5.78	165	1.36
RACRESNWC. Whites do not go to great lengths to understand the problems African Americans face.	5.35	193	1.58	5.27	173	1.53	5.48	165	1.43
RACRESNWD. Even when African Americans work hard to succeed, whites still view them in lesser terms.	5.58	192	1.48	5.57	174	1.38	5.63	166	1.37
RACRESNWE. Whites are given the benefit of the doubt more than African Americans.	5.81	193	1.53	5.91	174	1.43	5.90	166	1.36
Overall scale mean	5.60	191	1.35	5.61	173	1.25	5.71	164	1.21
Cronbach alpha	0.922			0.900			0.926		
Eigenvalue	3.55			3.30			3.59		
Variance explained	71.02			65.96			71.88		

Note. Statistics are for Black/African American respondents. Responses to the AATW items range from “Strongly Disagree” (coded 1) to “Strongly Agree” (coded 7).

Source. University of Notre Dame Attitudes toward Democracy Surveys.

understand the problems African Americans face”; “Even when African Americans work hard to succeed, Whites still view them in lesser terms”; and “Whites are given the benefit of the doubt more than African Americans.”

Response distributions, scale validity, and reliability statistics presented in Table 1 confirm the strength of the AATW scale. In each survey, Black respondents express relatively strong agreement with the items, with the highest agreement (mean responses from 5.81 to 5.91 out of 7) consistently for “Whites being given the benefit of the doubt more” and the lowest agreement (mean responses from 5.27 to 5.48) consistently for whites not going to “great lengths to understand the problems African Americans face.” Across the three studies, the Cronbach alpha reliability statistics are all above .900, and the composite of the items accounts for at least two-thirds of the variance. This scale’s validity is consistent with Davis and Wilson (2021).

Independent Variables: Reactions to January 6th Insurrection

Our primary focus is on African Americans’ various reactions to the January 6th insurrection based on attitudes toward the rioters, Congressional hearings, and media narratives used to defend the behavior. We argue that in different ways, reactions to the January 6th insurrection capture the extent to which rioters were

justified in attacking established democratic procedures and institutions. There are different ways to capture such reactions.

How individuals feel about the rioters themselves is intended to capture images of the Capitol building being attacked, ransacked, and pillaged by American citizens. Rioters on that day besieged law enforcement, ravaged offices of congressional representatives, and invaded the floor of the Senate to interrupt the counting of electoral ballots. Gallows were constructed to execute then Vice President Mike Pence, presiding over the counting of the ballots and Electoral College. And so, while the reactions to the rioters capture an important aspect of January 6th, memories of the event probably diminish over time and as they were identified and held responsible legally.

All three surveys evaluate the effect of “January 6th Protests” using a feeling thermometer measure where respondents rate how “favorable” (or “warm”) or “unfavorable” (or “cold”) they feel toward specific groups on a zero (0) to one hundred (100) scale. Respondents across the three surveys express highly unfavorable (cold) feelings toward the January 6th protests. The average ratings for Black respondents in 2022 (mean = 18.4, standard deviation = 26.1), 2023 spring (mean = 19.6, standard deviation = 26.9), and 2023 fall (mean = 20.3, standard deviation = 25.5) all fail to surpass “freezing” (i.e., 36 degrees), suggesting potential lingering hostility toward the January 6th protesters.

Another set of items used to measure January 6th reactions is the extent to which individuals support an alternative narrative of the insurrection propagated by the right-wing media. Given that the pretext for the January 6th rally was to combat election fraud in the 2020 presidential election and to retain President Trump, the rally and the rioters, despite being comprised of white supremacists, white nationalists, and paramilitary groups, were portrayed in some outlets as patriots and “true Americans” standing up for their country. In this viewpoint, they were the victims of election fraud, and the election (and country writ large) was being stolen from them.

Several items proposed in the 2023 spring and fall surveys assess the extent to which narratives of the events of January 6th are misinterpreted and negatively biased. Two items, both presented as assertions for respondents to agree or disagree with on a 7-point Likert scale, characterized the January 6th protest as “a justified reaction by patriots” (6.9% agreement, mean = 2.16, standard deviation = 1.59) and the media as biased because they “exaggerated the violence at the January 6th protest at the US Capitol” (10.8% agreement, mean = 2.35, standard deviation = 1.77). Black respondents expressed low agreement with these items suggesting they saw the events of January 6th as unpatriotic and the presentation of the events as neither biased nor exaggerated.

A final set of reactions to the January 6th insurrection pertains to the Congressional hearings and investigation. Such perceptions likely go directly to the acceptability of the January 6th attack. While the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigated and eventually prosecuted many individual rioters in the months following the insurrection, attempts to uncover the complicity of political leaders in its planning received mixed reactions among an increasingly divided and polarized Congress and electorate. A bicameral commission failed in the Senate,³ though the House approved a committee: the US House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol (hereafter referred to as the “Select

Committee”). The stated purpose of the committee was to uncover the conspiracy to obstruct democracy and constitutional practices and to bring those responsible to justice and prevent a future occurrence. However, some in Congress and the public dismissed the committee proposal as a partisan attempt to embarrass former President Trump and Republicans. We include this as a dependent variable because only serious legal offenses and threats to democracy deserve investigating and accountability, so a person’s attitude toward the Select Committee partially reflects how they rate the legitimacy of the January 6th insurrection.

Respondents indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree—on a 7-point Likert scale—that they “paid attention to the recent congressional hearings about the riot at the Capitol on January 6th,” the “hearings have changed the way [they] think about the riot at the Capitol on January 6th,” and the “hearings prove that Donald Trump is responsible for the riot at the Capitol on January 6th.” The Appendix contains the specific wording for each item. Black respondents report higher agreement with statements about their attention to the hearings (54.2% agreement, mean = 4.73, standard deviation = 1.68) and the evidentiary proof of Donald Trump’s responsibility (65.6% agreement, mean = 5.39, standard deviation = 1.64) and lower agreement that the hearings have changed their thinking (28.5% agreement, mean = 3.92, standard deviation = 1.78). Taken together, the responses suggest Blacks believe Donald Trump is complicit in the events of Jan. 6th, that they have paid attention to the hearings, but also that the hearings themselves have not replaced what they already believe about the events.

Justice and Fairness Beliefs (and Democracy)

From an African American perspective, it is one thing to believe in democracy, and it is another matter to believe in justice and fairness, at least as they are commonly applied. Though related, the two are not synonymous given African Americans’ experiences in society. Democracy (i.e., equal representation, the right to vote, habeas corpus rights, freedom of religion) is often seen as connected to justice, fairness, and equality, but the application of those beliefs often rings hollow for them. In other words, African Americans may believe in adherence to democratic principles and norms, but because of their experiences, applying those principles without any consideration to their status, difficulties, and experiences (what they are up against) is neither fair nor just. While general democratic principles are highly valued—like equal protection under the law, equal representation, the right to vote, and freedom from self-incrimination—African Americans believe that democracy does not go far enough in ensuring minority rights are protected or that voting should be made easier to overcome barriers they incur. Adherence to democratic norms does not consider the extra restrictions and deficits African Americans may experience. Therefore, a more just and fair approach should accommodate their current experiences. A just democracy is one that promotes, among other forms, distributive principles of justice, such as equity (fairness), equality (sameness), and need (essential requirement).

We use a seven-item compositive scale to assess these beliefs. The items that comprise the scale consist of assertions about voting rights (e.g., “Everyone should be allowed to vote.”), legal fairness (e.g., “The law should treat everyone the same,

regardless of wealth and power.”), and equal protections (e.g., “Men and women should have the same legal rights and protections.”) that respondents agreed or disagreed with. Stronger agreement with the assertions—on a 7-point Likert scale—indicates a stronger just-democracy orientation. The measure (mean = 5.97, standard deviation = 1.04) has a negative skew, indicating higher just-democracy orientations for African Americans. In addition, the composition scale has excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .860$). The full list of items is presented in the Appendix.

Results: The Etiology of Black Racial Resentment

Understanding African Americans’ reactions to racialized events like the January 6th insurrection and how this affects their racial resentment necessitates looking at different aspects of the event. Different components of January 6th can be expected to trigger different reactions. As indicated by their weak correlations, African Americans reacted differently to the rioters, the Congressional investigation into the insurrection, and alternative narratives. Each component on its own reflects a unique perspective on the January 6th insurrection.

Is Black Resentment Connected to the January 6th Rioters?

Feelings toward the January 6th protestors reflect an emotional reaction among African Americans. Like most American citizens, African Americans’ feelings toward the rioters may best be described as chilly and antagonistic (mean = 16 in 2022, mean = 19 in spring 2023, and mean = 20 in fall 2023), but more importantly, in other analyses, such feelings do not vary significantly across psychological and socio-demographics. The small sample size of African Americans does not bode well for the psychological constructs and socio-demographics to achieve statistical significance—an age-old challenge when analyzing small samples.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients in Table 2 indicate that emotional reactions to the January 6th rioters do not meaningfully contribute to African Americans’ racial resentment. While the signs of the coefficients for the January 6th rioters are encouraging, it is significant in only one dataset (fall 2023). This might be attributed to the length of time since the riots and the fact that many have been convicted of crimes and punished. In a sense, justice has been served and meted out for many of the January 6th rioters, and African Americans’ racial resentment may no longer be triggered. This reasoning is purely speculative, and more direct items are needed to flesh out how perceptions of justice may be repaired among African Americans.

However, consistent with our theorizing about justice, democracy, and African American racial resentment is the finding that just democracy is positive and significant. Thus, African Americans who are more strongly committed to justice and democracy tend to be more racially resentful. Our reasoning is predicated on the belief that African Americans strongly subscribe to ideas of justice and fairness, but the consequence is that when those values are perceived to be violated by others, it triggers a social comparison in which they are held to a different standard, and resentment sets in. Ironically, an adherence to justice and democracy for African

Table 2. OLS regression estimates for reactions to the January 6th rioters on Black racial resentment

	Spring 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Cumulative
Intercept	2.69** (.54)	2.77** (21.11)	3.70** (.51)	2.87** (.30)
Jan 6 th rioters feeling thermometer	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.01* (.00)
Justice and fairness beliefs	.36** (.07)	.37** (.06)	.23** (.07)	.33** (.04)
Age (years)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Gender (female = 1)	.26 (.20)	.10 (.17)	.58** (.18)	.31** (.11)
Education level	.04 (.10)	-.01 (.09)	.23* (.09)	.08 (.06)
Household income	.05* (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.02 (.52)	.02 (.01)
Year (Spring 2023 = 1)	—	—		.10 (.12)
Year (Fall 2023 = 1)	—	—		.16 (.13)
N	174	164	139	477
Adjusted R ²	.17	.24	.27	.20
Prob > F	.000	.000	.000	.000

Note. Data represent all African American respondents from 2022, 2023 (spring), and 2023 (fall) studies. Statistical tests are two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$.

Americans may have the unintended consequence of greater antagonisms. However, the small samples may limit our confidence in these interpretations, so they must be seen as more speculative.

Is Black Resentment Connected to the Congressional Investigation?

In Table 3, reactions to the congressional hearings seem to produce a similar result. There is some evidence that the congressional hearings, especially proving that former President Trump was responsible, enhanced African American racial resentment. The Congressional hearings and investigation uncovered the extent of the involvement and complicity of conservative leaders and white nationalist figures in the January 6th riots and attack on the Capitol. The coefficient is significant and in the expected direction in 2022 (these questions were not included in other data). This evidence could be stronger, but at the same time, the scant evidence cannot be ignored.

Here too, African Americans' belief in a just democracy is significantly connected to their racial resentment toward whites. An adherence to democracy leads to racial antagonisms when those values and norms are perceived to be capriciously applied.

Is Black Resentment Connected to Sanitized Narratives of January 6th?

A final dimension of the January 6th insurrection we examine is African Americans' reactions to sanitized narratives of the January 6th insurrection. We argued that such

Table 3. OLS regression estimates for reactions to alternative narratives of the January 6th riots on January 6th rioters on Black racial resentment

	Spring 2023 Data			Fall 2023		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	3.32** (.53)	3.81** (.59)	3.36** (.47)	4.34** (.59)	3.67** (.59)	3.14** (.53)
Jan 6 th justified as patriotic	-.11* (.05)	—	—	-.22** (.06)	—	—
Media exaggerated Jan 6 th violence	—	-.17** (.05)	—	—	-.11* (.05)	—
Antifa to blame	—	—	-.13** (.06)	—	—	-.04 (.05)
Justice and fairness beliefs	.35** (.06)	.33** (.06)	.36** (.06)	.22** (.07)	.27** (.07)	.31** (.07)
Age (years)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Gender (female = 1)	.11 (.17)	.07 (.17)	.06 (.17)	.47** (.17)	.46** (.17)	.45** (.17)
Education level	-.02 (.09)	-.02 (.09)	-.03 (.08)	.24** (.09)	.27** (.09)	.28** (.09)
Household income	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.04 (.02)	-.04 (.02)	-.04 (.02)
N	170	168	168	157	156	157
Adjusted R ²	.28	.30	.28	.30	.27	.25
Pro > F	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Note. Data represent all African American respondents from 2022, 2023 (spring), and 2023 (fall) studies. Statistical tests are two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$.

Table 4. Ordinary least squares regression estimates for reactions to the congressional hearings on January 6th insurrection on racial resentment (2022 only)

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Intercept	2.34** (.51)	2.38** (.54)	1.79** (.48)
Paid attention to Congressional hearings	.07 (.06)	—	—
Cong hearings changed thinking	—	.05 (.11)	—
Hearings prove Trump responsible	—	—	.27** (.05)
Justice and fairness beliefs	.35** (.07)	.36** (.07)	
Age (years)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Gender (female = 1)	.39* (.16)	.35 (.19)	.31 (.18)
Education level	.05 (.10)	.07 (.10)	.09 (.09)
Household income	.06** (.02)	.06** (.02)	.05* (.02)
N	188	189	188
Adjusted R ²	.19	.18	.28
Prob > F	.000	.000	.000

Note. Data represent all African American respondents from 2022, 2023 (spring), and 2023 (fall) studies. Statistical tests are two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$.

narratives may be the clearest form of obfuscation of guilt and an attempt to escape accountability. The OLS regression coefficients for the narratives in Table 4 support this supposition. Regardless of the specific counter-narrative and misattribution of blame, the coefficients are significant and in the anticipated direction. All attempts to mischaracterize the January 6th insurrection enhance African Americans' racial resentment. Such narratives seek to prevent accountability, which resonates with African Americans' sense of justice and fairness, which triggers their resentment. This is, by far, the strongest and cleanest evidence of the connection between the January 6th insurrection and African Americans' racial resentment.

This evidence does not seem to detract from or minimize the influence of just-democracy beliefs. African Americans' racial resentment is grounded in beliefs about fairness and democracy. As we have argued throughout this analysis, African Americans wish that others and the political system would live up to that promise.

In Table 5, we consider various reactions to the January 6th insurrection on African American racial resentment in a single model. Consistent with previous analyses, the claim that the media exaggerated the violence of January 6th (presumably to allude to justice and accountability) is significantly connected to African American racial resentment. We infer from this result that the attempt to minimize the violence or shift the blame to the media triggers a sense of injustice and unfairness that resonates with African Americans' high racial resentment. Also, as expected, individuals who possess higher beliefs in justice are more likely to possess higher levels of racial resentment. Thus, racial resentment is affected directly through beliefs about justice and indirectly through attempts to avoid accountability.

Table 5. Ordinary least squares regression explaining on racial resentment

	b	SE
Intercept	3.23**	.45
Jan 6 th rioters feeling thermometer	.01	.02
Jan 6 th justified as patriotic	-.03	.06
Media exaggerated Jan 6 th violence	-.13**	.05
Antifa to blame	-.04	.04
Justice and fairness beliefs	.46**	.06
Age (years)	-.01	.004
Gender (female = 1)	.29**	.12
Education level	.09	.06
Household income	-.01	.02
N	293	
Adjusted R ²	.33	
Prob > F	.000	

***p* ≤ .01, **p* ≤ .05.

Conclusion

As a result of the small samples of African Americans, much of what we conclude about how African Americans react to events like the January 6th insurrection is somewhat speculative. Much of the research on African Americans’ psychological orientations to politics and political attitudes suffers a similar fate. This may therefore be considered a first stab at clarifying the effects of January 6th on African Americans.

Considering this backdrop, we began with an idea, theory, and data. Among other important considerations, like social identity and racial consciousness, we have argued that African Americans’ political perceptions are steeped in their adherence to ideas of justice, fairness, and democratic norms. Although these ideals and values have often been fleeting for African Americans, democracy still represents freedom, equality, justice, and respect. Deviations from democratic norms have often resulted in racial prejudice and discrimination.

Racialized events, like the January 6th insurrection, challenge established democratic norms and views on justice, fairness, and deservingness. And, given that the insurrection was also imbued with racialized sentiments and motivations by white supremacists, white nationalists, and paramilitary groups, African Americans’ resentment can be expected to be heightened. These extremist groups, alleging voter fraud by minority districts, violently attacked and overpowered law enforcement, ransacked congressional offices (most notoriously the office of Nancy Pelosi), and invaded the Senate floor, all in a concerted effort to interrupt the counting of

electoral ballots with the goal of retaining a president who pandered to white supremacists, white nationalists, and stoked racial divisions.

To African Americans, the events of January 6th and its aftermath of deniability were menacing and foreboding because it was orchestrated by groups and individuals that vowed their repression and because the rioters' desire was to thwart the established democratic process. It challenged African Americans' sense of justice and fairness—rioters and those complicit in the organizing and planning deserved to be held accountable and punished, and the extent to which they were allowed to escape this enhanced African Americans' resentment. Though perhaps not as strongly as we would like, our results provide some evidence of how African Americans respond to events like the January 6th insurrection.

Admittedly, feelings toward the rioters themselves are weakly related to African American racial resentment toward whites, while alternative narratives—such as that the rioters were patriots, that the media exaggerated the violence, or that Antifa was responsible for the violence—trigger racial resentment. We interpret these narratives as reflecting the cleanest attempt to escape accountability by minimizing the event's significance and the participants' culpability. Reactions to the Congressional hearings, especially that it proved that former president Trump was responsible, were connected to African American racial resentment, though not strongly. We suggested the fact that the FBI's efforts to identify, arrest, and hold individual rioters accountable may partly explain the somewhat tepid connection to African American racial resentment. Overall, these results are not as strong as we would like, but at the same time, the evidence they provide cannot be totally discounted.

More compelling evidence supports our broader theoretical argument. We argue that the basis for African Americans' racial resentment is likely due to their expectations for justice, fairness, and equality, which goes beyond simple aspects of democratic norms. We show that African Americans who are more supportive of justice and fairness tend to be more racially resentful toward whites. African Americans high in support for justice and fairness might be described as more aware and sensitive to their violation and react by becoming more resentful (and probably more angry and experiencing other emotions as well). African Americans tend to believe that white supremacists and white nationalists will get away with their attempted overthrow of the government and attack on democracy.

Beyond the January 6th insurrection, there are other prominent events in American society that enhance African Americans' perceptions of justice and fairness, which ultimately triggers their resentment, although such events may also reinforce hatred and antipathy. We noted the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the murdering of individuals (e.g. George Floyd and Sonya Massey) by law enforcement challenged notions of justice and triggered racial resentment toward whites.

More generally, this research highlights how attempts to alter the narrative and to minimize the violence of the January 6th insurrection affect African Americans. It is through the attempt to minimize accountability and the need for justice, which we argue resonates with African Americans in particular because of their experiences with racial injustices. Everyone deserves justice and accountability. The political reality is that objective events and facts, like what really happened on January 6,

2021, are contested and denied impeding accountability. Such obfuscation raises questions about whether there will ever be justice and fairness, which leads to racial resentment. January 6th becomes another event in which African Americans perceive that there are different rules for them.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1 Other events in which white supremacists felt emboldened likely elicit similar emotional responses among African Americans. Take, for instance, the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 in which alt-right, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and far-right militias marched on the campus of the University of Virginia to protest the removal of a General Robert E. Lee statute. Expressions of racial hostility and animosity toward African Americans and other minorities may invoke a range of psychological responses—fear, anxiety, foreboding, depression, and anger.

2 We ran a simple test of this expectation by examining the extent to which just-democracy principles and Black racial resentment correlate with justifications for political violence. Justifications for political violence include that the “American way of life is under attack,” supporting violence to “ensure [one’s own party candidate] wins the 2024 Presidential election,” and a personal willingness to use “violence to ensure that [one’s own party candidate] wins the 2024 Presidential election.” Stronger agreement with these statements indicates greater justification for violence as a response to threats to the country. Table 1 shows the correlation statistics for the analysis. The results of this brief correlational analysis suggest that Black racial resentment operates in parallel with orientations toward beliefs in justice and is less likely to operate as a reactive force to threats or political violence. Essentially, a social comparison to whites through a lens of what comprises beliefs in justice appears to motivate Black racial resentment. In fact, the correlation between the just-democracy orientation and Black racial resentment is .546 ($p < .001$), a value that is statistically significant and strong in magnitude.

3 Mostly due to a filibuster in the Senate.

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APPENDIX: Survey Items

Black Racial Resentment

1. I resent when whites deny the existence of racial discrimination.
2. Whites get away with offenses that African Americans would never get away with.
3. Whites do not go to great lengths to understand the problems African Americans face.
4. Even when African Americans work hard to succeed, whites still view them in lesser terms.
5. Whites are given the benefit of the doubt more than African Americans.

Just-Democracy Principles

1. Everyone should be allowed to vote.
2. The law should treat everyone the same, regardless of wealth or power.
3. Men and women should have the same legal rights and protections.

Feelings toward the January 6th Rioters

1. We'd like to get your feelings toward some political figures and groups. Please rate the following groups or people on something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person or group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable or cold toward that person or group. Ratings of 50 mean that you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person or group ... Please rate [January 6th Protesters]

2023 Surveys (Spring and Fall)

1. The January 6th protest at the US Capitol was a justified reaction by patriots.
2. The media exaggerated the violence at the January 6th protest at the US Capitol.

2022 Survey

1. I have paid attention to the recent congressional hearings about the riot at the Capitol on January 6th.
2. The recent congressional hearings have changed the way I think about the riot at the Capitol on January 6th.
3. The recent congressional hearings prove that Donald Trump is responsible for the riot at the Capitol on January 6th.

Justification of the January 6th Insurrection

1. The January 6th protest at the US Capitol was a justified reaction by patriots.
2. The media exaggerated the violence at the January 6th protest at the US Capitol.
3. Any violence at the January 6th protest at the US Capitol was perpetrated by Antifa.

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