

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rage Against the Machine? Why System Justification Drives (Some) Asian Americans to Spurn Racial Solidarity

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(Received 21 August 2024; revised 7 February 2025; accepted 7 March 2025)

## Abstract

Why is solidarity between *people of color* (PoC) so difficult to achieve? New evidence suggests solidarity can be activated through a sense of shared discrimination between PoC. Yet other research highlights many real-world obstacles to this solidarity, including recurring inter-minority conflicts. We consider *system justification* as one possible mechanism that undercuts PoC solidarity. *System justification* is a human motive to bolster the status quo. *System justifiers* who are PoC condone racial inequalities as stable, predictable, and just—which alleviates mental stressors associated with their own racially stigmatized status. We investigate *system justification*'s impacts on Asian Americans: a key party to many coalitions and conflicts with Black and Latino people. Using national survey data, we find that *system justification* is significantly associated with Asian opposition to solidarity with Black Lives Matter, net of racial resentment, and other key covariates. We then refine this result experimentally by exposing Asian adults to the model minority myth—a system-legitimizing ideology. Exposure to this myth triggers *system justification*, which then increases Asian opposition to pro-Black and pro-Latino policies, among other solidarity-based outcomes. Both results are primarily driven by conservative Asian Americans, highlighting a need to better appreciate Asian Americans' ideological diversity in U.S. racial politics.

**Keywords:** System justification; conservatism; Asian Americans; solidarity with people of color

*“Solving the problem of racism requires . . . cross-racial relationships . . . and movements to bend the long arc of the moral universe.”*

—Oiyán A. Poon (2023: 7)  
*Asian American is Not a Color*

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“Asian Americans sometimes pursue a go-it-alone political approach that ignores and . . . reinforce[s] structural anti-Blackness.”

—Claire Jean Kim (2023: 245)

*Asian Americans in an Anti-Black World*

Although only two voices, each of these perspectives highlights the rich variance in Asian American politics with respect to people of color (PoC). On the one hand, many Asian Americans recognize that dismantling racism requires active engagement with coalition-based efforts against systems of oppression, which demands a deep reservoir of solidarity between Asian, Black, and Latino folks. Here, political psychologists have established that triggering a sense of shared discrimination among Asian, Black, Latino, and other non-White adults catalyzes solidarity between PoC, which then boosts support for policies benefitting racially stigmatized ingroups (for a meta-analysis, see Pérez, Vicuña, and Ramos 2023; Chan and Jasso 2023; Chin et al. 2023; Eidgahy and Pérez 2023; Pérez, Vicuña, Ramos, et al. 2023; Sirin et al. 2021; Cortland et al. 2017; Merseth 2018). On the other hand, more than three decades of political and sociological research finds evidence of conflict—and even violence—between PoC in “real-world” settings, including national, state, and local elections (McClain and Karnig 1990; Kim 2003; Kaufmann 2004; Meier et al. 2004; Vaca 2004; McClain et al. 2007; Wilkinson 2015; Carey et al. 2016; Benjamin 2017; Carter 2019; Kim 2023). These contrasting insights raise an interesting question: why do some racially stigmatized individuals spurn political solidarity with other people of color?

We answer this question psychologically by focusing on *system justification*. This disposition reflects individual differences in the tendency to bolster or support the status quo, which includes political systems, economic systems, and—most relevant to us—systems of racial oppression (Jost 2020; Jost 2019; Jost et al. 2004; Jost and Banaji 1994). As a widely prevalent human motive, system justification exists among members of racially dominant groups (e.g., White Americans), as well as members of racially stigmatized groups (e.g., African Americans, Latinos) (Pérez et al., 2024; Rivera Pichardo et al. 2022; Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 2000 Chapter 4). Individuals with higher system justification levels are inclined to rationalize racial inequalities, rather than critiquing them and working to deconstruct them. Hence, system justification research often highlights its role in explaining why—despite continued racial discrimination and oppression of stigmatized groups—we fail to observe more organized movements and rebellions against these forces (Jost 2020).

Among some U.S. people of color, higher system justification levels motivate individuals to endorse negative stereotypes about their ingroup, express some favorability toward Whites, and display attitudes that bolster the status quo—but at the expense of their stigmatized ingroup (Jost & Burgess 2000; Rivera Pichardo et al. 2022; see also Alamillo 2019). For example, Pérez et al. (2024) establish that *system justification* drives Latino support for nativist immigration policies, which harm some of their co-ethnics. These “paradoxical” patterns are more likely to happen when members of stigmatized ingroups believe that unequal relations between racial groups are legitimate (Tajfel 1981), which encourages dis-identification with one’s lower status group (Hickel et al. 2024) and promotes outgroup favoritism (Cadena

2023). These types of outcomes are traced to the *palliative* function of system justification (e.g., Napier, Bettinsoli, and Suppes 2020). Racially stigmatized people face chronic stressors due to their stigmatization. Thus, endorsing the status quo lets them “feel that the social context is stable, understandable, predictable, consistent, meaningful, and just (Jost and Hunyady 2003: 147).”

We use these insights from the system justification literature to explain why solidarity sometimes deteriorates between PoC. We do this by centering on the case of Asian Americans. Although prior work has uncovered the role of system justification in the politics of some African American and Latino individuals (Jost 2020; Pérez et al., 2024), none of this research probes whether a comparable dynamic exists among Asian Americans: currently the fastest-growing racial population in the United States. If we find evidence of system justification’s effects on Asian Americans, researchers are in a more comfortable position to confidently claim that this disposition is, indeed, a widely prevalent phenomenon among people of color, as prior work implies (Jost et al. 2004; Jost 2020; Rivera Pichardo et al. 2022; Pérez et al., 2024). Equally important, as a key partner in many political coalitions with PoC (e.g., Espiritu 1992; Geron et al., 2001; Merseeth 2018; Kim 2023; Pérez, Vicuña, Ramos, et al. 2023; Poon 2024), a focus on Asian adults allows us to better grasp why solidarity between PoC sometimes falters or fails to materialize (Kim 2003; Kim 2023; Kuo, Hudson, and Richeson 2024; Poon 2024).

To appraise system justification’s influence on Asian Americans’ racial politics, we marshal evidence from two studies. First, we leverage the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), a high-quality national survey containing a large and rich sample of Asian American adults ( $n = 3,975$ ). Using these data, we establish system justification’s viability as a motive that can explain some Asian Americans’ negative stance toward solidarity between PoC. We find that, net of key covariates (e.g., racial prejudice, American identity, education), higher system justification levels are significantly associated with decreased support for Black Lives Matter (BLM)—a pattern that is primarily driven by conservative Asian adults.

We then refine these results through an experiment with Asian American adults by examining one trigger to system justification. Specifically, we expose (or not) Asian adults to the *model minority myth*—a system-legitimizing myth (Jost 2020; Sidanius and Pratto 2000)—finding that it catalyzes system justification, which is then significantly associated with weaker support for pro-Black and pro-Latino politics and other indicators of PoC solidarity. Crucially, we also find that a heightened sense of system justification increases Asian Americans’ reported life satisfaction—which aligns with this disposition playing a palliative role for individuals (Napier, Suppes, and Bettinsoli 2020). These patterns are also primarily driven by conservative Asian American adults, further clarifying where in the Asian American community system justification’s influence is most likely felt. We conclude by discussing our results’ implications for ongoing research on solidarity between PoC.

### System Justification, Racial Hierarchy, and Asian American Politics: Theory and Hypotheses

What explains some Asian Americans’ endorsement of the racial status quo, which enshrines inequities between Whites and non-Whites, as well as between people of

color (Zou and Cheryan 2017; Masuoka and Junn 2013)? We suggest system justification as one possible pathway. According to this research, individuals—whether they are from racially dominant or racially stigmatized groups—possess a system-serving bias that bolsters a status quo of relations between an ingroup and outgroup(s) (Jost 2020). In the United States, the racial status quo is reflected in the stratification of racial groups (Sidanius & Pratto 2000; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Abrajano and Hajnal 2016; Zou and Cheryan 2017). Within this hierarchy, White people are positioned as *the* dominant group, with various Black, Asian, and Latino people stationed below them. Moreover, within this racial order, all groups stereotype Asian individuals as *perpetual foreigners* (similar to Latinos) but as socially *superior* (unlike Black people), which cements Asian Americans' racial stigmatization (Kim, 2003; Masuoka & Junn, 2013; Davies 2022). This racial stigmatization of various national origin groups (e.g., Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean) as *Asian American* is recognized by people classified into this pan-ethnic category (e.g., Zou & Cheryan 2017; Kim 2023; Lee et al. 2024) and occurs despite this mega-group's profound internal diversity (e.g., Lien et al. 2004; Wong et al. 2008; Lu 2024), which makes race a potent cleavage that systematically regulates U.S. intergroup relations between Asian Americans and White, Black, and Latino people at key junctures (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic) (e.g., Chan and Leung 2024). Indeed, while Asian adults, in the aggregate, identify more strongly with their national origin group (e.g., *Chinese*, *Korean*) than their pan-ethnic group (*Asian Americans*) (see Lien et al. 2004; Wong et al. 2008), political environments regularly provide cues that increase the relative salience of this pan-ethnic identity in Asian American politics (e.g., Junn and Masuoka 2008).

Although research establishes that Asian Americans sometimes mobilize politically to improve their station and the position of other PoC in this hierarchy (e.g., Kim 2023; Chan et al. 2022; Kim 2022; Kuo et al. 2017; Junn and Masuoka 2008; Masuoka 2006; Kim 2003), a sober look at the empirical record also shows that many of these efforts are sporadic and relatively short-lived, with incremental gains that often leave Asian people's disadvantaged station in the racial order intact. System justification theory (SJT) reasons that one determinant of this stasis is the support for the racial status quo that some racially stigmatized individuals express (Pérez et al., 2024; Jost 2020; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, Chapter 4). While it is true that Asian Americans experience cognitive stress and other pressures due to their disadvantaged position in society (Tuan 1998), system justification theory suggests that some stigmatized individuals will cope with these strains by placing faith in an unequal, but highly predictable and familiar status quo (Jost, 2020; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; see also Lerner, 1980; Major, 1994). This palliative function is crucial to understanding why some stigmatized individuals support policies that harm their co-ethnics—namely, because the status quo is deemed clear, familiar, and just (e.g., Napier, Bettinsoli, and Suppes 2020). By placing faith in the very system that is responsible for structural disparities between racial groups, we believe that system justification will dampen Asian American support for solidarity between PoC and other efforts designed to criticize and remedy a racially oppressive status quo. Thus, we hypothesize that:

(H1) higher levels of system justification, on average, increase Asian American opposition to solidarity with African Americans, Latinos, and other *people of color*.

But who, within the larger Asian American population, is more likely to be influenced by system justification? Our first hypothesis (H1) implies that all Asian Americans, in general, are equally susceptible to the influences of system justification to some degree. However, a closer look at the political diversity of Asian Americans raises a distinct possibility where *ideology* moderates the impact that system justification has on Asian American's opinions about solidarity with PoC. Like the Latino population, Asian American adults are characterized by a liberal central tendency, with significant variation around that average. Although roughly 2 out of every 3 Asian American adults self-identifies as politically liberal and/or as a Democrat, it is still the case that approximately one-third of this growing population self-identifies as conservative and/or as a Republican (e.g., Wong, Ramakrishnan, Junn, et al. 2008; Kuo, Mo, and Malhotra 2017; Hopkins et al. 2019; Chan, Kim, and Leung 2022; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023). This conservative segment, we reason, provides a subset of individuals who are perhaps more sensitive to the cognitive tendencies that inhere in system justification, which motivates one to rationalize the status quo. For example, if conservatives are inclined to favor stability and avoid rapid change (Stenner 2009), then it stands to reason that conservative Asian Americans are perhaps more likely to act on system-justifying motives. In other words, we should expect that bolstering the status quo via *system justification* will be more pronounced among ideological conservatives (versus ideological liberals) because of the stronger cognitive fit between their motivation to rationalize the status quo (system justification) and an ideological worldview that strives to avoid rapid change (conservatism). This means the relationship between system justification and an outcome will be significantly mediated by the level and direction of one's ideology (Hayes 2022). This interactive relationship would be consistent with prior work on majority groups, which suggests that *conservative ideology* and *system justification* are positively correlated, yet conceptually distinct (Jost 2020). It also aligns with research indicating that greater levels of liberal ideology predispose Asian Americans and other non-Whites toward greater solidarity with people of color (Pérez, Vicuna, and Ramos 2023; Pérez 2021). We therefore reason that individual differences in conservative ideology moderate the impact of system justification on Asian American views of solidarity with PoC. More precisely, we hypothesize that:

(H2) the influence of system justification on Asian Americans' views about solidarity with other PoC is more pronounced among ideological conservatives than liberals.

Taken together, (H1-H2) might give the impression that system justification is a chronic influence among those individuals who possess higher levels of it. However, we theorize that system justification is catalyzed only under very specific circumstances. The implication here is that Asian Americans are not always under the influence of system justification, but rather, this motivation is triggered in the presence of relevant political stimuli. One such stimulus is exposure to *rationalizing* or *legitimizing myths*—cultural narratives that justify the status quo between an ingroup and outgroup(s). These myths, which include the *Protestant Work Ethic* and the *American Dream*, provide elaborate explanations for the unequal

stratification of racial groups in the United States (Sidanius & Pratto, 2000; see also Jost, 2020; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2013; Kay & Jost, 2003), with exposure to these myths often catalyzing system justification's effects (Jost 2020). For example, Pérez et al. (2024) find that affirming the myth of the *American Dream* heightens *system justification* levels among Latino adults, which then steers them toward greater support for nativist policies that harm some of their co-ethnics.

In the context of Asian American politics, we focus on the role played by the *model minority myth*—the widely circulated notion that within America's racial hierarchy, Asian Americans are a culturally superior and less impertinent “minority” than their Black and Latino peers (Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010; Yi and Todd 2021; Kuo et al. 2024). The model minority myth's lure resides in its rationalization of observed differences between Asian Americans and other people of color, like Black and Latino individuals (Tuan 1998; Kim 2003). Specifically, this myth stereotypes all Asian Americans as socio-economically and academically successful, relative to their peers, despite substantial variation on both dimensions within the Asian American population (Poon 2024; Zou and Cheryan 2017; Masuoka and Junn 2013). The model minority myth explains these asymmetries between Asians and Black and Latino individuals, not as rooted in structural inequities between people of color, but rather, as a function of Asian American culture and individual hard work (Kim 2023). In this way, the model minority myth positions Asian Americans away from Black individuals and other “inferior” groups (e.g., Latinos) and closer to White Americans.

We think that exposure to the model minority myth undermines solidarity between PoC by highlighting alleged differences between Asian Americans and other PoC, thereby triggering *system justification*, which we propose as a *mediating* variable (Hayes 2022). This mediation framework allows us to appraise system justification's role as an important mechanism behind Asian American views of solidarity with other PoC. Accordingly, exposure to the model minority myth should trigger a system justification motive among some Asian Americans, since their relatively “better” position in the hierarchy confirms that the system of race relations is stable, predictable, and, most importantly, just. This bolstering of the racial status quo, we predict, comes at the expense of weakened solidarity between Asian Americans and other PoC. Furthermore, consistent with our earlier discussion, we believe this effect is more pronounced among ideologically conservative Asian American adults, which leads us to expect that the activation of system justification will be stronger (*moderated*) by ideological conservatism (*moderated-mediation*) (Hayes 2022). Thus, our remaining hypotheses are:

(H3) affirming the model minority myth will trigger system justification motives among Asian American adults, thus undermining a sense of solidarity with other PoC (*mediation*).

(H4) ideologically conservative Asian Americans are more persuaded and impacted by the model minority myth than ideological liberal Asian Americans (*moderated-mediation*).

For convenience, we catalog all four hypotheses in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Hypotheses About System Justification and Asian American Views of Solidarity with Other People of Color

(H1) higher system justification levels, on average, decrease Asian American solidarity with other people of color.	(H3) affirming the model minority myth triggers system justification among Asian adults, which then compromises solidarity with other PoC ( <i>mediated effect</i> ).
(H2) system justification's impact on Asian American solidarity with other PoC is moderated by ideological conservatism.	(H4) ideologically conservative Asian Americans are more persuaded and impacted by the model minority myth ( <i>moderated-mediated effect</i> ).

### Study 1: System Justification’s Association with Asian Opposition to Racial Solidarity in the 2020 CMPS

We begin to formally test (H1) and (H2) by drawing on an Asian American oversample ( $N = 3,929$ ) in the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS): an omnibus online survey that yielded nationally representative survey data on America’s major adult populations of color and their politics, including Asian American adults. These data are widely considered a benchmark survey for scholars of public opinion among PoC (Barreto et al., 2018). Although we did not design these data, the 2020 CMPS contains a suite of items that, in principle, operationalize our main variables of interest: system justification, ideological conservatism, and support for Black Lives Matter (BLM). In this installment of the CMPS, 25% and 18% of Asian American respondents were Chinese and Indian, respectively, with more than one-half being U.S.-born (54%), and about one-third holding a bachelor’s degree or higher (72%).

We appraise system justification with three previously validated items used to study this disposition among non-White adults (cf. Pérez, Alhambra, Nguy, et al. 2024). Here, Asian American respondents indicated the extent to which they strongly disagreed (1) or strongly agreed (5) with a trio of statements—each touching on the stability and predictability of the racial status quo: a) “Racial and ethnic minorities can get ahead in the United States if they work hard”; b) “Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard”; and c) “It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off.” We combine replies to these items into an additive scale on a 0-1 range ( $\alpha_{system} = .801$ ;  $M_{system} = .708$ ,  $SD = .222$ ), where higher values reflect stronger system justification.<sup>1</sup>

Next, we measure our outcome, *support for Black Lives Matter (BLM)*, with three statements. The first item asked Asian American respondents how much they a) support or oppose “the Black Lives Matter movement,” which was answered on a strong support (1) to strongly oppose (5) scale. The second two items, answered on a scale from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree, stated b) “Asian Americans have a responsibility to support the Black Lives Matter movement,” and c) “Asian Americans will benefit from the success of the Black Lives Matter movement.” We recode responses to these three items so that higher values indicate greater support for BLM. We scale responses to these three items and transform the resulting index to a 0 to 1 range ( $\alpha_{solidarity} = .835$ ;  $M_{solidarity} = .580$ ,  $SD = .289$ ).

In turn, we measure ideological conservatism with two items, which we theorize will moderate the impact of system justification on BLM solidarity. The first item is a traditional ideology question asking Asian American respondents, “When it comes to politics, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative,” with responses ranging from (1) Very Liberal to (5) Very Conservative. Additionally, we use respondent reports of their partisan self-identification, using a traditional scale that ranges from (1) Strong Democrat to (7) Strong Republican. This follows the measurement approach by other scholars who capitalize on the shared variance between these items (e.g., Jost and Thompson 2000; Napier and Jost 2008; Pérez 2010; see also Gerber et al. 2011). Consistent with our measurement strategy for our other key variables, we scale these two items to create an index of *conservative ideology* ( $r = .58, p < .001$ , two-tailed), which displays substantial variation ( $M_{conservative} = .41, SD = .27$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Although we are primarily interested in estimating the direct associations between support for BLM, system justification, conservative ideology, and the interaction between these last two variables, we undertake this observational analysis by including *anti-Black prejudice*, *American identity*, *college education*, *religiosity*, *Chinese-origin*, and *Indian-origin* as covariates. The inclusion of anti-Black prejudice is especially crucial, since political scientists often consider it a main driver of anti-Black opinion in the United States (Tesler and Sears 2010; Tesler 2016). We describe the coding of these covariates in our online appendix (OA), section 1 (OA.1), but we note here that all these control variables are also rescaled to a 0-1 range, which allows us to better compare effect sizes by placing all our predictors on the same interval. All reported  $p$ -values in the analysis below are exact and two-tailed.<sup>3</sup>

### Study 1 Results

Table 2 reports the raw correlations between our focal variables in this analysis, support for BLM, system justification, and conservative ideology. Consistent with our theorizing, we find that system justification ( $r = -.296, p < .001$ ) and conservative ideology ( $r = -.544, p < .001$ ) are each negatively and significantly associated with support for BLM. Equally important, we find that system justification and conservative ideology are positively and moderately correlated with each other ( $r = .299, p < .001$ ). Based on these initial patterns, we next examine whether system justification and conservative ideology explain Asian support for BLM either independently or interactively, net of additional covariates.

Table 3 displays the relevant results from two Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions. In the first one, we predict support for BLM as a function of one’s level of system justification, conservative ideology, and our suite of covariates. This allows us to directly test (H1). The second regression also predicts support for BLM based on the same variables but includes an interaction between system justification and conservative ideology, which lets us evaluate (H2).

In Table 3’s middle column, we find evidence that is consistent with (H1). In the absence of any interaction between system justification and conservative ideology, both variables are substantially, meaningfully, and reliably associated with decreased Asian American support for BLM. Specifically, a unit increase on our conservative

**Table 2.** Bivariate Correlations Between Support for BLM, System Justification, and Conservative Ideology

	Support BLM	System Justification	Conservative ideology
Support BLM	--		
System Justification	-.296***	--	
Conservative ideology	-.544***	.299***	--

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed. Data are from the 2020 CMPS.

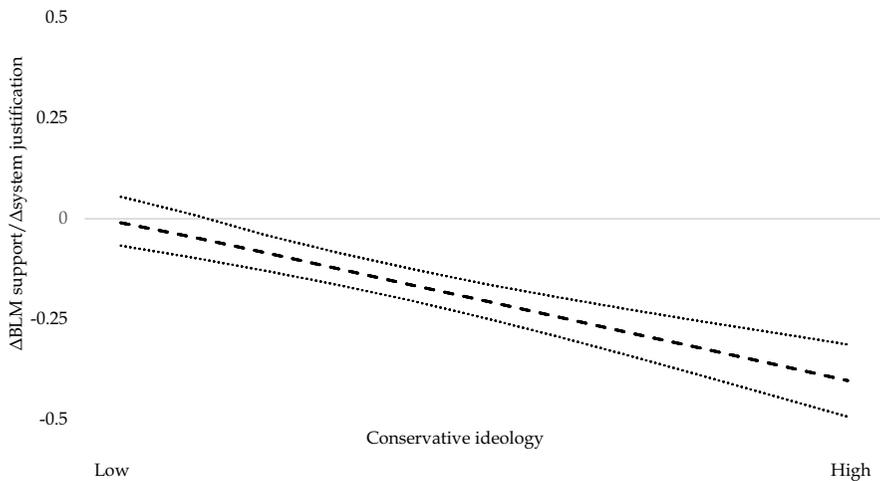
**Table 3.** Association Between System Justification and Asian Support for BLM by Levels of Conservative Ideology

	Support BLM	
System justification	-.151** (.020)	-.010 (.031)
Conservative ideology	-.464** (.016)	-.163** (.052)
System justification x conservatism	--	-.397** (.065)
Intercept	.983** (.020)	.883** (.026)
N		3,430

Note: For the sake of parsimony, only key predictors are displayed. Full results can be found in OA.2. Entries are OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. All variables run along a 0-1 range to ease interpretation. \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .10$ , two-tailed.

ideology measure is significantly associated with a reduction in Asian support for BLM of about forty-six percentage points. Furthermore, a unit increase in system justification is also negatively and reliably associated with a decrease in support for BLM of about fifteen percentage points ( $-.151$ ,  $SE=.020$ ). This pattern aligns with (H1), which predicted a negative relationship between these two variables.

To test (H2), we estimate our second regression model, which includes an interaction between system justification and conservative ideology. The relevant results are reported in Table 3’s rightmost column. There we see that system justification is again negatively associated with Asian American support for *BLM solidarity* ( $-.010$ ,  $SE=.031$ ,  $p < .849$ ), although this coefficient is imprecisely estimated. However, given the interaction between system justification and conservative ideology in this model, this coefficient reflects the relationship between system justification and support for BLM at the lowest level of conservative ideology—that is, among ideological liberals (cf. Kam and Franzese 2007; Brambor



**Figure 1.** Association Between System Justification and Support for BLM by Conservative Ideology (with 95% confidence intervals).

*et al.* 2006). This is a clear clue that system justification's influence on Asian American support for BLM might be moderated by ideology among Asian Americans (H2).

To formally evaluate this proposition, we focus on the significant interaction between system justification and conservatism ( $-.397$ ,  $SE=.065$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This coefficient tells us how system justification's influence on support for BLM changes as we move across our ideology scale from its liberal pole to its conservative one. Specifically, it indicates that as we move from very liberal (0) to very conservative (1) on our ideology measure, system justification significantly reduces Asian American support for BLM by nearly forty percentage points across our entire ideology scale, which strongly affirms (H2). This means that while system justification significantly reduces support for BLM among Asian American, on average, this pattern increases in intensity among more conservative individuals, net of our covariates. This moderated impact of system justification is depicted in Figure 1, which displays the association between system justification and support for BLM across higher levels of ideological conservatism among Asian American adults. These marginal effects (produced from Table 3's regression output) reveal that as one moves across our ideology scale in a conservative direction, higher system justification levels reliably erode support for BLM, consistent with (H2).

## Discussion

Using nationally representative survey data on Asian Americans, Study 1 finds evidence that supports H1 and H2. Indeed, the totality of our evidence from Study 1 indicates that higher system justification levels are both substantively and reliably associated with weaker Asian American support for BLM, which intensifies among more ideologically conservative individuals. Nevertheless, Study 1 cannot speak to

when system justification is catalyzed (*mediation*), among whom it is triggered more strongly (*moderated-mediation*), and how much it motivates broader opposition to solidarity-based efforts beyond Asian American support for the BLM movement. Thus, to improve measurement and clarify underlying processes (H3-H4), we conducted Study 2.

### **Study 2: Catalyzing System Justification via a Pre-Registered Experiment**

In partnership with Cloud Research, we recruited a sample of  $N = 650$  Asian American adults (see OA.3 for pre-registration). Participants had an average age of 36 years. About 43% of participants were female, with just over 66% reporting a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>4</sup>

After consenting to participate, Asian participants reported basic demographic data (e.g., age, gender, education), along with their ideology and partisan identity. We measured ideology with a scale ranging from 1-very liberal to 7-very conservative. In turn, we measured partisanship with a traditional 7-point scale, ranging from 1-strong Democrat to 7-strong Republican. To minimize measurement error, we again scaled these two items to operationalize ideological conservatism ( $r = .578$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed), which we say moderates Asian American reactions to the model minority myth (H4).

Following this brief pre-treatment schedule, we then randomly assigned Asian American adults to read a control news article or a treatment article on Asian people as model minorities, which we consider a rationalizing myth that is conducive to system justification (Sidanius & Pratto, 2000; see also Jost, 2020). While the control news article narrated the decline in giant tortoises across the globe (e.g., Hopkins et al. 2019), the treatment article narrated the socio-economic successes of Asian Americans, despite the continued existence of racial discrimination (full treatment in OA.4). Specifically, the treatment consisted of a mock news article attributed to the Associated Press, titled “*With a Strong Emphasis on Education, Hard Work, and Perseverance, Many Asian Americans are Reaching Socio-Economic Success, Unlike Many Blacks and Latinos*” This title captures the essence of the model minority myth (Kim 2003; 2023; Davies 2022), which valorizes Asian American successes in contrast to the alleged failures of Black and Latino people. Critically, the remaining text aligns with and expands on the trends highlighted by this article title. It also included a photo below the title depicting a range of national origin diversity within the Asian American population.

After completing a factual manipulation check (true/false) about the content of one's assigned article, all respondents completed three (3) items from a previously validated 8-item scale of system justification levels (Kay & Jost, 2003). Specifically, Asian American participants used a scale from 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree to complete the following statements: a) “In general, I find society to be fair”; b) “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve”; and c) “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.” We combine these items into an additive scale running from 0 to 1 ( $\alpha_{\text{system}} = .831$ ;  $M_{\text{system}} = .360$ ,  $SD = .242$ ).<sup>5</sup>

After measuring this hypothesized mediator, we then administered four (4) outcomes: *PoC solidarity*, *pro-Black policy*, *pro-Latino policy*, and *life satisfaction*. We gauged PoC solidarity with three statements completed on 5-point scale from

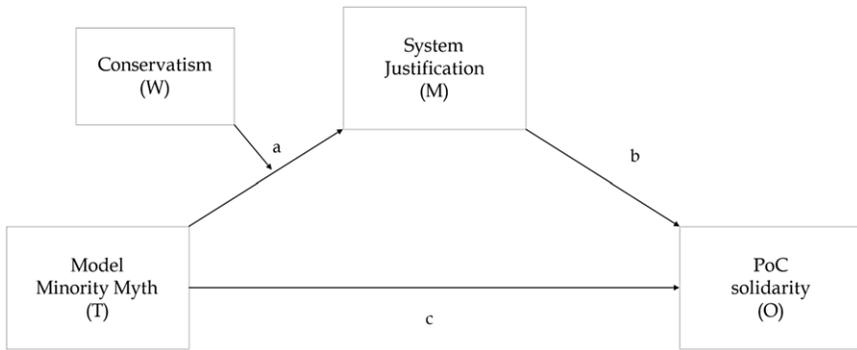
1-strongly disagree 5-strongly agree: a) “I feel solidarity with people of color, which include Black, Asian, and Latino people”; b) “The problems of Black, Latino, Asian, and other people of color are similar enough for them to be allies”; and c) “What happens to people of color in this country has something to do with what happens in my life as an Asian person.” Prior work has validated these items across PoC, including Asian Americans (Pérez, Goldman, Huo, et al. 2024). We combine replies to them into an additive scale reflecting agreement with PoC solidarity ( $\alpha_{PoC\ solidarity} = .726$ ;  $M_{PoC\ solidarity} = .657$ ,  $SD = .218$ ).

We then gauged support for pro-Black policy with three items on the same 5-point scale: d) “Set stricter criteria for the use of deadly force by police officers against Black suspects”; e) “Require bias training for police officers to limit their tendency to racially profile Black individuals”; and f) “Increase financial penalties against police officers found guilty of violating Black people’s civil rights.” We combine these into an additive scale reflecting average support for these proposals ( $\alpha_{pro-Black} = .847$ ,  $M_{pro-Black} = .791$ ,  $SD = .243$ ). Following a similar strategy, we measured support for pro-Latino policy with another trio of items, each answered on the same 5-point scale: g) “Increase the number of border patrol agents at the U.S.-Mexico border”; h) “Provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented Latino immigrants (reverse-coded)”; and i) “Renew efforts to prevent the deportation of Latino children brought to the United States as unauthorized minors.” We also use these items to create another additive scale indicating average support for these pro-Latino proposals ( $\alpha_{pro-Latino} = .789$ ,  $M_{pro-Latino} = .626$ ,  $SD = .256$ ).

Our final outcome is *life satisfaction*. We measured this variable to address the construct validity of system justification among a racially stigmatized population, like Asian Americans (Campbell and Stanley 1963). A key tenet of system justification is that humans express opinions in line with this motive because it performs a palliative function. For members of stigmatized populations, this palliative function counters, in the short term, the stressors associated with one’s disadvantaged position (Napier et al. 2020). Specifically, the expression of system justification buffers against this by leading people to construe the status quo as stable and fair, which implies a higher level of life satisfaction in the short run.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we measured life satisfaction with five previously validated items (Diener et al. 1985) answered on the same response scale as before: j) “In most ways my life is close to ideal”; k) “The conditions of my life are excellent”; l) “I am satisfied with my life”; m) “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life”; and n) “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” We build a final additive scale out of these items, also rescaled to a 0-1 range ( $\alpha_{life\ satisfaction} = .892$ ,  $M_{life\ satisfaction} = .491$ ,  $SD = .257$ ). All our analyses here use two-tailed tests and exact *p*-values.

## Study 2 Results

We use Stata 15.1’s **medeff** package, which simultaneously estimates the paths in a mediation model via Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). This appraises a treatment’s indirect effects in a causal inference framework (Imai & Yamamoto, 2013), allowing one to assess the robustness of downstream associations to confounding when mediators are not manipulated, as is the case here (Baron & Kenny, 1986).



**Figure 2.** Conceptual Mediation Model. *Note:* a = the path connecting the treatment’s (T) impact on the proposed mediator (M), moderated by (W). b = the path connecting the mediator (M) to our outcomes (O). c = the path reflecting the direct effect of our treatment (T) on our outcomes (O), which is not part of our theory and hypotheses. In a mediation analysis like this one, provisional evidence of mediation is obtained by multiplying “a” and “b” and seeing whether this joint effect is reliably different from zero at a given threshold of significance. This joint effect is also known as the Average Causal Mediation Effect or ACME.

Figure 2 depicts the conceptual model we estimate. We expect that exposure to the model minority myth will catalyze system justification (H3), with this process being more pronounced among ideologically conservative Asian Americans (H4). In turn, this should lead system justification to dampen PoC solidarity, support for pro-Black policy, and support for pro-Latino policy, while boosting reports of life satisfaction.

In any mediation analysis, it is crucial to first find treatment effects on a proposed mediator (Zhao et al., 2010). Therefore, we start with the effect of our model minority myth treatment on levels of system justification. We find no evidence of a direct, unmediated effect from exposure to the model minority myth to system justification (.016, SE=.019,  $p < .390$ ).<sup>7</sup> Given this result, we next test (H4) by assessing whether the effect of the model minority myth on system justification is moderated by conservative ideology. Table 4 provides the relevant results. Under the second column from left, Table 4 shows that exposure to the model minority myth (vs. control) insignificantly reduces levels of system justification identity (−.043, SE = .029,  $p = .144$ ). However, given the interactive nature of our analysis (cf. Kam and Franzese 2007; Brambor et al. 2006), this pattern is what emerges at the lowest level of our moderator, conservative ideology, which reflects the reaction of ideologically liberal Asian Americans to the model minority myth.

In contrast, the coefficient for the interaction between exposure to the model minority myth and ideological conservatism indicates how much the reaction to this legitimizing myth changes as we move in a conservative direction along our ideology scale. Specifically, this coefficient (.125, SE = .071,  $p < .081$ ) suggests that exposure to the model minority myth marginally increases system justification levels among more ideologically conservative Asian Americans. This heightened level of system justification is then significantly associated with reduced support for PoC solidarity (−.081, SE = .035,  $p < .001$ ), decreased support for pro-Black policy (−.173, SE = .037,  $p < .001$ ), and dampened support for pro-Latino policy (−.230, SE = .037,  $p < .001$ ), with these reductions ranging from 8 to 23 percentage points.

**Table 4.** Model Minority Myth Catalyzes System Justification Among Asian American Conservatives, Which Then Increases Opposition to a Variety of Solidarity-Based Opinions

	System Justification (mediator)		Support PoC Solidarity	Support Pro-Black Policy	Support Pro-Latino Policy
Model Minority Myth	-.043 (.029)	System Justification → (Mediator)	-.081*** (.035)	-.173*** (.037)	-.230*** (.037)
Conservative Ideology	.357*** (.052)				
Myth x Conservative	.125* (.071)				
N	650				

*Note:* Data are from an online experiment on Cloud Research. Entries are OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1, making them interpretable as percentage-point shifts. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .10$ , two-tailed.

**Table 5.** Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACMEs) by Proposed Mediator and Outcome Among Asian Conservatives When the Model Minority Myth is Affirmed, with 90% Confidence Intervals in Brackets

	Support PoC Solidarity	Support Pro-Black policy	Support pro-Latino policy
System justification	-.010 [-.025, .000]	-.022 [-.047, -.001]	-.030 [-.060, -.002]

*Note:* Data are from an online experiment conducted via Cloud Research. Entries are Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACMEs), with 90% confidence intervals in brackets. These ACMEs reflect the degree to which the interaction between our treatment and *ideological conservatism* impacts our outcomes through our proposed mediator, *system justification*. Confidence intervals that exclude a zero value are reliable at  $p = .10$  or better. Exact  $p$ -values reported in text.

While these patterns are consistent with system justification’s mediating role, more diagnostic evidence comes from formally appraising whether the paths from a) model minority x conservatism to b) system justification to c) reductions in solidarity-based outcomes are themselves reliable (see Figure 2). Table 5 reports these average causal mediation effects, or ACMEs, showing that all are correctly signed, with two out of three of them being significant at the 10% level or better. For example, the ACME for pro-Black policy indicates that exposure to the model minority myth marginally reduces support for this outcome through heightened system justification levels among conservative Asian Americans (-.022, SE=.012,  $p < .067$ ). In turn, the ACME for pro-Latino policy suggests that exposure to the model minority myth significantly decreases support for these policies (-.030, SE=.015,  $p < .046$ ). These patterns further support (H4).

***Is system justification palliative for Asian Americans?***

So far, the results from our experiment align with the claim that system justification is partly responsible for reductions in Asian Americans’ solidarity with other people of color. However, we have not addressed whether system justification operates in

this manner because of its palliative influence. If you recall, a key tenet about system justification's nature is that people express opinions in line with this motive because it performs palliatively. That is, system justification helps stigmatized populations counter the stressors associated with their disadvantaged position by placing faith in the racial status quo—which is stable and predictable—despite its role in producing racial inequalities. This palliative function counters the stressors associated with one's disadvantaged position, leading one to have a more optimistic view of life in the short run. If true, then we should expect a similar pattern as before, where the model minority myth increases system justification levels among conservative Asian Americans, which then leads to significantly higher levels of life satisfaction (which we measured as our last outcome). This means we should anticipate an indirect effect, or ACME, with a positive sign, which is different from the negatively signed ACMEs reported in Table 5. Consistent with this view, we find that the ACME for life satisfaction is both positive and statistically reliable ( $ACME_{\text{life satisfaction}} = .053$ , 90% CI [.010, .100],  $p < .021$ ). This implies that among more conservative Asian Americans, exposure to the model minority myth heightens their sense of system justification, which then leads to greater life satisfaction, consistent with the view of system justification as serving a palliative function.

### Sensitivity analyses

Our experimental evidence up to this point broadly aligns with two of our hypotheses about how and among whom *system justification* is catalyzed (H3-H4). Moreover, these experimental results affirm Study 1's observational analyses. However, just like Study 1's results, our experimental findings here are also vulnerable to possible confounding. Astute readers will note that while our treatment (i.e., model minority myth) is randomly assigned, our proposed mediator, system justification, is not. This means that the downstream associations between system justification and our outcomes could be driven by unmeasured, third variables. We formally address this possibility here with a sensitivity analysis (cf. Imai and Yamamoto 2013).

More specifically, we estimate how large the error correlation ( $\rho$ , rho) between our mediator and an unmodeled confounder must be for our estimated mediated effects to be compromised (Imai & Yamamoto, 2013). This quantity enables readers to better appraise our mediated results by bounding them away from zero. Evidence of robustness on this metric does not establish system justification's downstream causal influence. Instead, it serves to increase confidence in the viability of this variable as a mediator, which subsequent researchers can test with research designs that have more causal leverage than ours (Glynn 2022).

We conduct these sensitivity tests on the three outcomes where the corresponding ACME was reliably different than zero at the 10% level or better: 1) support pro-Black policy, 2) support pro-Latino policy, and 3) higher life satisfaction. On these outcomes, we find that these ACMEs are moderately robust, with sensitivity parameters ranging from  $\rho_{\text{pro-Black}} = -.182$  to  $\rho_{\text{pro-Latino}} = -.240$ , to  $\rho_{\text{life satisfaction}} = .325$ . For example, these sensitivity parameters inform us that we would have to observe an error correlation of about (.325) for the mediated effect on life satisfaction to vanish completely to zero. These sensitivity parameters align with

analyses for conceptually similar experiments (e.g., Pérez *et al.*, 2024; Vicuña *et al.* 2023).

## Discussion

Using a mediation experimental design with system justification as our proposed mediator, our analysis uncovered some evidence in line with (H3) and (H4). That is, exposure to the model minority myth catalyzed system justification among conservative Asian Americans, which then reduced solidarity with people of color across (which we operationalized in three ways). We also found evidence that these deficits in solidarity with PoC among Asian American conservatives can be traced to the palliative function played by system justification, as indicated by the increases in reports of life satisfaction in this sample. By these indications, then, Study 2 further reveals that system justification is an important, but underappreciated, factor in leading conservative Asian Americans to spurn solidarity with PoC.

## Summary and Implications

We endeavored to better understand why some people of color spurn solidarity with other racially stigmatized individuals. Focusing on the important case of Asian Americans, we proposed system justification as one possible answer. As a deep-seated predisposition, system justification reflects the degree to which an individual bolsters or affirms the (racial) status quo. Since all systems of oppression—including racial hierarchies—thrive on a consensus between members of a dominant ingroup and *some* members of a stigmatized outgroup(s) (Jost 2020; see also Sidanius and Pratto 2000), system justification provides a unified mechanism that explains how some people of color contribute to the stability of the racial status quo. On these dimensions, our empirical efforts uncovered evidence that (1) system justification is a meaningful component of Asian American views of solidarity with people of color; (2) system justification's influence on Asian American solidarity with PoC is more pronounced among ideologically conservative individuals; (3) system justification among more conservative Asian Americans is catalyzed by highlighting the model minority myth, which valorizes this group in comparison to Black and Latino individuals; and (4) system justification plays a palliative function for Asian Americans, consistent with this concept's formulation.

What should scholars of race, ethnicity, and politics make of these results? We wish to focus researchers' attention on three implications. On the theoretical side of things, our findings here provide yet another important clue as to why solidarity between people of color is so difficult to achieve in many cases. For more than three decades now, researchers have highlighted the many ways that structural inequalities between racially stigmatized individuals spark and amplify tensions and even violence between various people of color, including Black, Latino, and Asian individuals (e.g., McClain and Karnig 1990; Kaufmann 2004; Kim 2003; Meier *et al.* 2004; McClain *et al.* 2007; Benjamin 2017; Carter 2019; Kim 2023). Our evidence suggests that part of why these inequalities display a long shelf life is because some PoC systematically contributes to their stability by affirming the very system responsible for these disparities. When we couple the findings reported here

with evidence of system justification tendencies among other racially stigmatized groups, such as Black Americans (Jost et al. 2004) and Latinos (Pérez et al. 2024), it is much easier to appreciate how some segments within these populations help to prop up systems of oppression like racial hierarchies, especially through their spurning of solidarity with other racially stigmatized populations.

Indeed, an additional implication of our findings is the pressing need to better understand politically conservative tendencies—and their political effects—among people of color (e.g., Poon 2024; Kim 2023; Jefferson 2023; Hickel et al. 2020; Alamillo 2019; Philpot 2017). Research on PoC often focuses on the politically progressive currents within these populations, as evidenced, for example, by the significantly pro-Democratic levels of partisanship among Black Americans (White and Laird 2020), Latinos (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010), and Asian Americans (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Junn, et al. 2008). But this hyper-focus, we think, has come at the expense of better understanding the conservative inclinations of some PoC and the role they play in inter- and intra-group politics. This blind spot has taken on a greater sense of urgency as scholars debate the extent to which some people of color support racially conservative agendas. We have homed in on the independent role played by system justification, which helps to clarify matters by showing how this disposition orients some PoC to uphold the racial inequalities that conservative movements rail against. An additional step forward in this direction entails, not just recognizing system justification's prevalence among some PoC, but also synergistic efforts that better integrate system justification with present understandings of other conservative inclinations among PoC, including “denial of racism” (Alamillo 2019); “respectability politics,” (Jefferson 2023); and “anti-Blackness” (Pérez, Robertson, and Vicuña 2023). These efforts will need to be sustained and integrative in flavor, thus helping scholars to clarify how these concepts relate to one another—and how, in turn, they lead some people of color to contribute to racial inequalities.

This campaign to better understand system justification's influence on PoC will require more intricate research designs, especially if we wish to understand how this predisposition operates as a psychological mechanism. Our evidence suggests that system justification is a viable mechanism behind the racial attitudes of conservative Asian Americans. The strength of our approach comes from finding converging evidence across distinct research designs (e.g., observational, experimental). But to more fully establish the causal nature of system justification, scholars must devise ways that exact more leverage over this proposed mechanism. For example, in our experiment, we manipulated levels of system justification, but did not manipulate its downstream influence (which is typical in these types of experimental designs) (Hayes 2022). One possible innovation on this front is to conduct additional experiments, with larger sample sizes, that amplify and weaken the downstream impact of system justification through additional treatments (e.g., Imai and Yamamoto 2013; Pirlott and MacKinnon 2016). If researchers observe that system justification's downstream influence waxes and wanes according to this kind of manipulation, scholars can paint a clearer picture of system justification's causal influence on Asian Americans and people of color more generally. Given the continued racial diversification of the United States—and the growing political importance of coalitions between people of color (Wilkinson 2015; Benjamin 2017; Pérez 2021)—we think these methodological efforts are a worthy pursuit.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.26>

**Funding statement.** This research did not receive any specific financial support.

## Notes

**1** Across our studies, we aimed to measure all variables with multi-item scales whenever possible. In building these scales, we sought to use a heterogeneous set of items that allow us to tap into a broad range of opinions on a given attitude dimension (e.g., system justification). These steps help ensure that we validly and reliably tap into a respective attitude (Brown 2007; Pérez and Mártir 2024).

**2** In a highly polarized era, liberals and conservatives are better sorted into their “correct” party (Levendusky 2009). This entails fewer socially conservative Democrats and fewer socially liberal Republicans (i.e., less ideological variance within parties). Thus, measures of ideology and partisanship are now substantially correlated, with increased shared variance between them. Our conservatism scale seizes on this shared variance while averaging out random measurement error. This reduction in measurement error is key in interactive and mediational analyses like ours (Hayes 2022).

**3** As described in (OA.1), we operationalize anti-Black prejudice with a single stereotype item asking Asian respondents how violent (rather than peaceful) they perceive Blacks to be. We do this because measures of *racial resentment* (another form of anti-Black prejudice) are routinely criticized for conflating prejudice with ideology (Davis and Wilson 2021; Tesler 2016). This feature increases racial resentment’s collinearity with system justification and conservative ideology, which introduces a suppressor effect (Martinez Gutierrez and Cribbie 2021) (see results in OA.2).

**4** This was the maximum number of cases we were able to yield during a roughly 1-week time frame, a decision we pre-registered (see OA.3). Per our pre-registration, we originally aimed to yield N=800 to uncover a small effect (Cohen’s  $d \sim .20$ ) at  $p < .05$ , two-tailed with 80% power. With N=650, we can detect the same effect size at 80% power, but with a more relaxed alpha level, i.e.,  $p < .10$ , two-tailed. The minimum sample size to detect an effect of this size at this more relaxed alpha level is N=620.

**5** We only administered three (3) of the original eight (8) items in Kay and Jost (2003) to minimize respondent fatigue.

**6** In the long run, system justification is associated with depression and maladjustment among disadvantaged individuals because they internalize their alleged inferiority (Jost 2020).

**7** Moreover, there are no direct effects from exposure to the model minority myth to solidarity with PoC ( $-.011$ ,  $SE = .017$ ,  $p < .533$ ); pro-Latino policy ( $-.020$ ,  $SE = .020$ ,  $p < .325$ ); pro-Black policy ( $-.028$ ,  $SE = .019$ ,  $p < .139$ ); or life satisfaction ( $.009$ ,  $SE = .020$ ,  $p < .658$ ). Finally, ideology does not moderate any direct effect from the model minority myth to solidarity with PoC ( $.029$ ,  $SE = .063$ ,  $p < .649$ ); pro-Latino policy ( $.030$ ,  $SE = .069$ ,  $p < .658$ ); pro-Black policy ( $-.055$ ,  $SE = .068$ ,  $p < .420$ ); or life satisfaction ( $.093$ ,  $SE = .024$ ,  $p < .273$ ).

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**Cite this article:** Pérez E, Rogbeer K, Tran S, Huynh T, Ortiz E, Crossley H, Halili A, Lee SJ, Lempert J, Morel A, and Passananti M (2025). Rage Against the Machine? Why System Justification Drives (Some) Asian Americans to Spurn Racial Solidarity. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.26>