

Crafting Democratic Futures: Understanding Political Conditions and Racialized Attitudes Toward Black Reparations



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As a growing number of states and municipalities consider reparative policies for Black Americans, it is important to understand what shapes support for and opposition to these policies. We explore the role that awareness of racial inequality plays in shaping attitudes. Drawing on data from a large, representative survey in Detroit and one national survey, we find that awareness of racial inequality plays a powerful role in the likelihood of supporting reparative policies. Yet, in follow-up surveys, we find that exposing respondents to information on the rationale for and importance of reparations does not shift public support. These findings suggest that it is the awareness of racial inequality that is cultivated over time that appears to be the dominant force in building support for reparations. These findings are particularly important during a time when many school districts are severely restricting access to information about the history of Black Americans.

Keywords: reparations, United States, racialized attitudes, racial inequality

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After the American Revolution, Belinda Sutton, a Ghanaian-born enslaved woman who labored on the Royall plantation in Antigua before being transferred to Bedford, Massachusetts, registered the first successful petition in 1783 for reparations for years of uncompensated forced labor (Brewington 2021). Years later, Henrietta Wood, who had gained her freedom only to be wrongly resold into slavery, won her suit for reparations against Zebulon Ward, tallying the largest amount ever awarded a former enslaved person (McDaniel 2019). Although these few individual cases of success may be perceived by some as paramount, they are outnumbered by the overwhelming weight of history that followed. After the Civil War, more than four million formerly enslaved Americans sought some kind of apology, restitution, and redress for nearly two hundred and fifty years of servitude, only to see the country turn its back on them. Through the Homestead Act (1862), signed by President Abraham Lincoln, the United States government provided 160-acre plots for mostly native and foreign-born Whites (Dick 1970, U.S. Senate 2020b). He also signed a bill to compensate enslavers up to \$300 in cash for every newly freed person (U.S. Senate 2020a). Yet talk of land redistribution or forty acres and a mule for African Americans disappeared as a policy option almost as quickly as it arose even though former Sea Island planters who repledged allegiance to the United States were compensated for the loss of their human property. This has left the present generation to finally address the unfinished task of reparations for slavery, segregation, and the more recent period of racialized mass incarceration.

Conversations surrounding reparations for

American descendants of enslaved peoples have in recent years resurged in everyday American life, from pop culture to politics. While on the campaign trail, then presidential candidate Joe Biden committed to supporting a study of reparations for African Americans following the mass social movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020. This made Biden one of many 2020 Democratic presidential candidates openly supporting the study of reparations for Black Americans.¹ In 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee voted to move forward with H.R. 40, a bill introduced by Michigan Representative John Conyers in 1989 to study slavery reparations—although the bill was never scheduled for a vote from the full House. The ongoing increase in the visibility of reparations at the local and national stage begets the need for more detailed, nuanced, and empirically based examinations of attitudes about reparations in the United States. Current scholarship confronts the study of attitudes toward reparations generally from the perspective of nationally representative and sometimes nonrepresentative respondent samples (but see also Reichelmann, Roos, and Hughes 2022; Craemer 2009). This direction of scholarly inquiry, though essential to the broader study of reparations, does not place much emphasis on the awareness of and information about racial inequality. Projects are under way using historical methodology to explore race, history, and reparations in communities across the nation, most notably the Crafting Democratic Futures project anchored at the University of Michigan.² This project does not fully mobilize a social scientific approach, however. Consequently, the subcategory of local population's general attitudes and

1. During the 2020 election, fifteen of the Democratic presidential primary candidates espoused similar (though sometimes conflicting) views on supporting the study of reparations.

2. Housed within the Center for Social Solutions at the University of Michigan, the Mellon-funded Crafting Democratic Futures (CDF) project is a national network of humanities scholars located at nine geographically and organizationally diverse colleges and universities to develop tangible suggestions for research-informed, community-based reparations solutions. CDF teams span across the central north region of the country, across the Midwest, and down the eastern seaboard. Specifically, CDF teams comprise partners from Carnegie Mellon, Emory, and Rutgers (Newark) universities; Concordia (Moorhead, Minnesota), Connecticut, Spelman, Wesleyan (Macon, Georgia), and Wofford (Spartanburg, South Carolina) colleges; and the University of Michigan campuses. Pittsburgh's public media flagship, WQED (multimedia), is also a key partner, charged with developing a public documentary about reparations and race in the United States.

the attitudinal precursors of support for reparations in relation to broader national attitudes are left underexplored, a gap this article seeks to fill.

Drawing on data from a large, representative survey experiment in Detroit, Michigan, and one national survey experiment, we explore whether support for reparations hinges on an awareness of racial inequality and general political knowledge. We also explore how domain-specific knowledge of racial inequality and perceptions of the magnitude of inequality matter for assessing attitudes toward reparations. Does support for reparations hinge on an awareness of racial inequality? Further, what role does knowledge of racial inequality, and perceptions of the magnitude of inequality play in this process?

To address these questions, we first study variation in support for reparations in two political contexts: a majority-Black city that has already taken steps toward building a reparations policy, as well as a national sample of Black and White Americans. We then evaluate how general political knowledge and awareness of racial inequality affects support for reparations. To what degree is opposition to reparations a function of one simply not knowing the historical, political, and sociocultural context of Black Americans? We examine the magnitude to which a lack of awareness regarding the lasting impact of racism and its effects on American society shapes widespread support for reparations. And, to the extent that greater awareness of racial inequality does affect support for reparations, how effective are simple informational interventions at increasing awareness and support for reparative policies?

Overall, our findings highlight that even though awareness of racial inequality plays a powerful role in the likelihood of supporting reparative policies, one-shot messages are not enough to shift support. It is the awareness of racial inequality cultivated over time and reinforced by multiple institutions that appears to be the dominant force in building support for reparations. This is critical in a context in which education on anti-racism, African American history, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are being attacked and even banned across

the United States (Cammarota 2017; Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023).

THE CONTEXT AND CASE FOR BLACK REPARATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Since the civil rights movement, the African American community has achieved some progress in various social, economic, and political areas. For example, as we see in areas of education and political representation, the Black high school graduation rate (88 percent) is on par with the national average (90 percent), the number of Black politicians holding elected office is on an upward trend, and growth of the Black middle class is strong (Day 2020; Brown and Atske 2021; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998). However, despite the progress the Black community since 1964, much more remains to accomplish. Moreover, the country's belief in what psychologist Jennifer Richeson frames as "the mythology of racial progress," fuels the false narrative that the aggregate socioeconomic status of the Black community is experiencing a strong and steady upward trend (Richeson 2020). Belief in this myth is not exclusive to White Americans.

However, the reality for this community is that the gains made in the mid- to late twentieth century have since stalled dramatically. Racial inequities persist and targeted remedies are needed to eliminate disparities that are a consequence of targeted and discriminatory policies of the past and present.

The Persistence of Racial Disparities

An examination of the national Black-White wealth gap highlights the ongoing influence of U.S. policies in perpetuating racial disparities across various dimensions, including education and homeownership. These disparities highlight the need for racially targeted redress for the historic impacts of slavery and ongoing discrimination. Between 1900 and 1970, the racial gap in homeownership narrowed at a steady rate, stagnated, then subsequently reversed (Putnam and Garrett 2020). In 1960, according to Census Bureau data, the White homeownership rate was 65 percent and for Blacks 38 percent. In 2022, 74.6 percent of White households owned their homes, versus 45.3 percent of Black households. These rates

reflect that the racial gap in homeownership is larger in 2022 (30 points) than in 1960 (27 points) (Henderson 2022). In education, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data also show persistent racial inequities in college attendance rates. In every year since 2011, the college enrollment rate immediately following high school completion for White students was higher than for Black students (NCES 2022). Also, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree from a four-year postsecondary institution in fall 2010 was 64 percent for White students but just 40 percent for Black students; a 24 percent difference (U.S. Department of Education 2019). To address persistent levels of racial inequalities such as those highlighted earlier, government-sponsored interventions and modes of repair and redress are required (Bailey et al. 2017; Williams and Cooper 2019). Activists and scholars alike have long championed reparations as an essential component of the solution to the socioeconomic plight of the Black community (Coates 2014; Darity and Mullen 2022; Darity and Frank 2003).

Attitudes About Reparations Over Time

American support for Jim Crow-era policies and traditional anti-Black prejudice, often justified by beliefs in biological racism, diminished during the mid- to late twentieth century (for evidence that these trends have been overstated, see Jardina and Piston 2022, 2023). However, policies aimed at increasing opportunities for African Americans continue to face minimal support and strong opposition. When looking specifically at attitudes toward reparations, recent polling data reveals that well over half of Americans oppose the general idea with little variation over time (Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; Sharpe 2021; Blazina and Cox 2022). Despite the country's misguided belief in the myth of racial progress and the public's friction on their support for reparations, the United States currently finds itself in an era of

renewed interest in this policy area. On the 2020 presidential campaign trail, approximately six Democratic party primary candidates, including President Joe Biden, openly supported the study of reparations for Black Americans at the federal level. The longstanding call for reparations in the African American community does not come without precedent. The U.S. government provided reparations to other racial-ethnic groups such as Japanese Americans, Native Alaskans, and (as discussed) White Americans in the mid-1800s. Scholars have further posited that America currently practices forms of restorative justice as compensation for harms individuals have suffered (Ranalli and Hughes 2022). Thus, if the United States is no stranger to reparations, why is the opposition from the American public and government so vehement about repair focused on the harms enacted against African Americans?

Despite the lack of progress on reparations at the federal level, where H.R. 40 has remained stalled for more than thirty years, momentum is increasing at the local level. This highlights the importance of scholarly examination of national and local general attitudes toward reparations. In 2019 in Illinois, the Evanston City Council established a reparations fund aimed at addressing racial inequality around housing.³ Since then, a range of other states and localities, including Detroit, Michigan, have established reparations task forces or advisory councils to study, develop, and implement proposals for reparations for African Americans living in their respective areas (Hain and Mulcahy 2023; for more on local reparations programs, see Edwards et al. 2024; Newton and Nelsen 2024, this issue; Davies et al. 2024, this issue). It is therefore relevant to further understand local populations' general attitudes and public opinion toward reparations and whether those attitudes differ from national public opinion.

Due to the reality that most Americans endorse the myth of racial progress, the viability

3. In the case of Evanston, the policy is centered as a housing voucher program. Though promoted as a start toward reparations for the city's citizens, many have expressed displeasure with the implementation of this policy initiative (for more, see Darity and Mullen 2020).

of a successful federal legislative initiative targeted around reparations may appear unlikely (Kraus et al. 2019). This pessimistic sentiment is reflected in a recently published nationwide University of Massachusetts Amherst/WCVB poll. Here, researchers found that close to half of Americans conclude the federal government “definitely should not” provide cash payments to the descendants of slaves. Whereas 62 percent of respondents note an opposition to the idea of reparations in general, the strongest justification for the opposition is perception of African Americans as undeserving (Sharpe 2021). In terms of support for reparations by race, 28 percent of White respondents in this poll express support for reparations whereas 86 percent of African Americans express support for compensating the descendants of slaves. Explanations for White opposition to race-targeted policies consider racial resentment, group self-interest, and support for symbolic or race-neutral policies (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Bobo and Kluegel 1993). African Americans generally express support for race-targeted policies; Latino and Asian Americans vary (Lopez and Pantoja 2004). This consensus reflects the racial and ethnic differences noted in partisan and ideological identification over time. Furthermore, consensus in scholarship is established on the need to uncover more factors that underlie racial and ethnic differences in attitudes toward policies (race-neutral or targeted) on addressing racial inequality in America. By uncovering these factors, this realm of scholarly inquiry possesses strong potential to shape the political strategy of reparations movements at the national and local levels.

Factors Shaping Attitudes Toward Reparations

Current literature on White and Black attitudes toward reparations offers mixed results. For White Americans, attitudes toward reparations are affected by their racial identity, among other factors. In an original survey fielded in 2016, Ashley Reichelmann and Matthew Hunt (2022) found that private self-regard predicts opposition to reparative measures, while public self-regard fosters support for such measures. Private self-regard is defined as one’s

own personal sense of self, compared to public self-regard, which is how one is perceived by other people (i.e., the public). In tandem with scholarship surrounding support for race-neutral and symbolic policy implementation, Reichelmann and Hunt (2021) found White Americans are least opposed to selected symbolic reparations and policies designed to ensure “fair treatment” of Black Americans in the workplace. In terms of opposition and form of reparation, White respondents were most opposed to reparations in the form of direct financial payments to Black Americans and to policies involving “preferential treatment” of African Americans in the workplace. In another study, Reichelmann, Micah Roos, and Michael Hughes (2022) yielded similar findings. They found opposition toward race-targeted policies varies depending on how explicit the race-targeting is and whether the policy’s goal is opportunity enhancement or equality of outcomes. Demographically, White respondents who were most opposed to reparations were older and more conservative and viewed race relations as unimportant.

Further aspects of the literature find that attitudes toward reparations for slavery specifically and support for various forms of compensation are mediated by the belief that race relations will be hurt or hindered by awarding reparations (Campo, Mastin, and Frazer 2010). Although these authors found strong opposition to reparations for individuals, they also found more support for other forms of compensation, such as a slavery museum and community development programs. Again, this work highlights one of the largest commonalities across this area of study: public support of reparations, however tepid, is driven by symbolic measures rather than initiatives to alleviate socioeconomic disparities.

Although current scholarship has considered attitudes toward reparations in the United States generally, the focus is around White American attitudes. More inquiry and attention is needed for understanding attitudes more broadly. Additionally, more attention is needed on how current levels of general political knowledge and domain-specific knowledge about the existence or magnitude of racial in-

equality in the United States may or may not mediate support for reparations.⁴ This article aims to provide both.

METHODS

We draw on data from a large, representative survey in Detroit (the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, or DMACS) and one national survey experiment administered by the Black Truth Project (BTP) at the University of Michigan to explore racial attitudes toward reparations, particularly among Black and White respondents. DMACS is a University of Michigan initiative that regularly surveys a broad, representative group of Detroit residents about their communities, including their expectations, perceptions, priorities, and aspirations. BTP examines attitudes toward racial inequality and how knowledge about the racial wealth gap affects policy preferences among Black and White participants. The project explores messaging strategies for a nationally diverse population. Together, these datasets allow us to conduct a more comprehensive examination of racialized attitudes toward reparations using both local and national data. We are then able to offer timely information regarding the ways in which knowledge of and information about racial inequality impacts attitudes toward reparations. Last, the results of these analyses provide insights about prospects for the adoption of a national program of Black reparations.

Study One: Awareness and Attitudes in Detroit

Our first set of analyses comes from the city of Detroit. Although studies addressing a nationally representative respondent pool can illuminate attitudes toward reparative policies among a larger, more diverse sample of Americans, it is often difficult to account for variation in the political support of reparative policies across state and local contexts. Understanding the attitudes of local populations toward reparations is becoming increasingly important,

particularly in light of various local movements that aim to raise awareness and explore strategies for achieving reparations.

Such analyses exploring local attitudes are particularly important when political approaches to dealing with America's racial history are moving in dramatically opposing directions. Specifically, some states and municipalities are implementing reparative policies and others are implementing bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion officers, books, and curricula on related themes (Cammarota 2017; Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023; Friedman and Johnson 2022).

In turn, a focus on Detroit offers insights into two elements of context that we believe may be important to consider: the size of the local Black population and local familiarity with reparations. The city has a population that is 78 percent Black according to the U.S. Census, enabling us to examine attitudes toward reparative policies within a majority-Black context—something that has shown to affect political behavior and attitudes toward radicalized issues in the past (Howell, Perry, and Vile 2004; Fraga 2016; Hoston 2007). Additionally, Detroit is among the cities that have launched a reparations task force to study the ongoing and historic harms of slavery and systemic racism. The task force aims to make recommendations for city-level programs to address institutionalized sources of contemporary inequity in the areas of housing and economic development. Thus, a focus on a single municipal context can shed light on how attitudes toward reparations are taking form in the context of unique local political and historical dynamics.

We leverage representative data from Detroit, where residents are asked about their overall support for reparations.

To understand Detroiters' sources of support for and opposition to reparations, we administered a survey to a representative sample of 2,339 Detroit households through the DMACS. Respondents were part of a survey panel drawn from an address-based probability sample of all occupied Detroit households.

4. Here, domain-specific knowledge is defined as knowledge about a specific area. One can have high levels of broad political knowledge (such as knowing the three branches of government or naming the chief justice of the Supreme Court) but lower levels regarding specific areas (such as foreign policy or racial inequality).

Surveys were self-administered online or interviewer-administered via telephone between June 16, 2022, and August 26, 2022. The survey obtained an overall response rate of 26.8 percent (using American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 1), including 67.2 percent for respondents who had completed prior surveys with DMACS and 9.3 percent for new panelists. The responses were then weighted in two stages. In the first stage, we used a poststratification technique to account for the differential selection probabilities due to sample stratification at various points in panel construction. We calibrated the sample to match the estimated population aged eighteen and older in each stratum. In the second stage, we applied raking to adjust the weights to match the estimated distributions on gender, age, race, education, and income based on the Census Bureau's 2021 one-year estimates from the American Community Survey. Our analyses focus on the two largest ethnoracial groups in the city: Black Detroiters ($n = 1,253$) and White Detroiters ($n = 274$).

To measure attitudes toward reparations, we asked respondents the following question: "Some people think that some form of payment needs to be made to Black Americans to counter the lasting impacts of slavery and discriminatory policies. Others do not. What about you? How much do you support or oppose providing some form of payment to Black Americans to counter the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies?" Additionally, to assess the role that knowledge about the level of economic inequality between Black and White Americans plays in attitudes toward reparations, we included a question about beliefs in levels of economic inequality. Referred to as recognition of economic inequality, the ques-

tion asked: "Now thinking about the financial situation of Black people compared with White people today, would you say the average Black person is better off, worse off, or just about as well off as the average White person in terms of income, wealth, and overall financial situation?" Finally, to measure recognition of the legacy of racism, we created an index based on three survey questions assessing respondents' knowledge of the ongoing impacts of slavery and discrimination. This index includes measures assessing whether respondents believe that: "the legacy of slavery and discrimination against Black people continues to affect Black people," "racial discrimination is the main reason why many Black people can't get ahead these days," and "Black people who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their condition." Responses to all items were coded on a 5-point scale so that higher values were associated with a greater likelihood of believing that racial discrimination has significantly impeded access to wealth and economic opportunity among Black Americans. The index, recognition of the legacy of racism, had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.62, indicating reasonable reliability.⁵

In addition to measuring the relationship between knowledge about racial inequality and support for reparations, we also considered whether changes in knowledge could causally affect levels of support for reparations. To do so, we conducted a survey experiment in which half of respondents were randomly assigned to view a brief paragraph about how slavery and the Jim Crow era created barriers to Black socioeconomic well-being before the questions on reparations.⁶ The other half did not see that information. Together this allowed us not only to test the relationship between awareness of racial inequality and sup-

5. Recognition of economic inequality and recognition of the legacy of racism are moderately correlated, with a Pearson's correlation of 0.4087.

6. The text that those in the treatment group were exposed to read, "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and through the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments prevented many Black people from doing things such as earning income, owning property, opening bank accounts, attending school, and accessing health care. With this in mind, Detroit established a task force last year to make recommendations for programs that address historical discrimination against the Black community in Detroit."

port for reparations, but whether exposure to historical facts about government-fostered racial inequality is sufficient to increase support for reparations.⁷

How broad is Detroiters' support for reparations? Our findings demonstrate that support for reparations in the city of Detroit is quite extensive, with 64 percent of Detroiters supporting the provision of some form of payment to Black Americans to counter the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies. Just under a quarter of Detroit households (22 percent) indicated ambivalence or uncertainty about reparations, and said that they "neither support nor oppose." Thirteen percent indicated opposition to reparations for Black Americans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Black Detroiters were more likely to support reparations for Black Americans than White Detroiters, nearly three of every four Blacks (72 percent) versus significantly fewer Whites (38 percent).

Interestingly, among White Detroiters, higher levels of education and income were associated with greater opposition to reparative policies. Put differently, White Detroiters with more education were significantly less likely to support reparative policies than those with less formal education ($b = -0.4372$; $p < .05$). A similar pattern was found when looking at income: White Detroiters making \$60,000 or more were less likely to support reparative policies than those making less than \$30,000 ($b = -0.4262$; $p < .05$). This pattern of findings is consistent with past work demonstrating that White Americans tend to be relatively unsupportive of race-targeted policies, like reparations, especially when those policies seek to equalize outcomes between Black and White people (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Perhaps higher-resourced White Detroiters are more resistant to reparations because it threatens their own economic privileges and could possibly raise their levels of zero-sum competition between Black Americans. Further research

about heterogeneity in support for reparations among White people may be a fruitful avenue for future research to better understand what is driving this finding.

Next, we explored how perceptions of racial inequality between Black and White people mapped onto support for reparations for Black Americans, controlling for education, income, age, and gender. Overall, recognition of economic inequality played an important role in levels of support for reparations in Detroit (see table 1). Black Detroiters who said that Black people are a lot worse off economically than White people were more likely to support reparations ($b = 1.151$; $p < .000$). However, this was not true among White Detroiters. White Detroiters' attitudes toward reparations were unaffected by their level of recognition of economic inequality. In turn, efforts to increase these levels might increase support for reparations among Black Americans but would be unlikely to have an effect among White Americans.

Unlike recognition of economic inequality, our other measure assessing awareness of racial inequality, recognition of the legacy of racism, had a broader and more consistent relationship with support for reparations. Among Black ($b = 0.410$, $p < .000$) and White Detroiters ($b = 0.736$, $p < .000$), those who reported high levels of recognition of the legacy of racism were significantly more likely to support reparations for Black Americans than those with lower levels. Interestingly, these findings reveal that recognition of the legacy of racism has a larger impact on White Detroiters than on Black (figure 1).

In our final approach to capturing the effect of knowledge of racial inequality on support for reparations, we explore the effects of providing information about the history of U.S. racism on support for reparations. Interestingly, we find that exposure to historical facts about government-fostered racial inequality had no

7. Given that our measure of support for reparations referenced "the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies" in the question wording, the experimental group received information highlighting the tangible effects of these policies. Because many Americans, and especially White Americans, who do not support structural reforms to address racial inequality are not aware of or do not acknowledge the role of institutional racism, future research should examine additional ways to test the impact of messaging historical facts about racial injustice.

Table 1. Relationship Between Awareness of Inequality and Support for Reparations

	Black Detroiters (<i>n</i> = 1,253)			White Detroiters (<i>n</i> = 274)		
	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i> -Value	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i> -Value
Education						
High school or less (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Some college/associate degree	0.0822	0.0858	(ns)	-0.4596	0.2226	*
College+	0.0906	0.1010	(ns)	-0.4372	0.2126	*
Age						
<35 (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
35–54	0.1000	0.0989	(ns)	-0.1910	0.2140	(ns)
55–64	-0.0038	0.1237	(ns)	-0.5261	0.2615	*
65+	-0.0239	0.1083	(ns)	-0.2561	0.2072	(ns)
Household income						
Under \$30,000 (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
\$30,000–\$60,000	0.0347	0.0932	(ns)	-0.2850	0.2083	(ns)
>\$60,000	-0.0487	0.1053	(ns)	-0.4262	0.1884	*
Gender						
Male (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Female	-0.1894	0.0789	*	0.0108	0.1614	(ns)
Recognition of the legacy of racism	0.4099	0.0507	***	0.7357	0.0831	***
Recognition of economic inequality						
A lot better (reference category)	0	0		0	0	
Somewhat better	0.5982	0.3670	(ns)	-0.1943	1.1022	(ns)
Equally well off	0.7819	0.3219	**	-0.1096	1.0508	(ns)
Somewhat worse	0.9217	0.3098	**	-0.4768	1.0490	(ns)
A lot worse	1.1507	0.3094	***	0.5466	1.0553	(ns)
_cons	1.6633	0.3667	***	1.0282	1.0800	(ns)

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Cell entries report the coefficients of an ordinary least squares regression estimating the likelihood of support reparations, with higher coefficients indicating greater support for reparations. SE = standard error; ns = no significance.

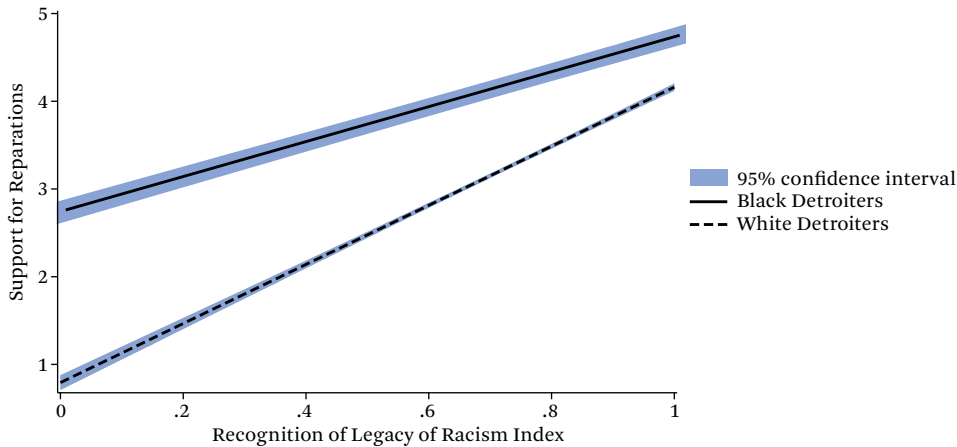
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

effect on support for reparations among either Black or White Detroiters.⁸

Taken together, these findings show that perceptions about the ongoing and historic harms of slavery and discrimination are

strongly linked to support for reparations. Although recognition of economic inequality is a key predictor of support among Blacks, the targeted beneficiaries of a reparations program, it is not true for Whites. By contrast, rec-

8. It is plausible that our reference to “the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies” in the question assessing attitudes toward reparations essentially “treated” those in the control group with information about institutional discrimination and detracted from any effects of our treatment. However, contemporary forms of racism do not tend to be centered around a denial that slavery or discrimination ever existed—the content referenced in our question wording. Instead, contemporary racism tends to be associated with a lack of acknowledgement that government policies played a central role in creating the racial disparities that persist today (but see Bobo 2011). In turn, by providing examples of both the structural roots of existing racial disparities, as well as specific policies that impeded Black Americans from accessing the traditional tools for accumulating wealth and success,

Figure 1. Support for Reparations by Recognition of Legacy of Racism

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: Results are presenting the linear prediction for support for reparations, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, recognition of economic inequality, and recognition of the legacy of racism for Black and White Detroiters, respectively.

ognition of the legacy of racism is a key predictor of support for reparations for both Black and White Detroiters, and the effect is larger in magnitude for Whites. Moreover, although we found support for our hypotheses that inequality perceptions shape support for reparations, experimental findings reveal that prompting Black and White Detroiters with information about the history and ongoing effects of U.S. racism does not affect their support for reparations. These findings shed light on the nuanced role that knowledge and perceptions of racial inequality have on levels of support for reparative policies. Even though inequality perceptions play a role in attitudes toward reparations, especially for potential beneficiaries of a reparations program, basic messaging about historical facts does not appear to be enough to shift such attitudes among either Black or White Detroiters.

Black Truth Project Results: Understanding Attitudes Toward Reparations Nationally

We next sought to explore the role that political knowledge, both general political knowledge

as well as awareness of racial inequality, play in attitudes toward reparations on a national stage. Is support for reparations a mere function of Americans' awareness of the magnitude of the problem? If so, is it any easier to shift levels of support on a national level than it was in Detroit? Additionally, how do general levels of political knowledge affect support for reparations? General levels of political knowledge are important to consider. Thus the primary goal of our second study was to assess the impact of information about racial inequality on support for reparations for Black Americans among Americans throughout the country. We sought to do so in two ways: first, by administering a standard political information quiz to determine levels of attentiveness to elite political discourse; second, with an experimental design. Political scientists have long relied on political information tests to gauge levels of political knowledge (Iyengar 1990; Zaller 1992). The cardinal logic with this approach is that respondents who are familiar with these basic facts must have acquired the information from reading or watching national news stories.

such as education, property, and investments, our treatment engaged with the specific type of information associated with acknowledging institutional racism. That said, future research should examine additional ways to test the impact of messaging historical facts about racial injustice.

Adopting a strategy employed by the organizers of the American National Election Studies for the last few decades, we measure political knowledge with four questions asking what political office or occupation is held by Nancy Pelosi, Kamala Harris, Boris Johnson, and Benjamin Crump.

General political attentiveness may be associated with support for reparations, but it is also possible that more domain-specific knowledge is required to alter public opinion (Kim 2009; McGraw & Pinney 1990). That is, we sought to determine whether specific information about racial inequality might be necessary to change attitudes about reparations. To test this hypothesis, we randomly exposed some of our study participants to information about the current racial wealth gap between Blacks and Whites based on information from the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances, even as some of our other subjects were merely given a brief definition of the term racial wealth gap.⁹

We present our first set of results in table 2, where we focus first on support for reparations in the form of cash payments to Blacks Americans. The question, similar to what was asked of local respondents, provided historical context. General questions aimed toward assessing attitudes on reparations do not inform respondents that the reparations movement has historically focused not just on the period of chattel slavery but also the lengthy post-Reconstruction period, when it was legally

permissible for government and private individuals to discriminate against African Americans (Darity and Mullen 2022).¹⁰ Even with this additional context, most Whites in our national nonprobability sample (39 percent) oppose or neither favor nor oppose (29 percent) the policy of providing cash reparations to Blacks. Most Blacks however, support (63 percent) or are at worst indifferent (28 percent) to the policy (table 2).¹¹

What are the effects of providing individuals with information regarding the racial wealth gap on support for reparations in the form of cash? As in our Detroit study, we find that providing information about the racial wealth gap makes no difference in support for cash payments as reparations. Moreover, and contrary to our expectations, White respondents with higher levels of political knowledge are 20 percentage points less likely to support cash payments. Consistent with previous literature assessing demographic factors in understanding White support for reparations, we found that Whites with higher education, as well as those who identify as liberal, and Democrats, are more likely to support reparations.¹² Black respondents were also unaffected by the experimental treatments. However, those Black respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were more supportive of cash reparations but the results were relatively weaker, at about 6 percentage points between low and high information levels, relative to the effects

9. All participants were provided a definition of the racial wealth gap. The 2022 national experiment had four conditions: four treatment groups and a control group. The treatment groups each received variations on the same information about the racial wealth gap between Blacks and Whites, albeit with slightly different frames. For this article, we have combined all of these treatment groups as our main focus in determining whether any information about the racial wealth gap influences support for reparations. In future work, we intend to explore whether the framing of this information makes a difference for either Black or White Americans.

10. The question was worded as follows: "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and during the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments discriminated against Blacks and in favor of Whites. Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose the government providing cash payments to Blacks in order to make up for the discrimination that led to the racial wealth gap we see today?"

11. It is difficult to compare these results with the results of national probability samples because most polls on this subject ask only about reparations for slavery, not the near-century of state-sponsored racial discrimination that followed it. Still, it is striking how similar these results are to the results from our Detroit survey.

12. Our results for education here are the opposite of what we find in our Detroit study. It is not clear why we get these discrepant results but it could be explained by sampling differences (such as one study focuses on a single city whereas the other relies on a national sample).

Table 2. Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Cash

	Whites	Blacks
No racial wealth information (control)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Political knowledge	-.20*** (.03)	.06** (.02)
Female	-.04** (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.15*** (.03)	.04 (.03)
Age	-.01*** (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology	.13*** (.03)	.08** (.03)
Partisanship	.19*** (.02)	.11** (.03)
Intercept	.64*** (.04)	.55*** (.03)
Adj. R^2	.32	.04
N	1,266	1,116

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

among Whites. As true for our White respondents, identifying as liberal and Democrat is also correlated with support for cash payments among Blacks as well (table 3).

Public discourse surrounding various forms of reparations typically focuses on cash payments; however, cash is only one of many possible forms of reparations. Specifically, in the BTP survey, we asked about reparations in the form of vouchers in addition to cash payments. Again, for both Black and White respondents we found that providing information about the racial wealth gap does not make a difference in supporting reparations in the form of vouchers.¹³ White respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were 12 percent less likely to support vouchers, and Black respondents with higher levels of political knowledge were 6 percent more likely (table 4).

What are the partisan differences in the effectiveness of information on the racial wealth gap and political knowledge on support for reparations in the form of cash and vouchers? As reflected in tables 1 and 2, we find that for both White Democrats and Republicans providing information on the racial wealth gap makes no difference in support for cash payments or vouchers. However, White Democrats with higher levels of political knowledge were 16 percentage points less likely to support cash payments and 4 percent less likely to support vouchers. White Republicans with higher levels of political knowledge are 22 percentage points less likely to support cash payments and 23 percentage points less likely to support vouchers (table 5).

In our last set of analyses, we focus on the factors associated with how people account for

13. This question was as follows: "During the time that slavery was legal (1619–1865), and during the Jim Crow era (1877–1968), federal, state, and local governments discriminated against Blacks and in favor of Whites. Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose the government providing Blacks with vouchers that they could use only for starting a small business, putting a down payment on a house, or paying for a child's college education, in order to make up for the discrimination that led to the racial wealth gap we see today?"

Table 3. Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Vouchers

	Whites	Blacks
No racial wealth information (control)	-.00 (.02)	-.00 (.02)
Political knowledge	-.12*** (.03)	.06** (.02)
Female	-.04** (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.16*** (.03)	.04 (.03)
Age	-.004*** (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology	.14*** (.03)	.07* (.03)
Partisanship	.20*** (.03)	.14*** (.03)
Intercept	.56*** (.03)	.56*** (.03)
Adj. R^2	.25	.05
N	1,268	1,111

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for two-tailed test

Table 4. Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Support for Reparations in the Form of Cash Payments and Vouchers, Whites Only

	Democrats Cash Payments	Democrats Vouchers	Republicans Cash Payments	Republicans Vouchers
No racial wealth information (control)	-.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.05 (.03)
Political knowledge	-.16*** (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.22*** (.05)	-.23*** (.05)
Female	-.11** (.03)	-.10** (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Education	.18*** (.04)	.17*** (.04)	.12** (.05)	.16** (.05)
Age	-.01*** (.00)	-.004*** (.001)	-.006*** (.00)	-.004*** (.001)
Ideology	.05 (.04)	.08* (.04)	.21*** (.05)	.17** (.05)
Intercept	.87*** (.06)	.76*** (.05)	.64*** (.05)	.62*** (.06)
Adj. R^2	.24	.16	.27	.17
N	541	542	529	531

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for two-tailed test

Table 5. Effects of Information on Racial Wealth Gap and Political Knowledge on Reasons for Support for Reparations, Supporters Only

	Whites Improve Relations	Whites Inequality	Blacks Improve Relations	Blacks Inequality
No racial wealth information (control)	-.42 (.91)	-.62* (.27)	-.18 (.21)	-.11 (.20)
Political knowledge	-.91** (.32)	1.73*** (.34)	.22 (.26)	1.52*** (.26)
Female	-.44* (.22)	.55** (.21)	.20 (.17)	.39** (.16)
Education	1.37*** (.39)	.24 (.37)	.19 (.34)	-.67* (.32)
Age	-.01 (.00)	.01+ (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02** (.01)
Ideology	.06 (.31)	.39 (.33)	-.34 (.31)	.52+ (.29)
Partisanship	-.15 (.29)	.31 (.31)	.00 (.29)	.10 (.28)
Intercept	-1.84*** (.45)	-3.16*** (.47)	-1.00** (.05)	-2.44*** (.37)
Chi sq.	37.15***	64.97***	4.69	68.11***
N	526	526	791	791

Source: Authors' tabulation based on Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2016.

Note: All variables in the model coded 0–1, except for age (eighteen through ninety-four).

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for two-tailed test

their support for reparations and whether these explanations differ by race. Of those Black and White respondents who support reparations, as shown in table 5, we asked what prompted their response. Among Whites with higher levels of political knowledge, the probability of their offer improving race relations as the reasons for their support is about 15 percent. The comparable probability among the least informed Whites is 31 percent. The experimental treatment has no effect on the probability of this explanation. We find stronger results among Whites when it comes to the explanation of confronting persistent racial inequality. Those who support reparations and have the highest levels of political knowledge have a 56 percent probability of offering this explanation. The comparable figure for those at the lowest levels is 18 percent. Also, Whites who do not receive information on the racial wealth gap (the control group) have only a 28

percent probability. Those who are informed about the magnitude of the racial wealth gap, however, have a 42 percent probability. For African American participants, the experimental manipulations were again ineffective at influencing the rationale for support. Still, as with Whites, general political knowledge was associated with a heightened propensity to attribute their support to addressing existing racial disparities. Specifically, the probability that Blacks select this explanation rises by 0.34 points from the lowest to the highest levels of political knowledge.

DISCUSSION

These results highlight three important takeaways. First, attitudes toward reparations differ between local and national respondents. Second is the racial divide in the effects of higher levels of general political knowledge on support for reparations. That is, higher levels of

political knowledge is correlated with less support from Whites and minimally higher levels of support for Blacks. Finally, perceptions of the existence and magnitude of racial economic inequality matter for understanding predictors of support or opposition to reparations. For Whites, being exposed to information regarding economic inequality and already recognizing the economic inequality that exists in America does not make them any more or less likely to support reparations. This last takeaway is important given the popular belief that opposition to reparations is driven largely by a lack of knowing on behalf of White Americans. Evidence here shows that learning and even already possessing knowledge about the socioeconomic reality of Black Americans does not move White Americans to support reparations.

Despite these findings regarding learning and possessing knowledge about economic inequality, we do find in our local sample that awareness of the legacy of racism does lead to a higher likelihood of supporting reparations among Black and White Detroiters. This silver lining prompts further scholarly inquiry into the role of K-12 and higher education in fostering development of a person's ability to make meaning and understanding of the economic inequality around them. It is very possible that simply knowing or being exposed to information about economic inequality does not equate to understanding how this inequality came to be. Scholarship in the area of political socialization supports this line of inference due to its being a process that begins in childhood during critical developmental stages and continues well into adulthood (Greenstein & Hyman, 1959). Thus, political information digested during this period can have an impact on how individuals come to develop their political attitudes, beliefs, and values. Recent legislative bans on collective efforts to provide this level of understanding of the historic impacts of slavery and discrimination in the United States, including institutional efforts such as diversity, equity, and inclusion programming in higher education and African American history honors curriculum in the K-12 schools further obstruct efforts at helping the public understand the broader history of

racial inequality in the United States. These legislative moves have important implications for future generations' understanding of racial inequality, highlighting the importance of policies that protect or enhance history education. Future research could focus on the role of education increasing support for reparative policies in areas where White respondents have less exposure to material impacts of racial inequity.

Understanding American attitudes toward reparations for African Americans is critical to achieving a successful reparations movement. However, general attitudes of local populations are often left out of the conversation. Given the current geographical racial makeup of the country, any probable federal reparations legislation will effect some cities and or areas of the country more than others. Thus, an inquiry into local attitudes toward reparations is warranted. This is reflected in the differences in support for reparations between nationally representative samples and local samples of respondents. Nationally, nearly half of Americans believe the federal government definitely should not support reparations to the descendants of slaves. Yet, on the local level, we find a majority of Detroiters support the provision of reparations to Black Americans in some form of payment, with the largest group being Black Detroiters. The literature has not yet conducted an extensive examination on the differences in attitudes toward reparations between local and national populations. This work aims to bridge that gap.

Support for reparations appears contingent on a belief that racial inequality resulting from historic and ongoing societal discrimination continues to affect Black Americans today. How people collectively remember historical events in the United States and their awareness of the ongoing impacts of racism shapes how people think about appropriate redress. As a predominantly Black city and one of the most populous metropolitan areas in Michigan, Detroit has a significant impact on electoral outcomes and could prove a bellwether for efforts toward reparations. It also has a long tradition of calling for reparations, making it a strategically relevant area to conduct empirical studies to understand residents' attitudes toward repara-

tions.¹⁴ Taken together, Detroit captures a distinct but relevant illustration of how racial politics and collective memory of racial inequality undergird support for reparative policies. However, the racial demographic of Detroit does not reflect national racial demographics. Thus it is possible that our findings here on support for reparations (64 percent of Detroiters overall) could be explained by the large African American population in Detroit. Despite this being taken into account, White Detroiters (38 percent) are still more likely than White Americans (28 percent) more broadly to support reparations by 10 percent.¹⁵ This difference is likely explained by intergroup contact theory. This theory posits that we can expect higher levels of tolerance and acceptance among White people who have more contact with Black people than those who do not (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Previous scholarship contends that a driver of White opposition to reparations is their perceptions of deservingness (Sharpe 2021). However, the literature is not yet settled on why those who perceive African Americans as not deserving feel that way. We provide evidence that White Americans' awareness of the legacy of racism and its impact on Black Americans today is a main driver of support for reparations, at least in the context of Detroit. However, introducing new information about the depths of racial inequality (specifically the racial wealth gap) had no significant impact on reparations support. Additionally, general political knowledge actually decreased support for reparations among Whites in the national sample. These findings suggest that information interventions alone may not be enough to shift support for reparations. Future research should consider how deservingness and responsibility may or may not intersect when an individual is justifying their reasons for opposing reparations.

This work provides evidence that though knowledge about racial inequality can predict support for reparations, it is still possible for individuals to acknowledge racial inequality and the magnitude of said inequality yet still

not support reparations with the exception of awareness of the legacy of racism. Future scholarship on the study of reparations should be cognizant of the difference between believing and not believing racial inequality exists, believing and not believing its magnitude, and further, believing and not believing the negative impact racial inequality has on the socioeconomic trajectory of African Americans.

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14. In 1989 House Representative John Conyers (D-MI) introduced bill HR-40, legislation that would establish a commission to study reparations proposals for African Americans.

15. According to a 2021 UMass Amherst public opinion poll, 28 percent of White Americans support reparations.

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