

# “Wokeness” in College; Examining policy preferences of Black and Non-Black college students

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## Abstract

*Recent political attacks on universities have been aimed at the discourse around race on campus and its potential impact on students’ beliefs and policy positions. Using a forced choice conjoint survey experiment, I test if college attendance causes non-Black students to adopt pro-Black policy positions. Using 222 undergraduate students through Georgia State University’s Sona System, I field an original survey to capture the support for policies between Black and non-Black students. The average marginal component effects (AMCE) results from the conjoint experiment show that Black and non-Black students do not converge in their support for pro-Black. I also find that policy is the most salient to Black students, while time may filter the policy support of non-Black students because of a preference for incrementalism.*

## Introduction

College is undoubtedly an agent of socialization in developing political ideologies, similar to how other lived experiences are for individuals (Dey 1997). A college education has been a defining demographic in the US with explanatory power for things like vote choice, partisanship, and policy preference. This educational divide is skewed towards American liberalism. Research finds that the more education one has, the more likely they are to be liberal. Thus, establishes the understanding that there is generally a liberal-leaning bias for those with a college degree (D. E. Campbell 2009; C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Bailey and Williams 2016). In our highly polarized time, this education divide has caused education to become more political and polarizing than ever. When one experiences unfavorable electoral results, it can cause members of the losing party to be less satisfied with the state of the country’s democracy, thus potentially causing individuals to be more critical of systems and structures (Enders and Thornton 2022), especially in an area like education. Conservatives assume that education is indoctrinating individuals to be too liberal and have passed policies at the state level with anti-Black sentiments under the guise of this assumption. This sets the stage for this paper; I examine this idea by assessing college students’ policy preferences.

Specifically, I seek to understand if universities influence non-Black college students to become politically more pro-Black. There are many mechanisms in college where the development of one’s political ideology can be impacted (Wodtke 2018; C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016). I test for the potential of indoctrination on college campuses by examining the convergence or divergence between Black and non-Black students in their support for pro-Black policy issues. Research finds that education can influence a student to have a structural view over an individualistic view of racial inequality (Wodtke 2018). However, while education may have liberal biases, as evident by legislative policy goals, the Black political agenda can be perceived

as too liberal (Owens 2005; Orey et al. 2006). Therefore, if non-Black student policy preferences are aligned with Black students, then indoctrination may be occurring. I conducted a force choice conjoint survey experiment to examine how the policy preference of college students aligns. I implore an average marginal component effects (AMCE) analysis to visualize the results. I find that college attendance is not systematically influencing non-Black students to be more pro-Black, as evident by their policy preferences.

## Literature Review

### Political Socialization in College

While the political discourse of 2023 is about indoctrination in universities, socialization is a more accurate term to describe the phenomenon conservatives are attacking. Dey defines socialization as “the process of internalizing cultural norms, values, and beliefs, and learning to function as a member of society” (Dey 1997). Socialization involves acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for individuals to become effective cultural or social group members. Dey emphasizes that socialization is an ongoing process that begins in childhood and continues throughout an individual’s life through various channels such as family, peers, schools, and media, and involves both intentional and unintentional learning (Dey 1997).

To understand socialization in universities, it is best to examine the mechanisms by which socialization can occur. Wodtke argues that college provides knowledge, an open environment, and critical thinking skills as a mechanism that influences students’ views of racial inequality (Wodtke 2018). Assessing *knowledge* refers to the college’s ability to provide facts about factors responsible for racial inequality (Wodtke 2018). The *open environment* of colleges allows for social interaction between diverse groups that allows negative stereotypes to be challenged (Wodtke 2018). Lastly, through education, students develop *critical thinking skills* that enhance their ability to challenge viewpoints (Wodtke 2018). However, critical thinking

skills can also slightly develop superficial egalitarian attitudes that act as ideological refinement (Jackman and Muha 1984). While broadly similar, other scholars see different mechanisms operating at universities.

Campbell and Horowitz would argue that the experiences of new cultures, “free space,” and peer-to-peer connections are the mechanisms that socialize students (C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Student *experiences with new cultures* can cause students to be more tolerant of outgroups (Bowman 2013; C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016). “*Free spaces*” are university environments that do not have rigid or clearly identifiable parameters that set rules for engagement (C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Students can grow and develop without being pushed in a particular direction in these “free spaces.” Lastly, *peer-to-peer* connections and experiences significantly impact viewpoints (C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Dey 1997). Regardless of the mechanism, there is no clear ideological direction that these mechanisms push students toward.

The environment of the colleges seems to matter more when trying to understand the ideological direction the previously stated mechanisms foster. Conservative college environments can lead to more conservative viewpoints in students and vice versa for liberal college environments. However, university professors tend to be more liberal-leaning, creating the possibility of reproducing political beliefs (Gross and Fosse 2012). However, regardless of the liberal bias, Mariani and Hewitt find that faculty political attitudes do not affect changes in student political attitudes (Mariani and Hewitt 2008). Through these mechanisms, students are socialized to see the world through different new viewpoints.

A college education correlates with a positive relationship with intergroup attitudes for whites and causes more tolerant attitudes (Jackman and Muha 1984). Even though education can

influence a student to have a structural view over an individualistic view of racial inequality (Wodtke 2018). This conflicts with DeSante and Watts-Smith’s argument that education as an institution can maintain and perpetuate institutional racism (DeSante and Smith 2019). I think these findings on influences of views on racial inequality lead to discourse that creates policies like HB 7 in Florida. Using “woke” as a term for the policy gives direction for this analysis because of its association with the Black community.

### **Black Political Culture**

There must be a basic understanding of Black political culture to define pro-Black to analyze what support for pro-Black policies looks like. Being more pro-Black is aligned with the Black community on policies that improves or worsens the Black predicament in the United States. These Black policies are designed to champion remedial efforts due to shared biology, experiences, and effects shaped by systemic disadvantage (DuBois 1903; Lewis and Nelson 2022). This does not mean the Black community is monolithic in their policy positions. However, it explains the variance of policy preferences (secondary beliefs). On average, one can find agreement on core beliefs.

Walton considers race, humanism, economics, and empowerment fundamental to Black political culture (Walton Jr 1985). There are variances in how these elements are understood within the different ideologies in Black political culture. However, they all touch on these essential features. Therefore, any pro-Black policies must address these elements to some degree.

Understanding race, economics, and empowerment are critical for understanding the elements fundamental in this analysis of Black political culture. First, deciding to address race within a policy stance shows the understanding within Black political culture that Black community members understand the systemic realities unique to them (Walton Jr 1985). Second, economic participation and well-being are central because of the manner in which goods and

resources are distributed (Walton Jr 1985). “Racial participation in the distribution system is specified to ensure a fair distribution of goods” (Walton Jr 1985). Third, the aim to empower Black people represents the critical understanding that there is a need for pro-Black progress. Walton also explains this element as the “great desire to get out of the Black predicament” (Walton Jr 1985). Walton’s elements critical to Black political culture illuminate the connection core beliefs within the Black community without making the Black community monolithic.

### **Race and Policy**

Not only is the liberalism attached to the Black community key here, but also the racial attitudes of non-Blacks to Black Americans. Race is always a central factor when understanding American politics. Sniderman and Carmines would argue that racial policy attitudes are merely extensions of the Conservative\ Liberal struggle in American politics (Sniderman and Carmines 1997). However, when centering race as pro-Black policies do, it is countercultural.

Wamble and Laird find “that calling for society to move beyond race leads to higher candidate evaluations,” supporting this idea of a post-racial society (Wamble and Laird 2020). Regardless of the type of language used, racial language was associated with lower candidate elevations (Wamble and Laird 2020). It would be naïve to assume that this effect is only limited to candidates. Explicit racial policies should also activate negative racial attitudes and low/lack of support for racial policies. Transue findings support this notion in that a superordinate identity increased support for tax increases greater than when respondents had a clear understanding of minority benefits from the policy (Transue 2007).

When policies have targeted benefits for specific racial groups, the exclusiveness of the policy can cause whites not to get on board with the policy (Transue 2007; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Schuman 1997). However, Schneider and Ingram would argue that it is not the particularism of the policy but which groups are being benefitted or burdened by the policy

based on the groups’ social construction (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Nevertheless, there are boundaries to interracial group policy support when policy is viewed as a competition for scarce resources (Gay 2006; Stephens-Dougan 2016). These interracial dynamics position this paper to further the conversation on how college is affecting its students.

Comparing non-Black students’ pro-Black policy preferences to Black students’ policy positions is appropriate, as their preferences reflect policies that address the Black predicament. Therefore, if college attendance indoctrinating non-Black students to support pro-Black policies, then we would expect alignment between Black and non-Black students’ support for pro-Black policies. Moreover, using the Black students’ political preferences as a baseline is suitable for this study because the Black political agenda can be perceived as too liberal (Owens 2005; Orey et al. 2006).

This leads to the hypotheses for this article because being more pro-Black is alignment between Black and non-Black students on policies and their implementation that improves or worsens the Black predicament in the United States. The two sets of hypotheses for this article address the attack on race-related research and test the liberal-leaning associated with a college education. If indoctrination is happening, then we would expect to see the following:

Pro-Black hypotheses:

(H1) Convergence between Black and non-Black students’ support for pro-Black policies.

(H2) Convergence between Black and non-Black students’ support for immediate action.

Liberal bias hypothesis:

(H3) Convergence between Black and non-Black students’ support for universal progressive policies.

## Methods (experiment procedures)

To examine if college attendance leads to support for pro-Black policies, I rely on a forced choice conjoint survey experiment of 222 Georgia State University undergraduate students. The survey was available to all students registered for the Introduction to American Government course. Students were recruited through Georgia State University’s Sona System, where students voluntarily take surveys for extra credit in the course.<sup>1</sup> The portal is free of charge for researchers affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Georgia State. As a Graduate student at Georgia State University’s Political Science department, I imported my Qualtrics survey into the survey portal for students to select.

While this is a convenience sample of students, Georgia State is an appropriate setting for this study because of the liberal environment of campus. Georgia State University is located in downtown Atlanta, a very liberal area in Georgia. Also, it is categorized as a minority-serving institution where the majority of its student population is minority groups. The institution has many features that overtly promote racial equality and expression.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the 2020 election, Georgia turned blue, electing two Democratic party Senators and casting all their electoral college votes for Democratic party nominee (President) Joe Biden. If college attendance leads to support for pro-Black policies, one would expect to find evidence of it in a case like Georgia State University.

In the survey experiment, students saw seven iterations of two hypothetical policy proposals. The treatments in the experiment were randomized by the *size, direction, policy area,*

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<sup>1</sup> Students received a unique ID number through the portal and all responses were anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> Georgia State University Multicultural Center; committed to increasing cultural competence and preparing students for global citizenship by cultivating a culture of care



and time attributes in each proposal. The policy proposal read, “A (size) (direction) in the national budget (policy area) over the next (time).” The attributes options are as follows:

**Table 1**

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Direction</b>
- “provide monetary reparations for Black Americans”	- Year	- 2%	- “Increase”
- “implement harsher sentences for felons”	- 3 years	- 4%	- “decrease”
- “decriminalize marijuana”	- 5 years	- 6%	
- “address the gender pay gap”	- 8 years	- 8%	
- “provide resources to local police departments”	- 10 years	- 10%	
- “address uses of excessive force by police”			
- “improve access to healthcare”			

The policy areas can be divided into three categories: (1) explicit Black policies, (2) implicit Black policies, and (3) progressive policies. The explicit Black policies are policies that clearly address issues that have been publicly associated with Black Americans and primarily impact their community. (Ex. “provide monetary reparations for Black Americans” and “address uses of excessive force by police”). Implicit Black Policies have implications that disproportionately impact the Black community. (Ex. “implement harsher sentences for felons,” “provide resources to local police departments,” and “decriminalize marijuana”). Progressive policies are characterized by their attempt to address systemic problems separate from Black policies previously defined. (Ex. “improve access to healthcare” and “address the gender pay gap”).

These policy categories are defined this way for the purpose of this study.<sup>3</sup> As stated earlier, the literature speaks to the general liberal bias of individuals who attended college (Bailey and Williams 2016; D. E. Campbell 2009; C. Campbell and Horowitz 2016), which is

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<sup>3</sup> All policy areas can be inherently racialized but that cannot be parsed out at this moment in data from survey as constructed.

the basis for the progress policy category. However, for pro-Black policies, there needs to be a more nuanced understanding to measure the strength of support. The explicit and implicit Black policies are separated to address the Black-specific grievances of some policies while accounting for the seemingly more general policies that also provide redress for Black grievances. Research shows that Black legislators perceive they will have success with policies in areas like welfare, healthcare, education, crime and punishment, economic development and employment, and social programs where the Black community is implicitly the beneficiary than explicitly because it can be more palatable for non-Black legislators in the agenda-setting process (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Owens 2005; Orey et al. 2006; Wright 2000; Sullivan and Winburn 2010; Gunderson 2020). By separating the policies, the results can test for this distinction in the support from non-Black students for pro-Black policies.

The average marginal component effect (AMCE) represents the effect of a particular attribute value of interest against another value of the same attribute while holding equal the joint distribution of the other attributes in the design, averaged over this distribution as well as the sampling distribution from the population (Bansak et al. 2019). This means that an AMCE can be interpreted as a summary measure of the overall effect of an attribute after taking into account the possible effects of the other attributes by averaging over effect variations caused by them. (Bansak et al. 2019). The average marginal component effects attribute levels are independently randomized from one another, which allows OLS to produce unbiased and consistent estimates of AMCE (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Because coefficient sizes in the conjoint analysis are directly comparable, the results also reveal the relative importance of each attribute as a determinant of policy preferences for this study.

## Results

Does college attendance influence non-Black college students to support pro-Black policies? The findings support the literature that college attendance does not cause students to support pro-Black policies. Figure 1 shows the estimated AMCEs for each attribute included in the survey experiment, along with their 95% confidence intervals, using the forced choice item as the outcome measure. The bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (CIs). The results are color-coded by Black and non-Black students.

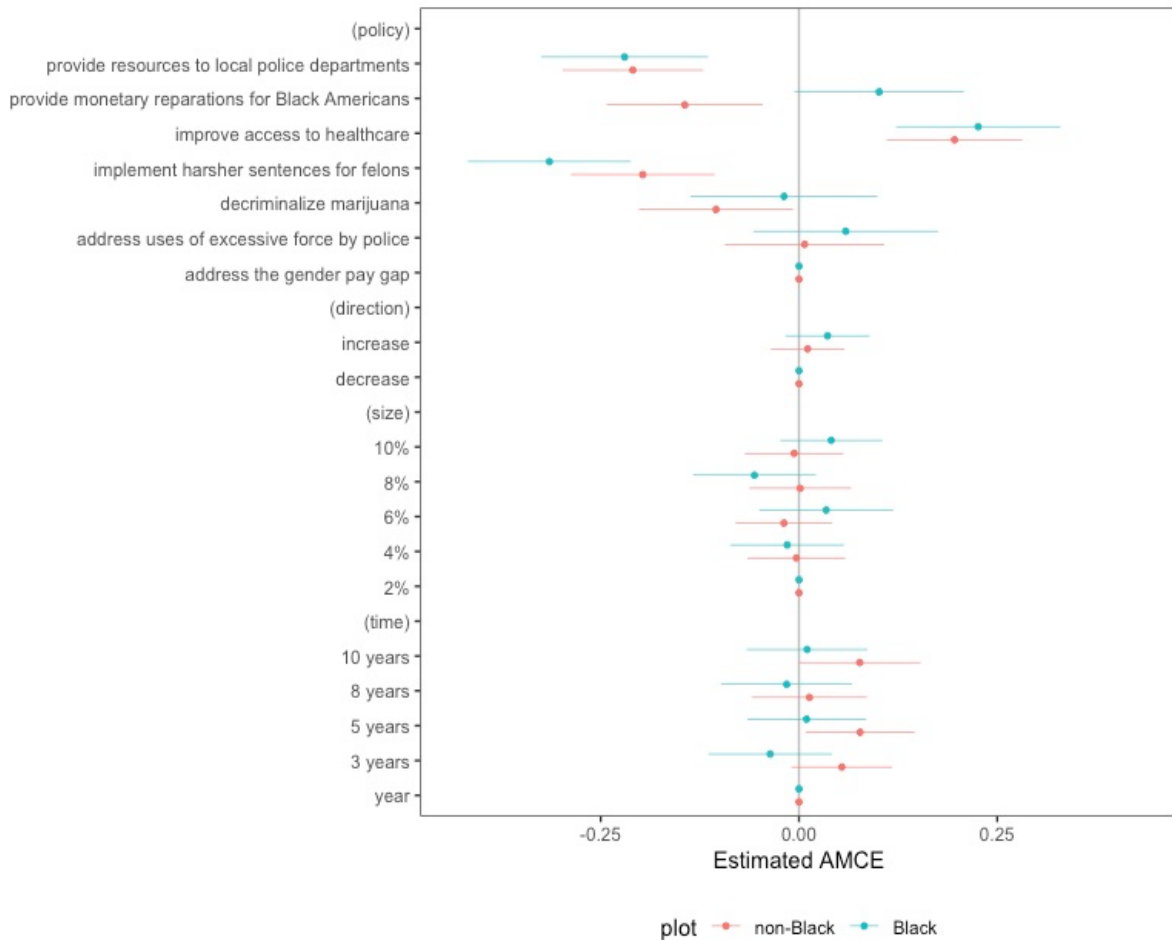


Figure 1

Figure 2 focuses specifically on the policy area attributes of the survey experiment. For the explicit Black policies, the findings show there is divergence between Black and non-Black

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students. The most significant divergence in the results for “provide monetary reparations for Black Americans.” We see strong support for reparations by Black students and strong opposition from non-Black students. Second, for “address uses of excessive force by police,” we see Black and non-Black students support the policy. However, non-Black students are closer to neutral on the matter. The preferences are not entirely aligned, but the divergence is not seemingly significant.

On the other hand, in the implicit Black policies, the results vary. For “implement harsher sentences for felons,” we see that both Black and non-Black students oppose this policy; however, Black students’ opposition is more intense. The distance between the positions of the two groups is not significant. Second for “provide resources to local police departments,” there is convergence between the Black and non-Black students. Lastly, for “decriminalize marijuana,” both groups seemingly oppose it. Non-Black students are more in opposition than Black students, but the difference is also insignificant.

*H1* states there would be convergence between Black and non-Black students’ support for pro-Black policies. When dividing pro-Black policies into explicit and implicit policies, we see that *H1* largely does not hold; however, the results are slightly different in the respective areas. The divergence in the explicit pro-Black policies shows that when the policy explicitly provides benefits to Black Americans, non-Black students may have reservations about providing those benefits even with their college attendance. When the policy is implicitly Black, the results vary to a degree, possibly because the distribution of the benefits is unclear.

*H3* states there would be convergence between Black and non-Black students’ support for universal progressive policies. To examine this, I observe the results for “improved access to healthcare.” For “improve access to healthcare,” Black and non-Black students converge in their

support for the policy area. The result shows they both strongly support “improve access to healthcare.” We see tremendous alignment for the progressive policies by both populations.

Support in support these policy areas follows the theme of earlier results.

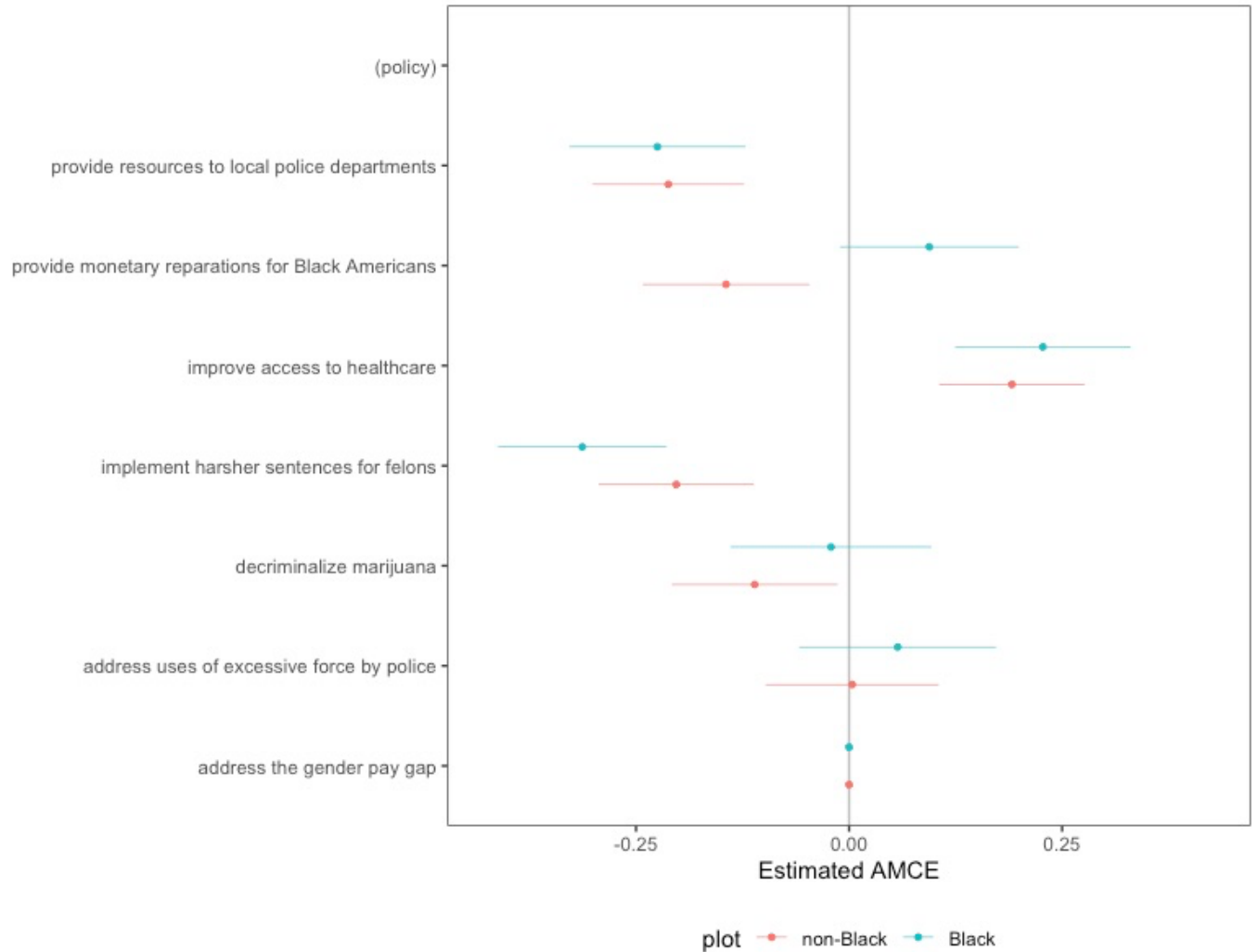


Figure 2

Figure 3 focuses specifically on the time attribute of the survey experiment.  $H2$  expects there to be convergence between Black and non-Black in support for immediate action. For Black students, their preferences for the time of policy implementation are scattered. From this graph, a straightforward analysis cannot be made. On the other hand, non-Black students seem to prefer incrementalism for policies to be implemented over extended periods of time. Non-Black

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students most strongly support policies to be implemented over 5 and 10 years with less support for 3 and 8 years. Clearly, there is no convergence between Black and non-Black students that supports *H2*. College attendance does not influence the desire for immediate action for non-Black students.

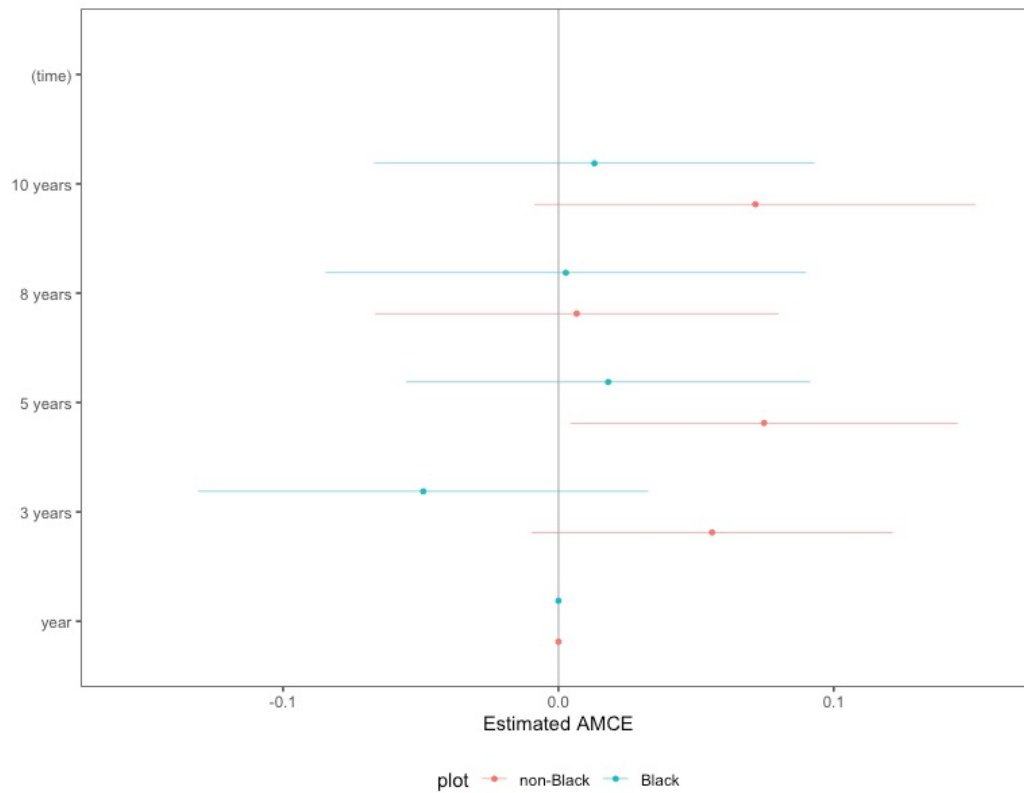


Figure 3

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	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Policy Attribute	
	(Non-Black)	(Black)
3 years	0.054 (0.037)	-0.036 (0.040)
5 years	0.077** (0.037)	0.010 (0.041)
8 years	0.013 (0.037)	-0.016 (0.042)
10 years	0.077** (0.038)	0.010 (0.041)
increase	0.011 (0.024)	0.036 (0.026)
address uses of excessive force by police	0.007 (0.044)	0.059 (0.049)
decriminalize marijuana	-0.105** (0.045)	-0.019 (0.050)
implement harsher sentences for felons	-0.197*** (0.045)	-0.315*** (0.052)
improve access to healthcare	0.196*** (0.045)	0.226*** (0.050)
provide monetary reparations for Black Americans	-0.144*** (0.044)	0.101** (0.050)
provide resources to local police departments	-0.210*** (0.044)	-0.220*** (0.050)
4%	-0.003 (0.036)	-0.015 (0.042)
6%	-0.019 (0.036)	0.034 (0.043)
8%	0.001 (0.037)	-0.056 (0.041)
10%	-0.006 (0.036)	0.041 (0.041)
Constant	0.521*** (0.047)	0.507*** (0.056)
Observations	1,706	1,308
R <sup>2</sup>	0.074	0.124
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.066	0.114
Residual Std. Error	0.483 (df = 1690)	0.471 (df = 1292)
F Statistic	9.009*** (df = 15; 1690)	12.214*** (df = 15; 1292)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

My regression analysis supports the findings from the AMCE plots regarding the impacts of policy attributes on policy preference.<sup>4</sup> For non-Black individuals, the analysis suggests a

<sup>4</sup> The robustness of my model is demonstrated by the consistency of the F statistic and the adjusted R-squared values across both racial cohorts, substantiating the reliability of my findings within the framework of my analytical approach.

statistically significant preference for incrementalism, as evidenced by the positive coefficients for a 5-year (0.077,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a 10-year duration (0.077,  $p < 0.05$ ).

When examining the universal progressive policy, both Black and non-Black students converge with their positive support for “improving access to healthcare,” although stronger among Black respondents for the policy (0.226,  $p < 0.01$ ). We see the most substantial divergence in preference for “monetary reparations for Black Americans.” Non-Black students displayed significant opposition (-0.144,  $p < 0.01$ ), while Black respondents supported the policy (0.101,  $p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, the negative coefficients associated with “decriminalization of marijuana” and “provide of resources to local police departments” show convergence on these policies, with the Black students expressing a notably stronger opposition to local police departments (-0.220,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Interpreting the average marginal component effect (AMCE) plot is intuitive because of the visual representation of how the preferences are aligned between the two groups. After presenting respondents with two hypothetical policy proposals, I found the “direction” and “size” attributes do not tell us anything meaningful about the policy preferences of the college students. Their results are less systematic, indicating the lack of importance on these particular attributes. This analysis focused on the “policy area” and “time” attributes because of their meaningful results.

## Conclusion

A trend begins to emerge in the results: the further a policy gets from universal benefits, the less non-Black students support the policy. This indicated that explicit racial policies suppress support by other racial groups. Non-Black college students are not supporting pro-Black policies and immediate action systematically, as evidenced by their lack of convergence with Black students in the survey experiment. While research shows a structural view over an



individualistic view of racial inequality (Wodtke 2018), this perspective does not translate into policy support or alignment with Black student preferences. This can be the result of college attendance developing more egalitarian attitudes that are inclusive of all groups rather than specific groups.

There seems to be a limit to how much education impacts support for pro-Black policies for non-Black students the more the policy only provides benefits to Black Americans. Black students support explicit, implicit, and progressive policies more than non-Black students. This is supported by Walton’s work on the fundamental tenets of Black political culture: race, humanism, economics, and empowerment (Walton Jr 1985).

The most important findings in the policy area analysis are the “improve access to healthcare” and “provide monetary reparations for Black Americans” results. We see the most significant convergence and divergence in these two policy areas, respectively. Black and non-Black converge on a liberal universal policy that provides benefits to everyone. The largest divergence between the two populations is in their support for “provide monetary reparations for Black Americans.” There is an inverse relationship between non-Black students' support for policies and how the policy specifically benefits groups. The more a policy only provided benefits to Black Americans, the less non-Black students supported it and the greater the divergence between Black and non-Black students. There seems to be a limit to how much education impacts support for pro-Black policies for non-Black students. Black students support explicit, implicit, and progressive policies more than non-Black students.

In the time analysis, the results do not show convergence for immediate action between Black and non-Black students. The coefficients seemingly suggest a neutral stance towards time for Black students. However, this may suggest the great desire of Black students to get out of the

Black predicament by focusing on the saliency of the policy when making choices. Black students tell us that the policy preference is so important that time does not matter. The Black students simply want what they want. While immediate action may be preferred generally, that did not show in the results. The results lead me to conclude that substantive policy is most important to Black students. In contrast, non-Black students seem to prefer policies to be implemented over more extended periods of time. Non-Black students seemingly filter their policy preferences by considering the timetable for implementing the policy in a manner that Black students do not.

The findings show that any regressive policies aimed at limiting the impact of college attendance on policy is unwarranted because college is not forcing people to adopt new pro-Black policy positions. College attendance is not systematically changing the policy positions of non-Black students. In summary, the analysis of the survey experiment findings highlights the important distinction in how the different policies illicit support from the populations.

As we look towards the future, new research should look at ways to test the specific mechanisms in college outlined in the literature review that can potentially impact policy positions. Being able to parse out ways to operationalize the different mechanisms will explain a lot about how these mechanisms specifically work at socializing students. Furthermore, future research should examine how college impacts the policy positions of Black people specifically, if at all. This article has a central assumption about the policy positions of Black college students based on literature. However, being able to test this, if possible, will lead to new insights in understanding Black political culture and the development of Black political ideologies.

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## Appendix

