

# Justice: The Racial Motive We All Have and Need

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**Abstract:** This essay posits that justice is the core value epitomizing our moment. Justice is violated when positive outcomes are undeserved, and the felt sense of injustice motivates a need for retribution. Because politics involves allocation (distribution and redistribution), deservingness is a core appraisal of “who gets what” and therefore justice is fundamental for politics. This is especially germane to race, ethnicity, and politics scholars. I present a few core tenets of justice theory, and argue that political science can take advantage of the moment to engage the concept of justice; especially as it relates to the study of racial attitudes and the identification of racial enablers—those ostensible non-racists who facilitate the status quo. Summarily, I propose that justice can unify debates over prejudice and politics, and advance our scholarly understanding of how well-intentioned people—regardless of their identities, or ideological or partisan labels—can facilitate racism, racial inequality, and injustice.

**Key words:** Racial Justice, just-world beliefs, racial resentment, deserving, racial politics.

“... if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country . . . Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have. (p. 149)”—James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972)

This special collection of essays for the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* (JREP) elicits conversations among scholars, new and established

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alike, to discuss and understand “what brought us to this historic moment and what this moment means for American politics.” Baldwin’s (1972) epilogue is both timely and apt, as it points to the society’s current contest over justice and the need to enlighten the masses for change.

Justice is one of the most important moral values because it reinforces the notion of fairness in human relations and shapes our opinions about politics (Gibson 2008). Society needs laws to provide order and structure, safety and security, and direction and faith, but laws cannot accomplish any of these unless they attend to justice. In fact, history shows that people will reject and rebel against their governors when laws are unjust. In America, the “love for justice” is the proverbial elephant in the room, and Baldwin’s statement calls on us to pull back the veil of ignorance—willful or innocent—and question the assumptions about America’s promises to establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty. It forces us to ask whether American institutions and their constitution are simply window dressing for White supremacy and maintenance of the status quo. It forces us to ask “the wretched” how we got here. From my perspective, we are at this critical stage in history because of the lack of “love for justice.” Humans have a fundamental need for justice (Taylor 2006); it motivates the social tensions that have produced the moment—and signifies the need to ease them so that we might carry ourselves past this moment.

In this essay, I argue that we need to direct more attention to the empirical and applied scholarship on justice, as it is fundamental to politics. Essentially, in political science, justice, even when we describe it as “social,” is hardly a required course or concentration for study. Given the page limits herein, I do not go into a full treatise, but rather attempt to provide some context for focusing on justice, offering a review of relevant theoretical features of justice that might advance our thinking about contemporary ideas regarding this concept, and conclude with thoughts about how to conceptualize enablers of injustice.

## A HISTORIC MOMENT COLORED BY (IN)JUSTICE

I view the moment as rife with conflict and injustice to the point that America appears to be reliving the noxious depravities of its past; in which social groups—partisan, gendered, religious, nationalist, regional, ideological, and racial-ethnic—battle over abstract values with life-altering consequences. In 2016, the American political system produced Donald Trump as President of the United States, after having just experienced eight years of the country’s first African American president, Barack

Obama who, by all factual accounts, led the country out of arguably America's worst economic and wartime recovery period in history. While Obama was a loyalist to the "Uniter in Chief" ideology, Trump openly railed against political correctness, particularly on matters of race and ethnicity, social status, and gender, and skirted many presidential candidate expectations regarding decorum, transparency, respect, and basic decency. While Trump was Chief Executive, America witnessed open disrespect for legal and ethical process, a sanctioned state of police brutality, a global pandemic that disproportionately affects racial-ethnic minorities in the United States—and abroad—a catastrophic economic outlook, and the prospect of a Trump-Pence ticket being reelected—even with polling margins favoring Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Frontline health workers, essential service sector workers (e.g., public works, grocery clerks, and factory labor), the elderly, undocumented and legal immigrants, members of the Islamic faith, and racial-ethnic minorities are each forced to question whether their lives really do matter. This should leave us all wondering if there is hope in a world where bad things seem to happen to good people, and good things seem to happen to bad people (Tyler and Lind 1992). From my perspective, this feeling of "wrongness" in American society reflects what people feel when there is widespread injustice (Lerner 1980).

My personal interest in justice stems from my personal demography and life experiences through which I have regularly witnessed maltreatment and retribution by mere ascription. I have multi-ethnic ancestry and was raised, educated, and socialized in both the northeastern (Boston, MA) and southern (Nashville, TN) parts of the country. These influences exposed me to the subtle racial-ethnic and class biases of the Northeast, and the overt racial biases of the South. My additional identity complementary modalities include being civilian and military, faculty and administration, and cyclist and car driver, each with their in- and out-group perspectives on fairness (see Gibson 2008). It took me some time to realize that my group experiences all raise questions of justice, and when those identities are threatened, the resulting anger often reflects some form of resentment. During this moment, I see many others dealing with the same experiences of injustice and feelings of resentment fostered by public leaders and their enablers; hence my desire to address the subject.

## THE JUSTICE MOTIVE IN POLITICS

Rawls (1971) identifies justice as "the first virtue of social institutions" (p. 3), remarking, "in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are

taken as settled” (p. 3). Most people view justice as a soft idea more so than an objective core value that determines political attitudes and behavior; however, justice offers a distinct scholarly lens and is itself an interdisciplinary construct worthy of attention (e.g., De Cremer 2007; Sabbagh and Schmitt 2016). For example, the field of organizational behavior has a long tradition of understanding the importance of distributive, procedural, interactional, retributive, and restorative justice. The work in these areas focuses on fairness with regard to worker pay, promotion criteria, manager–subordinate interactions, leadership style, conflict resolution, and reward and punishment for positive and negative conduct (Cropanzano and Ambrose 2015). Justice affects each of these organizational areas by raising concerns related to principles such as equity, equality, and need. If we conceive of society like an organization where decisions are made about “who gets what” (Lasswell 1936), then the fundamental role of justice in decision-making and allocation for political science (Tyler and van der Toorn 2013).

People evaluate political actions as being consonant with or dissonant from their values. Political decisions have consequences that produce *change*, and as individuals evaluate change, they appraise deservingness. People want to see politics produce fair and deserved outcomes, just procedures, equal treatment, limits on excess, and appropriate punishments.

Our “belief in a just world” (Lerner 1980), defined as a tendency to believe that people “get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (p. 11), best captures the justice motivation. Just-world beliefs motivate us to expect positive outcomes such as fair treatment, equal opportunity, and support for collective needs for those who are deserving. In this way, the question of who deserves justice reflects a socio-political determination just as much as a moral one because perceived deservingness tends to positively correlate with higher social status. Shared group identity also positively correlates with perceived deservingness, where in-group members tend to receive the benefit of merit, while out-group members tend to receive greater scrutiny. Thus, how one is treated tends to indicate one’s standing as a member (or non-member) of a group or community. Essentially, individuals and groups with higher standing are viewed as more deserving of justice than others, creating subjective boundaries for who deserves fairness or not (Opatow 1990). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that holding just-world beliefs allows individuals to also rationalize systemic and episodic forms of group discrimination, inequality, oppression, and violence (Hafer and Begue 2005). Unmistakably,

justice motives play a fundamental role in the study of race, ethnicity, and politics (REP).

## SEIZING THE MOMENT

Certainly, all group members (e.g., American citizens) want to be treated fairly because it expresses respect for them and acknowledges their standing (Smith et al. 1998). Thus, people often evaluate justice within the context of groups to which they belong, including race and ethnicity. As a result, the relative social standing of racial-ethnic groups reinforces the concept of justice in American racial politics. As Peffley and Hurwitz (2010) state, justice is “an inherently racial concept . . . it is impossible to think about . . . justice without also thinking about race, and, contrariwise, it is essentially impossible to think about race without also thinking about justice” (p. 80). And yet, searches of the top journals in political science, including *JREP*, come up nearly empty on “justice” (also “racial justice”) without the descriptors “Supreme Court,” “Legal,” “Criminal,” or “Social.” The inference is that political science’s understanding and application of justice stands in scholarly deficit. This does not mean that justice is completely absent from the discipline (e.g., Chong and Marshall 1999; Gibson 2008; Hochschild 1981; Tyler and van der Toorn 2013), just that it has not advanced to the above-mentioned Rawlsian status. This is not for lack of care, but perhaps for lack of the right moment.

As blatant injustices that have afflicted racial-ethnic groups over the course of American history become more crystallized to Whites via social media—especially younger White voters—maybe now is the moment to create a larger movement in political science on theorizing, measuring, and collecting data explicitly about justice. Perhaps now is the time to assess love for justice and to enlighten the ignorant, as Baldwin’s epilogue prompts. With larger shares of Whites engaging in protests over racial injustices (Barroso and Minkin 2020), they are more likely to witness first-hand the brutalities that racial-ethnic minorities face on a daily basis. This creates new opportunities for scholarly impact—theoretical and applied. Justice provides a robust framework for understanding how we got here (a state of injustice), and where we must go (a state justice). Thus, REP scholars should create a collective movement that produces more scholarship and teaching about how justice is fundamentally political, and if Peffley and Hurwitz (2010) are accurate, how justice is also fundamentally racial.

## HOWA FOCUS ON JUSTICE CAN RESHAPE OUR SCHOLARSHIP

Contemplating about justice has influenced my thinking about racial prejudice. As a student of racial attitudes, I was trained during the great debates about whether “new racisms,” such as racial resentment and symbolic racism, reflected prejudice or ideological politics (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears et al. 2000; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Stoker 1998). It was the “or” that bothered me most about the debate because affect-laden advocacy for or against any issue could reflect some level of definitional prejudice (Brewer 1999; McConahay 1986; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Ultimately, the debate seemed to remain unresolved with both sides publicly resolute in their perspectives (Feldman and Huddy 2005). This is a simplified version of events, but the point is that we often pose false comparisons when we look at racial attitudes: it’s either prejudice or not.

Perhaps the source of the problem stems from early academic conceptualizations of prejudice. In 1954, Allport (1954) conceptualized prejudice as a felt or expressed “antipathy” (p. 9) towards a group, or a member of the group, that comes with an emotional resistance to change. Sixty-three years later, *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Prejudice* (Sibley and Barlow 2016) defined prejudice as “ideologies, attitudes, and beliefs that help maintain and legitimize group-based hierarchy and exploitation (p. 4).” These definitions leave one with two basic conclusions: (1) nearly every negative belief about a group can be justifiably a form of prejudice and (2) therefore, no group, whether perpetrator or victim, is immune from prejudice. But, is it really prejudice when a Jewish person, black person, Muslim, or woman holds negative attitudes toward their abuser to the point where they want to see the abuser’s status reduced? The idea that abuser and victim alike are essentially the same in attitude seems conceptually off base, even if it meets the definitional standard. Broad conceptualizations of prejudice seem to reflect a dominant group perspective, leaving no room for victim antipathies. It was like the racial “one-drop” rule all over again, where anything that involves disagreement or opinion about race that could be prejudice, must be prejudice—similar to if one chooses Hispanic (black) and any other racial category on a survey form, researchers commonly classify them as Hispanic (black). For many REP scholars, the real problem is that this status quo thinking about prejudice anchors our training, but also creates dissonance when scholarship and life experiences do not mesh.

Brushing up against status quo ideas is quite perilous in academia; however, experiencing the “prejudice or not” dichotomy led me to settle on justice as a framework for understanding racial attitudes generally. Since resentment, free of any racial consideration, is a justice-related motive firmly embedded in beliefs about deservingness (Feather 1999), perhaps the concept of justice can unite prejudice and politics to the concept of racial resentment.

## A CASE EXAMPLE: JUSTICE AND RACIAL RESENTMENT

Classic racial resentment (Kinder 1986; Kinder and Sanders 1996) conceptualizes resentment as a form of racism and prejudice (cf. Feldman and Huddy 2005; Wilson and Davis 2011). The reasoning appeared to be that if whites are critical of African Americans or race, it had to be prejudice because it is negative. From my perspective, the labeling was not because general resentment is necessarily equivalent to general prejudice, but because of the moment: racial conservatism, from Goldwater to Reagan, was strategic and often hostile to Black America, not calling it a form of racial prejudice would have been an affront. Yet, by definition, general resentment is neither inflexible nor faulty, and the prejudiced connotation only becomes relevant when the measures include explicit racial labels. This departure of resentment’s general meaning highlights the dominant essentialism of racial attitudes, the conviction that they all have the same basic attribute of prejudice. Notably, Allport (1954) references “beliefs in essence” as the primary psychological mechanism for prejudice (p. 174), suggesting that perhaps our view of classic racial resentment is itself prejudicial.

The pure sentiment of resentment (Feather and Nairn 2005) is not bound to any race, and therefore if African Americans resent whites—say because whites deny blacks equal treatment even when they adhere to the rules of the game—then it makes little sense to include blacks in the same bucket as prejudiced whites. In addition, political decision-making must allow for some middle ground where the motivation to support or oppose candidates and issues, racial or otherwise, are not always reflective of hatred of the other side.

Since general resentment is a distinct concept with its own merits and theoretical expectations (Feather 1999), Darren Davis—my collaborator at the University of Notre Dame—and I decided to investigate how it originates and affects behavior before it is racialized. Every scholarly source

outside of political science viewed resentment as a legitimate moral reaction to a perceived injustice (e.g., Barbalet 2001; Feather 1999; Feather and Nairn 2005; Turner and Stetts 2005). Yet, its political science conceptualization as prejudice stunted our progress. Resentment was indeed negative, but at its core was an appraisal of deservingness that may or may not be due to personal or group attributes. We also discovered that resentment exists toward impersonal objects, in addition to persons or groups (Roberts 2003). For example, one can resent structures (e.g., factories that produce smog), events (e.g., road construction that blocks traffic), institutions (e.g., a university being ranked higher on reputation alone), organizations (e.g., Wells Fargo Bank with its sub-prime program), systems (e.g., the whole criminal justice system), rules (e.g., mandatory instant replay), and symbols (e.g., a confederate flag atop a state capital building). Knowing that individuals can resent impersonal objects pushed us further from resentment falling under the rubric of prejudice; people do not dislike the objects per se, they resent how the objects obstruct their versions of justice.

Certainly, race or group ideas *can* motivate personal and impersonal resentments, but that does not mean that race or group ideas *are* the only thing motivating resentments. I am not claiming that racism and racial prejudice do not exist, have diminished consequences for politics, or do not come in subtle forms. I am also not taking a side on the earlier mentioned prejudice versus politics debate. Instead, I am saying that justice motives can help to explain both prejudice and politics, that to believe that *only* prejudice influences racial politics is in and of itself a form of bias—if not prejudice—that mutes our scholarly understanding and range. Debating over the amount and forms of White *dislike* of racial-ethnic minorities is certainly important, but exclusively focusing on prejudice does not appear to fundamentally advance political science.

As a case in point, at the same time that Barack Obama entered office, America faced severe economic, financial, and military hegemonic threats. These threats were front and center for the American public on a daily basis concomitant with the 2008 presidential campaign, as well as during the first two years of the Obama administration. Operating in an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and erratically unjust world can threaten one's willingness to tolerate change, producing a defensive reaction that the world is already a just place and that the country does not need to change because victims deserve their suffering (e.g., Ciccariello-Maher and Hughey 2011; Kay and Jost 2003). This familiar reasoning aligns with system justification theory, which emphasizes the tendency to resist



change by perceiving existing social arrangements as fair, legitimate, and justified, even if proposed changes would actually advance one's self- or group-interests (Kay and Jost 2003). At both high and low levels of prejudice, those who believe the world is just tend to oppose change because if the world is just change is unnecessary, and if and when change does occur, people will perceive it as a threat that violates one or more principles of distributive justice (i.e., equity, equality, or need).

This reasoning from the literature on justice and threats to the just way of life has led Darren and I to an alternative framework for racial resentment, one that is consonant with the classic components (i.e., values, deservingness, resistance to the status quo) of the theory from Kinder and Sanders, but also the non-prejudice-related aspects of justice. We have come to regard racialized resentment as a reaction to injustice whereby one racial group is perceived by another as threatening standards of morality, civic virtue, and the principles of justice that frame merit in society (see Tyler and van der Toorn 2013). That is, any racial-ethnic group can have resentment toward another due to violations of justice principles. Whites can resent that African Americans are using race as a way to skirt traditional merit, and African Americans can resent that whites use race for oppression and discrimination. Both claims can resemble prejudice, but that does not mean they are; resentment can create outcomes that look like prejudice through a shared action of resisting change based on subjective principles. Kinder and Sears (1981) discuss this in their early reasoning about symbolic racism,

Symbolic racism represents a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline. Whites may feel that people should be rewarded on their merits, which in turn should be based on hard work and diligent service. Hence symbolic racism should find its most vociferous expression on political issues that involve "unfair" government assistance to blacks. (p. 416)

Calling these beliefs "racist" leaves very little middle ground on politics. It also ignores that blacks can hold similar views characterizing whites' lack of values such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility. While Kinder and Sears (1981) pointed to the faulty group generalizations characterized by Allport (1954), the same generalizations reflect the equity principle and other values inherent to distributive justice (Tyler and van der Toorn

2013). Kinder and Sanders (1996) recognized this limitation and changed the name from “racism” to “resentment” noting that “by failing to mention values [in the name] . . . it encourages the interpretation that symbolic racism is really just racism” (p. 293). Yet, they still characterized resentment as a form of racial prejudice, stating that

A new form of prejudice has come to prominence, one preoccupied with moral character, informed by virtues associated with the traditions of individualism. At the center is the content that Blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face, and they take what they have not earned. Today we say that prejudice is expressed in the language of American individualism. . . . [However] “racial resentment” . . . should not be confused with racial prejudice as Allport (1954) defines it. . . . We cannot be certain that the racially unsympathetic sentiments [used to measure racial resentment in the book] are expressions of presumption and ignorance (pp. 106–109).

This statement proposes that prejudice is expressed in the language of values, but as we know from the justice literature, the reference to effort in the Kinder and Sanders statement could also reflect a violation of perceived equity or need—activating beliefs about justice. The second part of the passage also makes clear that the symbolic racism measures which preceded the racial resentment concept fall short of Allport’s classic prejudice definition. Both of these statements harken back to my earlier complaint with the prejudice “or” political debate, as it is very likely that racial resentment reflects both prejudice *and* politics. However, when we only look on one side of the stage curtain, it limits our full understanding of the moment, including frustration and flabbergast at how some of our closest friends, relatives, and co-workers could support a political figure like Donald Trump—with his openly expressed racial biases and rejection of the demographic diversity that characterizes the United States. A focus on justice would tell us that we cannot simply label the problem as due to racism or prejudice; we have to engage arguments about perceived equity, equality, or need violations. Yes, this means being in a very uncomfortable position of sometimes accepting that when someone says they are not a racist, they may actually be correct (keeping in mind that we have no motivation to consider that they could be incorrect when they say they are a racist). Teasing apart prejudice and justice motives is very difficult, but that does not mean the optimal scholarly approach should focus on racial prejudice only. Justice can advance our understanding of political

motives to identify blockers of racial progress beyond the obvious racial bigots.

Reflecting on the role of justice motives in politics helps to explain why average everyday people could be well intentioned and racially tolerant, but still enable racism and racial inequality.

## PASSIVE ENABLEMENT OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

My concluding thoughts are about a proposed direction for where we are going. Since group biases are a fundamental feature of social cognition (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005), prejudice and racism are likely here to stay, at least for most of our lifetimes. However, thinking about racial resentment as a justice motive can improve our understanding of how average, everyday citizens can enable racism and racial inequality. Justice motives can facilitate both negative and positive reactions to racial progress (i.e., change), and therefore, one does not have to be racially prejudiced to enable racism or racial inequality.

A focus on justice can open different ways to think about how we got here and where we are going. Enablers are those whose actions and ideas allow others to continuously engage in socially destructive acts (Lancer 2015). For example, Clinical Psychologist, Mary Trump (Trump 2020) points to how, over time, *enablers* gave unjust power to former President Donald Trump's authoritarian, racist, and sexist beliefs and practices. She concluded that racism would have little power without Trump's enablers. This makes good theoretical sense, but no empirical research exists on enablers of social dominance. According to the American Psychological Association, *enabling* is a process whereby an individual (i.e., the enabler) contributes, consciously or not, to the ongoing maladaptive or pathological behavior of another. The "consciously or not" framing is not accidental; most of the time an enabler's acts are unintentional, and they are not completely aware of the consequences of their behavior. Enablers position themselves between the perpetrators and victims of injustice; doing so allows them to avoid responsibility for addressing the problem or playing an active role in the solution.

I define *racial enablement* as actions, conscious or not, by individuals, systems, and institutions that allow—permit, empower, or support—a maladaptive social condition that perpetuates racial subjugation and marginalization by maintaining a system of ostensibly non-racial values and practices

that perpetuates racial injustice. Racial enablers abhor the problem (i.e., racism), and become anxious when faced with intervening solutions. Racial enablers know that racism promulgates subjugation, derogation, inequality, and dominance; but when they realize what is required to end or reduce it—things such as special considerations, distribution beyond need, and acceptance of personal responsibility even when they have not done anything intentionally wrong—they become conflicted. Racial enablers may feel powerless to prevent the acts; that the negative behaviors they are enabling are not entirely detrimental; or that if they take preventative actions to halt the behavior, they will face undesired consequences (Murphy 1984; Rotunda and Doman 2001; Thomas et al. 1996). Efforts to reduce the conflict can lead to polarized states of resentment toward both the perpetrator and victims of racial prejudice, where neither appreciates the situation of the enabler. Ultimately, all parties involved halt their willingness to change because the perceived sacrifice is too great.

Racial enablers have a codependency problem; they do not believe in sacrificing their values, beliefs, or material possessions to bring about racial equality. This is because enablers believe their version of justice can exist with the status quo systems, traditions, and structures in place. Moreover, if their version of the world is essentially just, then why change it? Racial enablers become coincidental co-conspirators, victims of human psychology in the form of caring deeply about what they have and caring about a system that maintains one or more cherished elements of the status quo.

It would be wrong to assume that enablers of racial inequality are bound to a single race, political party, ideology, region of the United States, or education level. A defining feature of enablers is an unwillingness to change who they are, what they believe in, or how they do things. Enablers have the power to restore justice, but more often than not they lack the tools, language, and audacity to do so.

Resolving racial inequality involves a level of restorative justice, where perpetrators and victims come together to hash out offenses under ground rules of “good person, bad action” (Tyler and van der Toorn 2013). Under this approach, victims work with enablers to identify ways for perpetrators to atone for wrongdoings and become a part of the moral community. While this process of racial victims “helping” racial antagonists heal comes across as offensive and encumbering, research finds it is more satisfactory to victims, and the process leads to lower re-offense by perpetrators. Thus, various forms of justice offer different pathways to reducing inequality, such as giving victims more say in resolving justice.

Racial enablers are guilty of being human; not wanting to give up too much in the way of discomfort to resolve a racism and inequality problem that affects others much more than it affects themselves. I hope that readers do not mistake my words as a form of apology for human ignorance or evolution. Ostensible non-racists—white and black, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, and closed and open minds alike—are culpable of halting racial progress, but enlightenment requires equal footing in both prejudice and justice. As the epilogue from Baldwin (1972) states, “ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have”; and racial enablers feed off ignorance. If there was ever a moment where ignorance is front and center, it is now, and political scientists must become more creative and open in our thinking about the fundamental role of racial justice in politics.

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