Are We There Yet? Perceptions of Racial Progress Among Racial Minorities

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Given the transition from a society built on racialized slave labor and settler colonial genocide, current conditions in the United States often are celebrated as evidence of enormous racial progress. However, survey and experimental data reveal a significant gap in perceptions of racial progress between Black and White people (Brodish, Brazy, and Devine 2008; Eibach and Ehrlinger 2006; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2013). These scholars find that Whites compare current racial conditions to the past and conclude that racial equality has been achieved, whereas non-Whites compare present conditions to an ideal and conclude that racial equality is far from being achieved. These perceptual differences have consequences for attitudes toward affirmative action (Brodish, Brazy, and Devine 2008; DeBell 2017), decisions about how best to combat racial inequality, and beliefs about whether economic inequality persists (Onyeador et al. 2019).

The United States has long been a multiracial nation, and the population of non-White people continues to grow (Frey 2018). With continued growth, a broader spectrum of racial groups will weigh in on racial politics—deciding whether there are problems and, if so, where responsibility lies. To better capture these dynamics, this article extends the study of perceived racial discrimination to include beliefs about Asian Americans and Latina/os. I address two research questions: (1) Do people believe that rates of racial discrimination have changed from 1968 to 2018?; and (2) Which people, events, and themes come to mind when evaluating the prevalence of racial discrimination?

WHAT HISTORY TELLS US

School is a central site where people learn about racial groups in the past and the present. If students are looking for lessons about minority contributions to the political development of the United States, they will be sorely disappointed. Instead, the extensive contributions of racial minorities are ignored or minimized, as are the extensive barriers and discrimination they faced. Despite its importance, curriculum is heavily censored when describing racial minorities. Kindergarten through high school education in the United States presents a simplified version of Black civil rights history and often entirely erases Latina/o and Asian American histories (Foster 1999; Theoharis 2018). These omissions extend to college courses as well. Content analyses of introductory political science textbooks find that when Black and Latina/o people are discussed, they are relegated to a single chapter on the civil rights movement (Monforti and McGlynn 2010; Wallace and Allen 2008). Discussions of Asian people most often appear in content covering the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, focusing on Japanese internment, Chinese exclusion, and the *Korematsu* v. *United States* case (Takeda 2018).

The myopic focus on civil rights may distort perceptions of racial progress. What should be a story that "reflect[s] the immense injustices at the nation's core and the enormous lengths people had gone to attack them [instead] become[s] a flattering mirror. The popular history of the civil rights movement now serve[s] as a testament to the power of American democracy" (Theoharis 2018).

LESSONS FOR NOW

Descriptions of racial discrimination in the past frame our understanding of how groups experience discrimination in the present. Activist groups such as Black Lives Matter are compared to sanitized versions of civil rights leaders and criticized for not protesting "the right way" (Theoharis 2018). Labor exploitation of racial minorities is described as having already been resolved in the past (Foster 1999). Data show how different racial groups fare in society, including poverty rates, graduation rates, and health disparities, among other inequalities. I argue, however, that it is more important how people *perceive* their position in society and the position of others.

Fragile coalitions developed, in part, because of shared understandings of group position—for example, the cooperation of African American, Mexican American, and White labor in Texas (Krochmal 2016). More recently, Japanese Americans who were previously held in internment camps protested immigrant detention camps at the US–Mexico border (Fenwick 2019). With multiple histories and limited information, which specific groups or historical events do people think of when asked about racial discrimination?

DATA AND METHODS

To address these questions, I used the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a nationally representative sample of 1,000 US residents, to gauge perceptions of race-based discrimination. Respondents rated Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White people on how much discrimination they believed each group faced in the past (1968)[1] and

discrimination they face currently (2018).[2] A rating of 1 indicated no discrimination at all and a rating of 9 indicated significant discrimination. I averaged these ratings as a measure of perceived racial discrimination against each group.

Table 1 describes the number and percentage of each racial group in the sample.[3] Most respondents answered the

people in 1968. Black people are perceived to have experienced the most racial discrimination, with an average of 8.2, followed by Latina/os (7.3), Asians (6.5), and Whites (2.2).

In 1968, signs of White supremacy were unabashedly visible. The Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 had recently been passed and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

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questions about discrimination—957 of 1,000—and there was no significant difference between those who answered and those who did not in either the numeric rating or the open-ended questions.

Finally, respondents were asked about what came to mind when thinking about racial discrimination. I used the qualitative coding software, NVIVO, to identify the most common people, events, and themes mentioned. The open-ended questions provide a fuller context with which to understand the numeric ratings. The comments allow respondents to "speak for themselves," providing perspectives that the researcher may not have anticipated.

removed the last racial restrictions from immigration policies. The racial context in which these laws were needed can explain the perception that Black people faced the most severe discrimination and that White people faced the least.

The perceptions of discrimination against Latina/o and Asian people are more perplexing. As shown in table 2, the number of mentions in the open-ended responses do not correspond with the numeric ratings.

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Taken together, these data provide insight into how much discrimination Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White people appear to experience. Beliefs about the societal position of various racial groups likely underlie the development of other attitudes about race relations generally.

RESULTS

Group-based assessments of discrimination can be measured by both numeric ratings and comments from respondents.

Perceptions of the Past

Each racial group was rated on a scale from 1 to 9 to reflect the amount of discrimination they were perceived to face. Figure 1 shows the average rating of Asian, Black, Latina/o, and White

Table 1		
Number of Racial Groups in the Sample		
	Number of Respondents	**Percentage of the Sample**
White Respondents	757	79%
Black Respondents	93	10%
Latina/o Respondents	88	9%
Asian Respondents	19	2%

Which factors do people use when assessing racial discrimination? To better understand what goes into these ratings, I examined open-ended responses. After rating each group, respondents were asked, "What are some things that come to mind when thinking about racial discrimination in the past?" Table 2 shows the most frequent people, events, and themes that emerged.

Although respondents could have mentioned examples of any type of discrimination, the greatest number of comments referred to Jim Crow laws, followed by mentions of slavery. The examples given mostly mentioned Black people being denied jobs, housing, and opportunities to vote. However, Japanese Internment was the most mentioned event, even more frequently than the March on Washington and the Civil War. Other mentions concerning Asian people were Chinese Exclusion and anti-Asian sentiment during the Vietnam War. The references to past discrimination against Asian people closely mirrored the themes identified in textbooks.

Although Latina/o people were rated as experiencing high levels of discrimination (see figure 1), there were few concrete details reported. Two people mentioned the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 and a single respondent discussed Mexican repatriation. These responses suggest that when thinking about racial discrimination in the past, the images are largely associated with a small subset of events from the Black Civil Rights Movement. There were no Latina/o or Asian historical figures mentioned. White people including Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson were associated with Black history.

This certainly is not to say that Black people are represented with depth. Yet, there is something distinctive in the fact that no specific Latina/o, Native, or Asian *people* were

Figure 1
Average Perceptions of Past Racial Discrimination (1968)

Against Asians: Asian Respondents 7.1, Black Respondents 6.2, Latinx Respondents 6.4, White Respondents 6.4
Against Blacks: Asian Respondents 8.3, Black Respondents 8.5, Latinx Respondents 8.3, White Respondents 7.7
Against Latina/os: Asian Respondents 7.6, Black Respondents 7.4, Latinx Respondents 7.7, White Respondents 6.7
Against Whites: Asian Respondents 1.9, Black Respondents 2.4, Latinx Respondents 1.9, White Respondents 2.6

Legend: ▨ Asian Respondents ☰ Black Respondents ▤ Latinx Respondents ✕ White Respondents
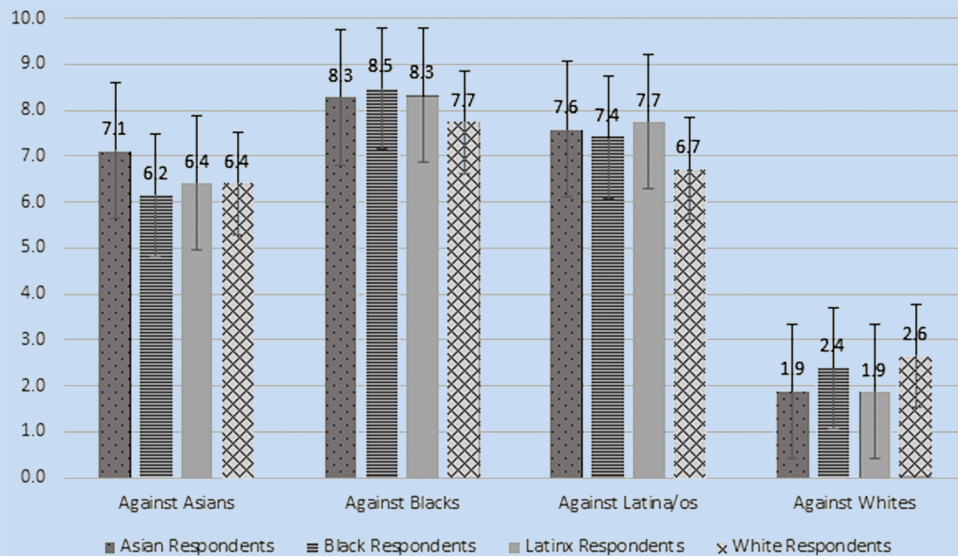
Table 2
Most Frequent Responses for Past Discrimination (1968)

People	Number and Percentage of the Sample
Martin Luther King, Jr.	30 (3%)
Rosa Parks	9 (1%)
Events	
Japanese Internment	32 (3%)
Key Words/Themes	
Jim Crow/Segregation	270 (34%)
Slavery	106 (13%)
Lynching	40 (5%)
Riots	37 (4%)

Notes: Of the 1,000 respondents, 793 provided an open-ended response. The percentages are calculated based on mentions per respondent. If a respondent mentioned something more than once, it was counted only once.

mentioned in any of the comments. When group names appeared in the comments, they were usually in a list of all minority groups. For example, this comment is typical of the listing manner of references to non-White groups: "Separate water fountains, men being paid better than women, Whites hired before Blacks, Hispanics & Asians" (White woman, 41).

HOW ARE WE DOING NOW?

Next, I discuss perceptions of racial discrimination in 2018. To what extent do people believe racial discrimination still occurs? Figure 2 shows that although there are differences in magnitude, on average, all racial groups see Black people as experiencing the most discrimination (7.1), followed by Latinos (6.7), Asians (5.0), and Whites (2.3). The pattern with Blacks and Whites at the poles and Latina/os and Asians in the middle is consistent with a long line of research beginning in the 1990s that shows this ranking of groups (Kim and Lee 2001).

Respondents then were asked, "What are some things that come to mind when thinking about racial discrimination today?" Table 3 shows the most frequent references people made when thinking about racial discrimination in the present.

President Donald Trump was the most-referenced person. Respondents viewed him as inciting discrimination and stoking much of the current racism that they perceived. There also was a broader set of examples for current discrimination. Mentions of immigration and "reverse discrimination" emerged as new types of discrimination.

The few comments about Asian people vacillated between viewing them as victims of discrimination or as perpetrators. One respondent noted that "Apparently, it is okay to bash on Asians and Caucasians" (White man, 31). Other comments included Asians as receiving undeserved benefits along with other racial minority groups—for example, "I see more opportunities for Blacks then [sic] Whites now. Affirmative Action. The common White guy cannot compete when the advantages go to Blacks, Asians, Mexicans and Women first" (White man, 53). The narrow focus omits current issues of discrimination against Asians.

A new theme of immigration emerged in comments discussing 2018. This theme resulted in more specific examples of discrimination against Latina/os. However, descriptions of discrimination were mostly *only* about immigration despite the discrimination that occurs against Latina/os in the criminal justice system, housing, and hiring.

The emphasis on immigration likely stems from persistent anti-immigrant rhetoric that was racialized—focusing on Mexicans specifically and Latina/os generally. Respondents mentioned hearing stereotypes of Mexicans as "illegal," rapists, and drug dealers.

Perceptions of discrimination against Black people in 2018 were similar to those in 1968. Respondents commented on job and housing discrimination as significant types of discrimination against Black people. However, a new theme surrounding police brutality emerged in comments about 2018.

The stories we tell ourselves about racial discrimination are not uniform across racial minority groups.

Table 3
Most Frequent Responses for Current Discrimination (2018)

People	Number and Percentage of the Sample
Donald Trump	74 (9%)
Trayvon Martin	34 (4%)
Events	
Charlottesville Rally	14 (2%)
Key Words/Themes	
Reverse Racism/Discrimination against Whites	92 (12%)
Police Brutality/Shootings	87 (11%)
Jobs/Hiring Discrimination	83 (11%)
Immigration	41 (5%)
Black Lives Matter	33 (4%)

Note: Of the 1,000 respondents, 759 provided a response.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Figure 3 shows perceptions of progress measured as the difference between past and present levels of racial discrimination. Negative numbers represent the view that discrimination has decreased for a group, whereas positive numbers represent perceived increases in discrimination. Most groups agree that White people have experienced slight increases in racial discrimination, although the average percentages are still quite low. Across all racial groups, Asians were seen as experiencing the greatest decrease in racial discrimination whereas Latina/os were perceived as experiencing relatively small decreases. It appears that people believe Asians and Blacks are doing much better, Latinos are doing moderately better, and Whites are doing worse.

CONCLUSION

Discussions of racial progress continue to be an important part of our political conversations. At stake is the understanding of what the United States represents as a country and how far we

Figure 2
Average Perceptions of Current Discrimination (2018)
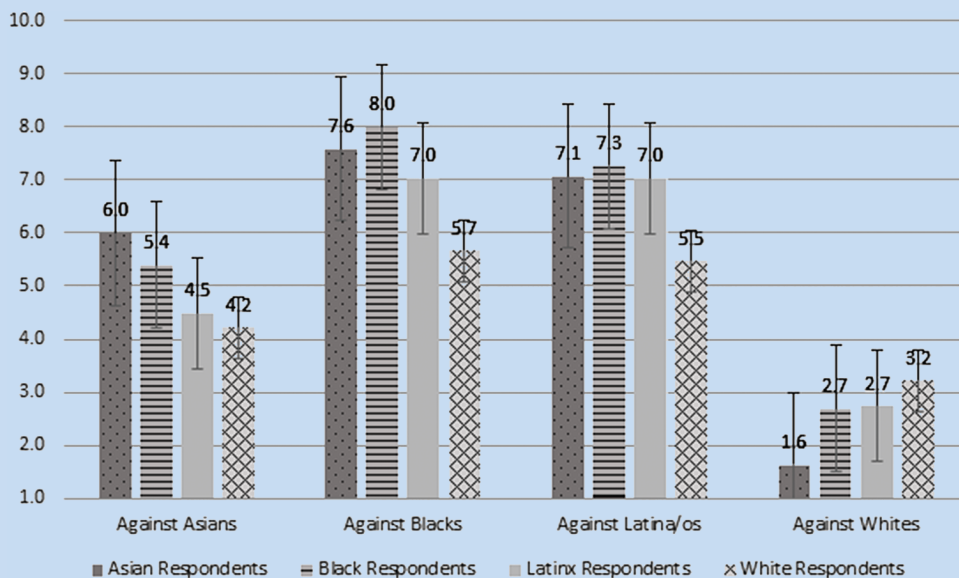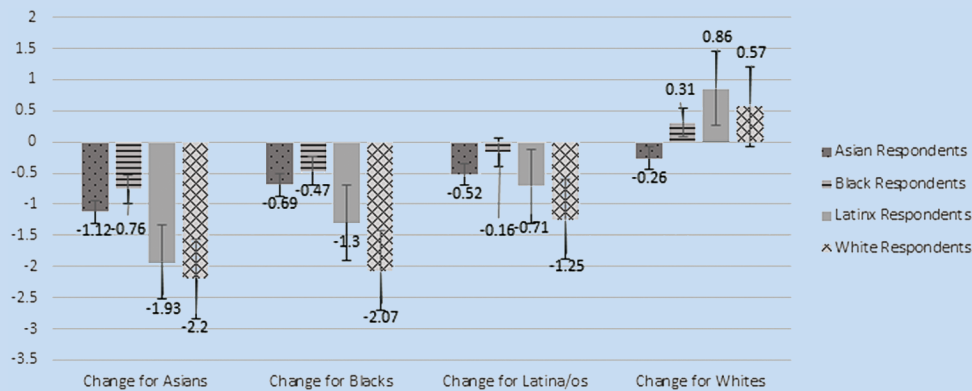
Figure 3

Perceived Changes in Racial Discrimination from 1968 to 2018

have yet to go to reach those ideals. More concretely, perceptions of racial progress are critical to understanding what political action needs to be taken (if any) to reduce persistent racial inequalities. For many people, these inequalities are a reflection of persistent racial discrimination. For others, however, they represent the failure of racial minorities to live up to their responsibilities to make progress and achieve the American Dream.

The stories we tell ourselves about racial discrimination are not uniform across racial minority groups. The data show a consistent ranking of which groups are perceived as the greatest targets of discrimination and which are the least. Although we might expect that people would refer mostly to their own racial/ethnic group, all respondents tended to speak specifically of Black people and the types of discrimination most associated with Blackness. Future work should incorporate a greater number of racial minorities to better understand the associations that Latina/os and Asian Americans think of when assessing how much discrimination exists against them.

The data also provide insight into which factors people rely on when assessing group position. Are racial inequalities and state violence part of a long trend of oppression (i.e., the limited-progress view) or infrequent and mild (i.e., the substantial-progress view)? The answers to these questions inform how we engage with government, the urgency of our political actions, and potential coalition partners. ∎

important contribution, providing further context for a more nuanced understanding of perceived racial discrimination.

NOTES

1. Fifty years ago (1968), how much discrimination do you think each of the following groups faced because of their race?
2. What about today (2018)? How much discrimination do you think each of the following groups face today because of their race?
3. A significant limitation of this study is the small sample size of racial minorities. Although the sample mimics the national population, it unfortunately limits the number of Asian, Black, and Latina/o respondents. Despite these limitations, the project provides an important cross-group comparison —joining other work in race and ethnic politics that moves beyond the outdated Black–White binary. The use of open-ended questions also is an

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