

Americans without Americanness: The Racial Boundaries of U.S. National Membership

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Abstract

Scholars have proposed that racial stratification in the United States is informed by at least two axes: perceptions of superiority versus inferiority and beliefs about national inclusion versus exclusion. To date, however, research on the racial boundaries of U.S. national membership has yet to fully account for the multiple and correlated dimensions of Americanness, the perspectives of racial minorities, and the contrast between first-order beliefs (one's own views) and third-order beliefs (perceptions of what most Americans think). I address these empirical and theoretical gaps with an original survey experiment ($N = 3,161$) and uncover several key findings. First, Americans' third-order beliefs structure national membership as a tripartite hierarchy that privileges Whites as most American, positions Latinos and Asians as least American, and locates Blacks in an intermediate position. Critically, this perceived national hierarchy persists even after accounting for characteristics such as immigrant generation status, language fluency, and civic engagement, suggesting that Americans hold essentialized conceptions of race and national belonging. At the same time, personal views often diverge from the ostensible societal consensus: only White Americans express first-order beliefs that mirror this tripartite hierarchy; Latino and Asian Americans reject their outsider status and instead claim an intermediate position, while Black Americans position themselves as more American than even Whites. I contend that these contested hierarchies of Americanness carry important implications for ongoing debates over immigrant assimilation, intergroup relations, and racial stratification in the United States.

Keywords

race, boundaries, national identity, Americanness, foreignness, hierarchies, stratification, experiment

Introduction

How does race inform boundaries of American national identity? Questions about what it means to be truly American have been posited and debated since the foundation of the country (Myrdal 1944/1995; Smith 1997; Tocqueville [1835] 2002). These disputes are not merely rhetorical but have profound social, political, and economic consequences.

Individuals who are marginalized or excluded from national belonging encounter

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discrimination in employment and education (Kang et al. 2016; Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015); receive lower levels of altruism and affective sentiment (Beaman 2017; Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis 2023; Perry, Whitehead, and Davis 2019); and suffer psychological and mental health consequences (Cheryan and Monin 2005; Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz 2011). A divided sense of peoplehood also harms the health of the nation itself: it has corrosive effects on the legitimacy of political institutions, undermines national stability, and worsens social stratification and inequality (Mylonas and Tudor 2021).

The debate over race and U.S. national boundaries has historically been demarcated by the binary Black-White color line that positioned Black Americans as racially inferior and unfit for citizenship (Du Bois [1903] 2016). However, rapid racial demographic changes in the United States have drawn increasing attention to the impact of immigration from Latin America and Asia in redefining what it means to be an American (Abascal 2015, 2020; Abascal and Centeno 2017; Flores and Schachter 2018; Schachter 2016). Some scholars have attempted to move beyond the binary color line paradigm by positioning Latinos and Asians as intermediate in a racial hierarchy that positions Whites and Blacks as, respectively, “superior” and “inferior” (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). Others have criticized this approach for assuming that racial positioning occurs along a single dimension, arguing that it is necessary to consider a second, *insider-foreigner* dimension of stratification that locates racial groups on a continuum from truly American to culturally foreign (Kim 1999; Zamora 2018; Zou and Cheryan 2017).

This study builds on the literature on the racial boundaries of Americanness by leveraging a conjoint survey experiment. This approach allows me to examine the relative importance of racial status in defining U.S. national membership compared to other theoretically relevant factors. Importantly, the multidimensional design disentangles the influence of distinct but highly correlated traits, providing a more precise understanding of how race shapes perceptions of

U.S. national membership. Concretely, I incorporate numerous attributes that prior literature has linked to perceptions of Americanness, such as family origins and background (Alba and Nee 2003), religion (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), language fluency (Schildkraut 2005), educational attainment (Flores-González 2017), political ideology (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021), residential location (Lichter and Brown 2011), and engagement with normative cultural behaviors such as voting and celebrating iconic U.S. holidays (Bloemraad 2022).

This approach further allows me to investigate the national positioning of Latino and Asian Americans. I build on prior work that highlights how these groups, as comparatively new entrants into the American racial order, are cast as outsiders to the nation relative to White and Black Americans (Kim 1999; Ocampo 2024; Xu and Lee 2013). In particular, I examine whether their tenuous belonging reflects an *essentialized foreignness* that renders them perpetually non-American, or whether theories of statistical discrimination explain such perceptions.

Meanwhile, I examine how Americans define national boundaries by analyzing both first-order beliefs (one’s *own* views) and third-order beliefs (perceptions of what *most Americans* think). To date, studies have typically focused on one of these perspectives in isolation (Ocampo-Roland 2025; Zou and Cheryan 2017).¹ Considering both types of beliefs simultaneously is useful because it distinguishes between individuals’ personal convictions and their perceptions of broader societal norms, which may diverge in meaningful ways.

Finally, I draw on large samples of White ($N = 1,280$), Black ($N = 590$), Latino ($N = 650$), and Asian Americans ($N = 641$) to achieve a comprehensive account of how different racial groups articulate the boundaries of Americanness. Notably, in contrast to prior research that has often focused on the perspectives of White respondents, this study is one of the first to analyze perceptions of Americanness across the nation’s four largest racial groups. By systematically mapping these diverse viewpoints, this article thus

offers important insights into U.S. intergroup relations and the dynamics of emergent social boundaries (Fouka and Tabellini 2022; Jiménez 2010; Jones 2023; Pérez, Robertson, and Vicuña 2023; Waters 1990).

Drawing on this original survey data, I uncover several key findings. First, Americans express third-order beliefs that structure national membership into a tripartite hierarchy: Whites as most American, Latinos and Asians as least American, and Blacks in an intermediate position. Moreover, I provide evidence that this national marginalization of Latino and Asian Americans reflects *essentialized* racial beliefs to the extent that these disparities persist even after accounting for various social and demographic characteristics. In fact, contrary to traditional assimilation theories, this relative foreignness ascribed to Latino and Asian Americans is stronger among U.S.-born than among foreign-born members of these groups. At the same time, I find that first-order beliefs about race and Americanness do not neatly align with such third-order perceptions. While White Americans express first-order beliefs that mirror this tripartite hierarchy, Latino and Asian Americans reject their outsider status to claim an intermediate position, while Black Americans position themselves as more American than even Whites. I contend that understanding these various boundaries of Americanness has significant implications for ongoing scholarly debates about immigrant assimilation, intergroup relations, and racial stratification in the United States.

Background

Race and American National Identity

Race has long been a foundational criterion for boundaries of U.S. national membership. This legacy can be traced back to the era of slavery and the Supreme Court's declaration in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) that the U.S. Constitution did not extend citizenship to Black Americans. Even after slavery

was formally abolished, deep-rooted racist ideologies were routinely employed to justify the exclusion of Black Americans from full social and political participation (Myrdal 1944/1995). This history of anti-Blackness in the United States is eloquently captured by W. E. B. Du Bois' ([1903] 2016) concept of double consciousness, which highlighted the struggles of Black Americans to reconcile their "two-ness" as both American and Black.

In recent decades, scholars have called for moving beyond the binary conception of the United States as "two nations, Black and White" (Kim 1999). This shift reflects a recognition of an increasingly multiracial America, spurred by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which opened the doors to mass immigration from Latin America and Asia. Today, over six decades later, Latinos and Asians, respectively, represent roughly 20 and 7 percent of the U.S. population, which stands in striking contrast to 1960 when Whites and Blacks together represented over 95 percent of the total population (United States Census Bureau 2026).

Many scholars have attempted to adapt the traditional color line paradigm by positioning Latinos and Asians in an intermediary location on a hierarchy that positions Whites and Blacks at the respective ends (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Sakamoto et al. 2009). Critics have noted that this framework fails to fully account for the distinct processes through which Latino and Asian Americans are racialized in the United States (Kim 1999; J. C. Lee and Kye 2016; J. Lee and Sheng 2024; Zou and Cheryan 2017). Notably, the traditional Black-White racial paradigm assumes that racial stratification occurs primarily along a single dimension of "superiority" and "inferiority." However, the racialization of Latino and Asian Americans also centers on contests over the contours of American national boundaries, especially beliefs about sociocultural belonging and membership. This study builds on prior literature by offering new theoretical and empirical insights on how Americans construct the racial boundaries of national belonging.

The Multiple Dimensions of Americanness

Existing debates over the contours of Americanness are often grounded in two competing visions of U.S. national identity: the *civic republican tradition* and the *ethnocultural tradition*. The former places normative boundaries of American membership around civic principles such as commitment to democratic values and practices, respecting collective rights and obligations, and striving to achieve the American Dream through hard work (Levy and Wright 2020; Tocqueville [1835] 2002). This more inclusive, aspirational articulation of American political tradition stands in contrast to the ethnocultural vision, which sets rigid, ascriptive boundaries on authentic group membership, such as being White (Devos and Banaji 2005; Theiss-Morse 2009).

However, a persistent limitation of traditional studies of Americanness is that they examine individual traits separately rather than as part of an integrated, multidimensional framework. As a result, they typically assess how each trait independently relates to perceptions of Americanness without accounting for other, potentially correlated attributes. For instance, studies that draw on public opinion datasets such as the General Social Survey (GSS) typically ask survey respondents to evaluate traits associated with American identity, but they are not truly multidimensional in the sense that the questions are asked one after another. Moreover, such data are limited by the fact that they only ask about one category for any given attribute (Citrin and Wright 2009; Schildkraut 2007). For example, they inquire if being White is considered important in being a true American, but they do not ask about how this association compares to being Black, Latino, or Asian.

This study leverages a conjoint experiment design that is particularly well-suited to build on this existing literature. Crucially, it allows for a simultaneous comparison of how multiple attributes theoretically linked to perceptions of Americanness (e.g., race, nativity, religion,

English fluency, and civic engagement) matter relative to each other. While recent innovative studies engage with similar methods and research questions, they also differ in important ways (Asbury-Kimmel 2025). For instance, Muna Adem and Denise Ambriz (2023) offer an insightful examination of the boundaries of U.S. legal and cultural membership, but they employ *nationality* rather than race as a core profile attribute. However, the study does not offer a detailed comparison of Americans' third- and first-order beliefs about U.S. national membership.

Essentialized Foreignness versus Statistical Inference

In a separate line of research, race scholars have argued that Latino and Asian Americans are positioned as culturally foreign relative to White and Black Americans (Kim 1999; Xu and Lee 2013; Zou and Cheryan 2017). But how should we conceptualize this foreignness? Claire Jean Kim (1999) argues that Asians in the United States have historically been ascribed an immutable otherness that rendered them incapable of Americanization. For instance, a 1942 editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times* asserted, "A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched—so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents, grows up to be a Japanese, not an American." At the same time, it remains unclear whether such race-essentialist beliefs explain the contemporary association of Asian (and Latino) Americans with foreignness.²

Insights from the theory of statistical discrimination offer a competing explanation (Arrow 1973; Phelps 1972). From this perspective, Latino and Asian Americans today are no longer ascribed an immutable foreignness informed by racist ideologies. Instead, they are presumed to be foreigners due to a simple demographic reality: as many as one in three Latinos, and two in three Asians, in the United States are foreign-born. For instance, a White American who encounters an Asian person at the grocery store may use statistical

averages about Asians as a group to make inferences about the Asian individual, particularly when they have incomplete information about that specific person. This uncertainty may contribute to the prevalence of questions such as: “Where are you *really* from?”

Empirical studies on how race shapes U.S. national boundaries have yet to adjudicate this ambiguity between essentialist beliefs and inferences based on demographic patterns. For instance, qualitative interviews with U.S.-born Latino and Asian Americans reveal that they are often incorrectly assumed to be foreign-born, but these encounters are not necessarily driven by the racist belief that these individuals are immutable foreigners (Flores-González 2017; Tuan 1998). Likewise, quantitative studies show that both Latino and Asian Americans are assumed to have lower levels of patriotism relative to White and Black Americans, but such assertions may be driven by the fact that many Latinos and Asians *are* foreign-born and thus objectively likely to be less patriotic (Xu and Lee 2013). Whether the foreignness associated with Latino and Asian Americans reflects race-essentialist beliefs or stems from demographic inferences is important because of its implications for twenty-first-century assimilation in the United States (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964). Notably, it alludes to whether the national exclusion of Latino and Asian Americans is a transitory phenomenon or likely to persist across generations (Schachter 2021).

The present study is uniquely suited to examine this empirical ambiguity. Critically, survey respondents are provided multiple pieces of information about hypothetical American profiles, including their race, nativity status, and English language fluency. This design minimizes the possibility that judgments of race and Americanness are driven by instances of statistical discrimination informed by highly correlated demographic characteristics. That is, it allows for a direct test of whether Latino and Asian Americans are ascribed an immutable foreignness relative to White and Black Americans.

Third- and First-order Beliefs of Americanness

Finally, studies examining perceptions of U.S. national membership have often solicited survey respondents to indicate what are known as third-order beliefs (Ridgeway 2019). This is typically measured by asking respondents what they think “most people” or “most Americans” believe, or how specific groups are broadly viewed in society. For instance, Linda Zou and Sapna Cheryan (2017) ask survey participants: “To what extent are <group> seen as foreign or American in U.S. society?” In other words, third-order beliefs capture *perceptions of cultural consensus*. This approach is taken in part because social desirability bias undermines the credibility of responses derived from purported first-order beliefs when researchers ask sensitive questions. At the same time, however, third-order beliefs are not simply “first-order beliefs minus social desirability bias”; they are their own estimand of interest (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Studies in the stereotype content model (SCM) tradition have long used this approach to theorize about cultural stereotypes and ideologies (Fiske et al. 2002; Mize and Manago 2022).

Third-order beliefs are socially consequential because human behavior is powerfully shaped by what people think most others desire or prefer, even if those actions run contrary to the personal preferences of both actors (Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2020; Correll et al. 2017). These dynamics can inadvertently reinforce existing social inequalities if, for example, Americans become less likely to vote for, hire, or befriend people whom they believe most others do not regard as “truly American.” For instance, in a recent study, Christianne Corbett et al. (2022) reveal that the perceived beliefs of “most Americans” have gendered consequences in the realm of U.S. political elections. Notably, voters who *personally preferred* women candidates for president but who viewed women candidates as less electable (due to the perceived sexism of “most Americans”) were

most likely to switch their votes to male candidates.

At the same time, examining first-order beliefs about U.S. national membership is also likely to yield valuable empirical and theoretical insights for at least two reasons. First, existing studies that exclusively focus on third-order beliefs inevitably overlook tensions that would likely emerge if people's personal perceptions were likewise surveyed. For instance, individuals may hold exclusionary third-order beliefs that cast certain groups as un-American, while simultaneously endorsing inclusionary first-order beliefs that repudiate such ideologies. Second, third-order beliefs are likely to skew toward a White-centric perspective to the extent that White Americans have historically exerted disproportionate influence in widespread cultural ideologies (Kim 1999). Examining first-order beliefs, particularly those of racial minorities, can help illuminate how racial minorities think about their own standing in U.S. national boundaries and how they position other groups in relation to themselves. Mapping out these diverse perspectives offers valuable insights into the dynamics of intergroup relations and evolving social boundaries (Abascal 2015; Fouka and Tabellini 2022).

Measuring both third- and first-order beliefs of Americanness is useful to achieve a better understanding of how Americans think about their national identity. Prior surveys have contributed to this empirical ambiguity by asking only one type of question, leaving open the possibility that some participants' answers reflect their own personal views, while others' responses reflect their third-order beliefs (Citrin and Wright 2009; Schildkraut 2007; Zou and Cheryan 2017). In contrast, this study offers a unique contribution by examining both types of beliefs and explicitly comparing (with large sample sizes) how White, Black, Latino, and Asian Americans' views on U.S. national membership across these two measurements diverge or converge.

Research Design and Data

This study draws on an original survey experiment with 3,161 Americans conducted in the

fall of 2022. The survey was designed on the platform Qualtrics, and the sample was provided by Bovitz, a company that maintains a large online research panel of U.S. respondents. This study was pre-registered on Open Science Framework (OSF).³ The survey sample is composed of 1,280 White, 590 Black, 650 Latino, and 641 Asian Americans stratified to be nationally representative of the U.S. population within each racial category by gender, age, educational attainment, and political party.

Survey Experiment Overview

Survey respondents were asked to evaluate the "Americanness" of eight profiles, presented one at a time, of hypothetical U.S. citizens who were randomized along nine attributes: race, family background, religion, language fluency, political ideology, civic engagement, favorite holiday, educational attainment, and residential location. This yields a total of 25,288 rated profiles. Table 1 lists the nine attributes and their feature levels. Supplemental Appendix A details the theoretical justification for the nine attributes, while Supplemental Appendix B presents an example of a hypothetical profile evaluated by survey participants. The ordering of the nine profile attributes was randomized across, but fixed within, each respondent (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).

Outcome Measures

Survey participants were asked to rate each profile's "Americanness" on a 1 to 7 scale from "low Americanness" to "high Americanness" along two measures: (1) what the respondent thinks, and (2) what they think most Americans think. These questions measure two distinct estimands of interest. The first captures first-order views of Americanness—that is, what respondents themselves believe or endorse. The second gauges third-order beliefs, which measure *culturally consensual* views. This approach is known as Most People Projective Questioning, and it is commonly used in prior literature to measure widespread, cultural stereotypes and ideologies (Mize and Manago 2018, 2022).

Table 1. Profile Attributes and Features.

Attributes	Features
Race/Ethnicity	White Black Latino Asian
Family Background	U.S.-born; parents or prior family U.S.-born U.S.-born; parents foreign-born Foreign-born; became legal U.S. citizen
Religion	Christian Non-Christian religion Atheist
Language Fluency	Speaks fluent English Speaks fluent English and a foreign language Speaks English with a foreign accent
Political Ideology	Very conservative Conservative Leans conservative Moderate Leans liberal Liberal Very liberal
Civic Engagement	Regularly votes in elections Sometimes votes in elections Rarely votes in elections
Favorite Holiday	July 4th Thanksgiving Saint Patrick's Day [White only] Juneteenth [Black only] Cinco de Mayo [Latino only] Lunar New Year [Asian only]
Educational Attainment	Less than high school degree High school degree Some college College degree Graduate degree
Residential Location	Rural Suburban Urban

Analytical Strategy

Studies analyzing conjoint survey experiments regularly focus on reporting the average marginal component effects (AMCEs). AMCEs are popular because they can be interpreted as the causal effect of an attribute relative to a selected baseline category, averaged over the joint distribution of all

other attributes in the design (Hainmueller et al. 2014). In this study, however, I report the main results with marginal means (MMs). This quantity “describes the level of favorability toward profiles that have a particular feature level, ignoring all other features” (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020:210). In the context of the present study, a higher MM value for one profile feature (e.g.,

White) compared to another (e.g., Latino) indicates that the former is, on average, evaluated as more American. AMCEs and MMs have a direct relationship with each other in that the pairwise difference between two MMs of a given attribute is the AMCE. The advantage of reporting MMs is that they are not anchored to researcher-selected baseline categories, allowing for direct comparison of preferences across profile attributes and respondent subgroups.

Results

Third-order Beliefs of Americanness

Figure 1 presents survey participants' third-order perceptions of Americanness, stratified by their racial background (White, Black, Latino, and Asian American).⁴ For instance, the top left panel shows that White respondents, on average, believed that most Americans would rate White profiles 4.79 on the seven-point Americanness scale, averaged over all other features. This MM value is substantively large, with a magnitude nearly identical to that of multigeneration status. By contrast, White respondents expressed third-order beliefs associating Latino and Asian profile features with much lower levels of Americanness—a penalty greater than or comparable to that attached to being atheist, having a foreign accent, or rarely voting.⁵

Black, Latino, and Asian survey respondents articulate similar third-order perceptions regarding the link between race and boundaries of Americanness. First, they collectively associate being White with higher levels of Americanness, relative not only to the other racial categories but also to competing attributes such as being Christian or speaking English fluently. Second, racial minorities likewise articulate a tripartite racial ranking in which White profiles are positioned as most American, followed by Black profiles, and finally Latino and Asian profiles as the least American. While the Black versus Latino profile contrast is statistically indistinguishable for Latino respondents, the results broadly point to a cultural consensus regarding the

perceived hierarchy of race and Americanness. Notably, this ranking inverts the positioning traditionally associated with how Black, Latino, and Asian Americans are located in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Meanwhile, Figure 2 compares third-order perceptions of Americanness across respondent political ideology, specifically between liberals and conservatives. Once again, similar patterns emerge. For instance, being White is a feature strongly linked to third-order perceptions of Americanness, rivaling if not surpassing the importance of other established traits. Meanwhile, both liberal and conservative respondents broadly agree that most Americans envision a tripartite racial ranking in which Whites are perceived as most American, Latino and Asian Americans the least, while Black Americans occupy an intermediary position.

Figures 1 and 2 underscore two important findings. First, they affirm the centrality of Whiteness in third-order beliefs of U.S. national membership. Across most subgroups of respondents, the importance of being White surpasses the weight of other key characteristics traditionally associated with Americanness such as being Christian, regularly voting, and speaking fluent English. Multigeneration status sometimes rivals the advantage of being White. Meanwhile, Latino and Asian racial status are among the most penalized features associated with third-order beliefs about Americanness. The degree of this penalty is comparable to the disadvantage linked with being first-generation, low-educated, atheist, and speaking English with a foreign accent. While there is some heterogeneity in these patterns, a widespread cultural consensus emerges regarding the impact of race on perceptions of Americanness.

Second, the marginalization of Latino and Asian American profiles relative to White and Black profiles persists *net* of attributes such as immigrant generation status, language fluency, political ideology, and civic engagement. To the extent that this association cannot be accounted for by objective demographic differences between racial groups (e.g., being foreign-born or speaking English with a non-native

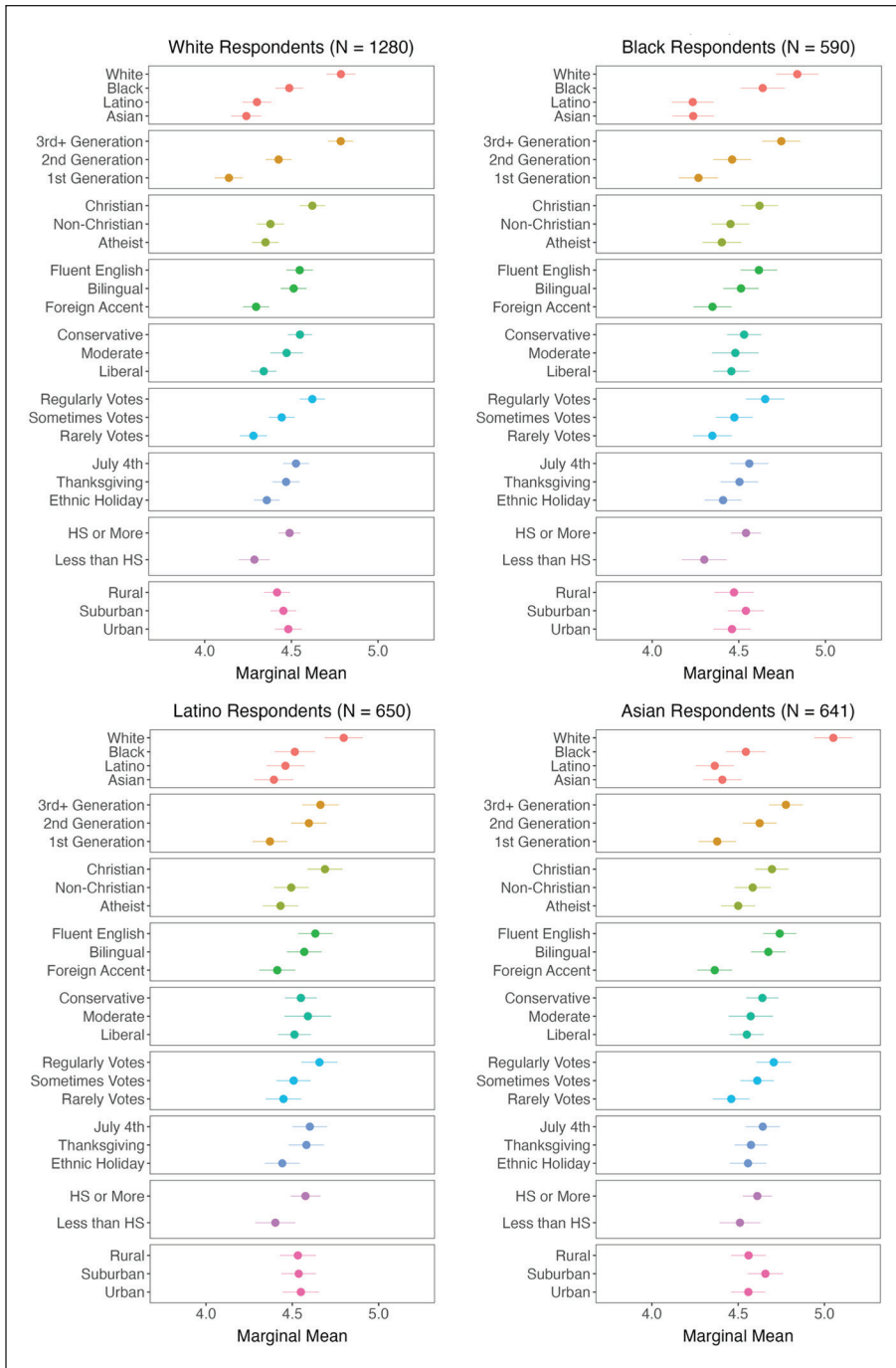


Figure 1. Third-order beliefs: perceptions of Americanness by respondent race (MM).

Note. This plot displays the marginal means of third-order beliefs about Americanness among White, Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

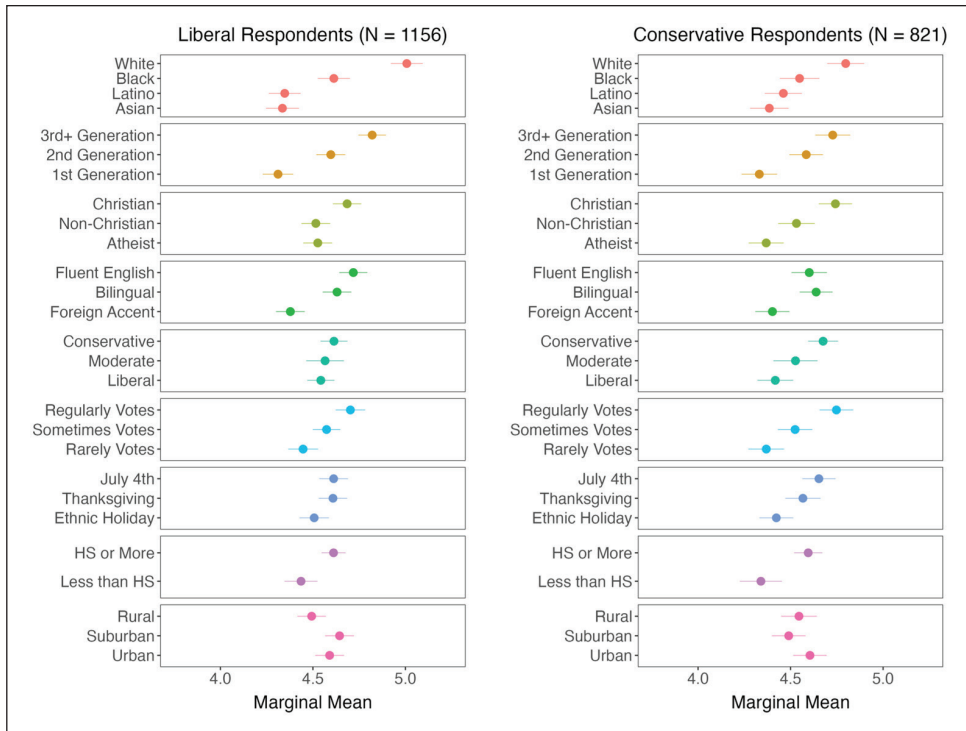


Figure 2. Third-order beliefs: perceptions of Americanness by respondent political ideology (MM).

Note. This plot displays the marginal means of third-order beliefs about Americanness among liberal and conservative respondents. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

accent), Latino and Asian Americans appear to be marked by an *essentialized* foreignness.

Supplemental Appendix C further stratifies the findings by the profile's family background (first, second, and third or more generation). As expected, survey respondents assign the highest average Americanness ratings to multigeneration profiles and the lowest average ratings to first-generation (foreign-born) profiles. These plots likewise confirm that within each family background category, third-order beliefs position Latino and Asian profiles as less American than White and Black profiles. Intriguingly, this racial disparity is stronger among profiles described as U.S.-born than among those described as foreign-born. For instance, the difference in MMs between first-generation Latino and White profiles is 0.37, while the respective gaps among the second and third generations are 0.52 and 0.65. That is, even as the *absolute* levels of foreignness culturally

associated with Latino and Asian Americans decrease across generations, the *relative* level of foreignness in comparison to White and Black Americans appears to be, if anything, stronger among natives than immigrants.

The Perceived U.S. National Hierarchy: Ranking Ideal-type American Profiles

To illustrate some of the concrete implications of these findings, Figure 3 plots a ranking of 12 ideal-type American profiles across race and immigrant generation status (4×3) according to third-order beliefs. I also include two theoretical constructs comparing profiles that can be described as "high ascribed, low achieved" and "high achieved, low ascribed." Examining these ideal-type constructs is both conceptually useful and practically important because Americans in real life do not evaluate the "Americanness" of fellow national members

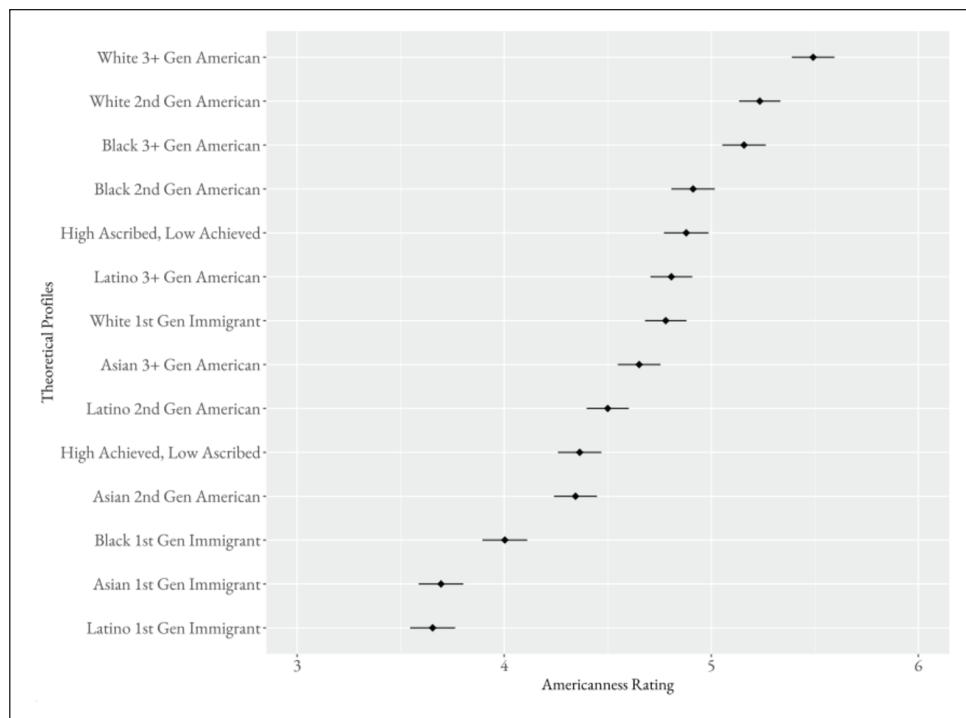


Figure 3. The perceived U.S. national hierarchy across ideal-type profiles.

Note. This plot displays the predicted values for third-order beliefs of Americanness across 14 hypothetical profile archetypes. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

based on just one or two attributes. For instance, when Americans invoke or think about an archetypal group such as an “average Joe” White American, they assume a constellation of characteristics such as their religion (Christian), immigrant generation status (third or more generation), language proficiency (fluent English), and political ideology (conservative). I calculate the predicted third-order beliefs of Americanness for each of these 14 hypothetical profiles, and I plot them in Figure 3.

Several patterns emerge from Figure 3. First, multigeneration White Americans occupy a clear, commanding position in third-order perceptions of Americanness. The secondary but still advantaged position of second-generation White Americans further reveals how White immigrant parents can expect their U.S.-born children to substantively outrank both multigeneration Latino and Asian Americans and parallel the perceived Americanness of multigeneration Black Americans, as measured

by third-order beliefs. Meanwhile, Black Americans occupy a liminal position where they are simultaneously marginalized as less truly American relative to comparable Whites *and* afforded recognition as more truly American than nearly all other racial and immigrant groups.

While race is evidently a central factor in influencing third-order perceptions of Americanness, Figure 3 reveals that boundaries of the perceived U.S. national hierarchy are likewise influenced by non-racial attributes, most notably nativity status. Compared to their same-generation White and Black counterparts, Latino and Asian Americans are perceived as less American, but an established family history in the United States still generates a considerable boost to their perceived Americanness. For instance, multigeneration Latino and Asian Americans are culturally positioned as more American than Black immigrants and occupy a similar, if not superior,

position relative to White immigrants. These patterns help to illustrate how a narrow focus on race and Americanness misses out on key nuances in how Americans think about and define U.S. national membership as expressed through third-order beliefs.

Finally, Figure 3 considers two theoretical ideal-type constructs comparing profiles that can be described as “high ascribed, low achieved” and “high achieved, low ascribed.” In the former, a person possesses all of the “high-in-Americanness” ascribed traits (e.g., being multigeneration, White, Christian) while exhibiting “low-in-Americanness” achieved traits (e.g., not embracing iconic U.S. holidays, being low-educated, rarely voting). The second profile represents the reverse scenario. Figure 3 shows that the “high ascribed, low achieved” profile considerably outranks the “high achieved, low ascribed” profile. The point of this comparison is to illustrate that an individual can expect modest inclusion in third-order perceptions of U.S. national membership by leaning on their largely birthright, ascribed traits *even if they do nothing to alter their achieved traits in their favor*. Conversely, I demonstrate how constrained one is in seeking recognition as truly American through hard work and deliberate effort *if their ascribed traits are stacked up against them*. Although these hypothetical profiles are not particularly “realistic” in that such combinations of attributes are somewhat unlikely in real life, they help illustrate how the perceived national hierarchy is more strongly defined by ethnocultural relative to civic traits.

First-order Beliefs of Americanness

Finally, I turn to survey respondents’ first-order beliefs about U.S. national boundaries. To date, many related studies have focused on the purported beliefs of “most people/Americans” or U.S. society more generally (Fiske et al. 2002; Kim 1999; Zou and Cheryan 2017), thereby neglecting what survey respondents themselves think and consequently overlooking potential tensions that may exist between third- and first-order beliefs of Americanness.

Figure 4 presents survey participants’ first-order perceptions of U.S. national boundaries, stratified by their racial background. One finding that emerges is that the effect of being White in shaping perceptions of Americanness is significantly weaker relative to when expressed as third-order beliefs. For instance, for White respondents, multigeneration status is more impactful than being White in first-order beliefs of Americanness ($p < .05$). A second important finding is that not all racial groups personally embrace the cultural ideology of a tripartite racial ranking in which Whites are positioned as most American, Latinos and Asians the least, and Blacks in between. For instance, Black respondents position their own racial group as most American, outranking even White profiles ($p < .05$). Meanwhile, Latino and Asian respondents position White profiles at the top, followed by their own racial group and Blacks, while they situate the remaining racial minority group (for Latino respondents, Asians, and for Asian respondents, Latinos) as furthest from national belonging ($p < .05$). In fact, it is only White American respondents who endorse a racial ranking of national membership in line with third-order beliefs of Americanness ($p < .05$).

Meanwhile, Figure 5 compares first-order beliefs of Americanness between liberal and conservative respondents. The most striking pattern that stands out is their disparity in the mean profile rating: liberal respondents offer an average Americanness score of 5.19, which compares to 4.83 among conservative respondents ($p < .01$). This significant and substantively large gap stands in sharp contrast to third-order beliefs (Figure 2), where liberal respondents’ average profile score of 4.58 is statistically indistinguishable from conservatives’ score of 4.55. In other words, whereas third-order beliefs showcase a broad cultural consensus across respondent subgroups, first-order beliefs stand out for their heterogeneity. This dynamic is likewise evident in how respondents evaluate specific profile features. For example, conservative respondents assign high Americanness scores to profiles that share their ideology, whereas profiles with a

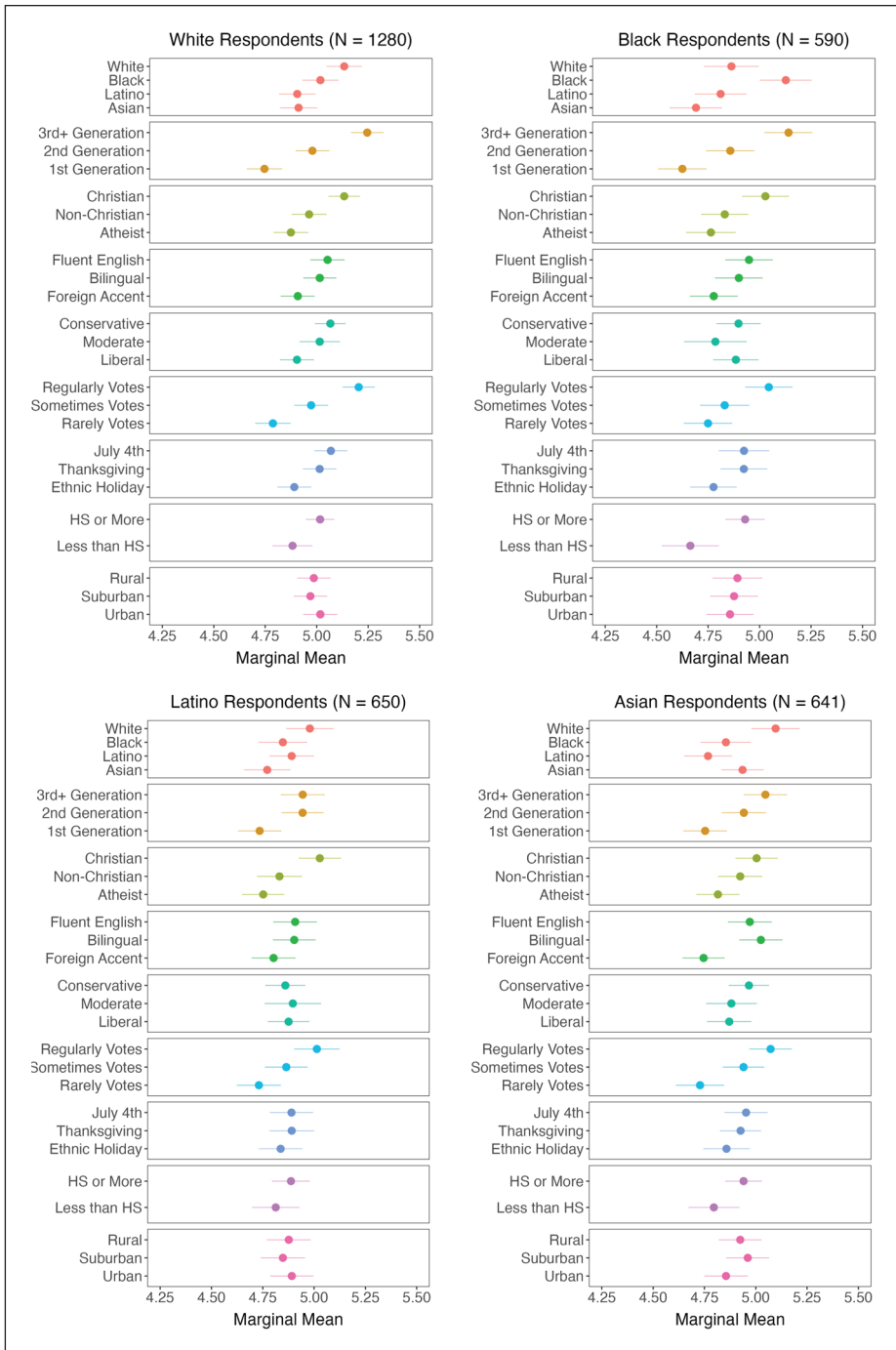


Figure 4. First-order beliefs: perceptions of Americanness by respondent race (MM).

Note. This plot displays the marginal means of first-order beliefs about Americanness among White, Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

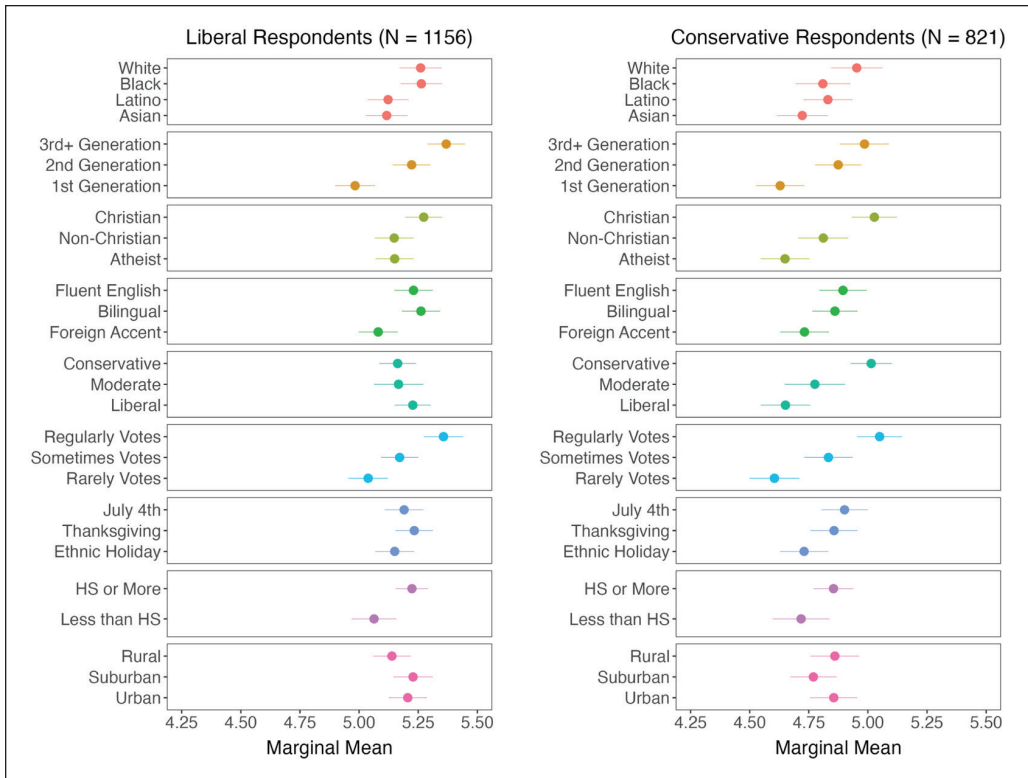


Figure 5. First-order beliefs: perceptions of Americanness by respondent political ideology (MM).

Note. This plot displays the marginal means of first-order beliefs about Americanness among liberal and conservative respondents. The error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

liberal ideology receive significantly lower MM scores ($p < .01$). Liberal respondents exhibit the opposite pattern, assigning higher Americanness scores to liberal relative to conservative profiles, though the in-group preference is comparatively mild ($p > .05$).

Taken together, Figures 4 and 5, which document first-order perceptions of U.S. national membership, carry key empirical and theoretical implications. For instance, many Americans simultaneously hold the perspective that Whiteness is powerfully linked to perceptions of Americanness as viewed by U.S. society at large while claiming to reject that very premise when expressing their own beliefs. This tension between third- and first-order beliefs is especially pronounced in how racial minorities conceptualize the racial hierarchy of Americanness. Black, Latino, and Asian Americans all openly challenge their subordinate placement according to third-order beliefs

and endorse a viewpoint that elevates their own racial group as more American than dominant cultural ideologies recognize. However, it is likewise notable that racial minorities' positioning of other minorities is not significantly more inclusionary. In fact, the primary difference between racial minorities' third- and first-order beliefs is that the latter conspicuously elevate *only their own group* while retaining the relative positioning of other racial minorities in a nearly identical manner.⁶

Discussion and Conclusion

What does it mean to be an American? On the one hand, there is a legal or technical response to this question, one that emphasizes being born in the United States or obtaining American citizenship through the prescribed immigration process (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Gonzales 2016; Menjivar 2006). At the same

time, most Americans maintain a deeper understanding of authentic national belonging such that it is possible to have formal, legal U.S. citizenship with varying degrees of Americanness (Bloemraad 2022; Flores-González 2017; Okura and Karim 2025). In this article, I examine how race structures these multidimensional, gradational articulations of U.S. national boundaries, drawing on an experimental survey with a large, racially diverse sample of American respondents.

This study uncovers several important findings. First, Americans' third-order beliefs organize national membership into a tripartite hierarchy that positions Whites as most American, Blacks in an intermediate position, and Latinos and Asians as least American. More broadly, I find that third-order perceptions of Americanness are highly ethnocultural, and race is one of the strongest predictors of perceived U.S. national membership: Whiteness carries more weight in being considered truly American relative to achievable characteristics such as engagement with normative U.S. cultural behaviors (e.g., being a regular voter and embracing July 4th) or upholding ostensibly cherished American values (e.g., working hard and achieving social mobility via high educational attainment). Meanwhile, being Latino or Asian is among the more penalized traits linked to perceived U.S. national boundaries, rivaling the disadvantage linked with being first-generation, atheist, and speaking English with a foreign accent. In other words, Americans perceive most other Americans to define U.S. national boundaries more by what one *is* than what one *does*.

Second, this outsider positioning of Latino and Asian Americans must be situated within broader societal perceptions that essentialize these groups as immutably foreign outsiders. Notably, many survey respondents ascribe greater foreignness to Latino and Asian Americans relative to White and Black Americans even when profiles are explicitly described as multigeneration, fluent in English, and highly engaged in both civic and patriotic cultural practices. That is, the effect of race in shaping third-order evaluations of Americanness persists even after accounting

for mechanisms based on social and demographic differences. Supplementary analyses further suggest that the relative strength of this racial essentialization *increases* across generations, casting doubt on theories of assimilation that would predict a convergence toward equality in the racial boundaries of Americanness (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964). These findings more broadly call into question mainstream scholarly endeavors to go “beyond Black and White” that transpose the experiences of Latino and Asian Americans onto a color line paradigm that locates them in an intermediary position of privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Sakamoto et al. 2009). Instead, I contend that a proper understanding of racial stratification in the United States must take into account dynamics of national and cultural marginalization.

I illustrate this point by examining how different racial and immigrant groups are hierarchically positioned in the perceptions of most Americans (Figure 3). For instance, the privileged status of second-generation White Americans showcases the belief that White immigrant families need only one generation to substantively outrank both multigeneration Latino and Asian Americans and parallel the Americanness of multigeneration Black Americans. Meanwhile, multigeneration Black Americans are perceived as less American than their White counterparts (a distinction which, notably, diverges from Claire Jean Kim's (1999) model that positions White and Black as equally American), but they are simultaneously assumed to be more American than nearly all other racial and immigrant groups.

Finally, I show that focusing exclusively on third-order beliefs about U.S. national membership conceals significant heterogeneity and dissent from these perceptions. For example, liberal and conservative respondents express sharply divergent first-order beliefs in how inclusively or exclusively they define boundaries of Americanness. Meanwhile, survey respondents broadly contest the primacy of Whiteness in defining perceptions of Americanness when opinions are expressed as first-order beliefs. In fact, only White respondents express first-order beliefs endorsing a

tripartite racial hierarchy in which Whites are positioned as most American, followed by Blacks in a liminal position, and Latinos and Asians as most foreign. These apparent tensions between third- and first-order perceptions of Americanness suggest that beliefs about U.S. national boundaries can be both culturally dominant *and* simultaneously contested.

Implications for Immigrant Assimilation, Intergroup Relations, and Racial Stratification

The findings from this study pose significant implications for three areas of scholarship. First, longstanding debates over race and assimilation too often elide the distinction between economic mobility and cultural acceptance into mainstream American society (Alba and Nee 2003; Sakamoto et al. 2009). I build on prior critiques of this discourse by empirically showcasing the essentialized foreignness associated with Latinos and Asians net of their sociodemographic characteristics (J. C. Lee and Kye 2016; J. Lee and Sheng 2024; Schachter 2016). Conversely, Black Americans appear to have achieved a degree of liminal symbolic recognition as truly American—despite the entrenched structural racism that continues to obstruct them from achieving socioeconomic parity with White Americans. Taken together, these findings suggest that it is critical to decouple our conceptualizations of economic integration and cultural acceptance as two separate (even if intertwined) processes, and to recognize that social groups can, and perhaps often do, make uneven or conflicting progress on these fronts.

Second, the findings from this article offer novel insights into the dynamics of intergroup relations and evolving social boundaries as the United States transitions to a majority-minority country. In particular, I build on prior studies by examining the perspectives of Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents, which allows for a more systematic account of how racial minorities define U.S. national membership and how they conceive of their own Americanness relative to other racial groups

(Ocampo-Roland 2025). For instance, I find that White and Black Americans express shared first-order beliefs positioning Whites and Blacks as more American than Latino or Asian Americans. Their mutual recognition as fellow “insiders” helps to explain why, despite the historical significance of the Black-White color line, White and Black Americans respond to perceived Latino population growth by aligning themselves with each other (Fouka and Tabellini 2022). Meanwhile, the finding that racial minorities are not more inclusive than White respondents in defining Americanness foreshadows the potential perils of what researchers have called “stigma-based solidarity” (Craig and Richeson 2016; Richeson and Craig 2011). That is, experiences with racial discrimination could encourage coalition-building among minorities, but members of these groups may also be willing to discriminate against each other if it allows them to buttress their own claim to Americanness. Whether minorities view each other as allies or not may further depend on the type of prejudice experienced (e.g., “denigration as racially inferior” versus “denigration as perpetually foreign”).

Finally, this study’s findings contrasting third- and first-order beliefs carry key implications regarding racial stratification in the United States. Notably, there is a growing interdisciplinary literature that showcases how individuals’ actions are powerfully influenced by what they believe others believe (Bursztyrn et al. 2020; Corbett et al. 2022; Correll et al. 2017). That is, discrimination based on national and cultural marginalization may be substantively driven by Americans’ third-order beliefs. In political elections, for example, American voters are cognizant not only of their own candidate preferences but also of the perceived attitudes (e.g., potential racial biases) of the median voter. As a result, even if Americans have favorable personal views of non-White political candidates, they may choose not to support, donate to, or vote for such candidates if they believe that most Americans privilege Whiteness in boundaries of authentic national membership. At the same time, it is crucial to highlight that first-order beliefs about Americanness are not race

neutral. For instance, White Americans espouse personal opinions echoing the tripartite racial hierarchy that are consistent with third-order perceptions. In fact, to the extent that first-order beliefs of survey respondents may be affected by social desirability bias, estimates of the prevalence or extent of racial discrimination based on self-reported first-order beliefs about race and Americanness may be downwardly biased.

This study is not without limitations. Most notably, the findings from the conjoint experiment are conditional on the distribution of the profile features included in the survey design, and alternative findings could emerge with a different selection of profile features (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). However, the selection of attributes was strongly informed by prior theory, and supplementary data collection that incorporates alternative features attests to the robustness of the main findings, particularly as they pertain to third-order perceptions of Americanness.⁷

Despite these caveats, this article points to several promising directions for future research. For instance, what are the social consequences of the racial boundaries of Americanness? That is, while prior studies have extensively documented how racial discrimination, informed by the U.S. racial hierarchy, informs deep-rooted Black-White disparities in employment, education, and health, they have comparatively neglected to examine how cultural marginalization in the U.S. national hierarchy may independently be linked to social stratification. For instance, it is plausible to think that Latino and Asian Americans are uniquely disadvantaged relative to both White and Black Americans in political representation because they maintain the weakest claim to U.S. national belonging. I call on scholars to empirically and theoretically develop this connection between perceptions of national inclusion and social inequality in future studies. More broadly, there is much work needed to deepen our understanding of how legal U.S. citizens who experience exclusion from authentic national belonging navigate and negotiate

their marginalized social position (Kwon 2022; Tuan 1998).

These questions are not limited to the United States and warrant extension to cross-national contexts (Beaman 2017; Karell 2015; Lamont 2000; Wimmer 2008). In South Africa, for example, the legacy of apartheid continues to shape symbolic and material exclusions from full national belonging (Seekings 2008). Meanwhile, in Brazil, the narrative of racial democracy has long portrayed the nation as having transcended race, even as this idealized portrait obscures persistent racial inequalities (Telles 2004). Understanding these dynamics through a systematic comparative study would deepen our knowledge of how race structures national membership and how boundaries of belonging are perceived, contested, and reconfigured across diverse societies.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. An alternative term for third-order beliefs is *generalized second-order beliefs* (Quadlin et al. 2023), but prominent literature in sociology employs the former phrase. Notably, Ridgeway and Correll (2006:433) remark: "We define beliefs about what 'most people' think as 'third order' beliefs to distinguish them from what other status researchers have labeled 'first order' beliefs (what an actor personally thinks) and 'second order' beliefs (what an actor thinks specific others in the situation think)."
2. When I invoke the term Asian, I do so inclusively to encompass South Asians. At the same time, scholars have observed that South Asians' claim to this identity is often marginal (Kibria 1996; Shankar and Srikanth 1998). For instance, data from the 2016 National Asian American Survey indicate that Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians of non-South Asian origin were less likely to categorize South Asians as Asian relative to East Asians (J. Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020). This suggests that when Americans imagine Asian profiles, they are more likely to have in mind East and, to some extent, Southeast Asians. Nonetheless, prior research shows that South Asians are racialized as "foreign" in ways that parallel those of East Asians (Adem et al. 2023).
3. Available at: <https://osf.io/xdybe/overview>. In addition to the official Supplemental Appendix associated with this article, I have made available an extended appendix containing further supplementary analyses. In the extended appendix, I discuss how the empirical results reported in this article align with the hypotheses I registered prior to data collection.
4. In the interest of plot legibility, I collapse the political ideology and educational attainment feature levels from seven and five to three and two, respectively. The presented results are not sensitive to this decision.
5. As an alternative way to interpret these marginal means, I rescaled the outcome as a Z-score and computed average marginal component effects (AMCEs). Among White

respondents, Asian profiles receive ratings that are about 0.35 standard deviations lower than White profiles. This effect is substantively large and more than twice as large as the 0.16 standard deviation penalty associated with being atheist rather than Christian.

6. Supplemental Appendices D and E provide subgroup analyses of both third-order and first-order beliefs about Americanness by respondent gender, age, and educational attainment. They reaffirm broad perceived consensus regarding the racial boundaries of Americanness, alongside evidence of in-group bias in first-order beliefs.
7. Native Americans are omitted as a profile attribute because it would be conceptually odd to randomize the nativity status of an ethnoracial group without any history of foreign origins in the context of U.S. history. While restrictions to profile attribute randomization are possible, they are not recommended (Schachter and Weisshaar 2025). Moreover, such estimates would be defined only for Native American profiles with third or more immigrant generation status, rendering uneven comparisons with other ethnoracial groups. This omission, however, leaves open an empirically important question for future research: where do Native Americans fall in lay perceptions of Americanness? One might expect them to be positioned as most American given their indigenous status, yet the same othering logic applied to Asian and Latino Americans could extend to Native Americans as well.

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