



Discussing Race & Identity Doesn't Have to Result in Backlash

Kristen Brock-Petroshius, Stony Brook University

With each new election cycle, progressives grapple with a core strategic question: should they appeal to the political “middle” and avoid identity politics and contentious issues? This perspective embodies Democrats’ **traditional strategy** and aligns with the **common conclusion** in research that support for equity policies is more attainable if discussions of racism and identity were forgone.

Such conclusions are understandable, as political practitioners **often struggle to accurately predict** what messages will resonate with different audiences. How advocates frame an issue is often at odds with what actually changes attitudes.

Large **bodies of evidence** further showcase how talking about race and identity can be counterproductive, often eliciting backlash. For example, a **recent study** found that using LGBTQ-inclusive language, such as the term “Latinx,” can stir backlash among Latinos, especially those who hold conservative views or anti-LGBTQ sentiments. Grounding strategies in political attitude change research can serve as a guide for making informed and effective choices.

When it comes to policy issues, most people hold a wide variety of political attitudes—including elements that can be described as both racist and anti-racist, pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant, pro-LGBTQ and anti-LGBTQ. As many movement groups have long concluded, avoiding discussion of race and identity may simply leave people vulnerable to having their racist, xenophobic, and anti-LGBTQ attitudes primed by reactionary politicians to shore up support for oppressive policies. We need more innovation in finding ways to talk about race and identity and still build support for equity policies.

This need for innovation is especially critical because the production of research knowledge is itself constructed. While numerous studies explore ways to activate racist, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-immigrant attitudes, thereby increasing opposition to a variety of equity policies, there is comparatively little research on strategies that successfully build support for racial equity, economic justice, immigrant rights, and policies that affirm the well-being of transgender people. This imbalance stems from publication pressures and biases against null results in academia, which discourage innovation and risk-taking in research. In response, some scholars have called for the development of robust bodies of multidisciplinary research aimed at answering the critical question: how can advocates discuss racism and identity to effectively build support for equity policies?

Promising Research Findings

When testing methods to successfully increase support for equity policies, two of my recent studies show promising results. The studies employ different methods to build support for equity policies in the context of

criminal legal system issues. The first study examines the effectiveness of a community organizing technique known as “deep canvassing,” while the second investigates message frames that combine race- and class-based appeals. Both studies test approaches that address anti-Black racism in the criminal legal system as compared to strategies that avoid discussion of racism altogether.

The **first study** shows that deep canvassing is an effective strategy, significantly increasing support for decarceration and other anti-carceral policies. Notably, discussing racism made no difference on policy opinions—a marked departure from the typical null or backlash effects that often result from conversations about racism. However, talking about race does hold unique value. While avoiding discussions of racism may yield better results in short-term electoral contexts in which crime is of particular concern, having conversations about racism is fundamental for changing deep ideological attitudes about carceral systems. Campaigns should align their messaging with their broader goals—this is where movement-based community organizing groups are likely to differ from political parties.

The **second study** confirmed that presenting racial or class disparity statistics was an ineffective method to build support for equity policies. Instead, the only message that successfully increased support for equity policies was the version that combined both race- *and* class-based equity arguments, with the effect being particularly pronounced among Black and Latine voters. It should be noted that while the most favorable messaging technique to voters was a specific framing method known as the race-class narrative, this was not the strategy that had the strongest impact on shifting policy opinions.

Together, these studies suggest that there are ways to discuss racism and identity that can effectively build support for equity policies and change related attitudes, but neither deep canvassing nor race- and class-based equity appeals are universal solutions. The effects of deep canvassing were not sustained two months later, and race- and class-based equity messages failed to positively move white and Asian American voters. The nuance of these findings inspires further questions and new research directions.

Paths to Progress

Progressives face daunting challenges: the normalization of racist, transphobic, and xenophobic rhetoric; moves towards fascism; economic pressures that undermine confidence in the status quo; and lack of trust in our political systems. While these issues require meaningful improvement to people’s material conditions and a strengthened sense of democratic engagement, the tactics and messages used by organizers, advocates, media strategists, and other policy practitioners further play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes.

The research presented here offers examples of a path forward. There are effective ways to discuss race and identity to build support for equity policies. The findings suggest that advocates, organizers, and scholars must embrace innovative strategies—like deep canvassing and testing out various ways to combine race- and class-based appeals—that engage these topics directly, rather than avoiding them. Further research and innovation can help strengthen tactical choices, providing a crucial tool to counter regressive forces and move towards a more equitable future.