

Justice for all: How race and American identity may affect politics

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Allegiance and loyalty to your country is highly valued in America, but what if you feel America doesn't love you back? New research examined whether feeling like you belong in America—or not—affected how members of different races and ethnicities participated in politics.

Ray Block Jr., associate professor of political science and African American studies at Penn State, said the study suggests that people who don't embody a typical white American identity may have complicated feelings of Americanness that may also affect their politics.

"We were able to get clues about how feelings of [allegiance](#) and belonging work together to affect how a person engages politically, for example by showing up to vote or by protesting," Block said. "Allegiance and belonging can mix together in meaningful ways to influence how much people are involved in a system that they feel they either belong to or which they feel might not love them back."

According to the researchers, the study—recently published in the *National Review of Black Politics*—was partially inspired by the current state of American politics and is important because a true democracy is based on everyone's voices being heard, not just those in majority demographics.

Block said that with debates surging about the separation of immigrant families, police brutality against Black Americans and other people of color, and a rise in white nationalism, he and the other researchers

wanted to examine whether those in ethnic or [racial minorities](#) might have complicated feelings about their identity in America.

"We started with the idea that certain groups of Americans don't seem to have as much claim to Americanness as other groups do," Block said.

"We noticed this in politics because sometimes people will weaponize American patriotism against outsiders. One of the ultimate ways to make someone an outsider is to question their Americanness. For example, when people questioned Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem."

For the study, the researchers used data from the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey. The survey included 10,144 participants—with 3,006 identifying as Asian, 3,102 as Black or African American, 3,002 as Latino/a, and 1,034 as white.

The researchers measured "Americanness" with two variables. The first was "belonging," measured by questions such as asking participants whether they felt most Americans valued their presence and whether they felt others tried to exclude them. The second was "allegiance," measured by asking how much being an American is important to them.

Finally, the researchers also looked at two forms of political participation: electoral and non-electoral. Electoral participation refers to actions such as voting and donating money to campaigns while non-electoral participation refers to actions such as signing petitions or participating in marches or protests.

"Non-electoral politics is usually the tool that those who feel voiceless use in politics," Block said. "Protesting and community activism, for example, might be what a person does when they feel outside the system. The more connected to the system you feel, the more likely you won't need non-electoral participation. But the less connected you feel you are

to the system, the more appealing non-mainstream forms of political action become."

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that white respondents felt strongly that they belonged in America, while racial and ethnic minorities felt less belonging. Whites also reported higher levels of allegiance. When measuring political participation, whites reported the highest level of electoral participation.

When the researchers examined the connections between Americanness and electoral and non-electoral participation, Block said things got a little murkier. While the findings were statistically insignificant, he said the results still show patterns and clues to how feelings of allegiance and belonging may affect how someone participates politically.

For example, one pattern suggested that when a person's sense of belonging was low, allegiance had no connection to political participation. But when belonging was higher, there was the possibility that also feeling allegiance could increase a person's tendency to vote.

"This makes sense—if electoral participation represents a very 'mainstream' type of activism, then why would anyone bother to take part in it if they do not think their society values/respects/includes them?" the researchers wrote in the paper. "Furthermore, the findings for non-electoral participation comport well with what we already know. The less highly regarded by their country people feel, the more appealing nonelectoral modes of activism become."

More information: Stacey Greene et al, Americanness and the "Other" Americans, *National Review of Black Politics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1525/nrbp.2020.1.3.396](https://doi.org/10.1525/nrbp.2020.1.3.396)

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