

Public Preferences for Targeted and Universal Preschool

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Abstract. For nearly half a century, debates over income-targeted and universal approaches to American preschool policy have fostered deep divisions among advocates, policymakers, and practitioners. This paper seeks to inform the debates with evidence from public opinion. It begins with the design and fielding of two large sample, nationally representative public opinion polls (N=1,000 in each) on preferences for targeted and universal preschool. These polls yield rich data with which to analyze the demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological correlates of preferences for each preschool approach and examine their responsiveness to policy framing and changes in projected program costs. Using a variety of quantitative methods, analyses suggest that Americans' preferences for targeted and universal preschool are substantially different than their theoretical characterizations.

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1. Introduction

Despite a half-century of research documenting the positive effects of high-quality preschool (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, 2000; Schweinhart, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), early childhood education (ECE) remains a fragmented system in America. The federal government funds Head Start alongside vouchers for low-income families; many states and localities supplement these programs, and some offer preschool programs of their own. Families pay for private childcare in homes, centers, and schools, often but not always regulated by state governments. These early learning options vary substantially in purpose, programmatic structure, and quality.

In response to this non-system of services, a small cadre of lawmakers and advocates has proposed an alternative: universal preschool. Universal preschool programs have no eligibility requirements. They serve 4-year-old children and, in some states, 3-year-olds, as well. Enrollment in these programs is entirely voluntary. In 1995, Georgia became the first state in the nation to offer universal preschool. Ten states and the District of Columbia now have or are working toward universal provision.¹ And, on February 12, 2013, President Barack Obama announced that the Federal government would begin working with states to make “high-quality preschool available to every child in America” (Obama, 2013).

Despite rising support for universal preschool, the “targeted versus universal debates” remain (Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011; Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones, 2006). These debates contrast redistributive and entitlement approaches to ECE. They center on preferences regarding the appropriate scope of government intervention in the lives of young children, definitions of equal opportunity, and cost-benefit calculations. They also employ a much larger literature on policy targeting and universalism (Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b; see also Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Greenstein, 1991b, 1991a; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). As a result, although universal preschool has gained popularity at every level of government, the “targeted-universal debates” continue to foster deep divisions among advocates, policymakers, and practitioners.

These debates only rarely invoke rigorous empirical evidence, however. Existing survey research suggests that Americans support the public provision of early childhood education, but provides little evidence on the question of targeted versus universal approach (Barnett, Hustedt,

¹ These states are: Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Robin, & Shulman, 2004; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Bostrom, 2002; EOI, 2002; Omnitrak Group, 2004; Page & Jacobs, 2009; Pérez & Zarate, 2006; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Sylvester, 2001). The current study fills this gap by examining preferences for targeted and universal approaches to preschool and the reasoning behind them. It is the first to employ nationally representative public opinion data on the topic. Data are drawn from two unique omnibus surveys (N=1,000 in each) fielded by YouGov in the Winter and Summer of 2013². Together, these surveys suggest that current public opinion on universal preschool policy is substantially different from its characterization by policy elites.

Synthesizing the results of both surveys, I find that the universal approach is not universally preferred. Instead, preferences for both approaches are conditioned by ideology and personal values. Self-interest plays a role in preference determination, as well, but a less central one than has been previously asserted. Preferences remain virtually unchanged by framing manipulations involving program descriptions, costs, and associated child outcomes. Supporters of universal preschool are agnostic on program finance scheme. Targeted preschool programs are not subject to racialization, as might be inferred from previous work (Greenstein, 1991a, 1991b). In all, the politics of targeted and universal preschool are largely ideological, suggesting that child and family policies, more generally, may be subject to different public opinion considerations than other policies with “targeted-universal” debates.

2. Theoretical Grounding and Relevant Literature

The targeted-universal preschool debates take root in much older scholarship on distributive justice, race in American politics, and the role of self-interest and values in the formation of policy preferences. The distributive justice literature draws on philosophy and social psychology and explores the moral principles underlying the allocation of public resources (cf. Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983; Walzer, 1983). This literature suggests that justice in the provision of preschool is a social construct, conditional on economic and political context, as well as the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of program beneficiaries (Greenberg, 1981; Sampson, 1981; Skitka & Tetlock, 1991). As a result, public opinion and political processes are central to the choice of targeted or universal approach. American politics and social psychology scholars add race to the list of characteristics relevant to the formation of policy preferences

² IRB Protocol: 26298, approved December 4, 2012.

(Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Dawson, 1994; Griffin & Newman, 2008; Lopez & Pantoja, 2004; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Sniderman & Piazza, 2002; Wilson, 1991). In particular, Greenstein (1991a, 1991b) suggests that narrow policy targeting by income, to include only families in poverty, necessarily evokes race. He contends, further, that racialization decreases support in the wider electorate, making narrowly targeted policies less likely to be adopted and less robust to cutbacks during economic crises.

The choice of a targeted versus universal approach to public preschool depends on considerations of race and income, and on intersecting and independent aspects of American morality. But it also depends on self-interest—among citizens, program beneficiaries, and policymakers responsible for crafting and implementing the public policy. Sears and colleagues argue that citizens' political and personal values dominate self-interest in the formation of policy preferences (cf. Sears & Funk, 1990a, 1990b, 2001). Other scholars, notably Skocpol, argue that self-interest plays a larger role (Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b). She writes, “Americans will accept taxes that they perceive as contributions toward public programs in which there is a direct stake for themselves, their families, and their friends, not just for ‘the poor’” (Skocpol, 1991a, p. 432). Skocpol endorses the universal approach across a range of social policies, including those governing ECE. Her line of reasoning has significantly influenced the targeted-universal debates at hand.

The history of American public investments in early childhood education reveals each of the theoretical tensions described above. It also reveals a willingness to pursue both targeted and universal programs, depending on timing and political context (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000; Rose, 2012). The current mix of program approaches, along with the powerful policy entrepreneurs behind each, has given rise to the debates over American preschool. The central arguments for each approach fall into three categories: (1) economic aspects of program administration, (2) political robustness, and (3) consequences for children and families. With respect to the first category, proponents of targeted preschool argue that their approach accrues lower total costs, produces high returns on investment, requires smaller administrative infrastructure, and does not supplant tuition paid by high-income families for private programs. Second, these proponents claim the support of business and civil rights leaders. Third, they argue that targeted programs can close racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, and can help low-income families identify and access high-quality preschool (Zigler et al., 2011).

By contrast, proponents of the universal approach argue that higher overall costs are justified by substantial societal gains, and that their approach capitalizes on economies of scale; that enhanced preschool access for lower-middle-income families is a pressing goal; and that universalization will increase access for low-income families by raising program visibility and reducing stigma. Citing Skocpol, they claim the support of self-interested voters and contend that this support guarantees political success. They argue, further, that universal programs can support economic integration in the classroom, improve the quality of other ECE options through market-based competition, and foster the growth and development of all children (Barnett, Brown, & Shore, 2004; Zigler et al., 2011, 2006).

Empirical research supports this last argument. A growing body of work suggests that both targeted and universal programs yield benefits for children across a variety of cognitive, social-emotional, and other outcomes (cf. Dotterer, Burchinal, Bryant, Early, & Pianta, 2009; Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). The effectiveness of state preschool initiatives does not appear to differ by program approach (Dotterer, Burchinal, Bryant, Early, & Pianta, 2009), but one study, in Georgia, documents greater benefits for low-income children attending the state's universal preschool program compared to their peers in Head Start (G. T. Henry, Gordon, & Rickman, 2006). Importantly, the existing literature on universal preschool offers little evidence to suggest that a universal approach can address the inequalities that arise before the start of formal schooling (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; though see Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2013 for evidence to the contrary).

3. The Current Study

Stepping back from the targeted-universal debates, most Americans support the public provision of early childhood education (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Bostrom, 2002; EOI, 2002; Hart Research Associates, 2003; Impact Texas, 2006; Nagle & Goidel, 2007; Omnitrak Group, 2004; Page & Jacobs, 2009; Pérez & Zarate, 2006; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Sylvester, 2001). As taxpayers, they favor spending existing tax revenues on ECE, and would be willing to pay more in taxes to support ECE programs (Page & Jacobs, 2009). In one state, respondents even favored serving young children over tax and spending cuts (Nagle & Goidel, 2007). While the existing literature documents high levels of support for early learning, it does not investigate *why* Americans hold such strong and consistent preferences regarding public ECE programs.

Historically, these programs have been created to narrow the academic and social-emotional gaps between children from low- and higher-income families that appear prior to school entry (Lee & Burkam, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In turn, theoretical interpretations of support for early childhood education focus on its equal opportunity-enhancing potential (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Page & Jacobs, 2009; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). Given that Americans favor policies that equalize opportunity (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Page & Jacobs, 2009; Sears, Henry, & Kosterman, 1999), this association could explain the high level of support for ECE—as well as differences in support for targeted and universal programs.

To date, no study has gauged preferences for public preschool by program approach. I therefore proceed based on the distributive justice, race in American politics, and formation of policy preferences literatures and test directly the assertions about preschool policy preferences referenced in Section 2. I conceive of preferences hinging on three considerations:

Who pays. Early childhood education programs have been financed through a variety of mechanisms. These mechanisms range from specially designated sin taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and lottery tickets to appropriations from general revenue funds. Regardless of tax scheme, the principle of self-interest applies: rational citizens will seek to maximize their post-tax income, and therefore favor programs that do not increase their personal tax burden. This principle is especially relevant for higher-income Americans, who are likely to pay a disproportionate share of the cost of public ECE.

If Americans' preferences for equality of opportunity are as strong as past research suggests, however, respondents may be willing to pay more in taxes for early childhood education. Page and Jacobs (2009) find that 64 percent of all Americans are willing to pay more in taxes for “early childhood education in kindergarten and nursery school” (p. 59). This proportion falls just a few points, to 57 percent, for Republicans and high-income Americans. It is possible, then, that personal tax burden may not significantly influence preferences for early childhood education.

Who goes. Universal programs offer early childhood education to all families, whereas targeted programs serve only low-income families (or, in some cases, those otherwise deemed at-risk).³ Scholars offer countervailing arguments for the role of self-interest in determining support for each approach. Sears and others have argued that “symbolic politics”—a concept encompassing political ideology and party identification—will dictate policy preferences more so than self-interest (Lau & Heldman, 2009; Sears & Funk, 1990a, 1990b, 2001; Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979; Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980). This line of reasoning suggests that personal income eligibility will not significantly affect preferences for universal versus targeted program approaches.

By contrast, Skocpol and others have argued that self-interest is a significant determinant of policy preferences and, as a result, policy success (Barnett, 2011; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b; Wilson, 1991). She contends that Americans will support public programs *if* eligibility extends to their families and social peers, “not just for ‘the poor’” (1991a, p. 432). Skocpol goes even further, holding that universal programs best serve the interests of low-income families: a larger base of program participants yields a larger base of political support, and resources can still be “targeted within universalism” to those most in need. Her arguments suggest that personal eligibility will significantly affect preferences for universal versus targeted program approaches.⁴

Who benefits. Despite Skocpol’s proposal, early childhood education programs in the U.S. have not been defined by “targeting within universalism.” Instead, they generally take one approach or the other. Each approach has shown different implications for inequality. Targeted programs, of both small- and large-scale, have been shown to narrow gaps in academic and social-emotional readiness for school and later life success (Campbell et al., 2002; Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2002; Reynolds, 2000; Schweinhart, 2005; Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). By contrast, universal programs generally raise levels for all children but have no systematic effect on

³ These approaches suggest different philosophical conceptions of equality of opportunity. Universal programs conceive of distributive justice based on equal inputs (“objective equality”), whereas targeted programs focus on achieving equal outcomes (“subjective equality”). See Cook and Hegtvedt’s (1983) summary of the literature on these competing versions of equality.

⁴ Importantly, as Skocpol mentions, self-interest need not be restricted to respondents’ personal use of the program. It also extends to the material considerations, and program use, of socially proximate groups (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990).

existing gaps (Ceci & Papierno, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Gormley et al., 2005; G. T. Henry et al., 2005; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; see Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2013 for counterevidence). Given this research base, I conceive of the *who goes* and *who benefits* aspects of early childhood education as inextricably linked.

Based on this preference formation framework, I designed two public opinion polls to help answer the following research questions:

1. What is the national level of support for public preschool?
2. What is the national level of support for targeted versus universal preschool?
3. What demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological characteristics predict these preferences?
4. To what extent are these preferences affected by framing manipulations?
5. Can preferences for universal preschool be explained by finance scheme?
6. Can preferences for targeted preschool be explained by racialization?

4. Data

This study will use public opinion data collected from two unique, nationally representative omnibus surveys fielded by YouGov. The first wave of data was collected between February 16 and 25, 2013, and the second was collected between June 24 and July 5, 2013. Survey respondents were recruited using a sample matching methodology (Rivers, 2007). In brief, this methodology relies on the construction of a nationally representative sampling frame from several census-type sources, including the 2010 American Community Survey (for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics), the 2008 and 2010 Current Population Survey (for voter registration and turnout characteristics), and the 2007 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (for religion, news interest, party identification, and political ideology). From this sample frame, a target sample is selected based on stratification by age, race, gender, education, and voter registration, and by simple random sampling within strata. Each case in the sample frame is then paired with a non-random (voluntary) survey respondent in the YouGov database using a propensity score matching design; matching characteristics include age, years of education, gender, race/ethnicity, predicted voter registration, news interest, inability to place oneself on an ideological scale, and party identification. Simulations show that matched sample estimators

have a similar sampling distribution to simple random sampling from the population (Rivers, 2007).

After applying the inverse probability weights, the two surveys yield samples with the following characteristics:

Table 1. Weighted YouGov Sample Characteristics

	Survey 1	Survey 2
Male	48%	48%
Age (Mean)	48	47
Family Income (Mean)	\$40-49,999k	\$40-49,999k
Parents of School-Aged Children	23%	35%
White	70%	68%
Black	11%	12%
Latino	12%	13%
Asian	2%	3%
Republican	25%	20%
Democrat	34%	35%
Independent	35%	29%

Each omnibus survey consisted of 20 minutes of questioning, on average, and was administered online. Items for this study occupy 2.5 minutes on the first survey (2500 respondent-minutes, total) and 2.8 minutes on the second survey (2800 respondent-minutes, total). In addition, YouGov provides standard information on respondent demographic and socioeconomic background characteristics. These characteristics include: age, gender, party identification (including both 3- and 7-point scales), political ideology, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, current employment and school enrollment status, religious affiliation and observance, interest in government and public affairs, annual family income, voter registration status, and home state.

The items designed for this study appear in Appendix 1⁵. Their content and wording were iteratively pre-tested using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk prior to inclusion on the survey instruments. In addition, I include two scales standard in the Political Science literature and pulled from the American National Election Studies: the first measures egalitarianism, and the second is the Symbolic Racism Scale (P. J. Henry & Sears, 2002). I also have access to a related measure of blatant racism in the first survey, and a measure of ethnocentrism developed by the National Election Study and adapted by Kam and Kinder (2007) in the second survey. The full text of each of these items is included in Appendix 1.

5. Methods

I employ a variety of quantitative methods in the analysis of these data. All methods are weighted using the sample weights derived from the sample matching procedure. They include summary statistics; t-tests to estimate the effects of experimental manipulations; seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR) to compare the relationship between respondent characteristics and preferences for different policy options; and multivariate weighted least squares (WLS) and ordinal probit models to disentangle the various predictors of preferences for targeted and universal preschool. In the most robust analysis of preferences for targeted and universal preschool, I fit a model of the following form (here shown using WLS):

$$PREF_i^* = \beta_1 EGAL_i^* + SELF_i^* \beta_2 + \mathbf{X}_i^* \beta_3 + e_i^* \quad [1]$$

where $PREF_i^*$ is the difference in support for universal and targeted preschool for individual i ; $EGAL_i^*$ is that individual’s observed egalitarianism; $SELF_i^*$ is a vector of self-interest indicators, including whether individual i is randomly assigned to a prime in which he or she will be taxed to pay for public preschool, and whether the individual qualifies for targeted preschool based on his or her reported annual family income⁶; and \mathbf{X}_i^* is a vector of respondent background

⁵ For ease of interpretation, experimental manipulations are marked by a forward slash (/). The assignment of respondents to each experimentally manipulated prime is random, except where otherwise noted. Full survey codebooks are available upon request.

⁶ I select the income eligibility threshold for the targeted program description at \$30,000 based on actual income requirements for targeted state pre-kindergarten programs during the 2010-11 school year, the most recent available at the time of survey construction (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011) and the 2012 federal poverty level, defined as \$23,050 for a family of four in 2012 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

characteristics, including demographics, socioeconomic status, and political party affiliation and ideology, as well as whether the respondent has ever benefitted from a free public preschool program.

6. Results

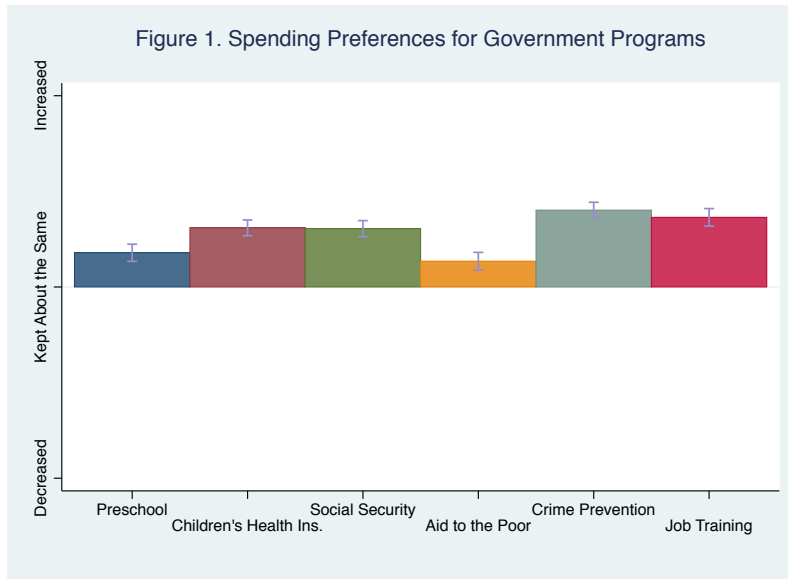
Each of the research questions that guide this study will be addressed in turn. The first survey (fielded between February 16 and 25, 2013) yields data relevant to questions 1, 2, 3, and 6. The second survey (fielded between June 24 and July 5, 2013) provides an opportunity to replicate findings related to questions 2 and 3, and to address questions 4 and 5.

6.1 Support for Public Preschool

To begin, I examine the national level of support for public preschool. I employ question wording standard in the American National Election Studies and ask whether government spending on preschool should be “increased, decreased, or kept about the same.” For the sake of comparison, respondents also express their preferences on several other education and social programs. The results are summarized in Figure 1. I plot the weighted mean level of support for each program, along with 95 percent confidence intervals around the mean. As noted by Ellis and Stimson (2012), Americans support the provision of public programs, including those focused on children (preschool and children’s health insurance), those that typify universalism and targeting (Social Security and aid to the poor, respectively), and those intended to accomplish some of the same societal goals as early childhood education (crime prevention and job training initiatives). Support for preschool is significantly lower than support for nearly all other programs, however (mean = 0.2, standard deviation = 0.7 on a 3-point scale ranging from -1 to 1). It is statistically indistinguishable from support for aid to the poor, a highly partisan and divisive policy issue (cf. Page & Jacobs, 2009).

To probe the ideological nature of public preschool, I estimate a series of bivariate regressions, predicting support for each program in Figure 1 with respondent partisan affiliation, political ideology, and egalitarian beliefs, in turn. I then compare these regressions using a seemingly unrelated regressions framework (SUREG). A series of iterative F-tests reveal that preschool is significantly more affiliated with political partisanship than Social Security and crime prevention ($p < 0.001$); more affiliated with political ideology than Social Security

($p < 0.001$), crime prevention ($p < 0.001$), and job training ($p < 0.10$); and less ideologically affiliated than aid to the poor ($p < 0.05$). As noted above, egalitarianism is also highly correlated with support for public preschool. In this regard, preschool preferences are indistinguishable from children’s health insurance, aid to the poor, and job training, and significantly more associated with respondents’ beliefs in the notion of equal opportunity than Social Security ($p < 0.001$) and crime prevention programs ($p < 0.001$).



Next, I turn to the debate between targeted and universal approaches to preschool. Given the unexpectedly political, values-driven nature of preferences for preschool, in general, I reason that the choice between targeted and universal preschool policy may be ideological, as well. Specifically, following Sears and colleagues (Sears & Funk, 1990a, 1990b, 2001), I weigh the influence of values against self-interest in considerations of preschool policy. Values may be political or moral; self-interest encompasses both program eligibility and the possibility of an increased personal tax burden to cover program costs. I document national preferences for each approach, and the average difference between them, before delving into the correlates and determinants of preferences for targeted and universal preschool.

6.2 Support for Targeted and Universal Preschool

Based on theoretical arguments made by both academic researchers and the policy elite, I hypothesize that the universal approach to public preschool will receive significantly more support than the targeted approach, on average (Kirp, 2007; Rose, 2012; Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b;

Zigler et al., 2011, 2006). Universalism aligns with both self-interest, as conceived by Skocpol and others, and with egalitarian values in their most literal formulation. As shown in the first column of Table 2, however, I find no statistically significant difference in support for public preschool by program approach ($p = 0.499$). Fully 36 percent of the sample has no preference for either approach; these respondents are more likely to favor than oppose both (43 percent compared with 27 percent), and many neither support nor oppose either one (30 percent). Of the respondents with a preference for preschool program approach, 35 percent prefer targeted, while 29 percent prefer universal.

Table 2. Support for Targeted and Universal Preschool

	Full Sample (N=999)	Tax Prime (N=510)	No Tax Prime (N=489)	<i>p-value of the difference</i>
Support for Targeted Preschool	0.38 (0.05)	0.41 (0.07)	0.34 (0.07)	0.412
Support for Universal Preschool	0.33 (0.05)	0.20 (0.07)	0.50 (0.06)	0.002
<i>p-value of the difference</i>	0.499	0.023	0.058	

Note: Means and standard errors are weighted by the sampling weights provided by YouGov. Support is measured using a five-point scale ranging from -2 (Strongly Oppose) to 2 (Strongly Support).

To assess the effect of financial self-interest on preferences for targeted and universal preschool, respondents were randomly assigned one of two tax-related policy descriptions. These descriptions, or primes, read as follows:

Most experts agree that if the government is going to pay for preschool, taxes may have to be increased on households like yours.

Most experts agree that the government can pay for preschool without increasing taxes on households like yours.

Support for each program approach by tax prime appears in the latter columns of Table 2. I find that respondents exposed to the threat of higher taxation have a significant preference for targeted preschool (0.21 points, $p < 0.05$), while those told that preschool would not require additional taxation marginally prefer the universal approach (0.16 points, $p < 0.10$). This finding directly counters arguments made by Skocpol (1991a, 1991b) concerning Americans' willingness to pay more in taxes for programs they and others like them are able to access. Because targeted programs are generally smaller and less expensive than universal ones, this

finding also implies that considerations of program size and cost may factor into calculations of self-interest alongside program access. I probe this possibility directly, below.

Examining the effect of the tax prime on preferences for each approach further illuminates the considerations that underlie them. With respect to targeted preschool, I find that the threat of higher taxes has no statistically distinguishable effect on support ($p = 0.412$). That is, Americans feel just as favorably toward public investments in low-income preschoolers whether or not they may have to pay more in taxes to fund them. By contrast, the threat of higher taxes results in a decrease in support for universal preschool that is both practically and statistically significant (0.30 points or nearly one-quarter of a standard deviation, $p = 0.002$). As mentioned above, these results may suggest that self-interested considerations of program size and cost dictate different responses to the possibility of higher taxes. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, they may suggest the importance of values in citizens' determination of taxation and spending priorities. While support for targeted preschool declines slightly as a result of the tax prime (0.07 points), egalitarian preferences for equality of opportunity may buffer or override self-interested concerns regarding the loss of personal income.

I probe the demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological correlates of targeted and universal preschool, below. First, however, I address the potential presence of bias in these results due to the coincidental timing of my first survey. This survey was fielded between February 16 and 25, 2013—just a few days after President Obama's State of the Union Address, on February 12, in which universal preschool was declared to be a national priority for the first time in our country's history. Coverage of this Address in general, and of universal preschool in particular, overlapped with respondents' survey participation. To assess the effect of the President's remarks on public opinion regarding targeted and universal preschool, I replicated the questions analyzed in this section for a subsample of respondents in my second survey ($N=290$, re-weighted to match the full sample of the first survey). This replication occurred between June 24 and July 5, 2013, long after media coverage of the State of the Union concluded. A comparison of responses between the two surveys yields no detectable difference in support for either preschool approach, on average ($p = 0.562$ for targeted, and $p = 0.976$ for universal). This comparison documents stability in Americans' preferences for public preschool, and in their relative preference for its targeted and universal forms.

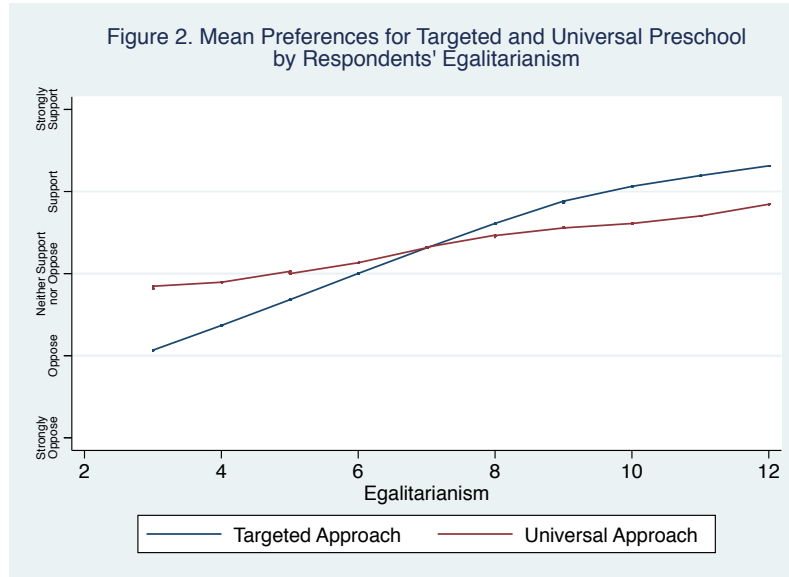
6.3 Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Ideological Predictors of Support for Targeted and Universal Preschool

In order to understand better the motivations behind Americans preschool policy preferences, I next examine support for targeted and universal preschool by a variety of demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological characteristics. I find significant differences in support by several respondent characteristics. Black respondents are significantly more likely to prefer targeted programs ($p < 0.05$). Parents of school-aged children marginally prefer universal preschool ($p < 0.10$), while non-parents marginally support targeted preschool ($p < 0.10$). I find no significant difference in support for preschool approach by gender, education, income, or age.

With respect to the self-interest hypotheses examined by Sears, Skocpol, and others (cf. Sears & Funk, 1990a; Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b), I find that those respondents who are financially eligible for targeted preschool prefer it over a universal approach ($p < 0.05$). Those ineligible have no significant preference, on average. Turning to ideological characteristics, I observe significant differences in support within every category of political ideology except moderate: those who identify as liberal and very liberal strongly prefer targeted programs ($p < 0.001$), while those who identify as conservative and very conservative prefer universal programs ($p < 0.10$, $p < 0.001$), on average. These patterns are mirrored when looking by self-identified political partisanship. The plurality of Democrats prefer targeted programs (44 percent, $p < 0.01$) while Republicans favor the universal approach ($p < 0.01$); Independents, those who identify with other parties, and those who are not sure have no distinguishable preference.

As discussed in Section 6.1, egalitarianism is a strong and significant predictor of support for public preschool, in general. It may function in one of two ways with respect to preschool program approach: respondents may associate egalitarianism, and specifically the belief in equality of opportunity, with uniform, universally available services, or they may associate it with a more narrow public investment in children from low-income families. The descriptions of each program type include both possible interpretations (see Appendix 1). However, respondents clearly align with the second. Figure 2 plots the smoothed Lowess curves of average support for targeted and universal preschool by respondents' observed egalitarian values. As documented above, there is a strong positive relationship between egalitarianism and both preschool approaches: one additional point on the egalitarian scale corresponds to an increase in support for targeted preschool of nearly one-fifth of a standard deviation ($p < 0.001$), and an increase in

support for universal preschool of roughly one-tenth of a standard deviation ($p < 0.001$). As is evident from Figure 2, however, egalitarianism predicts the *difference* in support for targeted and universal preschool, as well. Inegalitarian respondents show a substantial preference for universal preschool, while those with strong values surrounding equality of opportunity prefer the targeted approach.



Next, I disentangle the relationships between multiple demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological predictors of preschool preferences, focusing on the self-interest versus values hypotheses summarized above. To do so, I fit Model [1] using weighted least squares⁷. The results appear in Table 3, alongside those of some basic preliminary models.

Column 5 displays the results of fitting Model [1]. There, I find that the threat of increased taxation significantly increases support for targeted over universal preschool (by -0.34 scale points, $p < 0.01$), and that egalitarian values are associated with a similar preference (-0.11 scale points, $p < 0.01$). By contrast, program eligibility is not associated with differences in support for preschool by program approach, net of other factors. Both values and self-interest—only in terms of *who pays*—condition preferences for public preschool. That is, both the smaller size and lower overall program costs that accompany targeted preschool *and* the egalitarian values they enact by serving the lowest income children significantly predict a difference in support for targeted over universal approach.

⁷ The results are unchanged when using an ordered probit model to account for non-linearities in the dependent variable.

Table 3. Weighted Least Squares Estimates of the Predictors of the Difference in Preferences for Universal and Targeted Preschool

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Egalitarianism	-0.147 *** (0.025)			-0.132 *** (0.026)	-0.114 ** (0.036)
Tax Prime		-0.376 ** (0.126)		-0.403 ** (0.133)	-0.342 ** (0.130)
Eligibility for Targeted			-0.381 * (0.151)	-0.277 + (0.147)	-0.221 (0.156)
Demographics					X
Socioeconomic Status					X
Politics + Use					X
Constant	1.044 *** (0.192)	0.162 + (0.085)	0.073 (0.081)	1.239 *** (0.213)	1.104 (0.683)
N	985	999	876	866	799

Notes: + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dependent variable is the difference in support for preschool by approach (universal-targeted). Demographic controls include race, age, gender, and parental status. Socioeconomic status controls include respondent's education level. Political controls include ideology and party ID. Outcome is measured using a 5-point scale, strongly support to strongly oppose.

Finally, in the second survey, I am able to examine respondents' understandings of program costs and effectiveness. Over above demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological characteristics, these beliefs may explain the preschool policy preferences observed.

Respondents were asked which approach:

- ...does a better job of educating young children?*
- ...most benefits society?*
- ...costs more in your state?*

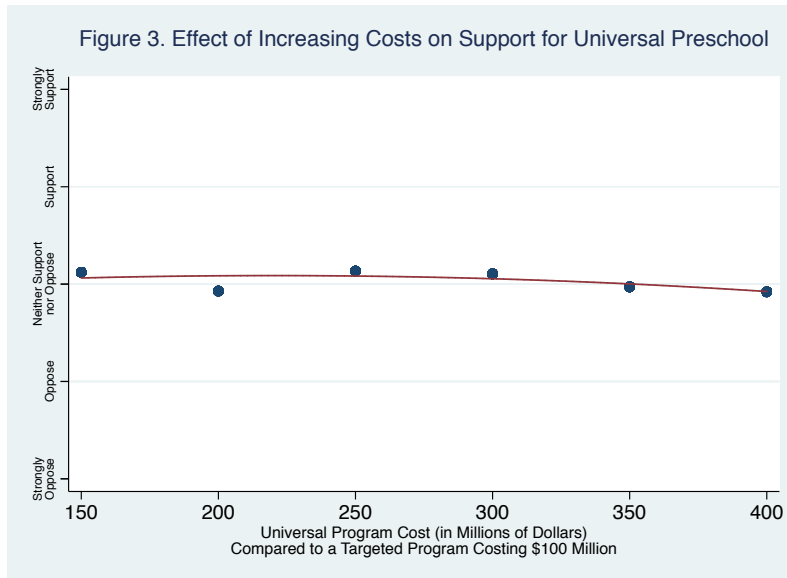
In each case, the plurality of respondents answered that there was no difference between these approaches. Universal programs were more likely than targeted programs to be judged effective at educating young children (28 percent compared to 18 percent), beneficial to society (30 percent compared to 28 percent), and costly (39 percent compared to 15 percent). Adding these predictors to Model [1] does not substantively change the findings reported in Table 3. It does yield further insight into the formation of preferences for targeted and universal preschool, however. With respect to the question of educational effectiveness, the belief that targeted programs do a better job does not predict differences in support for targeted versus universal preschool; a belief in the effectiveness of universal preschool, however, significantly increases support for this approach (0.63 scale points, $p < 0.01$). By contrast, a belief that targeted preschool offers great benefit to society has a large and significant effect on support for this

approach (1.26 scale points, $p < 0.001$), while the same belief applied to universal preschool only marginally increases support for this approach (0.43 scale points, $p < 0.10$). Finally, beliefs regarding program costs have no statistically significant effect on support for either approach. This finding suggests that costs, in general, may not affect preschool policy preferences. Only when costs are reframed as the possibility of higher taxation does self-interest dictate changes in relative preference for targeted and universal preschool.

6.4 The Effects of Policy Framing on Respondent Preferences

Having documented the level of American support for public preschool, preferences for its targeted and universal forms, and the respondent characteristic that predict them both, I turn to the effects of policy framing on expressed preferences. There is a large literature on the effects of providing citizens with different information or reshaping public appeals in campaigns for both policies and candidates (cf. Chong & Druckman, 2010; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). As applied to early childhood education policy, I examine differences in support for targeted and universal preschool resulting from three successive frames. The first frame states the eligibility criteria, or lack of criteria, for each program approach; the second adds statements regarding the effects of each approach on child outcomes (as a replication of the first survey's program descriptions); the third adds a series of escalating costs for universal preschool, while the cost of the targeted approach remains the same. The full text of all primes and the randomization scheme that allocated them among respondents are included in Appendix 1.

Comparing the first and second frames, I find that the addition of information about child outcomes has no effect on preferences for either targeted or universal preschool. The frames defined by program cost yield no significant effect on support for the universal approach, either. Increasing program costs in increments of \$50 million (compared to a steady targeted program cost of \$100 million) does reduce support (see Figure 3), but the reductions are small and fail to reach statistical significance. These results are consistent with the findings, above, regarding the lack of association between respondents' beliefs about program costs and their support for targeted or universal preschool.



6.5 Finance Schemes and Support for Universal Preschool

Given the diminishing significance of cost in determinations of support for public preschool, I employ one final survey experiment to examine the effect of proposed funding scheme on support for preschool, as compared with other education policies. The same program is described to all respondents—one intended to “help get all children off to a good start”—and two potential funding schemes are outlined. Proposal 1 offers \$6,000 for each child enrolled in the program; it entails free participation for all families. Proposal 2 offers \$8,000 for each child enrolled from a low- or middle-income family, while requiring high-income families to pay tuition to participate. Proposal 2 is modeled on the Obama Administration’s recent proposal to universalize public preschool (Matthews, 2013). Both proposals are declared to have the same total cost. Respondents are then randomly assigned to express their support for these proposals as applied to an infant/toddler, preschool, elementary school, or high school program. The results appear in Table 4.

Beginning with the preschool program, I find nearly identical support for both proposals. As above, respondents are not sensitive to abstract cost calculations when considering public preschool. Interestingly, this is not true of the other programs mentioned. With respect to programs for infants and toddlers, respondents show a clear preference for Proposal 2. They support this cost-sharing option far above Proposal 1 (46.0 compared to 26.6 percent), perhaps reflecting the current, highly privatized nature of care for the youngest learners. By contrast,

respondents shown an opposite preference for the funding of elementary school program; they prefer Proposal 1 to Proposal 2 by a margin of seven percent, and show the lowest likelihood of selecting “No Program.” Finally, the plurality of respondents shown the High School prime favors no program at all. This result may reflect shifting conceptions of deservingness, personal responsibility, and opportunity as children age (cf. Greenberg, 1981; Skitka & Tetlock, 1991).

Table 4. Support for Programs to "Get All Children Off to a Good Start"

	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	No Program
Infant/Toddler Program	26.6%	46.0%	27.5%
Preschool Program	35.3%	35.0%	29.7%
Elementary School Program	40.4%	33.5%	26.2%
High School Program	30.5%	31.5%	38.0%
Total	32.9%	36.7%	30.4%

Note: Proposal 1 entails a public investment of \$6,000 for each child; Proposal 2 offers a public investment of \$8,000 for each low- and middle-income child, and a fee for children from high-income families. Both proposals cost the same total amount.

6.6 Racialization and Support for Targeted Preschool

Finally, returning to the question of values in the determination of preferences for public preschool, I examine the question of whether income-targeted preschool programs are racialized in ways that might decrease their support among the electorate (Greenstein, 1991a, 1991b). I describe a generic targeted program to all respondents and then show them a photograph representing the program described. Half of respondents view a picture of a white teacher with two white students; the other half is shown a picture of the same teacher with two black students that is identical to the first in all ways except for the race of the students. The question and associated visual primes are included in Appendix 1.

Table 5. Support for Targeted Preschool by Racial Prime

	Full Sample
Support for Targeted Preschool with Black Prime	0.60 (0.07)
Support for Targeted Preschool with White Prime	0.55 (0.06)
<i>p-value of the difference</i>	0.624

Note: Means and standard errors are weighted by the sampling weights provided by YouGov. Support is measured using a five-point scale ranging from -2 (Strongly Oppose) to 2 (Strongly Support).

As shown in Table 5, I find no significant difference in support for a targeted preschool program by the race of children attending. While this result does not disprove Greenstein's theoretical argument for the link between income-targeting and racialization in public policy, in general, it does provide empirical evidence against that link in the case of public preschool. Further research is required to investigate the interplay between egalitarian values, policy preferences, and the age and race of program beneficiaries.

7. Conclusion

For nearly half a century, American public early childhood education has been delivered through targeted preschool programs. These programs were motivated by a particular set of goals and subjected to shifting social, political, and economic concerns. In February of this year, however, President Barack Obama declared that preschool for all children had become a national priority (Obama, 2013). He proposed a federal-state partnership to ensure that public programs were open to children from all families, nationwide, making strides toward universal provision. This change in policy approach reflects decades of theoretical arguments regarding preferences for targeted and universal preschool (Barnett, Brown, et al., 2004; Skocpol, 1991a, 1991b; Zigler et al., 2011, 2006). These arguments nearly universally vaunt the universal approach. Given the changing policy context, however, and the lack of rigorous empirical evidence to support these arguments, this paper offers the first national public opinion study of preferences for targeted and universal preschool.

I find moderate support for preschool, in general. This level of support is akin to support for aid to the poor. Moreover, I find that preschool policy is partisan, ideological, and values-driven, particularly with respect to egalitarian notions of equality of opportunity. Turning to the targeted-universal debates, both nationally representative samples suggest no significant preference for either approach, on average. More than one-third of respondents equally support (or oppose) both targeted and universal forms. Preferences for each form can be explained to some extent by race, parent status, and income eligibility. But the most consistent and meaningful difference in preferences is one defined by ideology. Self-identified Democrats, liberals, and egalitarians favor targeted preschool, while Republicans, conservatives, and inegalitarians favor the universal approach. The threat of higher taxation significantly decreases support for universal preschool, but has no effect on support for targeted preschool. Here, it

appears that both personal values and self-interested considerations of program size and cost determine respondent preferences. But cost considerations, more generally, have little effect on support for either preschool approach.

In all, these findings depart substantially from the political economic theory employed in service of the targeted-universal debates. They have been consistent over time, and have been robust to discussions of universal preschool in the 2013 State of the Union Address and the national media. However, they remain limited by the changing policy context. Universal preschool proposals are currently being considered and implemented by federal, state, and local governments. They have important implications for K-12 education policies, as well as regulations and government subsidies for private childcare, Head Start, and an array of other child and family policies. If American early childhood education policies are to reflect the public will, then the kind of rigorous empirical evaluation of public opinion included here might be replicated over time and focused on states and municipalities with changing preschool policy landscapes.

More broadly, this study documents the centrality of values and ideology in determining preferences for the government provision of preschool. Preschool does not appear to be an issue area in which all Americans support intervention or agree on the same type of intervention. Instead, preferences are largely determined by political beliefs, partisanship, and egalitarianism. These characteristics appear to function differently with respect to preschool policy than as theorized for programs with adult beneficiaries and as observed for educational programs serving older and younger children (Table 4). As a result, while the targeted-universal preschool debates may illuminate targeted-universal debates in other fields of public policy, they may also be a unique case of public opinion. More empirical research is needed to explore this possibility, and to understand changing preferences for public preschool beyond the current targeted-universal debates.

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Appendix 1: Public Opinion Survey Questions⁸

Wave 1: February 16-25, 2013

1. Preferences for Public Preschool

Next, we are going to show you a list of other government programs.

Should government spending on the following programs be INCREASED, DECREASED, or KEPT ABOUT THE SAME?

Preschool
Children's Health Insurance
Social Security
Aid to the Poor
Crime Prevention
Job Training

2. Preferences for Targeted and Universal Preschool

Most states and the federal government offer public preschool programs for 3-year-old and 4-year-old children. These programs are free for families who use them.

[Most experts agree that if the government is going to pay for preschool, taxes may have to be increased on households like yours. / Most experts agree that the government can pay for preschool without increasing taxes on households like yours.]

There are two types of preschool programs:

Type A:

Programs are offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in elementary school.
- Don't serve higher-income children.
- Help close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life.

Type B:

Programs are offered to all children, regardless of family income.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in elementary school.
- Help higher-income children do better in elementary school.
- Don't close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life.

⁸ For ease of interpretation, experimental manipulations are marked by a forward slash (/). The assignment of respondents to each experimentally manipulated prime is random, except where otherwise noted.

Would you support or oppose the government funding programs like these?

Type A (offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year)

Type B (offered to all children, regardless of family income)

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Support
- 2 Support
- 3 Neither Support nor Oppose
- 4 Oppose
- 5 Strongly Oppose

3. Racialization of Targeted Preschool

In a neighboring state, public preschool is available for poor children. Some studies show children who attend the program do better in reading and math when they get to elementary school. Other studies suggest there are some benefits, but they are very short-lived. Parents say they like the program, though a few report that it was hard to find a spot for their children. One classroom is shown below.

[*raceimage*]

Would you support or oppose your state funding programs like this one?

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Support
- 2 Support
- 3 Neither Support nor Oppose
- 4 Oppose
- 5 Strongly Oppose

[*raceimage*] is randomly assigned from the two photographs below:



Wave 2: June 24-July 5, 2013

4. Preferences for Targeted and Universal Preschool: Framing Effects

Most states and the federal government offer public preschool programs for 3-year-old and 4-year-old children. These programs are free for families who use them.

[Most experts agree that if the government is going to pay for preschool, taxes may have to be increased on households like yours. /

Most experts agree that the government can pay for preschool without increasing taxes on households like yours.]

There are two types of preschool programs:⁹

[Type A:

Programs are offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year.

Type A:

Programs are offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in elementary school.
- Don't serve higher-income children.
- Help close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life.

Type A:

Programs are offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in

Type B:

Programs are offered to all children, regardless of family income. /

Type B:

Programs are offered to all children, regardless of family income.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in elementary school.
- Help higher-income children do better in elementary school.
- Don't close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life. /

Type B:

Programs are offered to all children, regardless of family income.

These programs:

- Help low-income children do better in

⁹ Note that following frames were allocated as follows: 30 percent of the sample received the first frames, 30 percent of the sample received the second frame, and 40 percent of the sample received the third frame.

- elementary school.
- Don't serve higher-income children.
- Help close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life.

A program of this type costs each state \$100 million per year, on average.

- elementary school.
- Help higher-income children do better in elementary school.
- Don't close the gap between low- and higher-income children in school and later on in life.

A program of this type costs each state \$[150 / 200 / 250 / 300 / 350 / 400] million per year, on average.]

Would you support or oppose the government funding programs like these?

Type A (offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year)

Type B (offered to all children, regardless of family income)

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Support
- 2 Support
- 3 Neither Support nor Oppose
- 4 Oppose
- 5 Strongly Oppose

5. Preferences for Targeted and Universal Preschool: Mechanisms

Which type of preschool program do you think...

...does a better job of educating young children?

...most benefits society?

...costs more in your state? [Only shown with the first two frames, above.]

Response Options:

- 1 Type A (offered to children from families earning less than \$30,000 each year)
- 2 Type B (offered to all children, regardless of family income)
- 3 No difference

6. Universal Program Finance

In one state, lawmakers are considering a new [infant/toddler / preschool / elementary school / high school] program to help all children get off to a good start. Some lawmakers argue that government should not spend money on the program. Other lawmakers argue that government should spend money on the program, but they disagree about how. Here are two of their proposals:

Proposal 1. The [infant/toddler / preschool / elementary school / high school] program spends \$6,000 for every child enrolled. The program is free for all families.

Proposal 2. The [infant/toddler / preschool / elementary school / high school] program spends \$8,000 for every child enrolled. The program is free for low- and middle-income families. To make up for this cost, high-income families pay a fee to enroll their children in the program.

These proposals cost the same amount.

Which [infant/toddler / preschool / elementary school / high school] program would you most like to see in your state?

Response Options:

- 1 Proposal 1
- 2 Proposal 2
- 3 No Program

7. Lifecycle Spending

The government spends money on healthcare, education, food, and other services for children. Of all the money spent on children, what percentage do you think the government [is currently / should ideally be] spending on each age group?

Fill in the table below using whole numbers (for example, 20 to indicate 20 percent). Please check to make sure your percentages add up to 100.

- 0 to 5 year olds
- 6 to 11 year olds
- 12 to 17 year olds

Background Questions Asked in Both Surveys (in Addition to Standard YouGov Demographics)

8. Preschool Program Use

Have any of your children gone to a free public preschool program like Head Start or state pre-kindergarten?

Response Options:

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 3 Don't know

9. Egalitarianism Scale

For each statement below, please tell us how much you agree or disagree.

One of the biggest problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.

Today's income inequality is the natural reflection of differences in skills and abilities across our society.

If wealth were more equal in this country we would have many fewer problems.

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Agree
- 2 Somewhat Agree
- 3 Somewhat Disagree
- 4 Strongly Disagree

10. Symbolic Racism

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

It's really a matter of people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.

Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Agree
- 2 Somewhat Agree
- 3 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4 Somewhat Disagree
- 5 Strongly Disagree

11. Blatant Racism

In general, black people are less intelligent than white people.

Response Options:

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat Disagree
- 4 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 5 Somewhat Agree
- 6 Agree
- 7 Strongly Agree

12. Racism and Ethnocentrism

Different groups in American are often associated with different traits.

How well do you think the following scales describe whites in general?

[Respondents select a value on a 10-point scale labeled with the following endpoints]

- 1 Lazy...Hardworking
- 2 Unintelligent....Intelligent

How well do you think the following scales describe blacks in general?

[Respondents select a value on a 10-point scale labeled with the following endpoints]

- 1 Lazy...Hardworking
- 2 Unintelligent....Intelligent