

I or We? Linked Fate, Self-Interest, and African American Opinion Toward Reparations

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed renewed calls for reparations to advance racial equality in the United States. In response, a number of localities and institutions of higher education have provided reparations to the descendants of slaves. However, the policy remains controversial as evidenced by a clear racial divide characterized by overwhelmingly White opposition to reparations and strong majorities of African Americans supporting the provision of cash payments to the descendants of slaves. While much attention has been paid to empirical explorations of White opinion, in this paper we investigate the determinants of African American opinion, with a particular focus on the influence of measures of economic self-interest and linked fate in structuring African American opinion. Using data from two large national surveys of Americans, we find consistent evidence that linked fate is a strong and consistent predictor of African American support for reparations, while self-interest is a weaker and less consistent predictor, controlling for a wide array of political, socioeconomic, and attitudinal factors. These findings are reinforced by quantitative and qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses by African Americans to the question why they support reparations. Our results suggest that African Americans' views on reparations are more strongly associated with the well-being of the African American community and less to do with the individual economic benefits of the policy.

Keywords

African Americans, linked fate, public opinion, self-interest, reparations

Introduction

In late 1865, conservative Democratic president Andrew Johnson rescinded Special Field Order 15, which had redistributed conquered agricultural lands in rebellious states to freedmen and freedwomen. Ever since, many in the African American community have tirelessly fought for reparations to be paid to the descendants of slaves (Allen 1998; Coates 2014; Darity and Mullen 2020; Fullinwider 2000; Robinson 2000).¹ However, while other groups, such as Native Americans, Japanese Americans, and residents of the Marshall Islands have all received cash payments from the federal government as reparations for mistreatment, African Americans have not yet received reparations in recognition of the harm they suffered during centuries of chattel slavery in the United States (Darity and Mullen 2020; Davis 2024; Kim 2023).

The horrific murder of George Floyd in May 2020 activated a nationwide social movement for racial

reconciliation, leading to renewed calls for reparations to advance racial equality in the United States (Germain 2022; Hain and Mulcahy 2023; Kingdon 1997). In the

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following years, several localities such as Evanston, Illinois and institutions of higher education such as Virginia Theological Seminary have provided monetary or symbolic reparations to the descendants of slaves, and states such as California and New York have explored statewide reparations programs (Davies et al. 2024; Hassan 2023; Newton and Nelsen 2024). At the same time, however, Americans are deeply divided on the issue, with Whites overwhelmingly opposing reparations and African Americans strongly supporting them (Darity et al. 2024; Rhodes et al. 2024). For instance, according to a 2023 survey by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, 74 percent of Whites opposed cash payments to the descendants of slaves while 72 percent of African Americans supported them.

What explains public opinion on this issue, and what factors help to account for the racial divide more specifically? On one hand, many scholars have investigated why Americans, particularly White Americans, express resistance to reparations (Dawson and Popoff 2004; Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2006; Campo et al. 2004; Craemer 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Reichelmann and Hunt 2022; Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; Reichelmann et al. 2022; Rhodes et al. 2024; Hudgins et al. 2024; Nelsen et al. 2026). These studies have concluded that various racial attitudes, including racial resentment, perceptions of closeness to African Americans, beliefs about racial inequality, familiarity with African American history, and pride in White racial identity, heavily influence Whites' attitudes toward reparations.

On the other hand, relatively fewer studies investigate African American support for reparations (Balfour 2005, 2023; Davies et al. 2024; Dawson and Popoff 2004; Newton and Nelsen 2024). These studies point to factors such as racial consciousness, a desire for justice, and the belief that reparations will ameliorate the racial wealth gap as important factors that undergird African American support for reparations. While these studies provide insights into African American opinion, we note that a number of these studies either rely on data on African American opinion from early in the 21st century or focus their attention on black attitudes toward particular reparations policies found at the state or local levels. Thus, important empirical questions remain about African Americans' views toward reparations.

We argue that the dearth of research on African American attitudes toward reparations may reflect the assumption that African Americans overwhelmingly support reparations due to *self-interest*—that is, because Black people would financially benefit from cash payments personally. Yet this assumption has been largely untested due to sparse survey data on what African Americans think about reparations. This not only frustrates efforts to evaluate the role of self-interest in Black

opinion toward reparations; it also limits our ability to assess the role of the central rival explanation, *linked fate*—the notion that Black people support reparations because it is in their *group's* interest, both financially and symbolically (McClain et al. 2009)—on these attitudes. The failure to fully investigate Black opinion, in turn, limits our understanding of the reasons for the stark racial divide on this and many other issues.

To better understand African American opinion toward reparations, we assess two explanations for their attitudes. First, in line with conventional wisdom, we evaluate the role of *self-interest* in shaping Black Americans' views toward reparations. The possibility of a cash benefit opens the door to self-interest as a source of influence on African American attitudes toward reparations (Campbell et al. 1960; Darity and Mullen 2020). While decades of research have concluded that self-interest plays a limited role in structuring public opinion (Funk 2000; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992), a substantial body of scholarship suggests that self-interest *will* influence both attitudes and behavior when the effects of a policy are clear and the policy is likely to have a significant impact on the well-being of the individual or their closest relations (Chong et al. 2001; Citrin and Green 1990; Weeden and Kurzban 2014, 2017). Because cash benefits provide a particularized economic benefit, we hypothesize that measures of self-interest—including class membership, income, employment status, subjective assessments of financial well-being, and most importantly self-identification as a descendant of a slave (the group most likely to receive a benefit under any plausible reparations program)—will be associated with greater Black support for reparations.

Second, we examine the main theoretical alternative to self-interest in studies of African American public opinion: group interest (McClain et al. 2009; Simien 2005; Tate 2010). Specifically, we explore whether perceptions of *linked fate* among African Americans help to account for their attitudes toward reparations. As Dawson (1994) showed, African Americans' opinions on myriad issues are influenced by their view that their own social, economic, and political well-being are inexorably connected to the fate of their racial group. This sense of linked fate has encouraged many African Americans to support policies, parties, and candidates that benefit African Americans as a group, regardless of the impact on their personal well-being (Dawson 1994; Dawson and Popoff 2004; Philpot et al. 2009; Tate 1994).

The power of linked fate is thought to be particularly potent among African Americans who are connected to historically black institutions, such as Black churches, social clubs, and colleges, where Dawson and others contend norms concerning racial solidarity in part

originated and to this day continue to be communicated and sustained (Dawson 1994, 2001; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Rogers and Kim 2023; White and Laird 2020). In these spaces, scholars argue, messages that emphasize linked fate are not only more frequently communicated; social norms concerning the public expression of linked fate are also more likely to be enforced (Rogers and Kim 2023; White and Laird 2020; White et al. 2014). Thus, given the positive and potentially revolutionary impact that cash payments may have on the economic status and social recognition of the African American community, we hypothesize that linked fate will be associated with increased support for reparations among Blacks and this will be particularly true among African Americans who are connected to traditionally black institutions.

Using cross-sectional survey data from the 2023 American Multiracial Panel Study (AMPS), we find consistent evidence that linked fate is a strong and consistent predictor of African American support for reparations, while self-interest is a weaker and less consistent predictor, controlling for a wide array of political, socioeconomic, and attitudinal factors. As a supplemental test, we undertake quantitative and qualitative content analyses of open-ended responses to a question in a module of the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES) asking African American respondents to explain their attitudes toward reparations and find that African Americans who support reparations are more likely to use words associated with linked fate and collective identity than those relating to self-interest. Our results strongly suggest that Blacks' views about reparations are more strongly associated with their belief that the policy will have a positive effect on the well-being of the African American community and less strongly associated with notions that the policy will provide a personal financial benefit to Black Americans. More broadly, our findings have important implications for the study of self-interest and group interest in contemporary American politics as well as the future viability of reparations policies at the federal, state, or local levels.

Data and Methods

We rely on two large nationally representative surveys to test our hypotheses. The first is wave 2 of the American Multiracial Panel Study (AMPS) conducted online by YouGov from November 17 to December 12, 2023. The AMPS survey interviewed a total of 4,106 respondents with 900 respondents identifying only as Black or African American and included an oversample of respondents who identified as Republican. The second study was fielded as a module on the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES), an online survey of over 64,000 American adults conducted via YouGov on behalf of over

50 colleges and universities. The CES gathers a representative sample of respondents of "opt-in" volunteers from the YouGov database using data culled from the U.S. Census Bureau, voter registration databases, the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, and the Current Population Survey. Our module was in the field from September 29 to November 8, 2022, and interviewed 1,000 respondents, of which 132 self-identified as African American. Propensity score weights were used in constructing the samples in each survey to ensure that the samples were representative of the adult population with respect to age, gender, race, and education.

In keeping with the scholarship on the role of economic self-interest in opinion formation, we rely on a myriad of subjective and objective items that capture a respondent's economic well-being and status (Nteta 2013; Patillo 1999, 2005; Weeden and Kurzban 2014, 2017). Specifically, our analysis in the 2023 AMPS included items that tapped a respondent's income, employment status, assessments of their own financial well-being, and class membership as measured by a respondent's educational attainment. Because cash reparations would have the largest economic impact among those with the fewest economic resources, the self-interest hypothesis predicts that respondents who have higher income, are employed, perceive their personal financial situation as more positive, and have higher educational attainment will express less support for cash payments among African Americans.

A core debate in studies of the role of self-interest in shaping public opinion revolves around how to best conceptualize and measure self-interest (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder and Sears 1981; Weeden and Kurzban 2014, 2017). While many of the items outlined above can be viewed as general measures of self-interest, we seek to more directly measure self-interest as it pertains to the policy of reparations. According to the Pew Center, 57 percent of African Americans report having enslaved ancestors in the U.S. or abroad (Pew Research Center 2022). Given that descendants of enslaved people are most likely to receive reparations under any plausible national system, to better measure self-interest we also included a measure of a respondent's family history of enslavement on the 2023 AMPS survey. There, we asked "Were any of your ancestors enslaved in the United States or another country?" Response options to this item included "Yes in the U.S.," "Yes, in another country," "Yes, in the United States and in another country," "None of my ancestors were enslaved," and "Not sure." We coded whether individuals were descendants of a slave dichotomously, with respondents who indicated that their ancestors were enslaved in the United States or in the U.S. and in another country as 1 and all other respondents are marked as not having

ancestors who were enslaved in the United States as 0. If self-interest is an important influence on attitudes toward reparations, African Americans who identify as descendants of slaves should be more likely to express support for this policy.

We measure linked fate on the 2023 AMPS with an item that asks African American respondents to indicate their agreement with the statement, “What happens to people of color in this country has something to do with what happens in my life as a Black person” and response options range from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Some may question whether this item, focused on

people of color more generally, captures the extent to which African Americans express support for linked fate centered on the African American community. We note that prior research has found that African Americans, more so than Latinos and Asian individuals, identify more strongly as people of color and that all three racial groups believe that African Americans are the prototypical people of color (Chin et al. 2023; Pérez 2022). As a result, we believe that African Americans, when answering this question, are likely to view “people of color” as a proxy for their own racial group, thereby serving as a valid measure of linked fate. Regardless, any slippage between

Table 1. Predictors of African American support for cash payments to the descendants of slaves (OLS), 2023 American multiracial panel study

	Support for cash payments Made to descendants of slaves	
	Model 1	Model 2
Self interest		
Education (1 = postdoctoral degree)	−0.0910*** (0.0239)	−0.0905*** (0.0237)
Economic well-being (1 = Poor)	0.0738 (0.0400)	0.0755 (0.0400)
Income (1 = Highest income level)	0.0423 (0.0529)	0.0460 (0.0529)
Employed	0.0237 (0.0261)	0.0201 (0.0260)
Descendant of slave	0.0130 (0.0216)	0.00990 (0.0216)
Linked fate		
Linked fate	0.317*** (0.0410)	0.223** (0.0710)
Church attendance (1 = More than once a week)	−0.0248 (0.0336)	−0.145 (0.0905)
Linked fate * church attendance	N/A	0.178 (0.113)
Controls		
Male	−0.0605** (0.0220)	−0.0596** (0.0219)
Age (1 = Oldest)	−0.00516 (0.0754)	0.00157 (0.0756)
Party identification (1 = Strong republican)	−0.0990** (0.0353)	−0.0942** (0.0358)
Ideology (1 = Conservative)	−0.113* (0.0473)	−0.125** (0.0481)
Region (1 = South)	−0.0180 (0.0213)	−0.0149 (0.0212)
Constant	0.607*** (0.0680)	0.670*** (0.0796)
Observations	737	737
R-squared	0.185	0.189

Standard errors in parentheses. The bold was used to highlight coefficient estimates and standard errors that attained statistical significance at least the $p < .05$ level.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

our indicator and the conventional measure makes our tests more conservative assessments of the role of African American group interest. If linked fate is an important predictor of African American attitudes toward reparations, African Americans who express a stronger sense of linked fate should also express greater support for cash reparations.

The dependent variable under examination in the 2023 AMPS asked respondents, “Do you favor or oppose the federal government making cash payments to the descendants of slaves?” Support was measured on a five-point scale from “Strongly oppose” to “Strongly favor.” All items are coded to vary between 0 and 1. We model African American support for reparations using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. In our models, we include controls for respondents’ gender identity, age, region (Southern residence), partisan affiliation, and ideological identification—factors previously found to be important in shaping African American opinion (Cohen 1997; Dawson 1994; Kinder and Winter 2001; Philpot 2017; Tate 2010; White and Laird 2020). Finally, given that the majority of African Americans who attend religious services do so at predominantly Black churches (Pew Research Center 2021), we include a measure of a respondent’s church attendance in order to ascertain a respondent’s connection to the African American church. Details concerning each measure and response options can be found in [Supplemental Information 1](#).

Results

Study 1: 2023 American Multiracial Panel Study (AMPS)

[Table 1](#) presents our OLS regression model of support for reparations among African Americans from the 2023 AMPS. As the table shows, several factors emerge as significantly associated with support for reparations among African Americans. Women, Democrats, and liberals are all significantly more likely to support reparations for the descendants of slaves compared to men, Republicans, and conservatives, respectively.

Model 1 provides limited support for the self-interest hypothesis. On one hand, working-class African Americans, as measured by educational attainment, exhibit greater support for reparations than do middle- and upper-class African Americans. Moving from the highest level of educational attainment (post-graduate degree) to the lowest level (less than a high school degree) is associated with a nine-point increase in predicted support for reparations among Black respondents, holding the other variables at their mean values. The fact that working-class

African Americans, who have the most to gain financially from reparations, express the strongest support for reparations is consistent with the expectation that self-interest influences Black support for this policy. On the other hand, we find no evidence that income, employment status, or subjective perceptions of financial well-being influence African Americans’ support for passage of a federal reparations program. The apparent lack of predictive power for these variables is inconsistent with the expectation that self-interest influences African American support for reparations. To provide an even stronger test of the role of self-interest, we examine whether being a descendant of an enslaved person is associated with support for reparations. This is a more direct test of the role of self-interest, as it more clearly differentiates between Black respondents who would almost certainly receive a direct financial benefit from a reparations program and those who would likely be ineligible for a payment. Yet, as seen in [Table 1](#), we find no evidence that African Americans who self-identified as descendants of slaves differ from other African Americans in their support for reparations. The regression coefficient indicating whether a respondent self-identified as a descendant of slaves is neither statistically nor substantively significant. These patterns suggest that self-interest has a limited and inconsistent association with support for reparations among African Americans.

Although our analyses find limited support for the self-interest hypothesis, we find that linked fate is strongly and significantly associated with African American opinion toward reparations in 2023. African Americans who strongly believe that their well-being is tied to the well-being of people of color as a group are significantly more likely to support the federal government providing cash payments to the descendants of slaves than African Americans who have a weaker sense of linked fate. Moving from the lowest to the highest levels of support for linked fate is associated with a thirty-one-point increase in predicted support for reparations among African Americans, holding the other variables at their respective means.

While linked fate, more so than self-interest, helps to structure black opinion toward reparations, it remains an open question whether a respondent’s connection to the black community moderates the impact of linked fate. In order to address this question, in model 2 of [Table 1](#), we add a term to our model that interacts a respondent’s level of linked fate with their frequency of church attendance. If the influence of linked fate on support for reparations is stronger among individuals who are more deeply embedded in African American institutions, then the coefficient for this product term should be positive and statistically distinguishable from 0. However, as seen in [Table 1](#), the coefficient for this interaction does not attain

statistical significance. Thus, we cannot conclude from this analysis that the impact of linked fate on African American support for reparations is stronger among those who attend church services more regularly.

Study 2: 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES)

The results presented above show that linked fate is strongly related to Black support for reparations. However a top-down approach does not enable respondents to provide explanations for their opinions about reparations in their own words. Thus, this approach might mischaracterize the respective roles of self-interest and linked fate in influencing African American attitudes toward reparations (Nteta et al. 2016). We further investigate how self-interest and linked fate influence African American attitudes about reparations by examining written responses to an open-ended question querying the reasons for African Americans' attitudes about reparations in a module fielded on the 2022 CES pre-election survey.

We first asked respondents, "Do you think the federal government should or should not make cash payments to the descendants of slaves?" using a four-point response scale ranging from "Definitely should" to "Definitely should not." Next, we asked respondents to "Please describe in at least two sentences why you believe that the federal government [should/should not] make cash payments to the descendants of slaves." Given our focus on accounting for the influence of linked fate and self-interest as explanations of support for a federal reparations program among African Americans, we focus our attention on the 109 African American respondents who indicated the federal government "definitely" or "probably" should make cash payments to the descendants of slaves. We do so because we anticipate that only individuals who support reparations will articulate self-interest and/or linked fate justifications to explain their support; opponents of reparations will likely use different reasons to justify their positions.² Of the 109 respondents expressing support for reparations, 92 provided meaningful text responses to the open-ended prompt (all permutations of "Don't know" responses were manually removed from the dataset). We analyzed the texts of these responses using both dictionary-based quantitative content analysis methods and qualitative content analysis methods.

Dictionary-Based Quantitative Content Analysis

To explore how self-interest and linked fate influenced African American respondents' reasoning about reparations, we undertook a dictionary-based quantitative content analysis of the open-ended responses (Grimmer

and Stewart 2013) using Quanteda (Benoit et al. 2018), a package that provides a comprehensive workflow and toolkit for the management and analysis of text data in the R programming environment. A dictionary-based quantitative content analysis begins with a predefined dictionary of terms representing a concept and then uses word counts or other weighted measures of word incidence or frequency to score texts (Rice and Zorn 2021). Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis has strengths and weaknesses. The method is extremely easy to use, and when a validated dictionary is employed, results can be quite compelling. However, a generally applicable dictionary may produce faulty inferences in a particular application, either because the dictionary does not include words that are relevant to the concepts that are present in that application or because the substantive meaning of the words is different in the specific application than what was intended in the dictionary. In this analysis, we attempt to address these limitations by using two different kinds of dictionaries to measure linked fate and self-interested reasoning about reparations: dictionaries of terms from the General Inquirer (Stone et al. 1966), a venerable content analysis dictionary with a long history in the social sciences; and custom dictionaries, created for this project, that were derived inductively from the open-text responses.

Our first dictionaries of terms relating to linked fate and self-interest, respectively, come from the General Inquirer. To measure content that may relate to linked fate, we used the General Inquirer category "Our," which includes 6 pronouns relating to the inclusive self ("let's," "our," "ours," "ourselves," "us," and "we"), supplemented by the terms "black" and "African," which refer to the collective self in this specific application. The insight here is that, if African American respondents are drawing on linked fate in reasoning about their support for reparations, they should use words relating to the racialized *collective self*, as such words would provide textual evidence of the linking of the respondent's identity with African Americans as a group (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Perdue et al. 1990; Tropp and Wright 2001). Alternatively, to measure content that may relate to self-interested thinking, we use the General Inquirer category "Self," which includes 7 pronouns relating to the singular self ("I," "I'm," "me," "mine," "my," "myself," and "oneself"). If African American respondents reason about their support for reparations primarily in terms of self-interest, they should make frequent use of language referring to the singular self.

Our second dictionary of terms relating to linked fate and self-interest, respectively, draws inductively from the content of African Americans' open-ended responses. After removing English stop words, we

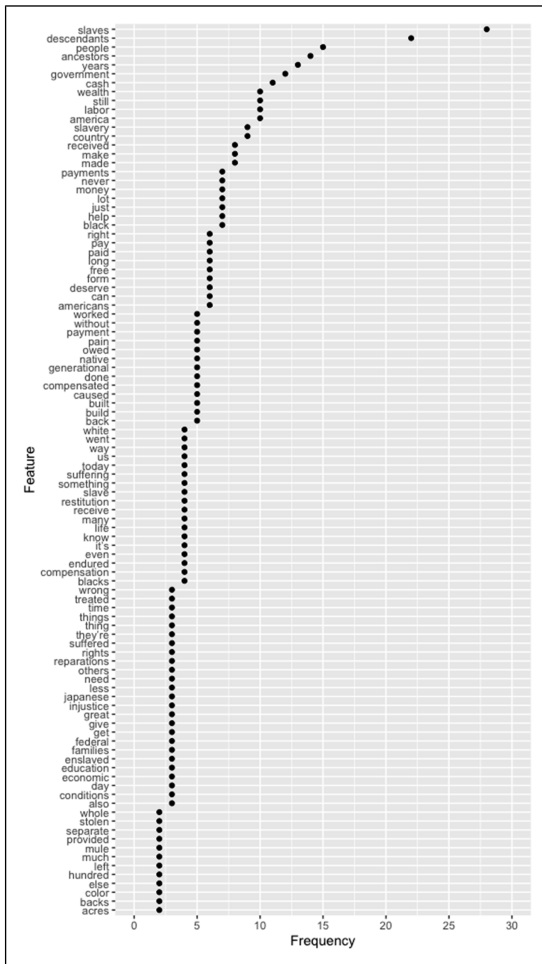


Figure 1. 100 most frequently occurring words in open-ended responses.

examined the 100 most frequently occurring words in the open-ended responses, both in isolation and in context. The 100 most frequently occurring words appear in Figure 1. Then, starting at the top of the list (i.e., the most frequently occurring words), we used our judgment and a qualitative reading of the most frequent words in context to allocate relevant words to either a linked fate dictionary or to a self-interest dictionary, stopping when we acquired a total of ten terms for each dictionary. We allocated words referring to collectivities (e.g., “descendants”) and collective experiences (e.g., “slavery”) to the linked fate dictionary; and words referring to money (e.g., “cash”), receipt of benefits (e.g., “receive”), and assertions of deservingness (e.g., “owed”) to the self-interest dictionary. Again, we presume that, if African Americans rely on linked fate to reason about their support for reparations, they will frequently use words relating to African American collectivities and collective experiences in their open-ended responses; while if their reasoning about their

support for reparations is self-interested, they will frequently use words relating to the monetary benefits of reparations in their open-ended responses. Our custom linked fate dictionary was comprised of the words “slaves,” “descendants,” “ancestors,” “slavery,” “black,” “generational,” “slave,” “blacks,” “enslaved,” and “families”; while our custom self-interest dictionary contained the words “cash,” “wealth,” “received,” “money,” “payments,” “paid,” “deserve,” “pay,” “owed,” and “compensated.”

We acknowledge that both our custom linked fate dictionary and our custom self-interest dictionary include terms used explicitly in (or closely related to) our question wording prompt (“Do you think the federal government should or should not make cash payments to the descendants of slaves?”). We made this decision for three reasons. First, because we want to measure thinking tightly related to collective experiences of enslavement and discrimination (linked fate), and monetary gain and personal benefits (self-interest), respectively, employing dictionaries of keyword terms, we have to use keywords that explicitly invoke these concepts. Second, and relatedly, because we want to give both the linked fate hypothesis and the self-interest hypothesis a fair shot in our quantitative content analysis, we need to gather the most frequently used terms relating to each of these concepts, even if doing so means using terms that were also included in the question prompts. Failing to use the most frequently invoked terms for each concept could threaten to bias the quantitative content analysis in favor of one hypothesis or another. Finally, and crucially, because the question wording prompt includes an equal number of words invoking linked fate concepts (“descendants” and “slaves”) and self-interest concepts (“cash” and “payments”), the prompt does not, in itself, *bias* respondents toward the invocation of either linked fate- or self-interest-related terms. Thus, we are confident that the keyword dictionaries reflect a fair representation of the top terms associated with linked fate and self-interest, respectively, invoked by respondents.

In our quantitative analysis of African American support for cash payments, we used the individual’s personal experience of being the descendant of an enslaved person in the U.S. as a measure of self-interest. In this section, however, we use the invocation of “slavery” and similar terms to measure linked fate. Although this may appear contradictory, our assessment of the qualitative content of respondent statements supports this decision. As we discuss in more detail below, when respondents invoked “slavery” or related terms in their qualitative responses, they were typically discussing African Americans’ *shared* experience with

enslavement rather than the personal benefits they would receive due to the enslavement of their ancestors. Responses that emphasized the collective mistreatment and trauma caused by enslavement were common; those that asserted that genealogical ancestors' experiences with slavery entitled respondents to personal compensation were rare.

Next, we applied the dictionaries to the open-ended texts in Quanteda to assess the relative prevalence of linked fate and self-interest terms in the responses. The unit of analysis was the response. Thus, in this application, Quanteda simply counted the number of words in each dictionary appearing in each response. With this information in hand, we can estimate our preferred quantity of interest, the average number of linked fate and self-interest words appearing per response.

Was linked fate or self-interest language more prevalent in African Americans' open-ended responses explaining their support for reparations? The average number of Our terms (our measure of linked fate thinking) per open-ended response was 0.46 (St.Dev. 0.76), while the average number of Self terms (our measure of self-interest thinking) was 0.15 (St.Dev. 0.53). To test whether the frequency of Our terms per response was significantly greater than the frequency of Self terms, we conducted a paired-sample difference of means test. The t-statistic of the paired-sample difference of means test is 3.50, which has a p-value of 0.000367. This indicates that the average frequency of Our terms per response is significantly greater than the average frequency of Self terms per response. Although both linked fate and self-interest inform African American reasoning about their support for reparations, this analysis is consistent with the inference that linked fate played a more prominent role, and self-interest played a less substantial role, in this reasoning process.

Next, we applied our custom linked fate and self-interest dictionaries to the open-ended responses. Words from both custom dictionaries are used with some regularity in the text responses. The average number of linked fate words appearing per open-ended response is 1.08 (St.Dev. 1.48), while the average number of self-interest words per open-ended response is 0.77 (St.Dev. 0.93).

Again, we used a paired-sample difference of means test to evaluate whether the frequency of use of linked fate words is significantly larger than that of self-interest words. The t-statistic of the paired-sample difference of means test is 2.14, and the p-value is 0.02, indicating that the average frequency of linked fate terms per response is significantly greater than the average frequency of self-interest terms. This finding reinforces our conclusion that, although both linked fate

and self-interest inform African Americans' reasoning about reparations, linked fate appears to play a somewhat larger role.

Qualitative Content Analysis

We also undertook a qualitative content analysis of the open-ended responses using the NVivo software, in which we read each of the open-ended responses to identify common patterns and themes (Saldaña 2013; Schreier 2012). Although this approach does not offer the same degree of quantification as dictionary-based methods, it allows a more nuanced understanding of qualitative patterns in the responses. This enables a more detailed assessment of African American respondents' reasoning about their support for reparations and serves as a check on the possibility that our quantitative content analysis underestimated the influence of self-interest on African Americans' reasoning about their support for reparations.

The qualitative content analysis revealed that, while African American proponents of reparations endorse the monetary benefits, their reasons for supporting reparations frequently rely on overlapping but distinct moral claims about what African Americans are entitled to as a group due to their collective experience with slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary racism in American society. African Americans' reasoning in favor of reparations therefore heavily relies on a broad sense of linked fate rather than a narrow calculation of individual monetary gain. We highlight five of the most prominent moral claims below.

Reparations as Atonement for Injustice Against African Americans

One prominent theme is that reparations represent a means for the federal government to atone both for the injustice of enslavement inflicted on African Americans as a group and for its failures to protect Blacks during the Jim Crow era. One respondent wrote "Two hundred 50 years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole." In a similar vein, another respondent wrote that reparations were required "Because the [federal] government encouraged slavery from day one. The descendants of slaves should be somehow compensated for years of oppression just for being BLACK." A third respondent stated bluntly that, "The government enslaved our ancestors, so the government should pay us."

Reparations as Reimbursement to African Americans for Lost Wages

A second prominent theme is that reparations are a form of monetary reimbursement to African Americans as a group for involuntary labor extracted from their ancestors during enslavement. Importantly, this reasoning does not emphasize the personal monetary benefits that would accrue from reparations; instead, it highlights ancestors' collective experience with the injustice of slavery and the corresponding collective moral right to reparations. "We worked all those years for free," exclaimed one respondent. Another respondent asserted that reparations were due "as reimbursement for their ancestors' hard work with no income." A third respondent reasoned that reparations were owed "because [enslaved people] were unpaid workers who often worked under harsh conditions. If this lineage [sic] can be traced back, then I feel like they should be compensated in the same way an estate would."

Reparations as Remediation for Suffering

Many respondents also reasoned that reparations are a form of compensation for the mental, emotional, and physical suffering that ancestors experienced under enslavement and Jim Crow. Again, responses highlighting this theme tend to emphasize the idea that reparations represent a restorative benefit for the experience of collective harm rather than a personal monetary entitlement. "They deserve [reparations] for all the pain and suffering," one respondent stated. "We have to start somewhere to make up for the pain caused and still being caused," another respondent reasoned. "Slaves went through a lot," a third respondent noted. "Their descendants shouldn't also."

Reparations as Equal Treatment With Other Historically Marginalized Groups

Some respondents argued that reparations for enslavement were needed to ensure equitable treatment of African Americans by the federal government. One respondent asserted that "Native American Indians have received some form of restitution. Asian Americans have received some for[m] of restitution for injustice. However, African Americans have not received any form of restitution for over 200 years of slavery." Another respondent argued that reparations were warranted for African Americans "[b]ecause our Federal Government pays and has paid reparations to other groups such as Asians and Native Americans." "Well [,] the Native Americans got their pay," a third respondent noted. "They live on reservations and have been accommodated quite

nicely. Why shouldn't descendants of slaves receive the same type of help [?]."

Reparations as Compensation for Contemporary Racism

Finally, numerous African American respondents argued that reparations were necessary to acknowledge, and address, both individual and structural racism in contemporary American society. "We can agree [slavery] is an injustice and something that is still in the basic culture of our country," one respondent argued. "It is worth at least the acknowledgment and rectification." "The economic disparity is so great & could be helped by an infusion of cash to be able to move ahead," another respondent reasoned. "Generational wealth is far less likely to achieve when just a few generations back, your great-grandparents were the children of slaves," a third respondent suggested. "Cash payments would allow the descendants to start building generational wealth to break the cycle."

Limitations

We note a number of limitations of our study. First, while we find a statistically significant relationship between linked fate and African American support for reparations, our use of cross-sectional data limits our ability to make causal inferences concerning the impact of linked fate on African American opinion. Second, our measure of African American opinion on reparations focuses attention solely on the provision of cash payments to the descendants of slaves in the U.S. Recent work on African American opinion has found that the level of support for reparations differs among African Americans depending on the type of reparation policy under consideration (Davies et al. 2024; Nelsen et al. 2026; Newton and Nelsen 2024). It is possible that the association between linked fate and African American support for reparations is limited to reparations involving cash payments and does not extend to reparations focused on apologies for slavery or the provision of housing/educational grants. Third, we recognize that our use of a respondent's frequency of church attendance as our sole measure of a respondent's connection to historically Black institutions may not fully capture the myriad of ways that an individual may be immersed in African American networks or exposed to messages from influential African American cultural and political elites. Future research could extend our analysis to assess whether our conclusions hold in experimental settings, with respect to different issues, or with the incorporation of additional

measures of connections to historically Black institutions. Finally, we acknowledge that our quantitative and qualitative content analyses of the reasons for support for reparations among African Americans were based on a relatively small sample of respondents. Future research could draw on larger samples to assess whether our conclusions are more broadly generalizable.

Discussion

Although reparations have long featured in African American demands for redress for the injustice of slavery, they have gained a place of particular prominence in contemporary public debate due to the advocacy of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, reparations are a racially divisive topic, with a supermajority of Whites expressing opposition and a strong majority of African Americans indicating support. Scholars have investigated the causes of White opposition to reparations, finding that racially inflected attitudes play a central role in engendering White resistance (Rhodes et al. 2024). In contrast, we know relatively little about variation in contemporary support for reparations among African Americans.

In this paper, we explored two hypotheses purporting to explain variation in African American support for reparations. The first hypothesis, self-interest, is the conventional wisdom in extant scholarship and popular commentary: namely, that African Americans support reparations primarily because they would personally benefit from any potential reparations program, such as cash payments. The second hypothesis, which has received far less attention, suggests that African Americans support reparations largely out of a sense of linked fate with the broader African American community. According to this hypothesis, African Americans support reparations, regardless of whether they will receive direct benefits, because they believe that their overall well-being is closely connected to that of the African American community as a whole.

To test these hypotheses, we examined patterns of African American support for reparations in two large national surveys, one fielded in November 2022, and one in December 2023. First, we assessed the correlates of support for reparations among African Americans and found that our measure of linked fate has a substantively large and statistically significant relationship with support for reparations, while our various measures of self-interest show comparatively small and inconsistent relationships with support for reparations. Second, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods, we analyzed open-ended text responses that shed light on African Americans' reasoning about their support for reparations and discovered that linked fate

terms and reasoning are much more prevalent than those relating to self-interest. We conclude that, although self-interest plays a modest role in shaping African American attitudes toward reparations, the influence of linked fate is substantially stronger.

These results suggest that the purported rift within the African American community, between the descendants of slaves and African Americans who do not trace their lineage to this period, over the policy of reparations may be overblown (Stockman 2019). Our results find that African Americans, irrespective of whether they have ancestors who were slaves, are supportive of the provision of cash payments to the descendants of slaves. Our findings also have broad implications for research on self-interest as an explanation for African American public opinion. While the role of self-interest in shaping public opinion is often assumed and taken for granted, a large body of research has raised serious questions about the extent to which self-interest structures Americans' attitudes (Dawson 1994; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; Kinder and Sears 1981, 1981; Lau and Heldman 2009). Our finding that self-interest plays a role in determining African American attitudes toward reparations is consistent with recent work indicating that self-interest is important under certain conditions—in particular, when the implications of policies for individual self-interest are clear (Chong et al. 2001; Citrin and Green 1990; Weeden and Kurzban 2014, 2017). Because reparations offer clear monetary benefits for African Americans, it is understandable that self-interest plays at least some role in shaping their attitudes about this policy.

Our research also speaks to the debate about the role of linked fate in structuring African American public opinion. Dawson's (1994) path-breaking research established linked fate as a critical determinant of African American attitudes. But more recent research has raised questions about the ubiquity, validity, and predictive strength of linked fate in accounting for African American public opinion (Bunyasi and Watts Smith 2019; Cohen 1997; Davis and Brown 2002; Gay et al. 2016; Philpot et al. 2009; Robinson 2010; Rogers and Kim 2023; Wamble et al. 2022; White and Laird 2020; White et al. 2014). In this study, we show that linked fate plays a powerful role in shaping African Americans' attitudes about reparations—indeed, one that significantly overshadows that of self-interest. We suspect that linked fate plays this central role both because reparations are directly tied to the collective experience of many African Americans' ancestors with slavery and because many proposed programs would have a large positive impact on the overall well-being of the African American community. In addition, in line with Rogers and Kim (2023), we also suspect that the importance of linked fate in shaping African American opinion may be the result of

centuries of rhetorical support for reparations offered by prominent African American elites coupled with the consistent support for reparations exhibited by and within African American social institutions and networks (Allen 1998; Coates 2014; Darity and Mullen 2020; Dawson 1994; Fullinwider 2000; Robinson 2000; White and Laird 2020). We hope that future work, employing experimental methods, tests the role that these “macro and meso level conditions” may play in priming linked fate and subsequently shaping Black opinion on reparations (Rogers and Kim 2023).

Future research should also continue to investigate African American attitudes toward reparations, using large samples, more detailed questions, and more sophisticated methodological approaches. Such work would shed greater light on why African Americans strongly support reparations as a group; why there is variation among African Americans in the strength of their support for reparations; and, more broadly, why African Americans and Whites remain so sharply divided on this policy.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. We use “African American” and “Black” interchangeably in this article.
2. Twenty-three African American respondents expressed opposition to reparations and were excluded from this analysis. To understand why African Americans oppose

reparations (and check our assumption that opponents of reparations do not use self-interest or linked fate to justify their positions), in Supplemental Information 2 we undertake a preliminary qualitative content analysis of responses from African American opponents of reparations.

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