



Health Research Brief

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How Do Social and Economic Ideology Affect Reactions to Racial Equity Language?

Why did we conduct this study?

To better understand the perspectives of influential people, we fielded the *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey to a nationally representative sample of state and local leaders drawn from multiple sectors ([How State and Local Leaders View Social Determinants of Health and Health Equity](#)). We fielded the survey in two phases—October 2020 through May 2021 and September 2021 through March 2022.

During the first phase of data collection, we became concerned about potential bias, because of variation in response rates across sectors, how few conservatives responded to the survey, and concerns raised by a few sample members who refused to participate in the survey. Those sample members described strong negative reactions to the perceived bias of the survey language. For example, one noted that the survey felt “more like a push poll for social justice than a survey on how to better promote a culture of health.” Another said that “it is clear that the survey is intended for individuals that concur with the organization’s theoretical beliefs (health equity, structural racism).” Yet another indicated that they declined to complete the survey because of the structural racism term and definition, and asked “How can anyone trust a survey that is loaded with biases?”

This heightened our concern regarding a central challenge to fielding a survey that discussed racial equity—how do we ensure our language is acceptable to all leaders, regardless of background, beliefs, or ideology? In reviewing the literature, we found that people’s views—their liberalism or conservatism—affects how they react to language

about racial equity. For example, in a messaging test before a communications campaign, messages about increasing opportunity resonated with both liberal and conservative respondents (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF] presentation, [Let’s Talk About Health Equity](#)). However, liberal respondents were more receptive to messages highlighting that personal choices depend on opportunities available to the person, but not to messages that highlighted personal responsibility for choices. On the other hand, conservative respondents were more receptive to messages about increasing opportunity and access, but not to messages that focused on race or advocated government intervention.

That research reinforces the notion that language can accentuate ideological divides. As a result, messages that seek to resonate across the ideological spectrum may be more effective if they focus on overall objectives, problems, and solutions without using jargon or politically laden terms (RWJF Culture of Health blog, [What Research Tells Us About Effective Advocacy Might Surprise You](#)). Messages that focus on closing gaps that reference universal goals (such as ensuring that all people have an opportunity to be healthy) rather than gaps between groups (primer on [Targeted Universalism](#)) may also be more effective. Finally, messages that focus on the future rather than on past causes of problems may help avoid backfiring (primer on [Strategic Case Making](#) and FrameWorks Institute blog on [Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring](#)).

That guidance regarding messaging helped us understand how *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey respondents may be responding differently

to questions about racial equity based on their views on social issues (social ideology) and economic issues (economic ideology) (Public Opinion Quarterly article, [Ideological Preferences Among the American Public](#)). For example, using racial equity language that emphasizes differences in outcomes based on race rather than differences based on current circumstances (such as poverty or living conditions) can backfire, as can language that focuses on past causes of ongoing problems (such as structural racism). Such messages can alienate more conservative audiences who might otherwise agree with the identified problem, solution, and overall objective, for example ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

To further explore the racial equity language included in our *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey—and language that may resonate with audiences across the ideological spectrum—we conducted a study that tested racial equity and social justice language from

the *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey against more ideologically neutral language.

What did we do?

To learn how economic and social ideology affect reactions to racial equity and social justice language, in summer 2021 we fielded a survey to an online population panel and analyzed findings from 1,004 respondents. Although this general population sample may be different in various ways from our *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey sample of leaders, findings from the general population may provide interesting insights regarding reactions to language. Exhibit 1 shows the demographic characteristics, party affiliation, and social and economic ideology of our respondents, which mirrored those of the general population as reported in recent [American Community Survey](#) data (demographics), [Gallup Poll Party Affiliation](#) data (party), and [Gallup Poll Ideology data](#) (ideology).

Exhibit 1. Respondent characteristics

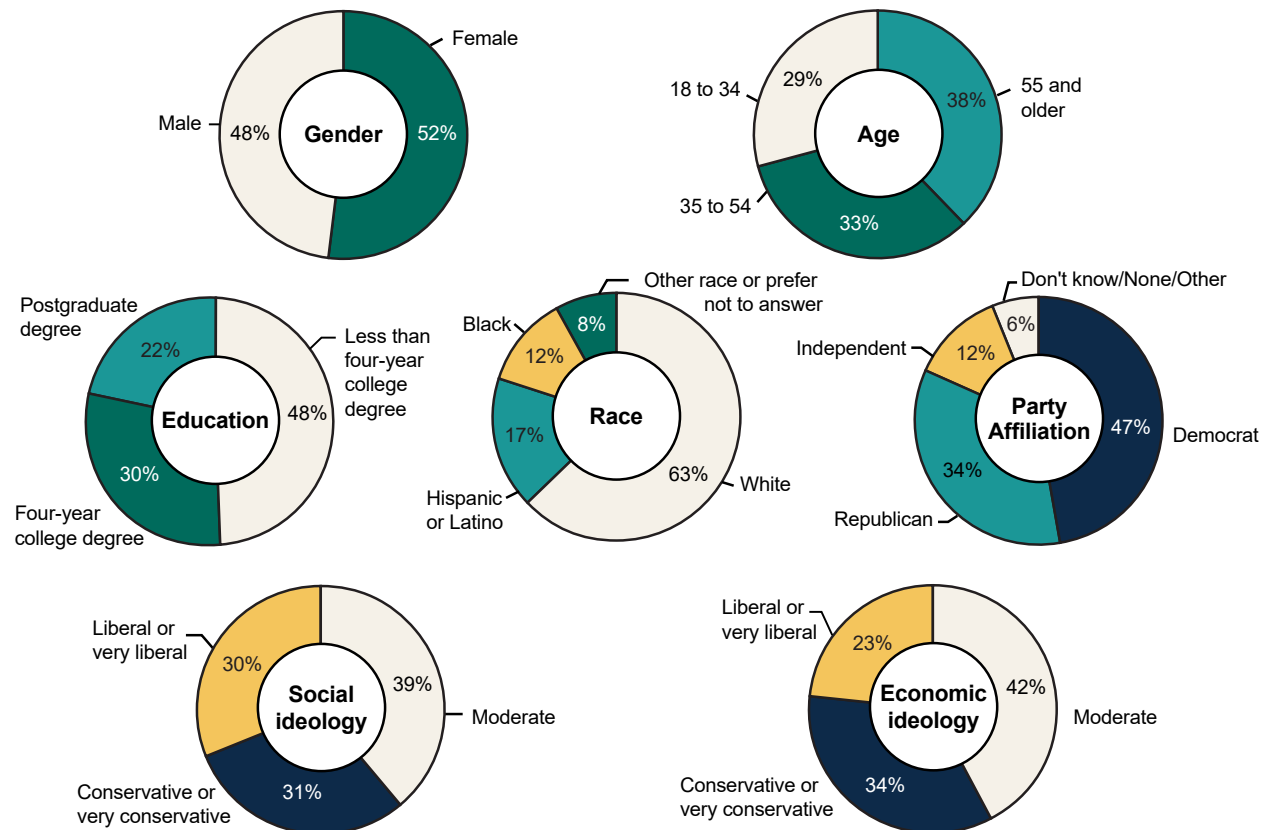


Exhibit 2 describes the four tests of racial equity language that we conducted. We randomly assigned respondents to statements that used racial equity language from the *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey or to statements that used more neutral language, and we asked them to indicate their level of agreement with those statements. The statements all focused on the overall objective of ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

We also conducted a few tests to see whether economic and social ideology affect reactions to social justice language with no mention of race. Exhibit 3 describes the three tests of social justice language that we conducted. We randomly assigned respondents to statements that used social justice language or to those that did not, and we asked them to indicate their level of agreement with those statements.

For each test, we had two research questions. First, do respondent reactions vary based on the **survey statement language** (that is, racial equity or social justice language versus more ideologically neutral language) to which the respondent was randomly assigned? Second, do respondent reactions to the survey statement language differ by **respondent ideology**?

What did we find in our test of “racism” language?

The first test compared “poverty and racism” language (racial equity language) to “poverty” language (more ideologically neutral language). Using a 5-point scale, respondents rated their level of agreement with the survey statement to which they were randomly assigned (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

Exhibit 2. Tests of racial equity language

Racial equity language	Tests	More ideologically neutral language
“poverty and racism”	Test 1	“poverty”
“inequalities faced by people of color”	Test 2	“inequalities”
“structural racism” <u>term</u> without the definition	Test 3	“inequalities reinforced by policies and practices”
“structural racism” <u>definition</u> without the term	Test 4	“inequalities reinforced by policies and practices”

Exhibit 3. Tests of social justice language

Social justice language	Tests	More ideologically neutral language
“fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible”	Test 1	“fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible”
“culturally appropriate health care”	Test 2	“health care”
“inequalities in the public safety, housing, education, health, cultural, and/or other sectors”	Test 3	“inequalities in the health sector”

- / Respondents assigned to the **racial equity language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: "Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible might include removing obstacles such as **poverty and racism** and increasing access to health care."
- / Respondents assigned to the **more ideologically neutral language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: "Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible might include removing obstacles such as **poverty** and increasing access to health care."

Exhibit 4 shows our findings. Whereas more liberal respondents had higher levels of agreement with racial equity language, more conservative respondents had higher levels of agreement with the neutral language.

What did we find in our test of "people of color" language?

The second test compared "inequalities faced by people of color" language (racial equity) to "inequalities" language (more ideologically neutral). Using a 5-point scale, respondents rated their level of agreement with the survey statement to which they were randomly assigned (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

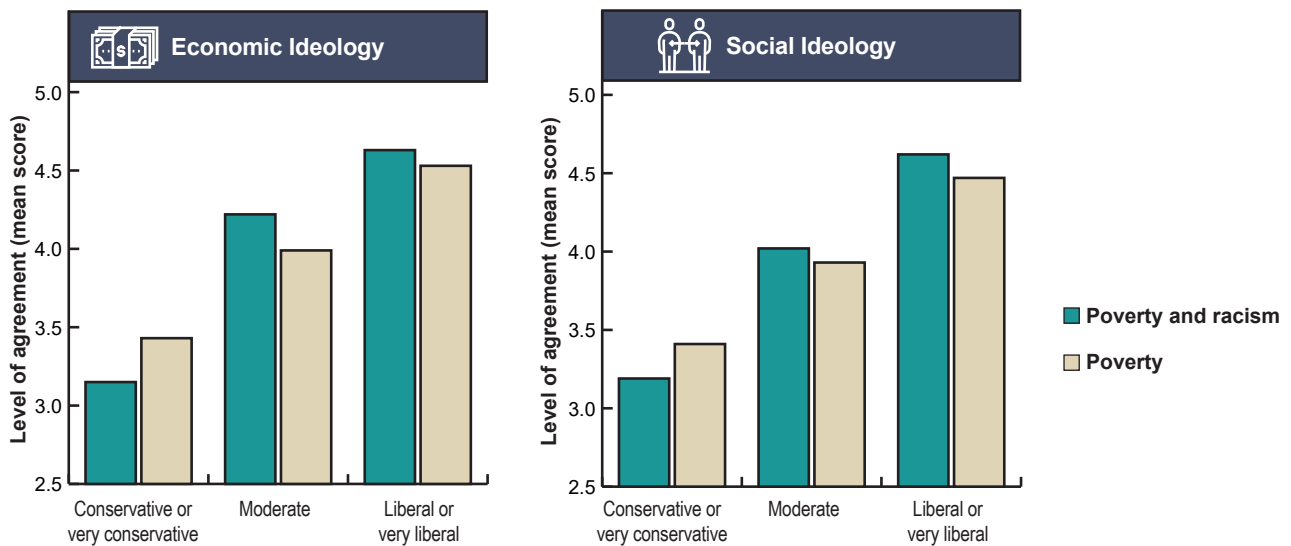
- / Respondents assigned to the **racial equity language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: "Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **inequalities faced by people of color.**"
- / Respondents assigned to the **more ideologically neutral language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: "Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **inequalities.**"

Exhibit 5 shows our findings. As with the "racism" test, more liberal respondents had higher levels of agreement with the racial equity language, whereas more conservative respondents had higher levels of agreement with the neutral language.

What did we find in our test of the "structural racism" term without the definition?

The third test compared the "structural racism" term without a definition (racial equity language) to "inequalities reinforced by policies and practices" language (more ideologically neutral). Using a 5-point scale, respondents rated their level of agreement with the survey statement to which they were randomly assigned (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

Exhibit 4. Findings from test of "racism" language by economic and social ideology



/ Respondents assigned to the **racial equity language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: “Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **structural racism**.”

/ Respondents assigned to the **more ideologically neutral language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: “Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **inequalities reinforced by policies and practices**.”

Exhibit 6 shows our findings. Respondents across the board had higher levels of agreement with the “inequalities reinforced by policies and practices” language (neutral) than with the “structural racism” term without a definition (racial equity). This effect was especially strong for more conservative respondents.

What did we find in our test of the “structural racism” definition without the term?

The fourth test included a survey statement that defined structural racism—“historical injustices reinforced by policies, practices, and

social expectations, kept up by institutions and individuals who may not have any conscious intent to discriminate”—without using the term (racial equity language). The test compared this language to “inequalities reinforced by policies and practices” language (more ideologically neutral).

Using a 5-point scale, respondents rated their level of agreement with the survey statement to which they were randomly assigned (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

/ Respondents assigned to the **racial equity language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: “Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **historical injustices reinforced by policies, practices, and social expectations, kept up by institutions and individuals who may not have any conscious intent to discriminate**.”

/ Respondents assigned to the **more ideologically neutral language** rated their level of agreement with the following statement: “Ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible may require addressing **inequalities reinforced by policies and practices**.”

Exhibit 5. Findings from test of “people of color” language by economic and social ideology

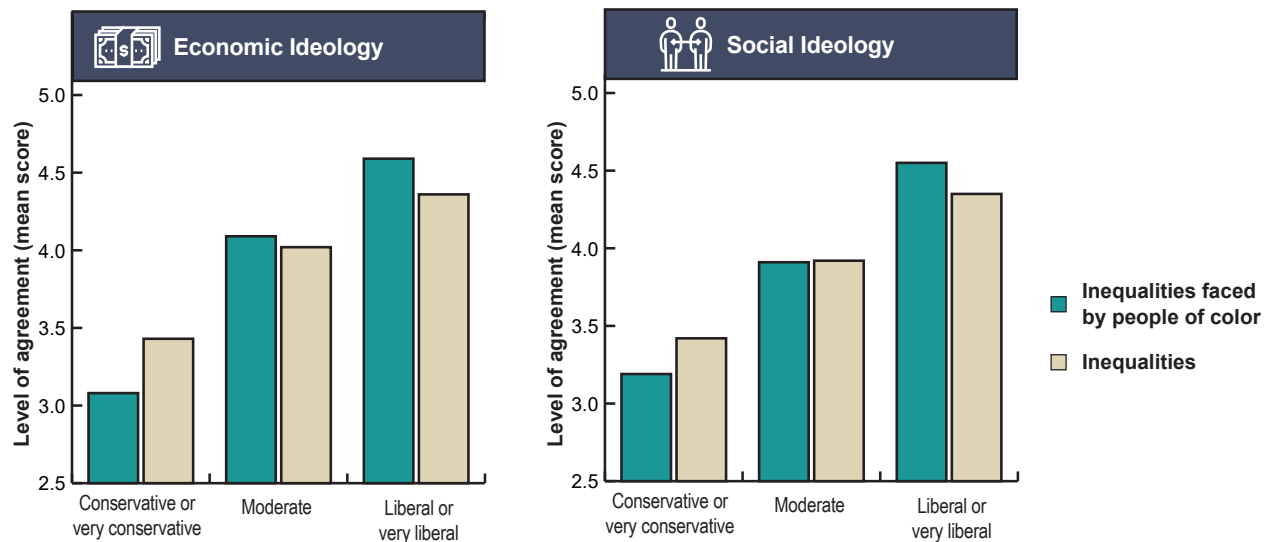


Exhibit 7 shows our findings. As with the test of the “structural racism” term, respondents across the board agreed more with the “inequalities reinforced by policies and practices” language (neutral) than with the structural racism definition without the term (racial equity). This effect was especially strong for more conservative respondents.

What did we find in our tests of social justice language with no mention of race?

We did not find the differences in agreement levels for the three tests of social justice language with no mention of race (see Exhibit 3; results not shown)

Exhibit 6. Findings from test of “structural racism” term by economic and social ideology

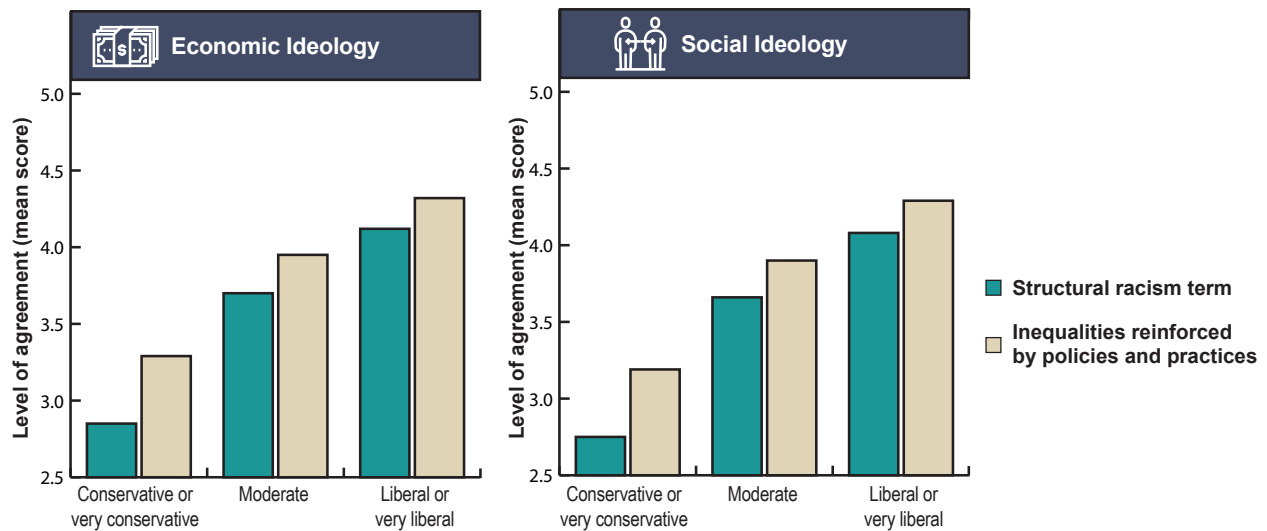
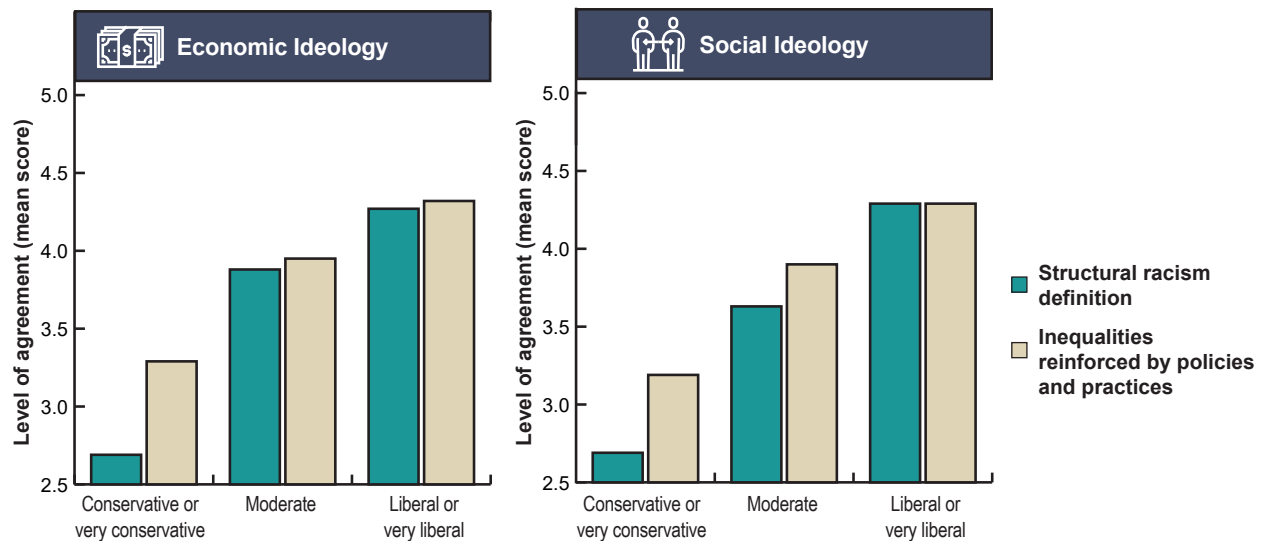


Exhibit 7. Findings from test of “structural racism” definition by economic and social ideology



that we found for the racial equity language tests (see Exhibits 2 and 4-7). That is, ideology affected respondents' agreement with racial equity language, but it did not affect their agreement with social justice language with no mention of race.

What do these findings mean?

Our first research question was "Do respondent reactions vary based on the **survey statement language** (racial equity versus more ideologically neutral language) to which the respondent was randomly assigned?" The answer is yes for both of our "structural racism" tests. When we included the "structural racism" term or definition in a survey statement, both liberal and conservative respondents agreed less with that statement than with the more ideologically neutral language. **In the context of our *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey, this meant that using the "structural racism" term or definition may have had the unintended consequence of alienating leaders across the ideological spectrum. This suggests that more ideologically neutral language might be more effective for engaging both liberal and conservative leaders with the overall objective of ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible.**

Our second research question was "Do respondent reactions to survey statement language differ by **respondent ideology**?" Again, the answer is yes. With the caveat that we conducted only four language tests—not a broad range of racial equity language tests—for all of our tests of racial equity language, liberal respondents agreed more with the statements containing racial equity language than with the statements containing ideologically

neutral language, but the opposite was true for conservative respondents. **In the context of our *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey, this meant that the racial equity language we tested may have been liberally biased. This suggests that using racial equity language could have had the unintended consequence of alienating more conservative leaders. Instead, more ideologically neutral language may have been more effective in engaging conservative leaders with the overall objective of ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible.**

The findings for the racial equity language stand in contrast to those for social justice language with no mention of race. With the caveat that we conducted only a few racial equity and social justice language tests—not a broad range of language tests—for the tests of social justice language, we did not find the differences in agreement levels that we found for the tests of racial equity language, either for survey statement language or for differences in survey statement language by respondent ideology.

In the context of our *What Shapes Health and Well-Being* survey, this meant that the social justice language with no mention of race may have been more effective than the racial equity language for engaging leaders across the ideological spectrum with the overall objective of ensuring that all people have a fair opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

Further research is needed to see whether these findings can be replicated with different populations and with a broader range of racial equity and social justice language tests than those explored in the current study.

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