



Health Research Brief

Nyna Williams and Martha Kovac

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

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 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 expressed 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?” Note that our baseline survey sample showed no demographic bias.

Our concerns deepened when we conducted a population panel survey experiment in summer 2021 ([How Do Social and Economic Ideology](#)

[Affect Reactions to Racial Equity Language?](#)).

Results showed that respondent reactions to racial equity language differed by respondent ideology, with liberal respondents reacting more positively to racial equity language and conservative respondents reacting more positively to more ideologically neutral language. To further understand the impact of survey language, we conducted two follow-up research activities in 2023—a leaders panel survey experiment to see if the pattern of reactions to racial equity language among leaders was similar to what we found for the general population and a qualitative study with leaders to better understand their reactions.

What did we do?

Leaders panel survey experiment

We conducted a panel survey in spring 2023 with 1,200 respondents in leadership roles to examine the differential impact of survey language by leader ideology. The respondents were members of an opt-in panel that met our eligibility criteria.

We used information available regarding the panel to focus on persons in leadership roles—employed full-time or part-time or self-employed, white collar, and with individual occupations in leadership positions.

Exhibit 1 presents the self-reported demographic characteristics of respondents in the leaders panel compared to our baseline survey. The leaders panel respondents were somewhat younger and more likely to be female than baseline survey

respondents; the race/ethnicity distribution was similar.

Exhibit 2 presents self-reported economic and social ideology of respondents in the leaders panel

compared to the population panel and the baseline survey. Whereas our baseline survey respondents skewed liberal, respondents from the population panel and the leaders panel were ideologically balanced.

Exhibit 1. Respondent demographic characteristics in the leaders panel and baseline survey

Demographic characteristics	Leaders panel (percent)	Baseline survey (percent)
Age		
Younger than 40 years	28	9
40-49 years	23	20
50-59 years	25	34
60-69 years	18	27
70 years or older	6	10
Gender		
Male	40	57
Female	60	40
Other	---	3
Race/ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	78	76
Black, non-Hispanic	7	10
Hispanic	9	7
Other	5	7

Exhibit 2. Respondent ideology for the leaders panel, population panel, and baseline survey

Ideology	Leaders panel (percent)	Population panel (percent)	Baseline survey (percent)
Economic ideology			
Very conservative	10	10	3
Conservative	20	24	18
Moderate	43	42	46
Liberal	20	16	26
Very liberal	8	7	7
Social ideology			
Very conservative	9	10	2
Conservative	19	20	12
Moderate	38	39	34
Liberal	23	21	36
Very liberal	11	9	16

Exhibit 3 presents the sector of respondents for the leaders panel compared to the baseline survey. For the leaders panel, sector was self-reported and we provided a response option for “other” in the survey question; 44 percent of leaders panel respondents selected “other”. Among those that selected one of the 10 sectors, leaders panel respondents were

more likely than baseline survey respondents to come from the health care systems and education sectors, and less likely to come from the public health and social services, physical safety, and cross-cutting sectors; the distributions for the other sectors were similar.

Exhibit 3. Respondent sector for the leaders panel and baseline survey

Sector	Leaders panel (percent)	Leaders panel (percent without “other”)	Baseline survey (percent)
Health care systems	9	16	7
Public health and social services	5	9	18
Housing	4	7	7
Transportation	5	10	7
Recreation/open space	2	4	3
Physical safety	1	2	7
Employment	7	13	11
Education	12	22	7
Economic/community development	7	12	11
Cross-cutting	3	6	22
Other	44	---	---

Exhibit 4 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.

Exhibit 4. 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”

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 5 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.

Exhibit 5. 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"

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**?

Leaders qualitative study

We conducted semi-structured interviews in summer 2023 with 12 participants in leadership roles to examine leader reactions to survey language and how those reactions may vary based on participant ideology. Participants were identified from LinkedIn and a proprietary database, and screened to ensure they met our eligibility criteria. They came from a variety of sectors, spanning education, health care systems, public health and social services, economic/community development, transportation, and cross-cutting. Participants generally held ultimate responsibility for the division they worked in, holding titles such as director, founder and owner, president, executive, and manager. Participants were predominantly white (9), with one each identifying as Hispanic, black non-Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander, and

were evenly split between conservative (6) and liberal (6) social and economic ideologies.

What did we find in our test of racial equity survey language?

Our panel survey examination of the differential impact of racial equity survey language ("racism", "people of color", and "structural racism" term and definition) by leader ideology found that respondents across the ideological spectrum had higher levels of agreement with more ideologically neutral language than with racial equity language, suggesting that neutral language may be more effective across the ideological spectrum. We also found that whereas more liberal respondents had higher levels of agreement with racial equity language, more conservative respondents had higher levels of agreement with more ideologically neutral language, suggesting potential ideological bias in the racial equity language. These findings are nearly identical to the findings from the population panel survey we conducted in summer 2021.

On the other hand, our examination of the differential impact of social justice survey language ("fair and just", "culturally appropriate", and focus on multiple sectors versus just the health sector) by leader ideology found that respondents had

similar levels of agreement with ideologically neutral and social justice language, and for the most part, their reactions to the social justice language did not differ by ideology. These findings are similar to the findings from the population panel survey we conducted in summer 2021; in that survey reactions to social justice language did not differ by ideology at all.

In our qualitative research, we found that both conservative and liberal participants overwhelmingly preferred more neutral language over racial equity language. However, liberals were more tolerant of racial equity language than conservatives, sometimes even supportive of the language. We asked participants for their reactions to racial equity language used in our baseline survey of state and community leaders. When given a statement that included the term “people of color”, most conservative participants and a few liberal participants felt that specifying “people of color” was unnecessary and off-putting, or made things too narrow for their liking. One conservative participant questioned, “Why should people of color be even a part of that? We are all Americans.”

When asked their thoughts on adding “racism” to a survey statement, many participants expressed concerns over this term. “It carries a negative connotation, more negative than the others, I don’t feel like it is necessary”, a liberal interviewee noted. Similarly, a conservative participant observed, “For the broader audience, it might be a word you need to water down. However, I do think that racism has led to a lot of the problems we see in our communities today.”

The final question of the survey language portion of the interview asked for participants’ thoughts on adding the term “structural racism”. We received various reactions to this phrase—a few clearly negative reactions, the majority noting it was unnecessary and potentially off-putting to

use, and a few participants indicating a positive reaction. “I don’t know what it means, I can’t even begin to imagine what it means”, a conservative participant answered discontentedly. Others expressed support for “structural racism” language. One liberal participant shared, “It evokes most strongly my thoughts around systems, institutions, and policies. Compared to the other two [statements] this would be number one.” The only participant identified as “very liberal” indicated general satisfaction with the explicit racial equity survey language, even indicating some of the language could go further to explicitly call out racism and inequity. However, the majority stated that including this term would create more hostility and division, “just the word racism, it can get some people upset.” It was notable that while being asked for their personal opinion on the survey language, most participants also made comments about how they anticipated the general public would react.

Taken together, our findings suggest that neutral language is generally preferred over racial equity language across the ideological spectrum. In addition, our findings suggest potential ideological bias in the racial equity language.

What do these findings mean?

Neutral language is generally preferred over racial equity language across the ideological spectrum. In addition, our findings suggest potential ideological bias in the racial equity language.

Reaction to social justice language with no mention of race does not differ by ideology and is similarly accepted.

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

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