

Deflecting from Racism

*Local Talk Radio Conversations about the Murder of George Floyd**

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The contributions to this volume each attempt to understand why advanced capitalist societies are less equal and less redistributive than they were in the 1990s. Our editors point out in their introduction that one set of potential explanations for the general rise in inequality centers on the decisions of elites, and another centers on the attitudes and choices of members of the public.

This chapter focuses on the latter explanation. Why do members of the public not support redistribution when doing so would likely benefit them economically? In the United States, racism is a leading explanation (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder 1993; Lupu and Pontusson 2011). Racism interrupts the ability of people to feel concern for each other, which support for redistribution requires (Epper, Fehr, and Senn 2020). Instead, people tend to save their concern for those with whom they identify (Fowler and Kam 2007). In the United States, a disproportionate share of low-income earners are people of color. Racism among Whites appears to drive lack of empathy or acknowledgment of the role of racism in economic inequality, which undermines support for more redistribution (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Elkjær and Iversen, this volume; Knowles et al. 2014; Lupu and Pontusson 2011).

To be clear, it is Whites who are particularly less supportive of redistribution (Alesina and Giuliano 2011; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005), especially

* My gratitude to Deb Roy and the Center for Constructive Communication at the MIT Media Lab for use of the RadioSearch archive. Thank you to Hakeem Jefferson, Kennia Coronado, Clint Rooker, participants in the 2021 Midwest Political Science Association Identity Subconference, the editors and authors of this volume, and especially Paul Pierson for comments on earlier versions. Thank you to Kyler Hudson and Kennia Coronado for research assistance. Thank you also to the Natalie C. Holton Chair of Letters & Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for funding.

when they perceive the recipients of “welfare” are people of color (Gilens 1999) or when they are living in contexts that suggest they likely perceive that recipients of redistribution are people of color (Luttmer 2001; Poterba 1997). In other words, racism appears to dampen the willingness of Whites to support what Cavaillé calls “redistribution *to*” others (this volume).

The fact that racism prevents redistribution is not news. Political actors in the United States have used racist appeals since the end of slavery to interrupt coalition building between Whites and Blacks that might threaten the fortunes of higher-income Whites (Alesina and Glaeser 2004). But the fact that the relationship between racism and lack of support for redistribution persists suggests we need to know more about how it is reproduced in the current political context.

In recent years, questions about the role of racism in lack of support for redistribution in the United States have arisen frequently with respect to White rural residents. I am drawn to these questions after years of studying what I eventually labeled “rural consciousness,” an identification as a rural resident intertwined with a perception of distributive injustice (Cramer 2016; Cramer Walsh 2012). I became aware of this perspective while conducting intensive listening in several dozen communities throughout the state of Wisconsin between 2007 and 2012. In the conversations I witnessed, I heard many White people in smaller communities and rural places expressing a perception that people living outside major metro areas were not getting their fair share of attention, resources, or respect. They said that the decisions that affected their lives were made primarily in cities and communicated out to them with little listening going on to the needs and concerns of people in rural areas. They also perceived that the wealth and the good jobs were primarily in the cities and that their taxpayer dollars were spent primarily on these urban communities, not on communities like their own. Finally, they perceived that the people making the decisions that affected their lives did not respect rural people like themselves.

This perspective tended to coincide with a preference for Republican Party candidates, who in the contemporary era have generally opposed redistribution. Many of the people I listened to perceived that the government was not working for them and therefore were highly skeptical of more government programs. This aversion to government is particularly striking in recent decades, given that rural areas have been particularly slow to recover from the Great Recession of 2007–2008 (Pipa and Geismar 2020; *The New Map of Economic Growth and Recovery* 2016).

The rural resentment toward urban areas that makes opposition to redistribution seem appropriate has been simmering, if not growing, for decades. Its multifaceted nature facilitates its use as a persuasive tool. The perspectives of resentment I heard in Wisconsin included resentment toward cities, city residents, public employees, liberal elites, Democrats, and people of color. Through this lens, geography represents not just whom the political in-group is, but whom people can trust, and whom they deem deserving. Candidates or

politicians priming resentment toward any one of the facets of rural resentment activate negative attitudes toward the other associated groups. Republican Scott Walker rose to power as Wisconsin's governor this way, and Donald Trump used a similar strategy to help win the US presidency.

In the wake of Trump's 2016 victory, Brexit, and other successes for right-wing populist candidates, a key debate has been whether support for these actors is driven by economic or cultural concerns (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Margalit 2019). The understandings that I heard suggest that the driver is not one or the other, but instead the intertwining of the two (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018; see also Rooduijn and Burgoon 2017). When people told me they were not receiving their fair share, they were claiming that they deserved more and that others were getting more than they deserved. Such assessments were about economics and culture at the same time. These claims are part of a culture infected with racist notions of what human lives are worth and who works hard (and is therefore deserving) (Soss and Schram 2007). Whether or not people support redistribution rests on their willingness to extend support to others and to see others in the country as members of the same community. In this way, economic concerns cannot be understood independently from cultural concerns in the United States.

In the study that follows, I sought to learn more about how racism in particular is intertwined with economic concerns and interrupts support for redistribution among White residents of rural areas in the United States. Specifically, I sought to listen to the way White residents of rural areas talked about racism and whether and how understandings of economic inequality and redistribution entered. In my earlier fieldwork, the people I listened to seldom talked about racism. For this reason, in this study, I intentionally focused on conversations about racism and listened to the way economics entered.

To do so, I turned to local talk radio shows. Investigating the conversations among hosts and callers on local talk radio shows allowed me to listen to the way people rooted in particular places made sense of politics during the pandemic, when face-to-face fieldwork was not possible. The talk radio audience is extensive,¹ and talk radio is an important source of information among Right-leaning voters in particular in the United States (Dempsey et al. 2021; Mitchell et al. 2021). National talk radio hosts have operated as important opinion leaders within the Republican Party since shortly after the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which made it possible for stations to air

¹ In 2019, Nielsen claimed that radio reaches more Americans each week than any other platform, with talk radio as the 2nd most listened-to format (Nielsen Company n.d.). The Pew Research Center reported that 9.6 percent of the US listening audience tuned into news/talk radio between January and November of 2016, and that the online radio audience has grown over time www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/07/State-of-the-News-Media_2017-Archive.pdf; see also (www.statista.com/statistics/822103/share-audience-listening-news-talk-radio/). Berry and Sobieraj (2011) argue the growth of talk radio was driven by deregulation and online listening, not conservative demand.

partisan programming without providing equal time to opposing views (Berry and Sobieraj 2011; see also Bobbitt 2010). Hosts such as Rush Limbaugh have likely been drivers of public opinion and the behavior of party leaders (Hacker and Pierson 2020; Rosenwald 2019).

Local talk radio shows are aired within a particular media market or select region. Many talk radio stations have at least one local show (Bobbitt 2010: Ch. 1). These local shows are important because their content is more likely to tap into place-based identities and illuminate the relevance of national-level issues for their listeners. Such information increases the chances that people will consider their own socioeconomic circumstances when forming an opinion on it (Chong, Citrin, and Conley 2001) and therefore be more likely to engage in political action (Ozzy 2012).

I focused on shows broadcast out of predominantly White, northern (and primarily Midwestern), and less metropolitan areas in order to focus my attention on the communication among residents comparable to those I had listened to while studying rural resentment. This communication is not necessarily representative of all communication among all conservative Whites, or even among all conservative northern, rural Whites. My intent was to closely observe specific cases of conservatives talking about race and racism to observe whether and how they connect these topics to opposition to redistribution.

Since the focus of my listening was on shows broadcast from places considerably less racially diverse than other rural areas of the country, future work would benefit from listening to similar conversations in other parts of the United States and around the globe, since understandings of race and racism are distinctive in the rural north (Carter et al. 2014).

I focus my analytic listening² on local talk show discussions about a particular event that undeniably involved race and racism: the murder of unarmed African-American George Floyd by Derik Chauvin, a White Minneapolis, Minnesota, police officer, and the resulting protests that took place in that city and around the world. Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, was captured on video and lit global protests against racial injustice because of the egregious nature of the way he was killed, with Chauvin kneeling on his neck for over nine minutes while Floyd gasped and pleaded for air.

There was very little explicit connection between racism and redistribution in these conversations. Instead, the shows deflected attention away from race and racism in a variety of ways, preventing much discussion of connections between redistribution or even economics and racism.

Paying attention to situations in which people legitimize turning away from racism is necessary for understanding how racism continues to prevent the United States as well as other countries from pursuing the redistribution that

² My deep gratitude to Paul Pierson for giving this label to my work. See Cramer (2022; 2023) for extensive explanations of this approach.

would to enable those at the bottom of the income scale to attain a sufficient standard of living in order to thrive. What narratives do people tell that de-emphasize humanitarianism and equality, and instead raise up individualism and aversion to large government (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Hochschild 1981)? What do people tell each other that leads them to perceive the cause of racial inequality is individual initiative rather than systematic disadvantage (see Kam and Burge 2018)?

In what follows, I will discuss when attention to racism arose and will describe and explain how hosts and callers deflected from it and how this prevented consideration of the linkage between racism and redistribution. The results contribute to our understanding of the way US society continues to relegate Blacks to the bottom of the status hierarchy in a way that perpetuates inequality. The active refusal to consider racism casts the problem of inequality as those at the bottom getting more than they deserve, rather than those at the top getting too much, and thereby places responsibility on Blacks for their lack of income, not on broader forces that might be advantaging Whites (see Knowles et al. 2014).

The collective deflection from racism that occurs on these shows perpetuates a view that racism is no longer a factor in the United States. Through this lens, hosts and callers justify their lack of empathy with people of color by treating inequality as the result of individual failings, or as the fault of Democrats, who make it an issue in pursuit of their own political goals.

USING LOCAL TALK RADIO TO LISTEN

To focus on the content of talk radio shows, I used a talk radio data collection tool designed by the Center for Constructive Communication at the MIT Media Lab.³ This tool, RadioSearch, ingested and automatically transcribed the content of dozens of talk radio stations from around the country for several years.

I initially focused my listening on a Right-leaning show broadcast out of Duluth, Minnesota, which is located in a rural area of the state in which Floyd was killed. (See Table 12.1 for details on the shows examined.) This was a weekday morning show called “Sound Off with Brad Bennett.”⁴ Each day, it started with this introduction: “Good morning, Northlanders, and Welcome to Sound Off. For the next 3 hours let your voices be heard about the things that are important to you, the hardworking men and women of the Northland, who pay more than their fair share of taxes.” This introduction also announced that host Bennett served as a Marine Corps Sergeant in the Vietnam War, and served three terms on the Duluth School Board.

³ www.ccc.mit.edu/

⁴ <https://wds710.com/shows-sound-off-with-brad-bennett/>

TABLE 1.2.1 Characteristics of broadcast communities

Station	Show	Location	City population ¹	2020 Trump vote in county ²	Percent people of color in city	Percent people of color in county	Median household income in city	Median household income in county
KBUL	Montana Talks	Billings, MT	109,595	60.6%	14.9%	14.1%	\$58,394	\$61,186
KLIX	Bill Colley Show	Twin Falls, ID	48,951	71.5%	22.5%	21.8%	\$50,739	\$55,785
KLXX	Joel Heitkamp Show	Fargo, ND	121,889	49.9%	17.3%	15.6%	\$52,810	\$62,218
KOAN	Eddie Burke Show	Anchorage, AK	293,531	52.8%	42.1%	–	\$82,716	–
KZSE	MPR News with Kerri Miller	Rochester, MN	118,924	43.8%	25%	20.9%	\$74,527	\$80,096
WAOK	Wanda Stokes Show	Atlanta, GA	488,800	26.2%	61.7%	60.4%	\$66,657	\$61,980
WDMS	Sound Off with Brad Bennett	Duluth, MN	85,195	41.3%	11.7%	9.1%	\$55,819	\$60,434
WTAQ	John Muir Show	Green Bay, WI	104,565	52.8%	31.3%	19.7%	\$49,029	\$64,458

¹ Population and race/ethnicity data are from 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Income data are from ACS 2019 1-year estimates. Percent people of color is defined as percent not identifying as non-Hispanic white alone.

² www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2020/11/10/election-maps-2020-america-county-results-more-voters/6226197002/. For Anchorage, Percent Trump support reported is for entire state since Alaska does not have counties (and information is not provided in the ACS estimates by borough. Anchorage is in Anchorage Borough.). Counties are as follows: Billings, MT, is located in Yellowstone County; Twin Falls, ID, is in Twin Falls County; Fargo, ND, is in Cass County; Rochester, MN, is located in Olmstead County; Atlanta, GA, is located in Fulton County with parts of the city extending into DeKalb County; Duluth, MN, is located in St. Louis County; and Green Bay, WI, is located in Brown County.

My logic of comparison was to focus on this show, then compare the content with shows hosted by White men in other states that were also broadcasting to White, rural, northern, and conservative audiences (Billings, Montana; Twin Falls, Idaho; Anchorage, Alaska; and Green Bay, Wisconsin). I wanted to know what patterns in these understandings were common across White, rural northern communities. I also compared these understandings to those I heard on less conservative shows broadcast to White, rural, and northern communities, in order to illuminate the partisan and ideological nature of the patterns (i.e., a Minnesota Public Radio statewide talk show; a center-left show broadcast out of Fargo, North Dakota, hosted by Joel Heitkamp, the brother of former Democratic US Senator from North Dakota Heidi Heitkamp). Finally, I contrasted these patterns to the way a Black female host targeting an urban, southern, and Black audience (in Atlanta) and her callers talked about George Floyd's death and ensuing protests as a most different comparison case, to help illuminate the distinctiveness of the understandings in the White, rural, and northern communities.

Floyd was killed on May 25, 2020. These shows began discussing his death on the morning of May 28th, after demonstrations turned violent in Minneapolis. I listened to entire broadcasts of the shows on this and the following several days, as well as broadcasts in the preceding months, on the day after the November 3, 2020, presidential election, and on the morning after the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol, to deepen my understanding of the contexts of these talk radio on-air communities.

As I listened to a show, I typed transcripts of what was said and noted observations on the tone and voice characteristics of callers. (The RadioSearch tool created machine transcriptions, but they were not sufficiently accurate for my purposes.) I periodically compared transcripts across stations and wrote memos about the patterns that I was noticing. When I completed my listening, I read through the transcripts station by station, starting with WDSM and worked out geographically through the other Right-leaning shows. I then analyzed the transcripts from the contrast shows (from Fargo and Atlanta).

As I read through the transcripts, I examined whether and how conversations about the economy, economic concerns, and economic inequality arose, and looked for the connections people made between economic inequality and race or racism. I recorded these observations in a memo along with excerpts from the transcripts that had led me to these conclusions.

It did not take long to notice that detouring away from race or racism was more prominent than conversations about race or racism. I therefore investigated how people steered each other away from racial and economic inequality and what the conversations suggested about hosts', listeners', and callers' concerns and understandings. Three major characteristics of the connection between race and economic inequality emerged: (1) the avoidance of race and racism, (2) a shifting of the conversation to blame political opponents, and (3) an assertion of values that justified these shifts.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The local talk radio shows I listened to clearly communicate identity with a particular place and the people living there. The stations air these shows in a line-up of nationally syndicated shows, such as *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, *The Sean Hannity Show*, *The Mark Levin Show*, *The Savage Nation*, and *The Mike Gallagher show*.⁵ The Fox news stations' local talk shows reference, quote, and rebroadcast some of the content from these national shows. Even when the hosts and callers on the local shows talk about national issues, they do so while referencing their local community. The hosts and their producers (who are often a part of the conversation as well) refer to their histories in the community. Hosts greet callers with their first name and place of residence (e.g., "Hello, Sandy from Silver Bay!") The advertisers tend to be local and are sometimes guests on the shows. (The Duluth show regularly welcomed representatives of the Benna Ford car dealership, Chad Walsh from the Dead On Arms shooting range, or "Lady O" from Lady Ocalat's Emporium [a fortune-telling business]).

Regular callers are important parts of the shows' communities (Brownlee and Hilt 1998). The shows celebrate first-time callers on the air and in online descriptions of the broadcasts's content.⁶ Callers influence the agenda and how it gets discussed, even when the host pulls in another direction. Such tension is the exception, however. Consensus is the norm, and callers are generally treated warmly, and sometimes even memorialized. On the Duluth show, Bennett and producer Kenny Kalligher made a point of honoring local veterans who had recently died. On one such occasion Bennett recalled a deceased listener, Thomas Fontaine, from "up in Grand Moret [Minnesota]," explaining that he was a Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran who "listened to us all of the time.... He had crazy-glued the dial on his radio so you couldn't move it off of WDSM."⁷

Each of these shows is a community unto itself and exudes a tone of familiarity. For example, when a caller gets dropped, hosts use the airwaves to speak directly to that person. "Mary, you call back. I hit the wrong dol garn button and I will get you on. I promise," the Fargo host said one morning.⁸

As I noted earlier, the talk radio audience is considerable and national-level politicians clearly believe these shows have an important reach.⁹ High-profile candidates and their surrogates made appearances on these broadcasts during the 2020 election cycle. The host and the producer of the Duluth show talked throughout the 2020 campaign about getting "the big guy" (Trump) on the

⁵ This is the lineup in which Bennett's show appears.

⁶ For example, Steve from Duluth, January 8, 2021.

⁷ January 8, 2021.

⁸ May 28, 2020.

⁹ See Bobbitt (2010: Ch. 9) for consequences of these local shows. See also Hofstetter and Gianos (1997) on politicians' use of these shows to communicate without journalists' scrutiny.

air and were disappointed when the campaign sent “only” his son Eric Trump instead. Aaron Flint, the host of the Billings, Montana, show, welcomed US Senator Steve Daines onto the air on June 3, the morning after the Montana primary elections. On May 29, John Muir enthusiastically welcomed gun rights proponent and Trump supporter Ted Nugent onto his Green Bay show.¹⁰

Although the conservative shows are often supporting Republican candidates, they do not simply toe the line, at least in the early stages of an issue. For example, Bennett, the Duluth show host, supported the use of masks early in the pandemic before doing so became a partisan issue. He also occasionally resisted extreme right-wing or conspiratorial comments from his audience. For example, on January 11, 2021, after the insurrection at the US Capitol, he lectured that one of the rioters, the “guy with the horns” was not in fact part of Antifa, the antifascist protest movement, as some callers were alleging. The libertarian host of the Twin Falls station, Bill Colley, likewise admonished a caller for suggesting that the reaction to the storming of the Capitol was overblown. One caller asked, “How many police were injured when Antifa did their riots?” Colley shouted back, “So that makes it OK?! What the hell is wrong with you?! Because stupid people on the left do it?”

CALLER: No I'm just saying it is being blown out of proportion.

COLLEY: Oh my God, there were people storming through the Capitol, breaking windows!! People are dead!!

These hosts did perpetuate conspiracy theories at times. Even after Bennet lectured that the man in the Viking helmet was not part of Antifa, he went on to argue that “There *are* some real things happening here that are just as bad as some of the stuff that is being made up ... [for example], the attempt to destroy free speech.... In the last few days ... almost every one of the [social media] websites of any kind ... has limited or cut off anything conservative. They have even killed the platform for one of the conservative websites out there [Parler]. Does this sound like China? A little bit!” Also, Colley claimed that the understaffing and underresourcing of security personnel on January 6th might have been intentional to justify a subsequent tightening of security at the Capitol.

Although these shows deflected attention away from racism, the hosts made a point to distance themselves from the labels of racist or White supremacist (see Bonilla-Silva 2018). During the first presidential debate in the 2020 general election, Trump refrained from taking moderator Mike Wallace’s invitation to denounce White supremacist groups, telling them instead to “stand back and stand by.” The next morning, Bennett defended Trump, arguing that Wallace was wrong to insinuate that Trump had never condemned White supremacists. When Floyd was killed, host Muir in Green Bay argued it was ridiculous to tie Trump and his rhetoric to the actions of the officer who had knelt on his neck.

¹⁰ Local talk radio is the source of information most trusted after Fox News for Trump supporters in Wisconsin as of October 2018 (Dempsey et al. 2021, Figure 2).

Trump is not a racist. The overwhelming number of Trump supporters are not racist.... We can't help it if there are isolated individuals or groups who are racist who support the Trump presidency.... The reason that they falsely demonize Trump and Trump supporters is because they don't actually have anything on Trump. Trump, even though they don't want to admit it, has been immensely successful for the United States on countless fronts for 3 plus years now. He has done a great job for all Americans, including African Americans.... This is leftists on the political left trying to control African Americans, politically.

Various hosts and guests talked about the importance of unity and a focus on commonalities over differences.¹¹ However, this attention to unity was typically a desire for less disruption to the status quo, not a desire to unify through attention to difference – a common strategy among Whites confronting the reality of racism (Cramer Walsh 2012). One broadcast that laid this out plain and clear was Bennett's show on January 8, 2021, after the US Capitol insurrection. Within minutes, he and his producer went from lamenting attention to divisions or subgroups to deriding pictures of interracial marriages on TV.

I am getting so sick and tired of being fed— *spoon fed*— that we all have to intermarry. Every time I watch a commercial on TV I see a white guy married to a black guy or a black woman or a white woman married to a black woman and mixed racial kids. That's not a hundred percent the way the world works, it just doesn't. But it seems that there is an effort to force us to accept that as a way of life, that we are going to all become a grey society or a beige society. Who has made that decision that every couple on TV needs to be biracial?

RECOGNIZING THE INJUSTICE OF FLOYD'S DEATH, THEN A SHIFT AWAY

It was in these contexts, in which the Right-leaning hosts distanced themselves from racism while preferring to deny it exists, that they reacted to Floyd's murder. On each of the Right-leaning shows, the hosts' initial response was a recognition that his death was the result of a horrific crime. "As far as George Floyd, I think it was a very serious crime that was committed against him," Bennett in Duluth said.¹² In Green Bay, Muir was similarly blunt. "Based on what this show has seen to date, regardless of the motive, what happened appears to be totally unacceptable."¹³ In Anchorage, a guest on the show was even more direct: "Somebody should have walked up to that cop and shot him right there."

However, even though these hosts recognized the injustice of the killing, they each quickly detoured away from the possibility that the incident was reflective of a broader pattern of racial injustice. Many of the hosts interpreted

¹¹ For example, Congressman Pete Stauber on WDSM November 2, 2020.

¹² May 28, 2020.

¹³ The host of this show uses an unusual third person style (e.g., "This show believes..." rather than "I believe...").

the murder as the case of a “bad apple” law enforcement officer. Even when callers suggested racism might be involved, the hosts turned attention back to the officers’ individual behavior. On the Green Bay show, Muir read a text from a listener that “Minneapolis obviously has a culture of hate within the police and it is being reciprocated within the community but I will never understand riots.”¹⁴ Muir’s response was that Floyd’s death was a result of “some terrible apples within the police dept.” The next day, caller Jim in Green Bay (who may have sent the text the day before), said,

An issue that is being overlooked ... the argument is that you have a few bad apples ... I agree, but what are the chances that in the entire Minneapolis police department you are going to get 4 or 3 to overlook and 1 to commit the crime? I guarantee that if you hand-picked 3 others they would have done the same thing ... I have relatives who are officers in the Green Bay area so I am very much pro law enforcement. I agree to pretty much everything you said so far, but I just wish people would quit saying it’s just a few bad apples. Because I think it’s worse in some police departments than we want to admit to and we have to as a society, we have to look at that.

Nevertheless, Muir gave the “bad apple” response. “This show does not want to speculate. We don’t know how many bad apples are out there. ...officers that were there they certainly failed. Inexplicable, inexcusable. There certainly are bad apples in that field.”

Asserting that the officers involved were just bad apples enabled the hosts to refocus attention on the protestors and discount the possibility that they were reacting to racism. They criticized the violent protests and claimed the protestors did not actually care about Floyd’s death. “When I see injustice I don’t go out and loot the local Target store. How does that bring you justice in any way?” Colley in Twin Falls asked.¹⁵ In Billings, host Flint had his own string of questions. “*Everybody* is criticizing what [officer Chauvin] did, so why are you burning down police precincts, AutoZones, cars? Why are you spraying a woman in a wheelchair with a fire hydrant? Why are you stealing TVs? That is not protesting, that is rioting and nothing to do with what this cop did.”¹⁶ A caller, Herb from Sheboygan Falls, asked Muir on his Green Bay show, “That man murdered that man ... [but] that being said, why with the economy the way it is would you burn down an AutoZone and loot a Target? Their whole message gets distorted and lost.”

Herb’s comment acknowledged the economic challenges that many people were facing. Such comments were not unusual on these shows. But Herb, like others, did not talk about these economic struggles as shared across racial groups. Instead, he brought up economic concerns as a reason to ridicule the way people in Minneapolis were responding to Floyd’s murder.

¹⁴ May 28, 2020.

¹⁵ May 28, 2020.

¹⁶ May 28, 2020.

BLAMING DEMOCRATS

As the days of protests continued, the hosts not only deflected attention away from racism, they deflected blame for the events onto other targets. Occasionally, the hosts suggested that Floyd was intoxicated and therefore to blame for his own death.¹⁷

More prominently, though, hosts focused on Democrats as the main target of blame. On the Billings, Montana, show, caller Monte in Livingston claimed that Floyd's death was part of a pattern of police shootings in Minneapolis.¹⁸ Host Flint agreed that Chauvin had crossed the line, but then he quickly deflected blame onto Democrats. "Senator [Amy] Klobuchar, Democrat presidential candidate, failed to hold [Chauvin] accountable when she was a prosecutor."

Others deflected blame onto Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. Bennett in Duluth said, "You can hear Biden trying to blame this on the Trump administration. What is missing here? Biden has been in office 44 years, Schumer, Pelosi, the lovely Maxine Waters for 48 years, and yet they blame America's problems on President Donald Trump who has been in office for about 3 years."¹⁹

Another common version of Democrat-blaming was to point out that the riots were happening in cities led by Democrats. On Bennett's show, Sandy from Silver Bay said, "Everyone agreed the officer made the wrong choice. You have a constitutional right to peaceable protest. However, you do not have the right to destroy anything. Now you are breaking the law and need to pay the consequences. Now, Brad [referring to the host], as far as I can see a lot of this is taking place in Democratic states and those with sanctuary cities."²⁰ Later in the show Bennett brought on the Republican candidate for the Minnesota US Senate seat, Jason Lewis.²¹ Lewis asserted, "Look, this is a colossal failure of leadership, and it is no different than their colossal mismanagement of COVID and nursing homes or their mismanagement of the inner cities for decades upon decades. We have had liberals control – left-wing politicians, liberal Democrats – control the most urban areas and now we've reached this breaking point."

The hosts went beyond accusations of negligent leadership. Some of them claimed that Democrats were actually fueling the riots to improve their chances of a Biden win in November. On June 2nd on Bennett's show, caller Todd from Duluth suggested, "Pelosi says she's going to impeach again, and Biden and the Democrats are going to bail the demonstrators out of jail. Looks like

¹⁷ Examples of blaming Floyd: Bennett in Duluth on May 29th, June 1st and June 2nd, Colley from Twin Falls on May 28th and June 1st, Burke in Anchorage on May 29th.

¹⁸ May 29, 2020.

¹⁹ May 29, 2020.

²⁰ May 29, 2020.

²¹ Lewis is a former talk radio host whose show went on to national syndication after he appeared regularly on the Rush Limbaugh show. His radio presence launched his successful candidacy for the US House, in which he served 1 term, 2017–2019.

they are funding all of this. Looks like they are going to burn down our cities and destroy our country.” Bennett responded with a theory.

If for example I were a conspiracy theorist nut job I would say, “Let’s see. We’ve got the Democrats who have a candidate who probably doesn’t have much of a chance of winning against Donald Trump with the economy as robust as it is and with so many people working, how would they possibly be able to kick the stool out from under President Trump? How would they possibly be able to do that?” Well, uh so Joe Biden is raising his hand and saying, “We gotta find a way to destroy the economy! Well how we gonna do that? Well, uh how ‘bout we get a pandemic? And we shut the whole country down? Nobody can go to work. Everybody’s gonna lose their jobs, they gotta wear masks. Oh! And then on top of that if that isn’t good enough if that doesn’t kick ‘er down enough then how ‘bout we have a mass riot and vandalism, we turn Antifa loose and uh destroy oh, I don’t know, how about like Minneapolis, how about we destroy 600 buildings in downtown Minneapolis/ St. Paul in about a 3-day period? Burn ‘em all down, wreck ‘em, destroy ‘em? That oughta pretty well kick the economy in the rump, don’t ya think?”

Bennett²² and Flint in Billings²³ talked about an international campaign among liberals to raise money to bail out protesters. They were treating the protests as a coordinated strategy by Democrats to win the presidential election, not as an outcry against racial injustice.

At least one host made an explicit claim that such behavior was part of a long-term strategy to use race to promote socialism. On June 1, host Colley in Twin Falls played a clip of Harvard Professor Cornell West talking with host Anderson Cooper on CNN, and then launched into a narrative that wove together the Democrats, socialism, and race. The clip he played was extensive and included West saying,

I thank God that we have people in the streets. Can you imagine this kind of lynching taking place and people are indifferent?!... You know what’s sad about it though, brother, at the deepest level? It looks as if the system cannot reform itself. We have tried Black faces in high places. Too often our Black politicians, professional class, middle class become too accommodated to the capitalist economy, too accommodated to the militarized nation state, too accommodated to the market-driven culture.... And what happens? What happens is we’ve got a neofascist gangster in the White House who really doesn’t care for the most part....²⁴

Colley interpreted the clip this way: “So he is talking like a Bolshevik. Look, I can’t give you my property. You burned it down, for crying out loud!”²⁵

²² June 2, 2020.

²³ June 3, 2020.

²⁴ www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/05/29/cornel_west_america_is_a_failed_social_experiment_neoliberal_wing_of_democratic_party_must_be_fought.html.

²⁵ By November, Colley referred to the events over the summer as “classic psyops.” “BLM and all that was classic psyops,” he said, as a caller claimed, “BLM, Antifa – they are being propelled by foreign agents.”

In these commentaries, the hosts were not only deflecting attention away from racism, but deflecting attention away from inequality. Bennet's remarks associated Democrats with both racial unrest and with manufactured economic challenges. Colley discounts Cornel West's system-level critique as socialist. This act of equating Democrats with the protests in response to Floyd's death makes it inappropriate to even consider the relationship of racial injustice to economic concerns.

REVERSE RACISM AND THE REFRAMING OF VICTIMHOOD

The Right-leaning hosts did not completely ignore the issue of racism. However, they did not let it remain the focus of attention for long, except to claim that it is Whites who are the targets of hate. Muir in Green Bay stated matter-of-factly that "BLM is a VERY racist group" whose members "don't actually care about the injustices that have been done to people – they are just there to forward their agenda and personally profit."²⁶ On Bennet's show, caller Tom from Port Wayne put it this way:

I'm very sad for the country.... Our country is in great peril. It is literally in some places on fire. We have people who were penned up for a long time through this stay-at-home and have lost their minds. They have envy and hatred of the majority of people in this country.... We have never had a moment in which people have such zeal and hatred toward others in the country.²⁷

While some of this concern about reverse racism was fear of hatred toward Whites, some of it was anger over a perception that racial minorities were treated better than Whites. This was especially clear on the Flint show in Billings. Elena in Philipsburg complained that nobody rose up in protest "when the government slaughtered the people at Waco or at Ruby Ridge"²⁸ On June 3, Flint brought up new legislation in New York that was "making it a felony for officials to share illegal immigrant driver data with U.S. customs officials." He took this as a sign of injustice toward law-abiding citizens, presumably Whites. "To me the rioting that is going on in this country is so similar to the illegal alien story where they want to create all these rules and these laws to crack down on the legal and the innocent, us, but then they want to protect people who are acting illegally."

Similar perceptions of injustice and victimhood laced comparisons the hosts drew between the January 6 insurrection and the George Floyd protests. Bennett in Duluth noted that the Minnesota attorney general intended to prosecute any Minnesotans who took part in the insurrection. A caller asked, "But took part

²⁶ May 29, 2020.

²⁷ June 2, 2020.

²⁸ May 29, 2020. These are two famous cases of standoffs between federal agents and armed resistors that took place in the early 1990s.

how? Broke windows, or just there? You would want people who did violence. But they didn't do that for the other riots this year." Bennett agreed: "Ok to uphold the rule of law, but let's do it evenly across all political leanings," suggesting a double standard in which liberals taking part in the Floyd protests were not prosecuted although conservatives storming the US Capitol were.

In Twin Falls, Colley voiced similar complaints and drew a connection to a rural versus urban divide. In the days after Floyd's death, he talked about the protests that had erupted in Portland and Seattle. He talked about this as a case of urban lawlessness contrasting with rural common sense. He and a caller joked that people in the nonmetro areas were armed, and would eventually be the last ones standing. A caller said, "Antifa types and these entitled little rich kids showed up in Washington [state], doing it in Tacoma, ran into about 60% of the armed citizens of the town and decided to go back to Seattle to burn it down." Colley responded, "One side has 60 rounds of ammunition, the other doesn't know which bathroom to use [referring to debates over transgender bathrooms]. [laughs] The people who can defend themselves, accurately anyway, are just regular Americans in flyover country, which is why you're not going to see [those protests] happening here."²⁹

Hosts and callers framed themselves as victims by claiming their communities were treated unfairly, thereby diverting attention away from racism. Those claims were part of a broader perspective that demographic change was making them the victims of injustice, in which they were not getting their fair share of attention, resources, and respect. One manifestation of this was that these shows occasionally lamented the loss of a whiter time in the United States. Senate candidate Lewis mentioned on Bennett's Duluth show "the same liberal policies that have turned the Twin Cities into something our grandparents wouldn't recognize."³⁰ Caller Sandy in Silver Bay said, "I look at what is happening right now, this is not the United States" and "On our money it says In God We Trust. Where are you people? You are not trusting God." She, too, was lamenting her image of a past society.³¹ Host Bennett conveyed a similar kind of nostalgia when he said, "This has now become a story of how much can we steal, how much can we burn? 'Who's George Floyd? [he said, sarcastically quoting hypothetical protestors.] Let's burn this place ... Let's break in and steal everything they got.' Is this Minnesota we're looking at? This looks like Detroit or some other community! It does not look like Minnesota anymore." He read a note from a caller on the air that expressed a similar sentiment: "I am so shameful of the people of this state.... No place deserves this chaos. We are so disheveled in what is happening. So shameful, disgusting. What happened to Minnesota?"³²

²⁹ June 1, 2020.

³⁰ May 29, 2020.

³¹ May 29, 2020.

³² May 29, 2020.

When the hosts gave voice to concerns about their geographic and on-air communities being victims of unequal and unfair treatment, they drew attention away from injustices to people of color, or even injustices, such as economic inequality, that they might have shared with people of color.

MOMENTARY EXPRESSIONS OF EMPATHY OR SOLIDARITY

There *were* moments on these shows during which the hosts and callers expressed empathy with people of color, but they were brief. For example, on May 29th, Bennett at WDSM said,

What do we hear often from low-income minority type people about their housing in certain developments? We hear, “There’s—We don’t have enough low-income housing. We need more low-income housing. We need better housing, this housing is so old we need better housing.” *And I kinda feel for a lot of them many times* [emphasis added]. Until I saw this today. One of the buildings that burned last night that was torched to the ground by one of these supposed people that are concerned about what happened to George Floyd, was a under-construction, affordable housing development that was burned to the ground.... And now what will we hear? “Well, we don’t have enough low-income housing. We don’t have enough housing for us.” You just burned it to the ground!

A few days later Bennett again shifted from empathy, this time using the topic of food deserts. “You know how minorities always say they have a food desert? Well, this Aldi grocery store was extensively looted.”³³ And then the next morning, he launched into a similar complaint.

So I think that when we look at the big picture of what is going down here or what has gone down, we have to be very attuned to the fact that a lot of the damage that was created in this community, a lot of the heartbreak, and a lot of the people in the community that are going to suffer now as a way to find food, find clothing because ... not only did they lose food stores that were there but a lot of the stores that were damaged were also stores ... that they bought clothing at ... and it has just become very, very difficult now for some of these areas to get the kinds of support that they need. So when you start sometimes by protesting, you sometimes leave your own communities unprotected, and you sometimes hurt *your own people* by what you do in that community [emphases added].

Sometimes Bennett’s language and that of his callers went beyond the use of an ambiguous “you people” to calling people foreigners.³⁴ This was part of a pattern of othering in which the “them” according to these shows was a vast anti-identity that included urbanites, Democrats, liberals, people of color, and foreigners. They were treated as a general outgroup of un-American residents

³³ June 1, 2020.

³⁴ Minneapolis has a large population of Somali immigrants. “When you have a community that rises up and burns – eventually it is going to cost the taxpayers of that community. That community won’t let that remain like a burned-out Mogadishu” (June 15, 2020).

of the United States (Finkel et al. 2020). Caller Don spelled this out from his cell phone on June 8th on Bennett's show. "Defunding the police department is the next step in a liberal experiment that is going to go wrong. Minneapolis is a sanctuary city. We brought in refugees from all different countries, and we've lived under their social liberal rules, and now it has gone bad, and along with the bigger cities, New York, L.A." After a little back and forth with Bennett, he added, "[Floyd] was no saint, and the cop was no saint, but to demonize – to say that there is systemic racism in the Twin Cities, that's a failure of how Minneapolis is run. It has nothing to do – nothing other than a reflection of the policies they continue to do to divide people by. We bring in people you know, they support different laws. Moslems have their view of how they think things should be run, they came from a different country. Instead of adopting our rules, they want to change everything."

COMPARING TO TALK ABOUT FLOYD'S DEATH ON LEFT-LEANING SHOWS

To help illuminate the perspectives I was hearing on these conservative shows, I turn now to content from the three Left-leaning shows. I sought to understand whether the hosts' and callers' comments considered a connection between the economic concerns and racism. Did their conversations around the Floyd murder and ensuing events touch upon economic concerns among Whites and people of color? Did they raise a different kind of connection between racism and economic concerns or inequality?

The show broadcast from Atlanta targeted to Blacks made explicit connections. The host, Wanda Stokes, talked about the riots resulting from Floyd's murder in a way that made it clear she and her audience were well aware that people were angry about the racial and economic injustices experienced by Blacks in Minneapolis and elsewhere. She did not have to explain that people were angry. Instead, she focused on how people should be channeling their anger.³⁵

Likewise, the Minnesota Public Radio show broadcast out of Rochester, near Minneapolis, addressed Floyd's murder as part of a pattern of injustice to Black Americans. One morning on MPR, civil rights attorney and leader Nekima Valdez Levy Armstrong was a guest. In contrast to the discussions on Heitkamp's show, Armstrong did not find it necessary to accommodate Right-leaning perspectives. "The system" she said, "is rigged when it comes to justice for African Americans. That has been the case since the system was developed. Cries for justice often fall on deaf ears just like the cries of George Floyd. That is very symbolic of what we go through day in and day out." At one point in the interview, the host said, "There is a tension between the process [for bringing the officers involved to trial] and the need for swift justice."

³⁵ May 28, 2020.

Armstrong responded, “The tension resides in the minds of white America. For Black Americans it is very easy to look at the video and to know that something unlawful happened.” Armstrong also challenged the idea that the rioting was inappropriate.

I don’t want any more lives to be lost but the reality is that this comes with the territory of people finally being fed up with the status quo, of no accountability. When it gets to this level of frustration, this combustible, you cannot predict or control the outcome. I’m not sure why people are so surprised that it happened here.... Given the volume of people who were present, people who are so outraged, we can’t control what they do as a result of their frustration. We are worried about repairing property damage. We need to be worried about the damage that has been done to communities from one generation to the next for maintaining the status quo and allowing police to kill with impunity. *That* is the real problem.

These two shows, targeted to urban audiences, made clear links between racism and injustice. However, in their broadcasts I analyzed, I did not hear emphasis on the manner in which Whites as well as people of color might benefit from greater redistribution.

I turned to the Fargo, North Dakota, show to listen for such a connection. This show’s audience was predominantly White and rural. It airs on an agricultural news station that announces crop prices and weather forecasts throughout the shows and broadcasts ABC News.

The show’s political orientation was moderate to Left-leaning. Although host Heitkamp’s sister is a former Democratic US Senator and Fargo is more liberal politically than the rest of the state, the station’s lineup includes an array of conservative-leaning nationally syndicated talk show hosts.

Some of the conversations on this show resembled those on the conservative shows. For example, the hosts and callers complained that the stay-at-home orders were unfair to relatively rural places like theirs, where the COVID-19 virus had not yet spread. Even on the morning of May 29th, as the news of Floyd’s murder was spreading, Heitkamp lamented that attention might be diverted by the murder and protests away from the struggles Fargo and other communities tuning in were having with the impacts of the pandemic. This was despite the fact that many of Heitkamp’s listeners were living in Minnesota, the state of Floyd’s death, since Fargo is located on the border of Minnesota and North Dakota. On the morning of May 29th, Heitkamp said, “With COVID there is a lot going on. Just understand we are going to be on this Minneapolis story, but lots going on, as this whole COVID thing happens. I hope the governor [of Minnesota] doesn’t give all his attention to Minneapolis because in outstate Minnesota the policies the governor has in place are crippling. They are really hard on certain businesses.”

Such comments about the competition for attention between more rural communities and urban places were common on his show. On the morning of May 29th, Heitkamp’s listeners were also reeling at the time over the death of

a White police officer in Grand Forks, North Dakota, who was shot and killed while on duty. Heitkamp lamented that although this was a tremendous loss to their local community, it would never be noticed by the national press. “I brought that up to a national reporter yesterday. Do they even know that we have an officer who died? Do they know what happened?” At times like this, Heitkamp’s resentment about the attention that urban areas received resembled that of the conservative hosts.

Heitkamp’s commentary was different from that of the more conservative hosts. He urged his listeners to have empathy across prominent divides. He encouraged them to notice that it was possible to mourn the death of a White police officer *and* a Black man killed by an officer. “You can have empathy. You can care and be heartbroken about what happened in Grand Forks and still question what happened in Minneapolis. You can be that person.”³⁶

Heitkamp also contrasted with the conservative hosts in his direct consideration of race and whiteness. He noted that his audience members likely had little experience with people who were not White. He said that the stations that carry his show in Canada, Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota “don’t have a diverse of a culture so they might not know the sheer logistics of the neighborhoods where the riots are taking place.”³⁷ The local weather and sports reporters on his show also talked openly about racism.

Although Heitkamp considered the role of racism and expressed more empathy with the people protesting Floyd’s death, his ability to consider the similarities in economic challenges faced by Whites and people of color was constrained by his audience and by his own rural versus urban frame. For example, some of his callers suggested Floyd was partly to blame, but Heitkamp disagreed, in an instructive rather than chastising manner. For example, a caller said, “I just wanted to mention this guy [Chauvin] should be charged with murder, but what if [Floyd] died of a heart attack? We need to wait and see the results of the autopsy. I think you said he clearly murdered the guy.” Heitkamp cut the caller short, saying, “I said he clearly caused his death. If I had my arm around your neck and you suffocated would I be charged?”³⁸ Heitkamp resisted the callers’ attempts to move away from the injustice of Floyd’s death, but he nevertheless moved quickly to more common ground, such as claims that the rioting was unjustified, or their shared support for police in general. In the days after Floyd’s death, Heitkamp regularly commented that the looters and protestors using violence ought to be charged, taking a tough-on-crime stance that resembles the comments on some of the conservative broadcasts.

Some of his audience members seemed to believe he was not doing enough to counteract conservative narratives. On May 29th, he read a text from a listener sent after others on the show had questioned the point of the looting.

³⁶ May 28, 2020.

³⁷ May 28, 2020.

³⁸ May 28, 2020.

“One of you responded, ‘They tried peacefully kneeling and you all had problems with that, too’” (referring to the National Football League players’ protests during the playing of the national anthem).

However, other audience members questioned the support for the protests that he or others had voiced. Heitkamp relayed one story of such backlash. He explained that while he was broadcasting on the Saturday night after Floyd’s death, when protests had turned violent in Fargo (May 30, 2020), a listener had sent him a message. He recalled the message like this: “‘I don’t care. Those Black’ and then using the N word ‘should all be shot.’ And then he goes on and writes, ‘Any of our officers marching with them’ and then uses the N word ‘should be shot, too’.”³⁹

In these ways, portions of Heitkamp’s audience limited how much he could highlight common cause with people of color. Also, his own resentment toward the attention given to urban concerns constrained any move toward recognition of common cause across racial lines, even when the conversation was focused on economic affairs. On May 29th, one of his guests was a business leader from Morehead, Minnesota, a community just across the Red River from Fargo. They talked about the injustice of Floyd’s death, but the emphasis of their conversation was on the perception that the rioting and protests were taking attention away from the serious economic challenges facing small towns in the pandemic and the way the restrictions on opening up businesses, created with urban businesses in mind, were economically devastating. In other words, the show did not draw attention to the ways economic challenges are similar across different social groups and communities, but instead on the competition between rural and urban areas for attention and resources.

Heitkamp may have been encouraging his audience to have more empathy, but he was still in the business of maintaining, if not growing, an audience of listeners. Like the conservative hosts, his commentary and that of the callers and guests he welcomed on, had to resonate with a predominantly White audience. To varying degrees, these shows faced the tragedy of Floyd’s death by tapping into a set of widespread values that further inhibited the connection these shows made between racism and economic inequality or other shared economic concerns.

One of the more common values that hosts and callers invoked as they detoured away from racism was accountability. Heitkamp, like the conservative hosts, noted that, yes, the officers involved in Floyd’s death needed to be held accountable, but then said the rioters needed to be held accountable as well.

Heitkamp’s emphasis on a respect for law and order was common on the conservative shows as well. Immediately after the storming of the US Capitol, many hosts denounced that violence, as they denounced the violent protests

³⁹ June 1, 2020.

against Floyd's death. Bennett in Duluth opened his broadcast the day after the insurrection by saying that yesterday was an "absolute disaster" in Washington, D.C., and laid out his law-and-order conception of good citizenship.

First of all, some of the TV stations tried to portray this as Trump patriots who had gone amuck. Let me just tell you that in my estimation patriots enlist and defend their country. They work hard, they do their best, raise families, good families, help their neighbors, perform civic duties, they grit their teeth and pay their taxes but they do pay. They show up and vote. They compete and whether they win or lose they do both with grace. They do not storm their Capitol over a lost election.... Hopefully they will be arrested and they will be jailed.⁴⁰

Likewise in Twin Falls that same morning, Colley took his listeners to task for thinking that the Capitol Police were traitors. He said he had been watching a video of the officers at the Capitol being stampeded.

Some people were screaming 'traitors!' What did you think they were going to do? March in with you and hold members of Congress hostage?! Some of you are saying they should choose their side. You expect them to lose their jobs in this tough economy? You think they should sacrifice their job but you shouldn't?!... Those Capitol officers, their job is to protect that building and the people inside it. That is their mission.

Although one can imagine how referencing widely shared values could help draw attention to shared concerns, the manner in which hosts talked about them reinforced divides. For example, especially on the conservative shows, discussion of patriotism portrayed real Americans as White Christians. Also, the shows celebrated civic engagement in their communities, but demonized government while doing so. The shows regularly emphasized that local businesses, organizations, and volunteers were the appropriate safety net for their communities, not government. In Duluth, Bennett and Kalligher criticized the enormous bill that the government was running up by sending out pandemic recession stimulus checks. But they applauded the fact that a local grocery store was handing out gift cards to "deserving" people, funded by donations from community members.

The shows conveyed a blatant reverence for capitalism and the free market. For example, on Bennett's show in Duluth on June 1st, caller Don argued that what was going on in Minneapolis and in other cities was the failure of leadership in liberal cities, among Democrats, and the left-wing protestors. "Failure of these people to respect any type of authority. They chastise capitalism. I challenge any of these people if they would like to go to a third world country and ask these people if they would like to be involved in capitalism that supports all these people who can go out and protest."

⁴⁰ January 7, 2021.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The inability to understand and share the feelings of members of racial outgroups is a part of racism that dampens Whites' support for redistributive policy. The local conservative talk radio shows I listened to for this study suggest that one of the ways this lack of understanding is perpetuated is by denying the existence of racism and by painting those who draw attention to racism as un-American. The hosts and callers justified deflections from the topic of racism while they reaffirmed beliefs in accountability, capitalism, and law and order. Broadcasts of these shows on topics other than Floyd's death conveyed that the communities of these shows were understanding public affairs through a lens that emphasized these values as well as patriotism, Christianity, and aversion to big government. The way they did so conveyed that considerations of either racism or a greater role for the government in the economy (e.g., through redistribution) were anti-American.

The image of the archetypal American conveyed on the conservative shows, and on Heitkamp's show, was that of a hard-working, flag-bearing, God-fearing, rural White male. This undermined empathy with people of color, and reduced the chances of recognizing that a broad swath of Americans are victims of economic inequality and are harmed economically by a lack of redistribution.⁴¹ Associating Democrats with people of color and the ambiguous specter of socialism also made it seem ridiculous to even consider redistribution. These hosts and their callers claimed that Democrats had fostered the violent protests after Floyd's death to push their political goals of "Bolshevism." In this perspective, communities were not getting their fair share because of the lack of Americanness of people of color and their allies.

Notice what this means about the way the aversion to redistribution is intertwined with racism. In this interpretation, it is the Democrats who are using racism to achieve downward redistribution. This is quite the opposite of perceiving that it is the Republicans who are using racism to inhibit empathy to prevent such redistribution from taking place.

Whether or not this understanding is part of an explicit political strategy, this is a notable framing. It is different from what we would expect from a divide-and-conquer strategy, in which attention to the haves versus have-nots is redirected through a frame of makers versus takers. Instead, it would seem to result from an attempt to cast support for redistribution as a threat to the very fabric of the country. It also opens up the possibility for those opposed to redistribution to campaign to people of color and argue that the actors and

⁴¹ Notice how consequential perspectives are for the likelihood that people will experience empathy toward others, even when those others are in an outgroup such as immigrants that is currently politically potent (Williamson et al. 2020).

organizations calling themselves allies are more interested in imposing socialism than in achieving racial justice. In other words, as this perspective gains traction, it creates an opportunity for the Republican Party to win votes among people of color.

Looking closely at the way political commentators like these talk radio hosts treat the possibility of redistribution reinforces what we know about the relationship between race or ethnic difference and support for redistribution more globally: that this relationship varies from country to country and seems to most centrally depend on how the political culture equates the presence of racial or ethnic “others” (e.g., immigrants) with concerns about the viability of social policy (Burgoon 2014). How racism matters for the possibility of redistribution depends on whether and how people use racism in these debates. Some might use racism to stoke fear over the way resources are currently allocated (i.e., Brexit). Some might use racism by ironically deflecting away from the topic in a way that prevents recognition of shared economic concerns among people of a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

The fact that the use of racism to prevent redistribution in the United States is a centuries-old story might suggest that this is not likely to change any time soon. But I draw your attention back to one of the Left-leaning contrast shows, the Joel Heitkamp Show, broadcast out of Fargo, North Dakota. There are currently spaces in American political culture in which people are actively struggling with the archetype of the true American as a hard-working, flag-bearing, God-fearing, rural, White male, rather than insisting on the defense of this image. It is notable that the shows I investigated, except for the Atlanta show, took place in the North, which has lagged behind the South in coming to terms with the legacies of slavery (Bartels and Cramer 2019). We should pay attention to communication in which people are actively struggling with the notion that real Americans are White Americans, because such moments may be a source of political change. Public opinion scholars have famously taken manifestations of ambivalence as signs of civic incompetence (Converse [1964] 2006). But maybe instead they should be taken as signals from the public that a reckoning of their competing values and commitments is in order (Hochschild 1993, 204–206).

These occasions of ambivalence are also a caution against concluding that the processes of understanding that we witness on these shows are the act of members of the audience adopting the talking points fed to them by the local show hosts, national show hosts, or a shadow set of political elites generating the shows’ content. Yes, there is a sharing of arguments in an apparently concerted fashion, particularly among conservative media outlets. But these arguments gain traction because they resonate with the experiences and understandings of the audience. The expressions of ambivalence are reminders that people are active processors who are guided by elites, but nevertheless have minds of their own.

Heitkamp's discussion of racism took place in a context in which rural consciousness was common. He regularly stated that policies are made with major cities in mind. He reinforced the idea that his listening areas were neglected. The avoidance of racism we hear in these broadcasts is part of a perspective in which it is these nonmetro communities and the people within them who are the victims, not people of color in the cities. Through this lens, people are perceiving that they are not heard enough by policymakers and that those who *are* heard are people of color who are allied with those they believe are in power, wealthy liberal urbanites.

In this way, people justify deflecting attention away from racism and away from the possibility of recognizing the ways in which their struggles are similar to those in larger metropolitan areas. When rural Whites understand economic policy this way, through a zero-sum framework in which listening to people of color comes at the expense of listening to people like themselves, it is not surprising that participants in these shows deflect attention away from racism.