Rejecting Meritocracy: The Influence of Inclusion and Perceptions of Changeability on

System Change Motivation in White Americans

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Abstract

The present study examined if White Americans could be motivated to decrease their endorsement of meritocracy as a system-legitimizing ideology. Previous research has found that presenting a college orientation program as changeable made people more likely to seek information that was critical of the college, especially if that change was relevant to the individual (Johnson & Fujita, 2012). However, it is unclear if these variables also matter in activating White Americans' willingness to question ideologies that support the American system as a whole. The present research ($n = 431$) investigates whether presenting the American political system as changeable and presenting White Americans as the beneficiaries of system change would decrease White Americans' endorsement of meritocracy and increase system change motivation. Results did not support the importance of either of these factors as predictors of system change motivation or meritocracy endorsement; instead, exploratory analyses suggested that perceived changeability led to decreased support for meritocracy, but only when the change was perceived as positive. The influence of perceived system-change positivity on meritocracy support as well as the potential significance of the locus of system change are discussed.

Keywords: System-change motivation, meritocracy, multiculturalism

Meritocracy is an inherently racist and classist system in the U.S. that overemphasizes the role of individual effort in contributing to personal success (Dei, 2013; Haney & Hurtado, 1994; Simpson, 2010). By asserting that individual merit is the sole factor that contributes to socioeconomic status, meritocracy ignores environmental contexts and devalues the substantial effects of identity-based discrimination on an individual's ability to succeed and navigate society (DiAngelo, 2016; Katz, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2009). Meritocracy does not account for the difficulty of upward mobility for those who are not born into high status environments; when compounded with the restrictive effects of discrimination, the difficulty is intensified for individuals with marginalized identities. The longer that meritocracy and the values associated with it—such as the Protestant Work Ethic—are relevant and ingrain themselves in the collective American consciousness, the more difficult it becomes for marginalized individuals to ascend the social ladder (DiAngelo, 2016; Augoustinos et al., 2005).

Strong beliefs in meritocracy correlate with numerous attitudes and behaviors that aim to actively oppress racial minorities and withhold aid from those who need it the most. Greater endorsement of meritocratic values along with stronger tendencies to defend and justify systems of meritocracy predict greater anti-Black attitudes in White Americans (Callahan & Viscio, 2012; Katz & Hass, 1988) and also predict less support for legislation targeting hate crimes (Mallett et al., 2011). This predictive relationship is more potent when the targeted racial minority members strongly identify with their race; a stronger belief in system-legitimizing viewpoints of meritocracy in White Americans has been found to lead to greater bias against strongly-identified minorities (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). Even beliefs in egalitarianism, which is traditionally thought to be a traditional American value, are diminished when individuals are primed to think about the Protestant Work Ethic in the context of the real world. The act of

thinking about the Protestant Work Ethic is enough to decrease an individual's endorsement of egalitarian views and makes them less likely to participate in egalitarian actions such as donating money to the homeless (Levy et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that meritocracy functions as an ideological system that discriminates against minority groups and favors White people that are born into the upper echelon of American society. Equity programs that provide reparations for historically marginalized communities and make American society fairer are having their progress impeded by meritocratic views that are strongly intertwined with the American system (Baker, 2019; Wilson, 2019). Meritocracy states that "handouts" are not necessary when "working harder" can produce the same results, without considering that the odds of success are stacked against a large majority of Americans from the very beginning for reasons beyond their control (e.g., their race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.) (Katz, 2019).

In order to achieve system-wide changes that are necessary to dismantle meritocracy, the dominant members of American society must decrease their endorsement of the system and actively pursue system change (Clark, 2009). Focusing on *racially* dominant groups specifically, since the dominant racial group in America is White people, appealing to Whites and finding ways to convince them to endorse system change on a large scale is crucial to the mission of eliminating meritocratic structures upholding systemic racism.

Based on these findings, we became interested in the central question of what factors encourage White people to engage in system change. More often than not, the status quo in the U.S. is working quite well for White Americans; figuring out the factors that could incentivize the most privileged members of society to endorse system change is inherently tricky. The majority of White Americans are deeply entrenched in a meritocratic worldview and appealing to

the American value of egalitarianism has already been shown to be incompatible with the ideals of the Protestant Work Ethic (Levy et al., 2006). Even poor Whites who don't occupy positions of power are motivated to rationalize the system, in spite of the system actively working against their interests (van der Toorn et al., 2015). As long as White Americans ascribe to the belief that upward economic mobility is achievable in the current system, they will continue to support the system and feel threatened by system change (Day & Fiske, 2017). Therefore, in order to figure out what could appeal to White Americans' system-change motivations, it's important to understand the aspects of system change that threaten White people and make them more likely to justify the current system instead.

Societal expectations in America are so strongly built around the meritocratic system and Protestant Work Ethic values that most Americans are prompted to express system-justifying beliefs as a coping mechanism whenever they are exposed to stressors that threaten stability and feelings of social dominance. For example, Hess and Legerwood (2014) found that individuals who were excluded from a social situation were more likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs, especially for participants who found being socially excluded to be more unexpected. The researchers proposed that because social exclusion is often surprising, it will motivate individuals to bolster their meritocratic beliefs (e.g. "people get what they deserve") as a way to cope with threats to the world's predictability and stability presented by social exclusion.

Feelings of White guilt are another threat to emotional stability that often trigger system-justifying beliefs as a coping response (Iyer et al., 2003). When Whites are exposed to information that makes them feel guilty about their racial privilege, they will often respond to these feelings by endorsing system-justifying worldviews in order to rationalize their personal privilege without admitting that their race is largely responsible for their dominant and

comfortable societal status (e.g. "My whiteness isn't responsible for my success, I'm different because I worked hard to get to where I am today."). In fact, White Americans in general are very unlikely to describe themselves as having more societal privilege based on their skin color, instead typically attributing their success to hard work and claiming that race was never a factor (Blodorn et al., 2016; Knowles et al., 2014).

However, as soon as White Americans perceive "preferential treatment" toward racial minorities (such as the enactment of racial equity policies) taking place, they're much more likely claim that they themselves are victims of racial discrimination. Norton and Sommers (2011) describe how Whites see racism as a "zero-sum game" in America; that is, as diversity gradually increases in the U.S. and more rights and freedoms are granted to racial minorities, White Americans feel as though they are increasingly the targets of race-based discrimination. This trend has become so extreme to the point where the average White American now perceives anti-White bias to be more prevalent than anti-Black bias, whereas the average Black American perceives that anti-White bias has always been a nonexistent phenomenon in the U.S. (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004).

According to many Whites, an example of this supposed modern-day "reverse racism" at the policy level that discriminates against Whites are affirmative action initiatives (Norton & Sommers, 2011). At face value, it might make sense why Whites would feel threatened by affirmative action policies, since the goal of these policies is to systematically increase diversity and have individuals of marginalized racial identities represented in different workplaces and educational settings (and, the "zero-sum game" perspective dictates that if other races gain, Whites lose out). However, many Whites do not realize that because the system has been rigged in their favor for such a long time, affirmative action policies actually level the playing field

rather than give racial minorities an edge over Whites. Structures of racism still overwhelmingly

dominate the system even with affirmative action policies in place at localized levels (Utt, 2017).

Nonetheless, most White Americans perceive increasing diversity in America as a major threat to

their cultural dominance and social status, making them more likely to double-down on beliefs in

systems that make life harder for racial minorities.

The feelings of threat felt by White Americans in response to ideas concerning racial

diversity is perhaps best exemplified by studies looking at how White Americans react to

statistical information that puts the rapidly increasing racial diversification of the U.S. into

perspective. Current U.S. population projections indicate the presence of dramatically shifting

racial demographics in the U.S. which predict that Whites will no longer be the majority race in

America by the 2040s (also known as the "majority-minority shift") (Vespa et al., 2020).

Notably, exposure to information about these shifting demographics leads White Americans to

endorse more conservative viewpoints (Craig & Richeson, 2014), show more concern about anti-

White discrimination (Craig & Richeson, 2018; Craig & Richeson, 2017), and express greater

explicit and implicit racial biases (Craig & Richeson, 2014). The findings of Craig and

Richeson's work show that Whites will only become more entrenched in conservative, racist,

system-justifying mindsets as demographics continue to shift and Whites feel more and more

threatened as a result. The risk of White Americans endorsing meritocracy more strongly in the

coming decades highlights an urgent need to find ways to persuade White Americans to endorse

system change rather than feel threatened by it.

Many studies have employed the tactic of assuaging reactionary feelings of threat in

White Americans as a strategy to ease reactions toward system change. A key finding in the

demographic shift studies by Craig and Richeson is that when Whites are told that their high

status and/or cultural dominance will not be jeopardized by demographic shifts, they feel less

threatened by demographic shifts and endorse conservative/authoritarian views less strongly

(Craig & Richeson, 2014). Since cultural threat was found to be the primary mediator between

demographic shift salience and political ideology endorsement shift, assuaging cultural threat

after exposing participants to demographic shift information had a significant dampening effect

on Whites' threat-motivated negative feelings toward immigration.

Plaut et al. (2011) also investigated the ways that White people react to racial diversity

and found that White Americans responded positively to diversity initiatives in the workplace

when the initiatives were presented through the frame of All-Inclusive Multiculturalism, which

emphasizes and celebrates the diversity of all individuals, including White people. All-Inclusive

Multiculturalism is a sort of compromise between the "colorblind" approach of diversity

training—which appeals to Whites but diminishes the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities—

and the approach of "Traditional Multiculturalism"—which faithfully celebrates the diversity

and lived experiences of racial/ethnic minorities but makes Whites feel threatened and excluded.

A common flaw with strategies looking to assuage threats perceived by White Americans

is that they offer only a temporary solution; making White Americans more content with

increasing diversity in the U.S. does not motivate them to actively participate in system change

efforts that aim to achieve economic and racial equity (Craig & Richeson, 2014). The system

itself is the root of the problem, and since Whites' strong negative reactions to diversity are

merely a symptom of the system born out of feelings of threat, more research must focus on

finding strategies to motivate Whites to dismantle the system of meritocracy itself.

Most existing literature on Whites' relationships to system change focuses on finding

different aspects of system change that cause threat and how to best alleviate these feelings of

threat, whereas a sparse amount of research has looked into how we can actually begin to

convince individuals to *endorse* system change ideas and policies. Johnson and Fujita (2012)

were one of the first to propose a model of system change motivation, focusing on how framing a

flawed system as being changeable or unchangeable influences the type of system-relevant

information that people seek out. Specifically, they found that when the system was presented as

changeable, participants showed preference toward reading an article containing negative

feedback about the system rather than an article containing positive feedback. This voluntary

negative information search indicated that the participants actively sought to learn about the

inherent flaws in the system and were interested in changing the system to fix these flaws, but

only when they had evidence that collective action can result in system change. This study

provides us with one major variable that influences whether or not an individual's system-change

motivation will be triggered: exposure to evidence that the system is changeable.

An important caveat to the findings of Johnson and Fujita (2012) is that the "system"

being targeted by their article manipulations is at the level of an individual university. This type

of system change is at a much smaller scale compared to the idea of getting White Americans

across the nation to abandon their ideological beliefs of meritocracy. Because the scope of

system change presented in the Johnson and Fujita model is relatively small, participants may

have felt less personally threatened by ideas of system change since the change they read about

was contained within the structures of the university. Therefore, it's uncertain whether or not the

procedure of presenting the system as changeable would be effective in promoting system

change motivation on a national, ideological level. As we've established, White Americans often

feel personally implicated (and even targeted) when exposed to ideas of system change at a much

larger scale, and so a strategy to combat feelings of threat and make White Americans feel as though they will benefit from system change is necessary.

We hypothesized that another major variable that influences an individual's engagement with system change ideas is personal incentive for system change, which is an especially relevant variable to consider when attempting to persuade members of the dominant racial group to endorse system change. It is difficult to provide an incentive for system change to individuals who have been positively impacted by the status quo for their entire lives, although some of the strategies explored in studies looking to alleviate White threat could instead be utilized to increase White endorsement of system change. We proposed that the diversity framework of All-Inclusive Multiculturalism (AIM) could be an effective tool in incentivizing White Americans to participate in system change because it tries to create a common ingroup among all racial groups, therefore Whites would perceive policies that are beneficial toward racial minorities as being beneficial toward Whites as well.

Rather than use AIM for its original purpose as a framing tool to assuage White fears of system change, we utilized this framework in an effort to incentivize White Americans to actively endorse and participate in system-change ideologies by highlighting the benefits of equitable treatment for *all* Americans (including Whites). Our theory was that by making White participants feel like members of a common ingroup that is being negatively affected by the current system, they would feel motivated to endorse system change and actively seek negative information about the system in order to learn about where to target system change efforts.

Craig, Badaan, and Brown (2020) proposed a model illustrating different pathways to support for action to reduce a perceived injustice (such as anti-Black racism) for socially dominant groups (such as White Americans) that supports the use of AIM in promoting allyship.

Their model suggests that relational closeness to a targeted group enhances the likelihood that a socially-dominant group will take social action on behalf of that group (such as allyship, solidarity, etc.), therefore it is plausible that a framework such as AIM which aims to create a shared ingroup across racial lines would push Whites toward social action. As mentioned previously, feelings of social exclusion lead to stronger system-justifying beliefs (Hess & Legerwood, 2014), so our suspicion was that feelings of inclusion with racial minority groups would lead Whites in the opposite direction and motivate them to support system change instead.

Taken altogether, our review of existing literature led us to the following question: is it possible to activate White Americans' system-change motivation in such a way that they decrease their endorsement of meritocracy? To answer this question, we created an experimental model manipulating two separate variables that we defined as having the most influence over an individual's system change motivation: (1) the perceived *changeability* of the system, and (2) the presence of an *incentive* to change the system.

Since our current study focuses on finding out what framework appeals the most to Whites while simultaneously being the most beneficial to racial/ethnic minorities, we only worked with AIM and Traditional Multiculturalism (TM) as our two levels for the system-change incentive manipulation. It has already been well established that the "colorblind" framework appeases Whites but is harmful toward racial and ethnic minorities (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Burke, 2017), thus we were uninterested in using colorblindness as a tool to promote system change.

Additionally, to accurately reflect the system-wide scope of our research question, we used a paradigm that framed system change within the context of the 2020-2021 presidential transition. Since the new policies of the Biden-Harris administration are relevant to all

Americans, we believed that using this paradigm while the potential for widespread system

change was on the minds of many White Americans would be an advantageous way to model the

relationships we were interested in. At the time of the experiment, it was still relatively unclear if

President Biden was going to live up to his reputation as a status quo politician or if he was

going to push for more progressive policies (Bucchino, 2020; Randall, 2020), which allowed us

to manipulate participant perceptions of the amount of system change that his presidency would

cause. To alter perceptions of inclusion, we either explicitly included or excluded Whites as the

beneficiaries of the policies that the Biden administration planned to implement.

We also decided to only recruit participants who identified themselves as being either

politically liberal or moderate because we had the suspicion that a simple news article

manipulation would not be enough to significantly alter opinions of meritocracy in conservative

Americans. Since meritocracy is so closely aligned with conservative ideals, we thought it would

take more than our manipulations to motivate conservatives to endorse system change, and so we

decided to focus our efforts on a population whose political beliefs would likely make them more

receptive to the intended effects of our manipulation conditions.

Ultimately, the main goals of the study were to (1) determine if there are any causal

effects of system changeability and system-change incentive on White participants' endorsement

of meritocracy and system-change motivation (*motivation* being different from *incentive*, since

incentive implies the presence of a reward whereas motivation implies acting in pursuit of the

reward) and (2) determine how system changeability and system-change incentive interact with

one another to affect these outcomes. Our prediction was that presenting the system as

changeable *and* providing an incentive to change the system by including Whites as beneficiaries

of system change along with racial minorities would lead to (1) the weakest endorsement of

meritocracy, (2) the strongest endorsement of progressive policies, and (3) the highest levels of system change motivation in White Americans.

Methods

Participants

We recruited a nationally representative sample of adult European-Americans ($n = 431$) who identified as being either politically moderate or liberal using Prolific, an online survey recruiting software. After being exposed to the experimental manipulation, participants recorded various demographic information about themselves, including: age, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, household yearly income (using a 12-point scale[1]), employment status, education, and social/economic political identity (using a 7-point scale: 1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*).

News Article Manipulation

Manipulation Conditions

Participants were randomly assigned to read an article detailing race-relevant policies planned by the Biden administration that corresponded to one of four manipulation conditions along two manipulation axes, *system-change incentive* vs. *no system-change incentive* and *changeable system* vs. *unchangeable system*. During the course of our study, we more commonly referred to the system-change incentive condition as the multiculturalism condition, as AIM corresponded with the incentive-present condition and TM corresponded with the no incentive condition. Therefore, the four manipulations were: (1) AIM/changeable system, (2) TM/changeable system, (3) AIM/unchangeable system, and (4) TM/unchangeable system.

All-Inclusive Multiculturalism. The diversity initiatives of the Biden administration were presented through the lens of All-Inclusive Multiculturalism; Whites were explicitly

included in the idea of "diversity" and both Whites and racial minorities were mentioned as

beneficiaries of system change.

Traditional Multiculturalism. The diversity initiatives of the Biden administration were

presented through the lens of Traditional Multiculturalism; Whites were not included in the idea

of "diversity" and only racial minorities were mentioned as beneficiaries of system change.

Changeable System. The article discussed how the new presidential administration

intends to dismantle existing structures in the American system and replace them with new,

progressive initiatives and policies.

Unchangeable System. The article discussed how the new presidential administration is

attempting to address issues of systemic racism and inequality by returning to the status quo that

existed during the Obama administration (i.e. "restoring the soul of the nation").

Article Contents

Each article selectively reported the Biden administration's plans for different housing,

education, and healthcare initiatives, depending on which manipulation condition for which the

article was created. Specific initiatives were drawn from the Biden-Harris campaign website as

well as various credible news sources to help frame the article within the parameters of a specific

manipulation. For the system changeability differing passage, the unchangeable condition article

stated that the Biden-Harris administration has plans to strengthen existing systems for housing,

education, and healthcare, whereas the changeable condition article stated that the Biden-Harris

administration has emphasized a need for widespread changes in U.S. support systems for equal

housing, education, and healthcare and plan to enact new policies to achieve positive system

change. For the incentive/multiculturalism differing passage, the TM article emphasized how the

housing, education, and healthcare policies being mentioned serve to benefit racial minorities in

Table 1.

Excerpts from Articles Read by Participants in Two Manipulation Conditions

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Changeable System/All-Inclusive Multiculturalism Condition:

Unlike in past administrations, support for initiatives to cancel significant amounts of student debt have gained traction in many circles. **Whereas during Trump's administration the idea of cancelling debt seemed profoundly unrealistic, the growing student debt crisis, combined with support from progressive democrats, have made such a plan seem much more plausible now.** Even as Biden continues to negotiate his plans to cancel student debt with young activists and his fellow democrats, his administration has other plans**. Among these are his plan to ensure that any person could attend two years of a community college professional training program without debt.** This would be available whether individuals had just graduated from high school or were adults going back for more education. **Biden would also make public colleges and universities tuition free for all families with incomes below $125,000, acting on a proposal originally by Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont.** Hopefully, Biden's plans will make higher education more accessible for all Americans, regardless of their background. **Low-income students, whether they are African American, Latino, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, American Indian, or even White, deserve the chance to attend college without being burdened with enormous debt.**

Unchangeable System/Traditional Multiculturalism Condition:

Unlike in past administrations, support for initiatives to cancel significant amounts of student debt have gained traction in many circles. **Despite this rise in popularity, and to the dismay of progressive lawmakers in Congress, Biden has made it clear that he will not yield to calls for the forgiveness of $50,000 in student loan debt for all Americans.** Instead, he has said that he is strongly considering forgiving $10,000 in student loan debt unilaterally for all Americans due to economic hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, **which will provide much needed relief to Black and Brown communities who are disproportionately burdened by student loan debts.**

Rather than focusing solely on student debt, the new education policy plans released by the Biden administration focus on continuing initiatives introduced by prior presidential administrations that center around equitable pay for teachers and increased education quality across the country. Biden plans to increase funding for Title I—the federal program that funds schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families—and require districts to use these funds to offer competitive salaries to educators. **This program is intended to provide much-needed assistance to woefully underfunded inner-city public schools, raising the education quality in marginalized communities by increasing teacher retention rate and providing these schools with more resources in general. The Biden Administration also intends to diversify schools by reintroducing certain actions taken by the Obama Administration,** such as directing the Department of Education to support schools in pursuing desegregation strategies and recognizing schools' interests in creating diverse student bodies.

Note. The four articles used substantially different language from one another due to each article containing different selectively reported information. Red boldfaced type in each excerpt indicates a section that contains language corresponding to the article's changeability condition. Blue boldfaced type in each excerpt indicates a section that contains language corresponding to the article's multiculturalism condition.

the U.S. and increase economic equality among racial minorities and White Americans, whereas the AIM condition article emphasized how the mentioned policies will serve to benefit disadvantaged Americans of all racial backgrounds, including White people. Table 1 presents excerpts from the changeable system/AIM article and the unchangeable system/TM article that focus on the presidential administration's plans regarding education policy.

Comprehension/Manipulation Checks

Immediately after reading the article manipulation, participants were instructed to complete a series of questions that tested both their comprehension of the article as well as the effectiveness of the manipulation conditions.

Comprehension Checks. The comprehension check questions were content-based multiple choice questions asking participants to recall different facts presented in the article manipulation (e.g. "Which of the following education initiatives does President Biden support in his newly released policy plans?"; presented with four multiple-choice options).

Multiculturalism Manipulation Check. The multiculturalism manipulation check question asked participants to select which racial groups would benefit from the policies presented in the article; if participants in the AIM condition selected "White People" and participants in the TM condition did not select "White People," we considered the multiculturalism condition to have been effective.

System Changeability Manipulation Check. The system changeability manipulation check question asked participants to indicate the amount of change they believed would result from the federal policies mentioned in the article (using a 5-point scale: 1 = *No change*, 5 = *A lot of change*). If participants in the changeable condition indicated that the policies would result in more change on average than participants in the unchangeable condition, we considered the changeability condition to have been effective. Additionally, if participants indicated a belief that there would be some level of change brought about by the Biden administration's policies (i.e. scored a 2 or above on the scale), they were asked to what extent they thought the resulting change would be positive or negative (using a 5-point scale: 1 = *very negative*, 5 = *very positive*).

Measures

System-Level Negative Information Search

Following the article comprehension and manipulation checks, participants were presented with a choice to either read individual facts that were critical of the current system (using a critical race theory framework) or read facts that were neutral toward the American system. Facts were drawn from such sources as the New York Times' 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et al., 2019) and various archives detailing the history of systemic racism in U.S.

For instance, a participant would be presented with a fact such as "One of the primary reasons many of the original American colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery, which was on its way to becoming outlawed across the British Empire," and were then asked whether or not they'd like to see a similar fact about American history or see a fact about American innovation. If participants chose to switch to the American innovation (i.e. system-neutral) fact, they would be presented with one historical fact about famous Americans that contributed to the invention of the lightbulb and would then proceed to the next section of the survey. There were a maximum of 15 system-critical facts a participant could choose to read, and because all participants were exposed to at least one system-critical fact before being given the option to switch, participants could score between 0 to 14 on this measure based on how many system-critical facts they read.

This measure builds off the negative information search measure presented in Johnson & Fujita (2012) as an operationalization of system-change motivation. In our operationalization of this measure, participants choosing to view a greater number of system-critical facts indicated greater levels of system-change motivation.

Belief in Meritocracy Ideology

Belief in meritocratic ideals was assessed using four items from this scale adapted from Lalonde et al. (2000). Assessed on a 7-point scale, higher scores indicated a stronger belief in

meritocratic ideals, such as that hard work and ability are the primary factors involved in social

mobility. Sample items: "Everybody in this country has equal opportunities."; "If you are a

member of a 'minority group' you can climb the ladder of success only so far (*negative-scored*)."

System-Legitimizing Worldview Scale

System-legitimizing beliefs were assessed using four items from this scale adapted from

Major et al. (2007). The four items were divided evenly to assess four major components of a

system-legitimizing worldview: (1) *Just World Beliefs* (e.g "I feel that people earn the

punishments and rewards they get."), (2) *Protestant Work Ethic Beliefs* (e.g. "If people work

hard, they almost always get what they want"), (3) *Individual Mobility Beliefs* (e.g.

"Advancement in American society is possible for all individuals") and (4) *Status Legitimacy*

Beliefs (e.g. "Differences in status between groups in American society are fair"). Assessed on a

7-point scale, higher scores indicated stronger system justifying beliefs.

Support for Progressive Policies

Support for a variety of well-known progressive polices was assessed using this scale

which asked participants about their level of support for: increased low-income housing,

affirmative action in college admissions, diversity training in schools and workplaces, universal

healthcare, tuition-free public universities, and an increased federal minimum wage. Assessed on

a 7-point scale, higher scores indicated stronger support for these progressive policies.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four article manipulations and

instructed to read the article thoroughly. After reading the article, participants answered the

comprehension and manipulation check questions. The participants then completed each of the

measures in the order listed above. Afterwards, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study. Participants were compensated $1.75 for successfully completing of the study.

Results

Per our pre-registration, we excluded survey responses from participants who indicated that they were socially conservative ($n = 24$) and from participants who failed a bot check task ($n = 27$), leaving us with our final pool of participants ($n = 380$).

Means and correlations for our main dependent variables are presented in Table 2. Notably, we found significant correlations between participants' negative information search scores, belief in meritocracy ideology (BMI), system-legitimizing worldview (SLW), support for progressive policies, and social conservatism. In general, the more that people endorsed system legitimizing ideologies, the less they were willing to seek information critical of the system or support policies that would change the system. We also found that participant income was

Table 2.

Pearson Correlation Matrix of Dependent Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. BMI	2.59	1.12	1.00							
2. SLW	2.84	1.23	**.71***	1.00						
3. NIS	7.70	6.16	**-.28***	**-.21***	1.00					
4. SPP	5.91	0.93	**-.68***	**-.62***	**.24***	1.00				
5. Social Conservatism	1.97	1.02	**.53***	**.47***	**-.19***	**-.61***	1.00			
6. Age	35.34	13.59	.04	.01	.02	-.05	**.11***	1.00		
7. Income	6.55	3.57	.07	**.13***	.05	**-.14***	.01	-.02	1.00	
8. Level of Education	4.26	1.37	-.01	.02	.10"	.00	-.08	**.19***	**.23***	1.00

Note. BMI = Belief in Meritocracy Ideology score. SLW = System-Legitimizing Worldview score. NIS = Negative Information Search score. SPP = Support for Progressive Policies; averaged measure from scores on six different policy support items.

***$p \leq .001$. **$p \leq .01$. *$p \leq .05$. "$p \leq .1$. Significant correlations ($p \leq .05$) are in bold.

significantly correlated with SLW scores ($r = 0.13$, $p \leq .01$) and support for progressive policies

($r = -0.14$, $p \leq .01$), indicating that participants in higher income brackets were more likely to

express system-legitimizing beliefs and show less support for progressive policies.

Checking Effectiveness of Manipulations[2]

The article manipulations were effective in making participants believe that White people

were included as the beneficiaries of the policies mentioned in the news article in the AIM

conditions ($M = 0.91$, $SE = 0.02$) versus the TM conditions ($M = 0.23$, $SE = 0.03$), $b = 3.49$, $SE =$

0.30, $z(379) = 11.53$, $p < .001$. The manipulations were also effective in making participants

believe that the government's policies mentioned in the article would lead to change in the

changeable condition ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.06$) versus the unchangeable condition ($M = 3.27$, $SE =$

0.06), $b = 0.56$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(379) = 6.11$, $p < .001$.

Confirmatory Hypotheses

The primary experimental hypotheses were tested using linear regression models

analyzing the impact of the article manipulations on the participants' negative information search

scores, BMI scores, SLW scores, and support for progressive policies. The results of these

models indicated that the manipulations had no significant effect on negative information search

scores, BMI scores, or SLW scores.

The multiculturalism condition had a main effect on support for increasing the federal

minimum wage such that participants in the AIM condition ($M = 6.52$, $SE = 0.07$) indicated

greater support for an increased minimum wage than participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.42$,

$SE = 0.07$), $b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(376) = 2.062$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1a). There was also a

marginally significant interaction between the multiculturalism and changeability conditions, $b =$

-0.38, $SE = 0.20$, $t(376) = -1.89$, $p = .06$. Within the unchangeable system condition, participants

in the AIM condition ($M = 6.62$, $SE = 0.10$) displayed greater support for increased minimum wage than participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.33$, $SE = 0.10$); within the changeable system condition, participants in the AIM condition ($M = 6.40$, $SE = 0.10$) displayed less support for increased minimum wage than participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.50$, $SE = 0.10$).

Exploratory Analyses

After determining that most of our primary hypotheses had not been confirmed, we became interested in the potential influence of participants' perceived positivity of system change[3] on the effectiveness of the changeability manipulation. Specifically, we wanted to explore the possibility that participants who were in the "changeable" condition and perceived the change being brought about by the policies mentioned in the article as positive would have a lower endorsement of meritocracy than participants in the same condition who perceived the system change as negative. This hypothesis was tested using linear regression models analyzing the impact of the changeability manipulation and the perceived positivity of system change on the participants' negative information search scores, BMI scores, SLW scores, and support for progressive policies.

When accounting for the perceived positivity of system change, the changeability manipulation had a main effect on participants' SLW scores, BMI scores, and support for progressive policies. On average, individuals in the changeable system condition indicated stronger system legitimizing beliefs ($M = 2.94$, $SE = 0.08$), $b = 3.99$, $SE = 0.76$, $t(368) = 5.25$, $p < .001$, stronger beliefs in meritocracy ($M = 2.69$, $SE = 0.08$), $b = 2.50$, $SE = 0.68$, $t(368) = 3.70$, $p < .001$, and weaker support for progressive policies ($M = 5.79$, $SE = 0.06$), $b = -2.55$, $SE = 0.51$, $t(369) = -4.99$, $p < .001$, compared to individuals in the unchangeable system condition ($M = 2.82$, $SE = 0.09$; $M = 2.52$, $SE = 0.08$; $M = 6.02$, $SE = 0.06$, respectively). In all three models,

there was also a significant interaction between the change manipulation and perceived change positivity: $b = -0.89$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(368) = -5.12$, $p < .001$ for the SLW model, $b = -0.53$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(368) = -3.47$, $p < .001$ for the BMI model, and $b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(369) = 4.57$, $p < .001$ for the progressive policy support model. In the unchangeable system condition, perceived positivity of system change did not have a significant impact on participants' SLW scores, BMI scores, or support for progressive policies; in the changeable system condition, greater perceived positivity of system change resulted in significantly lower SLW scores, significantly lower BMI scores, and significantly greater support for progressive policies (see Figure 2a, Figure 2b, and Figure 2c, respectively).

Next, I became interested in the unexpected interaction between the changeability manipulation and the multiculturalism manipulation and their effect on participant support for a federal minimum wage increase. I was curious to see if the main effect of multiculturalism and the interaction between the two manipulations in this model would be preserved if I isolated different groups of participants in the experimental sample based on socioeconomic status (SES). Two additional linear regression models testing the effects of the two manipulations on support for a minimum wage increase were created using two different samples filtered from the primary experimental sample ($n = 380$): the first sample (lower SES) only included participants with a household yearly income of less than \$50,000 ($n = 164$), whereas the second sample (higher SES) only included participants with a household yearly income greater than \$50,000 ($n = 216$). The main effect of the AIM condition increasing support for an increased minimum wage was only preserved in the lower SES sample, $b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.22$, $t(160) = 2.136$, $p < .05$, with participants in the AIM condition ($M = 6.60$, $SE = 0.12$) indicating greater support for an increased minimum wage than participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.39$, $SE = 0.10$) (see

Figure 1b). The multiculturalism condition had no significant main effect on support for an increased minimum wage in the higher SES sample (see Figure 1c).

Once again, there was a marginally significant interaction between the multiculturalism and changeability conditions, $b = -0.53$, $SE = 0.31$, $t(160) = -1.71$, $p = .09$, but only within the lower SES sample. The nature of the interaction within this filtered sample was the same as in the full experimental sample: within the unchangeable system condition, lower SES participants in the AIM condition ($M = 6.77$, $SE = 0.14$) displayed greater support for increased minimum wage compared to participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.29$, $SE = 0.17$); within the changeable system condition, lower SES participants in the AIM condition ($M = 6.43$, $SE = 0.10$) displayed marginally less support for increased minimum wage compared to participants in the TM condition ($M = 6.49$, $SE = 0.10$).

Discussion

Interpretation

Although our manipulation checks indicated that our experimental conditions were successful in manipulating participants' perceptions of both system changeability and the inclusion/exclusion of Whites as the beneficiaries of system change, there seemed to be other factors at play that were more influential in determining participant system-change motivation and the strength of meritocracy beliefs. System changeability and inclusion based on racial identity were ineffective at swaying participant endorsement of meritocracy on a fundamental, ideological level; however, our findings still uncovered certain significant relationships suggesting that the factors of changeability and inclusion could effectively be used to promote system change motivation in contexts other than the one presented in our experiment.

Notably, our exploratory analyses revealed the significant influence of perceived positivity of system change on how individuals respond to a system being presented as changeable. When the system was presented as changeable, participants decreased their endorsement of meritocratic beliefs and increased their support of progressive policies *only* when they believed that the changes being made to the system were positive. Additionally, the low levels of meritocracy endorsement exhibited by participants who were in the changeable system condition and had positive perceptions of system change were equivalent to the low levels of meritocracy endorsement exhibited by *all* participants in the unchangeable system condition regardless of their perceptions of change positivity (see Figures 2a-2c). This implies that White Americans feel more threatened when they perceive system change occurring at all and are most comfortable expressing system-critical views when they do not believe that the system is changing or changeable.

The equivalent low levels of meritocracy endorsement shown by participants in the unchangeable system condition across all levels of perceived positivity of system change may suggest a type of "performative activism" where White liberal Americans feel more comfortable holding system-critical views when they feel secure in the belief that the system cannot realistically be changed. If White moderates and liberals are presented with evidence that the system is unchangeable, then they may believe that they will never have to follow up on any system-critical beliefs and engage with them in earnest since system change efforts are futile. In a meritocratic system that is safely deemed unchangeable, even moderates and liberals who oppose certain policies that attempt to create equality may still outwardly show low levels of meritocracy endorsement since it is expected of their political ingroup and they feel no threat that change will ever happen. Future studies exploring these ideas could further investigate the

influence of perceived system change positivity on system change motivation and meritocracy beliefs, perhaps examining the factors that cause an individual to perceive certain types of system change as being either positive or negative.

Another factor that influenced the effectiveness of the manipulations was participant income, which specifically influenced the effectiveness of the multiculturalism manipulation on participant support for a minimum wage increase. While the sample-wide main effect of AIM increasing support for a minimum wage increase was preserved for participants with a household yearly income of less than $50,000, the multiculturalism condition had no effect on participants with a household yearly income greater than $50,000. The preservation of the AIM effect for lower SES participants is logical considering that these participants likely work jobs that are greatly affected by the minimum wage and would thus endorse a raise in the federal minimum wage more strongly if they feel included as the beneficiaries of system change policies. For higher SES participants, since they likely hold jobs that are not particularly affected by the minimum wage, their support of an increased federal minimum wage does not change when their racial ingroup is included as a beneficiary of system change.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations that likely impeded the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations and the validity of certain measures. The data was collected on March 24th, 2021, which may have been enough time after President Biden's inauguration that participants had already formed opinions on aspects of President Biden's administrative actions and were thus more resistant to being swayed by the article manipulations. Additionally, using the Biden presidency as an experimental model to manipulate perceptions of system changeability had many inherent risks in general. President Biden is a career politician who has been established in

U.S. politics for decades, and because he is seen as a political "insider" to many Americans, any change coming from his administration may not be viewed as change *to* the system as much as it is change coming from *within* the system. Since the locus of change was coming from the federal government in the manipulation articles, it's possible that participants in the changeable system condition simply interpreted the progressive policies being enacted by the Biden administration as the American system working as intended rather than as a signal that the system can change and needs to keep changing.

The negative information search task also had numerous flaws that likely impacted its validity as a measure of system-change motivation. The original intent behind making the task involve 15 system-critical facts was to create a more continuous measure of system change motivation than what has been done in past experiments examining this variable (such as Johnson & Fujita, 2012) where it is measured on a binary scale. However, because the vast majority of participants in the present study either chose to switch to the system-neutral fact topic immediately or read every single system-critical fact, the measure resulted in a bimodal distribution despite our efforts. Future studies focusing on how to operationalize system change motivation should either choose to stay with a binary scale that simply measures the presence or absence of system-change motivation or thoroughly workshop a measure that reliably creates a continuous distribution before implementing it in a formal experiment.

One future direction to pursue in this line of study would be to alter the locus of system change and observe how shifting this focus impacts perceptions of meritocracy and system change motivation. If individuals are made to read about collective action movements causing concrete, positive change (such as in the American Civil Rights Movement), they may be more invested in system-change ideas as they are now implicated as people who can participate in

system-change efforts. If the locus of system change comes from collective action rather than governmental structures, then the factors of changeability and inclusion/incentive likely become more relevant for system change motivation since individuals now feel like they have a personal responsibility to participate in system change efforts that will benefit themselves.

Additionally, it may be fruitful to repeat this experiment with only conservative White Americans, as they may care the most about being included as the beneficiaries of system change out of any population in America. Reyna et al. (2006) found that White conservatives care about the group membership of individuals who are the beneficiaries of affirmative action programs; white conservatives were more opposed to affirmative action programs that benefited Black people than they were to identical programs that benefited women. Since participants in this study perceived women to be part of their ingroup, these findings show that appealing to a shared ingroup through policy change efforts has the potential to sway conservatives to be more open to progressive policies that they typically regard as personally threatening and exclusionary.

Conclusion

The present study builds off of existing research looking into reactions to system change by exploring the potential impacts of perceptions of changeability and incentive to participate in system change on system-change motivation. In doing so, this study opens the door for continued research on what motivates individuals to change the system. As the U.S. moves closer toward becoming a "majority-minority" country and existing strategies to assuage threat in White Americans only offer a temporary solution to prevent the rise of racist attitudes that are predicted to come in the wake of demographic shifts, it is imperative that research continues to focus on strategies to (1) combat system-legitimizing beliefs and (2) encourage individuals to engage in system change efforts that will make American society more equitable for all.

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Footnotes

[1] Values for the household yearly income scale are as follows: 1 = Less than $10,000; = $10,000 - $19,999; 3 = $20,000 - $29,999; 4 = $30,000 - $39,999; 5 = $40,000 - $49,999; 6 = $50,000 - $59,999; 7 = $60,000 - $69,999; 8 = $70,000 - $79,999; 9 = $80,000 - $89,999; 10 = $90,000 - $99,999; 11 = $100,000 - $149,999; 12 = More than $150,000.

[2] When creating linear regression models testing the effects of our article manipulations, we coded the article manipulations in the following ways: in the multiculturalism manipulation, the TM condition was coded as 0 and the AIM condition was coded as 1. In the system changeability manipulation, the unchangeable condition was coded as 0 and the changeable condition was coded as 1.

[3] Because only $n = 7$ indicated that "No change" would result from the policies mentioned in the article manipulation, we determined that there were enough participants in the unchangeable condition who indicated their system change positivity beliefs to run valid exploratory analyses investigating the relationship between system changeability and perceived change positivity.
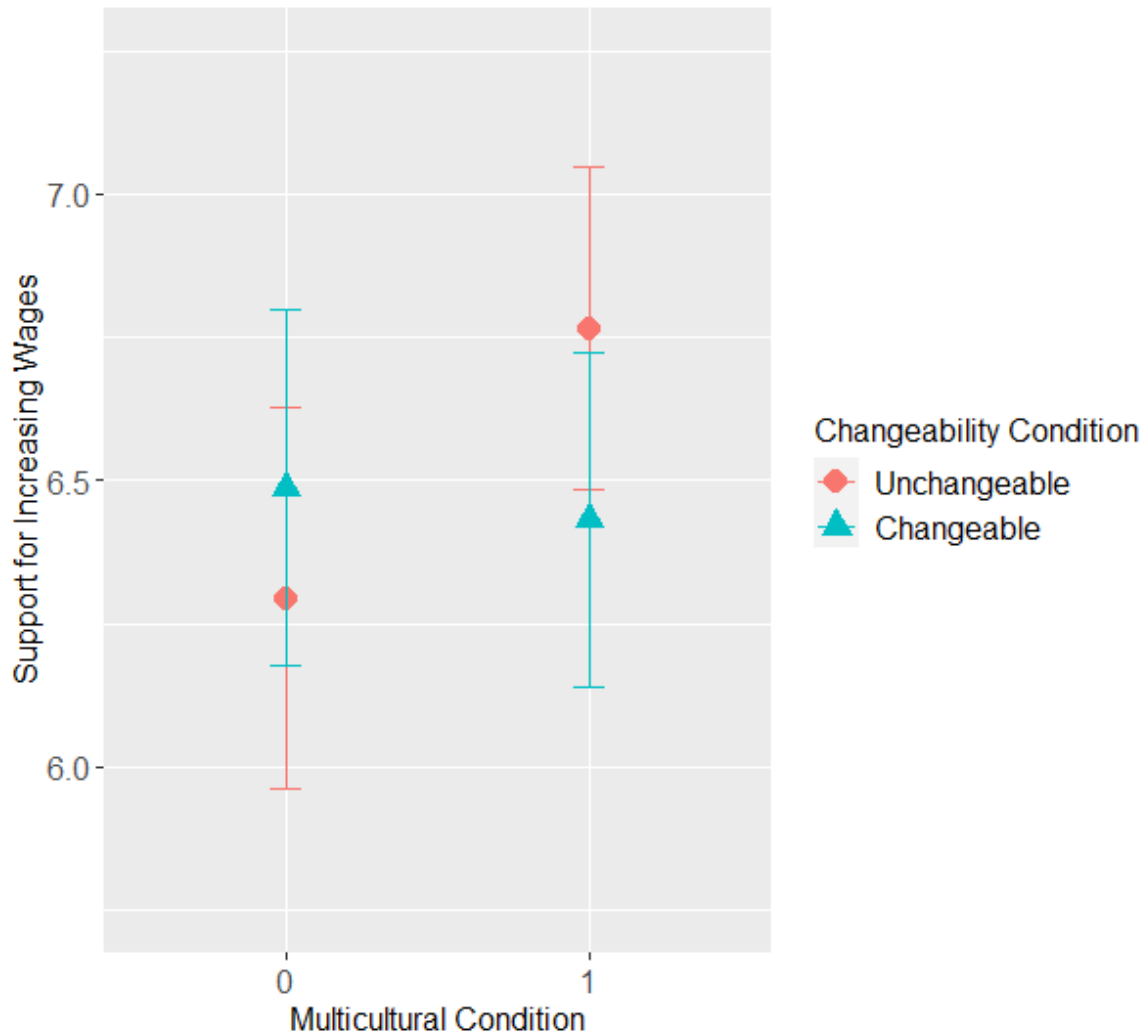
Supplementary Figures

Figure 1a.

Effect of Experimental Conditions on Minimum Wage Increase Support
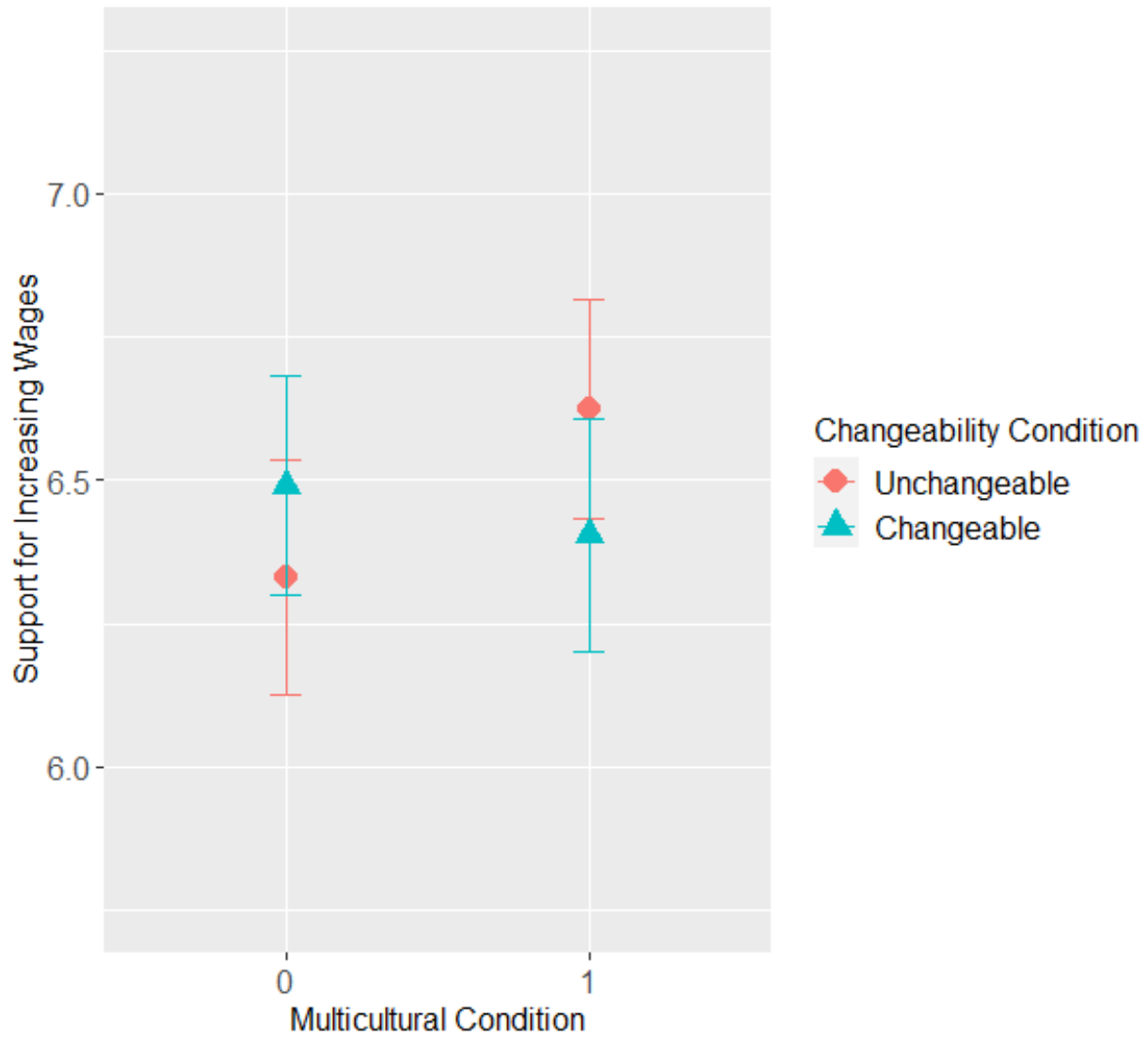
Note: Entire experimental sample ($n = 380$); significant main effect of multiculturalism manipulation and marginally significant interaction between multiculturalism condition and changeability condition.
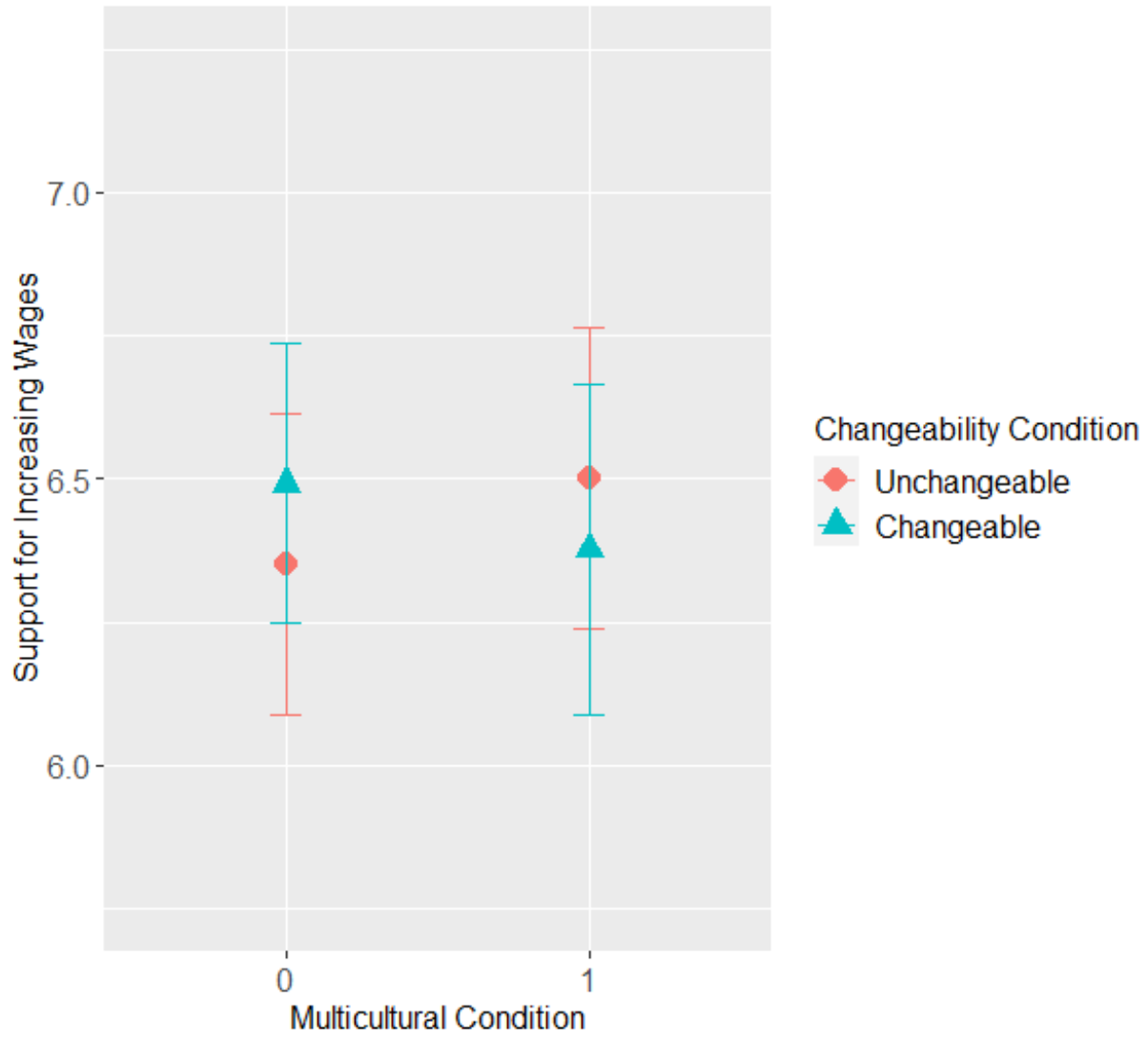
Figure 1b.

*Effect of Experimental Conditions on Minimum Wage Increase Support in Lower SES Sample*

Note. Low SES (household annual income of less than $50,000) sample (*n* = 164); significant main effect of multiculturalism manipulation and marginally significant interaction between multiculturalism condition and changeability condition.

Figure 1c.

Effect of Experimental Conditions on Minimum Wage Increase Support in Higher SES Sample

Note. Higher SES (household annual income of greater than $50,000) sample ($n = 216$); no significant main effects or interactions.

Figure 2a.

Interaction Between Perceived Positivity of System Change and Changeability Condition:
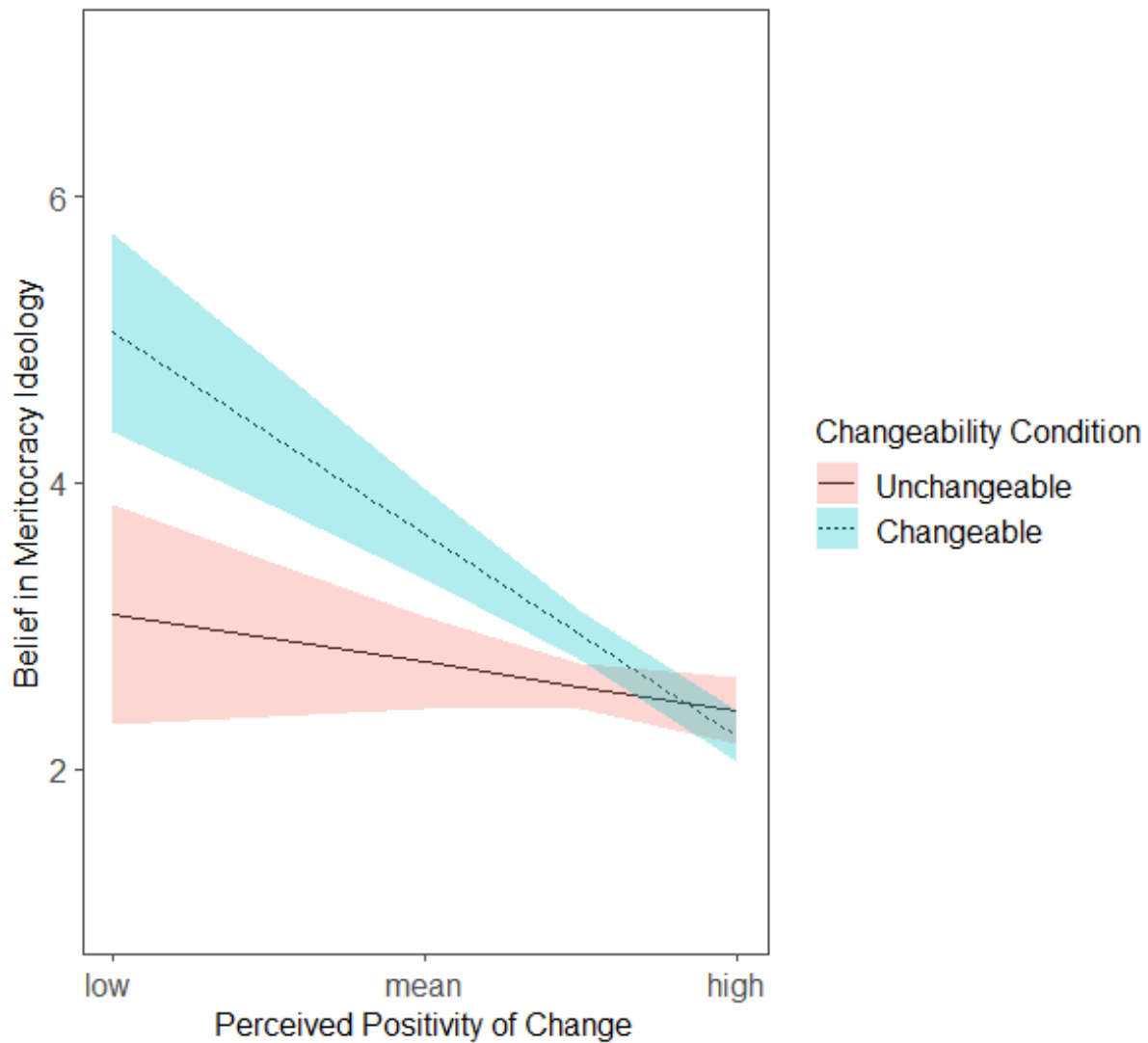
System-Legitimizing Worldview
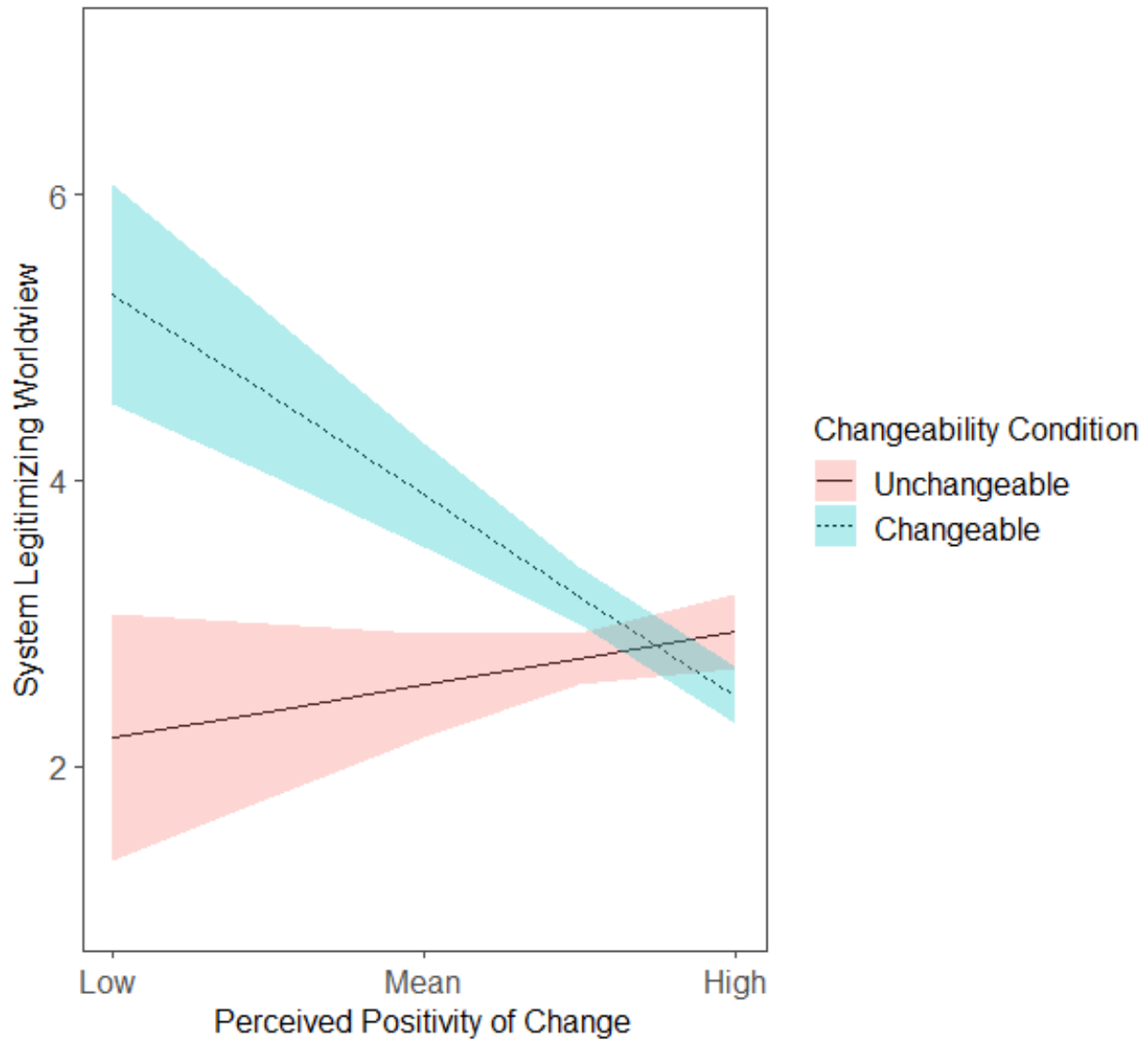
Note. Significant main effect of changeability condition on system legitimizing worldview. Significant interaction between changeability condition and perceived positivity of system change such that participants in the changeable condition had lower SLW scores when they perceived the system change as being more positive, whereas perceived positivity of system change did not have a significant impact on participants' SLW scores in the unchangeable condition.

Figure 2b.

Interaction Between Perceived Positivity of System Change and Changeability Condition: Belief
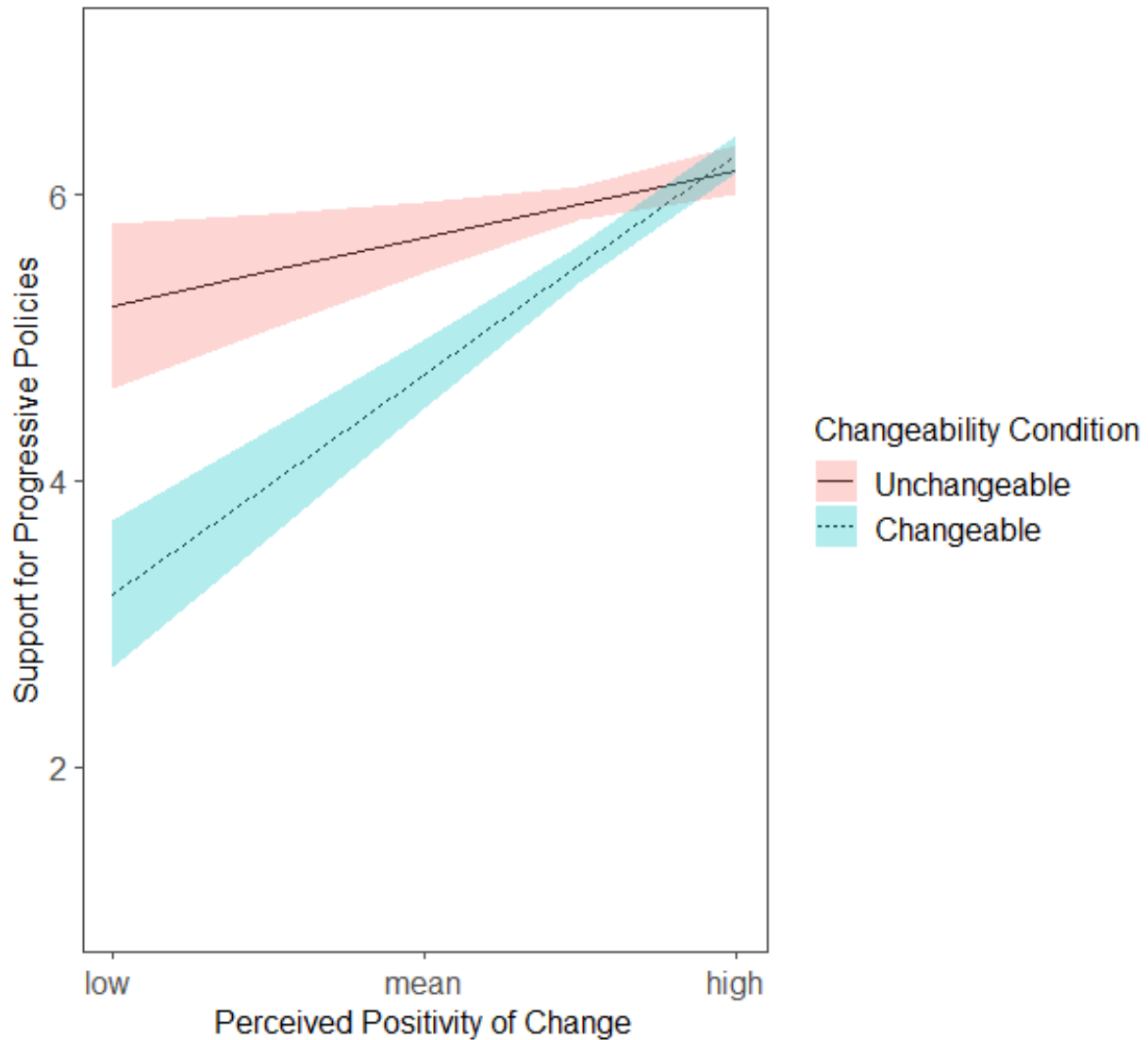
in Meritocracy Ideology

Note. Significant main effect of changeability condition on belief in meritocracy ideology. Significant interaction between changeability condition and perceived positivity of system change such that participants in the changeable condition had lower BMI scores when they perceived the system change as being more positive, whereas perceived positivity of system change did not have a significant impact on participants' BMI scores in the unchangeable condition.

Figure 2c.

Interaction Between Perceived Positivity of System Change and Changeability Condition:

Support for Progressive Policies

Note. Significant main effect of changeability condition on support for progressive policies. Significant interaction between changeability condition and perceived positivity of system change such that participants in the changeable condition had higher support for progressive policies when they perceived the system change as being more positive, whereas perceived positivity of system change did not have a significant impact on participants' support for progressive policies in the unchangeable condition.