

Partisan Reinforcement and the Poor: The Impact of Context on Explanations for Poverty

Daniel J. Hopkins*
Post-Doctoral Fellow
Center for the Study of American Politics
Yale University

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*daniel.hopkins@yale.edu. Direct correspondence to: 77 Prospect Street–ISPS, PO Box 208209, New Haven, CT, 06520-8209. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2005 Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association and the Harvard University American Politics Research Workshop. The author gratefully acknowledges Lauren Appelbaum, Andrea Campbell, Elisabeth Jacobs, Sunshine Hillygus, Jennifer Hochschild, Colin Moore, Ryan Moore, Helen Marrow, Andrew Reeves, and Joe Soss, all of whom provided feedback. *SSQ* editor Robert Lineberry and the anonymous reviewers provided valuable and often incisive suggestions as well.

Abstract

Past research has demonstrated that Americans view poverty in racial terms, and that they often blame the poor for their situation. But can local contexts undermine these views? Synthesizing racial and political theories of contextual effects, this article uses two nationally representative surveys to explore Americans' explanations for poverty. It shows that people living in areas where the poor are mostly white are less likely to attribute poverty to the failings of the poor themselves, as theories of racial threat would predict. Yet a second finding is stronger: the percentage of the county that voted Republican in the last election consistently predicts less structural and more individualistic explanations of poverty. Local processes of partisan reinforcement play a key role in shaping explanations of poverty.

In the eyes of many Americans, poverty is the problem of cities and of African Americans. Several scholars have demonstrated that these stereotypes of the poor as urban and Black have shaped the American welfare state by undermining public support for social programs (Gilens 1999, Gilens 1998, Quadagno 1994, Edsall 1991). Thanks to past scholarship, we know, too, that the media play a critical role in perpetuating these stereotypes. In magazines and on television, Americans are presented with an image of poverty that dramatically overstates the percentage of the poor who are Black (Clawson and Trice 2000, Gilens 1999). This stereotype influences not just which groups are perceived to be poor, but perceptions of who is to blame for poverty as well. As Gilens (2003, 1999) contends, those who see the poor as predominantly African American are more likely to fault the poor themselves for their situation.

That, in brief, is the conventional wisdom. But as this article demonstrates, local contexts can shape Americans' explanations of poverty as well.¹ Consider racial contexts as one example. They vary widely across the U.S., so if views of poverty are truly racialized, it is not hard to see how they might shape perceptions of the poor. According to the 2000 Census, just 24% of the poor are African American, while 46% are non-Hispanic whites. Since poor African Americans often live in conditions of hyper-segregation (Fischer 2003, Massey and Denton 1993), and since African Americans are geographically concentrated in southern states and certain northern cities, there is a sizable fraction of Americans who are unlikely to encounter poor African Americans in their daily lives. Those Americans might think about poverty distinctively. And although racial contexts provide a clear-cut example, they are not the only relevant contextual factor. For instance, living in a heavily Republican area might expose residents to the individualistic argument that the poor are to blame for their poverty.

Bridging research on views of poverty and contextual effects, this article explores how white, Asian American, and Latino explanations of poverty are affected by local contexts. Some Americans explain poverty in structural terms, as the product of social forces that are outside the control of the poor. Others attribute poverty to the failings of the poor themselves (Kluegel and Bobo 1993). Certainly, many mix these two explanations depending on how

poverty is framed (Wilson 1996). Still, the relative prevalence of these differing explanations is crucial in determining whether Americans are supportive of government action on behalf of the poor. The more poverty is seen as caused by outside forces, the more Americans are likely to see government anti-poverty efforts as valuable (Appelbaum 2001, Nelson 1999, Stone 1989). But does the prevalence of individualistic or structural views change depending on respondents' social environments?

Yes, in a word. Drawing on 1,543 respondents to the 2001 Poverty in America Survey (PIAS), this article demonstrates that respondents' local contexts affect their explanations of poverty. All else equal, respondents living in counties where the poor are white are less likely to adopt individualistic explanations for poverty. This is just what those who view poverty as a codeword for race would expect. But there is also a cross-cutting effect of one's political environment. As the percentage of the county that voted for Bush rises, individualism rises and structural attributions about poverty decline. These results are confirmed using the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS), a survey which enables us to address alternative explanations based on residential selection and media consumption.

In the next section, this article brings together research on attitudes toward poverty with work on contextual effects. It turns in Section 2 to empirical analysis, discussing how key concepts are measured. Section 3 presents the results from several statistical models. Local partisanship's influence is pervasive indeed. It proves the single most potent contextual predictor of attributions about poverty, and is a stronger predictor than education or income. Together, contextual partisanship and the racial composition of the local poor can shape attitudes quite markedly. For example, moving from Troup County, Georgia to St. Louis County, Minnesota—from a pro-Bush county where the poor are mostly Black to a pro-Gore county where the poor are overwhelmingly white—a respondent should become 0.55 standard deviations more individualistic in her explanations of poverty.

1 Context and Attitudes toward Poverty

The classic works on attitudes toward poverty have produced a rough consensus on the contours of American opinion (Kluegel and Smith 1986, Hochschild 1981, Feagin 1975, Huber and Form 1973, Lane 1962). By and large, Americans subscribe to a “dominant ideology,” which holds that opportunity is widespread, that people are responsible for themselves, and hence that economic inequality is fair (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Under this scheme, the poor are at fault for their poverty. At the same time, there is also an undercurrent of egalitarian and structuralist thinking among Americans, especially when thinking about homelessness (Wilson 1996, Lee et al. 1990). On the macro level, this ambivalence translates into disagreement about the causes of poverty.

While it might seem natural to conceive of structural and individualistic attributions for poverty as opposites—and thus as representing a single dimension—scholars have shown that they are two separate but related dimensions (Knight 1998, Kluegel and Bobo 1993). Put differently, the categories of individualism and structuralism are not mutually exclusive. One can imagine explaining poverty without using either explanation, perhaps by pointing to the role of bad luck (Feagin 1975). Or one can use both explanations, thinking of poverty as a combination of individual failings and structural impediments (Hunt 1996:295). Given the limited coverage of poverty in the media and in public discourse, attention to one explanation often crowds out the other (e.g. Wilson 1996). But individuals can and do use both explanations simultaneously.

Research on attitudes toward poverty reinforces the importance of understanding attributions, since attributions indicate who is deserving of government help (Appelbaum 2001, Cook and Barrett 1992, Iyengar 1991, Iyengar 1989, Stone 1989, Sniderman et al. 1986, Feagin 1975). But even so, this literature has been mostly silent on whether local contexts shape the attributions that people make.² And that seems surprising: a respondent’s local environment has a critical influence on the number of poor people she encounters as well as the nature of the interaction, their ethnic and racial background, and the visibility of their poverty. Environments also shape an individual’s exposure to attitudes through the conversations she overhears

and the political rhetoric on her television.

Before detailing the hypotheses, it is important to specify the two different types of local demographics of central importance. The *level* of poverty in a given area—in this case a county—might matter. As the percentage of the poor in a county rises, so too will the salience of poverty, and the chance of encounters with poor people. More people in the grocery store will be using food stamps, and more commuters will pass through visibly impoverished areas. But if the premise of this article is right, the *composition* of the poor could matter as well. The media condition people to see poverty as a chiefly African American phenomenon, but in some places, people’s experiences might lead them to challenge that stereotype (Wilson 1996). Thus the composition of the local poor might be critical in determining the extent to which racial stereotypes drive attributions about poverty.

1.1 Hypotheses

In the U.S., views on poverty are intertwined with views on race, making studies of racial contexts a useful theoretical starting point. The racial threat hypothesis dates to Key (1949) and Blalock (1967), and it contends that living around people of a different race will generate prejudice, as competition for scarce resources fosters out-group hostility.³ Applying theories of racial threat to the question of explanations of poverty, we might predict that *as the percentage of the poor in a county who are Black rises, out-group hostility will increase and we should expect more individualistic attributions and fewer structural attributions*. If the local poor are mostly from a different racial or ethnic group, explanations of their poverty will be influenced by out-group animosity and will be more individualistic. It is also possible that because of the close connection between racial attitudes and individualism (e.g. Kinder and Mendelberg 2000), individualism will be especially susceptible to influence by racial contexts. Individualism might rise with the percentage of the poor who are Black, as people draw conclusions from their day-to-day observations. But since structuralism implicates labor markets, discrimination, and other causes that are not easily observed, structuralism might not fall to the same extent.

Gilens' (1999) work emphasizes perceptions of the poor, and so encourages us to consider another pathway: perhaps local contexts act not by generating out-group hostility but instead by increasing the perception that the poor are a racial out-group. In Gilens' words, "Americans who mistakenly believe that most welfare recipients are black are substantially more likely to view welfare recipients as 'the undeserving poor' " (1999: 140). Given that, we might posit a perceptual variant of racial threat theory where certain contexts act to connect existing out-group hostility to explanations about poverty. An individual might have long-standing prejudices, but her context can reinforce her sense that the poor are members of an out-group, and so can make prejudices more relevant to her explanation for poverty.

By contrast, the contact hypothesis contends that inter-racial contact breeds toleration, although this is more common when the groups are of equal status, have shared goals, have a need to cooperate, and are supported by local institutions (Welch et al. 2001, Pettigrew 1998, Sigelman and Welch 1993, Allport 1954). There is no reason that the contact hypothesis is limited to racial out-groups, leading to a second hypothesis that *those who have poor friends or contact with the poor will be more likely to attribute poverty to structural causes*. Even so, it is important to note that proximity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for contact (see also Sigelman et al. 1996). Thus contact must be measured directly.

The racial context is not the only local factor that could shape perceptions of who is poor or why they are poor—and in a country where 46% of the poor are non-Hispanic whites, we over-simplify by assuming that attitudes toward the poor are driven by the same racial processes across different communities. In fact, an analysis of whites' voting patterns in three 1990s California initiatives finds that partisan contexts are a more consistent predictor of individuals' votes on questions of immigration, affirmation action, and bilingual education than are ethnic and racial contexts (Campbell et al. 2006).⁴ Sniderman et al. (1986) argue that attributions and partisanship are closely intertwined, so people's attributions about poverty might be susceptible to contextual influence in the same way that other political attitudes are. Yet some analyses do not employ individual-level partisanship or ideology as predictors (e.g.

Hunt 1996, Wilson 1996; but see Skitka et al. 2002, Hughes and Tuch 2000, Lee et al. 1990), and none employ aggregate-level partisanship.

Political scientists since at least Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1948) theory of the “two-step information flow” have argued that local elites and social networks can reinforce political messages. In their study of an upstate New York community, Lazarsfeld et al. argue that communities have opinion leaders who condense political information and pass it along through local social networks. More recent work has generally supported the basic findings on the importance of social networks in mediating political information (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, Brown 1988, Huckfeldt 1986). And although individuals can select their networks to some extent, those attempts are naturally limited by the pool of politically similar people around (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995: 284).

Local political contexts should reinforce certain messages, both because local elites highlight those messages and because social networks reinforce them. Since Republicans and Democrats have sent consistent and distinctive messages about the causes of poverty for decades (Brown 1999, Gerring 1998, Edsall 1991), with the Democrats more likely to cite structural explanations, a Democrat-dominated area will likely have more opinion leaders who advance structural explanations. Or the information available might be more supportive of the structuralist view that Democrats tend to adopt (Skitka et al. 2002, Zucker and Weiner 1993). Moreover, the social networks in those areas might make structural views harder to avoid, even among conservatives. And given these causal mechanisms, we might also expect a tipping point, beyond which communities are dominated by one partisan message or the other (Noelle-Neumann 1984). This article dubs this “partisan reinforcement,” although the term clearly includes both partisan *and* ideological processes. The hypothesis is straightforward: *counties that are more Republican in partisanship should generate more individualistic and fewer structural attributions among their residents.*

2 Data, Measures, and Models

The PIAS is a phone survey uniquely suited to testing these hypotheses. Conducted between January 4th and February 27th 2001, it offers a battery of questions about poverty, and was asked of a random sample of 1,943 Americans. This includes an oversample of 673 people whose incomes were below 200% of the federal poverty line. The regressions below control for this, and the descriptive statistics are weighted accordingly. As of November 2003, the percentage of American households with phone lines was 94.7% (Federal Communications Commission 2004). The minimum response rate (including unknown households or other unidentified phone lines) was 12%, and the cooperation rate was 32%. The survey's recent vintage allows researchers to account for any changes in attitudes that stem from the 1996 welfare reform (but see Soss and Schram 2007). Moreover, geographic information is available for each respondent at the county level, which provides a reasonable approximation of her locality's demographics. For certain studies, lower levels of aggregation are desirable, and being able to compare impacts at multiple levels is always best.⁵ But since even superficial encounters can help define and reinforce explanations of poverty, county-level measures are an appropriate proxy, and they have a long history within the contextual effects literature.⁶ County-level measurement also helps reduce the threat of selection bias, since it is more plausible that individuals are selecting into neighborhoods at much lower levels of aggregation. The county-level data come primarily from the 2000 U.S. Census Summary File 3, made available by Geolytics.⁷

This analysis covers only the 1,543 respondents who did not classify themselves as African American and for whom county-level data are available. As Hochschild (1995), Hunt (1996), and others have argued, African Americans have quite distinctive views when it comes to issues of poverty and inequality. Those differences are especially consequential given our goal here, which is to explore whether poor Blacks induce different contextual responses than the non-Black poor. Excluding African American respondents simplifies the interpretation of key coefficients since we can interpret African Americans as an out-group for all respondents. The analysis will not exclude Latinos or Asian Americans, but will identify both groups with

indicator variables. As with the vast majority of surveys, some individuals' responses were unavailable, although the non-response rates for each question are almost always below 7%. The analysis dealt with these missing data through multiple imputation; the parametric results reported below are averaged across the 5 imputed datasets as recommended by King et al. (2001) and implemented by Schafer (2003), although they are not sensitive to this decision.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Descriptive statistics for key variables pre-imputation are in Table 1, and the Pearson correlations for select variables are in Table 2. Among the correlations, the strong relationship between the percent of the poor who are white and the percent Black is noteworthy, since it indicates that the two measures are too closely related to efficiently estimate the impact of both in one model. Also, the correlation between one's own political party and the percent of one's county voting for Bush in 2000 is just 0.18, indicating that residential selection on the basis of partisanship is not all-determining.

2.1 Modeling Attributions

Past research provides a list of variables that affect attitudes toward poverty, including race and ethnicity (Hughes and Tuch 2000, Gilens 1999, Hunt 1996), wealth (Knight 1998, Hunt 1996), education (Gomez and Wilson 2004, McDonald 2001, Lee et al. 1990), and religion (Emerson and Smith 2000, Wilson 1999, Hart 1992, Sniderman and Hagen 1985). This section outlines how those and other independent variables are modeled. First, consider the variables that are usually determined early in life, and hence are furthest up the causal chain: a respondent's age in years, her gender, her religion, and her ethnicity. The latter concepts are measured using indicator variables for Protestants, Evangelicals, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. Education is typically determined prior to adulthood, and is measured here with seven response categories. Further down the causal chain is the respondent's income, measured via nine categories. We

then have her stable preferences and attachments, including her party identification, ideology, and place of residence.⁸ With place of residence comes the set of contextual variables that are at the heart of this article, including the percentage of the respondent’s county that voted for Bush in 2000; that is Hispanic; that is below the federal poverty line; and that has a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, I determined the percentage of the poor who are white, and each county’s population density, taken to be a proxy for urbanicity.

We next need valid measures of the extent to which people take an individualistic or structural view of poverty. The survey directly asked respondents, “which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?” This question clearly measures explanations for poverty, placing a structural response on one end of the continuum and an individualistic response on the other. Such questions can be very valuable, especially in detecting how the relative support for the two types of explanations varies across space. However, for the initial analyses, this binary indicator is imperfect, since we cannot separate out structuralism from individualism and we cannot distinguish the relative strength of respondents’ views. Alongside analyses of the binary dependent variable, this article draws on nine additional questions about the causes of poverty that measure the central concepts of interest. The items are not sufficiently unidimensional to simply create an additive index—their Cronbach’s alpha is 0.56—but by performing a factor analysis with two factors and varimax rotation (Fabrigar et al. 1999, Widaman 1993), we can isolate the individualism and structuralism inherent in the responses. In doing so, the analysis draws on the advice of past work in factor analysis and chooses several items for each latent concept (Fabrigar et al. 1999).

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3 shows the results for one of the imputed data sets, although all five are substantively identical. The factor loadings should be interpreted as standardized coefficients indicating the strength of the relationship between an individual’s response to the specific question and the underlying construct. The first factor isolates the individualism inherent in people’s responses:

it is strongly related to respondents citing “poor people lacking motivation,” “the decline in moral values,” and “drug abuse” as major causes of poverty. It is also positively related to responses that “people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty.”

The second factor is associated with the opposite answer to the binary question—that “circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor.” It is also strongly related to other responses that point to external causes of poverty, such as “a shortage of jobs,” “too many jobs being part time or low wage,” and “medical bills.” This second factor closely matches our *ex ante* notions of structuralism, as well as past operationalizations of that concept (e.g. Hunt 1996: 299). The portion of the variance accounted for by each of the two factors is almost identical at 0.11. These are, in short, valid measures of the extent to which people attribute poverty to individual or structural causes. Still, all key results below will be replicated with the binary indicator to demonstrate that they do not depend on these choices, and that similar patterns hold when we study the *relative* prevalence of the two explanations.

3 Results: Partisan Context and Attributions

Can the local context shape attributions about who is to blame for poverty? To answer that question, this section presents OLS models of respondents’ scores on the structuralism and individualism indices. The individual-level predictors are drawn from those listed above.⁹ In addition, the model includes self-assessed poverty status and an indicator variable marking respondents who were in the over-sampled demographic.

[Insert Table 4 Here]

The first results presented in Table 4 predict respondents’ scores on the structuralism index. Local Republican partisanship, higher local education levels, and less dense counties are associated with reduced structuralism. We might think of such places as affluent, right-leaning suburbs. Given that the standard deviation of the structuralism index is 0.78, the model indicates that a shift from a county that was 33% Republican to a county that was

66% Republican would decrease the structuralism inherent in a respondent's answers by 0.14 standard deviations. By contrast, the percentage of the poor who are white has no discernible influence. While contexts are related to people's explanations of poverty, it is chiefly partisan contexts—and not racial contexts—that predict structuralism.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

Individualism is closely associated with racial attitudes (e.g. Kinder and Mendelberg 2000), so it is plausible that the racial composition of the poor could still shape individualism. Living near poor African Americans, a respondent might offer more individualistic explanations for poverty without shifting her views about the broader structures causing poverty. Model 2 in Table 5 confirms this intuition, demonstrating that those living in counties where the poor are mostly white do provide less individualistic explanations. In addition, it affirms that county-level partisanship is a powerful predictor of individualism. This model specification also allows us to observe the influence of other aggregate-level variables, including the population density, the percent Hispanic, and the percent with a bachelor's degree. Respondents in more educated areas are less prone to adopt individualistic explanations. The other aggregate variables yield no strong effect.

At the individual level, Republicans, conservatives, Protestants, Hispanics, Asian Americans, those with lower incomes, and those with less education are all more likely to offer individualistic explanations of poverty, while other individual-level variables have little effect. The education and income findings echo those in Hunt (1996:306). Respondents in the oversampled demographic—those who are objectively below 200% of the poverty line—are no different in their attitudes. Still, the hypothesis about partisan contextual effects has considerable evidence in its favor. So does the hypothesis about the racial composition of the poor.

To ensure that the findings are not an artifact of the factor analysis, I ran a logistic regression predicting the original binary choice of a structural or an individualistic explanation. Substantively, the results are very similar to those just above. Consider two individuals who are similar but for their county of residence: one lives in a county where 39% of the poor

are white while another lives in a county where 87% of the poor are white. These figures represent one standard deviation above or below the mean. Under this model, the first will give a structural response 50% of the time while the second will give a structural response 57% of the time. For this dependent variable, a comparable shift in partisanship produces a comparable change.

One threat to the validity is that the findings might be driven by the poor themselves, and by their self-perceptions. Model 3 removes the 673 individuals whose income was below 200% of the federal poverty line. Here, too, the percentage of the county that supported Bush proves a strong positive predictor of individualism, above and beyond the impact of the individual respondent's partisanship *and* political ideology. The percent of the poor who are white is a significant predictor in Model 3 as well, although it is not as strong substantively.

3.1 Robustness Checks

How robust are these results, and what are the mechanisms behind them? First, it is important to note the results of several sensitivity tests which demonstrate the robustness of the findings. When we use listwise deletion instead of multiple imputation, the results are substantively very similar, albeit with greater uncertainty due to the deletion of 863 respondents who failed to answer a relevant question. The key findings on individualism from Model 3 hold up when we use a reduced model specification that removes age, the indicator variables for Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Protestants, and the county-level measures of the percent Hispanic and the percent with a college degree. They also hold up if we use extended models including all of the variables above as well as measures of marital status, employment status, residence in a suburb, Southern residence, or evangelical self-identification. The key contextual effects identified in this article are not spurious results stemming from the omission of family structure or any of those other individual-level variables.

At the aggregate level, the central results—those for the individualism index—are similarly robust to a range of variables including the percent poor, the percent immigrant, the logged

population as of 2000, the logged population change in the 1990s, the percent of public assistance recipients, residential stability, and a Gini coefficient measuring county income inequality. Income inequality and public assistance uptake rates are lower in places where the poor are mostly white, for example, but neither of those facts explains the key finding. Including the percent Black increases the estimated impact of the percent of the poor who are white, but it also increases its uncertainty due to the collinearity between the two measures. Simply put, these coefficients are stable in the face of a wide range of potentially confounding variables.

When analyzing individuals nested within geographic units, it is natural to consider the use of multi-level models (e.g. Gelman and Hill 2006). However, the PIAS is a random national sample, so the 1,543 respondents are drawn from 503 separate counties. 47% of respondents live in a county with fewer than 5 other respondents, so there is little information with which to estimate county-specific intercepts. This means that we are unlikely to gain much leverage by explicitly modeling county-level variability. Estimating a multi-level model of individualism confirms this suspicion, as the fraction of the variation explained at the county level is less than 0.001. Even so, the key coefficients remain quite similar in magnitude.

Model 4 again demonstrates the central findings of this article using non-poor respondents. It also allows us to consider one mechanism that could explain the impact of the percentage of the poor who are white. The mechanism implied by some of the racial threat literature is perceptual. In counties with many African Americans, the poor are perceived to be predominantly African American. Since African Americans are often seen as an undeserving out-group, explanations for poverty become infused with an unsympathetic individualism. But however compelling in theory, Model 4 does not provide evidence for the perceptual component of this pathway in practice. Including two measures of perceptions about who is poor does nothing to change the estimated impact of the local percentage of the poor who are white.¹⁰ Of the two measures, the perception that most welfare recipients are Black does increase individualism (confirming Gilens 1999), but higher estimates of the share of the nation's poor who are Black have no independent impact. Still, the key point is that this is not the mechanism through

which local contexts are operating. *If context shapes perceptions, it seems to do so in a more direct way, influencing perceptions about the poor, not perceptions of which groups are poor.*¹¹

An alternate pathway comes from the contact hypothesis. Perhaps proximity to the poor leads to more friendships across class lines, generating empathy and reducing individualism. Or perhaps in areas where the poor are predominantly white, cross-class friendships are more easily formed. Yet having a poor friend has no significant impact on individualism, as shown by Model 5. And again, the coefficient on the percentage of the poor who are white remains nearly identical, suggesting that friendship is not the mechanism through which context operates. In short, this article has tested several mechanisms for its racial findings and has disproven several without affirming any. The impact of racial context operates relatively evenly across residents.

Although one could imagine that partisan environments matter most in areas where there is a supermajority for one side or the other, breaking the key causal variable into several indicator variables shows that non-linear impacts are not at work. Nor does the county-level partisanship effect appear to be a product of measurement error at the individual level. It is correlated with individuals' reported ideology at just 0.15, and with their reported party identification at just 0.18. Moreover, the coefficient on county-level partisanship increases modestly when we remove either the ideology indicator or the respondent's partisanship, making it harder still to contend that the county-level partisanship is only a proxy for individuals' partisanship.¹²

[Insert Table 6 Here]

As an additional source of confirmation, Model 6 in Table 6 replicates the main findings using the 1,582 respondents to the 2000 GSS who were asked a battery of four questions about the causes of racial inequality.¹³ Here, we impose a constraint, and operationalize structuralism and individualism as opposing ends of a single dimension to examine the relative prevalence of the two types of explanations. Although this battery asked about the reasons for *African Americans'* poverty, rather than about the poor in general, it should allay concerns that the results above are specific to the scales or survey employed. Indeed, people in counties that were supportive of Bob Dole, the 1996 Republican Presidential nominee, were markedly less

likely to offer structural explanations of poverty in the spring of 2000. Those in counties where the poor were predominantly white, by contrast, were somewhat more structural or less individualist in their thinking. These results hold even with the seven-category measures of partisan identification and ideology provided by the GSS, yielding further evidence against the hypothesis that these effects are explained by mis-measured individual-level factors.

For the percent Republican, the results also hold when estimated only on the 910 1996 GSS respondents who lived in their communities for more than four years. Since people in this group have not recently moved to bring their attitudes into line with their residential environment, this coefficient is less likely to be driven by residential selection.¹⁴ And as Model 7 demonstrates, they hold even conditional on media consumption, meaning that contexts are not simply a proxy for exposure to media messages about poverty and race. Certainly, future work could productively consider sub-national variation in the media's portrayal of poverty, but individual-level variation in media consumption does not drive the core results here.

Returning to Model 2, I find that a shift from one standard deviation below the mean to one above it—that is, a shift from a county with 38% support for Bush to a county with 63% support for Bush—induces an increase in individualism of 0.16, or 20% of a standard deviation. The 95% confidence interval runs from 0.08 to 0.25. Whether through social networks or the messages transmitted by local political elites, partisan environments shape attributions about why people are poor. In short, a contextual variable that has received scant attention from past work proves central in explaining attributions about poverty.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Past work has downplayed the importance of context in shaping explanations of poverty (McDonald 2001, Gilens 1999, Kluegel and Smith 1986), and the results above help us understand why. Since places where the poor are white also tend to be more Republican, the effects identified above will typically cut against one another, making the geographic variation in attitudes hard to observe. In fact, the correlation between places that are Republican and places where

the poor are white is 0.40. Only by accounting simultaneously for the two impacts can we tease out how contexts shape explanations of poverty. But once we do, the effects become pronounced.

To some extent, the thorny question of mechanisms remains for future work. While we have seen that living near poor whites can reduce individualistic attributions, that is not because those in poor, white counties are more likely to have poor friends. The contacts that are reducing individualism are likely to be more superficial, whether they are between co-workers, neighbors, or even shoppers at a supermarket. Differing perceptions of who is poor also fail to explain these findings since they hold conditional on perceptions of the extent to which the poor are African American.

This article's most decisive finding is that partisan contexts have a powerful impact on how Americans think about the causes of poverty. Contextual partisanship influences both structuralism and individualism. It is not surprising that contextual partisanship matters, but it is surprising that it can outweigh explanations that are commonly cited in past work, including respondents' incomes, educations, and religious affiliations. Racial contexts are influential in shaping individualistic explanations of poverty, but not to the exclusion of other contextual predictors. Attributions about poverty are thus clearly political attitudes, and they are shaped by local political elites and/or the partisanship inherent in local social networks. Another critical next step is to disaggregate these partisan effects, and to determine what it is about the local partisan context that matters. Is it persuasion, information, or perhaps local elites? Local media might even play a role. And to tease out mechanisms more effectively, studying people as they are nested within social networks (e.g. Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995) is essential. The messages that are sent by major media outlets are often similar in tone, but the towns in which they are received differ widely. Some towns have the partisan infrastructure to adopt and reinforce media-driven messages, while others can find alternative elites or make sense of poverty on their own. Researchers who ignore these facts are also likely to miss some of the key sources of explanations for poverty.

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Notes
Education	1	7	4.20	1.70	
Income	15	200	60.21	49.33	thousands of \$
Poor	0	1	0.24	0.46	self-assessment
Age	18	99	46.16	18.04	
Hispanic	0	1	0.12	0.38	
Asian American	0	1	0.03	0.15	
Ideology	1	3	2.06	0.62	3 is conservative
Party ID	1	5	3.01	1.64	5 is Republican
Protestant	0	1	0.56	0.50	
Co. % Black	0.00	0.86	0.10	0.13	
Co. % Poor	0.03	0.51	0.12	0.06	
Co. % White poor	0.06	1.00	0.65	0.24	of total poor
Co. % Bush vote	0.14	0.86	0.50	0.12	
Has poor friend	0	1	0.48	0.50	
Poor Not to Blame?	0	1	0.49	0.50	
Individualism	-1.24	2.97	0.01	0.78	

Table 1: Summary of key variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Income (1)	1.00	-0.31	0.05	0.27	-0.10	-0.05	0.01	-0.19
Poor (2)		1.00	-0.07	-0.04	-0.07	-0.11	0.01	0.15
Party ID (3)			1.00	-0.07	0.18	0.06	0.00	-0.07
Pct. with BA (4)				1.00	-0.27	-0.15	-0.02	-0.43
Pct. for Bush (5)					1.00	0.40	-0.31	-0.18
Pct. Poor are Wh. (6)						1.00	-0.70	-0.43
Pct. Black (7)							1.00	0.32
Pct. Below Pov. (8)								1.00

Table 2: Pearson's correlations of key variables

Cause of Poverty	Loading 1	Loading 2
Drug Abuse	0.373	0.174
Medical Bills	0.130	0.481
Jobs Pay Poorly		0.485
Single-Parent Families	0.296	0.167
Shortage of Jobs		0.505
Welfare System	0.310	
Poor Lack Motivation	0.596	
Decline in Morals	0.479	0.108
Poor Schools		0.308
Beyond Control of Poor	-0.458	0.462

Table 3: Loadings for a factor analysis of explanations of poverty with two factors.

	Model 1: Structuralism	
	β	SE
Intercept	0.55*	0.18
Co. % Republican	-0.34*	0.17
Co. % White Poor	0.03	0.10
Co. % Pop. Dns.	15.95*	8.04
Co. % Hispanic	-0.14	0.15
Co. % College Degree	-1.63*	0.67
Education	-0.01	0.01
Income	-0.15*	0.06
Hispanic	0.08	0.07
Asian American	0.05	0.13
Cons. Ideology	-0.13*	0.03
Rep. Party ID	-0.06*	0.01
Poor	0.24*	0.06
Protestant	0.02	0.04
Age	0.04	0.11
Male	-0.21*	0.04
Oversample	0.08	0.05
R Squared		1,526
df		0.14

Table 4: Contextual predictors of structural explanations of poverty

Variable	Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Intercept	-0.26	0.20	0.02	0.25	-0.10	0.27	0.03	0.25
Co. % Republican	0.66*	0.18	0.89*	0.24	0.84*	0.24	0.88*	0.24
Co. % White Poor	-0.42*	0.10	-0.43*	0.14	-0.40*	0.14	-0.43*	0.14
Co. Pop. Dns.	-5.15	8.21	-5.45	10.48	-3.56	10.41	-5.35	10.49
Co. % Hispanic	-0.11	0.15	-0.45*	0.22	-0.44*	0.22	-0.45*	0.22
Co. % Coll. Degree	-2.39*	0.66	-2.97*	0.84	-2.89*	0.84	-2.97*	0.84
Education	-0.04*	0.01	-0.09*	0.02	-0.09*	0.02	-0.09*	0.02
Income	-0.15*	0.05	-0.16*	0.05	-0.13*	0.05	-0.16*	0.05
Hispanic	0.15*	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.07	0.10	0.08	0.10
Asian American	0.32*	0.14	0.16	0.18	0.09	0.18	0.16	0.18
Cons. Ideology	0.16*	0.03	0.16*	0.05	0.16*	0.05	0.16*	0.05
Rep. Party ID	0.04*	0.01	0.04*	0.02	0.04*	0.02	0.04*	0.02
Poor	-0.09	0.07	-0.12	0.11	-0.10	0.11	-0.13	0.11
Protestant	0.16*	0.05	0.09	0.06	0.10	0.06	0.09	0.06
Age	0.09	0.11	0.25	0.15	0.18	0.15	0.26	0.15
Male	-0.00	0.04	-0.04	0.05	-0.04	0.05	-0.04	0.05
Oversample	0.00	0.05						
% Poor Perceived Bl.					-0.20	0.17		
More Welf. Rec. Bl.					0.26*	0.07		
Poor Friend							0.04	0.06
df	1,526		853		851		852	
R-squared	0.13		0.20		0.21		0.20	

Table 5: Contextual predictors of individualist explanations of poverty

Variable	Model 6		Model 7	
	β	SE	β	SE
Intercept	2.146*	0.259	2.188	0.264
Co. % Republican 96	-1.263*	0.323	-1.241*	0.324
% White Pov.	0.334	0.171	0.303	0.173
Ideology	-0.130*	0.022	-0.130*	0.022
Party ID	-0.071*	0.016	-0.073*	0.016
Income	0.003*	0.001	0.003*	0.001
Male	-0.130*	0.057	-0.128*	0.057
Hrs Watching TV			-0.012	0.011
Days Read Newspaper			0.009	0.011
R-squared	0.07		0.07	
df	1,575		1,573	

Table 6: Replicating key results with 2000 GSS. Higher scores on the dependent variable indicate more structural explanations of poverty.

Notes

¹Following Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995: 10), this article defines a context as an environment which influences or constrains face-to-face social interactions and observations.

²In certain cases, this omission is intended. Kluegel and Smith argue against according significant weight to the local context, and point out that people are able to separate collective experiences from their own personal experiences (1986: 27).

³There are, of course, a wide range of types of threat, including economic competition, political struggle, or status threat. For recent statements, see Taylor (1998) and Oliver and Wong (2003).

⁴At the aggregate level, Tolbert and Hero (1996) show that California counties' partisan composition was a strong predictor of support for Proposition 187, on illegal immigration, even conditional on their ethnic and racial composition.

⁵For a thorough review of the growing field of contextual effects, as well as a discussion of the appropriate level of measurement, see Sampson et al. (2002).

⁶See Putnam (1966), Tolbert and Hero (1996), and Campbell et al. (2006).

⁷Key variables include poverty status by race (P159), demographics (P007), and income (P077). The 2000 Presidential returns were obtained from the Federal Elections Project.

⁸For the exact question wordings and cross-tabs, see the survey's website: www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty. It is reasonable to worry that party identification is endogenous to views of poverty, but research on the stability of partisan identification (e.g. Green et al. 2002) indicates that the causal arrow is likely to be far stronger running from partisanship to views on poverty rather than vice versa. For more on the potential endogeneity of ideology and partisanship to causal attributions about poverty, see Sniderman et al. (1986).

⁹The measures for evangelical Protestants and the county's percent poor are completely inconsequential, and so are included only in robustness checks. Also, age and income are divided by 100 to make the coefficients of comparable magnitude.

¹⁰Specifically, respondents were asked: "From what you know, what portion of poor people in this country do you think are African American? About a tenth, about a quarter, about half, or about three-quarters?" The second question asked, "Of all the people who are on welfare in this country, are more of them Black or are more of them white?" For more on the relationship between perceptions and local demographics, see Wong (2007).

¹¹Results not shown also provide no support for the notion that low-status individuals are especially threatened. The impact of the percentage of the poor who are white has no interactive effect with either education or income. Nor does it interact with an indicator variable for residents in the South or with population density, meaning that these results are not likely to be driven by Appalachia or other distinctive regional effects.

¹²Also, neither of these variables interacts strongly with the local area's partisanship, suggesting that the effects are not particular to those in the dominant political group.

¹³The questions read as follows: "On average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are... mainly due to discrimination? because African Americans have less in-born ability to learn? because most African Americans don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty? because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty?" Agreement with the first and third and disagreement with the second and fourth were taken to denote structuralism.

¹⁴The result for the percent of the poor who are white is positively signed but insignificant here in the reduced sample. The 2000 GSS did not ask about respondents' tenure in their communities, explaining the shift to the earlier year.

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