



DEMOCRACY REMIXED: BLACK YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

A Series on Black and Latino Youth Political Engagement

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Equal Protection? Race and Young People's Attitudes toward the Legal System

The verdicts in the Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases have focused increased attention on racial disparities in the American justice system. In January 2014, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,500 young people ages 18 to 29 to gauge their attitudes toward the legal system and examine to what degree they feel fully protected under the law. We report the following findings:

- Nearly three-quarters (73.2 percent) of Black youth believe the legal system does not treat all groups equally, a rate considerably higher than that for white and Latino youth.
- Compared with 2008, larger percentages of young people of all races believe that the legal system treats all groups equally. The increase was largest among Black youth, of whom twice as many believe the legal system treats all groups fairly in 2014 compared with 2008.
- Only about 60 percent of Black youth report feeling like full and equal citizens with all the same rights and protections as everyone else, compared with 64.1 percent of Latino youth and 72.9 percent of white youth.
- Fewer Black youth report feeling like a full and equal citizen in 2014 compared with 2005 and 2008. Fewer white and Latino youth also report feeling like a full and equal citizen in 2014 compared with both 2005 and 2008.

The Legal System and Political Inclusion

Equal protection under the law is a key component of political equality and human rights. As the United Nations has declared, equal protection is an especially important concept for historically marginalized groups. We examined young people's assessments of equal protection by asking them to indicate whether they believe the U.S. legal system treats all groups equally, and whether they themselves feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Though young people in general do not believe that the legal system treats all groups fairly, there are clear differences by race. Across both questions, Black youth consistently report the least support for the idea that equal protection currently exists in the United States. Only about a quarter (26.8 percent) of Black youth believe that the American legal system treats all groups fairly. A substantially larger percentage of Latino youth (36.7) believe that the American legal system treats all groups fairly, compared with 41.0 percent of white youth.

In addition, Black and Latino youth reported feeling like a full and equal citizen at considerably lower rates than white youth. Nearly three-quarters (72.9 percent) of white youth reported that they felt they had all the rights and protections of a full and equal citizen, compared with just 60.2 percent of Black youth and 64.1 percent of Latino youth. These clear and consistent differences indicate that political inclusion in the United States remains very much correlated with race.

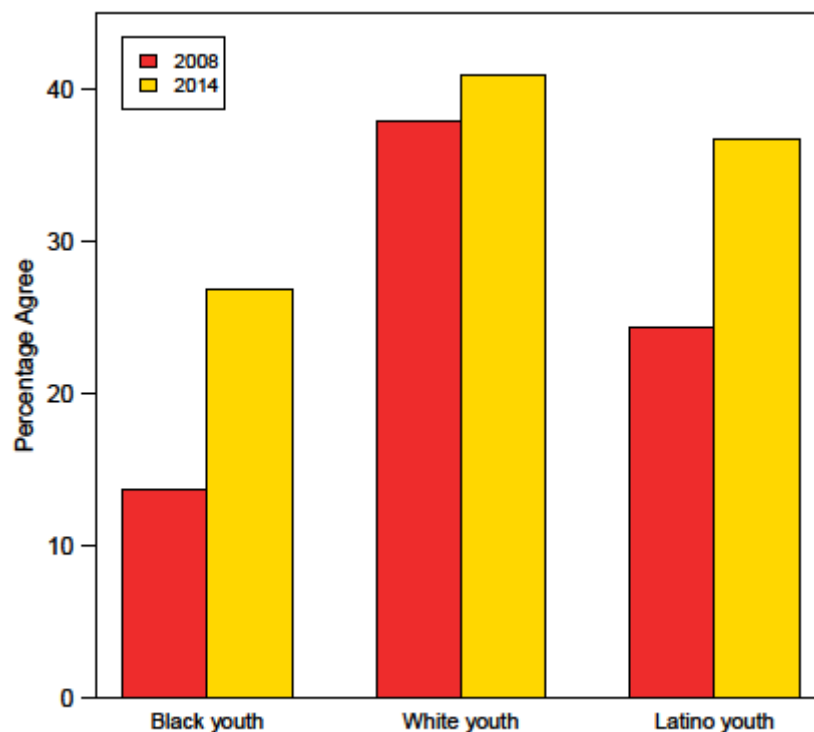
Table 1: Young People's Assessments of the Legal System and Political Inclusion, 2014

	Black (% agree)	White (% agree)	Latino (% agree)	All (% agree)
Generally the American legal system treats all groups equally.	26.8	41.0	36.7	38.1
Generally, I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have.	60.2	72.9	64.1	69.2

Sources: 2014 Black Youth Project survey.

These patterns have changed somewhat in recent years. Figure 1 plot compares assessments of fairness of the legal system for 2008 and 2014. In both years, fewer than half of young people in each racial group agreed with this statement. However, the percentages of young people agreeing with the statement also increased in each racial group between 2008 and 2014. The largest increases in support (approximately ten percentage points) came from Black and Latino youth. However, in both years, Black youth expressed the lowest level of support for the idea of a fair legal system. Thus, young people of color appear to remain unconvinced that the legal system treats people equally across all groups.

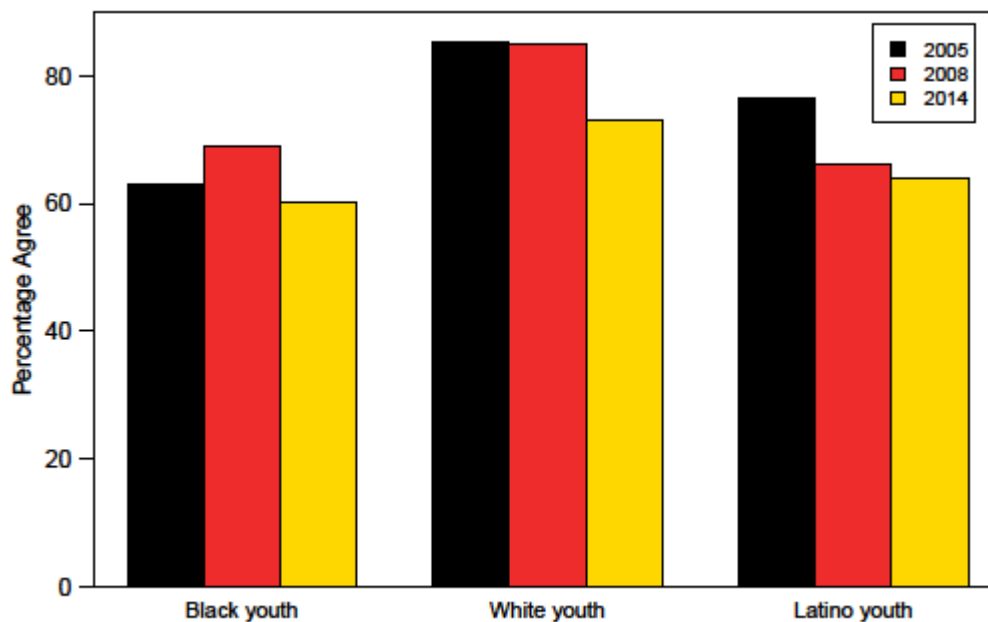
Figure 1: Youth Assessments that the Legal System Treats All Groups Equally, 2008 and 2014



As Figure 2 below shows, we see similar patterns when evaluating trends in the percentages of young people who report feeling like a full and equal citizen. Generally, Black youth reported the lowest levels of agreement with this statement, and white reported the highest levels of feelings of inclusion. Though Latino youth in 2005 reported considerably higher levels of feeling like a full and equal citizen compared with Black youth, these differences have largely disappeared. While the differences by race and across time are less pronounced in general when evaluating responses to this survey question, what is clear that large percentages of young people—and especially young

people of color—perceive large imbalances in how the privileges of citizens are allocated across our society.

Figure 2: “Generally, I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have.”



Discussion

The Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases again bring to the fore questions about equality before the law, particularly as they relate to young people of color. Contrary to claims about having entered an era of post-racialism, race continues to matter, and in critically important ways. Our data show that young people’s evaluations of the legal system and the privileges conferred to them by citizenship vary in important ways by race. Young people’s experiences as members of our country and with the legal system are importantly structured by race, and in turn these experiences shape their attitudes and evaluations.

Our analysis of young people’s attitudes toward the legal system sheds light on the challenges our nation must address, particularly with respect to enabling young people of color to see themselves as full and equal citizens, with the same rights as others. Many of these sources of inequalities are deeply embedded structures and institutions, and institutions are sticky. Thus, there is much work to do. By mobilizing to expose and change these structural sources of inequality, then, we may be able to move forward as a nation.