Perceptions of Racial Gaps, their Causes, and Ways to Reduce Them



Alberto Alesina,
Matteo Ferroni,
and
Stefanie Stantcheva

NBER Race and Stratification Meeting

Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards Racial Inequities

Question: large racial disparities, but little agreement on what to do. What is the reason?

Knowledge: Do people have accurate information about economic circumstances and opportunities of their own racial group and other groups?

Beliefs about causes of racial inequities: Do people explain the existence of racial gaps in different ways?

Policy Views: Do people have different views on what should be done, e.g.: on income-targeted vs. race-targeted policies?

Young people's views: Are these views already formed and are they still malleable among very young people (aged 13-17)?

Social Economics Surveys and Experiments

- Surveys have been used for a long time for measurement & statistics.

  We now have high-quality admin data on many variables (income, family situation, employment, etc.)

- Yet, **some things remain invisible** in data other than survey data (even great data!): **perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and reasoning.**

  Critical role in social, economic, and political outcomes.

- Revealed preference approach – our holy grail – can be challenging due to lack of data and identifying variation.

  We often do not "reveal" our beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, etc. on important issues with our micro, observed behaviors.

- Surveys are more than a measurement tool. Control of data generating process. **"Creating your own identifying variation and uncovering the invisible."**

Using surveys

- If used well, approach can be applied to many settings and questions (including as complement to other approaches).
- New mobile technologies & platforms offer opportunities.
- For the results to be reliable, it is critical that these surveys are well-designed, carefully calibrated, and deployed on appropriate samples.
- **Comprehensive guide**: "How to Run Surveys: A guide to creating your own identifying variation and revealing the invisible."
  (`socialeconomicslab.org/how-to-run-surveys/`)

Survey Sample: Adults and Teenagers

Large-scale surveys in the US of **8,400 adults** and **2,000 teenagers (13-17 years old)**.

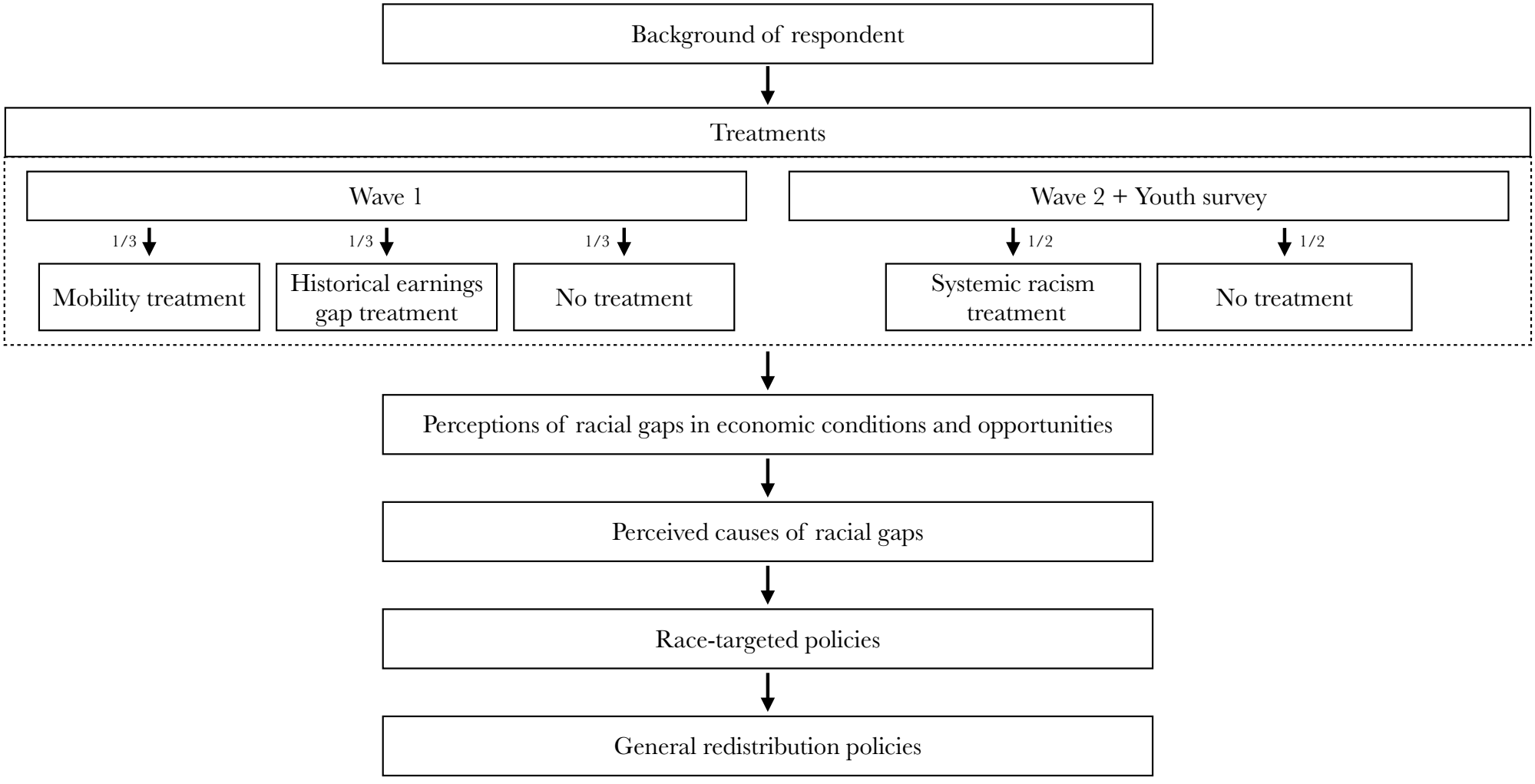
Done through commercial survey companies in 2019/20.

> Broad pools of respondents, variety of recruiting channels and rewards.

Adult sample: 4,200 people who identify as "Black" or "African American" (for brevity: "Black respondents") and 4,200 "White," "European American," and not "Hispanic" (for brevity: "white respondents"). ▸ Characteristics

Youth sample: 1,000 Black and 1,000 white non-Hispanic respondents. ▸ Characteristics ▸ Race/ethnicity question

Survey Structure



Data and Response Quality

Question design: balanced and benchmarking, images, minimize sensitive questions, adapted to teenagers.

Avoiding selection:

> Recruit respondents without revealing topic or our identity.
>
> Add benchmark questions from existing surveys (responses very close).

Careless responses: timer on each page; attention check questions.

Incentives: rewards for accurate answers (no effects); real stakes donation question (correlated with answers).

Feedback post-survey: 12% thought was left-wing biased; 17% right-wing.

Perceived Income and Mobility Gaps

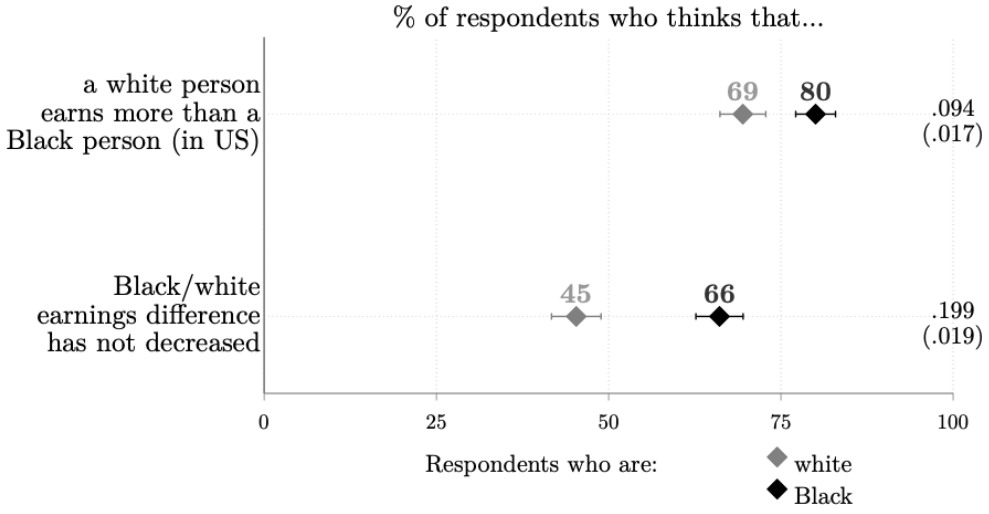
Perceived Causes of Racial Gaps

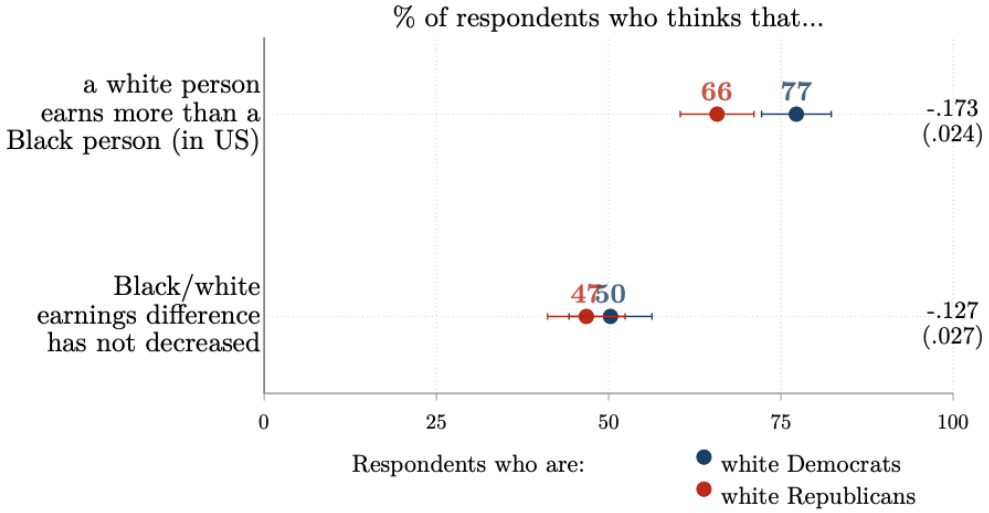
What Predicts Policy Views?

Perceived Income and Mobility Gaps

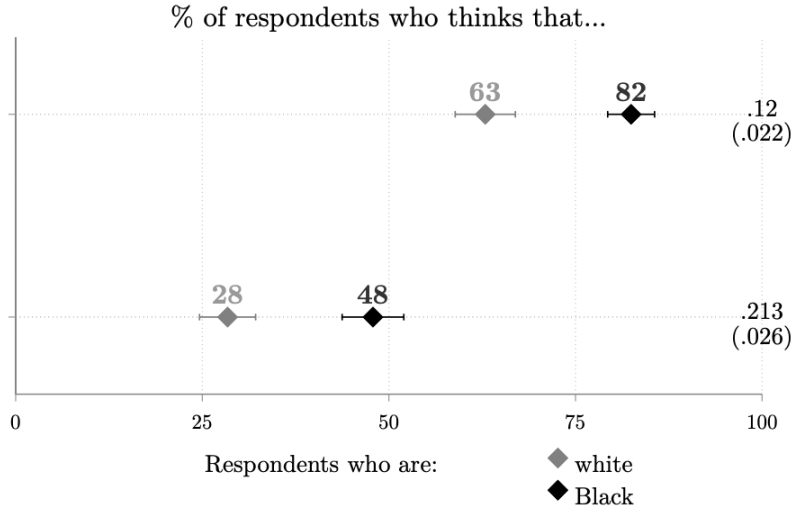
Perceived Racial Income Inequality

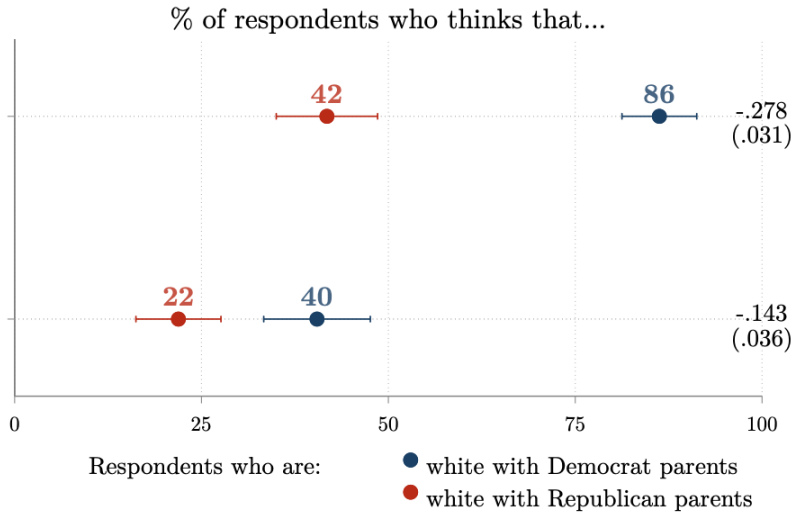
Adult survey





Youth survey



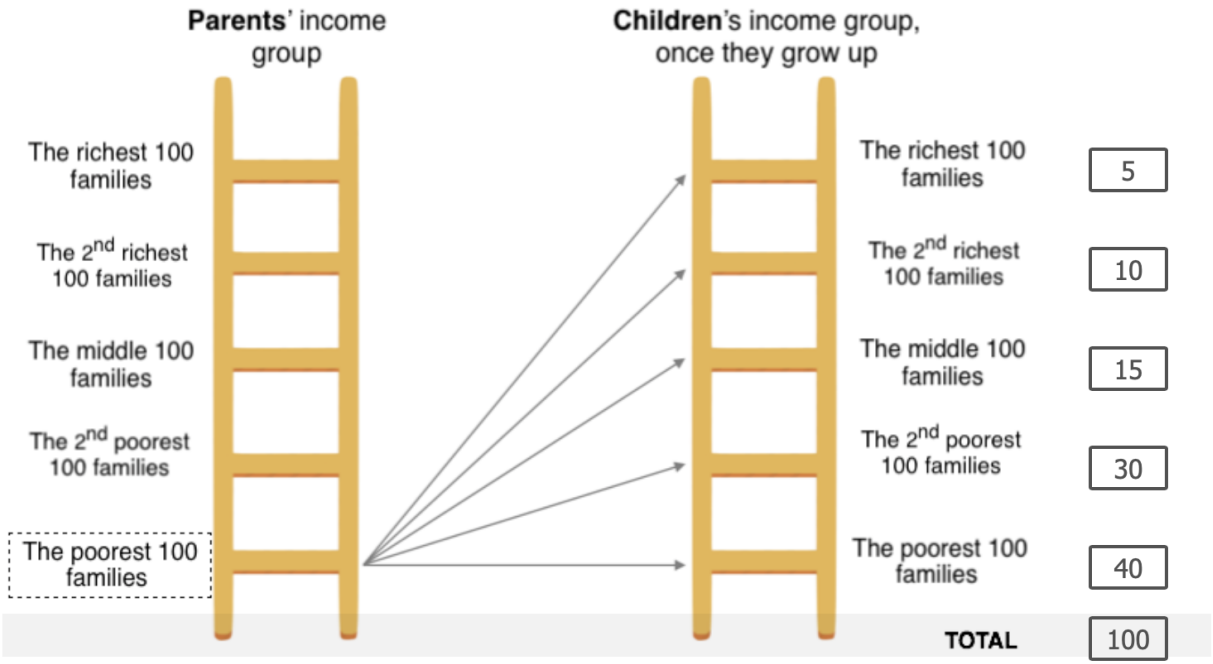


Eliciting Perceptions on Black and White Children's Mobility

Imagine now 100 **white** children born in one of the poorest 100 families. How will these **white** children do when they grow up?

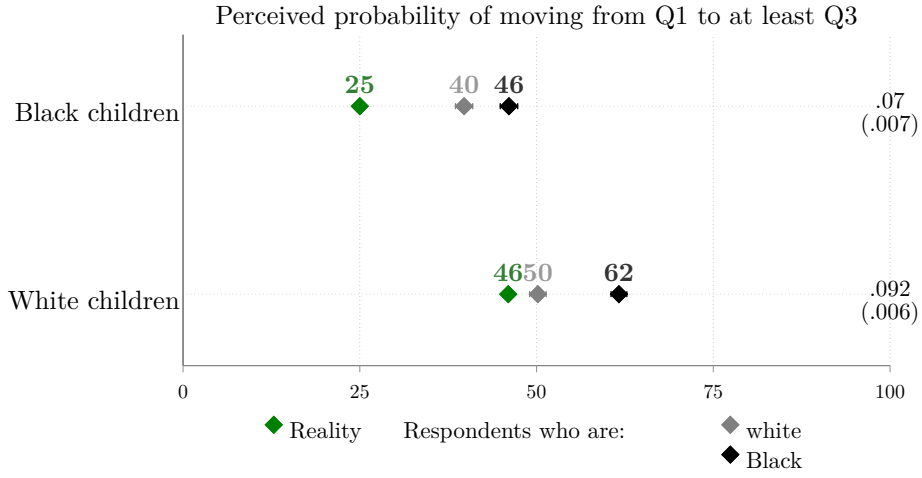
Please fill out the entries to the right of the figure below to tell us, in your opinion, how many out of 100 **white** children coming from the poorest 100 families will grow up to be in each income group.

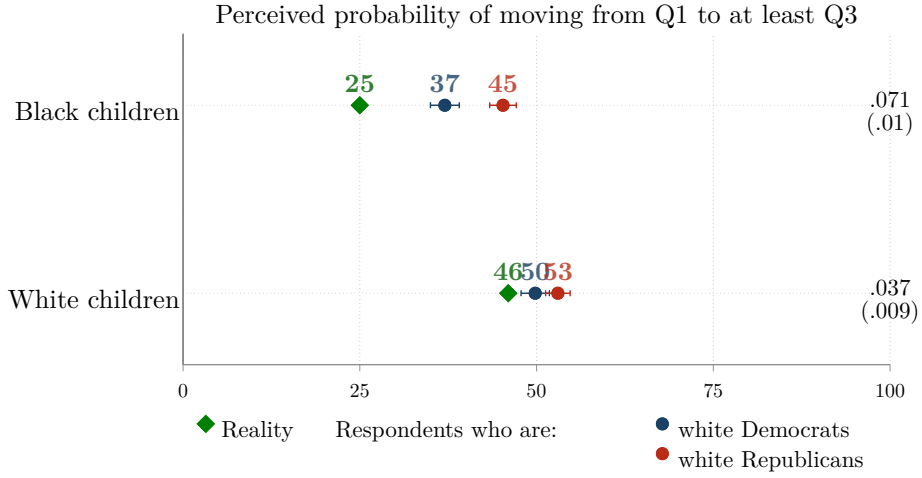
Please note that your entries need to add up to 100 or you will not be able to move on to the next page.



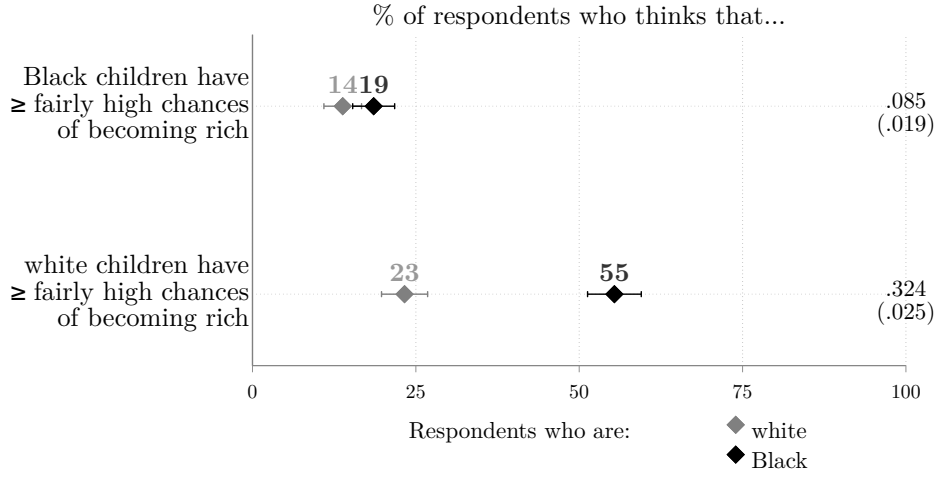
Perceived Racial Gaps in Mobility

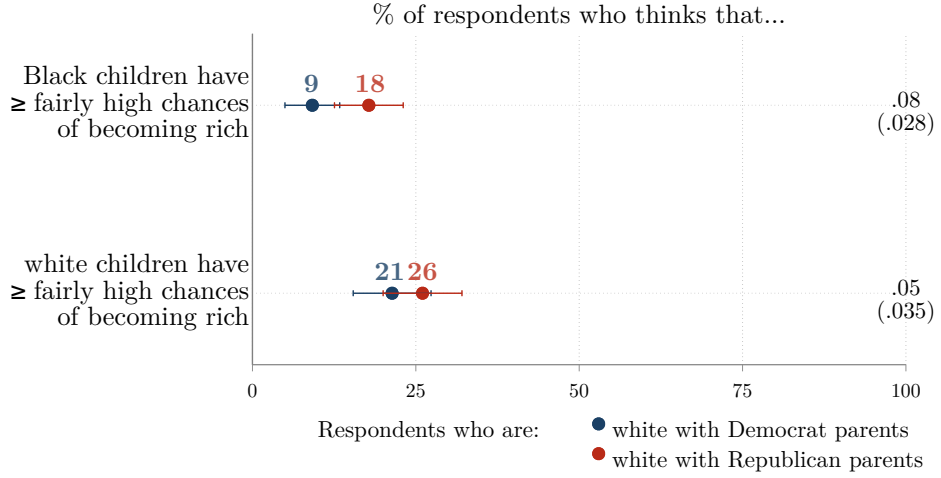
Adult survey





Youth survey

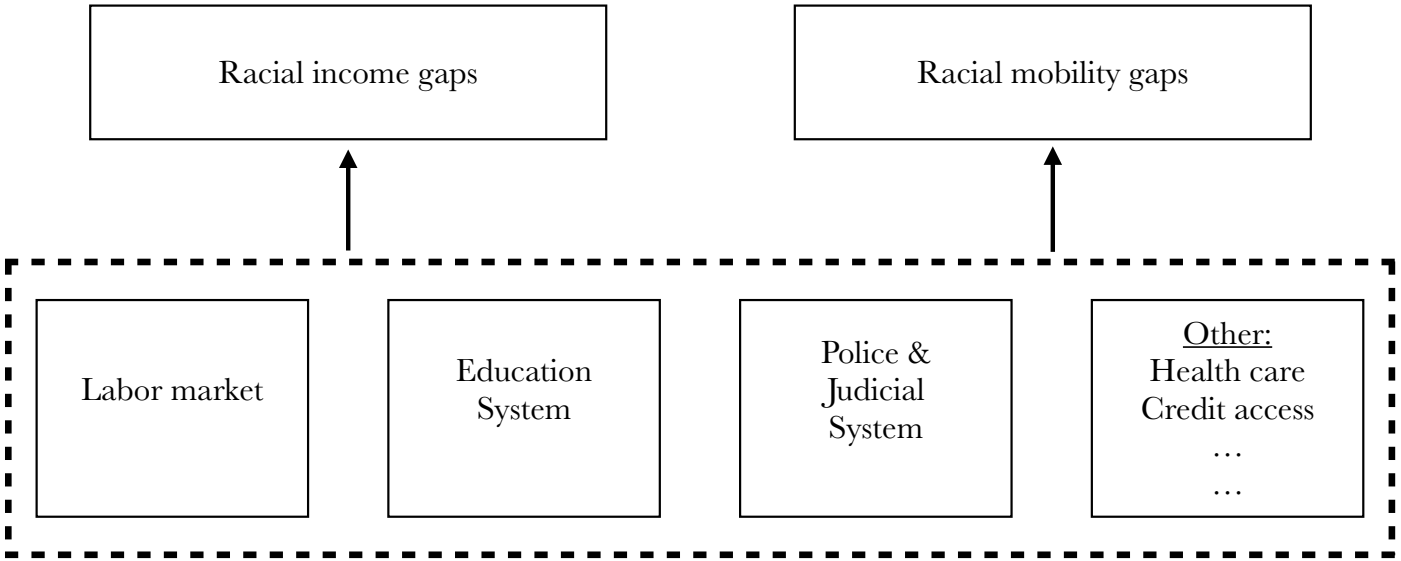


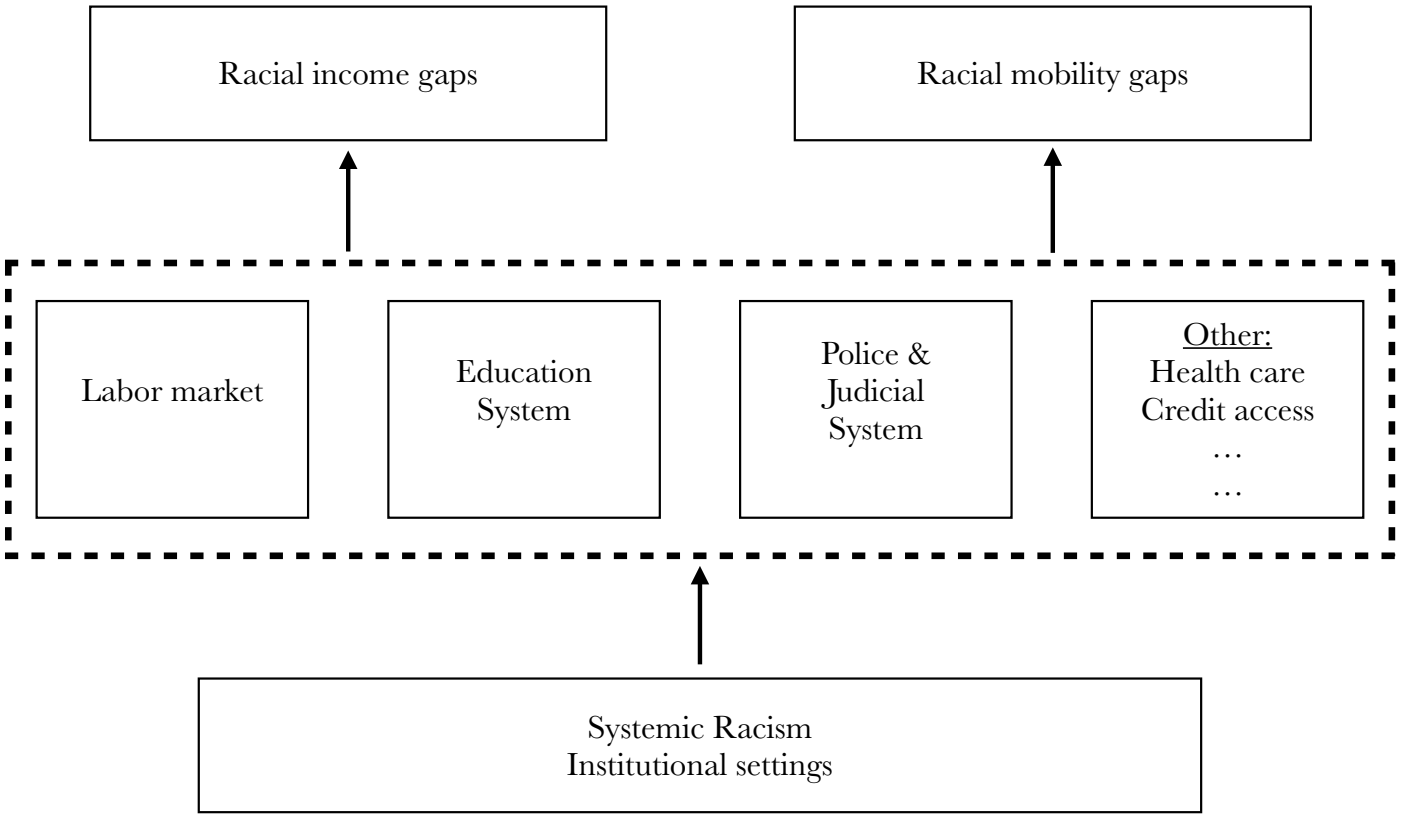


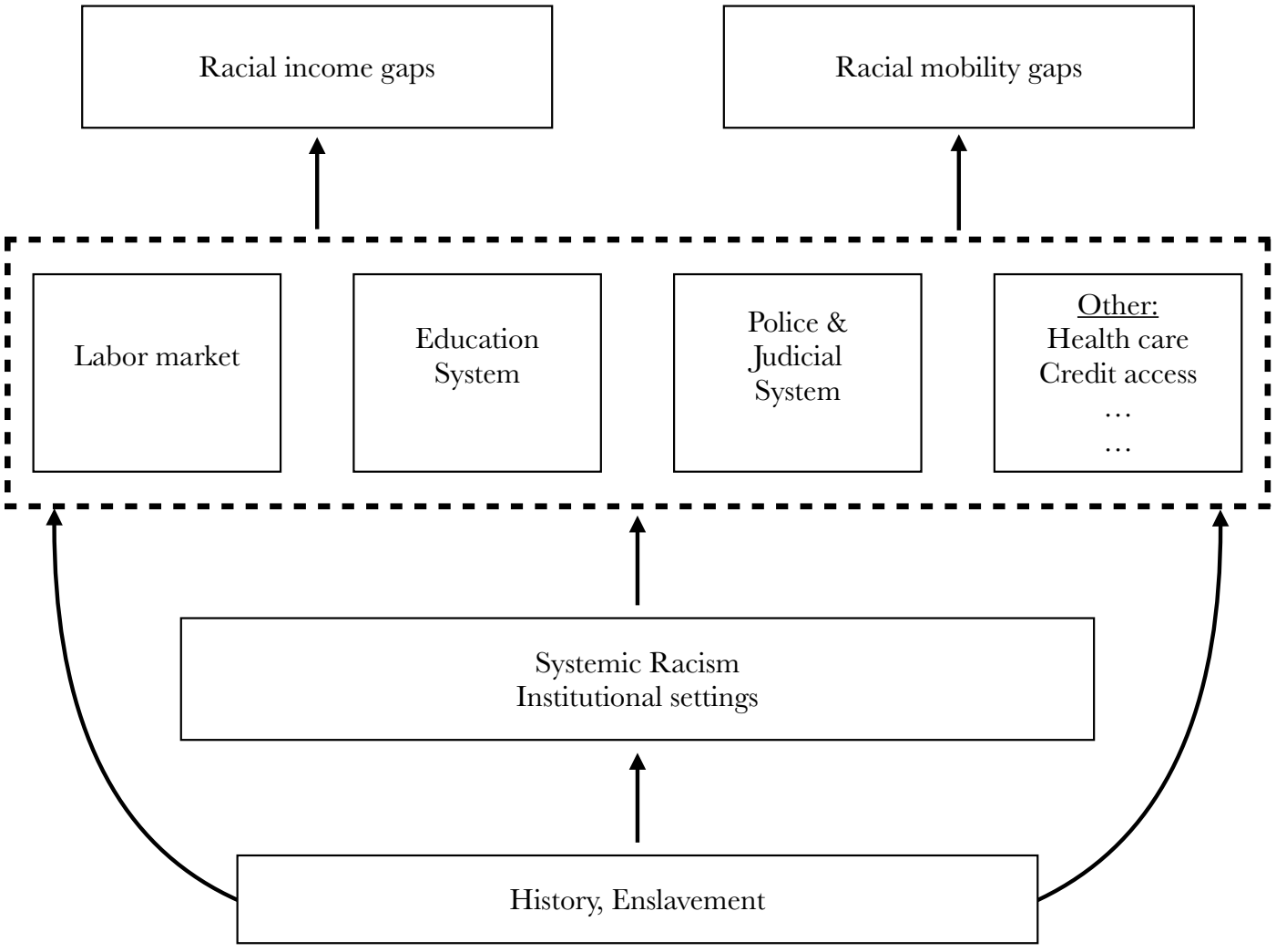
Perceived Causes of Racial Gaps

Racial income gaps

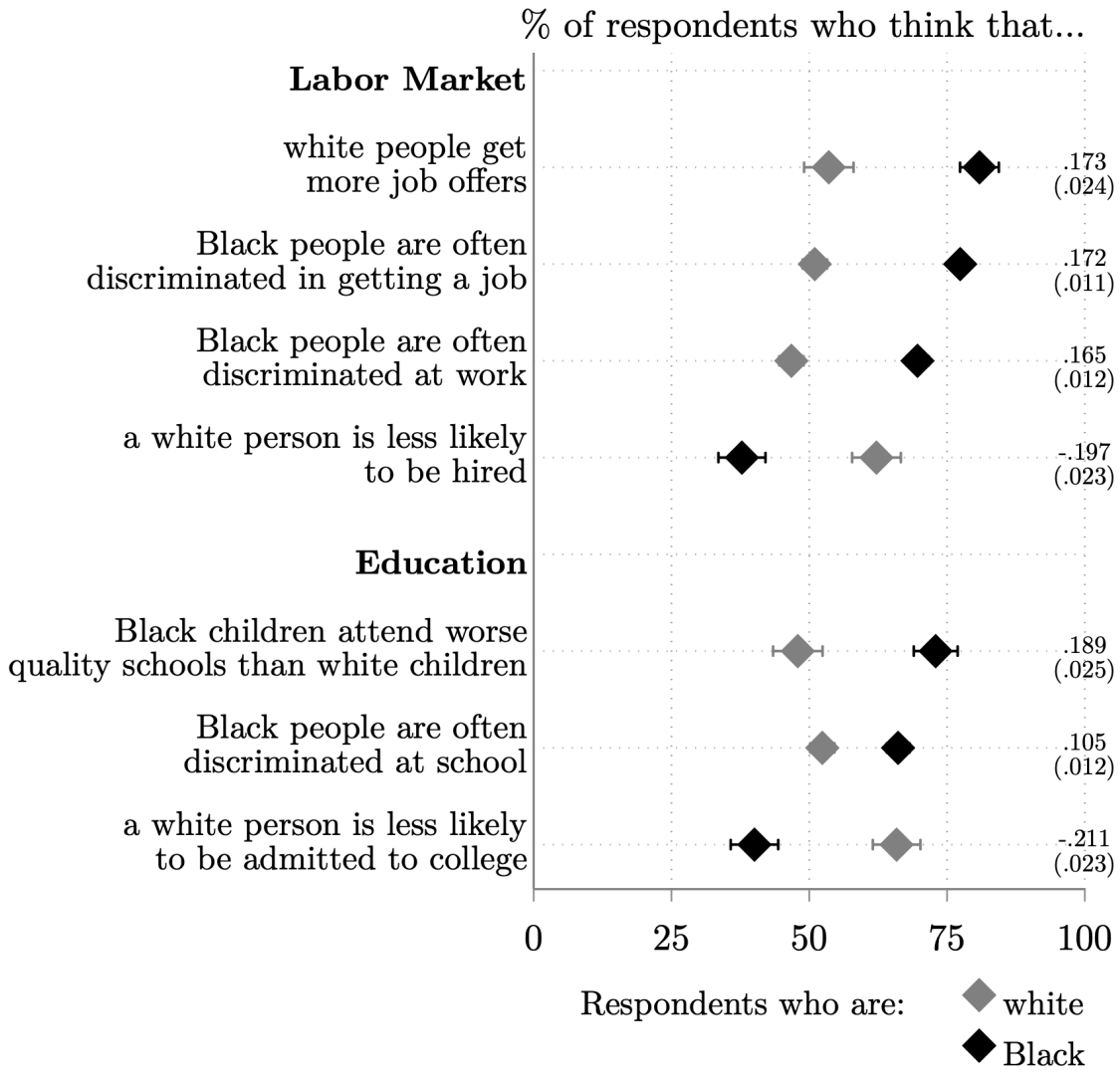
Racial mobility gaps

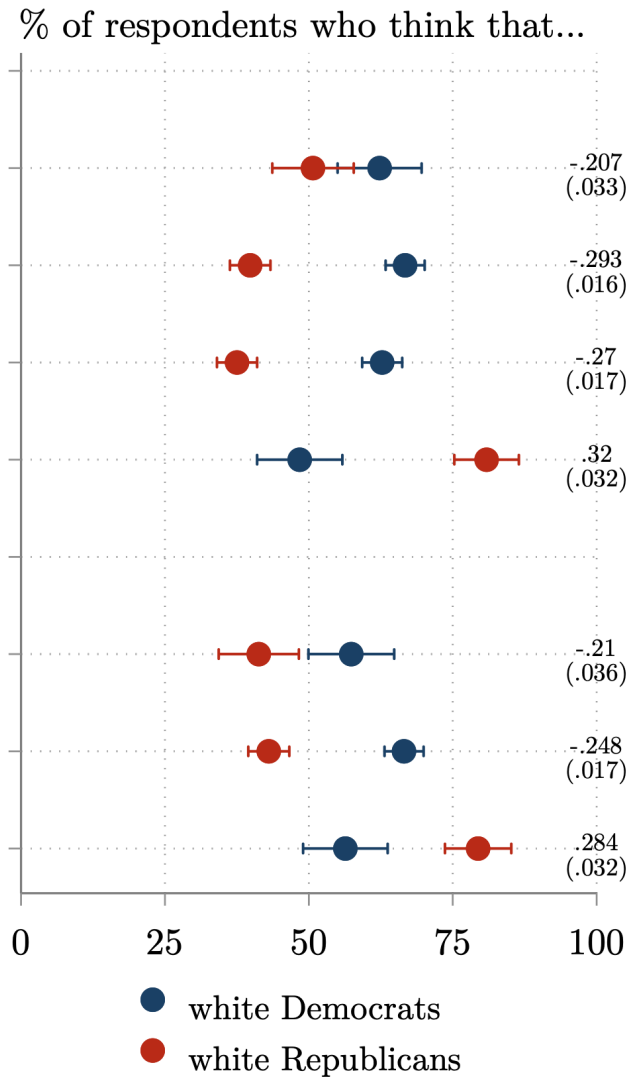

Racial income gaps
Racial mobility gaps
Labor market
Education System
Police & Judicial System
Other:
Health care
Credit access
…
…


Racial income gaps
Racial mobility gaps
Labor market
Education System
Police & Judicial System
Other:
Health care
Credit access
…
…
Systemic Racism
Institutional settings


Racial income gaps
Racial mobility gaps
Labor market
Education System
Police & Judicial System
Other:
Health care
Credit access
…
…
Systemic Racism
Institutional settings
History, Enslavement

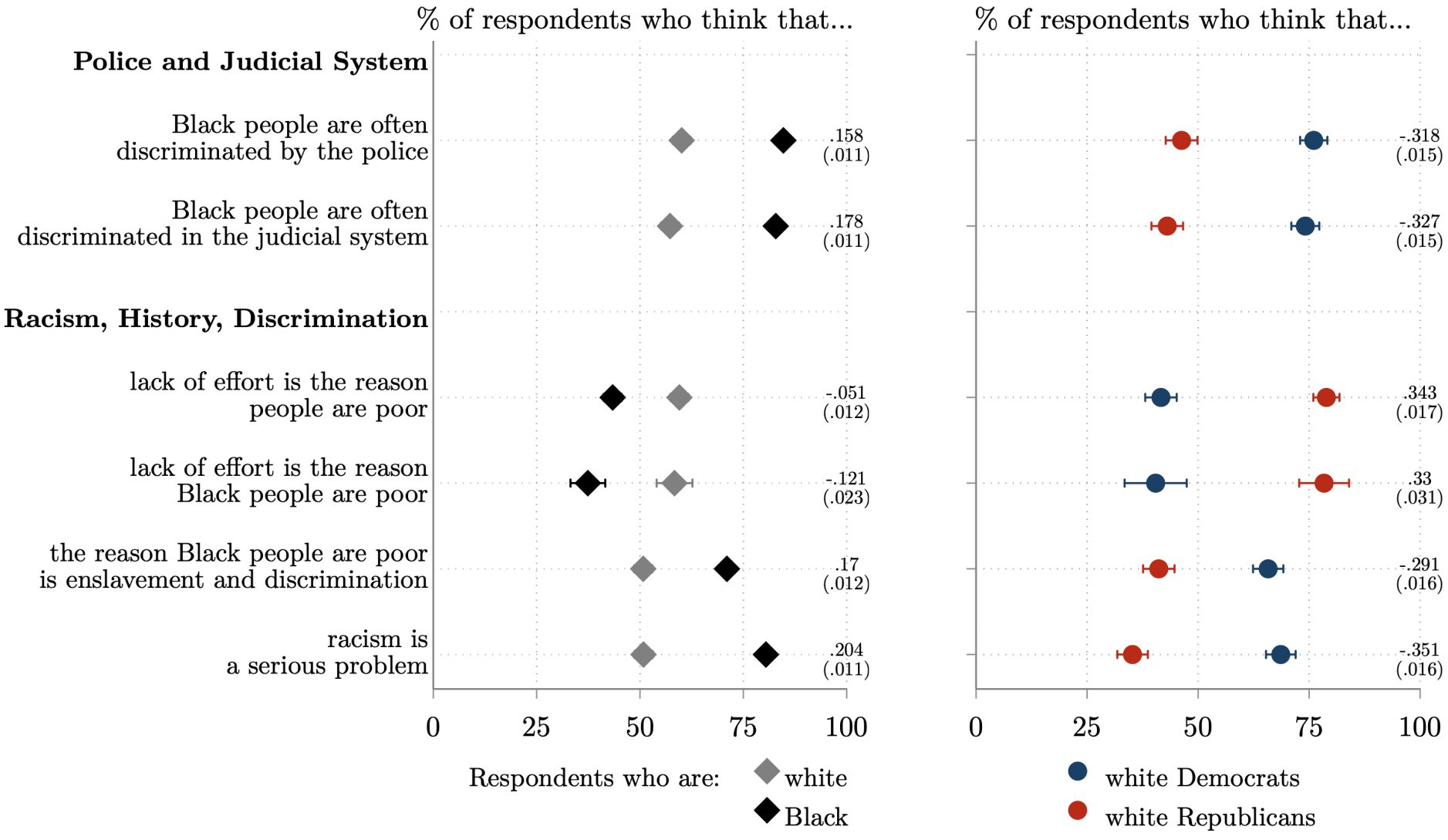
Perceived Causes among Adults





▸ Youth sample

Perceived Causes among Adults (II)



▸ Youth sample

Disagreements on What Causes Racial Inequities

- People perceive the income and mobility gaps between Black & white Americans differently...

  ... but by far the biggest disagreements lie in their perceived causes of racial inequities.

- **What predicts policy views?**

  People's support for general redistribution (or race-targeted policies) does not so much depend on their perceptions of the magnitudes of racial gaps, it depends on **why they think those gaps exist**.

Large Partisan Gaps

Black & white Democratic respondents:

- attribute persistent racial gaps to enslavement, long-standing discrimination, & racism.
- support income-targeted redistribution & race-targeted policies.

White Republican respondents:

- tend to view racial inequities primarily as the result of lack of effort and individual decisions.
- less inclined to support redistribution and race-targeted policies to reduce them.

- **Strikingly, these racial & partisan gaps are already prevalent among teenagers.**

  Teens' views imply substantial partisan gaps in line with their parents' political affiliation (sometimes even more polarized!)

▸ Race-targeted - Adults ▸ Race-targeted - Teens ▸ Redistribution - Adults ▸ Redistribution - Teens

What Predicts Policy Views?

Changing Policy Views

- **Experiments:**

  Showing people **information on gaps in earnings & opportunities** between Black & white people does not move policy views.

  Explaining some of the causes & consequences of **systemic racism** does.

  ▸ Earnings Gap ▸ Mobility Gap ▸ Systemic Racism

- Interpretation: Simply showing **how** unequal circumstances & opportunities are does not move people's beliefs on **why** they are unequal, does not change the narrative that respondents believe in.
- Although there are clearly large racial gaps along many econ & social dimensions, and although many people are (at least to some extent) aware of them, they disagree on their causes and, hence, on the way or even need to resolve them.

Thank you!



SOCIAL
ECONOMICS
LAB

APPENDIX

Adult Sample Characteristics

Back

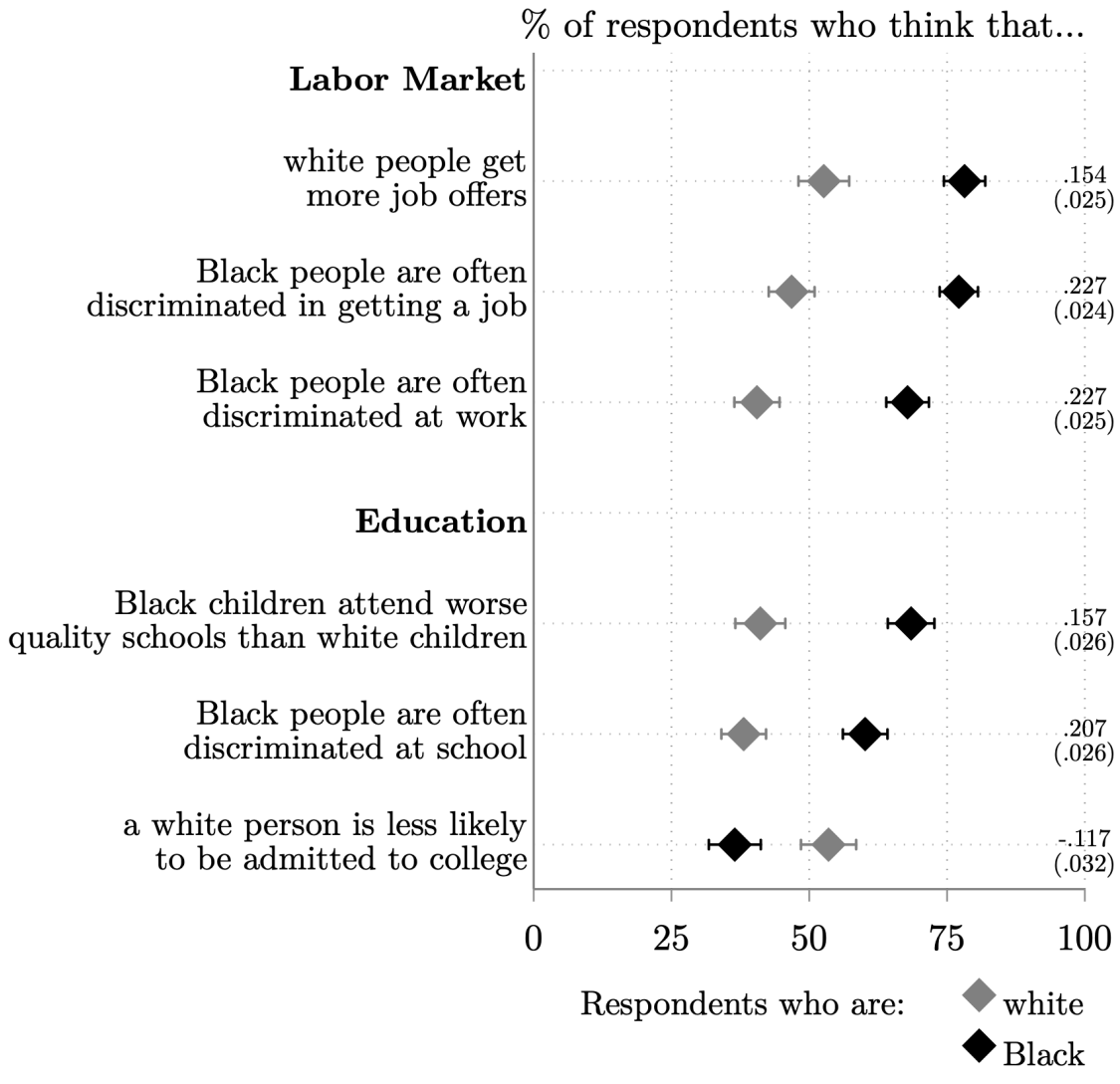
	Black Population					White Population				
	US (1)	Urban (2)	Wave 1 (3)	Wave 2 (4)	Wave 3 (5)	US (6)	Urban (7)	Wave 1 (8)	Wave 2 (9)	Wave 3 (10)
Male	0.46	0.46	0.45	0.46	0.46	0.50	0.49	0.42	0.50	0.50
18-29 years old	0.27	0.27	0.30	0.28	0.28	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.23	0.23
30-39 years old	0.20	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.22	0.18	0.19	0.20	0.20	0.20
40-49 years old	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.17	0.19	0.18	0.19
50-59 years old	0.18	0.18	0.16	0.18	0.18	0.20	0.20	0.18	0.20	0.19
60-69 years old	0.17	0.16	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.23	0.22	0.22	0.19	0.19
$0-$19,999	0.21	0.20	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.09	0.09
$20,000-$39,999	0.21	0.20	0.24	0.22	0.22	0.13	0.12	0.16	0.12	0.12
$40,000-$69,999	0.23	0.23	0.26	0.23	0.24	0.19	0.19	0.24	0.20	0.20
$70,000-$109,999	0.17	0.17	0.17	0.12	0.13	0.22	0.21	0.23	0.17	0.18
$110,000+	0.18	0.19	0.09	0.19	0.18	0.36	0.39	0.27	0.42	0.41
Northeast	0.16	0.17	0.17	0.23	0.22	0.19	0.20	0.23	0.23	0.23
Midwest	0.17	0.18	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.26	0.24	0.25	0.24	0.24
South	0.59	0.56	0.51	0.43	0.45	0.35	0.35	0.36	0.30	0.30
West	0.09	0.09	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.20	0.21	0.16	0.23	0.23
Democrat	0.53	0.54	0.71	0.73	0.68	0.24	0.25	0.38	0.38	0.34
Republican	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.09	0.33	0.31	0.35	0.40	0.41
Independent	0.38	0.37	0.24	0.19	0.23	0.37	0.38	0.27	0.22	0.25
4-year college or more	0.25	0.26	0.34	0.37	0.43	0.39	0.42	0.56	0.63	0.61
High school or less	0.44	0.42	0.23	0.25	0.20	0.32	0.29	0.14	0.15	0.16
Employed	0.66	0.67	0.61	0.62	0.62	0.72	0.73	0.65	0.68	0.70
Self-employed	0.04	0.04	0.07	0.10	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.05	0.06	0.07
Unemployed	0.04	0.04	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.05
Married	0.32	0.33	0.27			0.58	0.57	0.54		
Sample size			2,500	851	847			2,509	850	850

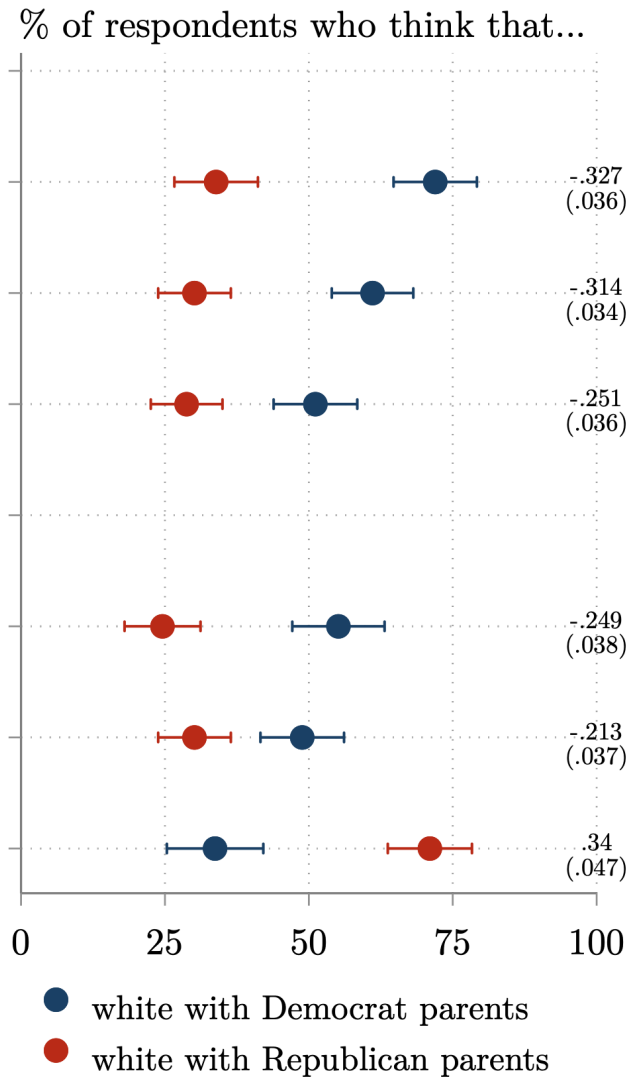
Teenager Sample Characteristics

Back

	Black Population			White Population		
	Pop (1)	Urban (2)	Sample (3)	Pop (4)	Urban (5)	Sample (6)
Male	0.51	0.50	0.50	0.52	0.51	0.50
13 years old	0.19	0.19	0.15	0.19	0.19	0.19
14 years old	0.19	0.19	0.18	0.19	0.19	0.20
15 years old	0.19	0.19	0.21	0.20	0.20	0.19
16 years old	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.21	0.21	0.20
17 years old	0.20	0.20	0.23	0.21	0.21	0.22
Share for which parents reported income			0.43			0.87
Parental income						
$0-$19,999	0.20	0.19	0.12	0.08	0.07	0.03
$20,000-$39,999	0.23	0.22	0.19	0.10	0.08	0.13
$40,000-$69,999	0.23	0.23	0.30	0.17	0.16	0.23
$70,000-$109,999	0.15	0.16	0.21	0.22	0.22	0.25
$110,000+	0.19	0.21	0.19	0.44	0.48	0.36
Northeast	0.16	0.17	0.19	0.18	0.20	0.24
Midwest	0.19	0.20	0.17	0.29	0.27	0.25
South	0.58	0.55	0.52	0.34	0.33	0.31
West	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.19	0.20	0.21
Democratic parents			0.73			0.35
Republican parents			0.08			0.39
Independent parents			0.20			0.26
Sample size			1,005			1,000

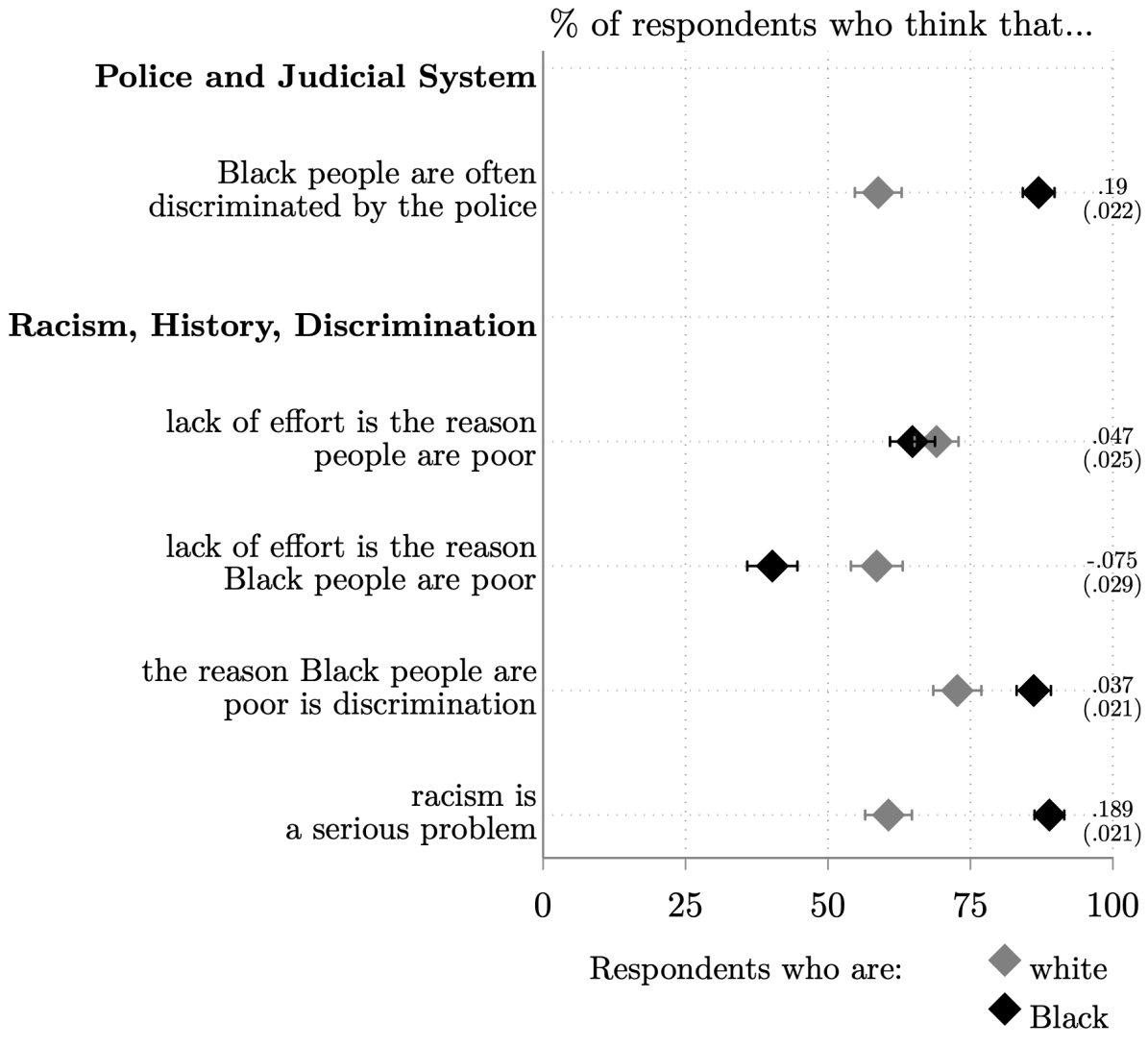
Perceived Causes among Teens

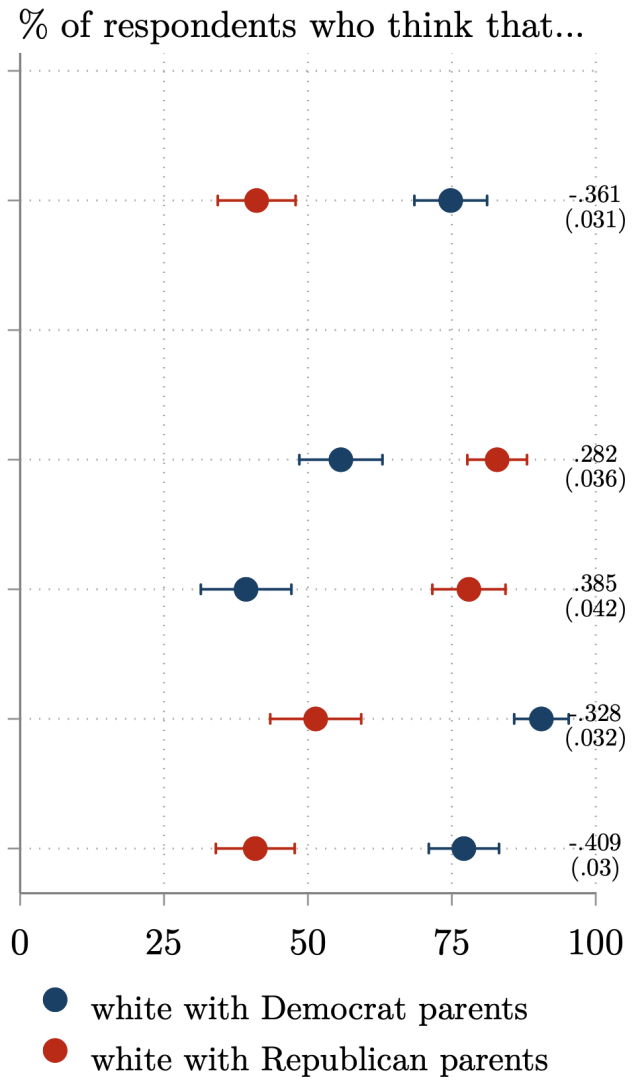




Back

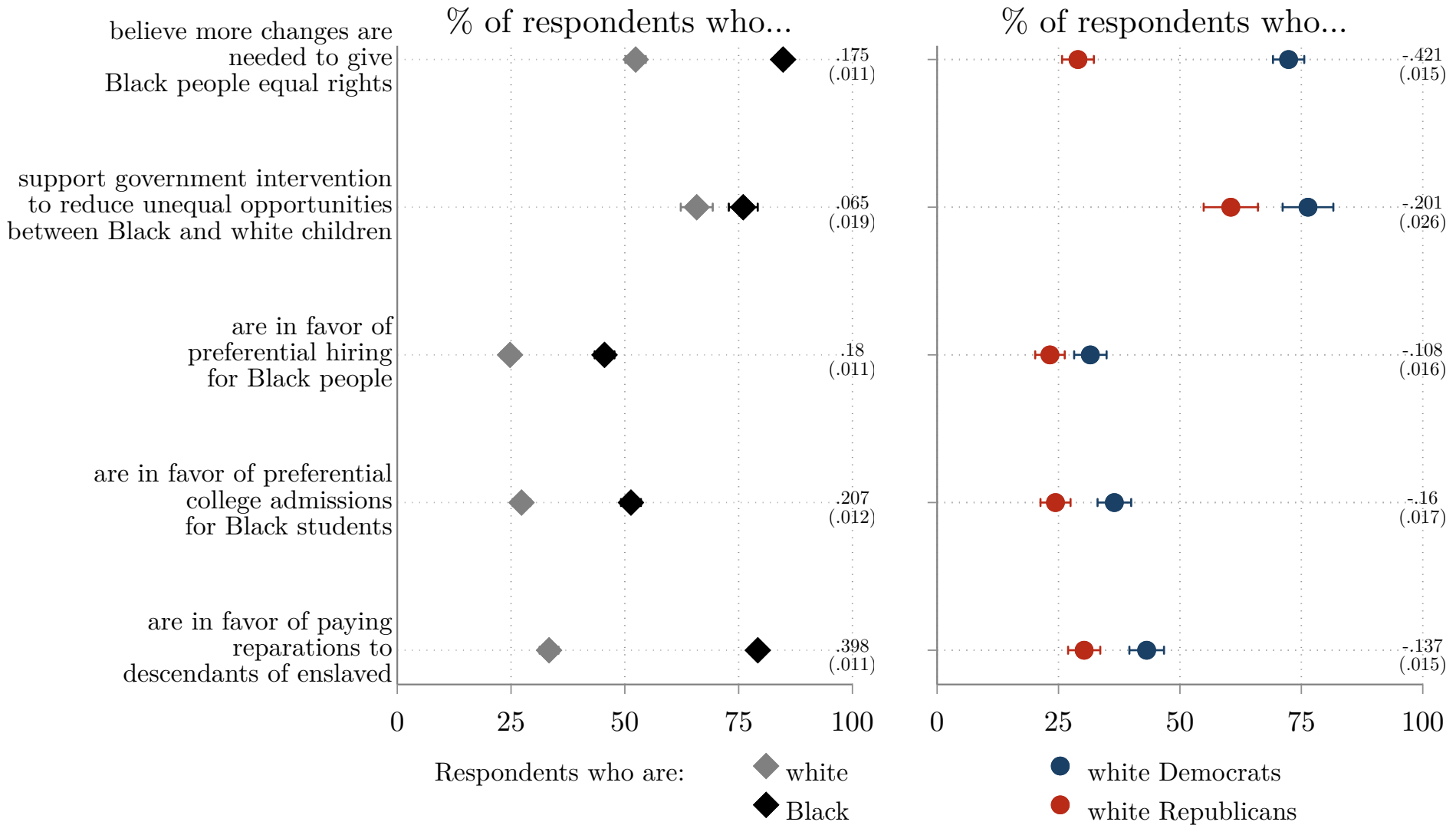
Perceived Causes among Teens (II)





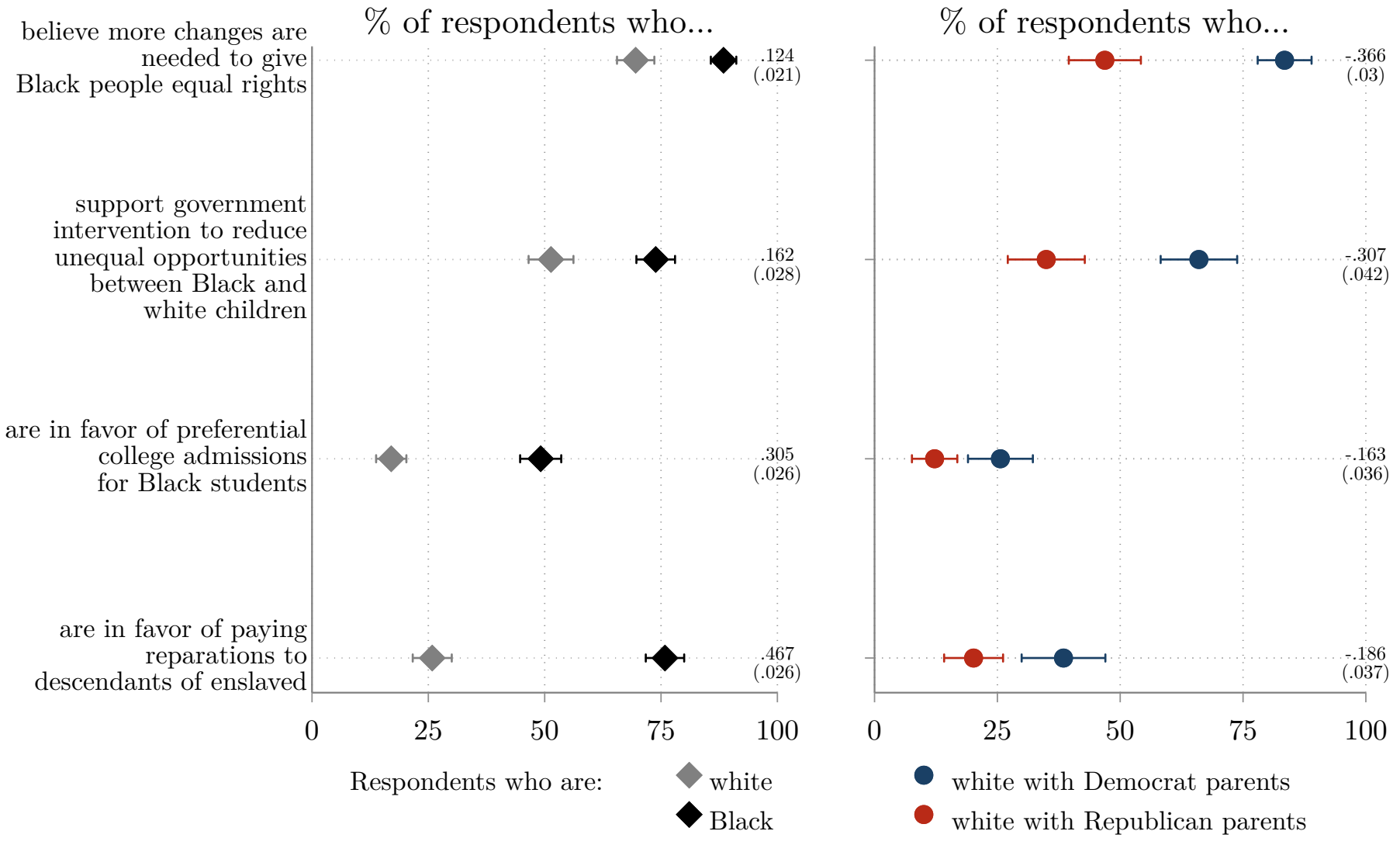
Back

Support for Race-Targeted Policies among Adults



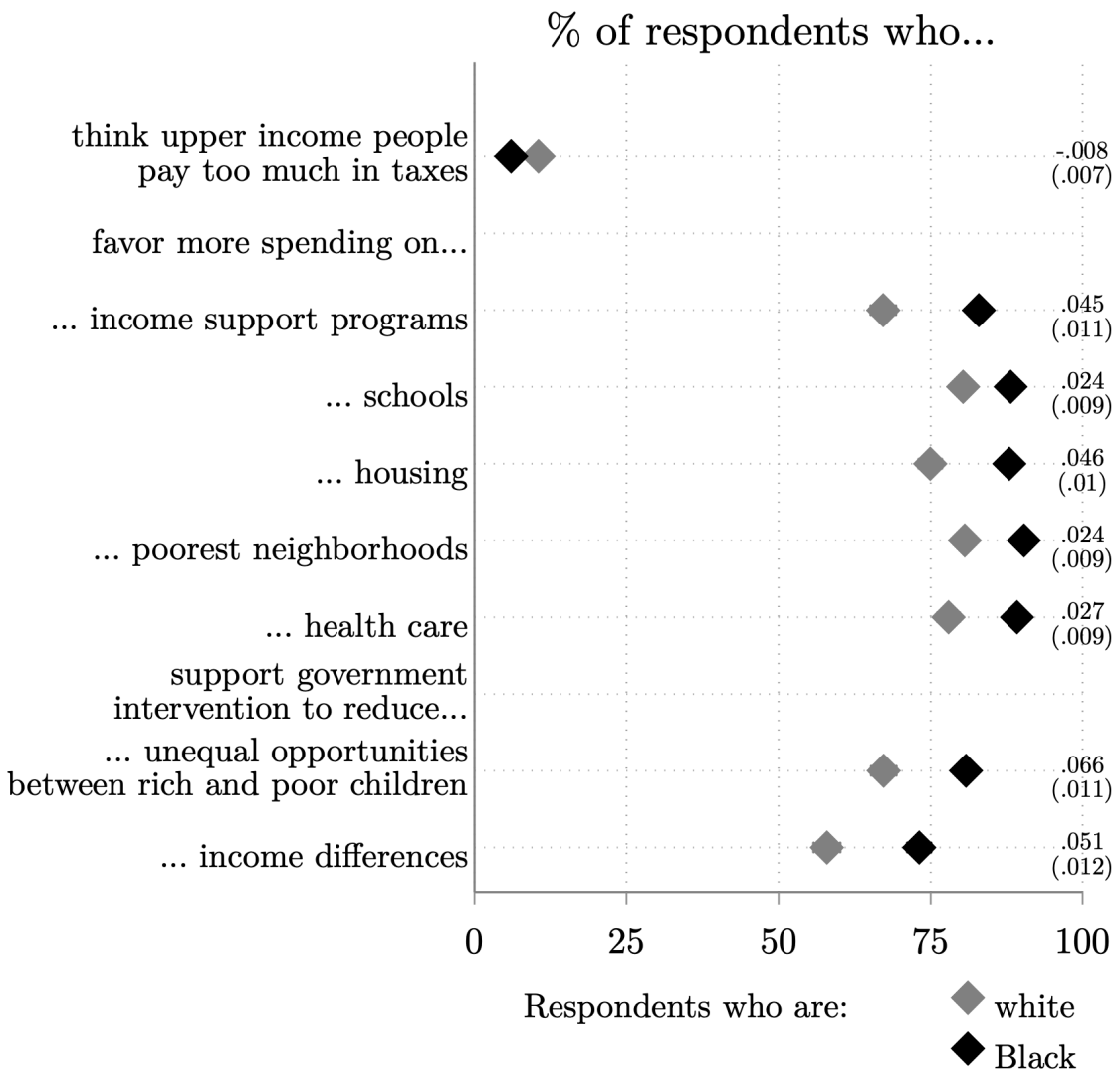
Back

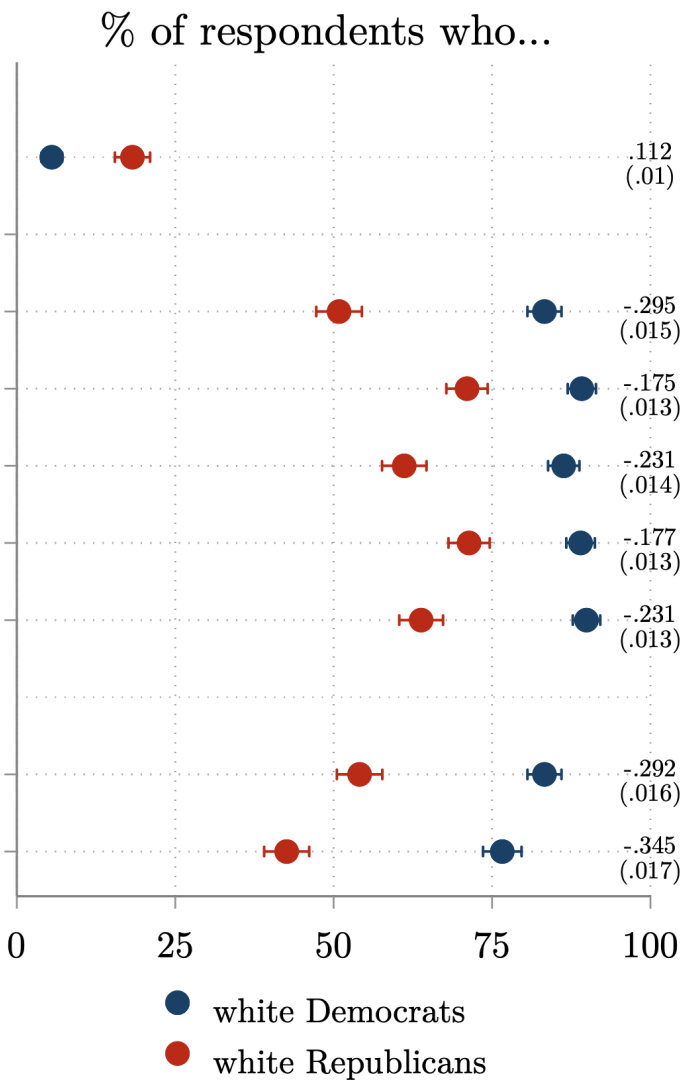
Support for Race-Targeted Policies among Teens



Back

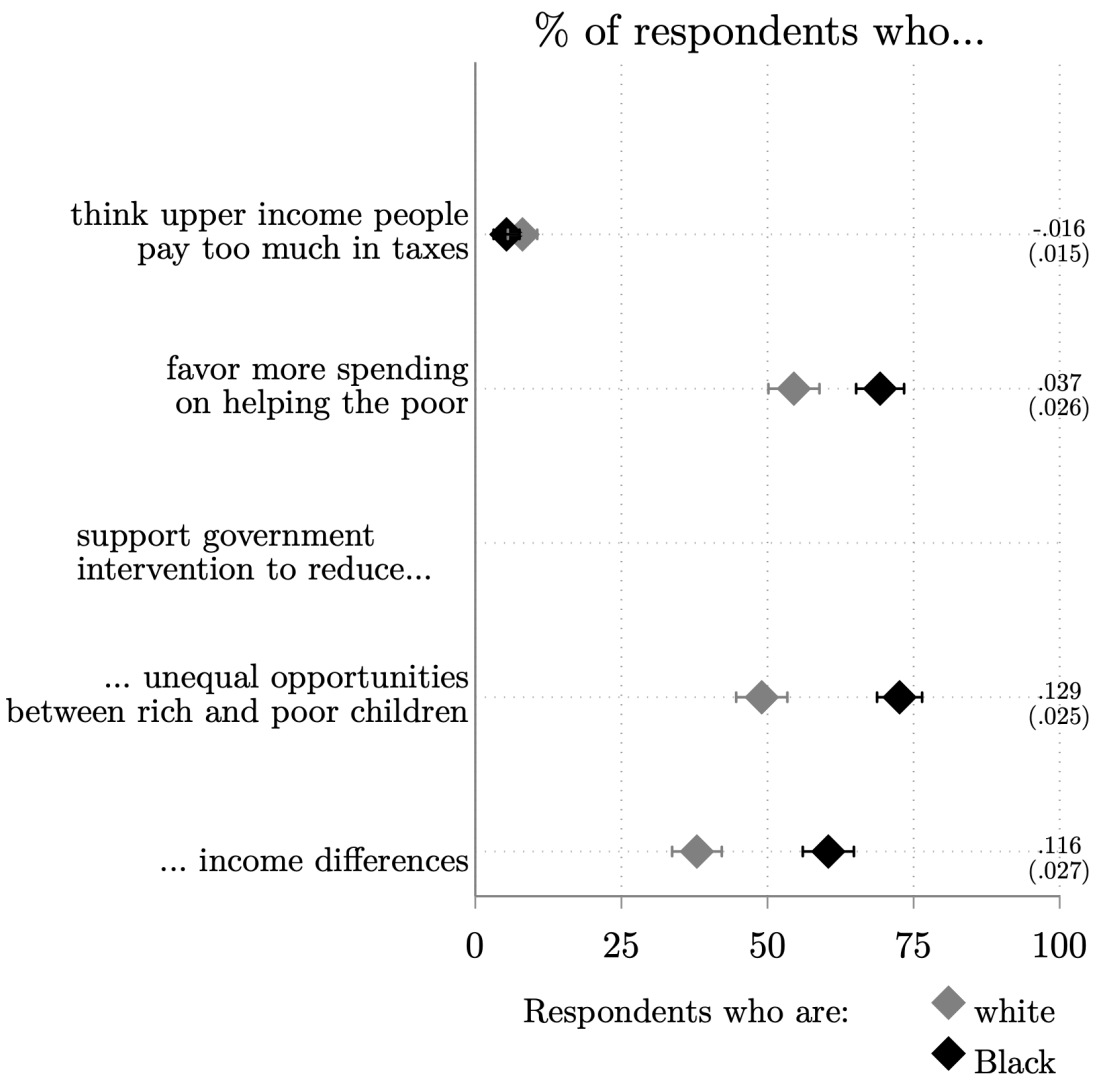
Support for Redistribution Policies among Adults

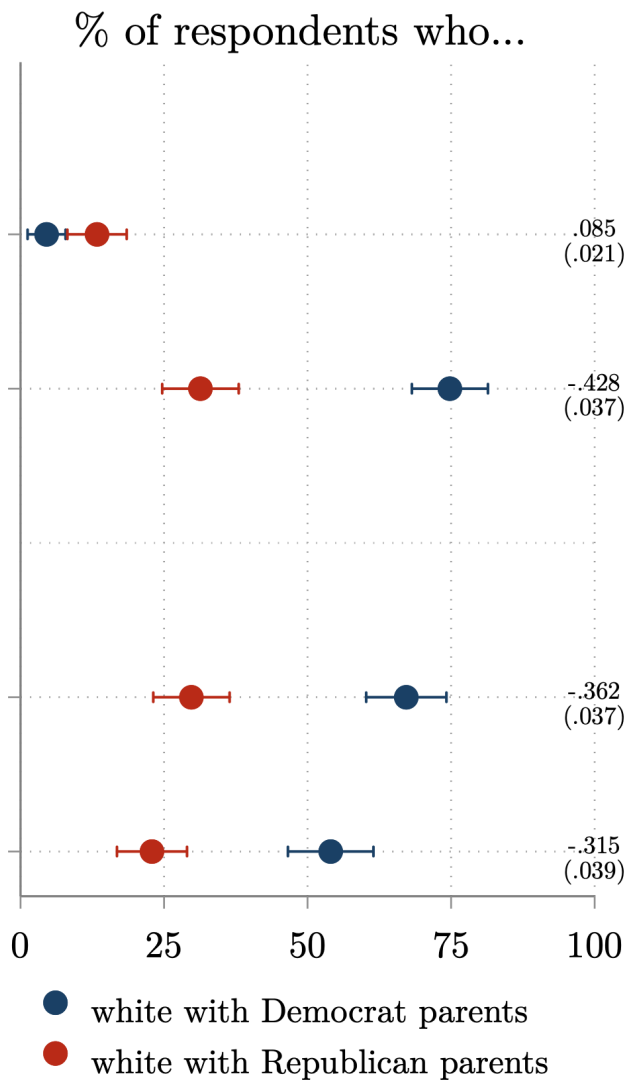




Back

Support for Redistribution Policies among Teens



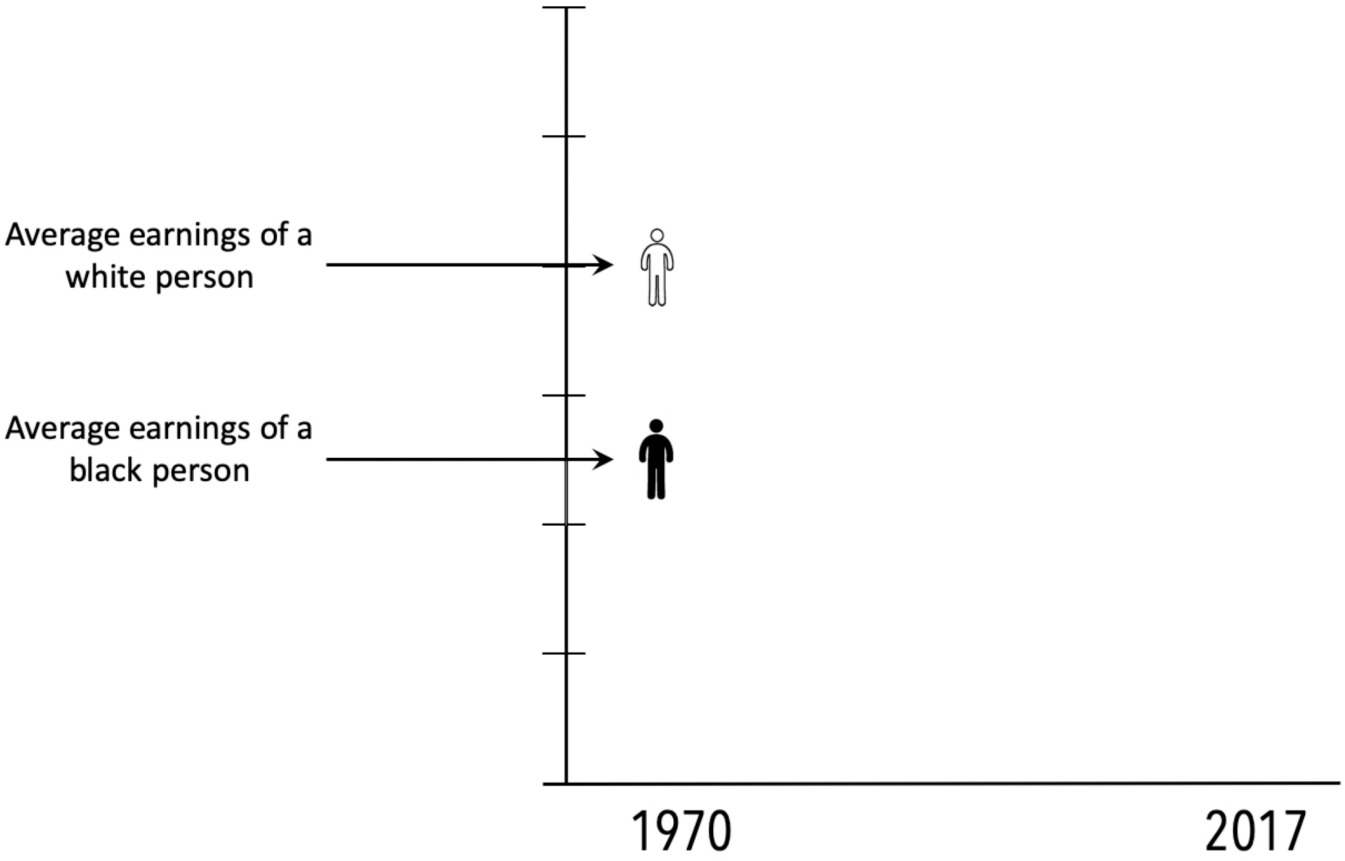


Back

Earnings Gap Treatment

In 1970, a black person would on average earn only two thirds as much as a white person.

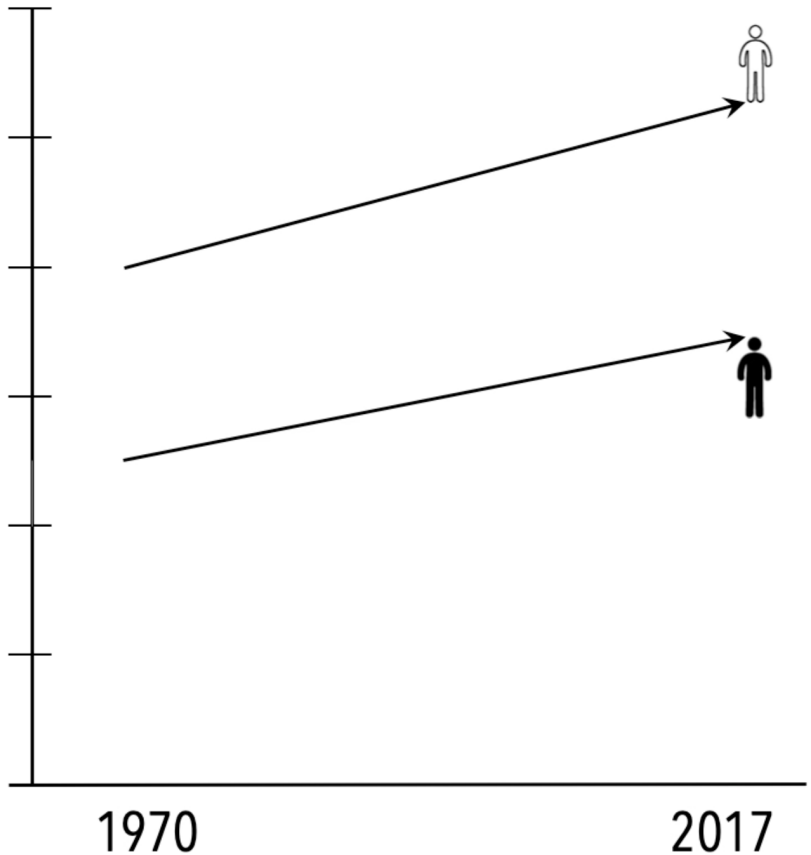
That is, for every dollar a white person earned, a black person would earn 63 cents.



Earnings Gap Treatment

Over time, the earnings of white and black people have grown.

But the gap in earnings between black and white people has not been closed at all over the years.



Back

Mobility Gap Treatment

Out of 100 **black** children born in one of the poorest 100 families,



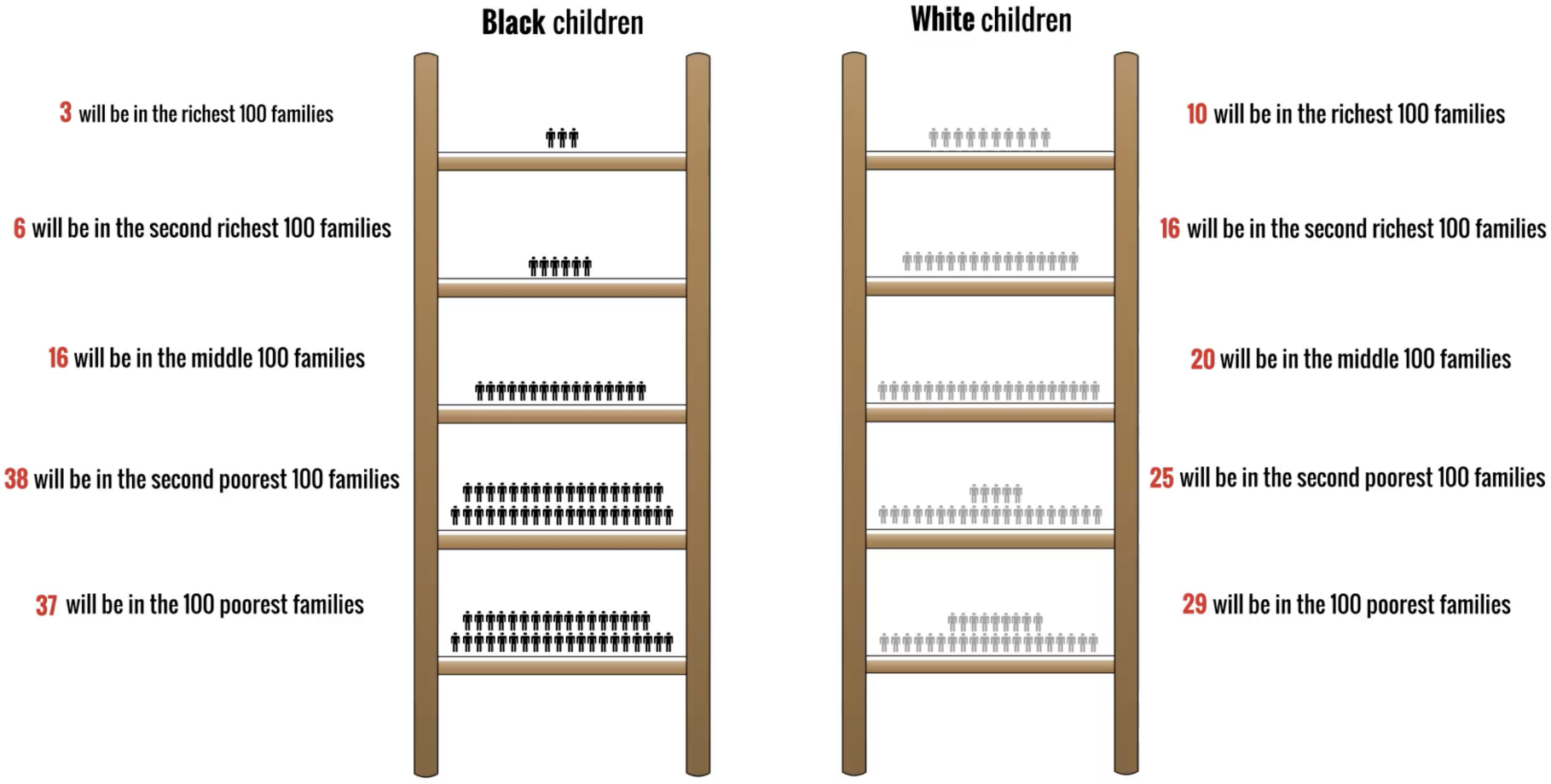
Mobility Gap Treatment

Out of 100 **white** children born in one of the poorest 100 families,



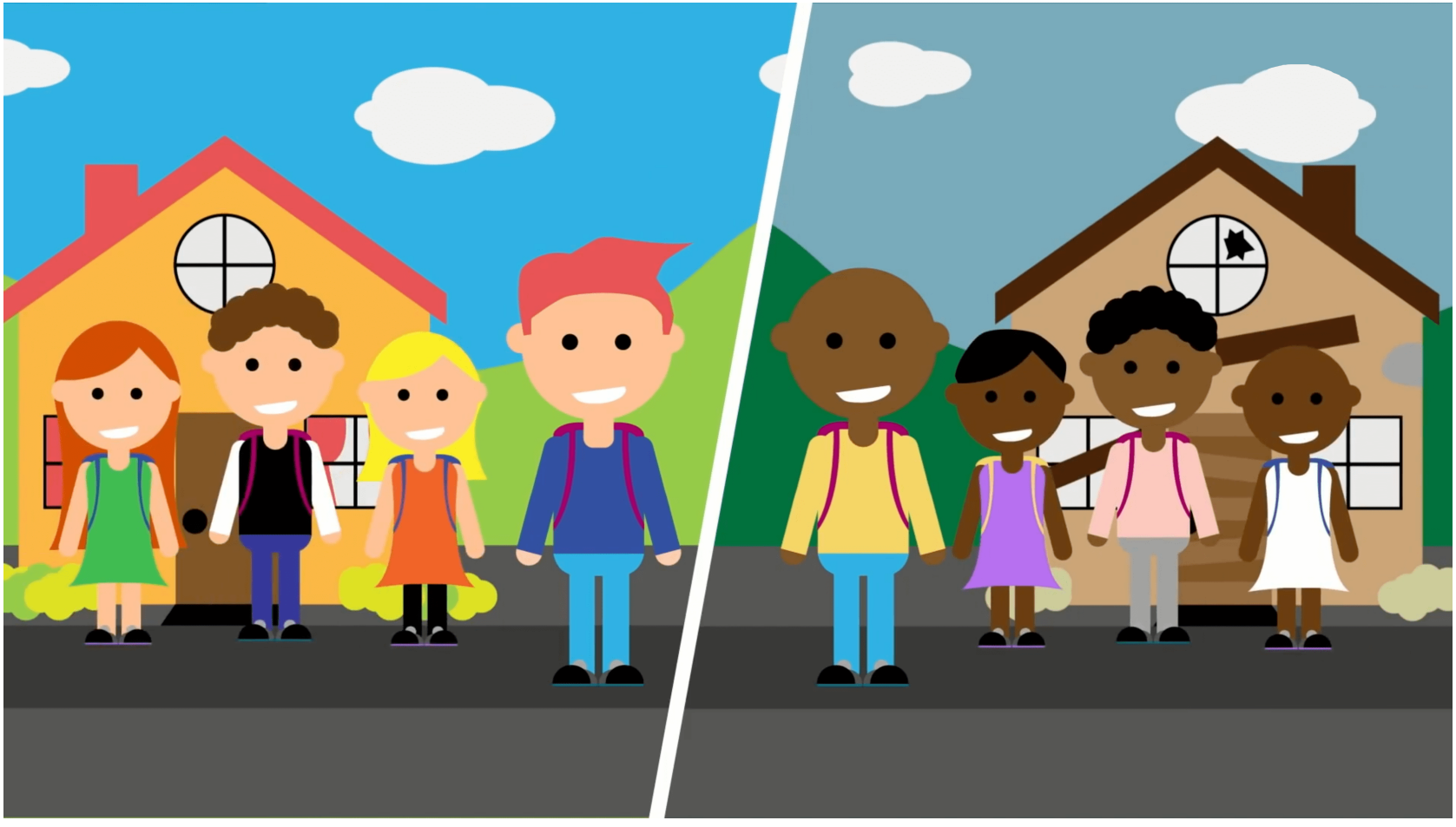
Mobility Gap Treatment

Let's compare again how **black** and **white** children born in one of the poorest 100 families will do when they grow up

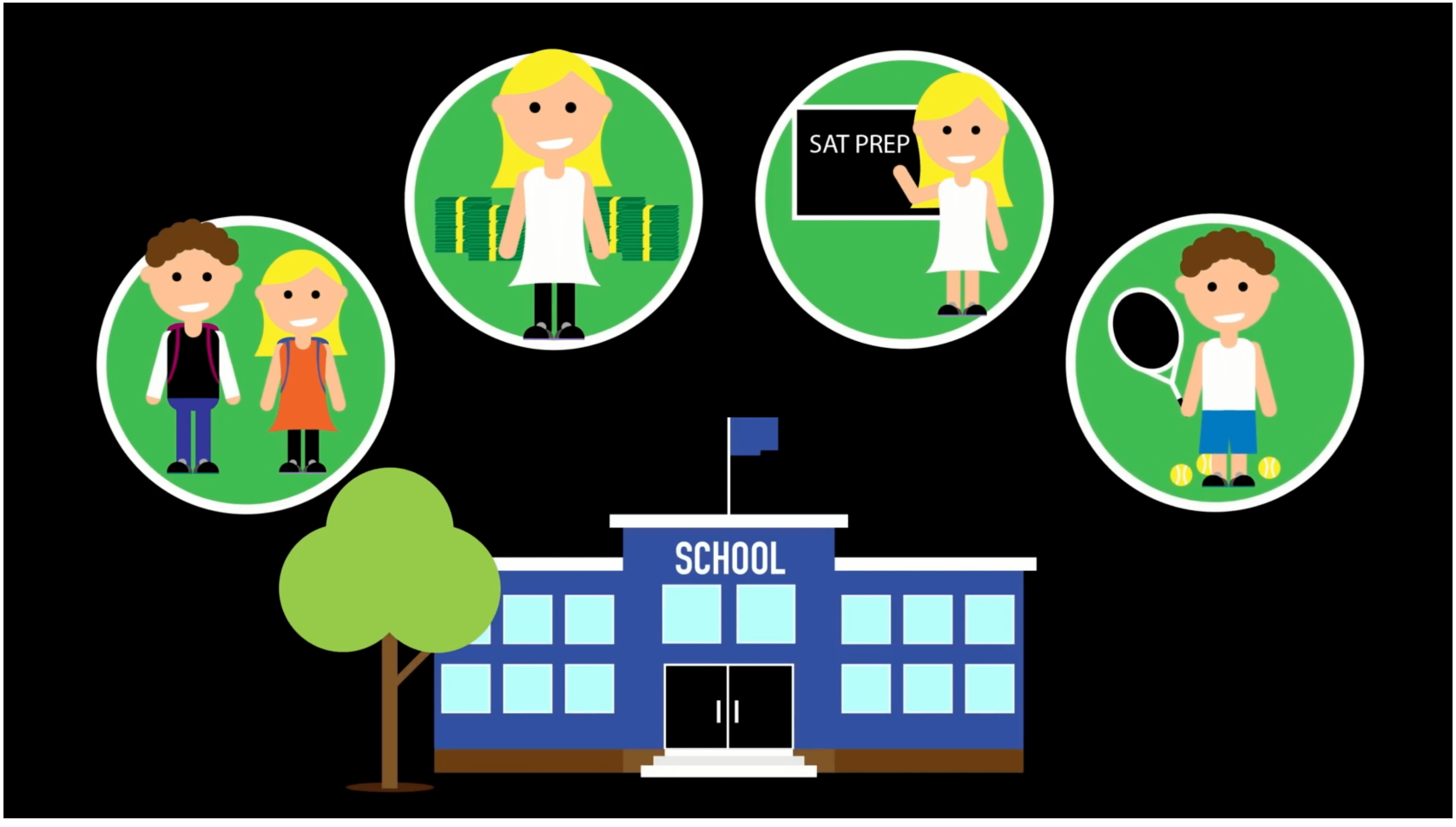


Back

Systemic Racism Treatment



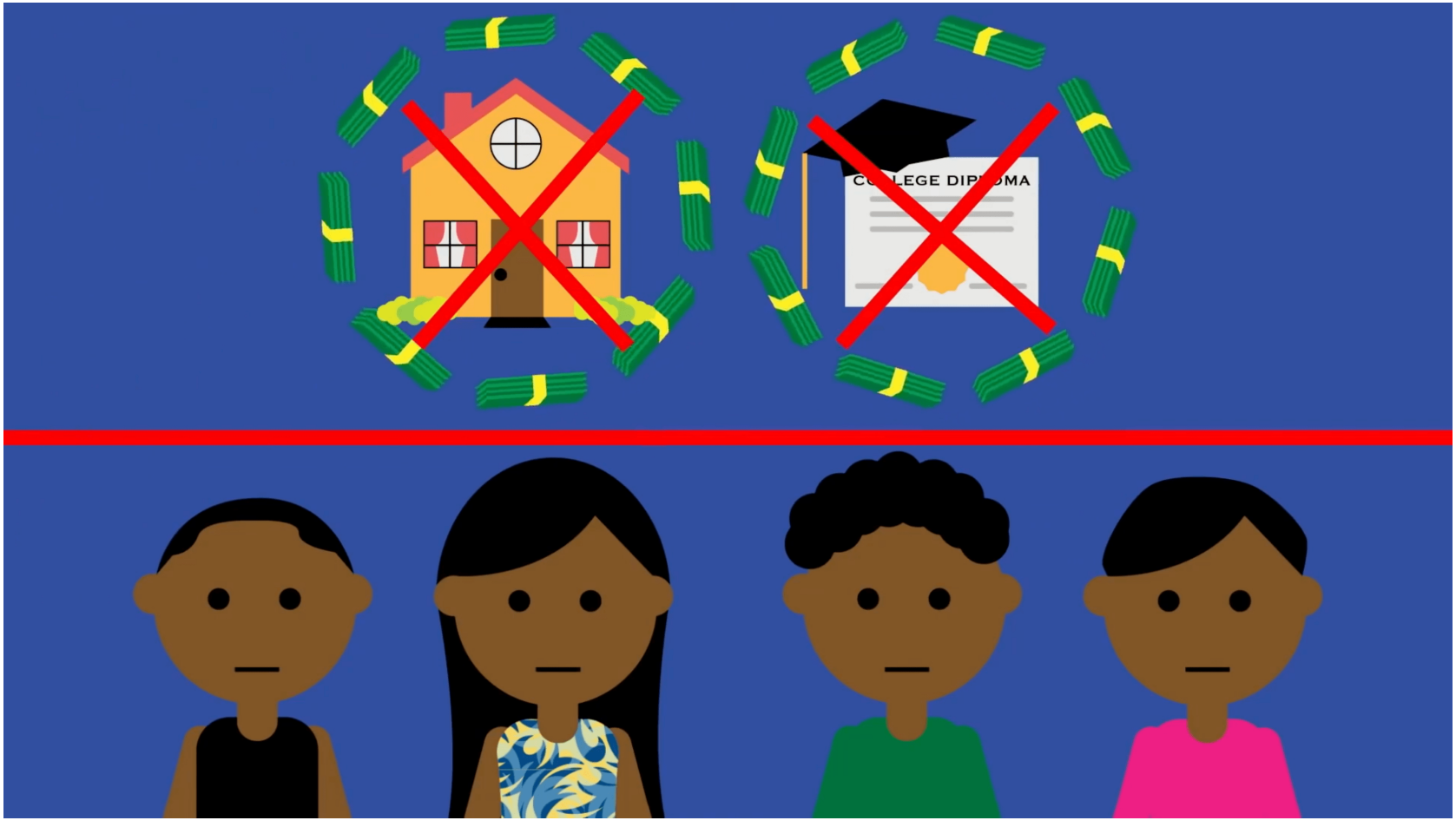
Systemic Racism Treatment



Systemic Racism Treatment



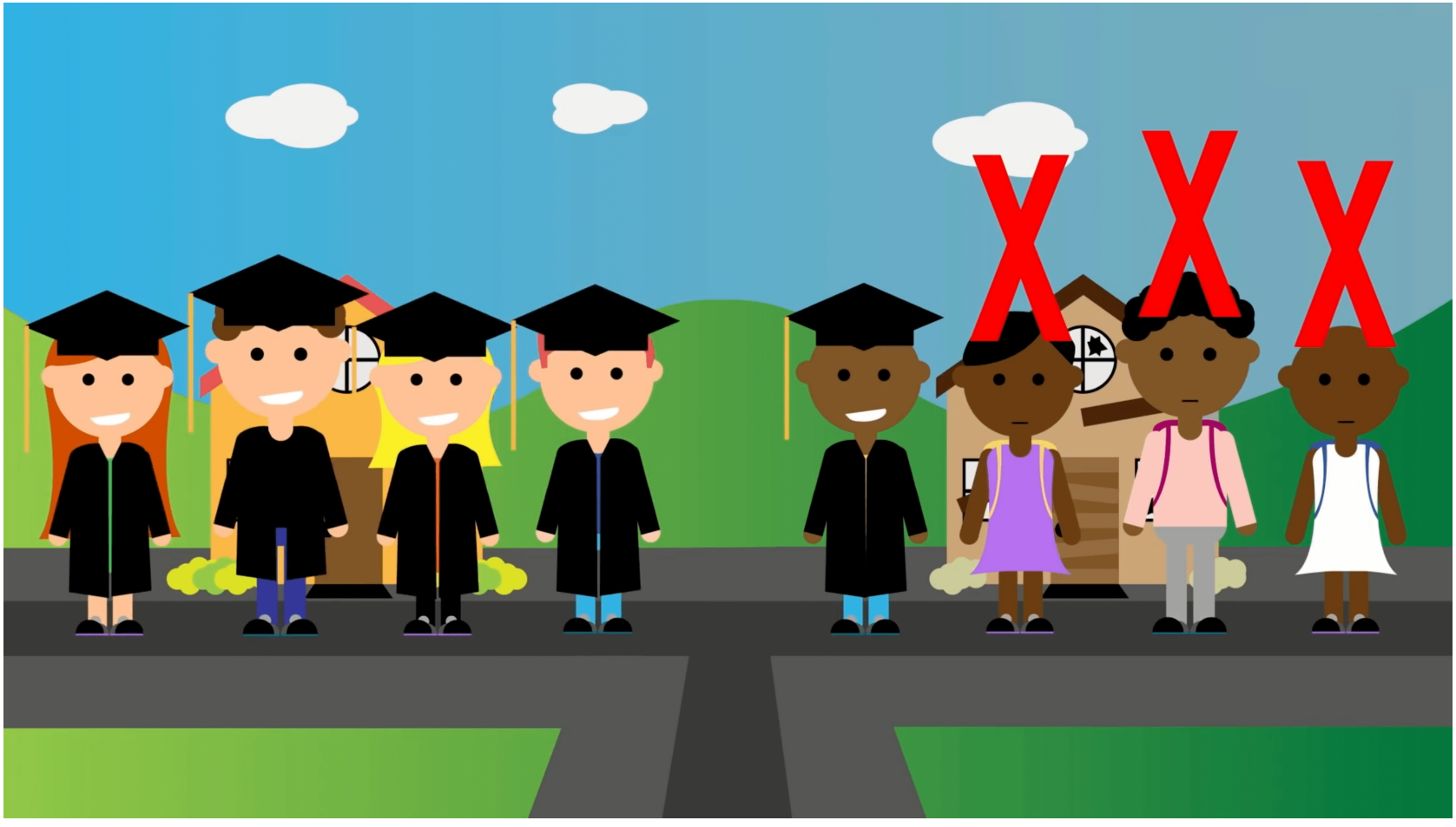
Systemic Racism Treatment



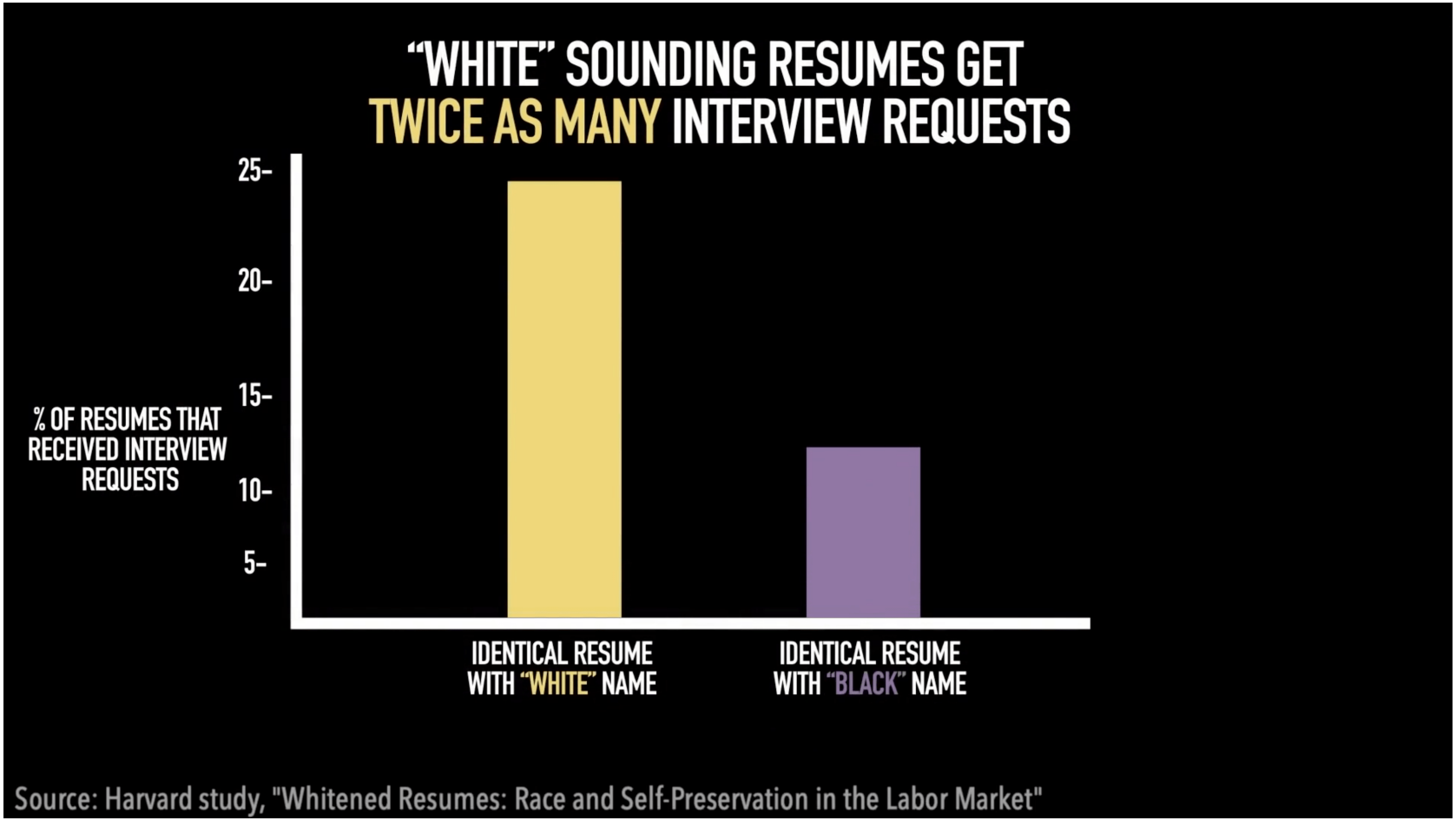
Systemic Racism Treatment



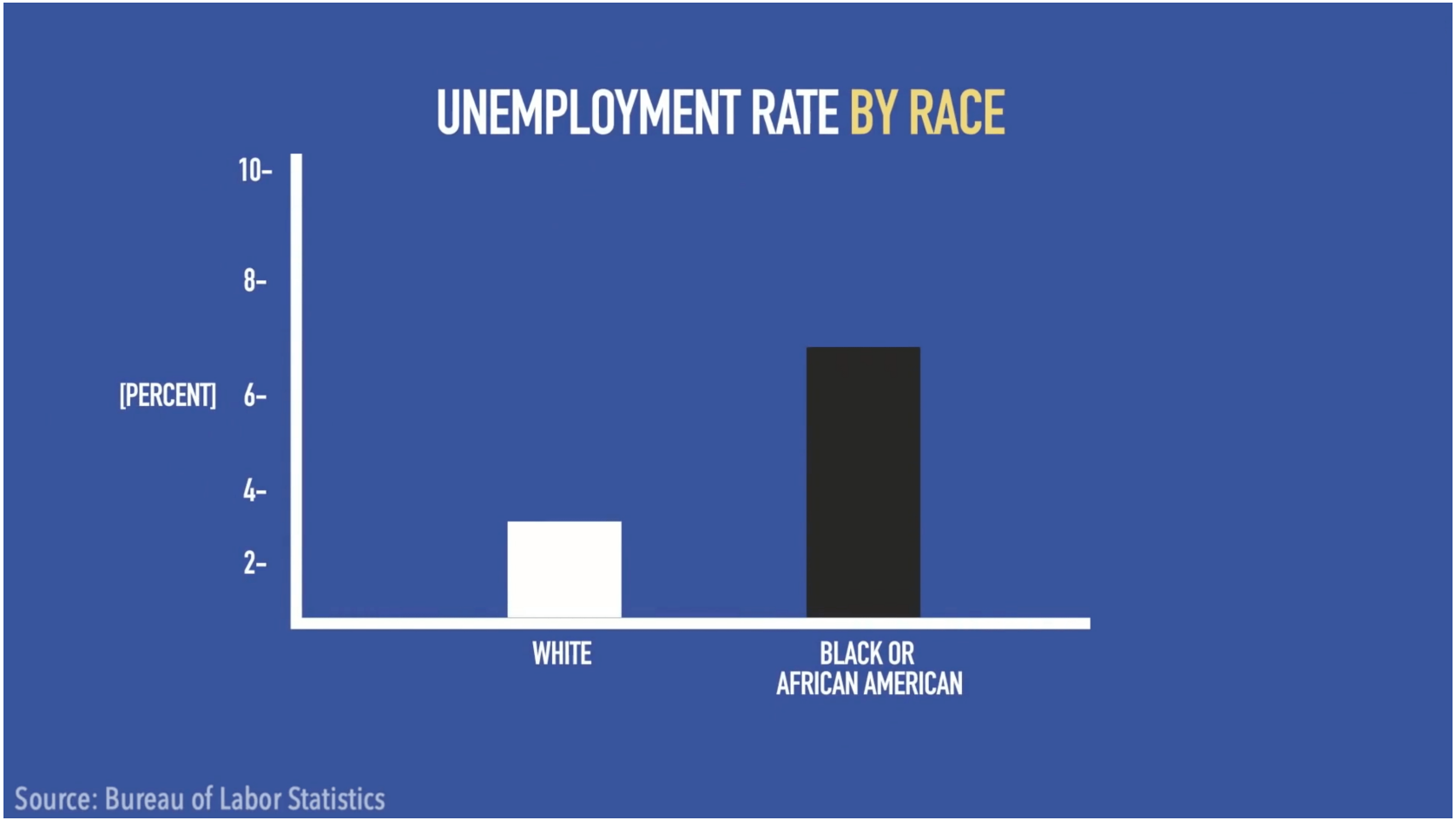
Systemic Racism Treatment



Systemic Racism Treatment

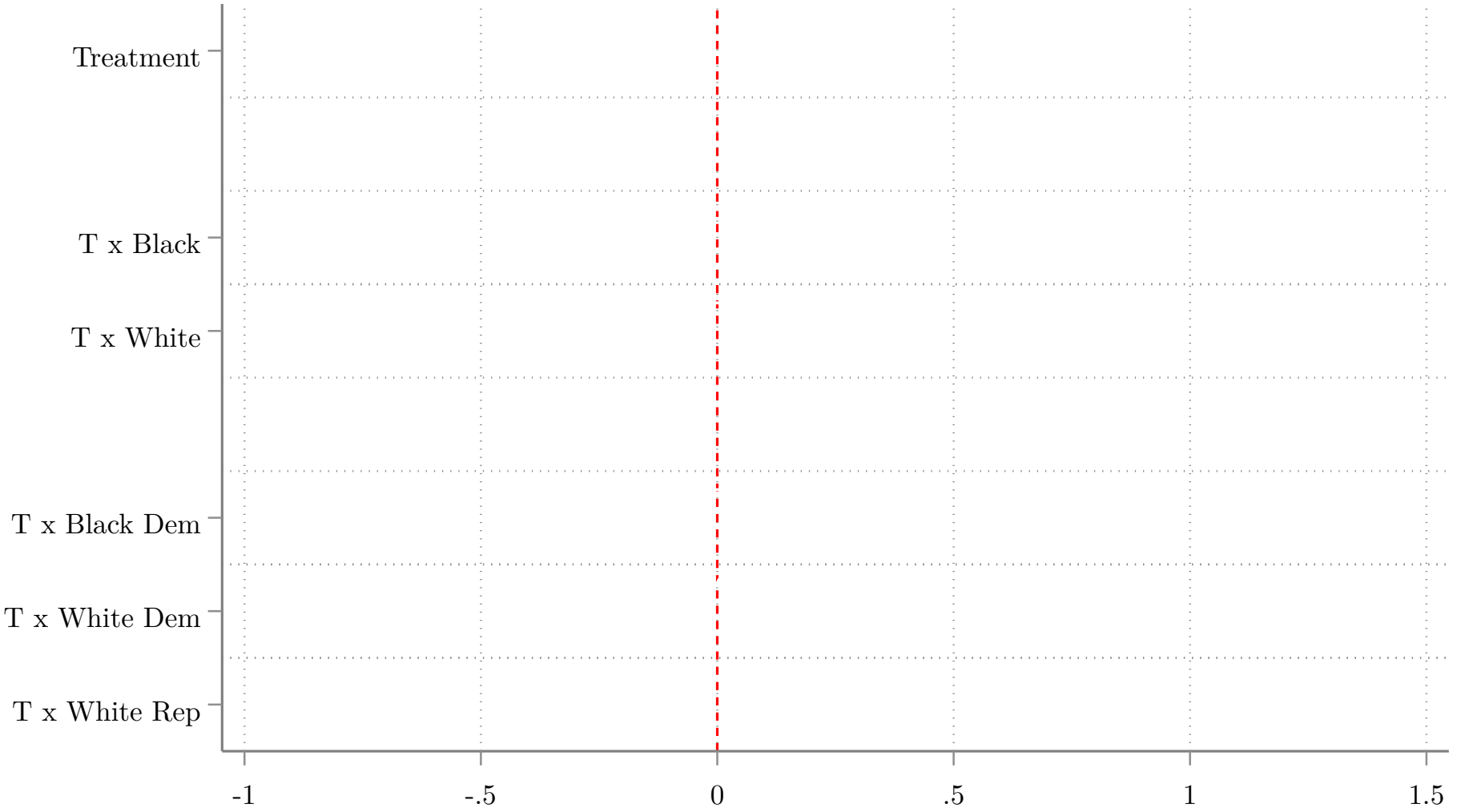


Systemic Racism Treatment

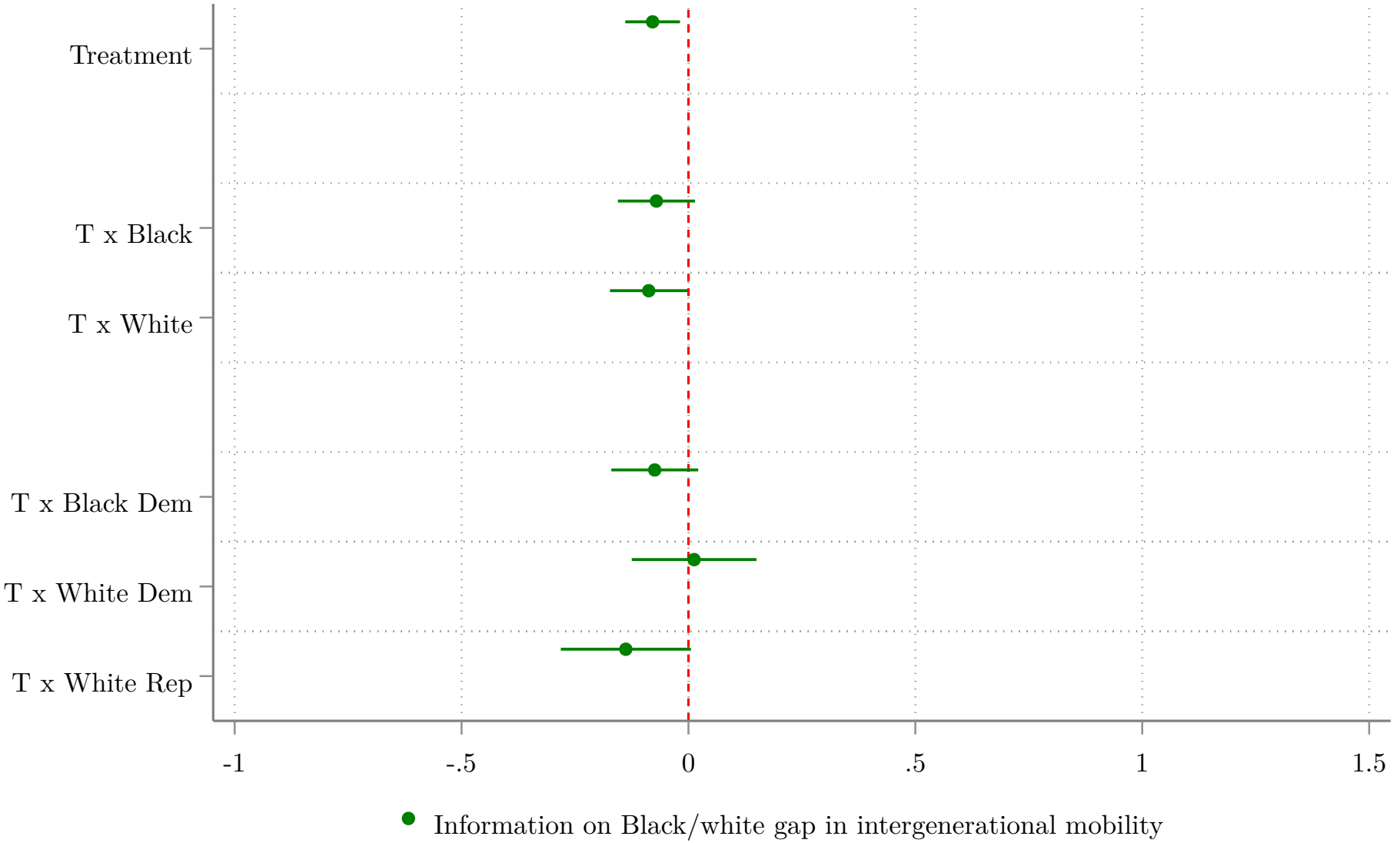


Back

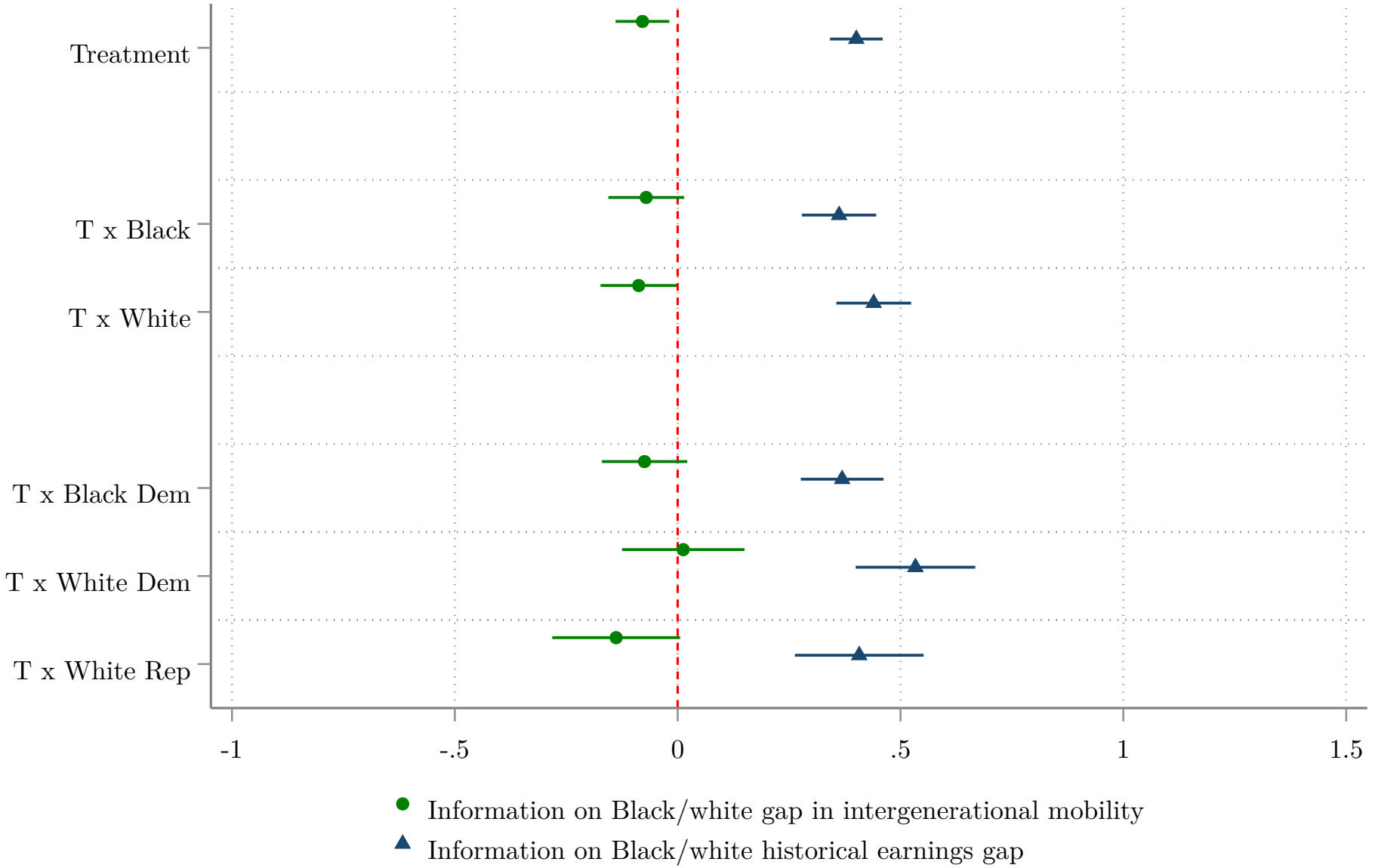
Treatment Effects - Racial Income Inequality



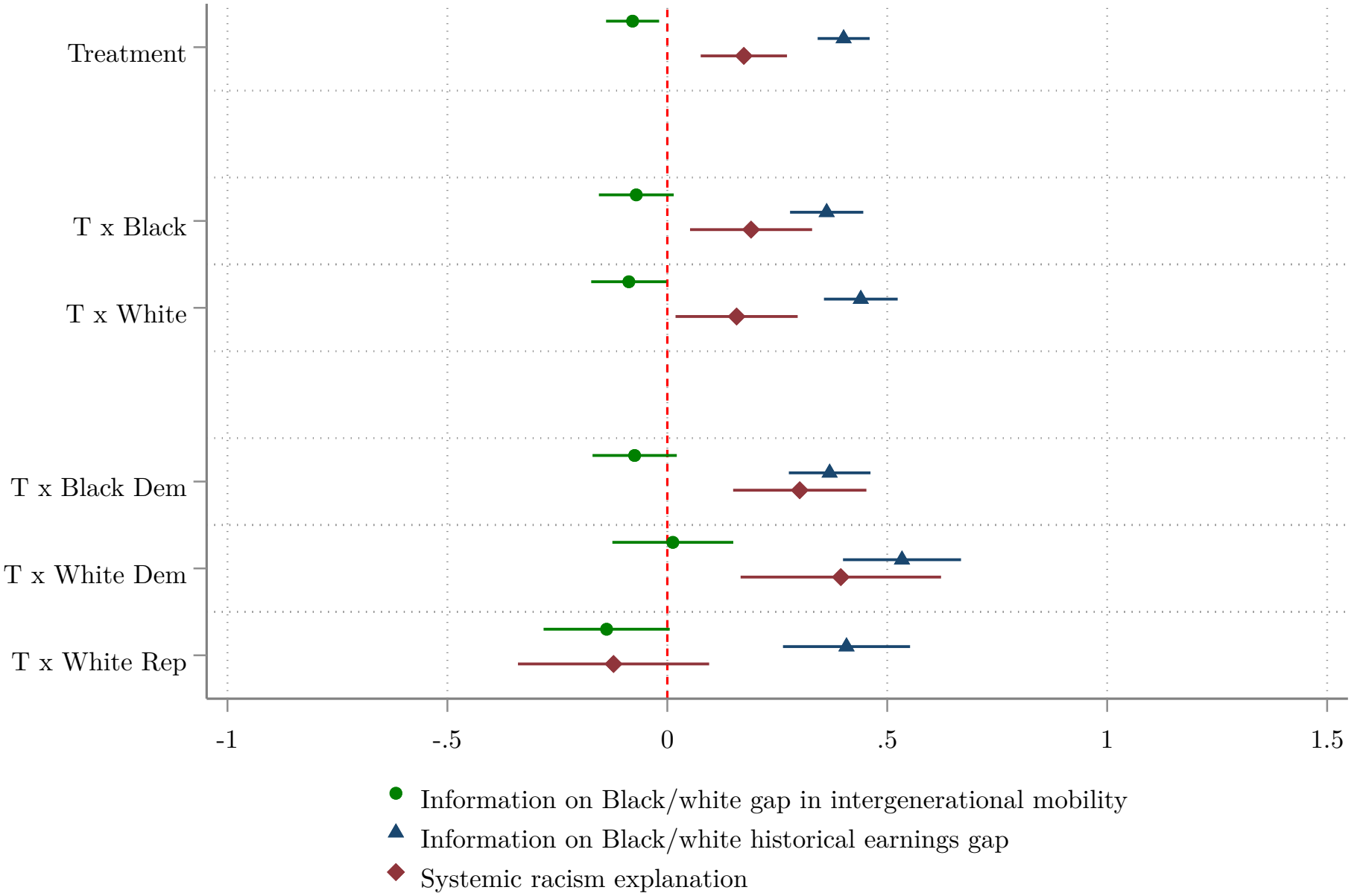
Treatment Effects - Racial Income Inequality



Treatment Effects - Racial Income Inequality

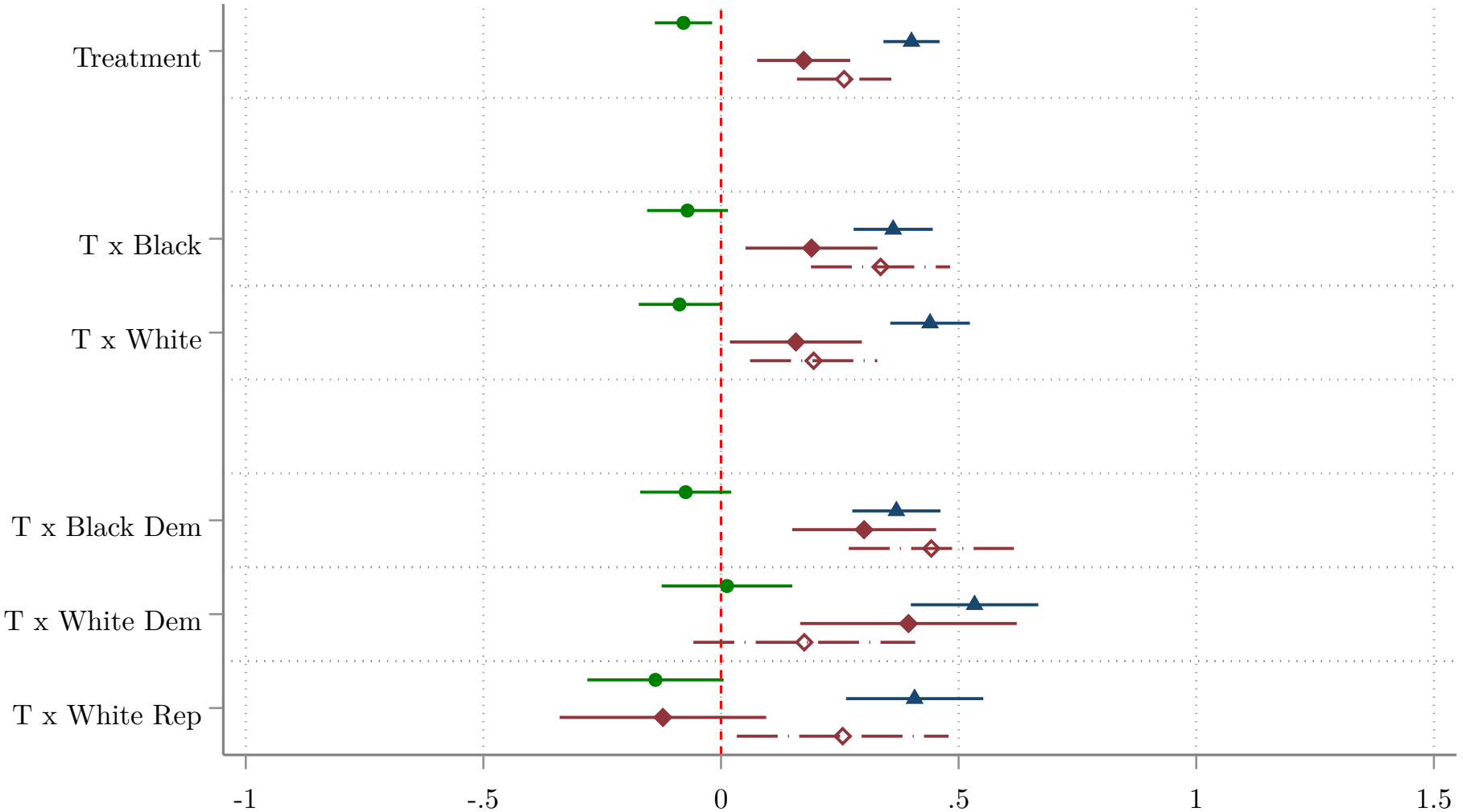


Treatment Effects - Racial Income Inequality

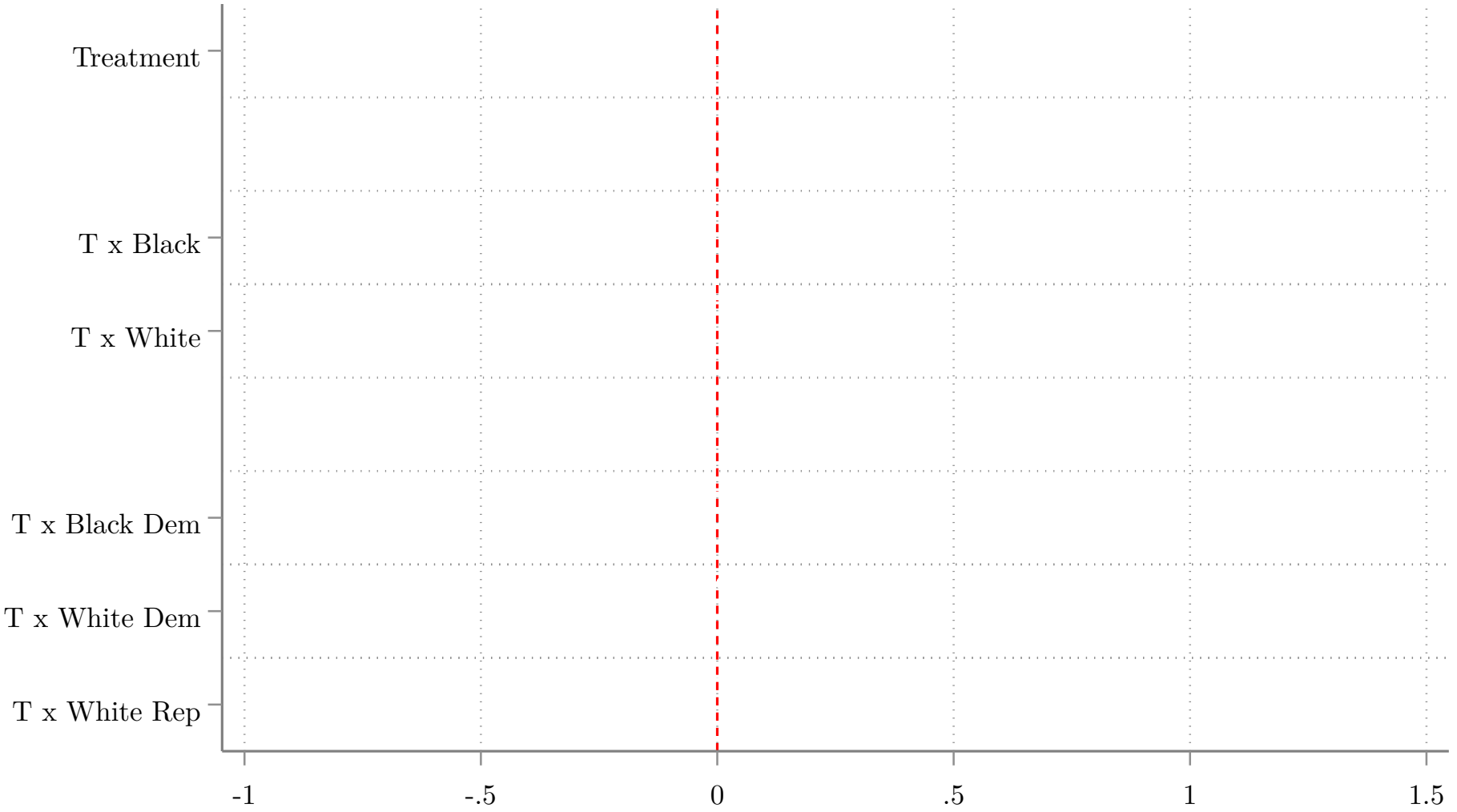


Treatment Effects - Racial Income Inequality

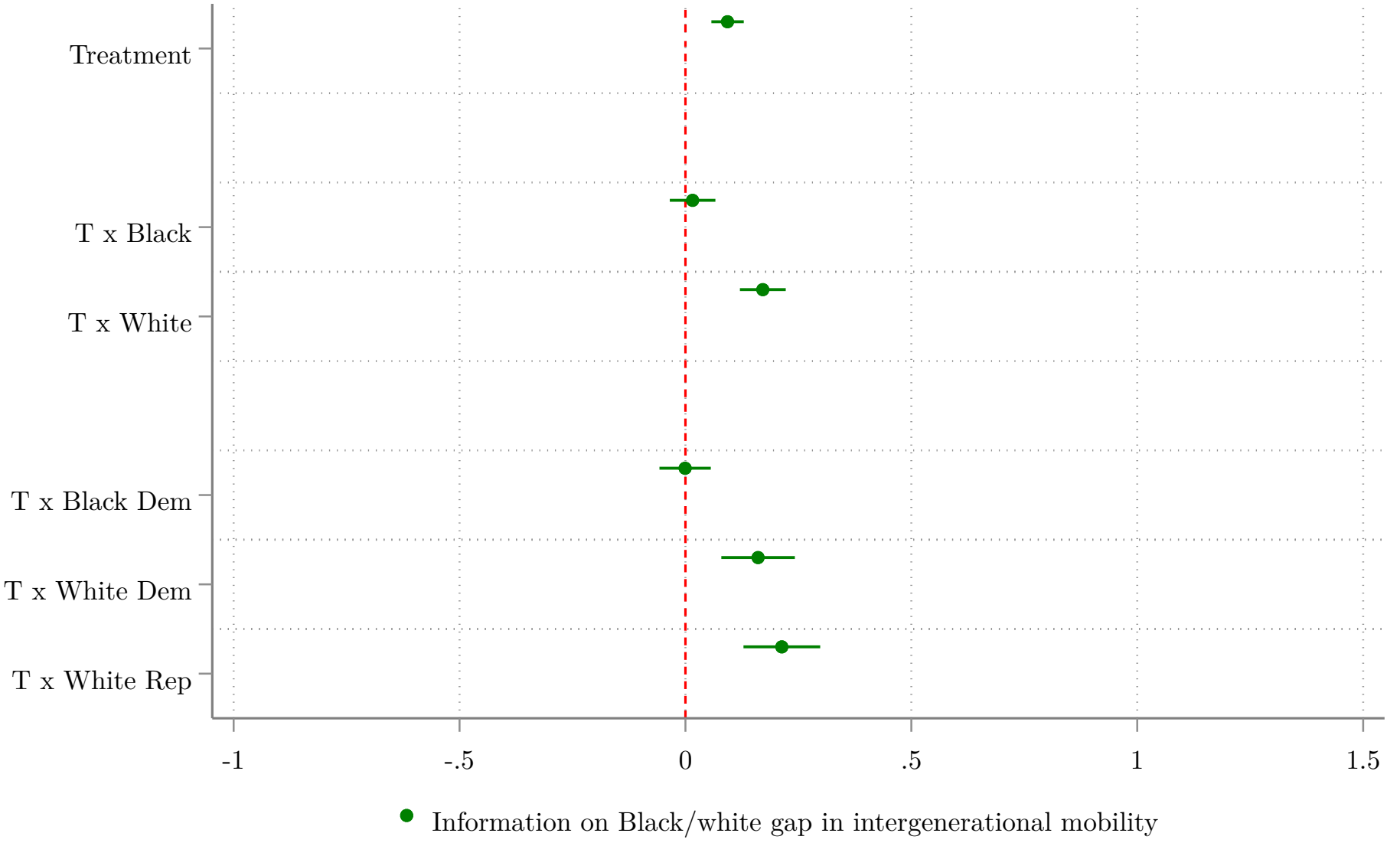
Back



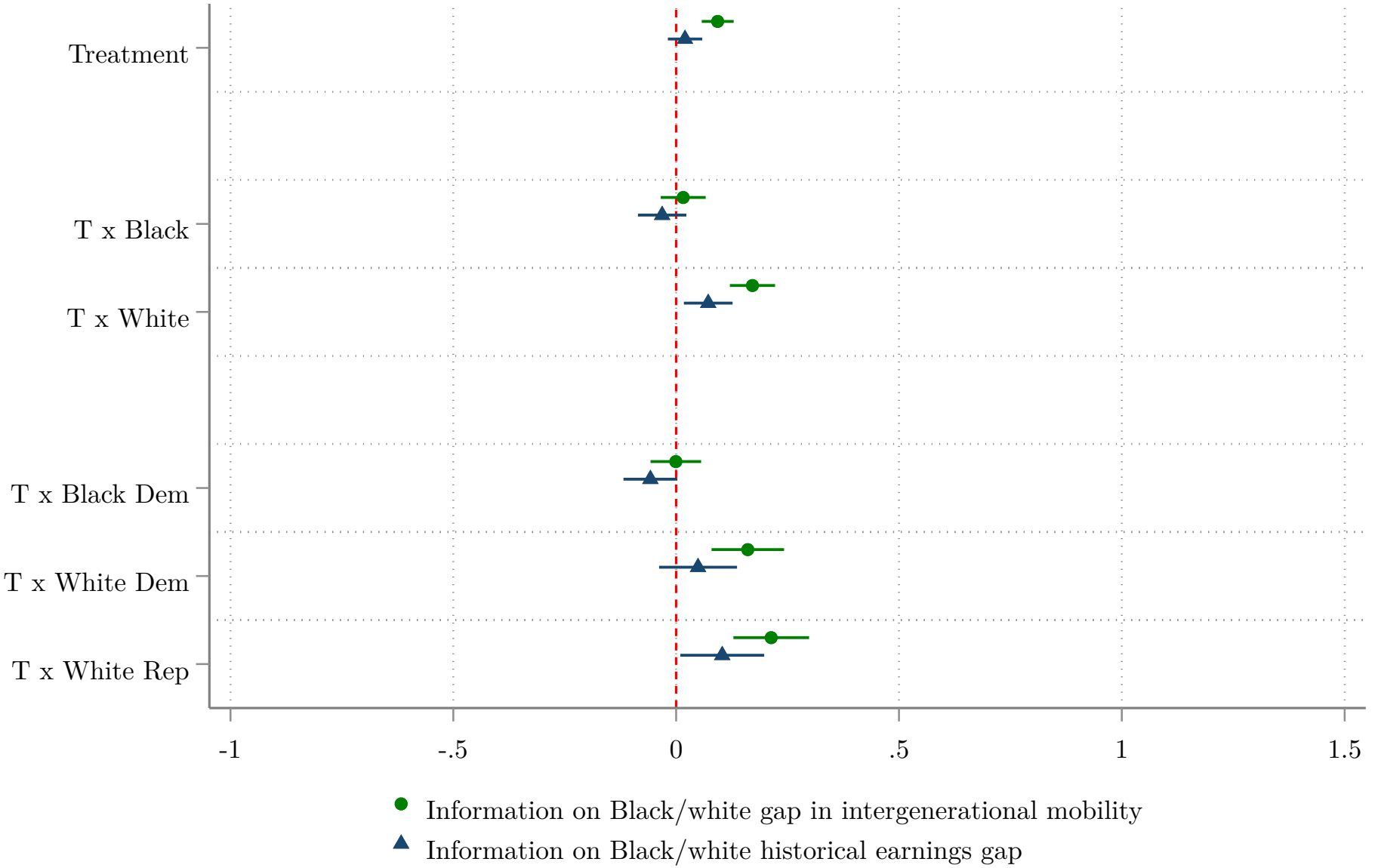
Treatment Effects - Racial Mobility Gap



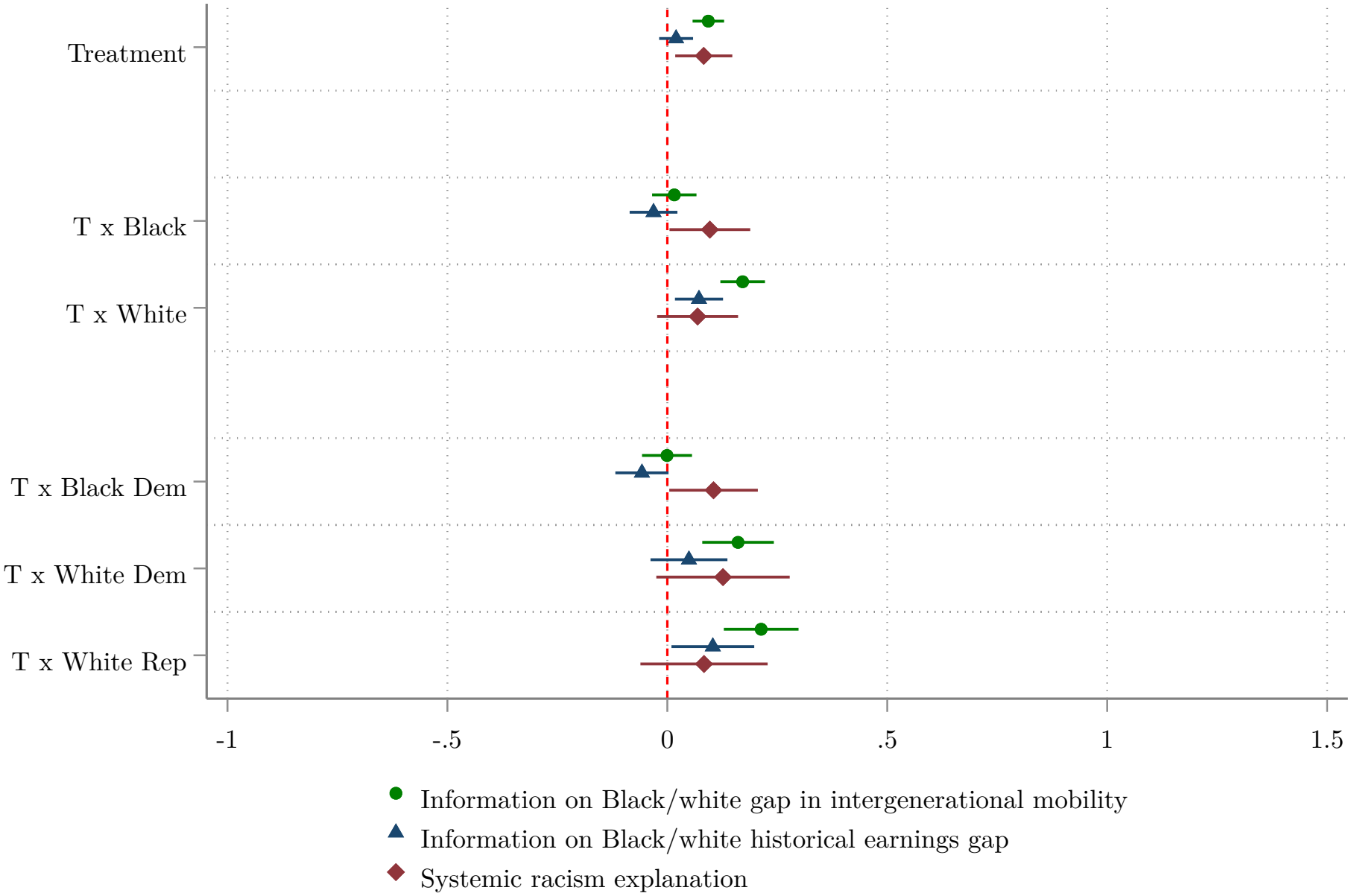
Treatment Effects - Racial Mobility Gap



Treatment Effects - Racial Mobility Gap

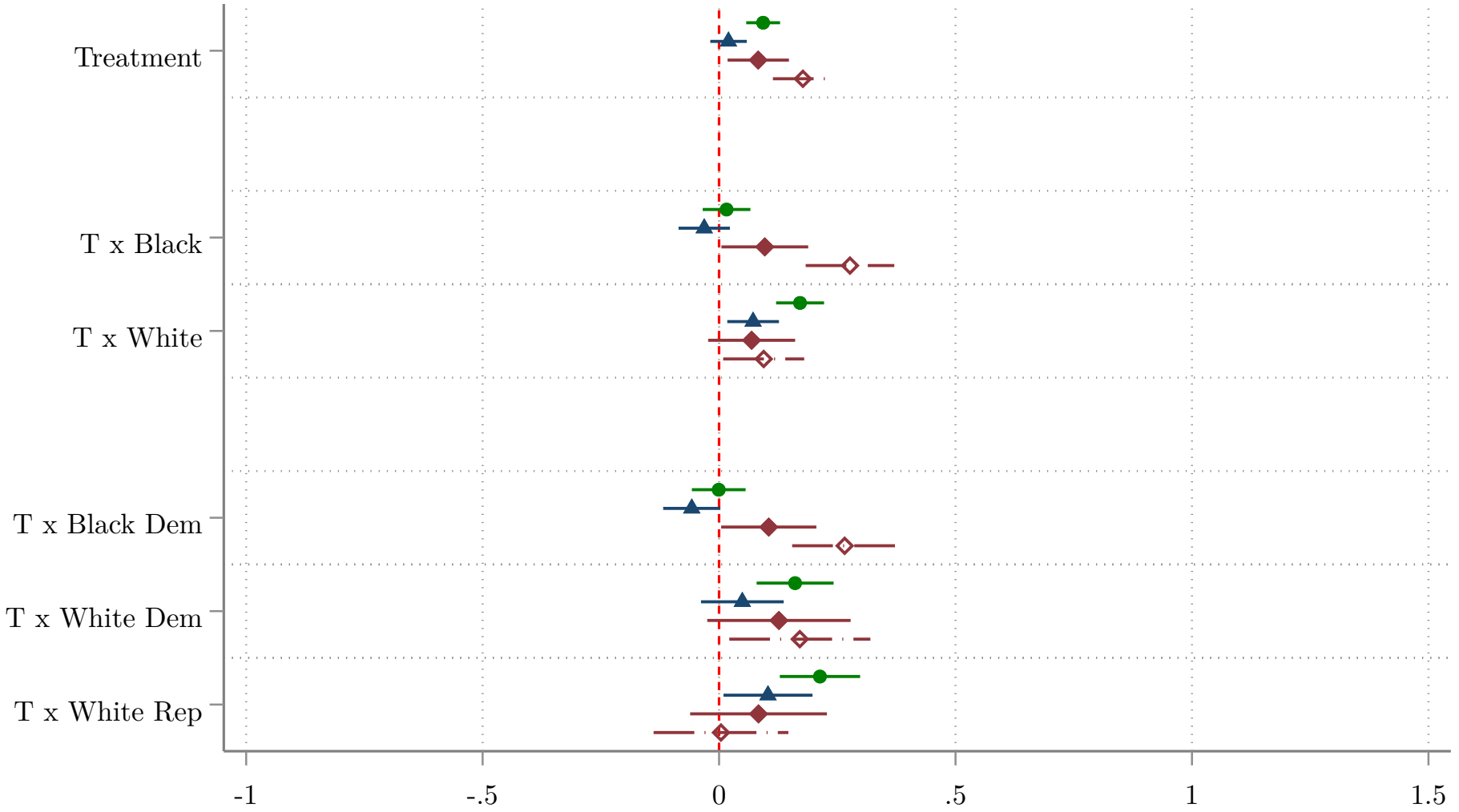


Treatment Effects - Racial Mobility Gap

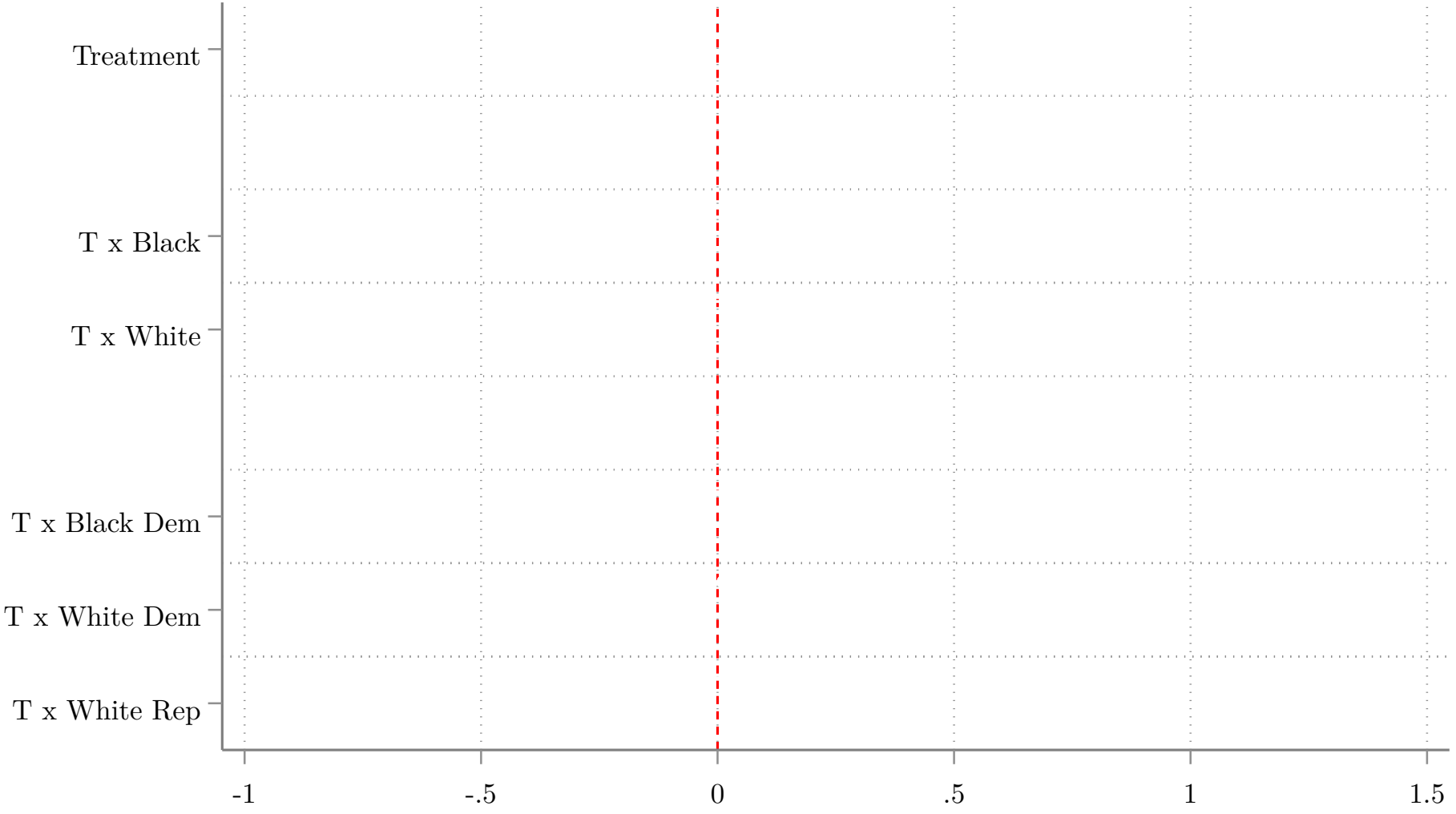


Treatment Effects - Racial Mobility Gap

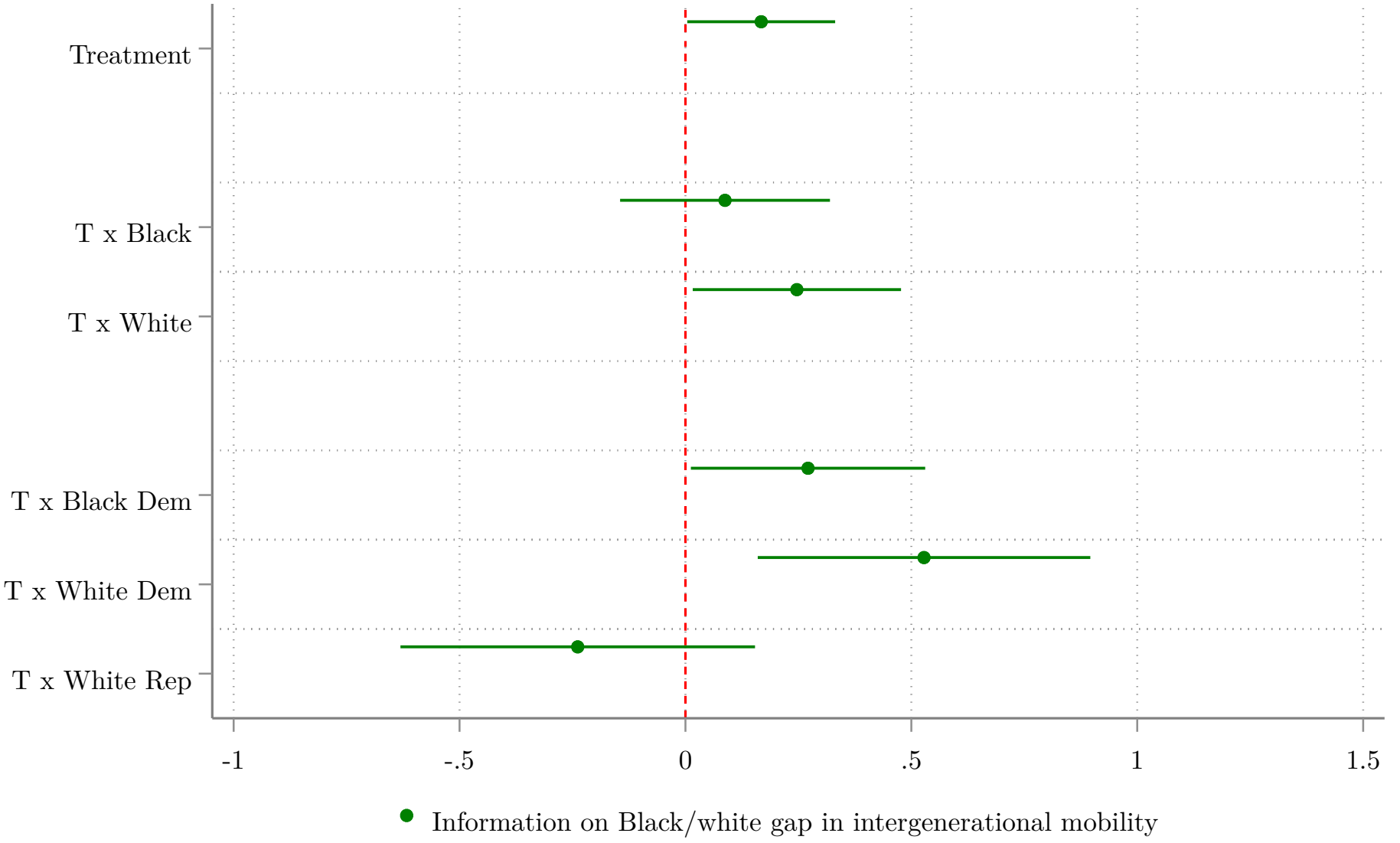
Back



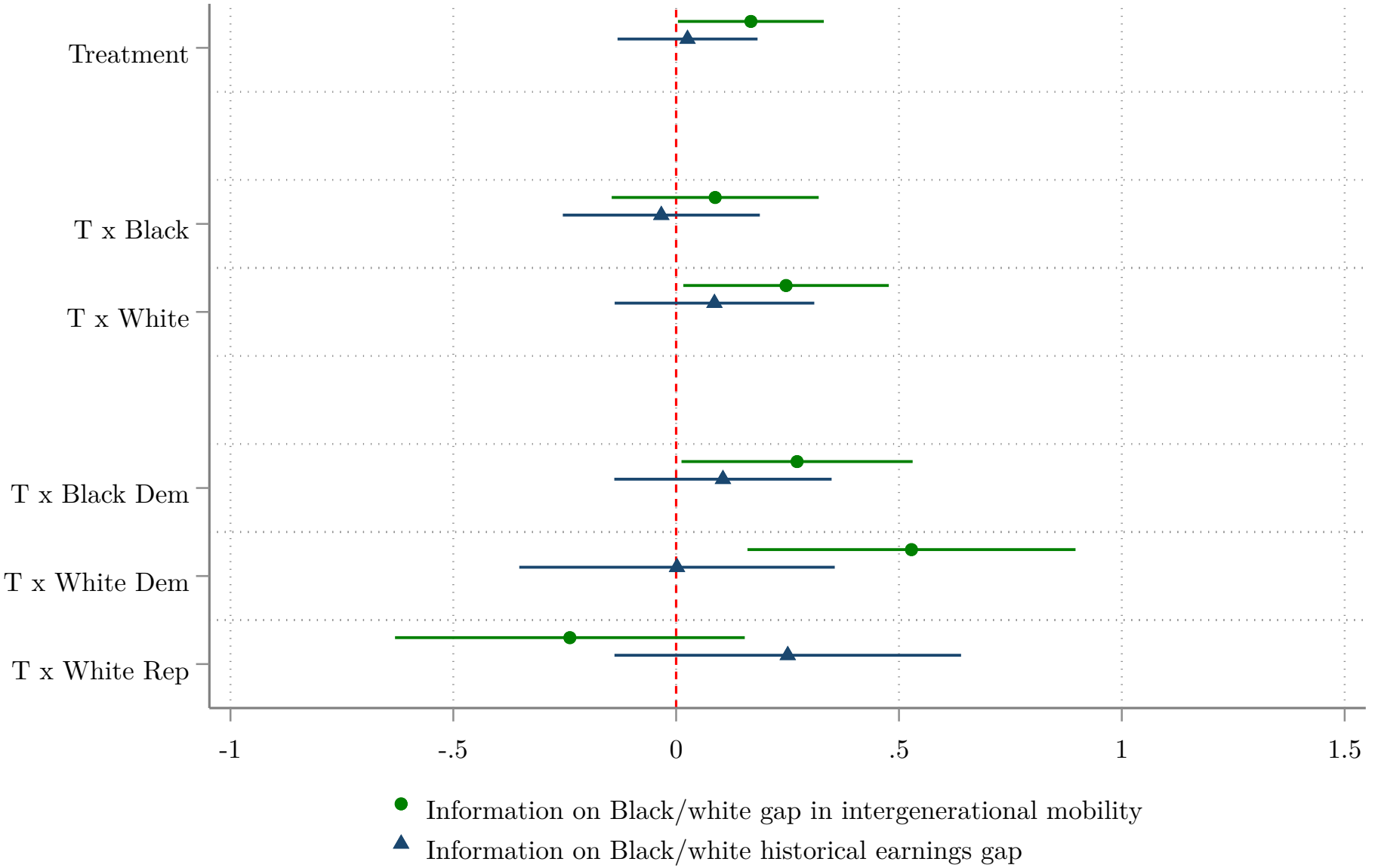
Treatment Effects - Perceived Causes



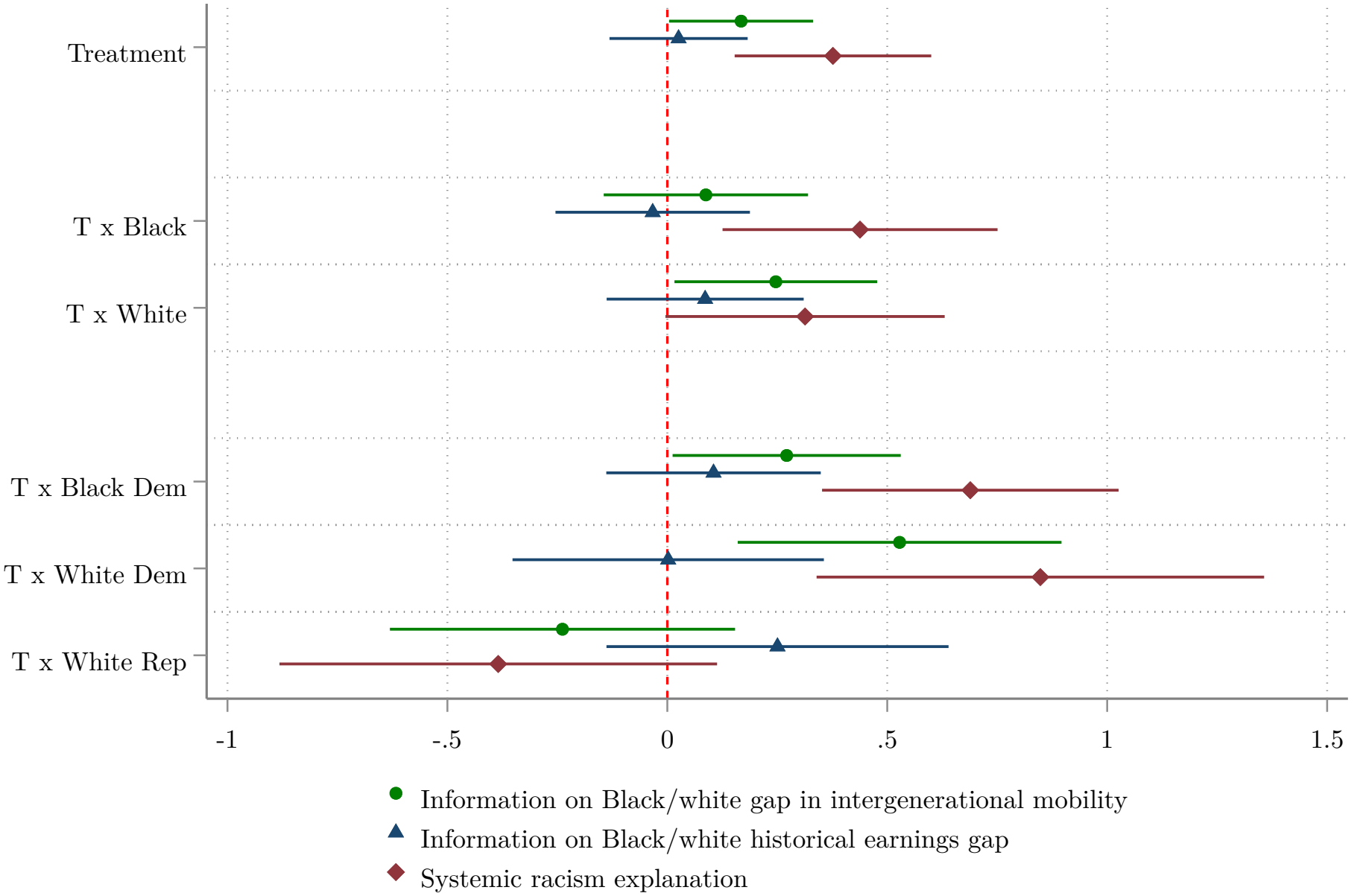
Treatment Effects - Perceived Causes



Treatment Effects - Perceived Causes

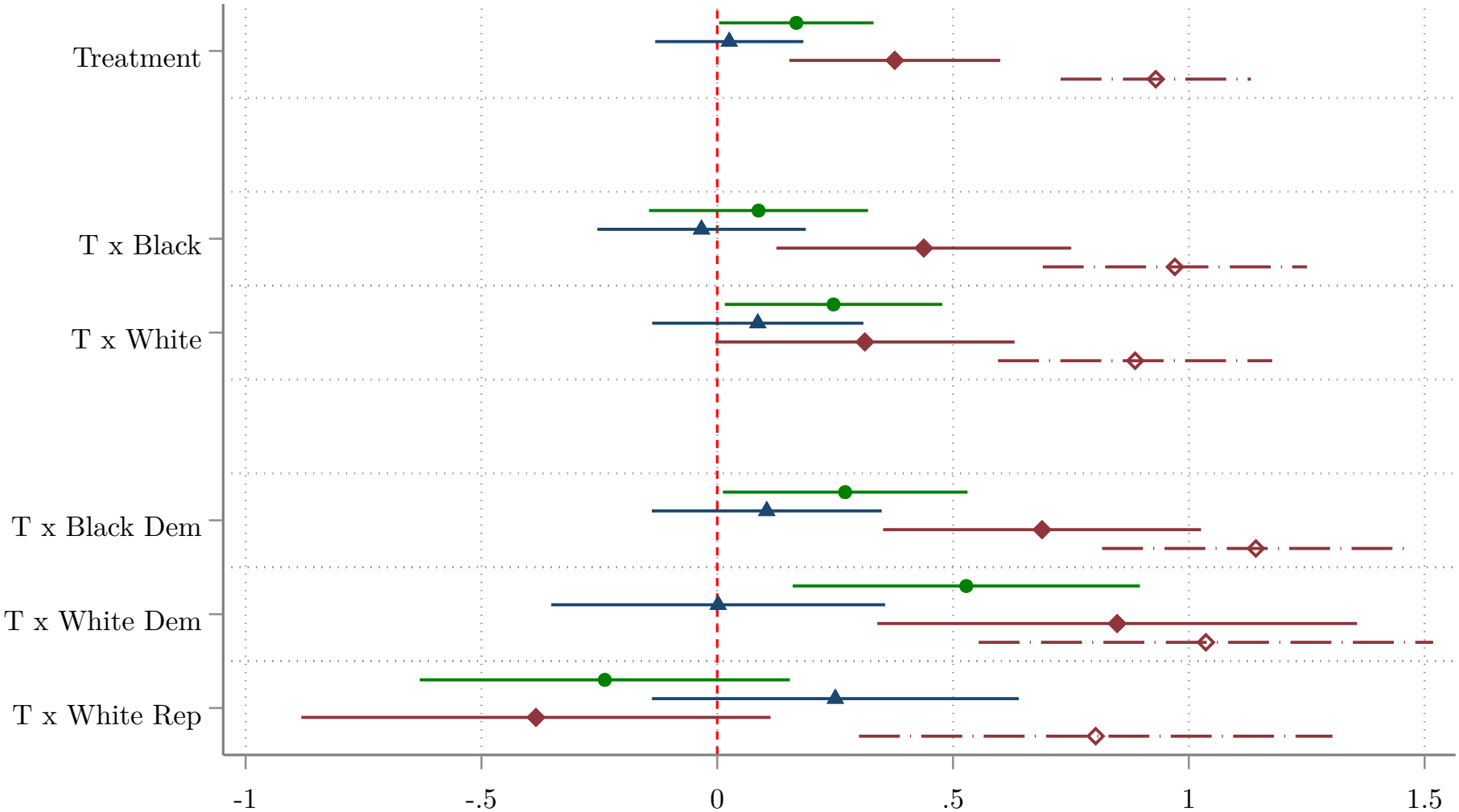


Treatment Effects - Perceived Causes

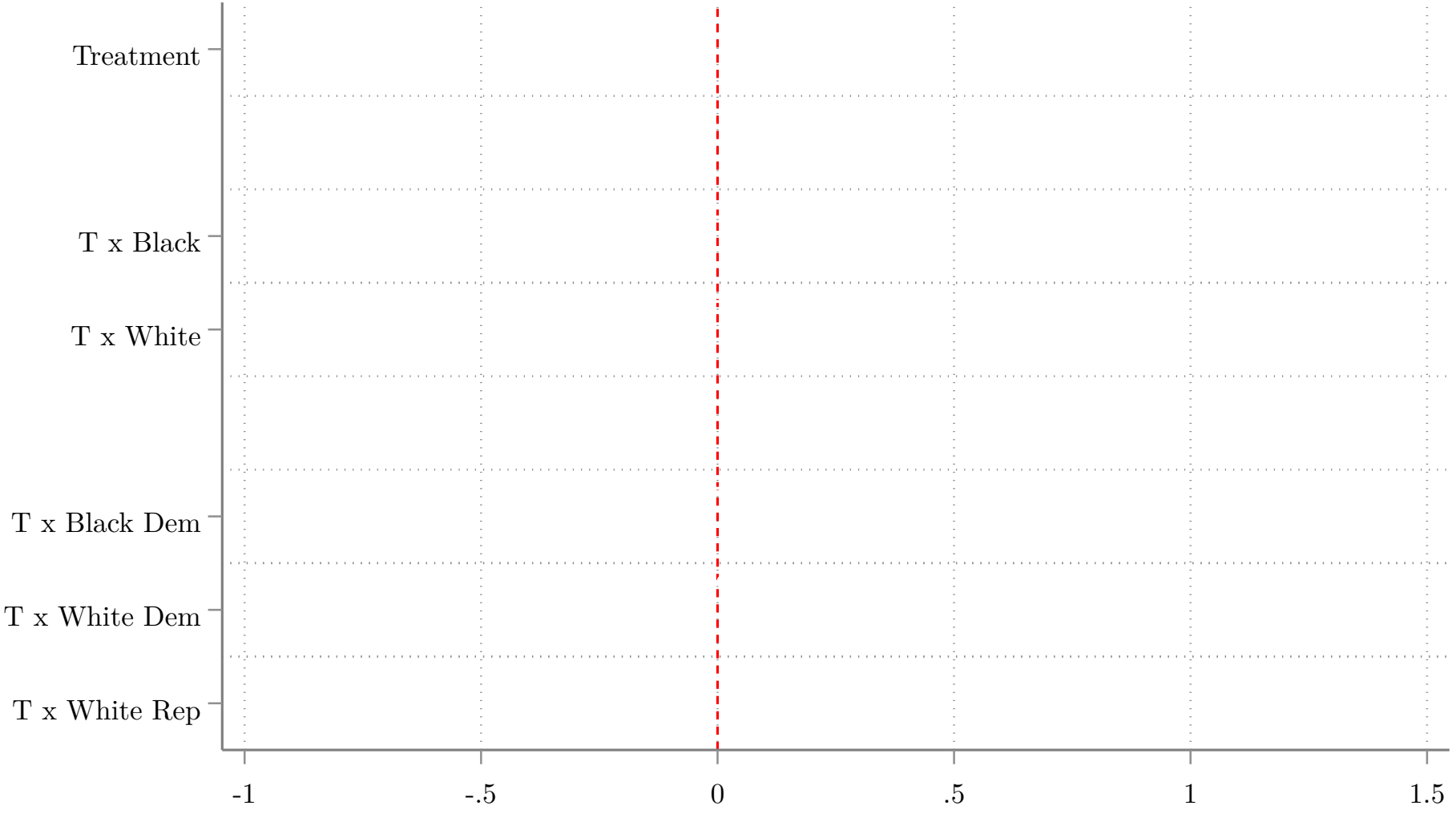


Treatment Effects - Perceived Causes

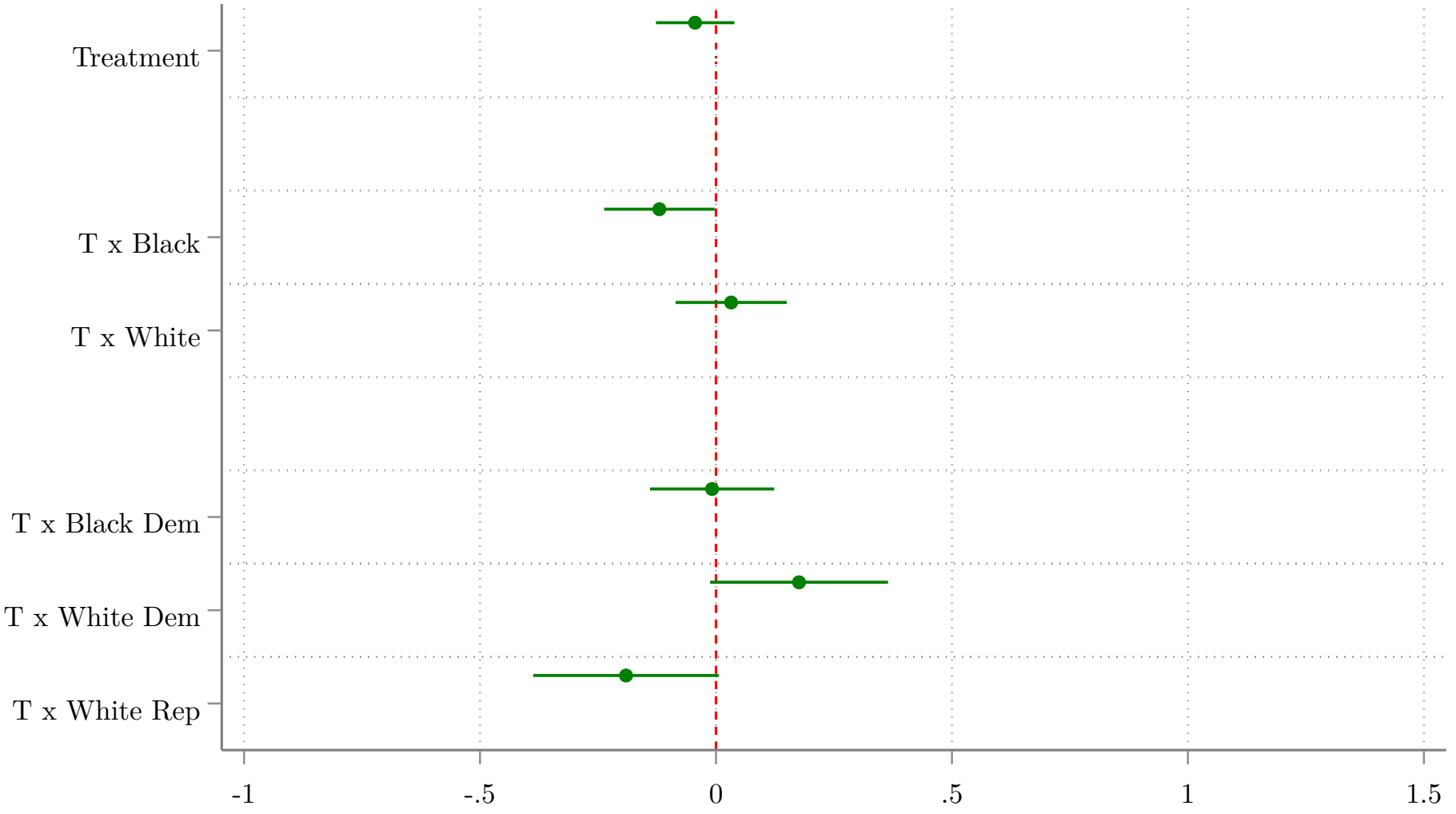
Back



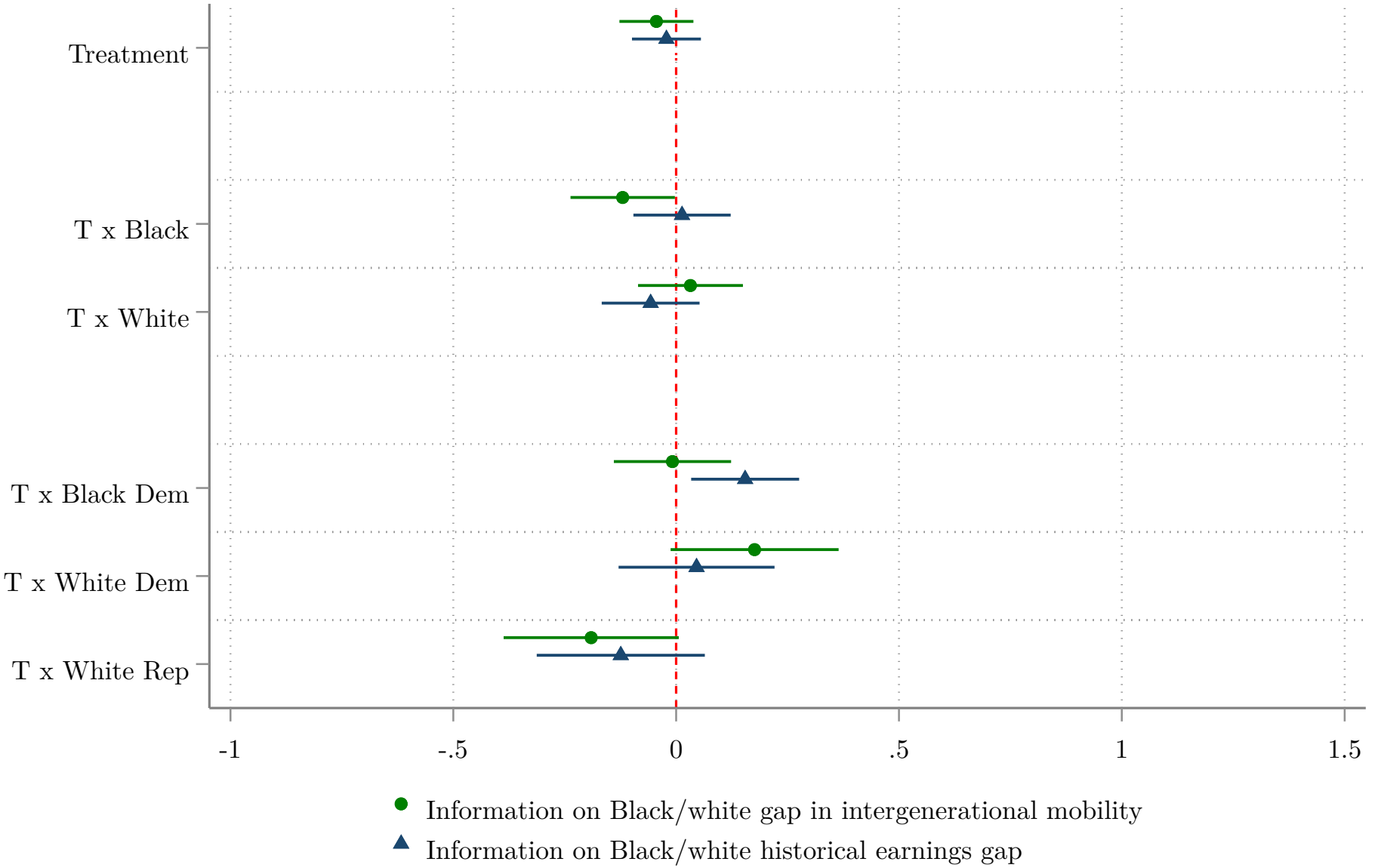
Treatment Effects - Race-Targeted Policies



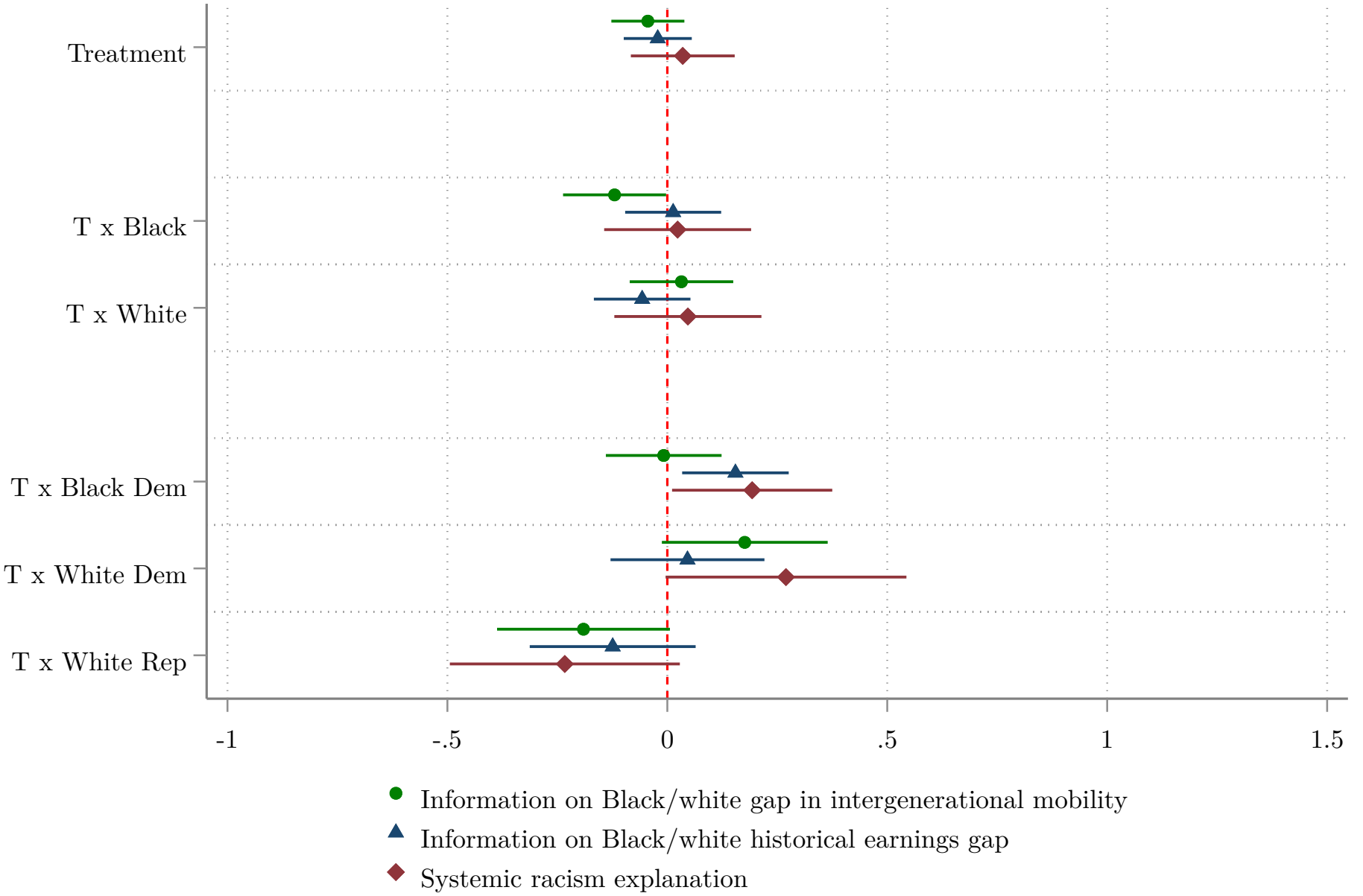
Treatment Effects - Race-Targeted Policies



Treatment Effects - Race-Targeted Policies

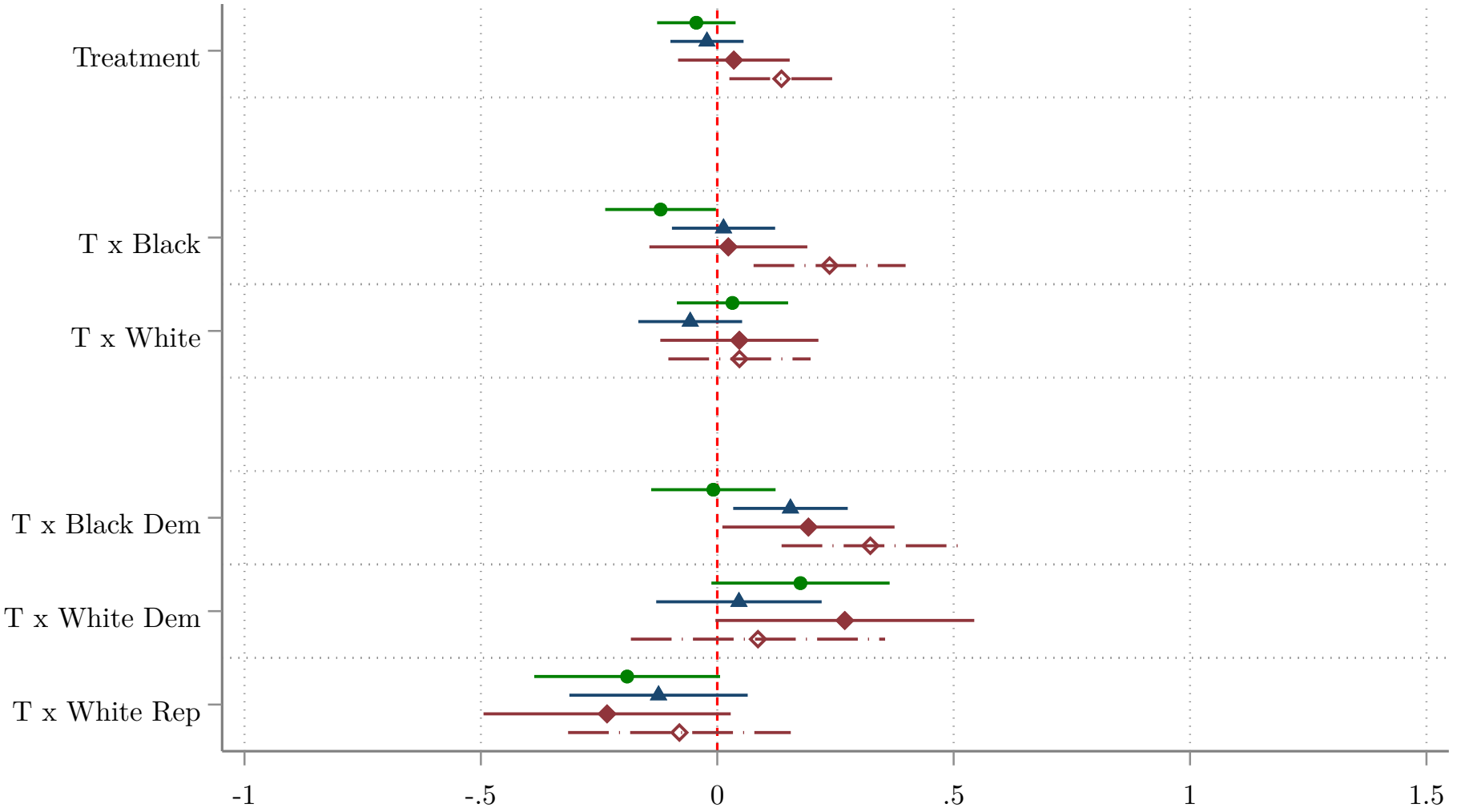


Treatment Effects - Race-Targeted Policies

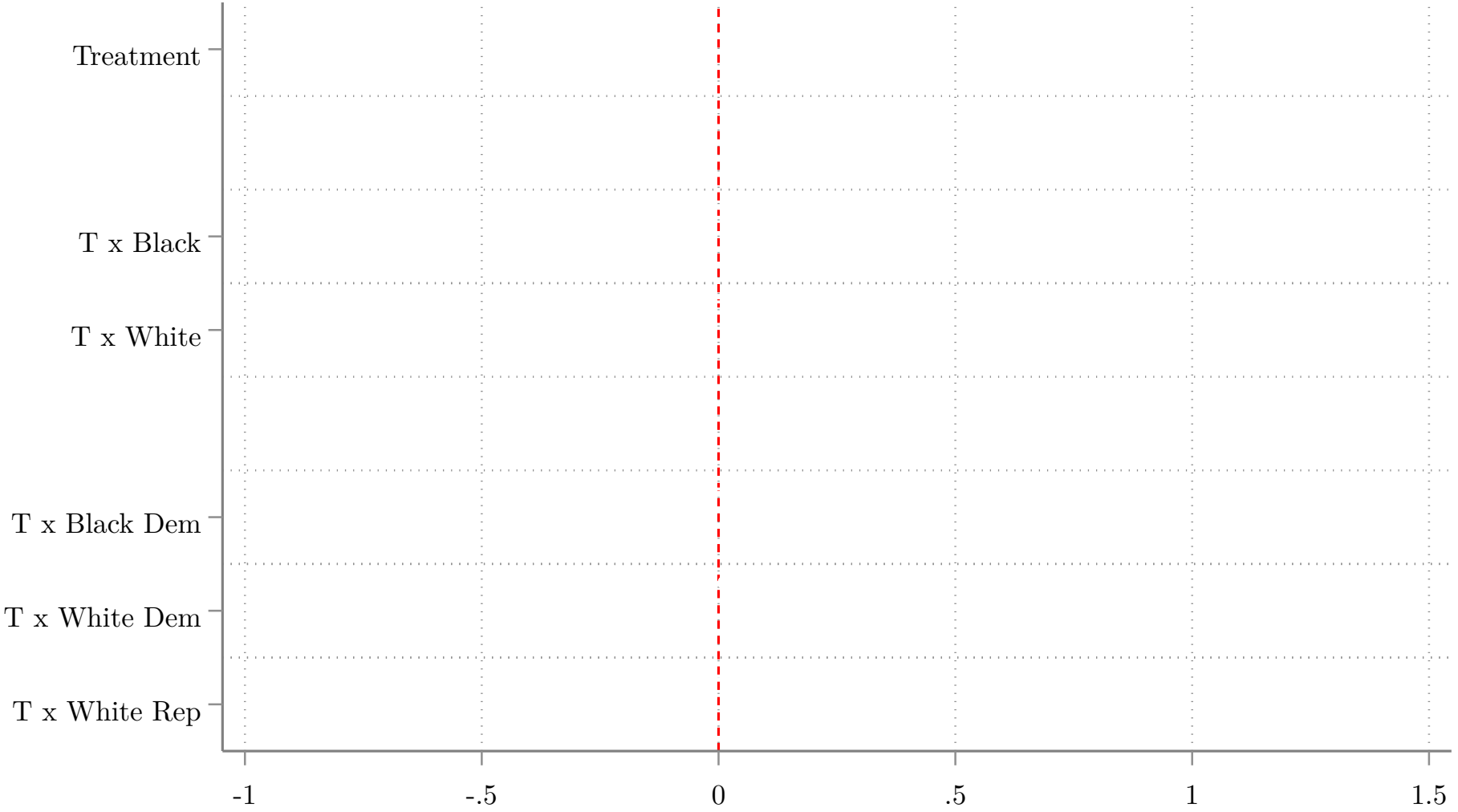


Treatment Effects - Race-Targeted Policies

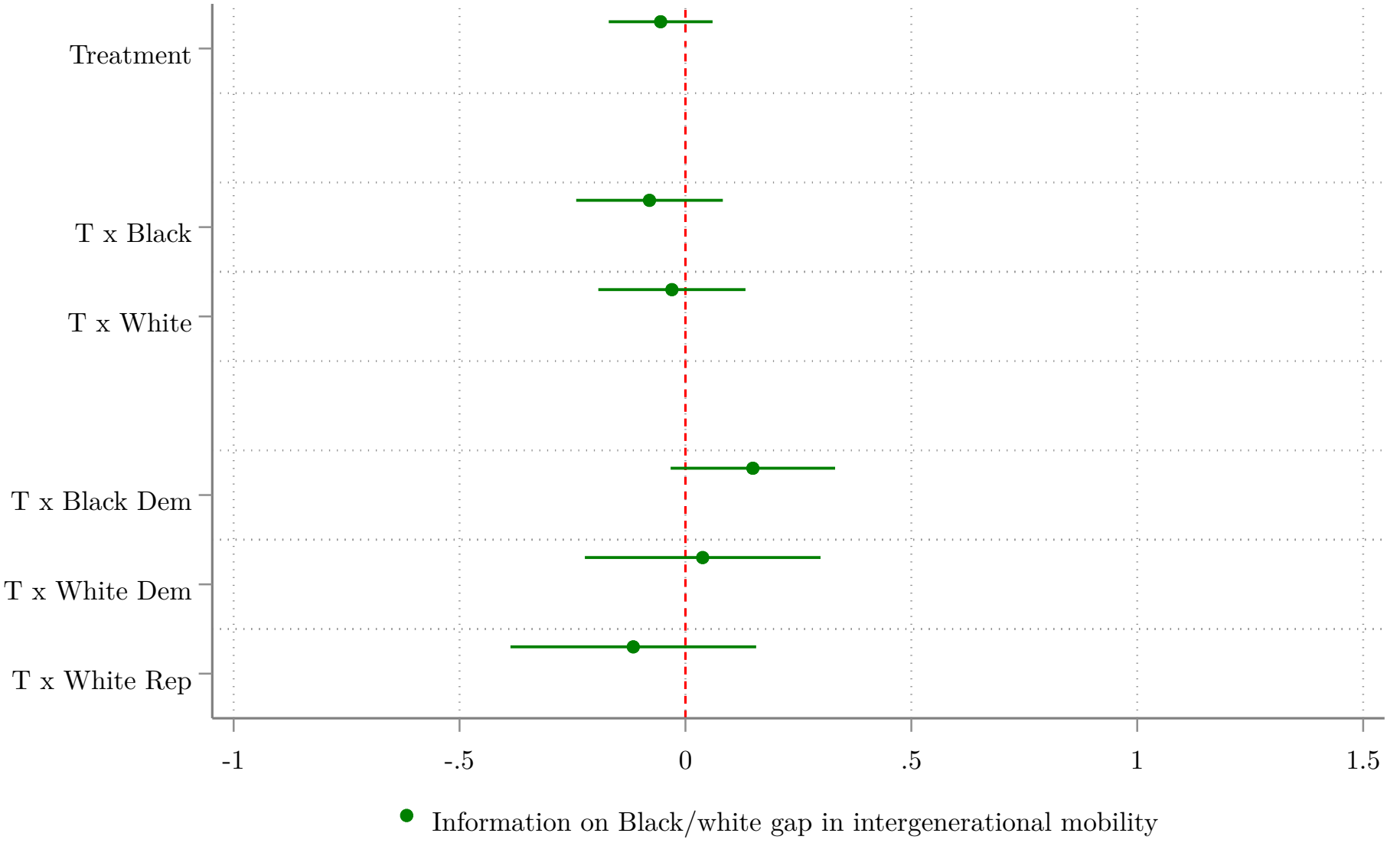
Back



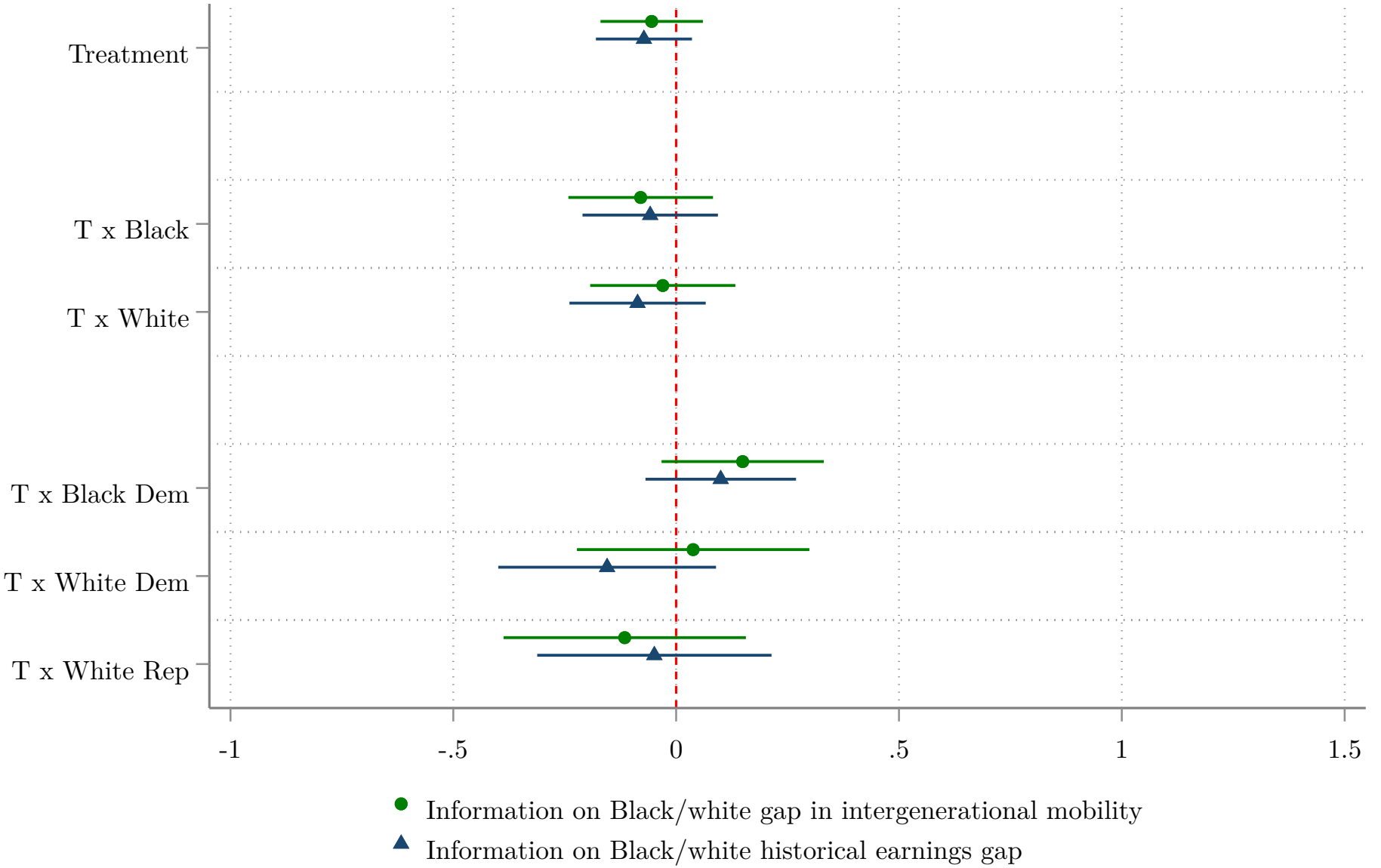
Treatment Effects - Redistribution Policies



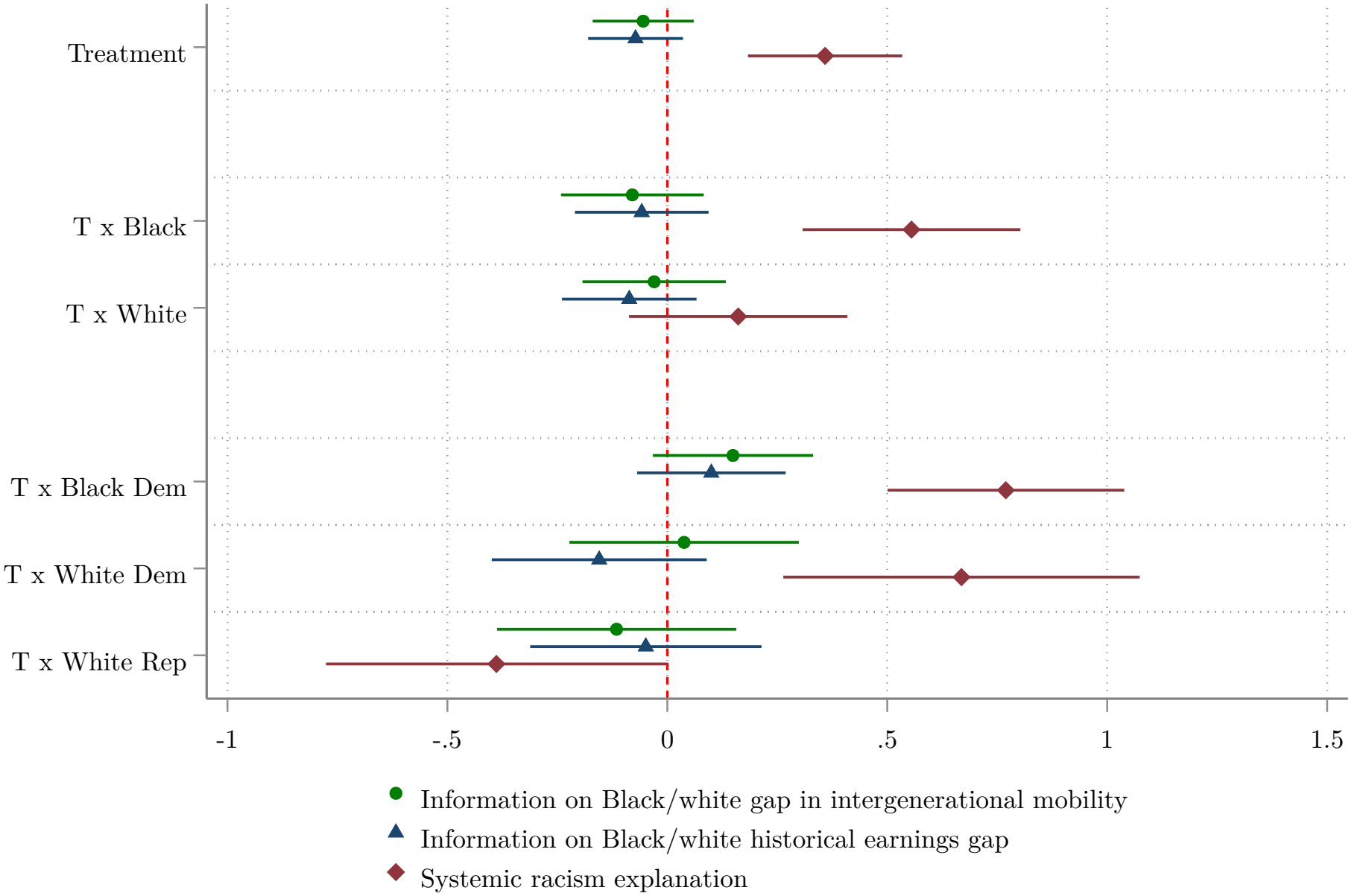
Treatment Effects - Redistribution Policies



Treatment Effects - Redistribution Policies

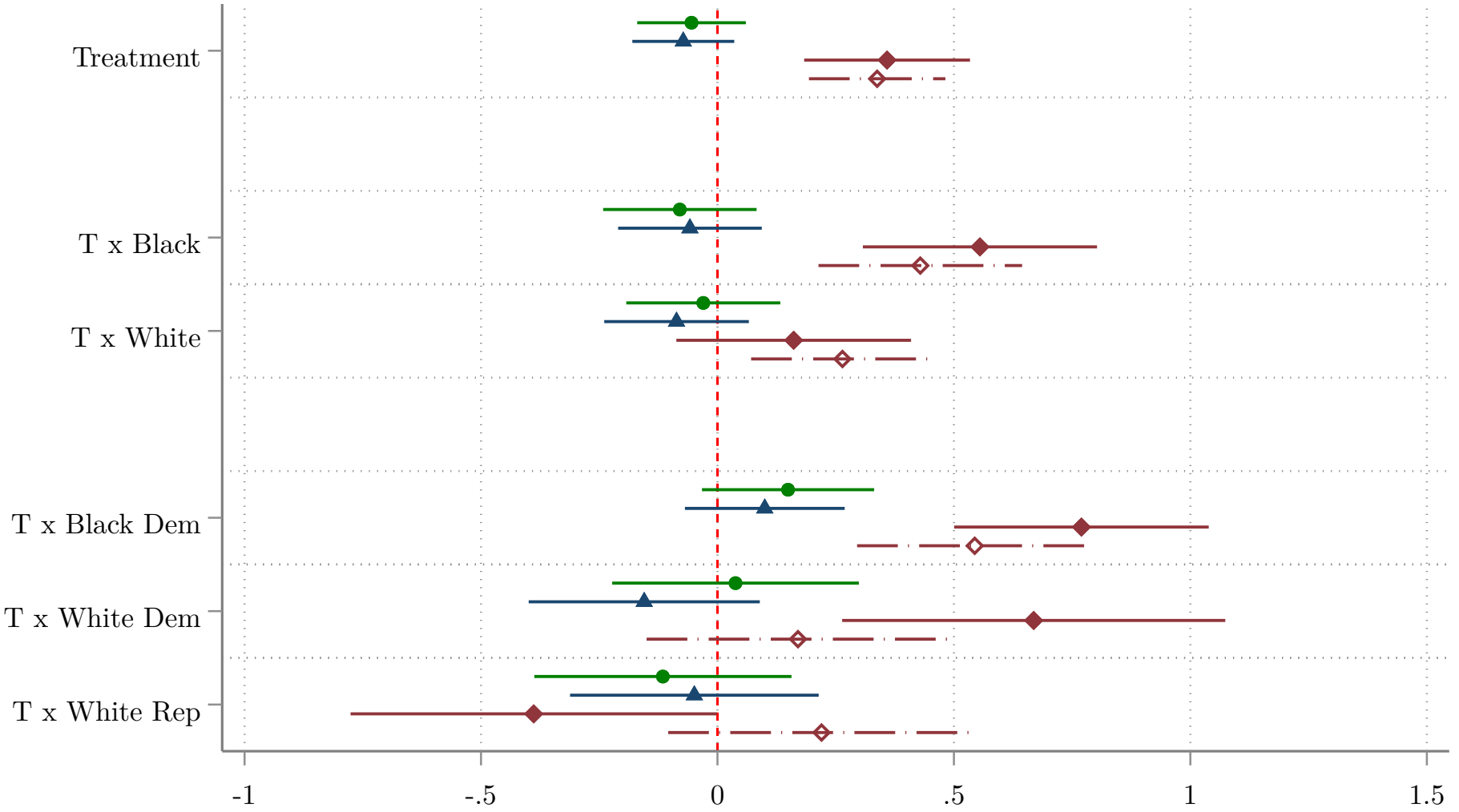


Treatment Effects - Redistribution Policies



Treatment Effects - Redistribution Policies

Back



Asking about race and ethnicity

Back

- Since 2020, Census asks: *"Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?" [No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; Yes, Mexican; Yes, Puerto Rican; Yes, Cuban; Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin].*

  Followed by: *"What is this person's race?" [White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaskan Native; Chinese; Vietnamese; Native Hawaiian; Filipino; Korean; Samoan; Asian Indian; Japanese; Chamorro; Other Asian; Other Pacific Islander; Some other race.*

- We originally asked: *"How would you describe your ethnicity/race?" European American/White; African American/Black; Hispanic/Latino; Asian/Asian American; Mixed race; Other (please specify).*

  Most problematic for our purposes is that we are not sure how Black Hispanics would identify themselves given these categories (2.5% of the US population). We exclude mixed race (not an option in Census). Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin rarely select "White" in our old question