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A social prospect theory of intergroup relations explains the occurrence of incremental progressive social change

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Throughout modernity, incremental progress has been a common pattern of social change. We propose a novel social prospect theory of intergroup relations that can explain the prevalence of this pattern by distinguishing between two types of social change: progressive and regressive. Progressive social change is defined as that which results in a new social system or regime, whereas regressive social change is that which results in a return to an earlier social system or regime. According to our proposed theory, which is an extension of prospect theory, (a) progressive social change represents possible gains for members of disadvantaged groups and potential losses for members of advantaged groups, whereas regressive social change represents possible gains for members of advantaged groups and potential losses for members of disadvantaged groups; (b) loss avoidance is a stronger motivator than gain-seeking; and (c) the likely outcomes of reverting to a previous state of affairs can be predicted with more certainty than outcomes of establishing a new and untested social system. When these three principles are applied to the context of group decision-making by members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups, a motivational tendency toward incremental progressive social change results. This is because members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups alike will be strongly motivated to avoid losing ground, but members of disadvantaged groups will be more strongly motivated than members of advantaged groups, because there is more certainty associated with the outcomes of regressive vs. progressive social change. Thus, social prospect theory provides a motivational explanation for the occurrence of gradual, incremental progressive changes despite the many sociopolitical disadvantages faced by beneficiaries.

KEYWORDS

prospect theory, social change, status quo, progressive change, regressive change

Introduction

“A great democracy has got to be progressive, or it will soon cease to be great or a democracy.” (Theodore Roosevelt)

Modern social systems are deeply unequal. According to the [United Nations \(2020\)](#), the world's 26 richest individuals own as much wealth as the poorest 50% of the world's population. In many countries around the world, racial and ethnic minority groups, including immigrants, are subjected to discrimination and prejudice ([Shan, 2013](#); [Sheppard et al., 2014](#); [White et al., 2014](#); [Minero and Espinoza, 2016](#); [Alvarez and Miller, 2017](#); [Karim et al., 2020](#); [Mubangizi, 2021](#)); LGBTQ+ individuals are victimized by hate crimes ([Flores et al., 2022](#)) and barred from marrying their

partners (Masci et al., 2020); and women are prevented from pursuing the same occupations available to men (Davidson, 2015). Despite these and many other persistent inequalities, gradual changes that benefit the disadvantaged occur with some frequency.

Over the past 200 years, the European and American empires that ruled most of the world have given way to dozens of self-governing states. The chattel slave trade that once dominated the trans-Atlantic economy has been eliminated. Between 1893 and 2020, the number of countries in which women were permitted to vote in national elections increased from 1 to 194 (Schaeffer, 2021). The Geneva Conventions established, for the first time, formal limitations on the use of extreme violence during wartime, resulting in numerous convictions for wartime atrocities. Additionally, interstate violence has declined in frequency and intensity since the end of World War II (Gill-Tiney, 2022). So, although inequality and injustice remain widespread around the world, considerable social progress has been made in attenuating these problems.

Social dominance and system justification perspectives on social stability and change

Because of the persistence of inequality and injustice, contemporary social psychological theory and research on societal organization emphasizes resistance to social change and the resilience of unequal social systems. Two major exemplars include social dominance theory (SDT) and system justification theory (SJT), which highlight different aspects of the social condition but arrive at similarly pessimistic conclusions about prospects for social change. SDT, initially proposed by Sidanius (1993), argues that social hierarchies are generally maintained through the threat and realization of violence and coercive oppression of subordinated groups by members of dominant groups. SJT, initially proposed by Jost and Banaji (1994), argues that people have an ideological tendency to legitimize the social systems on which they depend in order to address epistemic, existential, and relational needs (Jost, 2020). Although SDT focuses on relations between and among social groups and SJT focuses on the relationship of individuals and groups to the societal status quo, both theories suggest that the overarching social order is usually stable, apart from relatively rare periods of revolution, and is often regarded by participants as surprisingly legitimate (see also Mason, 1971; Moore, 1978; Elster, 1982; Johnson, 1982; Veyne, 1992; Elias and Scotson, 1994; Zinn, 2002).

To our knowledge, no theory in social psychology—including SDT and SJT—has attempted to explain patterns of incremental progressive change that have occurred throughout modernity. In broadside attacks against SDT and SJT (which frequently caricature and conflate the two theories), proponents of social identity theory (SIT) often claim that social change on behalf of the disadvantaged is ubiquitous (e.g., Reicher, 2004, 2011; Rubin and Hewstone, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2013). Turner (2006), for instance, wrote that “Anyone who looks outside the window at daily events around the globe will find that... resistance, conflict and change are as normal as the sun rising” (p. 42–43). Although these theorists have not clearly specified how or why or when members of disadvantaged

groups tend to accept vs. reject the legitimacy of the societal status quo, identity-based motives can help to explain why the disadvantaged sometimes do engage in protest and collective action (Osborne et al., 2019). The problem, however, is that SIT alone cannot explain why social change is as gradual and incremental as it is. Reicher (2011, p. 210–211), for instance, notes that B.R. Ambedkar led an important social movement in the mid-twentieth century that inspired Indian members of the Dalit (“Untouchable”) caste to fight for their rights, but he does not address the question of why it took centuries for this movement to take shape and gain traction and why Dalits today still have not achieved social, economic, or political equality.

Some critics have alleged that SDT and SJT lack any explanatory mechanisms for social change, but this is not true. SDT quite clearly acknowledges the prospect of progressive forms of social change through “hierarchy attenuating forces,” such as anticolonial scholarship, which (over time) contribute to reductions in group-based inequality (Sidanius et al., 2017). At the same time, SDT predicts a relatively stable pattern of intergroup relations in the long run. According to Sidanius and Pratto (2001), hierarchy attenuating forces are balanced by “hierarchy enhancing forces,” so that society maintains a “point of hierarchical equilibrium” with levels of inequality that are not “morally’ offensive or structurally destabilizing” (p. 327). While the point of hierarchical equilibrium can and does move according to the theory (Sidanius and Pratto, 2001), the hypothesis of “behavioral asymmetry,” which holds that “members of dominant groups are more oriented toward preservation of the status quo than subordinates are toward challenging it” (Sidanius et al., 2017, p. 151) implies that the forces of regressive change will generally outweigh the forces of progressive change. This implies that subordinated groups’ efforts to decrease inequality should, on average, meet with stronger resistance than dominant groups’ efforts to increase inequality.

According to SJT, transformative changes to the societal status quo elicit epistemic, existential, and relational threats to that which is experienced as familiar, safe, and socially shared. Thus, all other things being equal, people are motivated to resist social change and avoid reckoning with these potential threats (Jost, 2020). But, as already noted, two distinctive forms of social change may be distinguished from an historical perspective. The first of these, progressive social change, seeks to move beyond the existing system to create new and more egalitarian forms of social organization. An extreme example of progressive change would be the abandonment of capitalism in favor of a redistributive economic model. Conversely, regressive social change seeks to restore previous versions of the status quo in which social, economic, and political inequalities were even more pronounced (see Lipset and Raab, 1978). An extreme example of regressive change would be the reinstitution of Jim Crow racial segregation laws in the United States.

Both progressive and regressive changes would elicit relational and existential threats because advocating for either of the aforementioned regimes is likely to be met with negative social consequences and the threat of physical violence by defenders of the status quo. However, they presumably differ significantly in the degree to which they pose epistemic threats. Although

the socioeconomic ramifications of implementing a redistributive economic system in the U.S. cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, the ramifications of bringing back Jim Crow laws are described in every textbook on American history.

Because of this, SJT predicts that, all other things being equal, epistemic motives underlying system justification would favor regressive over progressive forms of social change. The connection between system justification and support for regressive social change is illustrated by the fact that system justification with respect to gender and economics predicted support for Donald Trump as a primary presidential candidate in 2016, when he campaigned under the slogan of “Make America Great Again” (Azevedo et al., 2017).

Donald Trump’s electoral success in 2016 notwithstanding, the expectation that regressive change will dominate progressive change is at odds with broader long-term trends in Western politics throughout modernity. It is true that regressive political movements remain influential around the world, even in liberal democracies such as the U.S. In 2023, for instance, a record number of discriminatory bills targeting LGBTQ+ individuals were introduced and passed (Peele, 2023). Nevertheless, incremental progressive change in governmental policy and sociopolitical attitudes is a frequent outcome of intergroup relations. Even though Black Americans remain distinctly disadvantaged relative to White Americans in many aspects of life—including income (Aladangady and Forde, 2021) and incarceration rates (Nellis, 2021; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2023)—the extent of blatant institutional discrimination toward Black Americans has decreased dramatically over the last century. These gains are enshrined in federal legislation against discrimination in voting (National Archives, 2022) and employment (Federal Trade Commission, 2021).

Moreover, despite the influx of anti-LGBTQ+ policies, support for legalized same-sex marriage in the U.S. in 2022 was over 70%, signifying an increase of over 250% in <30 years (McCarthy, 2022). Women’s participation in the workforce increased dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and women have been more likely than men to complete a college degree since the 1990’s (Parker, 2021). So, while it is true that reactionary or regressive social movements remain impactful, incremental progressive social change has also been a characteristic feature of the sociopolitical landscape in the U.S. and other Western nations over the past few centuries.

According to SJT, progressive change can be explained by a phenomenon known as “system-sanctioned change,” in which incremental changes to the status quo can occur because they are perceived as legitimate expressions of accepted sociopolitical institutions or values (such as democracy or patriotism) that do not alter existing social systems in any fundamental way and thus pose fairly minimal epistemic, existential, and relational threats (Feygina et al., 2010; Jost, 2020). However, regressive change can also be system-sanctioned if it is perceived to be a legitimate extension of the status quo. In fact, regressive changes may be more likely than progressive changes to be regarded as system-sanctioned because they pose less of an epistemic threat and vow a return to the status quo ante, as opposed to something that has yet to come into fruition. If even system-sanctioned forms of change privilege regressive over progressive change, what are the social psychological mechanisms contributing to the latter?

A social prospect theory of social change

Here we propose an extension of Kahneman and Tversky’s (1979) prospect theory to explain the phenomenon of incremental progressive change in terms of asymmetrical group motivations linked to probabilities of gains and losses for groups that are advantaged vs. disadvantaged by the status quo. Our proposed theory is predicated upon two important dimensions of social change. The first of these, which has already been discussed, is the dimension of progressive vs. regressive social change, that is, change that seeks to establish a new and more egalitarian status quo vs. change aimed at returning to an earlier regime in which inequalities were more pronounced (Lipset and Raab, 1978). The second dimension, which comes from prospect theory, is the potential for gains vs. losses, that is, changes that result in symbolic and/or material advantages vs. disadvantages for a given group, relative to the status quo. Unlike progressive vs. regressive social change, the dimension of gains vs. losses is a function of one’s group membership, because changes that result in gains for one group may result in losses for another.

While the reality of social change is complex, and mutually beneficial social changes can and do happen, intergroup relations are often *perceived* as a zero-sum game in which gains for one group must result in losses for another group (Davidai and Ongis, 2019; Stefaniak et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2022; Chinoy et al., 2022). Because of this tendency toward zero-sum thinking, which is especially common for members of advantaged groups (Eibach and Keegan, 2006; Stefaniak et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2022), progressive changes are likely to be seen as producing gains for disadvantaged groups and losses for advantaged groups, whereas regressive changes are likely to be seen as producing gains for advantaged groups and losses for disadvantaged groups. However, the pattern of perceived gains and losses is not symmetrical when it comes to regressive and progressive forms of social change. As noted previously, the two types of social change differ not only in terms of direction, but also in terms of the *certainty* of outcomes.

Because regressive changes involve reverting to states that have already existed, their outcomes are predicted with a greater degree of certainty than progressive changes. For instance, when conservative politicians invoke Christian values to push for the repeal of “no-fault” divorce laws (Republican Party of Texas, 2022; Wehle, 2023), which allow victims of abuse and other forms of mistreatment to get out of unsafe or unhappy marriages without the burden of proof, the negative outcomes this change would produce for women are obvious, because the history of this regime is known. Some women, such as those who are high in system justification motivation, may be persuaded by arguments for regressive change, but young women today, who know with certainty that women of previous generations eventually rejected and fought against dangerous legal restrictions on divorce that preceded “no fault” divorce laws, are unlikely to be convinced *en masse* by the promise of a return to the status quo ante unless they are influenced by “hierarchy-enhancing myths” through religion or male-dominated media (Sidanius et al., 2017).

The implications of progressive changes, by contrast, are inherently uncertain. Doing away with qualified immunity, which

protects police officers from liability in civil cases under most circumstances, is likely to benefit Black Americans, who have long suffered from disproportionate victimization at the hands of police (Bunn, 2022). However, this outcome cannot be known with certainty. It is possible, for instance, that reducing the ability of police officers to use their discretion would produce unintended consequences such as elevated rates of racist violence against Black Americans, who are already the most likely group to be victimized by hate crimes in the U.S. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023). Until this policy is actually implemented, its outcomes cannot be known.

This asymmetrical difference in epistemic closure, when combined with a zero-sum account of intergroup relations, may be critical to understanding why progressive changes are more likely to occur than regressive changes. Because the outcomes of regressive changes can be known with a great degree of confidence, and because regressive changes are often perceived to favor advantaged groups, it follows from a zero-sum account of intergroup relations that advantaged groups are overwhelmingly likely to experience net gains from regressive changes, whereas disadvantaged groups are overwhelmingly likely to experience net losses from regressive changes. Because the outcomes of progressive changes are inherently uncertain, but are often perceived to favor disadvantaged groups, it follows from a zero-sum account of intergroup relations that progressive changes give disadvantaged groups a possibility of experiencing a net gain but also a possibility of experiencing a net loss or no change in conditions, whereas progressive changes give advantaged groups a possibility of experiencing a net loss as well as a possibility of experiencing a net gain or no change in conditions. Because of biases in the way people make decisions regarding probabilities of events and gains vs. losses, the net result is that progressive change is likely to trump regressive change, if one considers only the relative motivational strengths of different social groups.

Prospect theory predicts a motivational advantage for incremental progressive change

According to prospect theory, people tend to be risk seeking in the domain of losses and risk averse in the domain of gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), a pattern that has also been observed in group decision-making (Whyte, 1993; Cheng and Chiou, 2008; Owens, 2011; Vis, 2011). This means that decision-makers prefer to take risks to avoid large losses and to avoid risks when offered small gains. For instance, when offered a choice between a 0.9 probability of winning \$3,000 and a 0.45 probability of winning \$6,000, decision-makers tend to choose the higher likelihood of winning the smaller value. However, when decision-makers are asked to choose between a 0.9 probability of losing \$3,000 and a 0.45 probability of losing \$6,000, they prefer to risk the lower likelihood of losing the larger value (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In this example, the two choices (or prospects) are equal in terms of their expected value—on average, the amount of money gained or lost is identical for the two options (\$2,700).

However, the same pattern of behavior is observed even when the average value of the choices is not the same. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) asked participants to choose between gaining \$3,000 with certainty and gaining \$4,000 with a probability of 0.8 (an expected value of \$3,200), people preferred the certain gain despite its lesser monetary value. When Williams (1966) asked participants to choose between a loss of \$100 with certainty and a loss of \$200 with a probability of 0.8 (an expected value of -\$160), they were indifferent between the two choices, suggesting that a lesser probability of losing \$200 such as 0.7 (an expected value of -\$140) would also have been preferred over a sure loss of \$100.

These observations, and the extensive research literature corroborating them (Ruggeri et al., 2020), indicate that potential gains and losses have diminishing returns in their subjective value, which is known as utility. Returning to the previous example, if losing \$200 with a probability of 0.8 has the same subjective value as losing \$100 with certainty, it can be said that:

$$(Utility\ of) - 200 \times 0.8 = (Utility\ of) - 100.$$

This can only be true if the utility of dollars lost is not linearly related to the actual monetary value. If each additional dollar lost is less subjectively harmful than the previous dollar, it makes sense that people are willing to take a risk that loses them more money on average if it has a chance of preventing the initial loss. The same pattern of diminishing returns for each additional increase in actual monetary value (known as diminishing marginal utility) is present for gains—if a \$3,000 sure gain is preferred over a 0.8 probability of a \$4,000 gain, then 80% of the utility of a gain of \$4,000 must be less than the utility of a gain of \$3,000.

Crucially, however, prospect theory holds that risk seeking in the domain of losses is stronger than risk aversion in the domain of gains. This means that while both gains and losses experience diminishing returns in utility as they increase, the effect is more pronounced for losses. If an individual is indifferent between a 0.8 probability of a \$200 loss and a certain \$100 loss, prospect theory predicts the certain gain required to achieve indifference with a 0.8 probability of a \$200 gain would be >\$100. This implies that avoiding losses is a stronger motivator than seeking gains, insofar as the subjective negative experience of losing \$100 is equivalent to the subjective positive experience of gaining some value >\$100. The prediction that a chance of loss must be outweighed by a greater chance of gain to be an attractive prospect is indeed supported by research, insofar as Kahneman and Tversky (1979) found that symmetric bets with an equal probability of gaining and losing the same amount of money (for an expected value of 0) were rarely accepted, and Williams (1966) found that a substantially larger chance of winning than losing \$100 is required to make the prospect appealing.

In the political realm, several studies confirm that loss aversion is generally a stronger motivator of political behavior than gain seeking (Arceneaux, 2012; Dedman and Lee, 2023; Steffen and Cheng, 2023). At the same time, a few studies suggest that gain seeking may be a stronger motivator in some situations, as when policies are described using a prevention (vs. detection) frame (Hause and Cohen, 2014). Moreover, the relative persuasiveness of loss vs. gain frames may vary based on individual differences in regulatory focus (Luttig and Lavine, 2016).

In any case, if prospect theory is applied to group decision-making—assuming a zero-sum perception of intergroup relations—asymmetries between gains and losses have important implications for social change. If a specific regressive change results in a near-certain gain for members of an advantaged group and an equivalent near-certain loss for members of a disadvantaged group, social prospect theory predicts that the disadvantaged group members' motivation to avoid the regressive change would be stronger than the advantaged group members' motivation to pursue the regressive change, because the motivation to avoid losses should outweigh the motivation to pursue equivalent gains. Because of the disparity in the strengths of these motivations, members of the disadvantaged group may be more likely to take steps such as putting aside individual desires in favor of group interests and participating in collective action in favor of those interests.

Following the same logic, the motivation of advantaged groups to avoid progressive change should be stronger than the motivation of disadvantaged groups to pursue progressive change. However, because the outcomes of a given progressive change can be predicted with a much lesser degree of certainty, members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups could potentially gain, lose, or experience no change in circumstances after its implementation. While the disadvantaged group is more likely to gain and the advantaged group is more likely to lose from a given progressive change, the substantial possibility of gaining when a loss is expected or losing when a gain is expected is hypothesized to weaken the motivational strength of both groups. Because the motivational strength of both groups is weaker in this scenario than in the regressive change scenario, the difference in the motivational strength between the two groups is hypothesized to be smaller.

The reasoning behind this hypothesis can be illustrated using an earlier example. As Williams (1966) found, a 0.8 probability loss of \$200 held the same subjective negative value as a certain loss of \$100. Because risk-seeking in the domain of losses is a stronger tendency than risk-aversion in the domain of gains, prospect theory predicts that a 0.8 probability gain of \$200 would hold the same subjective positive value as a certain gain of more than \$100. Therefore, the difference in subjective value between a certain loss of \$200 and a 0.8 probability of a \$200 loss would correspond to a larger amount of real money (\$100) than the difference in subjective value between a certain gain of \$200 and a 0.8 probability of a \$200 gain (some amount < \$100).

The upshot is that an increase in the level of certainty in the domain of losses influences decision-making more than an equivalent increase in the level of certainty in the domain of gains. The difference in levels of motivation to avoid losses and seek gains is hypothesized to be greater when the degree of certainty is higher, that is, in the case of regressive (vs. progressive) social change. Thus, based purely on gain/loss motivational factors, the likelihood of a successful push for progressive change by the disadvantaged group should be greater than the likelihood of a successful push for regressive change by the advantaged group. Because of staunch opposition and counter-mobilization, neither group is extremely likely to succeed in changing the status quo, but the motivational imbalance favors progressive over regressive changes, all else being equal.

Not only does this application of prospect theory account for the frequent occurrence of progressive change, but it also accounts for the gradual pace of progressive change. This is because the degree of uncertainty of progressive change increases as the extremity of the change increases. From time to time, members of disadvantaged groups may call for revolutionary changes, and such calls may broaden popular conceptions of what is possible in society, the fact is that calls for the outright dismantling of social institutions are generally unpopular even within groups that are harmed by those institutions. For example, at the very height of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, only 22% of Black Americans supported the abolition of the police force, whereas 70% of Black Americans supported the more modest proposal of reducing police budgets (Crabtree, 2020). Although some activists argue that incremental changes such as police reforms undermine progressive efforts by lending legitimacy to corrupt institutions and postponing more transformative changes (Simonson, 2021), the complete rejection of established institutions is, in practice, seldom popular.

Limitations, qualifications, and other considerations

As we have seen, social prospect theory predicts asymmetrical group motivations emanating from asymmetries in outcome certainty associated with progressive vs. regressive changes, leading to the conclusion that the former will slightly outweigh the latter. This theory can help to fill in some of the puzzle pieces left missing from prominent social psychological theories of social organization. Our goal in this article is not to replace SDT or SJT, but rather to supplement them. In many respects, the predictions made by social prospect theory align with those made by SJT, and its shortcomings can be partially explained in terms of social dominance processes.

Both SJT and social prospect theory would predict that for any given issue, defenders of the status quo have an advantage over those who seek to change the status quo (Jost, 2020; see also Moshinsky and Bar-Hillel, 2010; Eidelman and Crandall, 2012; Ross, 2021). They would also predict that when progressive change occurs, it is more likely to be incremental than radical. According to SJT, this is attributable, in part, to the fact that radical changes threaten the very foundations of social systems, triggering epistemic, existential, and relational needs to maintain some semblance of certainty, safety, and social belongingness.

According to social prospect theory, modest or incremental progressive change is more common than radical progressive change because disadvantaged groups are risk averse in the domain of gains, and thus tend to prefer small changes with more predictable outcomes over sweeping forms of societal reorganization. This is a prediction that aligns neatly with SJT because the desire for greater relative predictability can be classified as an epistemic need. However, unlike SJT, social prospect theory holds that a high degree of certainty is only preferred in the domain of gains. In the domain of losses, people are said to be risk-seeking, and this could motivate members of disadvantaged groups to push back strongly against the prospect of regressive change. To be

clear, we do not believe that the psychological processes highlighted by SJT and social prospect theory are mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they may operate concurrently in at least some situations.

One potential weakness of social prospect theory is its inability, when taken on its own, to explain reactionary societies in which regressive change occurs more frequently than progressive change. The rapid imposition of authoritarianism by fascist governments, for instance, would be extremely unlikely if the motivational dynamics proposed by social prospect theory dominated the direction of social change in all circumstances. However, when social dominance phenomena are considered, this can be readily explained. According to SDT, members of dominant (i.e., advantaged) groups will often resort to violent and oppressive means of maintaining the hierarchical structure of societies (Sidanius et al., 2017). When the power differential between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is sufficiently great—because of factors such as numerical representation or monopolistic access to physical force—disadvantaged groups will have little capacity to prevent regressive changes, regardless of their motivation to prevent it—and may even participate in reactionary social movements.

Therefore, we propose that social prospect theory is applicable only to the extent that existing social structures allow disadvantaged groups to advocate for their own interests. Although perfect democracies in which disadvantaged groups enjoy complete political equality may not exist, even sociopolitical arrangements that are highly unequal may provide disadvantaged groups with enough freedom to advocate for some degree of progressive change. For instance, the women's suffrage movements of the twentieth century managed to secure voting rights for a group that had previously been denied even the most basic types of formal participation in politics (Piven and Cloward, 2012). As noted by President Theodore Roosevelt in the epigram for this article, democratic systems allow for the possibility, at least, of egalitarian progress—and unless such progress actually occurs, a society is incapable of realizing its democratic potential.

System justification can explain the occurrence of regressive change in terms of motivated system-defensiveness and backlash against perceived threats to the legitimacy or stability of the societal status quo (Liaquat et al., 2023). Experimental studies suggest that exposure to critiques of the overarching social system (Kay and Friesen, 2011; Mao et al., 2021)—as well as threats to epistemic (Jost et al., 2012), existential (van der Toorn et al., 2015), or relational needs (Hess and Ledgerwood, 2014)—can increase levels of system justification motivation. This motivation, in turn, could lead members of advantaged groups to push more strongly for regressive changes, thereby outweighing disadvantaged group members' motivation to avoid regressive change. In post-WWI Germany, for example, existential needs triggered by terrifying economic circumstances likely contributed to the rapid rise of authoritarianism and the implementation of regressive changes such as the banning of modern art and literature.

One major limitation of social prospect theory is the assumption that people perceive a zero-sum situation when it comes to intergroup relations. While this is indeed a prevalent pattern of thinking about intergroup relations, it is not ubiquitous in all contexts, and many people realize that not every gain

for a social group must be accompanied by a loss for another group (Stefaniak et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2022; Chinoy et al., 2022). It is possible that people who hold a positive sum view of intergroup relations are also more likely to favor incremental progressive change because of the uncertainty of outcomes, insofar as advantaged groups are more likely to be seen as potentially benefiting from progressive changes than disadvantaged groups are to benefit from regressive changes. In this way, progressive changes may be more likely than regressive changes to be viewed as “win-win” propositions. For example, someone with a positive sum view of intergroup relations may take the perspective that instituting policies that help Black Americans could materially benefit Americans of all races by increasing the nation's productivity and improving the economy. However, the same person may assume that mutually beneficial outcomes are much less likely to result from a regressive change with a more certain outcome.

Another major limitation we have not addressed is that social prospect theory in its elemental form has no way of accounting for social interactions between more than two groups. This may make it difficult to generalize to the “real world,” in which intergroup relations almost always involve or are influenced by more than two groups. The theory's focus on intergroup dynamics is itself another limitation, insofar as social groups are by no means monolithic, and there is surely substantial within-group variation in motivations to avoid losses and seek gains. Previous research suggests that individual differences in brain structure (Canessa et al., 2013; Duke et al., 2018), emotional processing (Bibby and Ferguson, 2011), regulatory focus (Luttig and Lavine, 2016), and the ability to cope with resource loss (Osmundsen and Petersen, 2020) all contribute to variability in loss-avoidance and gain-seeking behavior.

The most important untested assumption of social prospect theory is that the outcomes of regressive changes are experienced as more predictable than the outcomes of progressive changes, in general. While we feel the logic underlying this assumption is intuitively appealing, testing this assumption would be a necessary first step before the validity of the theory can be assessed. One way to do this would be to present participants with a series of regressive and progressive policy suggestions and ask them to rate the degree to which they believe each of the outcomes is predictable. If the assumption of asymmetry in outcome certainty is supported, the remaining predictions of the theory can be tested.

At this point, the major hypotheses of social prospect theory we have proposed are as follows: (1) individuals from disadvantaged groups will exhibit a motivation to avoid regressive changes that is stronger than the motivation of individuals from advantaged groups to pursue regressive changes; (2) individuals from advantaged groups will exhibit a motivation to avoid progressive changes that is stronger than the motivation of individuals from disadvantaged groups to pursue progressive changes; (3) the difference between the motivation of individuals from disadvantaged groups to avoid regressive changes and the motivation of individuals from advantaged groups to pursue regressive changes will be larger than the difference between the motivation of individuals from advantaged groups to avoid progressive changes and the motivation of individuals from disadvantaged groups to pursue progressive changes. To investigate these hypotheses, participants from advantaged and disadvantaged

groups (e.g., White and Black participants) could be asked to indicate the motivational strength of their support vs. opposition to a series of regressive policies (e.g., a bill to ban all race-based affirmative action practices) as well as progressive policies in a race-relevant domains (e.g., a bill to repeal qualified immunity).

We believe that social prospect theory, as we have laid it out, can explain the prevalence of gradual, incremental, progressive change in society, but we acknowledge that it is not the only theory capable of explaining this phenomenon. The theory of collective autonomy, proposed by Kachanoff et al. (2022), could also account for the overall pattern, because it assumes that social change is driven in part by members of social groups' desire to remove restrictions on their abilities to express their identities. Whereas, advantaged groups can and sometimes do perceive restrictions on their collective autonomy, the motivation is probably stronger in disadvantaged groups because their collective autonomy is restricted in reality to a much greater degree. As in the case of social prospect theory, the motivational advantage possessed by members of disadvantaged groups may be diminished through social dominance and system justification processes—as well as differences in the control and mobilization of material resources. Thus, collective autonomy motives may also help to explain why pressures for incremental progressive change may outweigh pressures for regressive change, perhaps in conjunction with the motivational processes highlighted by social prospect theory.

Concluding remarks

We have suggested that a novel application of prospect theory can explain the frequent occurrence of gradual, incremental progress as a pattern of social change. Social psychological perspectives such as social dominance theory and system justification theory help to explain resistance faced by members of disadvantaged groups (and their allies) in the quest for progressive social change, and therefore shed some light on why many progressive social change movements are modest and piecemeal rather than radical and revolutionary. However, these theories emphasize the social and political advantages of regressive change and do not explain why progressive change occurs as often as it does. In this article, we have proposed that a modified, social version of prospect theory at the level of intergroup relations can

help to fill in some of the gaps. Social prospect theory, as we have conceived of it thus far, is limited in scope because it focuses more or less exclusively on the phenomenon of incremental progressive change. Nonetheless, it could contribute value to the psychological literature on social stability and social change, especially when invoked in dialogue with other theoretical perspectives.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Author contributions

IC: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. JJ: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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