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Race and 2008 Presidential Politics in Florida: A List Experiment

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Abstract

We use the list-experiment methodology to address three questions raised by the presidential candidacy and election of Barack Obama. First, to what degree did white voters hold feelings of racial antipathy toward blacks as a group in 2008? Second, were those feelings manifest in their response to Obama's candidacy and subsequent election as president? Third, to what degree did whites actually take pride in the nomination and election of an African American to the nation's highest office? Our analysis of four statewide surveys in Florida shows that few white voters were upset by Obama's electoral achievements, and many took some pride in his historic candidacy and election. Nevertheless, substantial racism still appears to linger in Florida.

KEYWORDS: race, list experiment, 2008 election

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"If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our Founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

--President-elect Barack Obama
November 4, 2008

Despite the strong Democratic winds provided by the unpopular Bush presidency and a rapidly deteriorating economy, some observers wondered aloud whether race would turn out to be the 800-pound gorilla in the 2008 presidential election. The general election result seemingly provides a definitive answer to the question of whether America is ready for an African-American president, but a quick glance at exit-poll data shows that America remains something less than a fully "post-racial" society. Race has been a powerful political cleavage in the United States for decades (Stanley and Niemi 2006), and it remained so in 2008. Ninety-five percent of African-American voters chose Obama, as did two-thirds of Latinos, but McCain won a majority (55%) of white votes (Election Results 2008).

Differences in how black, brown, and white Americans viewed the state of the economy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the role of the federal government in providing a social safety net no doubt explain much of this racial cleavage. Yet previous research would also raise the possibility that simple racial antipathy on the part of many whites, along with racial pride on the part of many blacks, may actually have exacerbated the racial divide in the 2008 election. In this paper, we explore the degree to which white voters in a southern state were upset by, and ,alternatively, inspired by, the candidacy of the first African American to win the presidential nomination of a major party.

Old and New Racism

Most scholars agree that the expression and manifestation of white racism has evolved, though there is disagreement about its contemporary nature and extent. So-called "old" racism was overt, and according to Key's (1949) classic treatise on the American South, the most strident white supremacist candidates in the Old South generally found greater support in "black belts" where white voters felt threatened by change to the existing order. That pattern was replicated in George Wallace's 1968 third-party presidential candidacy (Wright 1977) and again in David Duke's unsuccessful bids for a U.S. Senate seat and Governor of Louisiana in 1990 and 1991, respectively (Giles and Buckner 1993).

By contrast, the "symbolic" racism thesis proposes that while outright bigotry has declined among whites in the United States, racism continues to exist,

masked behind references to the individualist values embedded in the American Creed or in a secularized Protestant work ethic (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981). Proponents of this view maintain that symbolic racism is pervasive and stems more from anti-black affect than from personal self-interest (Sears et al. 1980), though its impact on voter choice may depend upon how deeply race is intertwined with electoral messages and strategy (Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990).

Critics of the symbolic racism thesis agree that the decline of blatant expressions of racist sentiment does not mean that white racism has disappeared. However, they view patterns of bias as inconsistent with the notion that modern racism stems from blacks' violation of traditional individualist values (Sniderman et al. 1991). While prejudice in the form of negative stereotypes of blacks is still observable among a segment of the white population, the good news is said to be that a larger segment of the white population now holds some *positive* stereotypes about the black population. Sniderman and Stiglitz (2008) found that prejudice (negative stereotypes of blacks) plays a role in shaping voter choice generally, but esteem (positive stereotypes of blacks) is also fairly widespread and has an especially notable effect among partisans who are ideologically conflicted.

The Obama phenomenon raises several questions in the context of this literature. First, to what degree did white voters continue to hold feelings of racial antipathy toward blacks as a group in 2008? Second, were those feelings manifest in their response to Obama's candidacy and subsequent election as president? Third, to what degree did whites actually take pride in the nomination and election of an African American to the nation's highest office? To address these questions, we analyze data from four surveys of Florida residents conducted between September of 2008 and March of 2009.

Survey 1 was a telephone poll of 839 registered voters in the state, conducted by Cherry Communications (a private commercial firm) between September 28 and October 5, 2008. Each respondent was asked 53 questions, including evaluations of President Bush, Governor Charlie Crist, and the political parties; vote intention; which candidate would perform better in several policy areas; retrospective evaluations of the economy; and basic demographic information. Surveys 2 through 4 are from monthly statewide surveys of consumer confidence among adults in Florida households, conducted by the University of Florida Survey Research Center (UF SRC) in October of 2008, November of 2008, and March of 2009. In addition to measuring attitudes about the national and Florida economy, plus demographic information, the UF SRC generously appended several questions relating to campaign interest, vote intention/choice, and issue preferences, as well as those described in greater detail below.

Table 1: Description of Survey Data

	Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3	Survey 4
Dates of Surveys	September 28 – October 5, 2008	October 1 - 31, 2008	November 5 – 30, 2008	March 1 – 31, 2008
House	Cherry Communications	UF SRC	UF SRC	UF SRC
Primary Purpose	Media Poll	Consumer Confidence	Consumer Confidence	Consumer Confidence
Sampling Frame	Registered Voters in Florida	Adults in Households in Florida	Adults in Households in Florida	Adults in Households in Florida
Method	List	RDD	RDD	RDD
Number of Respondents	839	504	449	514
Response Rate	36.0%	RR4 = 19.7%	RR4 = 19.8%	RR4 = 20.2%
List Experiment Manipulation(s)	Upset: “A black candidate running for president.”	Upset: “A black candidate running for president.” Proud: “The fact that a black candidate is able to win his party's nomination for president.”	Upset: “A black man being elected president.” Proud: “A black man being elected president.”	Upset: “Blacks pushing themselves where they are not wanted.”

Table 1 provides descriptive information about each survey. No state is a perfect microcosm of the national electorate, but our focus on Florida provides some important analytical leverage. First, as in the previous two presidential elections (Shaw 2006), Florida was a battleground state in 2008. Both major-party campaigns spent considerable resources on television advertising, and both

candidates (along with their spouses and running mates) made numerous visits between the conventions and Election Day. With no other statewide races on the ballot in 2008, Barack Obama and John McCain had the political stage largely to themselves. Accordingly, Floridians had even more of an opportunity than most Americans to encounter and weigh arguments for and against each candidate. Beyond that, Florida is a southern state, where we might expect to see stronger vestiges of "old racism" among white residents than are present in other parts of the country (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997).

Measurement Strategy

Measuring racial attitudes in surveys can be tricky because, under the symbolic racism thesis, these attitudes might be especially vulnerable to the threat of *social desirability* (Schuman and Presser 1996; Tourangeau and Smith 1996). That is, although some people freely admit to having negative affect and overt biases toward African Americans, many whites might be tempted to conceal anti-black attitudes behind what they know to be more socially acceptable answers to direct questions about race (Craemer 2008; Krysan 1998.). A solution is to ask about racial attitudes and motivations *indirectly*, providing some cover for individual respondents to express attitudes about sensitive topics while maintaining the analyst's ability to assess the prevalence of those beliefs in the aggregate. The "list-experiment" methodology accomplishes those goals by randomly assigning respondents to baseline and treatment conditions.

In Survey 1, the commercial poll conducted in late September and early October, respondents assigned to the baseline condition were told, "I'm now going to read you four things that sometimes make people angry or upset. After I read all four statements, just tell me *how many* of them upset you. I don't want to know which ones, just *how many*." The four statements were as follows:

"One: The way gasoline prices keep going up."

"Two: Professional athletes getting million-dollar-plus salaries."

"Three: Requiring seat belts be used when driving."

"Four: Large corporations polluting the environment."

Respondents randomly assigned to the treatment condition were provided a fifth stimulus that might be upsetting:

"Five: A black candidate running for president."

The latter group of respondents presumably understood that the interviewer could not possibly know which stimuli were upsetting. As a result, they should have been more likely to express any true negative feelings about "a black candidate" in their numerical response than if they had been faced with a direct question about their racial attitudes. The logic behind the list experiment is that any difference between the two groups in the *average number* of upsetting

stimuli reflects the proportion in the overall sample that is upset by, in this case, "a black candidate running for president."

For example, if we assume for a moment that everyone in both groups was upset by gas prices and pollution, and that no one in either group was upset by millionaire athletes or seat-belt laws, the mean number of upsetting items in the baseline group would be exactly 2. If thirty percent of respondents were also upset by a black candidate running for president, the mean number of upsetting items in the treatment group would be 2.3 – and our estimate of the proportion upset by a black candidate is the difference in means between the two groups multiplied by 100 ($.30 \times 100 = 30$ percent).

This technique of estimating aggregate effects without identifying individuals who may be reticent to reveal socially undesirable responses¹ was developed by Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens (1997; see also Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997), who showed that both the prospect of a black family moving in next door and governmental affirmative action policies elicited more anger among white Southerners in the early 1990s than among white non-Southerners. Applications of this methodology have also demonstrated substantial anger over the prospect of a female president (Streb et al. 2008) but surprisingly little negative affect directed to a Jewish vice-presidential or presidential candidate (Kane, Craig, and Wald 2004).

It is possible that *ceiling effects* in this type of design could cause us to underestimate the extent to which respondents were upset by the sensitive item. For example, such a result might occur if a large segment of the treatment group was upset by all four non-sensitive items *as well as* the sensitive item (a black candidate), but under-reported the total number of upsetting items in an effort to mask what might be considered a socially undesirable response. We attempted to minimize that possibility by providing four non-sensitive stimuli rather than three (Sniderman and Carmines 1997, 48) and by including one stimulus that might be more likely to upset individualists (mandatory seat belts) and one that might be more upsetting to environmentalists (corporate pollution), two groups that often conflict in day-to-day politics.

In fact, less than ten percent of our respondents in the baseline groups (those who did not see the sensitive "black candidate" item) in Surveys 1 and 2 reported being upset by all four non-sensitive items. This result allayed most of our fears about ceiling effects. In keeping with the literature on the extent and sources of white racism, our analysis in this paper is limited to non-Hispanic

¹ Corstange (2009) has recently developed a method that makes it possible to do multivariate analysis based on a modified form of the list experiment in which baseline group respondents are asked about each item individually, while treatment group respondents are still asked the "just how many" question.

whites.² However, while there are too few Hispanics and "others" in any of the surveys for us to examine them separately, the findings reported below are not substantially different from a pooled analysis of whites, Hispanics, and other non-blacks.

"Upset" Effects

The top row of Table 2 shows the results from Survey 1, where our basic finding is that the main effect is essentially zero. The mean number of upsetting stimuli in the treatment group (who heard the list including "a black candidate running for president") was 2.27, which was exactly the same as in the baseline group.³ These findings are largely confirmed by the results in Survey 2, the October consumer confidence survey, reported in the second line of Table 2. In this study, roughly one-third of respondents were assigned to the baseline group, and one-third were assigned to the treatment group. (The remaining one-third will be discussed shortly.) The mean number of upsetting responses is actually *lower* in the treatment group (2.37, n = 140) than in the baseline group (2.42, n = 139).

While that difference is more than likely attributable to random assignment, it again underscores the trivial number of whites in Florida who evidenced upset by a black candidate running for president. Given the overall similarity of the findings in these two pre-election surveys, we pooled the data for an analysis of subgroups based on vote preference. Not surprisingly, Obama supporters showed no hint of being upset in the aggregate – but, then again, neither did those who backed McCain. In fact, the treatment condition mean was lower (though not significantly so) than the baseline mean in both instances.

On the other hand, it is conceivable that a black *president-elect* might evoke more anxiety among white Southerners than a black *candidate*. However, our evidence from Survey 3, the November post-election survey of consumer confidence, does not reveal any such pattern. In this survey, we changed the treatment stimulus to read as follows:

"Five: A black man being elected president."⁴

² In Survey 1, respondents were asked, "Is your race or ethnic identity white, African-American, Hispanic, Haitian, or something else?" Our analysis included only the 627 people who said they were white. In Surveys 2-4, non-Hispanic whites were those who answered "no" when asked whether they were of Spanish or Hispanic origin, and "white (or Caucasian)" to the question, "What race do you consider yourself?"

³ Four respondents (1.3%) in the treatment group indicated that they were upset by all five stimuli, including the treatment item. This result is consistent with our conclusion that very few whites in the sample were upset by a black candidate running for president.

⁴ The dramatic and unexpected drop in gasoline prices in fall 2008 also prompted us to change one of the baseline stimuli from "the way gasoline prices keep going up" to "high gasoline prices."

Again to our surprise, the mean number of upsetting stimuli for non-Hispanic white respondents in the treatment group was marginally lower (2.14, n = 118) than in the baseline group (2.32, n = 130). Even among McCain voters, there was no discernible difference between the baseline condition (2.21, n = 62) and the treatment condition (2.23, n = 47).

Further subgroup analyses of the October and November data (which must be viewed cautiously due to the small numbers of cases involved) did not reveal any statistically significant "upset" among Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, men or women, those with less or more education, the young or the old. In short, the list experiment is designed to detect what might be seen as socially undesirable and racially sensitive responses, but it did not reveal any significant degree of upset among white Floridians about a black candidate or a black president-elect.

Table 2: Analyses of List Experiments

<u>Treatment Stimulus / Survey</u>	Baseline		Treatment		<u>Effect</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>p(t)</u>
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>N</u>				
Upset: "A black candidate running for president."								
Survey 1 - Sept. - Oct. 2008	2.27	317	2.27	306	-0.3	-0.04	614.66	0.97
Survey 2 - October 2008	2.42	139	2.37	140	-4.6	-0.40	276.86	0.34
Upset: "A black man being elected president."								
Survey 3 - November 2008	2.32	130	2.14	118	-17.9	-1.31	228.16	0.19
Proud: "The fact that a black candidate is able to win his party's nomination for president."								
Survey 2 - October 2008	2.82	139	3.47	102	65.0	4.54	202.56	0.00
Proud: "A black man being elected president."								
Survey 3 - November 2008	2.82	132	3.44	101	61.8	4.53	198.43	0.00
Upset: "Blacks pushing themselves where they are not wanted."								
Survey 4 - March 2009	1.99	217	2.32	174	33.6	2.83	340.62	0.00

That result is largely consistent with the lack of any "Bradley effect" in Florida in 2008, as Obama's actual margin of victory in the state (2.8%) was slightly *higher* than both the mean estimate in the fifteen statewide polls that ended in the last week of the campaign (2.1%) and the trend estimate (1.7%) reported on Pollster.com (2008). Thus, our instrument's failure to detect latent racial animosity toward Obama is entirely consistent with the absence of over-reporting of support for the Democratic nominee in pre-election polls.

"Proud" Effects

In Survey 2, we introduced a variant of the list experiment by asking respondents in our baseline group a second question: "I'm now going to read you four things that sometimes make people feel proud or inspired. After I read all four statements, just tell me *how many* of them make you feel proud or inspired. I don't want to know which ones, just *how many*." The statements were as follows:

"One: American athletes participating in the Olympics."

"Two: The overall system of government in this country."

"Three: The performance of our military in Iraq and other trouble spots around the world."

"Four: The opportunities for people who work hard to get ahead in life."

The remaining one-third of our respondents were asked about a fifth stimulus:

"Five: The fact that a black candidate is able to win his party's nomination for president."

To be clear, respondents in our baseline group were asked both the "upset" and "proud" baseline questions without any reference to "a black candidate"; one treatment group was asked about the "upsetting" stimuli with reference to "a black candidate"; and a separate treatment group was asked about the "proud" stimuli, including "a black candidate." As in our analysis of "upsetting" responses, we are able to calculate the estimated proportion of respondents who were "proud or inspired" by the nomination of a black candidate by subtracting the baseline mean from the treatment mean, and multiplying by 100.

The most striking finding in our analysis of this item is the very high proportion of whites who claim some pride or inspiration from a black presidential candidacy. The mean number of "proud or inspiring" stimuli in the treatment group is 3.47 ($n = 102$), as compared to 2.82 ($n = 139$) in the baseline group, resulting in our estimate that 65% of white non-Hispanic Floridians had some positive emotional response to Obama's candidacy. Not surprisingly, that sentiment was almost universal (88.6%, $p(t) < .01$) among those who preferred

Obama, but it was shared by a substantial number of McCain supporters as well (47.0%, $p(t) < .02$).

We replicated the "proud" list experiment in Survey 3, the post-election November consumer-confidence survey, changing the fifth treatment stimulus to the following:

"Five: A black man being elected president."

Consistent with our earlier findings, many white Floridians seem to have shared a positive emotional response to the historic election of a black candidate. The mean in the treatment group (3.44, $n = 101$) was significantly higher than in the baseline group (2.82, $n = 132$), resulting in an overall estimate that 61.8% of white respondents were proud or inspired by Obama's election. Again, the effects were positive and significant among McCain voters (48.9, $p(t) < .02$) and Obama voters (74.6, $p(t) < .01$) alike.⁵

Has Racism Disappeared?

Our analysis of Surveys 1-3 revealed that few whites were distressed about the candidacy or election of an African American (at least, this particular African American) in 2008, and most appeared to take some pride or inspiration from being a part of history with him. These results beg the question, however, of whether racism in Florida has been eliminated, a topic addressed in the consumer confidence survey in March of 2009 (Survey 4). In this survey, baseline group respondents were read the same four "upset" stimuli presented to respondents in Survey 3:

"One: High gasoline prices."

"Two: Professional athletes getting million-dollar-plus salaries."

"Three: Requiring seat belts be used when driving."

"Four: Large corporations polluting the environment."

Treatment group respondents were given a fifth option:

"Five: Blacks pushing themselves where they are not wanted."

This latter stimulus was chosen to evoke core racist sentiment, and we were dismayed but not surprised to see that a considerable amount of it lingers in Florida. The mean number of upsetting stimuli in the Survey 4 baseline group was 1.99 ($n = 217$), while the mean in the treatment group was 2.32 ($n = 174$), which

⁵ It is possible that there are ceiling effects in this experiment, as 22.4% of the baseline group reported being proud of all four non-sensitive items, and 22.6% of the treatment group reported pride in all five items. If anything, however, ceiling effects should result in an *underestimate* of the "proud" effect. Only 1.9% of the baseline group (3 respondents) reported that none of the non-sensitive items gave them any sense of pride or inspiration, and no one in the treatment group reported lack of pride or inspiration in all five items.

gives us an overall estimate of 33.6% of white non-Hispanic Floridians who evidenced this form of racist sentiment.

Conclusion

The most striking finding in our data is the dog that did not bark. In the throes of her primary campaign, Senator Clinton appealed to the political instincts of Democratic super-delegates with an overt message that Senator Obama could not win, and an unspoken argument that white working-class voters throughout the country (but especially in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the South) would not vote for an African American. Pundits also wondered aloud about the potential for a "Bradley effect," one that might evaporate Obama's lead in the late-October polls (for example, CNN 2008; but see also Silver 2008, Hopkins 2008). Using a methodology that had previously revealed racist views among New South whites, our surveys revealed that few whites in Florida were distressed about an African American being nominated for, or winning, the presidency. Indeed, about two-thirds of white Floridians, including a considerable number who voted for John McCain, appeared to take some pride or inspiration in being a part of the important milestone represented by the election of Barack Obama.

This is all the more remarkable given that the other dog in our data barked loudly. Racism in Florida is hardly a thing of the past, as a third of our white respondents revealed such sentiments barely a month after the inauguration of President Obama. Broadly speaking, these findings parallel those of Kane, Craig, and Wald (2004), who found little resentment of a Jewish candidate for president or vice president even in the face of considerable lingering anti-Semitism. Both that study and ours recall Citrin, Green, and Sears's (1990) caution that campaign context conditions the degree to which racial sentiments are manifest in the voting booth.

Part of the explanation for what happened in 2008 may stem from Obama's biracial identity and background, with his presidential campaign going to great lengths to emphasize that his values came from the American heartland via his white grandparents. Perhaps some credit also goes to the McCain campaign, for its refusal to use negative stereotypes of blacks in its message. But much of the story, in our view, reflects the resurgent and overwhelming strength of both the long-term force of partisanship (Bartels 2000) and the short-term retrospective evaluations of the Bush presidency (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2003), both (but especially the latter) having been primed by the Obama campaign's twin mantras of "change" and "no third term."

The disconnect between our findings that show, on the one hand, a great deal of persistent racial antipathy and, on the other, almost no manifestation of that antipathy in attitudes toward the nation's first African-American president,

raises questions concerning when voters frame candidacies in terms of race and when they do not. Specifying which campaign contexts will mute or even overwhelm white racism remains a challenge for the scholarly community.

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