

Press release text (includes contact information for lead researchers)

<http://www.washington.edu/news/articles/unconscious-racial-attitudes-playing-large-role-in-2012-presidential-vote>

Background

1. Studies of the 2008 Presidential election showed that race attitudes influenced the vote in ways that would certainly have produced a smaller winning margin for Barack Obama than he would have had in the absence of race bias.
2. Both conscious (“explicit”) and unconscious (“implicit”) race attitudes played a role. The race attitude investigated is “White preference” — a preference for racial White relative to Black.

Main observations — Jan thru Apr 2012 (Studies during contested primaries)

1. Data collected in the first four months of 2012 revealed that stronger White preference was very consistently associated with favoring Republican candidates relative to Barack Obama.
2. This pattern was shown for all three types of race attitude measures and was comparable to the substantially greater White preference shown by supporters of McCain relative to supporters of Obama in 2008. (The 2008 study is described in an article published in 2009: <http://faculty.washington.edu/agg/pdf/Greenwald&al.ASAP.2009.pdf>)

Conclusions

1. It was not a surprise that voters with stronger White preference favored politically conservative candidates. This relationship has been observed repeatedly in recent Presidential elections.
2. These findings do not *at all* call for a conclusion that politically conservative candidates are racist. It does mean, however, that — for whatever reason — politically conservative candidates are more attractive to voters with White-favoring racial attitudes.
3. The obvious questions raised by these observations: After nearly four years having an African American President in the White House, why do race attitudes (including unconscious race attitudes) continue to role in electoral politics?

One possible answer is that, as President, Barack Obama is now more powerful than he was as candidate Barack Obama in 2008. This increased power and status may have brought out race-based antagonism that had less reason for being activated in 2008. Another possible answer is connected to Republican candidates’ frequent assertions that their most important objective is to remove Barack Obama from the presidency. This campaign slogan may have strong appeal to those with latent racial motivation.

4. We expect to learn of additional interpretations fairly soon after these results are made known. As we continue this study for the next 6 months, we will try to test all reasonable interpretations by adding appropriate new measures to the test procedure presented at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/featuredtask.html>

What is most surprising about these findings?

- **Role of racial attitudes among political liberals**

Political psychologists have known for some time that conservatives have stronger pro-White racial attitudes than liberals. Some of our most interesting and least expected findings had to do with the racial attitudes of liberals, and the relation of those attitudes to their candidate preferences. As was also true for conservatives (2,700 in our sample), for liberals (7,900 in our sample) both implicit and explicit racial attitudes reliably predicted their attraction to Republican candidates. Although it may be surprising that self-described liberals preferred Republican candidates, fully 11% of self-described liberals in our sample did, almost a thousand in number.

- **Role of racial attitudes among racial egalitarians**

Another surprise came when we examined how race attitudes worked for those who described themselves as entirely egalitarian in their racial attitudes — they indicated that they had exactly equal warmth toward White and Black people and (on another question) described themselves as equally liking Black and White. Close to 50% of our sample described themselves in this way (about 6,500). Even slightly more strongly than self-described liberals, for these egalitarians implicit White race preference predicted their preference for a Republican candidate.

To take test these observations about liberals and egalitarians to the limit, we examined the subset of our sample (over 4,000 in number) who described themselves as BOTH liberal in political beliefs and egalitarian in racial beliefs. For these, too, both explicit and (especially) implicit race attitudes significantly predicted preference for Republican candidates.

Methods

The “Decision 2012” study was launched <https://implicit.harvard.edu> in early January of 2012. The Decision 2012 site assessed three types of measures from visitors who contributed their time to building up the Decision 2012 data archive. These three types of measures tapped:

- Political beliefs, including party preference, political ideology (liberalism–conservatism), and candidate preferences. The candidate measures focused on Barack Obama and the five main contenders for the Republican nomination, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum.

- Race attitudes, of three major types that scientists label as *explicit* (openly endorsed), *implicit* (of which people may be unaware), and *indirect* (also known as “symbolic racism”).
- Demographics, including age, race, sex, education level, and religiosity

During January–April 2012, 27,63 visitors to the implicit.harvard.edu web site provided at least partial data for the Decision 2012 study. Our conclusions are based on 14,707 of these who completed all of the major measures used in our analyses and identified themselves as eligible to vote (American citizens aged 18 or older). Demographics of these eligible voters are listed at the end of this background document.

Researchers

The Decision 2012 project is led by a group in University of Washington’s Psychology Department, with collaborators in Psychology Departments at University of Virginia and Harvard University. The UW group consists of Anthony G. (Tony) Greenwald (Professor), Teri A. Kirby (PhD student), and Kaiyuan Xu (2011 Honors BA graduate). The University of Virginia collaborators are Brian A. Nosek (Associate Professor), and N. Sriram (Research Scientist). The Harvard collaborator is Mahzarin R. Banaji (Professor).

Further Data Collection

By the end of April, Mitt Romney had emerged as the certain Republican nominee. Accordingly, continuing research on the this project will consider only Romney and Barack Obama as the candidates of interest and some related additions will be made to the set of measures included in the project. If the future findings show a declining role of race attitudes in predicting candidate preference, this will suggest that issues dividing the Republican candidates contributed most to the observed involvement of race attitudes in January–April. If, however, the of role race attitudes increases, this will suggest that the issues dividing the Republican candidates from Obama are important in explaining the involvement of race attitudes in predicting candidate preference.

Data Availability

Because the currency of our research topic, it is not appropriate for us to use the accustomed scientific strategy of withholding public description of results until findings have been peer-reviewed for journal publication. To make the basis for our conclusions available to those interested in understanding the data basis for our conclusions we will post selected summaries of the Decision 2012 January–April data publicly. Also, as additional results become available they will similarly be posted. We plan to post updates approximately monthly between now and the November election. (The first such posting has not yet been uploaded, however.)

Sample description**Sample size:** 14,707**Age:** Minimum = 18 years, mean = 32.7 years, standard deviation = 13.2 years**Sex:** Female (60.1%), Male (39.9%)**Race:** White (78.0%), Black/African American (6.8%), Asian (3.4%), Native American (0.6%), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.4%), Multi-racial (6.7%), Other or unknown (4.2%)**Ethnicity:** Hispanic (7.0), Not Hispanic or Latino (86.1%), Unknown or unreported (6.9%)**Education:** <= high school graduate (8.9%); some college (42.5%); college degree (19.4%); post-graduate education or advanced degree (29.2%)**Party:** Republican (33.7%); Democrat (60.5%); unstated (5.8%)