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# Voters, Emotions, and Race in 2008: Obama as the First Black President

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## Abstract

Social desirability effects make it difficult to learn voters' racial attitudes. List experiments can tap sensitive issues without directly asking respondents to express overt opinions. The authors report on such an experiment about Barack Obama as the first black president, finding that 30 percent of white Americans were "troubled" by the prospect of Obama as the first black president. The authors examine policy and emotional underpinnings of these responses, finding that expressed emotions of anxiety and enthusiasm condition latent racial attitudes and racial policy beliefs especially for those exhibiting a social desirability bias. The results suggest that Obama's victory despite this level of concern about race was at least in part a result of intense enthusiasm his campaign generated. This enthusiasm for Obama may have allowed some white voters to overcome latent concerns about his race. The research suggests emotions are critical in understanding racial attitudes.

## Keywords

race, religion, Obama, emotion, list experiment, 2008 election, voting and elections, public opinion

For more than six decades the role of race in American politics has captured the interest of academics and pundits alike. In *Southern Politics* V. O. Key (1949) examined the underlying forces that structured politics in Southern states, putting black disenfranchisement at the center of southern politics. But the widespread explicit racism that Key documented is difficult to imagine today. The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president is evidence for many that the equality dreamed of during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movements has been, for the most part, achieved. Throughout this historic campaign emotions ran high as anxiety about Obama (among Republicans and conservatives) and enthusiasm, especially among younger voters, generated the highest voter turnout since the 1960s. In his inaugural address, President Obama used the fact that his own father would not have been served in most Washington, D.C., restaurants not many years ago as evidence of how far America has come from its past. Yet students of race and politics will not be as quick to dismiss the importance of race and ethnicity in the modern version of Key's have–have-not conflict. In fact, there is some evidence that his race was a significant disadvantage for Obama in 2008. Despite his clear electoral victory over John McCain, some argue that Obama's winning margin was much smaller than expected given the state of the economy and historically low approval rating of the incumbent president (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008, 2009).

There is no doubt that Obama's nomination and victory in the 2008 presidential election are historic. The United States fought the Civil War over whether black slavery was an abomination in the "land of the free." Reconstruction at first put African Americans on an equal footing with whites in the South but later became synonymous with oppression based on color. For nearly sixty years the nation operated under the *Plessey v. Ferguson* doctrine of "separate but equal," in which separation was anything but equal. And two U.S. presidents (Lincoln and Kennedy) lost their lives at least in part because they fought for equality for blacks. Andrew Delbanco in the November 6, 2008, *New York Review of Books* writes, "It's been sixty years since the Dixiecrats walked out of the 1948 Democratic convention, more than forty since George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door, and twenty since the elder George Bush ran his Willie Horton ads." Yet despite this history, in 2008 the American public elected a black man to lead the nation.

There is much to examine about the role of race in American politics sixty years after Key's groundbreaking

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work on racial threat that found whites residing in Southern counties with higher African American populations were more likely to adopt more segregationist policies. And yet there is considerable resistance from scholars and political pundits to the idea of racial voting in 2008. We focus here on the extent to which white voters' underlying predispositions about race were a factor in the 2008 presidential election. Our work builds on a recent study of support for a generic black presidential candidate conducted in mid-2007, well before Barack Obama became the Democratic nominee but after he declared his candidacy. In this study Heerwig and McCabe (2009) conducted a survey "list experiment" designed to tap latent attitudes toward a black candidate, allowing them to compare expressed support for such a candidate to unvoiced latent attitudes toward the same candidate. They found that 30 percent of Americans exhibited concern about voting for a generic black presidential candidate, even though nearly 85 percent had claimed they would support such a candidate when asked overtly. However, there may be a significant difference between expressing support for a generic candidate compared to a real candidate in the heat of an actual campaign. So while latent attitudes toward a generic candidate appear to suggest that racial voting may persist, the proof is in whether such attitudes appear when we turn to the real case of Barack Obama.

It is not enough though to simply find out if some voters harbor unvoiced opposition to a black president. Indeed the more interesting question is what underlies such latent attitudes and whether they can be overcome. So we go beyond the straightforward list experiment to examine voters' affective responses to Obama in our analysis. While classical political thought drew distinctions between reason and emotion, more recent reconceptualizations in political science (Marcus et al. 2006; Lodge and Taber 2000, 2005; Redlawsk 2002; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010) demonstrate that emotions must be seen as an integral part of political decision-making processes. Perhaps in the realm of racial politics, emotional responses to candidates by voters interact with or condition deeply held and often hidden beliefs about race.

We use a survey list experiment to examine the extent to which imagining Obama as the "first black president" troubled American voters in the month before the November 2008 election. The power of the list experiment is its ability to tap attitudes that are not otherwise openly expressed. Using this randomized experiment we find significant unvoiced concern over the potential election of Barack Obama. While much of this concern can be explained by partisanship, education, and age, there remains evidence of latent racial attitudes toward Obama that are not conditioned on these controls. We then examine the

policy and emotional underpinnings of these responses. The results suggest that Obama's victory despite this level of concern about race was at least in part the result of intense enthusiasm his campaign generated. High enthusiasm for Obama may have allowed some voters to overcome latent concerns about his race. On the other hand voters expressing anxiety about Obama were more troubled by his race. Consistent with some previous research using aggregate-level data (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008, 2009) these results point to the continued presence of racial voting in 2008.

### *Contemporary Racism: What We Know and What We Do Not*

Contemporary racial discrimination is commonly discussed in terms of symbolic racism, modern racism, and racial resentment (Sears et al. 2000; also see Hurwitz and Peffley 1998; Stoker 1996).<sup>1</sup> Symbolic racism originates from a combination of negative affect and stereotypical beliefs about blacks and the perception that blacks do not follow the American values of hard work and obedience (Sears et al. 2000; Sears 1994; Henry and Sears 2002; Kinder and Sears 1981, 1985; Kinder and Mendelberg 2000; Sears and Henry 2003, 2005). Symbolic racism includes denial of discrimination against blacks and beliefs that blacks need to work harder and are too demanding in terms of equal rights (Tarman and Sears 2005). Another component of symbolic racism involves the belief that blacks disproportionately benefit from government policies. We term this latter component "policy-based racism" throughout this article. While policy-based racism is distinct from symbolic racism, they are related concepts.

Symbolic racism is quite different from the idea of "old-fashioned" or "Jim Crow" racism, in which blacks are seen as inherently inferior to other races. This ideology was common among Americans prior to World War II, becoming less prominent by the end of the 1960s. Most racial theorists believe that old-fashioned racism has nearly been eliminated and that symbolic racism is now the main cause of discriminatory views toward blacks (Sears et al. 2000). Although some contend that symbolic racism is not conceptually or empirically different from conservative ideology (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sniderman et al. 1997; Sniderman and Tetlock 1986; Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. 1997), more recent studies have refuted this claim. Symbolic racism can explain white attitudes toward racial policies independent of and distinct from conservative views toward the role of government (Tarman and Sears 2005; Valentino and Sears 2005). At the same time it is also possible that symbolic and policy-based racial responses could mask some underlying

continued belief in the inherent inferiority of nonwhites. Neblo (2009) has recently argued that debates about racism's role are stuck in a cycle of disagreement. He suggests that the major parties in these debates are each right in their account of public opinion about racial politics, but for different subsets of subjects. Rather than homogeneity, Neblo claims there is diversity and complexity in racial attitudes in the United States.

At the same time the political science literature on racial attitudes has generally failed to consider the role of emotion although sociologists have long understood that racism is not purely rational (Memmi 2000). Memmi argues racism is illogical and that using only logical arguments to counter it will naturally fail. In other domains political science scholars have found affective evaluations regularly influence how people think about candidates (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010) and issues (Lodge and Taber 2000, 2005). Rational updating requires that negative information lowers a candidate's evaluation while positive information must do the opposite (Green and Gerber 1999). But voters may act as motivated reasoners, attempting to hold to an existing positive evaluation by using any one of a number of processes to explain away new negative (incongruent) information (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000; Taber and Lodge 2006; Redlawsk 2002; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010). Obama's presidential candidacy may have been an ideal case of incongruent information for those holding racial attitudes. For some voters, the idea of Obama as the first black president may have triggered some deep-seated worries, but the reality of his campaign and the enthusiasm it generated may have helped to overcome them. Whether positive or negative, affect cannot be separated from underlying information processing and thus needs to be considered in the context of racial attitudes.

We build on Neblo's (2009) theme of diversity as we seek to parse out policy-based aspects of racism from old-fashioned racism, emotions, and ideological conservatism. But old-fashioned racism is unlikely to be expressed openly, and so we must tap its latent roots by asking questions in ways that respondents cannot recognize. The list experiment allows us to tease out whether policy-based racism is different from latent racial attitudes and whether either is different from ideological conservatism or basic partisan support for a candidate. We can also test whether emotions, such as fear and anxiety, condition racial attitudes.

The more precise question we examine is whether Barack Obama's race influenced white voters in the 2008 election. While in recent years white voters have been more willing to vote for blacks running for public office (Sigelman et al. 1995; Terkildsen 1993), race has still

been found to be a major obstacle for minority candidates, especially in the South (Giles and Buckner 1993; Glaser 1994; Valentino and Sears 2005; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchins, and White 2002). More generally, an experiment conducted by Terkildsen (1993) using fictional candidates (although the participants were told the candidates were real politicians) found substantial evidence of discrimination by white respondents. Both feeling thermometers and vote choice were significantly lower for black candidates compared to the white candidates with the same political backgrounds. Sigelman et al. (1995) find that whites are more likely to question the competence of liberal minority candidates in an experimental setting. Even those minority candidates who are able to win face challenges. Haynie (2002) shows the performance of black state legislators is evaluated less favorably by their peers, independent of other potential factors.

### *Measuring Racial Attitudes*

While previous research has used many approaches to measure racial attitudes, methods that rely on asking respondents to explicitly express attitudes toward racially charged issues are subject to "social desirability effects." Individuals are not always truthful when responding to survey questions if they feel their answers must align with socially acceptable norms (Berinsky 1999, 2002). As Berinsky (1999, 1211) argues, the difference between privately held beliefs and public responses may be a result of the "desire to cloak attitudes that society as a whole might deem unacceptable for fear of social sanctions. It is plausible that under circumstances where respondents fear they might be 'censured' or socially shunned for their attitudes . . . they might shade those attitudes when reporting them to the interviewer." Social desirability effects have been revealed in reference to not only racial attitudes and policy (Berinsky 1999, 2002; Gilens, Sniderman, and Kuklinski 1998; Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. 1997; Sniderman, Crosby, and Howell 2000) but also the possibility of a female president (Streb et al. 2008) as well as overreporting of voter turnout (Karp and Brockington 2005).

### *Survey List Experiments*

One solution to the social desirability problem is to build on the burgeoning survey experiment paradigm with random assignment of respondents into groups receiving different but related stimuli. The list experiment is a powerful and intuitive survey method used in a number of studies that ask potentially sensitive questions (e.g., Gilens, Sniderman, and Kuklinski 1998; Kuklinski, Cobb, and

**Table 1.** Question Wording for List Experiment

“Some people will vote for Barak Obama this fall and some people will not. Regardless of your overall feelings toward him, please indicate how many of the following five facts about Obama trouble you when you think about choosing the next president. I SHOULD ADD, TOO, THAT we are not interested in WHICH ONES trouble you, only HOW MANY. Are you ready?”

The four statements read to the control group were (order was randomized):

1. During the primary campaign, he described small-town Pennsylvanians as “bitter” and said that they “cling” to guns and religion.
2. He has served in the US Senate only since 2005.
3. He used to be a smoker.
4. He was a member of Jeremiah Wright’s Trinity United Church of Christ for 20 years, before he resigned in May of 2008.

The treatment group received the same four statements above with the additional following statement:

5. If elected, he will be the first black president

The list experiment was carried out in the first quarter of the questionnaire, following questions about Obama’s and McCain’s policy impact and before questions about issue importance.

Gilens 1997; Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. 1997; Sniderman, Crosby, and Howell 2000; Kane, Craig, and Wald 2004). It works quite simply. One randomly assigned control group receives a list of items to which they are asked to respond, indicating how many (in our case) “trouble” them. The treatment group receives the same list plus an additional target item and is also asked to report how many items are troubling. The simple difference in group means between treatment and control groups provides a measure of the percentage of the treatment group that is troubled by the target item since other than the target item all items are the same between groups. And because the treatment group is a random subset of the full sample, results can be generalized to the population from which the random sample is drawn. The list experiment provides an unobtrusive measure and does so without the respondent knowing what information is being sought.

The potential of this methodology is evident in the recent study by Heerwig and McCabe (2009) using a June 2007 Knowledge Networks online survey list experiment to test whether Americans would support a generic black candidate for president. The control group was given three positive statements and asked how many they agreed with. The treatment group was given the same three plus a fourth statement (“I am willing to support a black presidential candidate”) and was also asked to indicate how many statements they agreed with. Comparing the group means, the authors find that 70 percent of respondents would actually support a black presidential candidate while 30 percent would not. But when asked explicitly (in a different question) about supporting a black presidential candidate, 84 percent of respondents say they would do so. Heerwig and McCabe (2009) argue that the 14 percent difference between the two responses is a measure of the social desirability effect. In examining individual differences, they found in particular that well-educated respondents are the least likely to misrepresent their support for a black presidential candidate.

In our list experiment control group respondents were asked to report how many of four statements about Barack Obama “trouble” them, while in the treatment group participants were asked about these same four statements, plus one more stating, “If elected he will be the first black president.” The statements and question wording are provided in Table 1. Respondents were asked to report how many of the items on the list troubled them, but not which specific ones. Subtracting the means for the control group from the treatment group produces the proportion of the population troubled by the idea of Obama as the first black president.<sup>2</sup> For example, if none of the respondents in the survey sample were troubled by the target item, the mean response of both groups would be the same. Alternatively, if some people were troubled by Obama’s race, the subsample difference of means would give an approximation of the proportion of the population that felt this way.

### *Methodological Issues with List Experiments*

Although the design of the list experiment is simple, potential methodological issues exist. For instance, while control items should be relatively benign, including items that few respondents find troubling may make the target item in the treatment group appear too obvious. Moreover, the target item may be masked as well by other items that might seem similar though not exactly the same. Conversely, if the control items trouble most people, many in the treatment group would be required to answer that all items trouble them, thereby eliminating the item selection anonymity. A researcher may also be tempted to include a lengthy list of control statements. However, having a large list can hide the effect of the target item because of larger variance driven by the other items (Fox and Tracy 1986). At the same time, too few items might lead to more cases where all items are found troubling.

**Table 2.** Distribution of Responses to Latent Questions

Number of troubling items	Control	Treatment
0	29.2	24.1
1	17.0	17.5
2	16.9	17.2
3	26.7	22.5
4	10.2	9.2
5	—	9.5
<i>n</i>	698	697

The presence of too many troubling control items leads to potential ceiling effects (Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. 1997). The logic of the list experiment is that respondents know that they can be “troubled” by the idea of Obama as the first black president without the interviewer knowing it is that particular item that troubles them. If too many respondents consider all four control items troubling, the likelihood is that a significant number will not honestly give their true number. Kuklinski, Sniderman, and colleagues (1997) report an iterative estimation to adjust for the ceiling effects. However, there is little information available as to their exact approach. We do know that their means were quite high at 2.28 out of 3 items in the control and 2.24 out of 4 items in the treatment condition. In our sample the means are substantially lower: 1.71 out of 4 items for white respondents in the control and 2.04 out of 5 items for the treatment condition. Moreover, only 10.2 percent of our respondents said that all 4 items troubled them in the control, and 9.5 percent said that all 5 items troubled them in the treatment condition. So while there is a small group of participants for whom identifying all 5 items makes it clear to the interviewer they were troubled by Obama as the first black president, the vast majority of respondents could be comfortable that the interviewer would not know if this were the case. Table 2 presents the distributions for both treatment and control groups in our survey experiment.

In addition, a separate test of the design finds that simply increasing the number of items does not increase the number of troubling items when the treatment list does not contain the racial target item but instead an innocuous target item.<sup>3</sup>

## Data and Method

Our survey list experiment ran in the month before the 2008 presidential election on a national random sample telephone survey of 1,666 registered voters from October 1 to November 2, conducted by the University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll.<sup>4</sup> While the survey included nonwhite respondents, we report responses from the 1,308 white

non-Hispanic respondents. The sample sizes of other races are small and thus of limited use for analysis. In addition, since the primary focus of most media and punditry was how white voters would respond to a black candidate we chose to make that our focus here as well.

Our primary goal is to tease out latent racial attitudes that might not be expressed directly. A secondary interest is measuring the difference between race-based policy responses and latent racism. In addition to the list experiment question, we use a question about whether Obama’s public policies will benefit blacks to measure explicit attitudes toward racial policy expectations. Respondents were asked, “If Barack Obama is elected President, do you think the policies of his administration will favor whites over blacks, favor blacks over whites, or will they treat both groups the same?”<sup>5</sup> The baseline (“both equally”) was the overwhelming response, with 79.7 percent of white respondents in the sample giving this answer. In contrast, 19.5 percent of white respondents said Obama’s policies would favor blacks over whites.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

By subtracting the control group mean from the treatment group, we obtain the proportion of white respondents troubled by Obama as the first black president during the month before the election. Among whites in the control group (responding to four statements;  $n = 698$ ) the mean number of troubling statements is 1.71. In the treatment group (responding to five statements, including the target item;  $n = 697$ ) the mean is 2.04. The difference between the groups is 0.33 ( $t = 3.4, p < .001$ ). Thus, at first cut, 33 percent of all white respondents appear to be troubled by the fact that if elected Obama would be the first black president. While not the same as refusing to vote for him, almost one in three respondents expressed concern when they could do so with the belief that their position would not be known. Interestingly, this finding is quite close to Heerwig and McCabe’s (2009) finding that 30 percent of their respondents were not supportive of a generic black president. Given the difference in timing and our focus on a real candidate, the consistency is striking. Table 3 reports difference estimates between the treatment and control groups for whites, nonwhites and nonblacks, and blacks. While the differences appear substantive, given the small number of cases the results are not statistically significant except for those for whites.

Table 3 also displays the differences by subsamples of whites. Beginning with partisanship, Republicans are of course more troubled by Obama than are Democrats. For Republicans the control group mean ( $n = 252$ ) is 2.64 while the mean of the treatment group ( $n = 270$ ) is 2.95, implying that 31 percent of Republicans are troubled by

**Table 3.** List Experiment Results: Mean Number of Troubling Items

	Control			Treatment			Percentage difference	t-test sig.
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n		
Whites only	1.71	1.39	698	2.04	1.61	697	33	.001
Nonwhites and nonblacks	1.44	1.29	63	1.72	1.62	76	28	ns
Blacks	0.39	0.68	56	0.53	1.12	45	14	ns
The following are for whites only								
Republican	2.64	1.05	252	2.95	1.31	270	31	.01
Democrat	0.80	1.09	238	0.95	1.21	223	15	.20
Independent	1.61	1.32	184	1.95	1.58	188	34	.05
Obama voters	0.62	0.90	305	0.75	1.02	286	13	.11
McCain voters	2.74	0.97	317	3.13	1.18	331	39	.001
Don't know	1.37	1.08	27	2.04	1.45	27	67	.10
18–29	1.45	1.40	42	1.59	1.32	41	14	ns
30–44	1.81	1.36	88	1.72	1.43	76	–9	ns
45–59	1.71	1.30	194	1.92	1.57	194	21	.16
60 or older	1.70	1.50	298	2.23	1.72	306	53	.001
Obama's policies favor blacks	2.98	0.83	117	3.43	1.16	138	45	.001
Obama's policies equal	1.33	1.28	521	1.59	1.48	515	26	.001

Control groups received four items; treatment group received five items.

Obama as the first black president ( $p < .01$ ). A similar margin is found among self-identified independents, where we find 34 percent troubled by Obama as the first black president ( $p < .05$ ). Among Democrats, only a small, statistically insignificant difference is found between the treatment and control groups. Perhaps the apparent discomfort shown by significant shares of Republican and independent respondents is triggered not by Obama as the “first black president” but by “*if elected*, he will be the first black president.” It seems possible that distaste for electing *any* Democrat is at work here rather than Obama's race. We return to this important point below.

Examining the difference between the treatment and control groups by candidate preference we find significant differences similar to those for partisanship. Among McCain voters in the control group the mean number of troubling statements was 2.74, compared to 3.13 in the treatment group. This difference of 0.39 ( $p > .001$ ) suggests that almost 40 percent of McCain supporters are troubled by the fact that if elected Obama would be the first black president. Putting aside pure partisanship for the moment, this may suggest that traditional conservatism overlaps considerably with latent racial attitudes (Sniderman and Piazza 1993). For those who say they plan to vote for Obama, there is no statistical difference between the control and treatment groups.

These two groups of voters already had their minds made up about whom they supported and were unlikely to change by Election Day. But most elections are won or lost on the margins. Among the small 6 percent of survey respondents who said they did not know whom they would

vote for even in the last few days before the election the responses suggest that they would be more likely to break for McCain. The mean number of statements troubling undecideds in the control group is 1.37, while in the experimental group the mean is 2.04 ( $p < .10$ ). Thus, among undecided voters, 67 percent appear troubled by Obama as the first black president. National survey results seem to support this; Obama polled very close to his final numbers, while McCain did almost two points better.<sup>7</sup>

Examining demographic groups further we see little evidence of a treatment effect by age except for older respondents. Among whites age 60 or older the mean number of troubling statements in the control group ( $n = 298$ ) is 1.71 and the mean in the treatment group ( $n = 306$ ) is 2.23, a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ), implying that 53 percent of older respondents are troubled by Obama's race. However, we find no statistically significant differences among the treatment and control groups for the young or middle aged.

### The Role of Policy Beliefs

Before we turn to controlling for partisanship and demographic factors, we explore the extent to which concerns about policy underlie our results. Recall that the policy question allowed respondents to state explicitly whether they believed Obama's policies would favor one group (blacks or whites) over the other or would treat both equally. While this question is not an identical match to the unobtrusive measure used in the list experiment (troubled by Obama as the first black president) it does provide

**Table 4.** List Experiment by Obama's Policies and Party Identification

	Policies treat equally				Policies favor blacks over whites			
	Control	Treatment		<i>p</i>	Control	Treatment		<i>p</i>
Democrats	0.63	0.76	.13	< .2	3.33	2.80		
<i>n</i>	217	192			6	5		
Independent	1.23	1.40	.17	<i>ns</i>	2.92	3.58	.66	< .05
<i>n</i>	113	115			24	31		
Republican	2.48	2.79	.31	< .05	2.97	3.41	.44	< .01
<i>n</i>	126	146			74	82		

Control and treatment groups are the mean numbers of troubling items. The unlabeled group is the difference between the control and treatment groups.

an explicit measure of respondents' policy-based racial attitudes.<sup>8</sup> Among the 19.5 percent of voters who stated Obama's policies as president will favor blacks over whites, the mean number of troubling statements in the control group is 2.98 while the mean in the experimental group is 3.43. This is a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) suggesting that 45 percent of those who believe Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites find Obama as the first black president to be troubling. But it is also a consistent response. More interesting is to examine the latent response among the large majority (almost 80 percent of Americans) who claim that they believe Obama's policies will treat blacks and whites equally. Here the control group mean is (1.33), while the mean number of troubling statements for the treatment group is 1.59, a statistically significant difference of .26 ( $p < .001$ ). Thus 26 percent of white voters who say they believe Obama's policies will treat blacks and whites *equally* still find troubling the prospect of Obama as the first black president. Even among those who do *not* exhibit explicit policy-based racial concerns a significant percentage are nonetheless troubled.

These simple group differences are highly significant. But of course it is no surprise that those whites who say Obama will favor blacks are also troubled by him as the first black president. In some situations symbolic racism and latent racial attitudes coincide (Sears et al. 2000). It is much more interesting that 26 percent of those who say Obama's policies will treat both blacks and whites equally are also troubled by the idea of him as the first black president.

### Controlling for Partisanship and Demographic Factors

Not surprisingly, additional analysis of the means indicates a partisan divide over policy perceptions as shown in Table 4. Virtually all Democrats say that Obama's policies will treat blacks and whites the same, while more than 20 percent of independents and over one-third of

Republicans believe blacks would benefit over whites. Partisanship plays a significant role both in policy beliefs and in the number of items that "trouble" respondents in both control and treatment groups. Thus it is possible that the differences we find are less about race and more about the fact that Obama (a Democrat) might be elected at all. The "trouble" might simply be about electing a Democrat of any stripe.

To control for this as well as for other demographic factors, we estimate an ANOVA model where the dependent variable is the number of statements troubling respondents and the key explanatory variable is the experimental treatment (respondents are coded 1 if they are in the treatment and 0 for the control experimental group). As with the earlier analyses, only white respondents are included.<sup>9</sup> As controls we include binary indicators for whether the respondent is a Democrat or a Republican (with independents as the reference group) and whether respondents believe Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites (coded 1, treat both equally coded 0). All relevant interactions are included, including the experimental treatment by party and by policy belief.<sup>10</sup> Table 5 reports the ANOVA model including controls for age (measured in years), income, and education. Please see Appendix for question wording and variable coding.

The results are illuminating. While partisanship has a direct effect on the number of statements troubling respondents about Obama's presidency, there are no interaction effects for the list experiment treatment and partisanship. As we would expect simply because Obama is a Democrat, Republicans are associated with a higher number of troubling statements and Democrats a lower number of statements. Consistent with previous research, we find that higher levels of education reduce the number of statements troubling the respondent (see Oliver and Mendelberg 2000; Heerwig and McCabe 2009). Those who are willing to say they believe Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites are more likely to be troubled by Obama as a black president. Most importantly, we see that the experimental treatment interacts with beliefs

**Table 5.** ANOVA Model Predicting Number of Statements about Obama Troubling Respondents

Source	Between-subjects effects				Parameter estimates	
	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig.	b	SE
Corrected model	1025.852	10	76.202	.000		
Intercept	218.072	1	161.988	.000	3.336	0.259
Age	0.961	1	0.714	.398	0.002	0.002
Education	11.073	1	8.225	.004	-0.074	0.026
Income	0.996	1	0.740	.390	-0.106	0.018
Treatment group	11.917	1	8.852	.003	0.381	0.253
Democrat	91.766	1	68.165	.000	-0.791	0.124
Republican	111.603	1	82.901	.000	0.803	0.120
Obama's policies favor blacks	219.406	1	162.978	.000	1.329	0.124
Treatment × Dem	0.817	1	0.607	.436	-0.136	0.175
Treatment × Rep	0.004	1	0.003	.954	0.010	0.175
Treatment × policy	3.621	1	2.690	.101	0.299	0.182
Error	1502.390	1116	1.346			
Total	6156.000	1127				
Corrected total	2528.241	1126				

**Table 6.** Predicted Mean Effects of Treatment by Obama's Policies Favoring Blacks

Obama	Version	Predicted M	SE	95 percent confidence interval	
				Lower bound	Upper bound
Policies treat both equally	Control	1.48	0.07	1.36	1.61
	Treatment	1.63	0.06	1.51	1.75
Policies favor black over white	Control	2.51	0.12	2.27	2.76
	Treatment	2.96	0.11	2.73	3.18

Dependent variable: number of troubling statements about Obama. Covariates appearing in the model are set at the following mean values: respondent's age = 57.70, income level = 5.97, education level = 5.18.

about preferential policy for blacks. Those in the treatment group who say Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites are troubled by more items than those who do not.

The predicted means for this interaction, with other covariates held at their mean values, are shown in Table 6. Among those who say Obama's policies will favor blacks the predicted mean in the control group is 2.51, while in the treatment group it is 2.96. The difference is 0.45. Recall that the simple means test difference shown in Table 2 for this group was also 0.45. Controlling for partisanship and demographic factors, including education, does *not* reduce the estimate of latent racial views among the 20 percent of respondents willing to say that Obama's policies will prefer blacks. It appears that this group is expressing sincerely held policy beliefs about Obama. There is no evidence of social desirability bias for this subset of respondents.

However, among the much larger share of Americans (80 percent) who claim to believe that Obama will treat both blacks and whites equally (and thus do not express

policy-based racism), the predicted mean number of troubling items for the control group is 1.48 while for the treatment group it is 1.63, a difference of 0.15. Without controls this difference in means is 0.26. In other words, education, age, income, and partisanship account for just over 40 percent (0.11) of the difference between the treatment and control groups, leaving a great deal unaccounted for by these standard controls. These results are consistent with research showing social desirability bias is related to lower education levels (Heerwig and McCabe 2009). So while instituting controls does nothing to change estimates for those who are overt in stating that Obama will favor blacks, for those who claim he will treat both groups equally controls reduce but do not eliminate the difference between the groups. This suggests that something else—latent or hidden racial attitudes—conditions responses to Obama. Partisanship and education explain some of these feelings, but they do not override what are most likely subconscious concerns about race, given the target item's explicit racial reference.<sup>11</sup>

### Exploring Emotional Underpinnings of Latent Racial Attitudes

We find that the likelihood of feeling troubled by Obama as the first black president is very high for those white voters who explicitly express a belief that Obama's policies will advantage black people. Even after we apply appropriate controls, nearly half of these voters are troubled by the idea of Obama's election. They are troubled by Obama, but their trouble stems at least in part from their expressed policy beliefs. The more interesting question is about the group of voters who profess to believe Obama's policies will treat both blacks and whites equally—perhaps responding to social desirability in their explicit answer—but who nonetheless appear to be troubled by him in a latent attitudes experiment.

To better understand these voters, we examine the emotional underpinnings of those exhibiting latent racial attitudes. We have shown that the list experiment allows us to isolate the effects of a clearly racial statement and that many white voters are willing to express underlying racial beliefs when given the opportunity to do so without perceived risk. These beliefs have a policy basis for some voters, but for others there is obviously something more. We explore this by examining emotional responses to Obama tapped by a series of questions asking how often Obama (also asked for McCain) made the respondent feel *anxious* or *enthusiastic*. Respondents could choose among *often*, *occasionally*, *rarely*, and *never*. The order of the questions—in terms of both the candidates and the specific emotions—was randomized. To examine the role of these two emotions we add both to the model in Table 5, dichotomizing responses of *often* and *occasionally* into high anxiety or enthusiasm and *rarely* and *never* into low anxiety or enthusiasm. Note that we want to examine a possible three-way interaction—*emotion by policy by treatment*—since we need to determine the extent to which emotional responses differ between those who explicitly express that Obama will treat blacks better than whites and those who do not. Thus, we estimate two models, one for the latent experiment control group and one for the treatment group.<sup>12</sup> Table 7 reports the results of these two models. The addition of the emotions measures significantly improves the model fit over the initial model in Table 5.

We are particularly interested in the interaction of emotions and policy as reported in Table 8. The top part displays the predicted marginal means (number of troubling statements) comparing the control and treatment groups for those who say Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites. The bottom part of the table displays the predicted marginal means for those who say Obama's policies will treat both blacks and whites equally. Emotions have a much greater effect among those who say

Obama will treat both groups equally compared to those who say he will favor blacks, so we focus on the second part of the table. The mean number of troubling statements for those with low enthusiasm for Obama in the control group is 2.13, compared to 2.39 in the treatment group, for a difference of 0.26. However, among enthusiastic voters the mean number of troubling statements in the control group is 1.16 compared to 1.18 in the treatment group, a statistically insignificant difference of 0.02. It appears that high enthusiasm for Obama overrides the latent racism in the treatment group.<sup>13</sup> This is an important point. All else equal, feeling enthusiastic about Obama appears to overcome unvoiced latent concerns about him as the first black president.

Comparing the mean number of troubling statements within the treatment group only—with the target racial statement included—high enthusiasm voters express 1.21 fewer concerns on average than those with low enthusiasm, a large difference on a scale running from 0 to 4. Enthusiastic voters who also believe policy will be evenhanded report only half as many troubling items as those who are not enthusiastic (1.18 vs. 2.39). Enthusiasm for Obama dramatically reduces latent racial attitudes.

Taken to their logical conclusion, these results suggest that the generation of significant enthusiasm for Obama was crucial to his victory. It may well be that a black man could not have been elected president in the contemporary United States given fairly widespread latent (or hidden) concerns about race without eliciting intense enthusiasm. High enthusiasm for Obama may have allowed some white voters to overcome concerns about his race.

Even in the control group we find a marginally significant interaction effect for enthusiasm and policy ( $F = 3.048$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Among those in the control group—which has no specific reference to race—enthusiastic voters who believe Obama will favor blacks average 0.43 fewer troubling items than those with low enthusiasm. Among those who state that Obama's policies will treat both groups equally, enthusiastic voters report an average of 0.97 fewer troubling items than those with low enthusiasm.

Turning to the negative emotion of anxiety, in the control condition the interaction term of anxiety and policy is not statistically significant ( $F = 1.152$ , *ns*). As displayed in the bottom half of Table 8, the interaction of anxiety and policy beliefs does become significant for those respondents in the treatment condition, where the racial item is included. For those who claim that Obama's policies will treat both groups equally, we see strong effects of both positive and negative emotional responses (enthusiasm discussed above and anxiety). Anxious voters reported about 50 percent more troubling items than non-anxious voters, even while claiming Obama's policies will treat blacks and whites the same (2.12 vs. 1.46), or a

**Table 7.** ANOVA Model Including Emotions (Enthusiasm and Anxiety) Predicting Number of Statements about Obama Troubling Respondents

Source	Between-subjects effects				Parameter estimates	
	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig.	b	SE
<b>Model 1: Control group</b>						
Corrected model	552.487	10	65.259	.000		
Intercept	103.089	1	121.768	.000	3.078	0.355
Age	0.536	1	0.633	.427	-0.002	0.002
Education	1.728	1	2.041	.154	-0.042	0.030
Income	1.130	1	1.335	.249	-0.025	0.021
Democrat	1.213	1	1.432	.232	-0.126	0.106
Republican	13.528	1	15.979	.000	0.425	0.106
Obama's policies favor blacks	16.630	1	19.643	.000	0.917	0.295
Enthusiasm	17.045	1	20.134	.000	-0.430	0.289
Anxiety	11.686	1	13.084	.000	0.416	0.299
Enthusiasm × policy	2.576	1	3.042	.082	0.540	0.310
Anxiety × policy	0.976	1	1.153	.283	-0.342	0.319
Error	446.160	527	0.847			
Total	2412.000	538				
Corrected total	998.647	537				
Adjusted $r^2$	.545					
<b>Model 2: Treatment group</b>						
Corrected model	800.774	10	66.872	.000		
Intercept	119.199	1	99.542	.000	3.286	0.402
Age	3.234	1	2.701	.101	0.005	0.003
Education	5.836	1	4.874	.028	-0.077	0.035
Income	0.449	1	0.375	.540	-0.014	0.024
Democrat	8.428	1	7.038	.008	-0.328	0.123
Republican	7.954	1	6.642	.010	0.313	0.121
Obama's policies favor blacks	74.608	1	62.305	.000	1.569	0.325
Enthusiasm	17.458	1	14.579	.000	-0.110	0.316
Anxiety	2.574	1	2.150	.143	-0.213	0.279
Enthusiasm × policy	12.408	1	10.362	.001	1.103	0.343
Anxiety × policy	10.051	1	8.394	.004	-0.875	0.302
Error	678.965	567	1.197			
Total	3685.000	578				
Corrected total	1479.7397	577				

difference of 0.66 troubling statements. Respondents most susceptible to social desirability bias were also most sensitive to anxiety about Obama.<sup>14</sup> For those whose emotional reaction to Obama is anxiety, latent racial responses increased, the opposite of the effect for enthusiasm.<sup>15</sup>

These results describe an interesting joint effect of emotion and policy beliefs. When we do not explicitly point out that if elected Obama will be the first black president, voter anxiety does not condition the effects of policy beliefs in responding to the list. But when the target item is included in the list, anxiety toward Obama increases latent racism for those who say that Obama's policies will treat both races equally. More than half of these respondents (52 percent) say that Obama made them feel anxious at least "sometimes" or "often," and those who

express anxiety report more troubling items in the treatment list. We find anxiety is related to racism, just as enthusiasm apparently can help quell it.

## Conclusion

One might simply point to the fact that Barack Obama won the presidency and ask why even inquire about the role of race in 2008. An African American holding the nation's top elected position must be clear evidence that racial barriers have all but fallen. This is consistent with the dominant paradigm of the 2008 election presented in the mass media; racial voting in 2008 did not exist. This line of reasoning has also been the basis of a legal challenge to the Voting Rights Act's section 5, which was recently heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 8.** Predicted Marginal Means, Interaction of Emotions, and Policy Beliefs

	Control		Treatment		Difference	F	p
	M	SE	M	SE			
Obama's policies will favor blacks over whites							
Low enthusiasm	2.67	0.17	3.30	0.16	+0.63		
High enthusiasm	2.24	0.28	3.19	0.30	+0.95		
Low anxiety	2.25	0.29	3.35	0.27	+1.10		
High anxiety	2.67	0.16	3.13	0.17	+0.46		
Obama's policies will treat blacks and whites equally							
Low enthusiasm	2.13	0.09	2.39	0.11	+0.26		
High enthusiasm	1.16	0.07	1.18	0.08	+0.02		
Difference low/high					-1.21		
Low anxiety	1.26	0.08	1.46	0.09	+0.20		
High anxiety	2.02	0.08	2.12	0.08	+0.10		
Difference low/high					+0.66		
Control model interactions							
Enthusiasm × policy						3.042	.08
Anxiety × policy						1.152	ns
Treatment model interactions							
Enthusiasm × policy						10.362	.001
Anxiety × policy						8.394	.004

Table entries are predicted means and standard errors.

While the United States has progressed from the racist Southern culture described by Key, this article contends modern racism continues to be a factor in electoral politics. Consistent with some previous research using aggregate data (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008) this analysis points to substantial racial attitudes about Obama from white voters in the month before the 2008 elections and, by extension, the potential for racial voting. Our data show that nearly one-third of the white electorate was troubled by the prospect of Obama becoming the first black president in the month before the election.

The nature of the list experiment means that we effectively hold constant all of the nontarget items to which people might respond that they are troubled and can zero in on the degree to which the targeted item (Obama's race) creates a response. Of course this underlying response to Obama's race is not uniform across all groups, and it is important to account for the fact that Obama not only is black but also is a Democrat. Respondents could simply be reacting to the prospect of a Democrat winning, not necessarily a black man winning. And when we control for partisanship (and education, age, income) we account for only about half of the observed latent racial attitudes. Even after controlling for other factors, the list experiment reveals significant evidence of racially based attitudes toward Obama among those who overtly claim to see him as fair (in terms of his public policies). The negative emotion of anxiety is a critical factor affecting these latent racial attitudes. We find that anxiety appears to be

associated with social desirability behavior. Anxious white voters who say Obama's policies will be evenhanded but still exhibit hidden racism may be worried about Obama because of his race. On the other hand the positive emotion of enthusiasm reduces latent racism for those in both the control and treatment groups, with its largest effect on those in the treatment group who said Obama's policies will treat blacks and white equally.

We should not ignore the possibility that Obama's race played the opposite role for some voters, for whom enthusiasm was at least in part generated *because* he is black. Unfortunately, just how much of an effect this had cannot be detected by our list experiment, which focused on a negative response to race. There is no question that some of Obama's support—especially in the primaries—came from progressive Democrats who saw Obama's race as an opportunity to publicly express their racial liberalism. Of course these voters were virtually certain to vote for Obama in the general election independent of his race, given their ideological position.<sup>17</sup>

Our research also contributes theoretically to the literature on race by integrating emotions through affective evaluations. We find that racial policy attitudes overlap with latent racial attitudes and ideological conservatism for one subset of white respondents, and these voters willingly express their beliefs that Obama will treat blacks better than whites. For these voters the two types of racial response are one in the same. But for another group of voters latent racial attitudes exist in the absence of expressed

statements that Obama will be problack in his policies. These voters claim to believe Obama will treat both groups fairly (showing a form of social desirability bias in their answer), but their responses to the presence of the target racially charged item in the list suggest they really believe otherwise. Since policy and ideology do not explain these responses, we examine emotions and show how the expressed emotions of anxiety and enthusiasm condition racial policy beliefs especially for those exhibiting social desirability effects. The results suggest high expressed enthusiasm for Obama as a candidate allowed some white voters to overcome latent concerns about his race, while high anxiety increased concerns about race. We contend emotions are critical in understanding racial attitudes.

## Appendix

### Question Wording

**Policy Question.** Q25 If Barack Obama is elected President, do you think the policies of his administration will favor whites over blacks, favor blacks over whites, or will they treat both groups the same

- 1 whites over blacks
- 2 blacks over whites
- 3 Treat both groups equally
- 8 Don't Know
- 9 Refused

**Emotions Questions.** Now I would like to ask some questions about how you feel about the presidential candidates. I will ask you about some feelings, and would like you to say if you have experienced each feeling often, occasionally, rarely, or never when thinking about a candidate. Let's begin:

[RANDOMIZE ORDER OF THE CANDIDATES AND EMOTIONS TO BE ASKED]

For [Barack Obama/John McCain], I would like to know how often he makes you feel:

- Q70B Afraid [Prompt as needed: Feel afraid often, occasionally, rarely, or never]
- Q71B Worried or anxious
- Q72B Enthusiastic
- Q73B Hopeful
- 1 Often
  - 2 Occasionally
  - 3 Rarely
  - 4 Never
  - 8 Don't Know
  - 9 Refused

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## Notes

1. Sears et al. (2000) believe these terms can be grouped as types of “new racism” and are slightly different interpretations of the same concept. Such distinctions are unnecessary for this study, and the term *symbolic racism* is used here to refer to the more general idea of what Sears et al. call new racism.
2. We selected the word *trouble* because we needed a negatively charged word that was not overly strong. Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. (1997) report asking respondents if they were “angered” by the idea of a black family moving in next door and note that the term *angry* might be too strong. *Trouble* seems to us to tap exactly what we want to know—a vague sense of unease, discomfort, or worry—which the respondent might not even admit to herself or himself is related to race.
3. Certainly there is no question that the variance in the five-item treatment group should be higher than the variance in the four-item group. Such a difference is controlled for through statistical tests of significance. However, if the treatment group *mean* is higher simply because there are more items, the interpretation of any list experiment can be questioned. We tested this proposition in a separate random sample telephone survey of 1,002 adults in one Midwestern state in March 2009, five months *after* the election. This list experiment had three randomly assigned groups. Groups 1 and 2 repeated the survey list experiment described in this article. Group 3 was also given a five-item list about Obama, but the target was “He has two children” rather than “He is the first black president.” The control mean was 1.60, while the treatment mean for Obama as the first black president was 1.70. Interestingly the treatment mean for “He has two children” was lower, at 1.47, rather than higher than the control mean. As expected, the variance is higher in both five-item lists than in the four-item list. Having an additional item does not increase the mean number of troubling items.
4. The Hawkeye Poll was fielded by the University of Iowa Social Science Research Center from October 1 through

November 2, 2008, with a goal of completing fifty respondents per day. The sampling frame was a national random sample of households with landline telephones and at least one registered voter. Callers were instructed to ask first for the youngest male at home who was a registered voter. If a male was not available, callers spoke to an available female. The interview was terminated if the respondent was not a registered voter. The American Association for Public Opinion Research response rate 1 was 7.5 percent, cooperation rate 1 was 19.0 percent, refusal rate 1 was 32.0 percent, and contact rate 1 was 38.0 percent. Data reported here are unweighted as appropriate for experimental designs.

5. We asked the racial policy question for Obama and John McCain. Candidate order was randomized.
6. Virtually no respondents ( $n = 11$ ) claimed that Obama's policies would favor whites over blacks.
7. See <http://www.pollster.com/polls/us/08-us-pres-ge-mvo.php>.
8. In some previous studies using the list experiment technique, the control group that was not asked the "sensitive" item (in this case, being troubled by Obama being the first black president) was later asked this item explicitly. Given the lack of this parallel explicit measure in our survey, we use a related but distinct measure of policy-based racial attitudes. It is likely that respondents who report that Obama will *not* favor blacks but are also troubled by his race in the list experiment are revealing some social desirability bias. However, some respondents may sincerely believe that Obama's policies will be evenhanded but yet remain troubled that he would be the first black president. Lacking the parallel survey question, we do not know precisely how much social desirability exists. However, the policy-based race question provides a more realistic explicit survey question than directly asking if the respondent's is "troubled" by Obama's race (which we believe few people would admit). We use it to develop a measure of social desirability behavior that we believe is useful, although different from previous research. Those who say Obama's policies will be evenhanded but are also concerned about him as the first black president may be exhibiting some cognitive dissonance over Obama's race. It is among this group that the effects of emotions (anxiety and enthusiasm) are the most pronounced, as we show below.
9. The few respondents ( $n = 11$ ) who say that Obama's policies will favor whites over black as well as those with no answer to the policy question are dropped from the analysis.
10. An alternative model specification where being in the treatment or the control group was interacted with all the demographic factors (age, education, and income) revealed the same substantive finding as reported here.
11. As a robustness check we replicated our survey list experiment on the October wave of the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) fielded by Polimetrix (Jackman and Vavreck 2009). While the survey list experiment question wording is identical, the policy question about whether Obama would favor blacks over whites is significantly different. There is only a binary choice of yes or no and the question does not refer to Obama's "policies" per se. We find evidence of similar partisan gaps in the list experiment in the CCAP examining 813 white non-Hispanic respondents. Among white Republicans in the control group the mean number of troubling items about Obama was 2.75 ( $n = 134$ ), compared to the treatment group where the mean was 2.96 (diff = 0.21,  $p < .1$ ,  $n = 139$ ). There were no statistically significant differences for Democrats or independents. Among McCain voters the control group mean was 2.94 ( $n = 196$ ) and the treatment mean was 3.12 (diff = 0.18,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 195$ ), while among Obama voters there was no statistically significant difference. We replicate the ANOVA model reported in Table 5 using the CCAP data. Generally tracking the Hawkeye Poll data, Republicans are associated with a higher number of troubling statements and Democrats a lower number, and again there are no interaction effects between partisanship and the treatment. Increased education is associated with fewer troubling statements, and increased age is associated with more. And as with the telephone sample those who think Obama will favor blacks are more likely to be troubled by him. The CCAP analysis ensures us that partisanship is not interacting with our experimental treatment and the results of the list experiment are not an artifact of partisanship.
12. While we get the equivalent results if we run a single model with three way interactions, running two separate models allows us to see the effects more clearly.
13. Predicted marginal means are calculated for the control group with covariates at their means: age = 56.73, income = 6.01, education = 5.14.
14. Predicted marginal means are calculated for the treatment group with covariates at their means: age = 58.40, income = 5.94, education = 5.22.
15. When we compare the predicted mean number of troubling items for the treatment to the control group we get a more complicated story. The control group mean for high anxiety voters who say that Obama will treat racial groups equally is 2.02, while treatment mean is 2.12, suggesting only 10 percent of voters who express anxiety appear to be troubled after controlling for partisanship, education, age, and income. But for low anxiety voters, the difference is larger, with the control mean at 1.26 and the treatment mean at 1.46, suggesting that 20 percent were troubled by the racially charged item. Among those who said Obama's policies will treat racial groups equally while also claiming not to have felt much anxiety about him, as many as one-fifth may be hiding feelings of racial resentment. When asked, these voters say Obama's policies will be fair and that Obama does not make them anxious. Yet they still find Obama as

the first black president troubling. This then may truly represent deep-seated racial attitudes.

16. *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District Number One v. Holder*, 08-322 (argued April 29, 2009, decided June 22, 2009). The Court chose to rule on narrow statutory grounds rather than reach a decision on the constitutionality of the Voting Rights Act.
17. Lynn Vavreck posted intriguing results of a list experiment examining reasons to both vote for or against Obama in the weeks before the general election. She finds that roughly similar percentages of voters saw Obama's race as a reason to vote him as well as to vote against him. Details can be found at <http://blogs.princeton.edu/election2008/2008/10/where-have-all-the-clinton-voters-gone-and-what-does-race-have-to-do-with-it.html>. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

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