



## FlashReport

## Is Obama the Anti-Christ? Racial priming, extreme criticisms of Barack Obama, and attitudes toward the 2008 US presidential candidates

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of subtle racial priming on the persuasive impact of criticisms of Barack Obama in the month prior to the 2008 presidential election. To prime Black or White race, participants wrote a paragraph about a student with a typical Black or White name. They then read editorials that accused Obama of being unpatriotic or being the Anti-Christ, or that listed his positions on major issues. Participants responded to both criticisms with diminished preferences for and more negative beliefs about Obama, but only when African-American race was primed. Interestingly, the Anti-Christ criticism increased preferences and positive beliefs about Obama in the absence of racial priming, suggesting this criticism may have lacked credibility under neutral conditions.

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## Introduction

In the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama became the first African-American to be elected president of the United States. Throughout the campaign and after his election, right wing-groups criticized Obama, sometimes focusing on his attitudes, behavior, and values, and sometimes raising more extreme claims that were incredulous to most Americans. Some observers speculated that racial concerns affect the appeal of these criticisms, especially the more extreme ones. For example, former president Jimmy Carter argued that “people who are guilty of... personal attack against Obama have been influenced to a major degree by the belief that he should not be president because he happens to be African-American” (“Carter again cites racism”, 2009). This study examined the possibility that racial concerns increased the impact of criticisms of Barack Obama prior to the 2008 presidential election, especially extreme ones that might not otherwise be effective.

Theory and research on modern (McConahay, 1986), symbolic (Sears & Henry, 2005), aversive (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004), and ambivalent (Katz & Hass, 1988) racism suggest that although egalitarian values prevent most people from overtly expressing and even privately acknowledging racist attitudes, anti-Black sentiment persists in subtle forms. This study investigated the possibility that subtle racial concerns made people more susceptible to

criticisms of presidential candidate Obama, even extreme ones, such as the claim that he is the Anti-Christ.

Research has shown that racial attitudes were indeed associated with attitudes toward Obama and voting intentions in the 2008 election. In a national survey prior to the election, Dwyer, Stevens, Sullivan, and Allen (2009) found that modern racism was associated with negative evaluations of Obama. Greenwald, Smith, Sriram, Bar-Anan, and Nosek (2009) found that both implicit and explicit indicators of anti-Black attitudes were associated with intentions to vote against Obama, with each accounting for unique variance. Knowles, Lowery, and Schauberg (2010) found that implicit anti-Black prejudice predicted reluctance to vote for Obama, opposition to his healthcare policies, and agreement with specific criticisms of healthcare reform. Interestingly, these attitudes predicted opposition to healthcare reform when it was attributed to Obama but not when it was attributed to Bill Clinton, a White president who promoted similar policies. Racism predicted negative attitudes toward Obama in these studies regardless of political orientation.

Because these studies were correlational, it is unclear whether racial attitudes themselves, or a third variable, were responsible for negative evaluations of Obama. To address this issue in the present study, we adapted Wheeler, Jarvis and Petty's (2001) procedure for priming race in which participants write about a day in the life of a college student whose name was commonly associated with either Black or White Americans. They found that subtly priming a Black racial stereotype in this way led non-Black participants to subsequently perform worse on a math test. Our use of this manipulation enabled us to assess the causal impact of such racial concepts on reactions to criticisms of Obama.

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Specifically, we sought to determine if activating racial concepts affected the impact of criticisms of Barack Obama. We were especially interested in whether activating racial concerns would increase the negative impact of extreme implausible criticisms, which might be rejected under neutral conditions. Perhaps the most far-fetched criticism of Obama put forth during the election was that he is the “Anti-Christ” prophesied in the Bible. In October 2008, a Google search returned more than 680,000 links related to the words “Obama-and-Anti-Christ.” One common argument for this claim is that Obama’s name contains 18 characters, 18 divided by 3 equals 6, and 666 is the symbol of the Anti-Christ. Prophetic claims about a previously unknown Muslim with no sons, rising to tremendous popularity and power are another common line of “evidence” for this claim. Surprisingly, these ideas are accepted by a substantial minority of Americans, e.g., 18% of political conservatives in New Jersey agreed that Obama might be the Anti-Christ (Weigel, 2009).

Although only a relatively small percentage of Americans openly endorse this belief, we wondered if such claims might nonetheless affect people’s judgments, and whether this would be especially likely when racial concerns are activated. To this end, we assessed the effect of subtle racial priming on the impact of both extreme and mainstream criticisms of Obama on attitudes and beliefs toward the two major candidates in the 2008 US presidential election. We predicted that participants primed with a stereotypical African-American name would be more susceptible to criticisms of Obama, even criticisms so extreme as to be rejected under neutral conditions, such as the claim that he is the Anti-Christ. We also assessed whether this would be manifested in endorsement of specific beliefs about him and rival candidate John McCain. This would be consistent with idea that people distort beliefs on dimensions unrelated to a persuasive argument to maintain a rational justification for their attitudes (e.g., Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987).

## Methods

### Participants

Sixty-two women and 26 men of non-African descent from a western university participated for extra course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 59 ( $M = 22.03$ ,  $SD = 7.63$ ).

### Procedure and materials

Participants were told that the study was an evaluation of the relationship between creativity and attitudes. They completed a packet that contained, in order, the following materials.

#### Religious fundamentalism scale

Participants first completed Altemeyer and Hunsberger’s (1992) 20-item religious fundamentalism (RF) scale (e.g., “There is a religion on this earth that teaches, without error, God’s truth.” on 9-point scales). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was = .95.

#### Race prime

Following the procedures of Wheeler, Jarvis, and Petty (2001), participants were told they would perform a creative writing task with either their dominant or non-dominant hand. All participants were told that they were randomly assigned to use their dominant hand to write a brief story about a student named either *Tyrone Walker* (a stereotypically Black name) or *Brad Walker* (a stereotypically White name).

#### Criticism of Obama

Next, participants read one of three editorials about Obama. In the Anti-Christ condition, the editorial was titled, “Is Obama the

Anti-Christ?” and was constructed from statements found on various websites. It pointed out similarities between Obama and claims made about the Anti-Christ:

... The Anti-Christ will be a man in his forties, he will be of Muslim descent, people will flock to him and he will promise false hope and world peace, he will not have any male descendants to pass on his name, he will be an unknown man that rises to power... Obama ... only has daughters for children, he is a man in his forties that comes from Muslim descent, he was an unknown man who has risen to power, and he promises world peace.

In the mainstream criticism condition, the editorial was titled “Should Obama be Running for Office?” It criticized Obama for being unpatriotic and friendly to terrorists.

... I saw a photo of Obama and two other loyal American leaders and he refused to put his right hand over his heart nor did he salute the American flag. He does not mind putting on clothing similar to those worn by Islamic terrorists, but will not be seen wearing an American Flag lapel pin or seen saluting an American flag ...

The control essay neither praised nor criticized Obama, but presented statements describing his positions on various issues. This passage was titled “Interview with Obama’s Campaign Manager”:

Obama opposes privatization of Social Security. He has pledged to ... keep Social Security and Medicare solvent. Promises to amend federal bankruptcy laws to keep companies from choosing bankruptcy to avoid private pension obligations. Promises to eliminate the income tax for seniors who earn less than \$50,000 a year.

#### Candidate support

Participants then completed an 11-item measure of candidate preference. First, a single sentence stem was presented, “Which Presidential candidate do you think would do each of the following?” followed by 10 evaluation items, e.g., “Improve America’s economy,” and “Be a competent President.” The last item assessed voter preference: “I will probably vote for...” Responses to all items were assessed on 10-point scales (1 = *John McCain*, 10 = *Barack Obama*), with higher scores indicating support for Obama. A composite candidate preference scale consisting of the mean of the 10 items was highly reliable ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

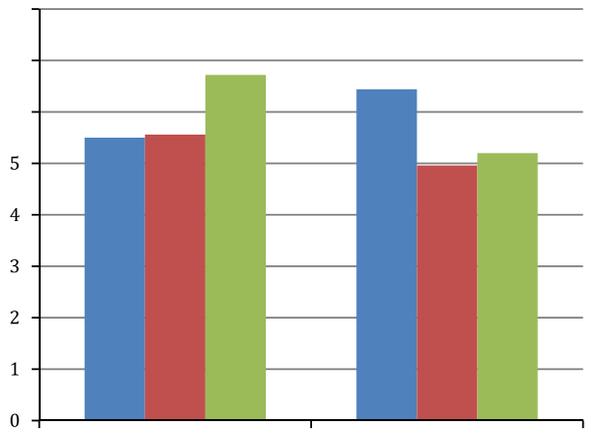
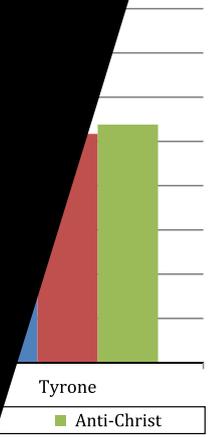
#### Beliefs about the candidates

Participants then completed a 16-item (1 = *totally disagree*, 10 = *totally agree*) candidate beliefs questionnaire, with half the items reflecting negative beliefs about Obama (e.g., “Barack Obama is too inexperienced to be president.”), and half reflecting negative beliefs about McCain (e.g., “John McCain is too old to be president.”). Scores were reversed so that higher scores indicated more positive beliefs about the each candidate. Composites consisting of the mean of items for each candidate were highly reliable, McCain ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and Obama ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Results

### Manipulation check

If the racial priming manipulation effectively activated stereotypes about African-Americans, essays in the Black-prime condition would express more of the Black stereotype. Independent raters blind to experimental conditions rated essays as either ste-



racial and editorial primes.

inter-rater agreement was 87%. Essays were more likely to be than Brad essays,  $\chi^2(1,$

ance (ANCOVA), controlling for RF candidate preferences. High RF significant effect was the predicted racial effect,  $F(2, 80) = 4.15, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$ . Pairwise tests showed that among Black-prime participants, the Anti-Christ editorial (p = .03) and Anti-Christ editorial for Obama, compared to the control condition. For White-prime participants, the Anti-Christ editorial had a significant effect and increased preference for Obama in the mainstream (p = .03) and control conditions did not differ from each other (p = .85). Looked at differences between conditions, a significant effect of racial priming was a reduction in preference for Obama produced in the Anti-Christ-Black-prime condition. There was also a non-significant trend for increased preference for Obama in the neutral-criticism-Black-prime condition. Pairwise main effects tests showed that the Anti-Christ editorial increased preference for Obama relative to both of the other conditions when Black race was primed and that the Black prime increased preference for Obama when either mainstream or Anti-Christ editorial primes were lodged against him.

#### Beliefs about the candidates

2 × 3 ANCOVAs controlling for RF performed on positive beliefs regarding Obama and McCain revealed only a main effect of RF and the racial prime × editorial interaction,  $F(2, 80) = 3.55, p < .05, \eta^2 = .10$ ;  $F(2, 80) = 3.55, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$ . As may be seen in Fig. 2, the results for beliefs about Obama paralleled those for evaluations of the candidates. As may be seen when comparing Fig. 2 and 3, beliefs about McCain were the mirror image of those about Obama; conditions that decreased positive beliefs about Obama

increased positive beliefs and McCain. Patterns of pairwise comparisons for beliefs about both candidates were the same as for the preference measure.

#### Discussion

Racial priming increased the impact of both mainstream and extreme criticisms of Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign. Writing a short essay about a person with a stereotypic African-American name combined with both mainstream and extreme criticisms of Obama to reduce preference for him as presidential candidate and produce more negative beliefs about him and more positive beliefs about John McCain. The finding that the name priming manipulation (Wheeler et al., 2001) affected the racial character of the stories participants wrote shows that it did indeed activate racial concepts. Although RF, a variable highly correlated with political conservatism and anti-minority attitudes (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), predicted more negative evaluations of Obama, it did not moderate the effect of racial priming. Although most contemporary Americans deny racial bias, when race is nonconsciously activated, people become more susceptible negative claims about African-Americans.

This race-activated susceptibility to criticisms of Obama emerged even in response to the rather far-fetched claim that he is the Anti-Christ, which backfired, producing more favorable attitudes toward him, in the White-prime condition. The fact that the Anti-Christ editorial led to *increased* preference for Obama in the absence of racial priming shows that the Anti-Christ claims were not persuasive when racial concerns were not activated. These findings thus help explain the impact of extreme and otherwise unpersuasive claims, by demonstrating that activation of racial concerns makes them more persuasive.

These findings are consistent with theories of modern (McConahay, 1986), symbolic (Sears & Henry, 2005), aversive (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004), and ambivalent (Katz & Hass, 1988) racism that converge in suggesting that as societal endorsement of egalitarian values increases, racial attitudes are more influenced by disguised forms of racial animosity that people are unwilling to admit to others or themselves. This helps explain why the subtle racial priming manipulation, of which no one reported any awareness, increased the effect of both types of criticisms of Obama. This also helps explain why some people endorse ideas that most see as untenable – such as the claim that Barack Obama is the Anti-Christ, a supernatural source of evil.

Although not significant, there was a trend for the Black prime to increase preference for Obama in the neutral condition. The juxtaposition of Black stereotype activation tending to increase preference for Obama under neutral conditions but decrease support for him when he is criticized is consistent with Katz and Hass' (1988) work on racial ambivalence-amplification. From this perspective, modern White attitudes toward African-Americans often contain both positive and negative elements, and this ambivalence leads to exaggerations of both positive and negative reactions to members of this group. Within the context of the present study, the trend toward increased preference for Obama in the Black-prime-neutral condition, which simply presented his positions on the issues, may reflect generally positive reactions to those positions that were exaggerated by racial priming. The decreased preference for Obama in the criticism conditions may reflect exaggerated negative reactions to him after the critical essays. Of course given that the effect of Black priming in the neutral essay condition was not statistically significant, this interpretation is speculative and needs further empirical assessment. However, the divergent effects of the Black prime, depending on the editorials participants read, are suggestive of racial ambivalence.

It is also noteworthy that the effects on candidate preferences and beliefs about Obama and McCain were virtually identical. This suggests that the racial prime made participants more receptive to

negative claims about Obama, and that this affected their attitudes and beliefs across a variety of content domains, perhaps to help maintain a basis of beliefs consistent with their negative evaluations of him.

In sum, these findings show that criticisms of Barack Obama, during the 2009 presidential election, whether credible or not, produced more negative evaluations of him when race was salient. This raises the possibility that subtle racial biases might also increase the impact of criticisms of Obama, both mainstream and extreme, during his term as president. Thus an unfortunate side effect of Obama's ethnic identity, and that of other leaders and politicians of color, is that it may discourage rational debate. Perhaps some of the issues raised in current debates in the media and congress reflect this distraction from the issues produced by irrelevant racial concerns.

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