

Racial Salience and the Obama Vote

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Abstract

Barack Obama's successful campaign for president renewed both scholarly and popular interest in understanding the extent to which race remains a barrier for African American candidates in American elections. Despite a substantial body of work that indicates that African Americans do face significant barriers to winning white votes, initial interpretations of the 2008 election results suggest that the Obama vote was not depressed because of his race. In this paper, I introduce a relatively unobtrusive measure of racial salience to examine whether these initial interpretations are correct. I find that when race was a more salient factor for white voters, they were substantially less likely to vote for Obama and were more likely to think that Obama was focusing attention on African Americans during the campaign. I estimate that the salience of race for some whites may have cost Obama as much as 3% of the white vote. Thus, this paper indicates that even in Obama's historic 2008 campaign, African American candidates continue to face barriers to winning white support.

Introduction

The 2008 presidential election culminated in an historic breakthrough for an African American presidential candidate; but it has also provided scholars with a unique opportunity to study the significance of race in contemporary American electoral politics. A substantial body of research conducted prior to the 2008 campaign indicated that an African American candidate would face greater challenges winning over white voters than a white candidate would (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004 for a review). Yet, some initial analyses of Obama's victory suggest that his race did not significantly depress white support for his candidacy (Ansolabehere and Stewart 2009; Mas and Moretti 2009; though see Parker et al. 2009; Pasek et al. 2009; Hutchings et al. 2009). As Ansolabehere and Snyder note, "Obama won because of race—because of his particular appeal among black voters, because of the changing political allegiances of Hispanics, and because he did not provoke a backlash among white voters." Many election post-mortems argued that part of the reason that Obama did not provoke a backlash among whites was because "economic issues trumped race" (Judis 2008; see also Ambinder 2009). In other words, some whites might have otherwise voted against Obama because of their racially conservative views, but race was not salient to their vote decisions in 2008.

In this paper, I conduct an in-depth examination of the role of race in affecting white support for Obama. In particular, I examine the extent to which racial salience—that is, the importance of race to a voter's decision making—moderated white support for Obama, particularly among racial conservatives. Experimental research has demonstrated that increasing the salience of racial considerations can affect Americans' political preferences (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004 for a review). These experimental studies generally compare a control group to one that has been treated with a statement or visual that is meant to prime race; thus, the salience of race is being manipulated by the researcher. While this

experimental approach has successfully demonstrated that increasing the salience of race in the minds' of citizens can alter preferences, political scientists have mostly lacked a way to measure racial salience in observational studies.

I introduce a relatively unobtrusive observational measure of racial salience—a ranking instrument—that was included on a battery of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Responses to this item suggest that race lacked salience for most white Americans in 2008. However, even after controlling for demographic and political variables, whites for whom race was salient were substantially less likely to vote for Obama, particularly if they also held racially conservative views. Racial salience also influenced respondents' views of the campaign—white racial conservatives who scored higher on the racial salience measure were more likely to say that Obama was focusing his campaign's attention on African Americans.

This paper begins by discussing the importance of racial salience for conditioning white opposition to African American candidates. I then introduce the ranking instrument and make a case for the validity of this measure for determining whether race is salient for an individual. After demonstrating the importance of racial salience in affecting the propensity of whites to vote for Obama, I conclude by estimating how much support Obama's race cost him in the 2008 election outcome and discussing the importance of these findings for understanding the continued significance of race in American electoral politics.

Race and Support for African American Candidates

Political scientists have focused significant attention on the role of race in affecting various aspects of public opinion and political behavior (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004 for a review). With regard to the latter, a litany of studies have examined the role that race plays in affecting the voting behavior of white Americans in elections where an African American is running for office. This work has noted that it is quite rare for black congressional

candidates to win in majority white districts, which suggests that voters prefer candidates from their own race (Canon 1999; though see Highton 2004). In fact, experimental research demonstrates that when given the same descriptions of a hypothetical candidate, whites express significantly more support for the lighter skinned candidate compared to the otherwise identical candidate with darker skin (Terkildsen 1993; Weaver 2005). White voters may oppose a black candidate for different reasons. Overt racism may depress support for African American candidates if some portion of white voters refuse to support a black candidate based on skin color alone. However, white opposition to African American candidates may also arise from the stereotypes that are associated with race. For example, whites perceive black candidates as less competent and more liberal than their white counterparts (Sigelman et al. 1995; McDermott 1998; Citrin et al. 1990). Some white voters may be willing to vote for an African American candidate in theory, but their propensity to attribute negative stereotypes to that candidate on the basis of his or her race makes it unlikely that the candidate will win their votes in reality (Sears et al. 1997).

While citizens may hold negative racial stereotypes, this does not necessarily mean that those views will influence their choices in an election featuring a minority candidate. After all, citizens may draw on any number of considerations when considering their candidate preferences and race may not ultimately be among the salient factors brought to bear (Zaller and Feldman 1992). The research on racial priming provides evidence for this supposition (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002; though see Huber and Lapinski 2006). In that work, scholars tend to use experimental treatments to manipulate how salient race is in a subject's decision making process. This is done by exposing a treatment group to either explicit or implicit racial messages and then comparing their responses to those of a control group that is not exposed to those appeals. In most studies, participants exposed to the racial prime become more or less likely to express support for the relevant candidate or policy depending on their racial views. For example, priming race prompts racial liberals to

more reliably support racially liberal candidates or policies while the racial cues lead racial conservatives to oppose those same candidates or policies (see Hutchings and Jardina 2009 for a review).

These experimental findings provide a useful way of considering the role that race may (or may not) have played in the 2008 presidential campaign. Any number of different considerations may weigh on a voter's mind when determining which candidate he or she prefers (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar and Simon 2000). Some considerations may lead the individual to favor the Republican candidate, while other considerations will lead the individual to favor the Democrat. Ultimately, the vote decision will be most influenced by the considerations that are given the most weight by the voter when the decision is made (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Thus, in 2008, a white voter may have expressed racially conservative attitudes, but if that voter gave little weight to Obama's race when determining who to vote for, those conservative racial views would be less likely to lead the voter away from supporting Obama. In short, racial conservatives may have been less likely to support Obama, but that pattern was likely moderated by the importance that they placed on race.

Measuring Racial Salience

While the experimental work described above indicates that racial considerations can play a more or less salient role in a citizen's political decision making, it is less common for political scientists to employ observational measures that are capable of accurately assessing the extent to which race was an important consideration in one's vote decision (though see Hutchings 2003 and Iyengar 1990). In other words, scholars can manipulate the extent to which race is salient for a group of respondents, but they have been less successful in developing ways to determine how salient race is to one individual compared to another. Yet, there are two main reasons that such a measure would be of value for understanding how salient racial considerations are to individuals beyond the experimental context. First,

despite inventive approaches that allow researchers to use realistic primes, most research on racial priming is still based on experimental methods; a valid observational measure of racial salience would allow for more studies on racial priming and racial salience beyond the lab setting. Second, because the experimental work on racial priming relies on comparing a control group to a treatment group, the research is limited to making claims about the effect of racial cues to a group that received the treatment compared to a group that did not. This approach does not allow one to establish a baseline for how salient race is to a particular individual.

Social desirability bias presents the most significant hurdle to valid observational data on how important race is to individuals. For example, in 2008, exit polls asked some respondents how important a factor race was in choosing between the candidates. If respondents answered this question honestly, then it would provide a good measure of the extent to which race was salient for voters in the 2008 presidential election. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that one can take the exit poll question at face value. The validity of responses to sensitive questions tends to suffer from the fact that many individuals seek to provide socially desirable responses during surveys. This leads individuals to over-report the extent to which they engage in desirable activities such as voting (Clausen 1968; Traugott and Katosh 1979) and it also tends to lead many respondents to mask their true racial attitudes (Krysan 2000; Kuklinski et al. 1997). It is likely the case that the 2008 exit poll question was susceptible to social desirability bias. While it could be considered socially acceptable for African Americans to state that Obama's race was a factor in their vote decisions, it would be far less acceptable for whites to express the same sentiment (particularly if they were supporting McCain). Thus, even if racial considerations were salient to their vote choices, white McCain voters would have an incentive to report otherwise.

Survey researchers have taken a number of approaches to minimizing the extent to which social desirability bias affects respondents' reports of sensitive attitudes or behaviors. Since

the source of this bias is a desire to present oneself in a positive light to others, removing the interviewer from the process may help. Indeed, self-administered surveys (like those conducted over the Internet) do tend to be less susceptible to social desirability bias than those in which the respondent interacts with an interviewer (Richman et al. 1999). It is also possible to attempt to control for the bias by modeling a respondent's likelihood of answering a sensitive question in the first place. Berinsky (2002) took such an approach with questions soliciting opinions on school integration and found that a significant share of respondents were hiding their opposition to school integration by providing a response of "don't know" to these questions.

Perhaps the most innovative work in this area has focused on developing survey questions that reduce the need to mask one's attitudes or behaviors. The list experiment is the most prominent example of such an approach. For this method, the sample is split into at least two separate groups. The "control group" is given a list of three (or more) items and asked how many of these they oppose (or support). The "treatment group" is given a list with one additional item—the item of interest—and then asked the same question. Importantly, neither group is asked which items they oppose, just how many. Thus, unless they report that they oppose all of the items, individuals in the treatment group are not revealing whether the socially sensitive option is the one they are favoring or opposing, therefore reducing the pressure to mask their true beliefs.¹ Researchers can then compare the treatment group to the control group to determine the percentage of the sample that actually opposes the additional item. For example, if the average in the control group is 2 items and the average in the treatment group is 2.3 items, then the researcher assumes that 30 percent of the sample opposes the additional item.

¹Of course, the list experiment cannot fully reduce issues arising from social desirability bias. If someone supports or opposes every other item on the list, then the respondent still has an incentive to give an untruthful response to hide the fact that they support/oppose every item (including the socially sensitive one).

The list experiment has succeeded in uncovering a number of sensitive views and behaviors (e.g. Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Kane et al. 2004; Streb et al. 2008; Heerwig and McCabe 2009). While the list experiment provides a useful way for tapping overall support or opposition to sensitive items and can even be used to compare support and opposition across subgroups, its value is limited by an inability to conduct individual level multivariate analyses with the data generated from the instrument.² For example, the list experiment approach would make it nearly impossible to determine whether individuals for whom race was a more salient factor were less likely to vote for Obama after controlling for factors such as ideology and socioeconomic status. In other words, asking respondents to report how salient a factor race was to their vote likely introduces considerable social desirability bias while using a list experiment would preclude the kind of multivariate analysis that would be necessary to gain a richer understanding of how the salience of race influenced support for Obama in 2008. Therefore, in the following section, I introduce a new approach—the ranking instrument—that seeks to minimize social desirability bias while also maintaining the ability to include a measure of sensitive attitudes in multivariate vote choice models.

Measuring Racial Salience

This paper focuses on a survey instrument included on a component of the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES was conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix, of Palo Alto, California, and consists of matched random sample surveys. YouGov/Polimetrix maintains a large panel of people who have been recruited to participate in online surveys. They began by taking a target random sample of the adult population based on the 2006

²Corstange (2009) has recently developed a procedure that allows for such analyses of list experiment data, but this procedure relies on conducting the list experiment in a different way for the control group and such an approach may introduce bias in its own right (Flavin and Keane 2008).

American Community Survey. For each member of this target sample, YouGov/Polimetrix finds members from their opt-in sample that match that person on a number of characteristics including gender, age, race, region, education, news interest, marital status, party identification, ideology, religious affiliation, church attendance, income, and registration status. The matched sample is then weighted using propensity scores to assure that the sample is nationally representative.³

The matched sample for this component of the CCES included 1,000 respondents who were representative of American adult citizens on the factors mentioned above. Respondents were interviewed in October and re-interviewed in November following the election. Of the original sample, 934 respondents completed both waves of the survey. The instrument was located at the end of the post-election survey battery.⁴ Respondents were presented with the following question and response choices:

If you had to vote in an election but did not know any of the candidates competing, which pieces of information would be most useful for helping you decide who to vote for?

- *The political party each candidate belongs to*
- *The occupation of each candidate*
- *Which candidate your friends support*
- *The candidate that was endorsed by the local newspaper*
- *The gender of each candidate*
- *The race or ethnicity of each candidate*

³Additional information about the sampling procedure is available at <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/cces>.

⁴The question followed a battery of questions about unrelated topics (specifically, the question followed a battery about Internet usage).

Respondents were asked to rank each of the six items from most to least helpful. They did this by dragging each item from a column on one side of the screen to a column on the other side. Entries in the original (left-hand) column were randomized to control for any ordering bias. It is important to emphasize that the ranking instrument is not intended to measure implicit attitudes (see Fazio and Olson 2003). Rather, it is designed to reduce the respondents' incentives to mask their true views when responding to questions that ask them for introspection. To accomplish this, the ranking instrument provides the respondent with a range of potential places to locate a socially undesirable option. A respondent may be unlikely to rank a socially undesirable option near the top of a column, but the social desirability pressures are not likely to be as pronounced for choosing between ranking such an option second or third from the bottom rather than last. A respondent may not want to admit that the race or ethnicity of a candidate is the thing they would most want to know, but they may feel less social pressure about placing that item third or fourth on the list.

While the CCES did not include sufficient measures to test the validity of the claim that the ranking instrument was unobtrusive, I used a convenience sample of American adults to compare this approach with a list experiment. This analysis provided evidence that the ranking instrument was at least as unobtrusive as the ranking instrument. Additional details about this validity test can be found in Appendix 1.

To further reduce the possibility of the instrument producing social desirability bias, it was necessary to include at least two socially undesirable items. In this case, the items had to do with the race/ethnicity of a candidate and the gender of a candidate. Many respondents likely viewed rating race/ethnicity or gender highly as being a socially undesirable response given the norms against using a candidate's race or gender to determine one's vote (Streb et al. 2008; Heerwig and McCabe 2009). However, respondents ranking all six items were forced to place one of these socially desirable responses ahead of the other, thereby providing

some information about the relative salience of one category over the other.⁵

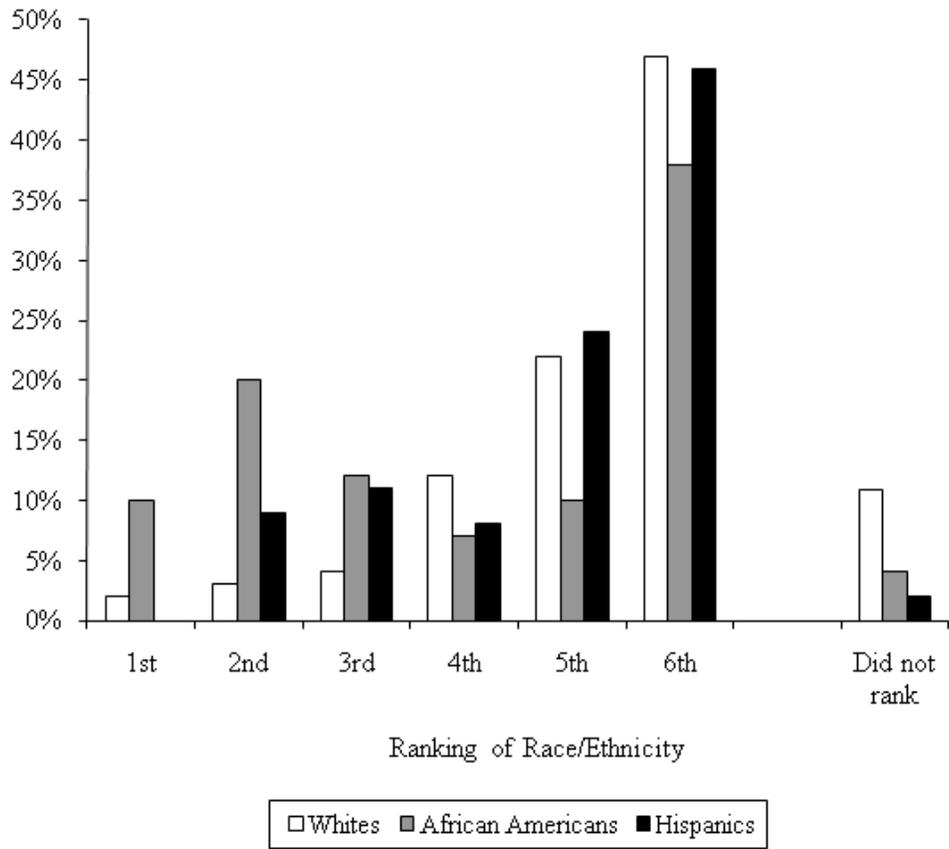
A related point about this instrument is that respondents were not compelled to rank each of the items they were given; they could either skip the question entirely or only rank those items that they wanted to rank. While respondents were not told that they could opt-out of the ranking, 9 percent of respondents did avail themselves of this option. Among respondents who ranked race/ethnicity, 49 percent rated it as the item that would be least helpful in deciding for whom to vote. An additional 23 percent of respondents ranked race/ethnicity fifth out of the sixth items. For the most part, these were respondents who placed gender in the sixth position. Thus, about 70 percent of the sample rated race/ethnicity as either last or second to last in terms of its salience in making an uninformed vote decision. However, approximately three in ten respondents placed race/ethnicity in the fourth position or higher.

The distribution of responses to this question among whites, blacks, and Hispanics is presented in Figure 1. The figure indicates that white respondents were more likely to opt out of ranking race/ethnicity, perhaps indicating that social desirability bias did condition non-responses to this question to some extent. However, the rate of non-response for this item was still relatively small given that this was the final question on the survey and did involve significant work on the part of the respondent to complete.

It is also important to note that this measure is intended to capture the importance (or salience) of race/ethnicity to a respondent's vote decision; it is not meant to be a measure of racial conservatism. There are two reasons to think that the question is successful in this regard. First, the distribution of responses in Figure 1 demonstrates that African Americans are more likely rank race/ethnicity higher than white respondents. This pattern cannot be attributed to the fact that African Americans are more racially conservative than whites; rather, it indicates that for some African Americans, the race or ethnicity of a candidate can

⁵There were no statistically significant differences in how men and women ranked race/ethnicity relative to gender. Among both groups, 72 percent ranked race/ethnicity lower than gender.

Figure 1: Ranking of the Importance of Rank/Ethnicity for Vote Decision in a Hypothetical Election



Note: A small number of respondents falling into other racial categories are excluded from this figure.

be a salient factor for their vote decisions.

A second way of demonstrating that this measure is capturing something other than racial conservatism is to compare these responses to those for a question soliciting opinions on affirmative action. Questions on affirmative action are among those typically used to measure a respondent's racial conservatism (see Valentino and Sears 2005 for a recent example). Racial conservatives tend to be more strongly opposed to affirmative action than other respondents, even after controlling for ideology. Thus, if the instrument asking respondents to rank the importance of race/ethnicity is measuring racial conservatism, then it should be related to respondents' views on affirmative action.⁶

Figure 2 plots the average ranking of race/ethnicity for each response category on the affirmative action question. The figure includes one plot for all respondents and one plot for only white respondents to determine whether the question only taps racial conservatism among whites. The plot on the left side of the figure indicates that among all respondents, those strongly opposed to affirmative action actually ranked race/ethnicity as *less* salient, rather than more so. However, the confidence intervals overlap across the entire range of affirmative action views, indicating no statistically significant relationship between affirmative action views and racial salience among all respondents. The plot on the right side shows that whites gave race/ethnicity nearly identical rankings regardless of their views of affirmative action, with the confidence intervals overlapping for each value.⁷ Thus, the results presented in Figure 2 suggest that the ranking instrument is capturing something different from mere racial conservatism.⁸

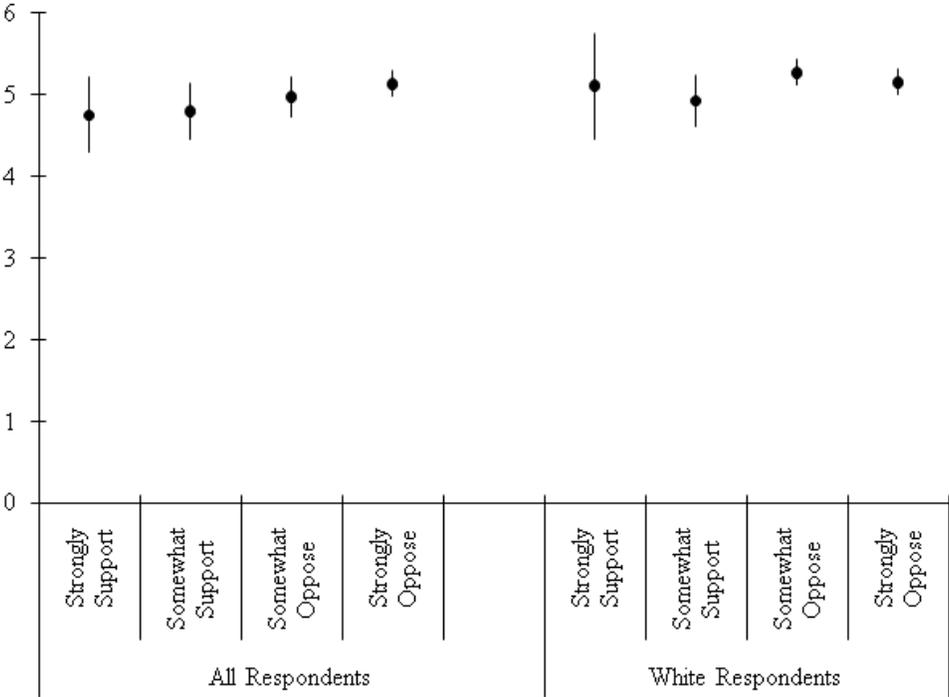
Overall, the ranking instrument appears to be successfully tapping the extent to which

⁶Unfortunately, other questions that might be used to gauge racial conservatism were not included on the survey questionnaire.

⁷There was also no significant relationship between these measures in a multivariate analysis controlling for other demographic and political variables.

⁸I conducted a similar analysis for respondents' self-reported political ideologies (on a five-point scale). The findings were very similar to those presented in Figure 2. There were no statistically significant differences in the average ranking of race across ideological categories.

Figure 2: Average Ranking of the Importance of Rank/Ethnicity by Affirmative Action Opinions



Note: Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals. Estimates generated using sampling weights.

race/ethnicity might be salient to an individual. This sets the measure apart from other instruments that gauge the extent to which respondents hold conservative or liberal views on racial issues. The measure also appears to minimize some of the social desirability bias that plagues other instruments. While African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to rate race/ethnicity as salient, a significant proportion of white respondents ranked those characteristics higher than sixth as well.⁹ But is this measure of racial salience meaningfully related to how respondents voted in the 2008 election? In the following sections, I answer this question.

Analyzing the Effect of Racial Salience

As noted above, a significant body of research on racial priming demonstrates that when the salience of race is heightened, whites are less likely to support minority candidates or policies that are viewed as disproportionately benefiting African Americans (Hutchings and Valentino 2004). While these studies have relied on experimental manipulation of racial salience to uncover these effects, in this paper I use the ranking instrument to determine the role of racial salience outside of the experimental context. Specifically, I examine the effect of racial salience on two dependent variables—whether a respondent reported voting for Obama in the general election and whether he or she thought that African Americans were among the groups that Obama “focused most of his attention on” during the campaign.

The reported vote choice measure comes from the post-election wave of the 2008 survey. Of the 934 respondents who answered the post-election questionnaire, 825 reported voting.¹⁰ The weighted vote among post-election respondents was roughly equivalent to the actual

⁹The Appendix information for this manuscript provides detailed information about how different subgroups ranked race/ethnicity. Overall, there were no statistically significant differences among white respondents depending on gender, age, income, or region. There were small differences across education categories, however.

¹⁰After applying sampling weights, the percentage reporting that they voted drops to 75%.

national outcome—53% of respondents reported voting for Obama and 45% for McCain. The dependent variable for the analysis presented here is the two-party vote for president; thus, the small proportion of respondents who voted for third party candidates are excluded. In addition, consistent with the tradition of the extant work on racial priming, this paper focuses exclusively on white respondents since African Americans and Hispanics were unlikely to penalize Obama if race was more salient to their vote.¹¹ Among the 708 whites in the survey who reported voting, Obama won 46% of the two-party vote (after applying sampling weights).

The second dependent variable captures respondents' views of Obama's strategy during the campaign. During the pre-election wave, which was fielded in October, respondents were asked, "During the presidential election campaign, which of the following groups do you think Barack Obama has focused most of his attention on?" They were given 21 choices and respondents could choose up to five.¹² African Americans were among the groups from which respondents were able to choose and 52% of white respondents chose this group as one of their responses to the question; in fact, this was the most frequently chosen group among white respondents.¹³ As noted above, one barrier that whites may face in voting for African American candidates is the role of stereotypes. Among the many stereotypes that whites might attribute to a black candidate is the belief that he or she would focus more attention on pandering to African American voters than a white candidate would. The second dependent variable tests for such an effect.

¹¹I conducted an identical analysis using all voters (including racial and ethnic minorities) and found the same effects for whites that are presented here but no significant effect for racial salience on the votes of non-whites.

¹²The choices were men, women African Americans, Hispanics, whites, people living in rural areas, people living in suburban areas, people living in urban areas, Born-Again Christians, Jews, Catholics, members of labor unions, lower-income citizens, middle-income citizens, upper-income citizens, young adults, middle-aged adults, elderly adults, liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

¹³The second most frequently chosen group was "young adults;" 48% of whites selected this demographic in response to the question. This was followed closely by the percentage selecting "lower income" (44%) and "middle income" (43%) Americans.

Since racial salience may be related to other demographic and political characteristics that also influence one’s vote choice or perceptions of the campaign, I include controls for such variables in both models. With regard to demographic factors, I account for respondents’ gender, age, marital status, income, education, and frequency of church attendance.¹⁴ I also control for each respondent’s party identification and ideology.¹⁵ Given that racial salience may be an important determinant of party identification and ideological self-placement among whites, including these variables helps to isolate the effects that racial salience had on voting in this particular election.

I also include the measure capturing respondents’ views on affirmative action. After controlling for ideology in the model, the affirmative action variable should provide a reasonable proxy for how conservative or liberal a respondent’s views are on race issues. Nearly two-thirds of white respondents were either strongly opposed (43%) or somewhat opposed (24%) to affirmative action. Support was more tepid; 26% said they somewhat supported the programs while just 7% strongly supported them. If affirmative action attitudes are a sufficient proxy for racial conservatism, then whites who expressed stronger opposition to affirmative action should also be less likely to report voting for Obama in 2008.

Finally, each model includes an interaction term between the variables measuring respon-

¹⁴Gender is an indicator variable that equals 1 for women and 0 for men; 52% of whites in the sample were women. Marital status is also an indicator variable which is set to 1 for the 59% of white respondents who reported being married. Income is operationalized as a 14 point scale ranging from those earning less than \$10,000 per year (coded 1) to those earning more than \$150,000 (coded 14). The median income category for white respondents was \$50,000-\$59,999 (coded 8). Education was measured with a six-point scale ranging from those with no high school (coded 1) to those with post-graduate degrees (coded 6). The median white respondent had completed some college (coded 3). Church attendance ranged from those saying they attended more than once per week (coded 1) to those saying they never went to church (coded 6); the median white respondent attended church “a few times a year” (coded 4). Finally, the age variable was coded as the respondent’s reported age; white respondents ranged in age from 18 to 85, with an average age of 49.

¹⁵I use the standard seven-point partisan identification scale which ranges from those identifying as strong Democrats (coded 1) to strong Republicans (coded 7). The average rating for white respondents on this scale was a 4.0 (non-leaning independent). Ideology is operationalized with a five-point scale ranging from “very liberal” to “very conservative;” the average white respondent had an ideology just to the right of moderate (3.2).

dents' rankings of race/ethnicity and their views on affirmative action.¹⁶ This term allows for a test of whether the influence of racial conservatism is contingent on racial salience. As noted above, experimental work on racial priming has found that when race is made more salient, the effect is greatest for racially conservative respondents (Mendelberg 2001, for example). Indeed, for those with liberal racial attitudes, the relative salience of race is not likely to have exerted much of an influence on support for Obama or views toward his campaign. After all, a racial liberal is not likely to provide less support for a black candidate relative to a white one regardless of the weight they are placing on race. On the other hand, the effect of racial salience should be far more pronounced among racial conservatives. When individuals with more conservative views on race also place more weight on racial considerations, their support for Obama is expected to decline. However, when racial conservatives give less weight to race, then they may become more likely to support Obama. This is the moderating pattern I expect to find. Alternatively, if the effect of racial conservatism is not moderated by racial salience, then racial conservatives should be equally unsupportive of Obama regardless of the emphasis they place on race. In the following section, I demonstrate that the former pattern emerged in 2008—racial conservatives were much less likely to support Obama when race was more salient to them, but more willing to do so when they placed less importance on race.

Results

The full results for the two logit models examining the effects of racial salience on the the vote for Obama and perceptions of Obama's campaign are presented in Table 1.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the results indicate that both partisanship and ideology were significant predictors

¹⁶The variable measuring where respondents ranked race/ethnicity ranges from 1 to 6, with 1 meaning the respondent would most want to know the candidates' race/ethnicities and 6 meaning that this is the information he/she would least want to know.

¹⁷Sample weights were used when estimating all of the models.

of whether an individual voted for Obama. The substantive effects of both variables are strong as well. Holding the other variables in the model at their means, the probability of a strong Democrat voting for Obama was .88, for independents it was .47, and the probability of a strong Republican voting for Obama was .10. Ideology also had a substantial effect; whites identifying as “very liberal” had a .96 probability of voting for Obama while it was just .06 for those who reported being “very conservative.” A voter’s age also had a strong impact on their presidential vote, with older whites showing less support for Obama than those who were younger. Support for Obama dropped by approximately 6 points for every additional 10 years of age. Married respondents were about 25 percentage points less likely to vote for Obama compared to those who were not married.

Partisanship also had a significant (though substantively smaller) effect on the extent to which whites thought that Obama focused most of his attention on African Americans during the campaign. Strong Democrats were 22 percentage points less likely to agree with this statement as strong Republicans. Ideology was an even more important factor; individuals identifying as “very conservative” were twice as likely to agree with that statement as those who reported that they were “very liberal.” The coefficient for gender was also statistically significant, indicating that women were 14 percentage points more likely to say that Obama was targeting African Americans compared to men.

The key variables of interest are for racial salience, views on affirmative action and the interaction term, which indicates whether the effect of racial conservatism is contingent on where the respondent ranked race/ethnicity. In the vote choice model, the coefficient for the interaction term was positive which is supportive of the notion that the effect of racial salience on vote choice is more pronounced among those opposing affirmative action. Furthermore, a joint Wald test of statistical significance indicates that the interaction term and the measure of racial salience have a jointly significant ($p < .01$) effect on vote choice. In the second model, the interaction term is also in the expected (negative) direction and jointly significant with

Table 1: Logit Models Estimating Effect of Racial Salience on Vote for Obama in General Election and Perceptions of Obama’s Campaign (White Respondents Only)

Independent Variables	Voted for Obama		Focused on African Americans	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Ranking of Race/Ethnicity	-.074 [†]	.597	.118 [†]	.351
Affirmative Action Views	-2.035*	1.046	1.389**	.614
Ranking X Aff. Action Views	.207 [†]	.196	-.212* [†]	.114
Party ID	-.707***	.114	.161**	.067
Ideology	-1.493***	.424	.385***	.140
Female	-.578	.416	.553**	.227
Married	-1.040**	.469	.250	.244
Age	-.032**	.015	.004	.008
Church Attendance	.150	.131	.003	.073
Income	-.041	.074	.052	.038
Education	-.087	.129	-.098	.084
Intercept	13.554***	3.540	-3.838*	1.973
Observations		539		606
Log Likelihood		-111.018		-347.456
Adj. Count R ²		.811		.421

Note: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, two-tailed test of significance using sampling weights. [†] Indicates that the Wald test for joint significance is significant at p<.01. The Wald test estimates whether the coefficients for the ranking of race/ethnicity and the interaction term are jointly distinct from 0. In model 1, F = 6.9 (p<.01); in model 2, F=12.8 (p<.01).

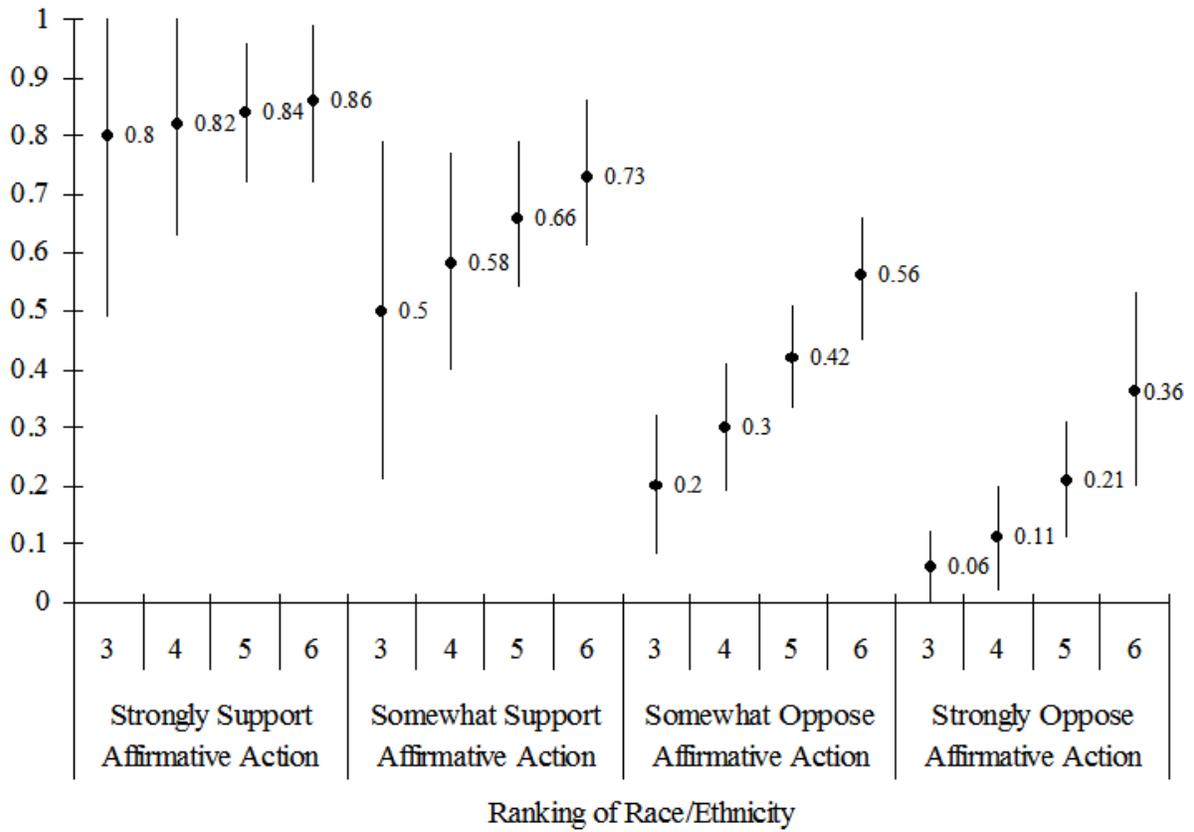
racial salience. The effect of racial salience on one's perception of the extent to which Obama focused on African American's during the campaign also appears to be significantly tied to their racial conservatism.

Figure 3 presents the nature of the contingent effects of racial salience and affirmative action attitudes on presidential vote choice. The figure plots the predicted probability of voting for Obama depending on a respondent's ranking of race/ethnicity and his or her views on affirmative action. These predictions were generated while holding all other variables in the model at their means and the vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals for the predictions. The plots only ranged from those who ranked race/ethnicity third to those who ranked those factors last since very few white respondents ranked race/ethnicity either first or second.

Affirmative action views were strongly related to the probability that an individual would vote for Obama. Regardless of how salient the respondent ranked race/ethnicity, she was much more likely to vote for Obama if she supported affirmative action than if she opposed it. However, racial salience also appeared to moderate the relationship between racial conservatism and voting for Obama. For respondents who supported affirmative action, racial salience appeared to make little difference. For example, among strong supporters, ranking race/ethnicity sixth rather than fourth increased support for Obama by a negligible amount, and the confidence intervals around these predictions overlapped, indicating that we cannot be confident that these differences actually exist in the population of voters. On the other end of the affirmative action scale there was a strong relationship between racial salience and the Obama vote; moving from fourth to sixth on the racial salience rankings increased support for Obama by 25 points among those who were strongly opposed to affirmative action. The confidence intervals for these predictions do not overlap, indicating that we can be confident that they would exist among the population of voters.

Another way to look at the patterns in this figure are to compare predictions for different

Figure 3: Contingent Effect of Racial Salience and Affirmative Action Views on Predicted Probability of Voting for Obama in General Election



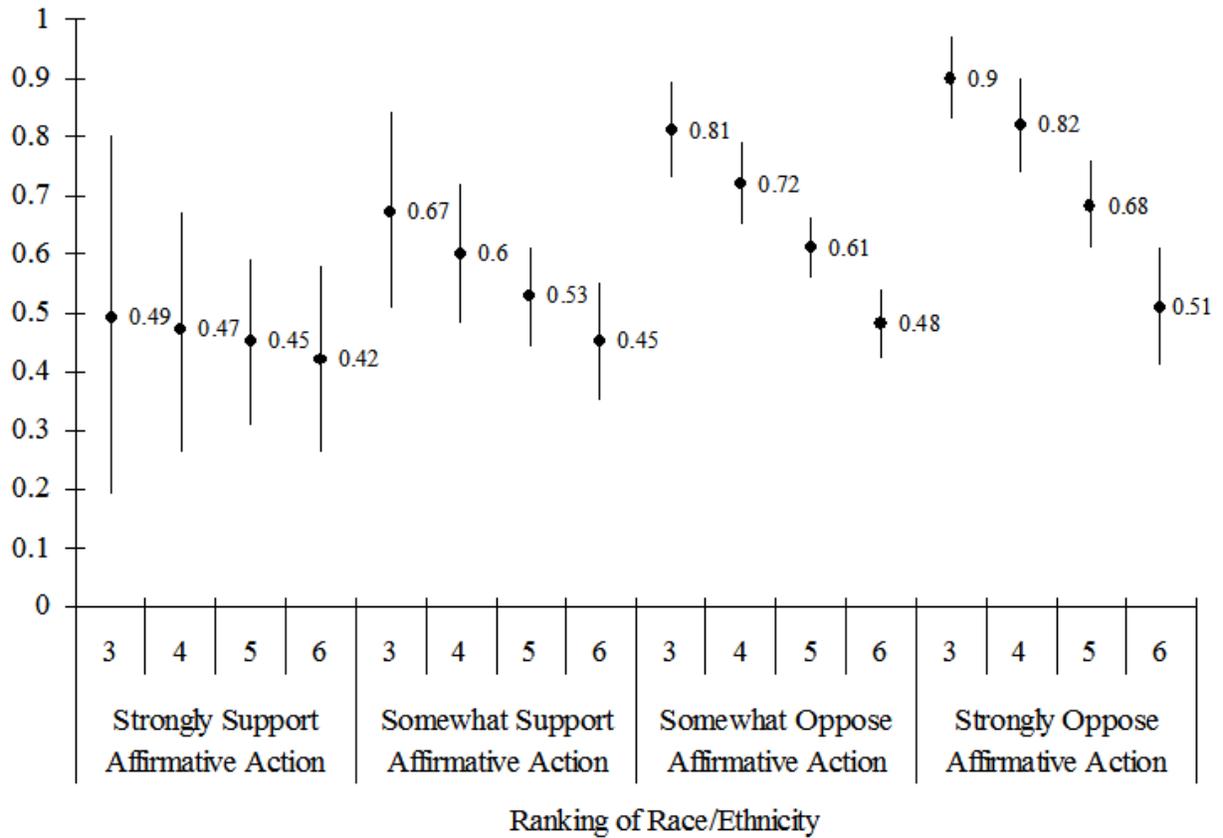
Note: Probabilities generated from a logit model, holding control variables for gender, age, marital status, income, education, church attendance, partisanship, and ideology at their mean values. Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals.

levels of racial salience across the range of views on affirmative actions. For example, the difference in the probability of voting for Obama between strong affirmative action supporters and strong affirmative action opponents was .71 for those ranking race/ethnicity fourth (.82 for strong supporters versus .11 for strong opponents). However, when respondents ranked race/ethnicity last, the difference between strong supporters and opponents of affirmative action dropped to .5 (.86 versus .36). Thus, when race was less salient for those with more conservative affirmative action views, the effect was somewhat tempered; however, even under these conditions, the respondent was significantly more likely to vote for McCain than Obama. In short, racial conservatism among whites acted as a barrier to voting for Obama, but that barrier was less pronounced for those voters who placed less importance on race.

Figure 4 presents a similar plot as Figure 3, except in this case the predicted values represent the probability that an individual thought that Obama was targeting African Americans during the campaign. As with the probability of voting, racial salience appeared to have little effect on perceptions of the campaign for those respondents that supported affirmative action. There was, however, a strong effect for racial salience among those who opposed affirmative action. For example, a strong affirmative action opponent who ranked race/ethnicity fourth was over 30 percentage points more likely to think Obama was targeting African Americans during the campaign than a person with similar views on affirmative action who ranked race/ethnicity last. The confidence intervals for these predictions do not overlap, indicating we can be more than 95% confident that these differences would exist among the population of voters.

It is also instructive to compare predicted probabilities for different levels of racial salience across the range of views on affirmative action. In fact, when examining the figure from this perspective, the findings become even more striking. Strong affirmative action opponents had a probability of .82 of thinking that Obama was targeting African Americans during the campaign when they ranked race/ethnicity fourth; this was 35 points higher than strong affir-

Figure 4: Contingent Effect of Racial Salience and Affirmative Action Views on Predicted Probability of Thinking that Obama Campaign Was Targeting African Americans



Note: Probabilities generated from a logit model, holding control variables for gender, age, marital status, income, education, church attendance, partisanship, and ideology at their mean values. Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals.

native action supporters who ranked race/ethnicity fourth. However, among those ranking race/ethnicity last, there was only a difference of .08 (.51 versus .42) between strong opponents and supporters of affirmative action and the confidence intervals for the predictions overlap. Thus, when it came to whether respondents thought that Obama was paying particular attention to African Americans during the campaign, racially conservative whites for whom race was less salient held similar views to racial liberals. It was only when race was more salient that the views of racial conservatives departed from those of racial liberals.

A Partisan Effect or a Race Effect?

While the analyses above demonstrate that racial salience had a significant effect on whether whites voted for Obama and how they perceived Obama's campaign, the findings do not rule out the possibility that racial salience affects the propensity of whites to support any Democratic candidate, and not just African American candidates. Therefore, I conducted two separate tests to determine whether it was a partisan effect rather than a race effect that was driving these patterns. First, I used the same model specification tested above to estimate respondents' vote choices for the House of Representatives. The results from this test are presented in Table 2. Notably, neither the racial salience variable nor the affirmative action variable approach traditional levels of statistical significance. The interaction term between these two variables was also small and lacked statistical significance, indicating the lack of an effect for any of the race-oriented variables.¹⁸ Thus, the analysis of the House vote provides some initial evidence that racial salience affected the extent to which whites supported Obama, but did not have a significant effect on support for Democrats more generally. While examining the House vote is not a perfect baseline for comparison, these results do suggest that the effect of racial salience may be limited to the candidacy of an African American nominee.

¹⁸A joint Wald test for the three component terms also lacked statistical significance.

Table 2: Logit Model Estimating Effect of Racial Salience on Vote for U.S. House Member (White Respondents Only)

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
Ranking of Race/Ethnicity	.218	.604
Affirmative Action Views	.080	1.162
Ranking X Aff. Action Views	-.078	.213
Party ID	-.552***	.096
Ideology	-.815***	.238
Female	-.285	.339
Married	.060	.385
Age	-.007	.012
Church Attendance	.069	.113
Income	-.071	.053
Education	.227*	.116
Democratic Incumbent	.952	.577
Republican Incumbent	-.243	.547
Intercept	4.214	3.343

Note: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, two-tailed test of significance using sampling weights. N=484. Log-Likelihood = -167.572. Adj. Count R²=.572.

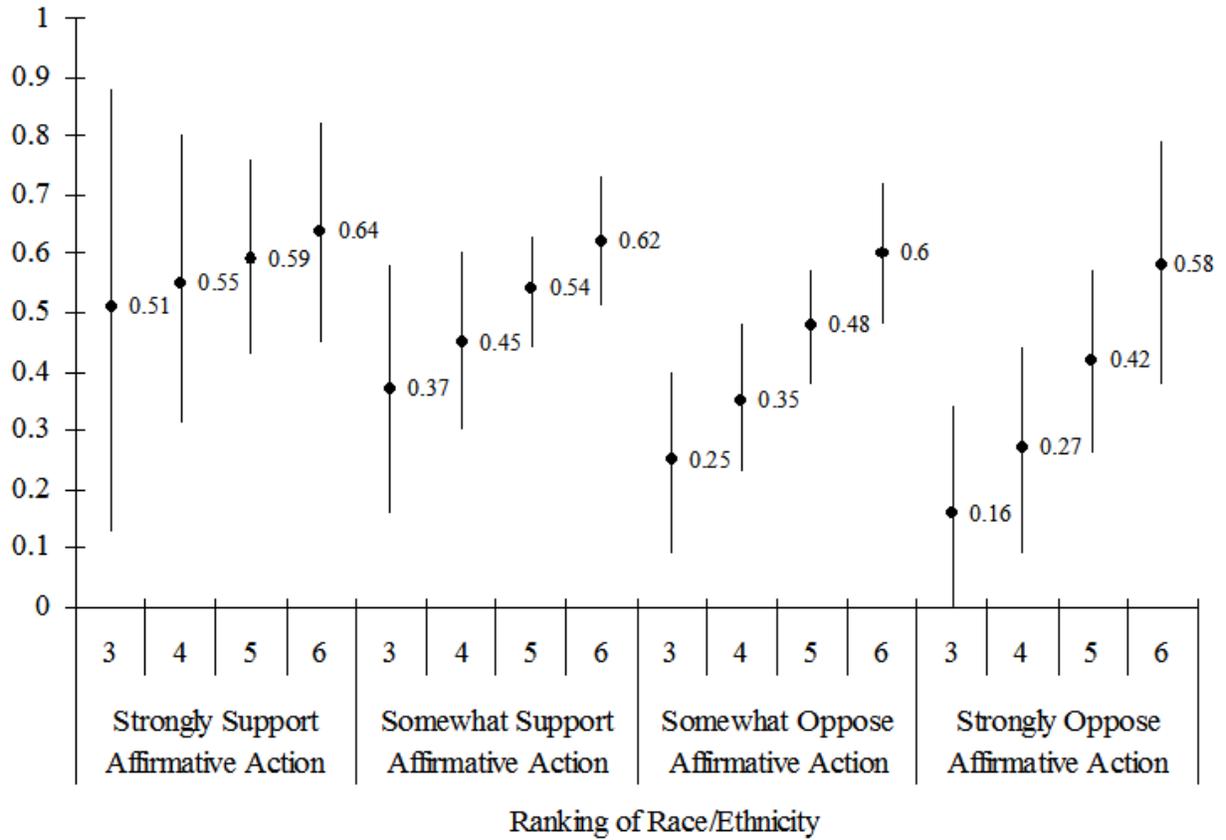
As a second test of whether the influence of racial salience was due to Obama's race rather than his party, I examine reported vote choices in the 2008 Democratic nomination campaign. In the pre-election CCES survey, respondents were asked whether they voted in a presidential primary or caucus and, if so, which candidate they voted for. From this information, I constructed a dependent variable that equaled 1 if the individual voted in a Democratic primary/caucus for Obama and 0 if they voted for Hillary Clinton or John Edwards. I estimated the same model as described above except that party identification was removed from the model since I was only examining Democratic primary voters. If the contingent relationship between racial conservatism and racial salience is simply a partisan effect, then I would not expect to find the same patterns in the Democratic primary as I did for the general election. However, if this effect is due to Obama's race, then the effect should also be evident among Democratic primary voters.

The full model results are presented in Table 3. As with the general election models, the

joint effect of the racial salience measure and the interaction term was statistically significant and in the expected direction. The predicted effects of racial salience and racial conservatism on the vote for Obama for the Democratic nomination are presented in Figure 5. Note that the size of the confidence intervals in this figure are significantly larger than in the other figures since I am limited to analyzing just 218 white respondents who reported voting in the Democratic primary. Nevertheless, the figure reveals similar patterns to those from the general election. When respondents ranked race/ethnicity lower (less salient), they were more likely to vote for Obama. However, this effect is larger and statistically significant only for Democratic primary voters who oppose affirmative action. A Democratic primary voter who was strongly opposed to affirmative action and ranked race/ethnicity third had a predicted probability of just .16 of voting for Obama. A Democratic primary voter who was similarly opposed to affirmative action but ranked race/ethnicity last had a probability of .58 of voting for Obama. Thus, as with general election voters, racial salience moderated the influence of racial conservatism on the propensity of white Democratic primary voters to support Obama. This finding suggests that the influence of race on support for Obama was not merely a partisan effect, but was likely related to Obama's race.

Overall, the results presented here indicate that the extent to which race was a salient factor for citizens in 2008 played a significant role not just in affecting their vote choices for president, but also their evaluations of whether Obama was focusing on African American voters during the campaign. The effect of racial salience on presidential vote choice was particularly pronounced for voters with more conservative views on Affirmative Action. In the following section, I discuss the significance of these findings for understanding the continued importance of race in American electoral politics, as well as the potential utility of the ranking instrument for studying other attitudes or behaviors that tend to be prone to social desirability bias.

Figure 5: Contingent Effect of Racial Salience and Affirmative Action Views on Predicted Probability of Voting for Obama in Democratic Primary



Note: Probabilities generated from a logit model, holding control variables for gender, age, marital status, income, education, church attendance, and ideology at their mean values. Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals.

Table 3: Logit Model Estimating Effect of Racial Salience on Vote for Obama in Democratic Primary (White Respondents Only)

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
Ranking of Race/Ethnicity	.016 [†]	.463
Affirmative Action Views	-1.058	.895
Ranking X Aff. Action Views	.164 [†]	.171
Ideology	-.408**	.206
Female	-.630*	.333
Married	-.022	.349
Age	-.053	.012
Church Attendance	.140	.120
Income	-.023	.057
Education	.369***	.118
Intercept	2.719	2.673

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, two-tailed test of significance using sampling weights. [†] Indicates that the Wald test for joint significance is significant at $p < .05$. The Wald test estimates whether the coefficients for the ranking of race/ethnicity and the interaction term are jointly distinct from 0. In this model, $F = 3.9$ ($p < .05$).

Conclusion

This paper utilized a unique survey instrument to examine the effects of racial salience in a non-experimental context. The ranking instrument appeared to operate as a less obtrusive way of uncovering a subset of white respondents for whom race was more salient. The apparent success of the ranking instrument in this context provides an incentive for further developing and testing it in other contexts where social desirability bias is a concern. Given the limitations of the list experiment approach for conducting multivariate analysis, the ranking instrument could prove to be a viable alternative for measuring sensitive items. For example, the classic Kuklinski et al. list experiment asks respondents how many items make them angry or upset, with the treatment condition adding including the added item “a black family moving in next door.” A ranking instrument approach to measuring this concept might add additional sensitive items and then ask respondents to rank all of the items based on how angry or upset they make them. While the list experiment likely remains a better

approach for determining the extent to which social desirability bias is affecting responses, the ranking instrument may be a useful supplement by allowing for multivariate analysis of some socially sensitive items.

Of course, the substantive findings uncovered using this instrument are of even greater importance. The results demonstrate that race did play a significant role in affecting the vote choices of some whites, particularly those racial conservatives for whom race was more salient. While over half of white respondents ranked race/ethnicity last among pieces of information they would want to know in a low information election, one-in-five white respondents ranked race/ethnicity fourth or higher on this scale. While this paper cannot weigh in on the question of whether race was less salient for voters in this election than it might have been under other circumstances, the findings do indicate that the extent to which race was salient for white racial conservatives influenced support for Obama. It is also worth noting that while the diminished salience of race increased the propensity of white racial conservatives to vote for Obama, even those racial conservatives for whom race was least salient were still substantially less likely to vote for him than racial liberals.

How might the salience of race among whites have affected the margin of Obama's victory in 2008? To make this determination I mimic an approach taken by Hutchings (2009). As a baseline, I used the vote choice model in Table 1 to generate predictions for each white respondent based on their actual values on the independent variables. Assuming anyone with a predicted probability above .5 would have cast a vote for Obama, I estimate that his baseline support among whites in my sample was 47.5%. I then adjusted the data so that every respondent was assumed to give the least possible salience to race (i.e. each respondent was assumed to have ranked race last) and I generated a second set of predicted probabilities. The second set of probabilities indicate that if no white voters found race to be salient, Obama would have won 50.6% of the vote among whites in my sample. Thus, Obama would have performed about 3 percentage points better among whites under these

conditions. Given that exit polls estimated that whites made up approximately three-fourths of all voters, performing 3 percentage points better among whites would have translated into a gain of about 2% in Obama's overall vote share. This might have not only moved Obama's vote share to above 55%, but it also could have meant the difference between carrying states like Missouri and Montana (both of which Obama lost by less than 3% of the vote).

It is important to note, however, that any estimates about what Obama's support may have been under hypothetical conditions are quite tentative. Nevertheless, the findings in this paper do point to the continued significance of race in American politics, even in an election that culminated with Obama's historic victory. Indeed, the conclusion that Obama's vote among whites may have been depressed because of his race is consistent with speculation from political scientists who projected a larger vote margin for a generic Democratic nominee on the basis of national conditions (see Lewis-Beck and Tien 2009, for example). Furthermore, the size of this effect is similar to those reported by other studies examining the influence of race in the 2008 vote (Pasek et al. 2009; Hutchings 2009). Race remains a salient electoral consideration for a non-trivial proportion of American whites, and this reality continues to diminish white support for African American candidates, even those who ultimately win despite this bias.

Appendix 1: Demonstrating the Validity of the Ranking Instrument Measure of Racial/Ethnic Salience

In this paper, I argue that the ranking instrument provides a less obtrusive way to measure sensitive attitudes at the individual level. While it was not possible to directly test this claim with the 2008 CCES data, I did conduct such a test using a survey experiment on a convenience sample of American adults. The sample was taken from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website, which has become an affordable and accessible venue for recruiting subjects into social science surveys. Buhrmester et al. (Forthcoming) report that Mechanical Turk "participants are at least as diverse and more representative of non-college populations than those of typical Internet and traditional samples. Most importantly, we found that the quality of data provided by MTurk met or exceeded the psychometric standards associated with published research" (p. 6-7; see also Paolacci et al. 2010).

I recruited 700 American adults from Mechanical Turk to complete a short survey on current events. Respondents received between 25 and 50 cents for completing the brief survey. After removing non-white respondents from the dataset as well as a small group of respondents who straight-lined responses, I was left with 561 white adult participants. Overall, the sample was younger (mean age of 35) and more female (63%) than the population of white adults; nevertheless, the participants offered far more variance in age and education than a sample of college students.

To test the validity of the ranking instrument for measuring sensitive attitudes, I randomly assigned respondents into one of four conditions. One-fourth of the respondents were assigned to complete the ranking instrument, just as it appeared in the 2008 CCES. The remaining respondents were assigned to one of three conditions for a list experiment. As noted in the paper, the list experiment has been successful in coaxing less biased responses to sensitive questions. While the list experiment is limited in its ability to determine which respondents are responding to the sensitive item, it can nonetheless serve as a useful way

of gauging how well the ranking instrument is performing in overcoming social desirability bias. The ranking instrument used in this paper can easily be adapted to a list experiment format with a control group and two treatment groups. Each of the respondents assigned into the list experiment was presented with the following preamble and then the list of items they received was determined by which condition they were assigned to. The table indicates how many respondents were ultimately assigned to each condition.

If you had to vote in an election but did not know any of the candidates competing, how many of the following pieces of information would you find helpful in deciding who to vote for? We don't want to know which pieces of information you would want to know, just how many:

Control Group (N = 128)	Treatment 1 (N=156)	Treatment 2 (N=146)
The political party each candidate belongs to	The political party each candidate belongs to	The political party each candidate belongs to
The occupation of each candidate	The occupation of each candidate	The occupation of each candidate
Which candidate your friends support	Which candidate your friends support	Which candidate your friends support
The candidate that was endorsed by the local newspaper	The candidate that was endorsed by the local newspaper	The candidate that was endorsed by the local newspaper
	The gender of each candidate	The race or ethnicity of each candidate
Mean = 2.10	Mean = 2.36	Mean = 2.29

The mean number of items that control group respondents said that they would want to know was 2.10. I use this as the baseline for comparing the treatments applied in the other two conditions. The average number of items reported in Treatment 1 was 2.36 and the mean for Treatment 2 was 2.29. Thus, based on these means, I can conclude that 26% ($p=.03$, one-tailed test) of respondents thought that the gender of the candidates would be a useful piece of information and 19% ($p=.09$, one-tailed test) would want to know the race/ethnicity of the candidates.

These results can now be used as baseline values for testing the validity of the ranking instrument. For example, the list experiment result indicates that 26% of respondents find at least one item on the control group list to be less useful in making their vote decision

than the gender of the candidates. Accordingly, at least 26% of respondents should rank gender higher than one of those four items. In fact, among the 131 respondents assigned to answer the ranking instrument, 44% ranked the gender of the candidates higher than one of the control items. Similarly, since we used the list experiment to conclude that 19% of respondents would want to know the race/ethnicity of the candidates, but not something else on the list, then that same percentage of respondents should rank race/ethnicity higher than at least one item from the control group. In fact, I found that 28% of those assigned to the ranking instrument placed race/ethnicity above one of those four items.

Overall, the findings from this convenience sample indicate that the ranking instrument is at least as unobtrusive as the list experiment. While the limitations of the convenience sample reduces the extent to which these findings can be generalized, the random assignment of respondents to different conditions allows for a reasonable comparison between the ranking instrument and the list experiment. When combining this analysis with the findings from the paper, one can be reasonably confident that the ranking instrument is providing a relatively unobtrusive measure of racial salience.

Appendix 2: Average Ranking of Race/Ethnicity by Demographic/Political Characteristics (White Respondents Only)

Group	Average Ranking of Race/Ethnicity	95% Confidence Interval
High School or Less	5.14	4.94, 5.33
Some College	4.91	4.61, 5.20
Bachelor's Degree or More	5.34	5.23, 5.46
Men	5.11	4.91, 5.31
Women	5.13	4.96, 5.30
Income less than \$40k	5.09	4.82, 5.36
Income b/w \$40k & \$100k	5.16	4.98, 5.33
Income over \$100k	5.36	5.20, 5.52
Ages 18-34	5.00	4.70, 5.30
Ages 35-54	5.23	5.06, 5.40
Ages 55 and over	5.11	4.88, 5.33
Northeast	5.10	4.75, 5.46
Midwest	4.99	4.73, 5.24
South	5.19	4.97, 5.42
West	5.19	4.98, 5.41

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