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FlashReport

Endorsing Obama licenses favoring Whites

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ABSTRACT

Three studies tested whether the opportunity to endorse Barack Obama made individuals subsequently more likely to favor Whites over Blacks. In Study 1, participants were more willing to describe a job as better suited for Whites than for Blacks after expressing support for Obama. Study 2 replicated this effect and ruled out alternative explanations: participants favored Whites for the job after endorsing Obama, but not after endorsing a White Democrat, nor after seeing Obama's photo without having an opportunity to endorse him. Study 3 demonstrated that racial attitudes moderated this effect: endorsing Obama increased the amount of money allocated to an organization serving Whites at the expense of an organization serving Blacks only for participants high in a measure of racial prejudice. These three studies suggest that expressing support for Obama grants people *moral credentials* (Monin, B., & Miller, D. T. (2001). Moral credentials and the expression of prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 33–43), thus reducing their concern with appearing prejudiced.

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For the first time in American history, voters in 2008 had the opportunity to vote for an African–American presidential nominee from a major political party. Many voters probably felt that endorsing Barack Obama demonstrated not only their political values, but also their lack of racial prejudice. Ironically, establishing oneself psychologically as unprejudiced may make people feel more comfortable expressing views that could be interpreted as prejudiced. Contemporary Americans are normally careful not to express such views for fear of experiencing disapproval or guilt (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), unless their past behavior establishes their *moral credentials* as unbiased individuals: Monin and Miller (2001) showed that merely choosing an African–American – who was the most qualified applicant – for a hypothetical job increased the likelihood that participants would describe a subsequent job as being better suited for White applicants. Consistent with these findings, we propose that endorsing Obama can license people to favor Whites at the expense of Blacks.

We conducted three studies to test this proposition. Study 1 tests whether letting participants endorse Obama increases their willingness to favor a White job applicant. Study 2 seeks to replicate this effect and rule out two alternative explanations. Study 3 examines whether people high in racial prejudice are especially likely to favor Whites in a budget allocation task after endorsing Obama.

Study 1

Method

Participants

In February 2008, 99 undergraduates (52 females and 47 males; mean age = 19.28 years, $SD = 1.67$; 45% White, 23% Asian–American, 7% African–American, 7% other races, and 6% multiracial) completed a study in campus eateries in exchange for candy. On average, these students rated themselves as likely voters ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.84$; 1 = *Not at all likely*, 7 = *Extremely likely*); eighty-two were already registered to vote.

Procedure

Participants indicated for whom they would vote (by circling his picture) if candidates Barack Obama and John McCain faced each other in the presidential election. Either before (*control condition*) or after (*credentials condition*) doing so, participants imagined having to make a hiring decision for a police force characterized by racial tension, and indicated whether they thought this job was better suited for a particular race (police-hiring task from Monin & Miller, 2001). Participants indicated their responses on a 7-point scale anchored at -3 (*Yes, much better for a Black*) and $+3$ (*Yes, much better for a White*), with a midpoint of 0 (*No, I do not feel this way at all*).

Finally, participants provided demographics and reported which candidate they supported (open ended). We predicted that, compared to those in the control condition, participants in the credentials condition would express a stronger preference for hiring Whites.

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Results

Because only participants who supported Obama could be credentialed by choosing him, we excluded 15 participants who endorsed McCain either on the manipulation or in the demographics section (no difference by condition, $\chi^2[1] = .25, ns$), leaving 84 participants.

As predicted, participants who completed the police-hiring task after endorsing Obama said the job was significantly better for a White person ($M = .55, SD = .15$) than did control participants ($M = .17, SD = .12$), $t(82) = 2.04, p = .04, d = .45$.

Study 2

Endorsing Obama licensed Study 1 participants to favor a White applicant for a police job. Two alternatives to credentials could account for this result, however. First, simply expressing one's preference for a Democrat may have been sufficient to produce the effect (political expression account). Second, perhaps seeing Obama activated stereotypes about Blacks that biased participants' decision towards a White applicant (priming account). We conducted Study 2 to rule out these alternatives.

Method

Participants

In July 2008, 79 undergraduates (23 females and 56 males; mean age = 20.56 years, $SD = 1.87$) were recruited as in Study 1. Again, they characterized themselves as likely voters ($M = 5.23, SD = 2.14$); sixty-two were already registered to vote.¹

Procedure

As in Study 1, participants in the *credentials* condition viewed pictures of Obama and McCain, and circled for whom they would vote. In the *political expression* control condition, participants viewed pictures of John Kerry and George W. Bush, and circled for whom they would have voted in 2004 (when most participants were below voting age). Circling Kerry meant endorsing a Democrat, but not an African–American. In the *priming* control condition, participants viewed the same pictures as in the *credentials* condition, but circled the younger candidate. Thus, Obama supporters in the priming control performed an identical behavior to those in the *credentials* condition (i.e., circling Obama), but only in the *credentials* condition would this behavior indicate endorsement of a Black candidate.

After some filler items, all participants completed the police-hiring task. Finally, participants provided demographics, and indicated whether they were more likely to vote for Obama or McCain (forced choice). We predicted that participants would express a greater preference for Whites in the *credentials* condition than in the two control conditions.

Results and discussion

We excluded five participants in the *credentials* condition for not choosing Obama, and two in the *political expression* condition for not choosing Kerry. We also excluded ten participants who did not select Obama in the demographics section, leaving 62 participants.

Overall, participants' responses to the police-hiring task differed marginally by condition, $F(2, 59) = 2.87, p = .065, \eta^2 = .09$. Planned orthogonal contrasts confirmed our predictions that while responses in the *political expression* control ($M = -.05, SD = .84$)

and the priming control ($M = -.15, SD = 1.09$) did not differ significantly from each other, $F(1, 59) = .13, ns$, participants in the *credentials* condition ($M = .50, SD = .83$) favored Whites for the job significantly more than participants in the two control conditions did, $F(1, 59) = 5.65, p = .02$.

The results of Study 2 replicated those of Study 1 and ruled out two alternative explanations. Neither expressing support for a Democrat who is not Black (Kerry), nor viewing and circling a picture of Obama without indicating support for him, was sufficient to elicit subsequent preference for a White applicant. Only when participants expressed their endorsement of the African–American presidential candidate did they contend that the job was better suited for Whites than for Blacks.

Study 3

If endorsing Obama licenses favoring Whites, then it should have an especially strong effect on individuals whose preexisting attitudes dispose them towards White favoritism, and who should thus be most inhibited in the absence of credentials. We tested this prediction in Study 3 by including a standard measure of prejudice: the Modern Racism Scale (MRS; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). We predicted that participants with higher MRS scores would be more likely to take advantage of credentials to favor Whites.

To increase the generalizability of our claims, Study 3 used a new dependent measure akin to the local propositions on ballots in many states. Participants decided how to divide money between an organization representing a mostly Black neighborhood and one representing a mostly White neighborhood. Participants also received information that they might use to justify favoring the White organization (i.e., that the Black organization had received funding from another source), but that left ambiguous how much funding the White organization deserved. Reasoning that credentials would increase participants' comfort making use of this potential justification, we predicted that endorsing Obama would increase allocations to the White organization, especially among participants high in modern racism.

Method

Participants

In August 2008, we recruited 71 participants (46 females and 25 males; mean age = 22.77 years, $SD = 7.71$; 38% White, 32% Asian–American, 8% African–American, 10% other races, and 11% multiracial; 77% undergraduate, 11% graduate student, and 11% non-student) from a psychology department subject pool. Participants described themselves as likely voters ($M = 5.59, SD = 2.17$); fifty-five were already registered to vote.

Procedure

Participants received \$10 to complete a packet of unrelated surveys at one of four sessions. They were randomly assigned to either the *credentials* (Obama vs. McCain) or the *political expression* control (Kerry vs. Bush) condition used in Study 2. They then read the following passage:

Imagine that your local government has a budget surplus, \$100,000 of which is to be used to fund private organizations that combat poverty. Members of your community are asked to vote on how much of the funds to allocate to each of two neighborhood organizations. These two neighborhood organizations serve areas with comparably high crime, unemployment, and poverty rates. The Bryant Street Organization serves a primarily White neighborhood, while The Maple Street Association serves a primarily African–American neighborhood.

¹ We did not measure race in this study.

The Maple Street Association recently received a large [or “\$200,000”]² cash gift from a private donor. Given that information about these two groups, how would YOU vote to allocate the government’s surplus funds (\$100,000)?

Response options on the 11-point response scale ranged from *everything to the Black group to everything to the White group*, with a midpoint labeled *equal amount to each group*, and each intermediate point labeled with a corresponding monetary division (e.g., *\$10,000 to the White group, \$90,000 to the Black group*).

After a filler task, participants completed the MRS (sample item: “Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights”), indicated for whom they would vote in the 2008 election, and provided demographics.

Results

Exclusions

We excluded two participants who were not US citizens, 14 who did not endorse the Democrat (i.e., Obama or Kerry) or who did not choose Obama over McCain at the end, and one whose MRS score was 3.41 SDs above the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, recommend a cut point for outliers of $z = 3.29$, i.e., $p < .001$), leaving 55 participants.

Preliminary analyses

We submitted MRS scores and funding allocations to a condition (2) by session (4) factorial ANOVA. No effect was significant for MRS (all F s < 2.2), so we used MRS as a moderator. Allocations unexpectedly differed by session, $F(3,47) = 3.80$, $p = .02$ (all other F s $< .4$), so we used session as a blocking factor.

Allocation of funds

We standardized MRS scores, dummy-coded the credentials condition as 1 and the political expression condition as 0, and computed an interaction term by multiplying the two. We then tested a regression equation predicting allocation with condition, MRS, their interaction, and three effect codes for session. Neither condition, $t(48) = .57$, *ns*, nor MRS, $t(48) = -1.67$, *ns*, was a significant predictor, but the hypothesized interaction between the two was significant, $t(48) = 2.92$, $p = .005$, $\beta = .62$, partial $f^2 = .18$.

To interpret this interaction, we tested simple slopes at various levels of the moderator (Jaccard, Wan, & Turrisi, 1990). At 1 SD above the MRS mean, we replicated the moral credentials effect: the White organization received \$16,478 more (and the Black organization received \$16,478 less) in the credentials condition than in the control condition, $t(48) = 2.48$, $p = .02$. As predicted, this effect was weaker at the MRS mean: credentials increased the White organization’s allocation by \$2,555, $t(48) = .57$, *ns*. Surprisingly, at 1 SD below the MRS mean, credentials increased the Black organization’s allocation by \$11,368, $t(48) = -1.99$, $p = .07$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 support our contention that the moral credentials afforded by an Obama vote can increase people’s comfort favoring Whites. Endorsing Obama increased the proportion of funds allocated to Whites at the expense of Blacks, but only for those Obama supporters with higher levels of preexisting prejudice (as measured by the MRS). Interestingly, our new dependent measure did not yield a main effect of credentials, apparently because

the behavior of high-MRS participants was offset by the tendency of low-MRS participants to increase allocations to the Black group after endorsing Obama. Additional research is needed to establish the reliability of this marginal effect for low-MRS participants, but this result raises the possibility that voting for Obama can increase the expression of egalitarian values for those whose attitudes dispose them less towards White favoritism. By increasing high-MRS participants’ allocations to Whites while increasing low-MRS participants’ allocations to Blacks, endorsing Obama seems to have enabled both groups of participants to act more consistently with their racial attitudes.

General discussion

Our three studies demonstrated that expressing support for an African–American candidate licenses people to favor Whites at the expense of Blacks. In Study 1, Obama supporters were more willing to say that a job was better suited for Whites than for Blacks after they had expressed support for Obama. Study 2 replicated this effect, and showed that just seeing Obama or endorsing a White Democratic presidential candidate did not yield similar results. Study 3 showed that after endorsing Obama, only participants who were higher in modern racism increased the proportion of money they allocated to a White organization at the expense of a Black organization. Together, these findings suggest that endorsing Obama may not change attitudes, but rather establishes moral credentials and increases comfort expressing preferences that favor Whites.

Our experimental tasks left ambiguous the extent to which these preferences represented prejudice. Because we theorize that moral credentials increase confidence that subsequent ambiguous behavior will appear non-prejudiced, we created situations that permitted non-prejudiced interpretations of favoring Whites (e.g., racial tensions on the police force might make a Black officer uncomfortable in Studies 1 and 2; a prior donation to the Black organization might make the White organization more deserving in Study 3). We suspect that credentials especially license behaviors that afford such non-prejudiced interpretations, and perhaps do not license blatantly racist behaviors. Indeed, credentials may often provide safety for well-intentioned individuals to express ambiguous preferences – but the fact that high-racism participants, more than others, used credentials to favor Whites in Study 3 suggests that credentials can also provide cover for less savory motives.

Unlike many experimental simulations, our paper-and-pencil surveys are remarkably similar to the real-world situation they model. On November 4th, 2008, millions of Americans cast their ballots for Barack Obama, and then selected among candidates, some African–American, for local offices (including law-enforcement jobs, as in Studies 1 and 2) and voted for propositions related to racial issues (as in Study 3). Our findings raise the possibility that the opportunity to vote for an African–American for President could have reduced some voters’ concerns about appearing prejudiced, thereby ironically increasing the likelihood that they would favor Whites in subsequent decisions. At the same time, to the extent that fears of appearing prejudiced can prevent the open discussion of race-related topics (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; cf. Plant & Butz, 2008), expressing support for Obama might also make people more comfortable acknowledging and addressing issues surrounding race, as Obama himself (2008) has urged Americans to do.

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² This variation did not affect allocations, nor did it interact with the manipulation, so it is not discussed further.

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