

Fear of Racial Favoritism and Opposition to Black Candidates

Keywords: Barack Obama, biracial elections, group conflict, stereotypes, resentment

Despite the re-election of America's first African-American president, most white Americans continue to withhold their support from black candidates. According to the conventional wisdom, the primary explanation for white opposition is *prejudice*—that is, negative feelings, stereotypes, and resentment toward blacks. On the one hand, numerous studies have indeed found that whites with greater racial prejudice were less likely to support Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections (e.g., Pasek et al. 2009; Pasek et al. 2014; Piston 2010). Yet in prior studies of biracial elections, the evidence that prejudice reduced support for black candidates is decidedly mixed (Citrin et al. 1990; Knuckley and Orey 2000; Sears et al. 1997). These inconsistent findings suggest that prejudice alone cannot explain why whites oppose black political leadership.

In this proposal, I offer an alternative theory: that many whites perceive black political leaders as a threat to white group interests. Specifically, I argue that a large number of whites fear racial favoritism; they expect black elected officials to favor blacks over whites in government policymaking. The notion that whites may view black political leadership as threatening is not new (e.g., Hajnal 2007), nor is the underlying theory of group conflict, which has long emphasized perceived threats to group interests as a driving force of discrimination (e.g., Esses et al. 2010; Bobo and Tuan 2006). But to-date we have lacked survey measures of fear of racial favoritism, and as a result the available evidence that white racial fears are an obstacle to black candidates remains anecdotal. To overcome this limitation, I offer new survey measures, and then demonstrate their considerable impact on support for Obama during the

2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 elections, controlling for racial stereotypes and racial resentment, two of the most widely used indicators of racial prejudice currently included on the ANES.

Data and Measures

The data I employ come from two sources. The first is an eight-wave nationally representative panel survey spanning the 2008 and 2012 elections. The first five waves were collected as part of the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), fielded between fall 2007 and winter 2009. Wave 1 began with approximately 20,000 respondents, with fresh samples added to each subsequent wave. For wave 6, fielded in 2010, I reinterviewed a random sub-set of 3,263 non-Hispanic whites from the 2008 NAES. And for waves 7 and 8, fielded immediately before and after the 2012 election, I recontacted a representative sub-sample of 2,606 respondents from the 2008 NAES. All waves were fielded over the Internet by GfK (formerly Knowledge Networks), which recruits nationally representative samples of adults using address-based sampling, and supplies free Internet access to those who need it. For this analysis, I rely on non-Hispanic white respondents in waves 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.¹²

The second data set I employ is the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES was fielded over the Internet by YouGov, which uses matched random sampling methodology to produce samples that are representative of the national U.S. adult population on key Census characteristics (for more information and evidence of validity, see Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). The 2014 CCES included a pre-election and post-election

¹ The dates of each wave are: wave 1: Oct. 2, 2007—Jan. 1, 2008; wave 2: Jan. 1—March 31, 2008; wave 3: April 2—Aug. 29, 2008; wave 4: Aug. 29—Nov. 4, 2008; wave 5: Nov. 5, 2008—Jan. 31, 2009; wave 6: Sept. 21, 2010—Oct. 6, 2010; wave 7: Oct. 20—Oct. 29, 2012; and wave 8: Nov. 14, 2012—Jan. 29, 2013.

² Consistent with prior studies of GfK samples (Chang and Krosnick 2009), the panel compares favorably with census data, though as with national surveys more generally, younger and lower-educated individuals were somewhat underrepresented. Panel attrition did not seriously undermine the representativeness of the sample. Nor did I uncover any evidence that panel conditioning influenced responses to the racial attitude questions.

wave. This analysis uses 1,590 non-Hispanic whites interviewed on the post-election wave fielded between November 5 and December 6, 2014.

To measure fear of racial favoritism, I created items assessing *perceptions* of racial favoritism and *attitudes* about racial favoritism. The four items tapping perceptions of racial favoritism ask white respondents whether they agree or disagree that black elected officials are more likely to favor blacks over whites in various aspects of government decision-making; the follow-up item tapping attitudes about racial favoritism asks whether such favoritism is good or bad. Table 1 shows the full question wording and response frequencies from wave 8 of the 2007-2013 panel study. As expected, a majority of whites perceived racial favoritism on three of the four perception items and evaluated favoritism negatively. For the analyses of the panel, I averaged responses to the four perception items to create a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha for waves 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are .94, .92, .93, .94, and .94). Due to space constraints, the CCES included only the first three perception items, though they still combined to produce a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = .94). Consistent with perceptions and attitudes about racial favoritism representing distinct concepts, the Pearson's correlations between them were close to zero (between -.004 and .08 on the panel survey and .17 on the CCES); moreover, across numerous analyses, I find little evidence of a significant interaction.

Table 1. White Americans' Perceptions and Attitudes about Racial Favoritism

Perceptions of Racial Favoritism

Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Black elected officials are more likely to . . .

1. Favor blacks for government jobs over white applicants.	
Strongly agree	16.0%
Somewhat agree	38.5%
Somewhat disagree	30.7%
Strongly disagree	14.8%
2. Support government spending that favors blacks.	
Strongly agree	18.1%
Somewhat agree	42.4%
Somewhat disagree	26.0%
Strongly disagree	13.5%
3. Give special favors to the black community.	
Strongly agree	16.0%
Somewhat agree	37.7%
Somewhat disagree	29.2%
Strongly disagree	17.1%
4. Support policies that could cost whites jobs.	
Strongly agree	9.5%
Somewhat agree	26.7%
Somewhat disagree	43.0%
Strongly disagree	20.8%

Attitudes about Racial Favoritism

Thinking about the statements you just read, would it be good or bad if black elected officials favored blacks?

Very good	1.4%
Somewhat good	17.7%
Somewhat bad	48.3%
Very bad	32.6%

Note: Includes non-Hispanic whites from wave 8 (N = 1,627). Excludes those who declined to answer—about 4% of the sample.

To measure racial prejudice, I rely on the standard indicators of racial stereotypes and racial resentment included on the American National Election Studies. The stereotype items appeared on the 2007-2013 panel study, starting in the latter part of wave 3. With six items,

whites were asked to rate both whites and blacks on scales ranging from hardworking to lazy, intelligent to unintelligent, and trustworthy to untrustworthy. For each dimension, I subtracted ratings of blacks from ratings of whites and averaged the difference scores (Cronbach's alphas for waves 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are .91, .90, .92, .91, and .93). On the CCES, I included three standard racial resentment questions, which also combined to form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = .84).³ In addition to measures of racial attitudes, the following analyses also include the standard predictors of Obama support, including economic perceptions, party identification, political ideology, education, age, income, gender, and residence in the South. All of the independent variables were coded to range from 0 to 1.

Effects of Fear of Racial Favoritism on Support for Obama

The first set of analyses examines the impact of white fear of racial favoritism on Obama favorability on five waves of the 2007-2013 panel survey. Obama favorability was measured with the standard 0-100 feeling thermometer. Each column in Table 2 represents a single OLS regression model predicting Obama favorability from perceptions of racial favoritism, attitudes about racial favoritism, racial stereotypes, and the set of control variables (to conserve space, only the coefficients for the race variables are shown). In each of the five waves, perceptions of racial favoritism had a large and significant impact: those who perceived a great deal of racial favoritism rated Obama between 14 and 25 points lower than those who perceived little favoritism. Attitudes about racial favoritism also had a sizeable impact on four of the five

³ Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with three statements: 1) The Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. 2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class. (reverse coded) 3) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder, they could be as well off as whites.

waves, with those who evaluated racial favoritism very negatively rating Obama between 4 and 16 points lower than those who evaluated racial favoritism very positively.⁴

Table 2. NAES 2008-2013: Fear of Racial Favoritism Predicts Obama Favorability, Controlling for Racial Stereotypes (OLS)

	Wave 3 Summer 2008	Wave 5 Fall 2008/ Winter 2009	Wave 6 Fall 2010	Wave 7 Fall 2012	Wave 8 Fall 2012/ Winter 2013
Perceptions of Racial Favoritism	-14.18*** (1.41)	-24.71*** (.80)	-15.04*** (1.37)	-14.62*** (1.81)	-17.63*** (1.83)
Attitudes about Racial Favoritism	-15.67*** (1.71)	-15.08*** (.79)	-14.51*** (1.45)	-3.78 (2.03)	-10.64*** (2.08)
Racial Stereotypes	-30.69*** (4.58)	-19.97*** (2.55)	-11.23** (4.30)	-13.40* (5.72)	-15.28* (5.92)
Constant	12.86** (4.84)	34.07*** (2.44)	46.22*** (4.01)	54.70*** (6.19)	62.58*** (6.72)
Sample Size	3,524	13,860	3,110	1,685	1,606
Adj. R ²	.49	.55	.66	.70	.68

Note. Presents unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Favorability ranges from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating more positive feelings toward Obama. Each model includes controls for perceptions of family finances, perceptions of the national economy, party identification, ideology, education, income, age, gender, and region (South). All of the independent variables range from 0 to 1. ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Fear of racial favoritism influenced whites' feelings toward Obama, but did this translate to a lower likelihood of voting for him? To answer this question, I executed logistic regression models among whites on waves 3, 5, 7, and 8, which were fielded immediately before and after the 2008 and 2012 elections. Each of these waves included measures of self-reported vote intention/choice (where 1 equals a vote for Obama and 0 equals a vote for his Republican opponent). As shown in Table 3, perceptions of racial favoritism produced significant negative

⁴ These findings are not due to projection, or, put another way, reverse causality. In additional analyses not shown, I replicated the cross-sectional models predicting Obama favorability using lagged measures of the independent variables. In all cases, the effects of perceptions and attitudes about racial favoritism remained large and significant.

effects on Obama vote choice on all four waves, and attitudes about racial favoritism produced significant effects on waves 3 and 5.

Table 3. NAES 2008-2013: Fear of Racial Favoritism Predicts Obama Vote Choice, Controlling for Racial Stereotypes

	Wave 3 Summer 2008	Wave 5 Fall 2008/ Winter 2009	Wave 7 Fall 2012	Wave 8 Fall 2012/ Winter 2013
Perceptions of Racial Favoritism	-1.53*** (.23)	-2.50*** (.15)	-2.36*** (.49)	-1.72*** (.47)
Attitudes about Racial Favoritism	-1.48*** (.28)	-1.41*** (.15)	.18 (.55)	-.20 (.49)
Racial Stereotypes	-1.95* (.81)	-2.65*** (.52)	-.78 (1.47)	-2.99# (1.64)
Constant	-5.47*** (.81)	-4.68*** (.48)	.94 (1.65)	-.02 (1.73)
Sample Size	3,014	12,062	1,458	1,287
Nagelkerke R ²	.73	.77	.86	.84

Note. Presents unstandardized logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Vote choice ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 equals support for Obama and 0 equals support for his Republican opponent. Includes controls for perceptions of family finances, perceptions of the national economy, party identification, ideology, education, income, age, gender, and region (South). All of the independent variables range from 0 to 1. ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

To provide substantive meaning to the results in Table 3, I calculated the predicted probability of a vote for Obama at different levels of the favoritism variables, while holding all others predictors at their means. So, for the 2008 election (wave 5), whites who perceived a great deal of racial favoritism (1) had a .19 probability of voting for Obama, while whites who perceived very little racial favoritism (0) had a .74 probability of voting for Obama. Similarly, whites who evaluated racial favoritism as very bad had a .36 probability for voting for Obama, while whites who evaluated racial favoritism as very good had a .69 probability of voting for Obama. For the 2012 election (wave 8), the probability of voting for Obama at the high and low

ends of perceptions of racial favoritism were .19 and .57, while attitudes about racial favoritism did not have a significant impact.

To assess the robustness of the findings from 2007-2013 panel, I now turn to the 2014 CCES. Table 4 shows an OLS regression model predicting Obama favorability using the same predictors employed in the previous analyses, but here controlling for racial resentment rather than racial stereotypes. As shown in Table 4, both perceptions of racial favoritism and attitudes about racial favoritism had significant negative effects on whites' favorability toward Obama, controlling for racial resentment. Whites who perceived a great deal of racial favoritism rated Obama about 12 points lower on the 99-point feeling thermometer than whites who perceived little favoritism. And whites who evaluated racial favoritism negatively rated Obama 8 points lower than whites who evaluated racial favoritism positively. In sum, fear of racial favoritism has consistently influenced support for Obama from the early stages of his 2008 campaign through the 2014 midterm elections.

Table 4. CCES 2014: Fear of Racial Favoritism Predicts Obama Favorability, Controlling for Racial Resentment (OLS)

Perceptions of Racial Favoritism	-12.38*** (2.16)
Attitudes about Racial Favoritism	-7.94** (2.33)
Racial Resentment	-17.54*** (2.78)
Sample Size	1,318
Adj. R ²	.68

Note. Presents unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Favorability ranges from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating more positive feelings toward Obama. All independent variables range from 0 to 1. Includes controls for perceptions of family finances, perceptions of the national economy, party identification, ideology, education, income, age, gender, and region (South). ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Discussion

Research to-date examining white opposition to black political leadership has focused almost exclusively on the role of racial prejudice, thus neglecting other theoretical approaches. In this proposal, I draw on group conflict theory to suggest measurement of a new concept: fear of racial favoritism. Using my new survey items, I first show that a majority of white Americans expects black elected officials to favor blacks over whites and evaluates racial favoritism negatively. More importantly, I present a multitude of analyses demonstrating that white fear of racial favoritism matters *above and beyond* the effects of racial prejudice as captured by two of the most widely used measures included on the American National Election Studies. Fear of racial favoritism substantially reduced support for Obama during all four election cycles examined (2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014). Because these findings strongly suggest that fear of racial favoritism is a key driver of white opposition to black political leadership, I propose including the five new survey items on the ANES pilot study and time-series surveys.

References

- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Douglas Rivers. 2013. Cooperative Survey Research. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 307-29.
- Bobo, Lawrence D., and Mia Tuan. 2006. *Prejudice in Politics: Group Position, Public Opinion, and the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Dispute*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chang, L., & Krosnick, J. A. 2009. National surveys via RDD telephone interviewing vs. the Internet: Comparing sample representativeness and response quality. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73, 641-678.
- Citrin, Jack, Donald P. Green, and David O. Sears. 1990. White Reactions to Black Candidates:

- When Does Race Matter? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54, 74-96.
- Esses, Victoria M., Lynne M. Jackson, and Caroline Bennett-AbuAyyash. 2010. Intergroup Competition. In *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination* (pp. 225-240), eds. John F. Dovidio, Miles Hewstone, Peter Glick, and Victoria M. Esses. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hajnal, Zoltan H. 2007. *Changing White Attitudes toward Black Political Leadership*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University of Press.
- Knuckley, Jonathan, and Byron D. Orey. 2000. Symbolic Racism in the 1995 Louisiana Gubernatorial Election. *Social Science Quarterly*, 81, 1027-1035.
- Pasek, Josh, Alex Tahk, Yphtach Lelkes, Jon A. Krosnick, B. Keith Payne, and Tevor Tompson. 2009. Determinants of Turnout and Candidate Choice in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: Illuminating the Impact of Racial Prejudice and Other Considerations. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73, 943-994.
- Pasek, Josh, Tobias H. Stark, Jon A. Krosnick, Trevor Tompson, and B. Keith Payne. 2014. "Attitudes toward Blacks in the Obama Era: Changing Distributions and Impacts on Job Approval and Electoral Choice, 2008-2012." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 78, 276-302.
- Piston, Spencer. 2010. How Explicit Racial Prejudice Hurt Obama in the 2008 Election. *Political Behavior*, 32, 431-451.
- Sears, David O., Colette Van Laar, Mary Carrillo, and Rick Kosterman. 1997. Is It Really Racism?: The Origins of White Americans' Opposition to Race-Targeted Policies. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 61, 16-53.