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FlashReports

The ironic consequences of Obama's election: Decreased support for social justice

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ABSTRACT

Do Americans think that, because of Barack Obama's election, affirmative action and other policies that address racial injustice are no longer necessary? In this study, we examined this question by assessing participants' perceptions of racial progress and support for remedying racial injustice both prior to and after Barack Obama's presidential victory. Following the election, participants increased their perception that racism is less of a problem in the US today than in times past. They also expressed less support for policies designed to address racial inequality. Given the continued prevalence of racial disparities in virtually all aspects of American society, these results raise important implications for the status of policies aimed at eliminating racial injustice.

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"If Obama becomes the president, every remaining, powerfully felt black grievance and every still deeply etched injustice will be cast out of the realm of polite discourse. . . A black president means that America no longer has any race problem to talk about!" (Bobo, 2008, p. 1)

Is sociologist Lawrence Bobo right? Do Americans now think that, because of Barack Obama's election, affirmative action and other policies that address racial injustices are no longer necessary? One could just as plausibly argue that Obama's victory, by validating affirmative action policies from which Obama himself says he benefitted (Swarns, 2008), would usher in a new era of support for policies that create opportunities for other African Americans to achieve similar success in the United States.

There are several theoretical reasons why Obama's election might result in decreased support for policies that address racial injustice. First, Obama's victory provides a salient example of racial progress. This ease with which racial progress comes to mind could lead to the generalization that racism is dissipating and that all Blacks are prospering (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Second, Obama's victory may reinforce the sentiment that America is a country where individuals, regardless of their life circumstances, create their own destiny by working hard (Katz & Hass, 1988) rather than by being beneficiaries of assistance programs such as affirmative action (Steele, 1990). This kind of rigid belief in the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) leaves its proponents blind to prejudice and discrimination (Major et al., 2002). Third, Obama's victory might cause Americans to focus on how far we have come, with respect

to racial progress, as opposed to how far we have left to go (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006). Finally, Americans who voted for Obama may use that action to convince themselves that they are egalitarian, and this bolstering of their egalitarian self-image could provide them with sufficient moral credentials to subsequently withdraw their support from policies that benefit minorities (Monin & Miller, 2001). In sum, by increasing perceptions of racial progress and the belief that America is a meritocracy where individual effort is rewarded, Obama's election could produce ironic consequences in the form of decreased support for policies aimed at mitigating racial injustice. If this is correct, it raises important implications for social justice as the US has pervasive racial disparities in all aspects of society, including education, poverty, health, incarceration, and access to economic resources (Curry, Malone, & Jones, 2006).

In this study, we longitudinally examined perceptions of racial progress, endorsement of the PWE, perceptions of how much further the US needs to go to achieve racial equality, and support for policies aimed at remedying racial injustice both *prior to* and *after* Obama's victory. We hypothesized that following Obama's victory, participants would perceive more racial progress, endorse the PWE more strongly, express a decreased need for further efforts to achieve racial equality, and decrease their support for policies aimed at remedying discrimination.

Methods

Seventy-four University of Washington undergraduates (68% female; $M_{age} = 18.89$ years, $SD = 1.12$) participated in pre and post-election study sessions for course credit. Eight additional participants who did not complete post-election measures and three par-

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ticipants who were outliers ($>3SDs$ from the group mean) were excluded from analyses. Participants self-identified as White (52.7%), Asian American (28.4%), Latino American (4.1%), Native American (2.7%), and multi-racial/other (12.2%). Participants completed two identical anonymous online surveys; once within the 10 days prior to the election outcome and then again during the week following the election. Unless otherwise noted, all measures were rated on scales with endpoints of 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) and 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

Racial progress

Racial progress was measured with three items: Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, great progress has been made toward racial equality in the United States; There has been little improvement in conditions for racial minorities in the US since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (reversed); The 2008 presidential election shows that we have made strides toward racial equality ($\alpha_{\text{pre-election}} = 0.64$, $\alpha_{\text{post-election}} = 0.69$).

PWE

PWE was assessed with four items: If people work hard, they almost always get what they want; Most people who don't get ahead should not blame the system; they really have only themselves to blame; In America, getting ahead doesn't always depend on hard work (reverse); Even if people work hard, they don't always get ahead (reverse). These items were adapted from Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, and Federico (1998) ($\alpha_{\text{pre-election}} = 0.78$, $\alpha_{\text{post-election}} = 0.79$).

Need for future racial progress

Need for future racial progress was assessed with three items: The United States has further to go in order to achieve racial equality; There is little need for further efforts to achieve racial equality (reversed); When I think about racial progress, I think about how much improvement the US needs to make ($\alpha_{\text{pre-election}} = 0.73$, $\alpha_{\text{post-election}} = 0.72$).

Support for policies that address racial inequality

Support for policies that address racial inequality comprised four items: Affirmative action programs are still needed today; Desegregation programs that ensure diversity in public schools are still necessary today; Businesses should increase their efforts to promote diversity in the workplace; Efforts should be made to promote equal access to healthcare for minorities ($\alpha_{\text{pre-election}} = 0.73$, $\alpha_{\text{post-election}} = 0.79$).

Candidate preference

Participants indicated which candidate they were supporting (pre-election) and supported (post-election) in the 2008 Presidential Election. Participants reported supporting Obama (81.7%), McCain (16.9%), and undecided/other (1.5%) at both times 1 and 2.

Results

Racial progress

Consistent with predictions, a paired *t*-test indicated that perceptions that the United States had made great strides toward racial equality increased following Obama's election (see Fig. 1), *t*

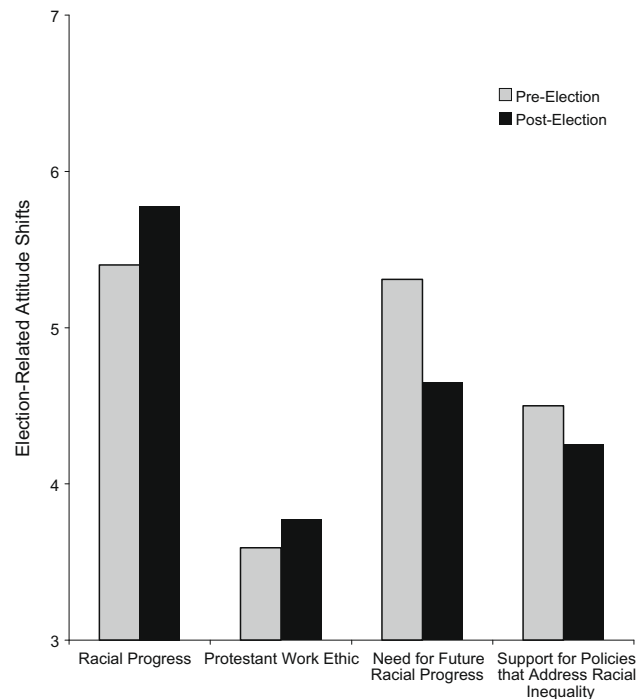


Fig. 1. Election-related attitude shifts.

(70) = -4.12 , $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.46$; pre-election $M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.83$; post-election $M = 5.78$, $SD = 0.77$.

PWE

Also supporting hypotheses, Obama's election was associated with increased endorsement of the PWE, suggesting that the election led to greater perceptions that anyone, regardless of life circumstances, can achieve success in the US through hard work, *t* (70) = -2.03 , $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.16$; pre-election $M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.17$; post-election $M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.07$ (see Fig. 1).

Need for future racial progress

Following Obama's election, participants showed the anticipated decrease in their perceptions of how much further the US needs to go to achieve racial equality (See Fig. 1), *t* (70) = 5.33 , $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.61$; pre-election $M = 5.31$, $SD = 0.99$; post-election $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.18$.

Support for policies that address racial inequality

As can be seen in Fig. 1, after Obama's election, participants expressed less support for policies that address racial inequality than they did prior to the election, *t* (70) = 2.67 , $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.22$; pre-election $M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.10$; post-election $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.20$.

Candidate preference

A natural question that emerges from these data is whether the effects described above similarly characterize participants who voted for Obama and McCain. Although our sample provides insufficient power for formal statistical analyses examining this question (there were just 12 McCain supporters), Table 1 provides the percentages of Obama and McCain voters who displayed the effects described above. As can be seen in the table, the patterns are quite similar for both groups of voters. The only exception was that Obama supporters were more likely to increase their endorsement of

Table 1
Percentages of Obama and McCain supporters showing the predicted effects.

Dependent measure	% Increased	% Unchanged	% Decreased
<i>Racial progress</i>			
Obama supporters	63.8% (37)	20.7% (12)	15.5% (9)
McCain supporters	58.3% (7)	25.0% (3)	16.7% (2)
<i>Protestant work ethic</i>			
Obama supporters	55.2% (32)	19.0% (11)	25.9% (15)
McCain supporters	41.7% (5)	16.7% (2)	41.7% (5)
<i>Need for future racial progress</i>			
Obama supporters	10.3% (6)	19.0% (11)	70.7% (41)
McCain supporters	25% (3)	0% (0)	75.0% (9)
<i>Support for policies that address racial inequality</i>			
Obama supporters	29.3% (17)	8.6% (5)	62.1% (36)
McCain supporters	16.7% (2)	16.7% (2)	66.7% (8)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are frequencies.

the PWE following the election than McCain supporters. The small sample of McCain supporters unfortunately precludes drawing strong conclusions about this divergent pattern.

Intercorrelations between variables

We next examined whether increases in racial progress and PWE were associated with decreases in the need for future racial progress and policies that address racial inequality. We computed change scores by subtracting participants' pre-election scores from their post-election scores for each measure. Higher scores indicate increased endorsement of each measure following the election. As can be seen in Table 2, increases in perceptions of racial progress and PWE were marginally associated with perceiving less need for future racial progress following the election than prior to it. Counter to expectations, increases in perceptions of racial progress and PWE were unrelated to changes in support for policies that address racial inequality.

Discussion

The results of this longitudinal study were consistent with the notion that Obama's victory may represent a setback for remedying racial injustice. After Obama's election, participants concluded that racism was less of a problem and that anyone can achieve success through effort and perseverance. Of importance, after the election, participants perceived that there was less to be done in the service of achieving racial equality and they expressed less support for policies that address injustice such as affirmative action, school desegregation, and diversity policies. These findings are disconcerting given that there are pervasive racial disparities in virtually all aspects of American society (Curry et al., 2006). For example, Black men over the age of 18 are seven times as likely to be incarcerated as White men of the same age range, Black families are nearly three times as likely to live below the poverty line as White families, and, compared to Whites, Blacks are 30% more likely to die from both heart disease and cancer (Curry et al., 2006; The

Table 2
Intercorrelations between election-related changes in the variables.

	1	2	3	4
1. Change in racial progress		0.19	−0.20 [#]	0.13
2. Change in PWE			−0.21 [#]	0.00
3. Change in need for future racial progress				0.34 [*]
4. Change in support for policies that address racial inequality				

^{*} $p < 0.01$.

[#] $p < 0.10$.

Pew Center of the States, 2008; Williams & Jackson, 2005). If Americans assume that racism is less of a problem now that they have elected a Black president, their misperception could make it difficult to garner resources and support for efforts that are so desperately needed to address these racial disparities.

Americans may also use Obama's victory as a justification for further legitimizing the current status hierarchy and for blaming Black Americans for their disadvantaged position in society (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003). These justifications may result in the failure to examine structural aspects of society that lead to profound disadvantages for minorities (e.g., failing schools in predominately minority neighborhoods).

Although changes in perceptions of racial progress and PWE were marginally correlated with changes in the need for future progress, it was surprising that neither changes in racial progress perceptions nor PWE predicted changes in policies that address racial inequality. It is possible that changes in progress and PWE might have had stronger effects on policy attitudes if we had assessed policy related decisions as they apply to a single minority individual rather than minorities in general (e.g., should a company's affirmative action policy be used in hiring a specific minority candidate?). As it is easier to justify negative treatment toward a single minority individual relative to a larger minority group (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004), these salient case-by-case situations may be those that are more strongly predicted by perceptions of racial progress and PWE. Alternatively, our PWE measure was general and reflected attitudes about individual effort and success, rather than beliefs about whether hard work by groups in America, such as minority groups, is rewarded. A measure that was more specifically focused on beliefs about whether minorities experience contingencies between effort and outcomes may have been a stronger predictor of policy attitudes. It is also possible that people varied systematically in the pathways that led them to express less support for policies aimed at remedying racial injustice. More nuanced approaches that identify moderators of adopting a given pathway could further elucidate the processes underlying the effect.

One limitation of the current research was its use of a predominantly Obama-supporting west coast college student sample. Although our sample was not representative of the United States as a whole, the political liberals sampled in this research are perhaps those least likely to show the effects we observed as they are less likely than political conservatives to engage in system justifying behaviors such as the denial of injustice (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Further, course curricula and university mission statements make education about injustice, racial disparities, and diversity prominent in the university environment (Lopez, 2004). As such, emerging adults in this environment should be particularly well-educated about the disparities facing minorities in the United States. This race socializing aspect of the university environment may also explain why both Obama and McCain supporters responded similarly across the measures. Thus, obtaining our effects despite our sample speaks to the potential power of these effects. Indeed, our results are consistent with telephone survey data with nationally representative US samples showing that prior to the election (January 2008), 63% of Americans reported that racial discrimination against Blacks was a serious or very serious problem (CNN, 2008a). In the week after the November 4th 2008 election, only 54% of respondents in another independent sample agreed with this sentiment (CNN, 2008b).

In conclusion, the current study provides evidence that Barack Obama's presidential victory may have ironic and unintended consequences for remedying racial injustice in the United States. Specifically, construing President Barack Obama's victory as an achievement in race relations may hinder efforts to eliminate the racial disparities that continue to plague and divide the United States.

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