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# The power of post-racial: an exploration of post-racial rhetoric's influence on candidate evaluations

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## ABSTRACT

While there has been much discussion among scholars and pundits about whether American society has become post-racial since 2008, the conversation has yet to delve into how politicians who call for citizens to move past racial divisions are evaluated relative to those who use other kinds of racial language. We offer a theoretical framework that explains how and why post-racial language is an effective rhetorical tool for any politician, and establish how it compares to previously researched forms of political language about race. Using an experimental test, we establish that post-racial language influences candidate evaluations in meaningful ways that differ from racial language styles that emphasize compassion or derision towards black people, and find that calling for society to move beyond race leads to higher candidate evaluations. We discuss the implications of these findings as they relate to the ongoing discussion about political stereotypes and racial discussions.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Racial politics; elections; political behavior; campaigns; candidate; evaluations; political rhetoric

Despite the growing body of literature within political science on whether or not America has become a post-racial society (Gillespie 2010; Piston 2010; Tesler and Sears 2010), there has been minimal investigation into the leverage political figures gain by using post-racial language, or rhetoric that calls for society to move beyond racial divisions. While various scholars have looked into the ways in which white individuals respond to language about the issue of race, finding that language about black people that is compassionate or derogatory leads to variation in white attitudes (Mendelberg 2001; Stephens 2013), little is known about how post-racial rhetoric,<sup>1</sup> or rhetoric that calls for society to move beyond race, affects white attitudes. The primary question of this research is - What influence does post-racial rhetoric have on white candidate evaluations? We also engage, the extent to which this brand of language more or less effective based on the race and/or party of the candidate who employs it? Finally, we seek to explore how the outcomes of this particular rhetorical tactic compare to those found in extant literature (i.e., de-racialized, racially inflammatory, and racially compassionate).

We reach these goals using an experimental test similar to that of Stephens (2013) where we vary the kinds of racial language, the race, and party of the candidate to

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investigate the influence and effect of statements that call for us to “move beyond race” have on candidate evaluations.<sup>2</sup> We find that regardless of the candidate’s partisan affiliation or race, the use of post-racial language leads to consistently positive affective evaluations from white voters. We conclude with a discussion of the power of post-racial language and the implications that this research has for our understanding of racial dialogues within the contemporary political space.

Building on the works of (Bonilla-Silva 2017 and Sherrow Pinder (2015), we contend that *post-racial language* gives politicians, regardless of their race or partisanship, the ability to speak on racial issues in an explicit way without being perceived as being in favor of or against blacks.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we test to see if, as put forth in contemporary literature, the partisanship of the candidate matters in how the racialized language impacts the favorability of the political candidate (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Stephens 2013).

### Racial priming and racial signaling theory

There has been much debate about Mendelberg’s (2001) findings that whites’ response to racialized rhetoric tends to be informed by the “norm of equality.”<sup>4</sup> Most of the racial priming studies conclude that implicit appeals prime racial attitudes, while explicit messages, because they violate norms of racial egalitarianism, are less likely to evoke these sorts of racialized evaluations (Nelson and Kinder 1996; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007; White 2007).

LaFleur Stephens (2013)<sup>5</sup> situates herself in the midst of both the literature on influence of racial stereotypes and racial priming by developing a theory on racial signaling, and examines how whites evaluate candidates based on their race, and use of racialized rhetoric, in order to understand how the norm of equality is applied when the source of explicit racial language varies. The results of her experimental study reveal that whites lend more support to the black candidate than a white candidate who uses racially inflammatory and potentially offensive rhetoric about black parents needing to help their children achieve more. She goes on to establish that these findings are consistent even when the respondent’s level of racial resentment is accounted for. She concludes that when appealing to whites, black politicians are rewarded for their use of strong, racially inflammatory language while their white counterparts are punished for the same. These findings lead her to conclude that Mendelberg’s (2001) norm of equality is, for white voters, conditioned on the race of the individual making the racial claims (102).

Although we find Stephens’ theoretical and methodological approach convincing, and her results persuasive, we deviate from her work in a few ways. First, we theorize that post-racial language provides a suitable alternative for individuals seeking to discuss race in explicit, but not complimentary or offensive ways, and thus add post-racial language as a test to see how it relates to other racial language styles that. We argue that the efficacy of post-racial language exists because, for many, a post-racial society represents the ideal of what racial equality would look like. Second, we investigate candidate evaluations through an analysis of several affective measures: feeling thermometer ratings, perceived trustworthiness, and ability to represent interests. Using multiple affective measures allows for a broader understanding of candidate assessment, which we believe has broader political implications (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995).<sup>6</sup> Third, we stratify by

partisanship based on the discussions found in the existing literature on the stereotypes about party, and the influence of perceptions of out-group party members have on individuals. No study to date has investigated the power of post-racial rhetoric and its potential effect on political attitudes and behaviors. In fact, the prevalence of this language suggests that there is potency to this rhetoric that requires further examination as we move forward in the study of racial rhetoric.

## The power of post-racial

To demonstrate that there has been an increase in post-racial discourse, we conducted a LexisNexis content analysis of six major newspapers (The Washington Post, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Daily News (New York), and The New York Post) over the last 16 years.<sup>7</sup> These newspapers were selected since they are among those with the highest circulation. Our key search terms were “post-racial” and “post racial.” The results from the analysis show that in 2008, we observe a major increase in post-racial mentions (9 mentions in 2007 to 74 mentions in 2008) due to the presidential bid of the first black president, Barack Obama. These results provide strong evidence that there has been an increase in post-racial discourse in the political environment. While we acknowledge that post-racial language is not employed uniformly across the newspapers, the increase in discussions around post-raciality suggests that Barack Obama’s presidential election led to an increase in questions about whether American society had moved beyond race.

For the purposes of this paper, we define post-racial language as language that calls for society to move beyond racial or skin color differences. This kind of rhetoric has made its way into the public discourse in various ways from numerous sources. For example, while discussing President Obama’s 2nd State of the Union address, Chris Matthews of MSNBC had this to say,

... [race] wasn’t there tonight, and it takes leadership on his part to get us beyond these divisions ... I hope what I saw is true, that we’ve gotten beyond it ... I think he’s taken us beyond black and white in our politics, wonderfully so, in just a year. (Matthews 2010)

2016 Republican Presidential candidate, Dr. Ben Carson voiced a similar assertion when, during the first Republican debate, he said “ ... skin doesn’t make them who they are. The hair doesn’t make them who they are. And it’s time for us to move beyond that ... ” In fact, ABC News reported that their tweet using that statement was, according to Twitter, “the most retweeted media tweet from the first GOP debate” (Struyk and Faulders 2015). The growing prevalence of post-racial language within the ranks of both Democratic and Republican parties makes it clear that understanding its influence on political behavior is an important and necessary step in the ongoing discussion of racialized language. Both of these examples embody the kind of post-racial rhetoric that we seek to better understand in this paper because they explicitly call for society to end the distinctions based on racial dimensions.

## What post-racial is and what it is not?

There are numerous ways in which scholars discuss racialized language, but there are some terms that tend to be used to explain the same phenomenon. *De-racialized language* is

often referenced in the same way as *race neutral language*, which is generally characterized by the absence of racialized language from a politician's rhetoric altogether as an approach that black politicians can use in order to gain support from whites (Hamilton 1977; Gillespie 2010). An example of this is when, during his first presidential bid, Obama focused his attention on discussing the Iraq War instead of engaging discussion on race (Cho 2009).

Moreover, the terms *colorblindness* and *post-racial*, while having commonalities, have two important distinctions. Drawing on Sherrow Pinder's definition, post-raciality "promotes the idea that the election of the first black man, Barack Obama, as president of the United States proves that the United States has moved beyond race" (63). This sentiment points to the most important difference between post-raciality and colorblindness namely that one's belief that society has transcended racial divisions is informed by a moment in time or a specific event, which scholars contend is Barack Obama's election as President of the United States (Cho 2009; Pinder 2015; Bonilla-Silva 2017).

To be sure, Barack Obama's election led many prominent pundits and periodicals to question whether the United States had become post-racial, and for some, whether race should still be considered a salient social factor. In an investigation of how Barack Obama's presidency affected American perceptions of racial progress, the Pew Research Center finds that, after his election, nearly 52% of voters polled felt that race relations would improve, and approximately 4 months after Obama's inauguration, there was a significant increase in people's sense that race relations were generally good (Dimock 2017). These sentiments were echoed by pundits as well. Indeed, an article in the Economist claims that Obama's success in the Iowa caucuses was a "post-racial triumph" (The Economist 2008), and David Schorr of the National Public Radio claims, "The post-racial era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them" (Schorr 2008).

These findings and statements, in conjunction with the increase in discourse surrounding post-raciality that we find in our content analysis, make it clear that whether or not America actually moved beyond racial divisions, Obama's election marked a meaningful shift in perceived race relations in the United States.

The second distinction is that post-raciality, unlike colorblindness, does not ignore past racial discrimination, but instead uses the "post-racial moment" to highlight the declining significance of race and, with it, the prevalence of racism. We posit that one's perception of Obama's presidency as the "post-racial moment" signals immense societal progress and could lead an individual to believe that issues of race should no longer be a priority in the public discourse.

## Post-racial language

We posit that post-racial rhetoric, though explicitly racial rhetoric, differs from the traditionally explored forms of explicitly racial rhetoric – either racially inflammatory or racially compassionate language because when a politician uses post-racial language she shows no explicit preference or animosity toward any racial group. We argue further that post-racial language works on two dimensions. The first dimension is one on which post-racial language suggests that society has moved beyond race because of a

moment, which shows that we, as a society, have progressed. The second dimension builds off the first by showing that because the specific moment promotes a sense of progress, it also allows politicians and individuals to ignore the systematic nature of racism in the country by promoting a sense of equality that comes from Obama's election.

Our claim is that post-racial rhetoric offers politicians, regardless of race, a suitable alternative to the use of strong racially offensive or racially compassionate rhetoric. By advocating for moving beyond race, post-racial rhetoric allows politicians to speak on issues of race without being derogatory or preferential towards any particular racial group. The effects of this language, while beneficial for both black and white politicians, are effective in different ways based on the race of the politician.

For white candidates, the literature shows us that using racially offensive language leads to them being punished by white voters for violating the norm of equality, or coming off as being overtly racist in their critiques of blacks. However, they are also punished for showing some compassion or understanding of the socio-political plight that some blacks face. This leaves them in a paradoxical space where their ability to speak on issues of race is constrained for fear of being seen as racially insensitive or too racially understanding. The use of post-racial language allows white candidates to speak about race without being in violation of either of those constraints. *Thus, we expect that white candidates will receive more positive evaluations when they use post-racial language relative to when only know the candidate's race and party are known, or when they use racially inflammatory language (H1).* By calling for society to move beyond race, white candidates are able to criticize the concept of race and its salience in society, often citing it as more divisive than unifying, without appearing to be too biased.

There are many works that show how the power and influence of stereotypes about minorities, particularly black politicians, affect white voter attitudes. Black politicians who seek to gain support from white voters must navigate various stereotypes that white voters tend to leverage against them because of their race (Terkildsen 1993; Sigelman et al. 1995; Schneider and Bos 2011; Krupnikov and Piston 2015; Jacobsmeier 2015; Jones 2015). Post-racial language allows black politicians to show white voters that they are not confined to the stereotypes that are often leveraged against them because of their racial identity. Through utilization of post-racial language, black politicians are able to not only affirm the racial attitudes of some whites by suggesting that racial divisions are a thing of the past, but also show that, because of this view, they have the capacity to represent the interests of non-black voters. Additionally, black politicians who employ this rhetorical strategy are able to assuage concerns of white voters who may not subscribe to the strong racially inflammatory language but still subscribe to stereotypes about black politicians. *We expect that the evaluations of black candidates who use post-racial language will be equally as positive as candidates who use racially derogatory language about black people (H2).*

In the same way that some voters use the race of a candidate as a shortcut to determine what the candidate represents, voters also use stereotypes based on partisanship to evaluate candidates (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993; Petrocik 1996; Goren 2002; Hayes 2005). Republicans are regarded as being stronger on issues surrounding defense, taxes, and social issues, while Democrats are seen as more adept on social welfare and social group relations (Petrocik 1996; Hayes 2005). While partisanship does serve as a salient lens through which to view political candidates, *we expect that a politicians or participants'*

*partisan affiliation will not alter the evaluations of either candidate when they use the post-racial language (H3).* This expectation stems from the fact that there is nothing in post-racial language that violates the ideals of either party. However, consistent with the literature on partisan and racial stereotypes, *we do expect that the race or party of the candidate will condition respondents' evaluations based on their use of racially inflammatory or racially compassionate language (H4).*

## Methods

### Experiment description

In order to gain some understanding about the role of post-racial rhetoric, we use an experimental design similar to Stephens (2013). The sample of 1,019 white partisans for this experiment was collected using Qualtrics, a company that provides a quota sample for surveys and experiments. In total, we have 515 non-Hispanic white Republicans and 504 non-Hispanic white Democrats. This sample was collected over three weeks in March 2016. We stratified this sample by party to avoid the likelihood that being presented with a candidate of another party would lead a participant to disregard the message and evaluate the candidate based solely on his partisan affiliation. This concern stems from work that shows partisanship has become more of an identity for many individuals, which leads to strong, negative out-group sentiment across party lines (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Mason 2015; Mason 2018).

Prior to the experimental conditions, each respondent will be asked a series of demographic questions, and randomly assigned to view a fictitious Congressional candidate's biography on his website. The race of the candidate will either be black or white, which will be indicated by a photograph of the candidate. Subsequently, those who are randomly assigned to the control will be directed to a series of standard survey questions about candidate evaluations, racial attitudes, and racial policies directly following the biography. However, those who are randomly assigned to treatment conditions will be exposed to a fictional news article to examine the impact of racial rhetoric on evaluations of the candidate. The article will also contain a photo of the candidate, and will match the race of the candidate in the biography they were exposed to previously. After exposure to the treatment is over, they will be directed to the same questions of those from the control condition.

### Procedure

Upon clicking a link to the survey, the subject is presented with a statement that explains that they have been randomly selected to participate in a study for a campaign. The statement outlines what the study will look like, asks the subjects for their consent, and assures them that any and all information they provide will be kept confidential to the best of my ability. Subjects will be asked to identify their age, education level, gender, what region of the country they live in, and what they identify as. Once they have answered these questions the respondents will be randomly placed into a condition where they will see a biography of Robert Perkins, the fictional candidate. Some respondents will see Perkins as a black man, while others will see him as a white man.



	<i>Control</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Racial Animus</i>	<i>Racial Compassion</i>	<i>Post-Racial</i>
<i>Black Candidate</i>	Black Candidate Bio	Black Candidate Bio & Non-Racial Black Candidate	Black Candidate Bio & Racial Animus Black Candidate	Black Candidate Bio & Racial Compassion Black Candidate	Black Candidate Bio & Post-Racial Black Candidate
<i>White Candidate</i>	White Candidate Bio	White Candidate Bio & Non-Racial White Candidate	White Candidate Bio & Racial Animus White Candidate	White Candidate Bio & Racial Compassion White Candidate	White Candidate Bio & Post-Racial White Candidate

**Figure 1.** Experimental treatment controls and conditions.

Figure 1 outlines the layout of each of the experimental conditions and the control. After reading the biography, respondents will be directed to questions about Robert Perkins’s race, political party affiliation, whether he is a good representative of their interest, trustworthiness, his perceived ideological leaning, and asked to rate him on a scale of 0–100. Those subjects in the treatment conditions will be shown an article that uses a specific kind of racialized language. The subjects will be matched with the same race of the candidate they saw in the biography, but the randomly placed in 1 of 4 article treatments where the rhetoric on race is different (non-racial policy, racial animus, racial compassion, and post-racial). We use foreign policy as a proxy for non-racial rhetoric. Table 1 details the racialized rhetoric in the conditions. Subjects will then be directed to answer a series of

**Table 1.** Text from experimental conditions<sup>10</sup>.

	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Racial Animus</i>	<i>Racial Compassion</i>	<i>Post-Racial</i>
Article title	Republican Congress hopeful weighs in on Foreign Policy	Republican Congress hopeful calls for an end to “coddling blacks”	Republican Congress hopeful calls for recognition of hardships Blacks face	Republican Congress hopeful calls for Moving Beyond Race
Article text	It is imperative that countries come to learn that there will be grave serious consequences if they decide to engage in explicit aggression against the United States and its citizens. We will not allow any foreign power or head of state to intimidate or terrorize us. It is my firm belief that all options of engagement should remain on the table when dealing with international aggressors.	We must stop coddling Black communities who consistently break the law are unemployed, and do not seem to appreciate the importance of working hard to be successful. We cannot simply give people handouts because of the past. Our success as a nation was born out of hard work, determination, and perseverance, which are the American values that make us great.	We should have some compassion and recognize the hardships that many within African American community face because of past discrimination. As a nation, we are only as strong when we acknowledge our problems and work together to solve them. We still have a way to go before we assuage the concerns of communities of color.	The color of our skin does not make us who we are, and it is time to move beyond the divisions that skin color creates. It is my firm belief that we have progressed enough as a society to do away with these artificial divisions and move forward. Our strength as a nation is in our unity. We are United States of America, not the divided states.



questions about the article, the candidate, and their political and social attitudes and behaviors.

When the subject has completed the study, they will be thanked for their time, debriefed, and provided with the contact information of the primary investigator should they have any problems, questions, or concerns.

### **Measures**

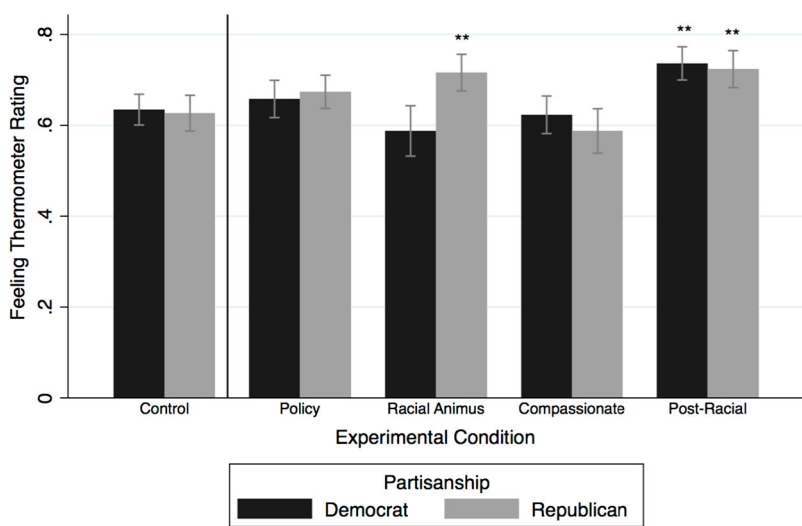
Voters very rarely use facts of a political campaign to inform their decision to support a political candidate. Indeed, many rely on affective evaluations to influence their candidate-support decision making (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). With these findings in mind, we focus on three different affective measures of candidate evaluation. First, we examine feeling thermometer ratings, which measure the broad affective attachment the respondent has to the candidate by having them assess their “warmth” or “coolness” towards the candidate on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 is extremely cool or strongly dislike and 100 is “extremely warm” or strongly like. We then measure how trustworthy respondents think the candidate is by having them place how trustworthy they believe the candidate to be on a scale of 0–10 where 0 is “Not at All Trustworthy” and 10 is “Very Trustworthy.” Finally, we investigate how, based on the experimental condition into which they are randomly placed, participants perceive Robert Perkins’s ability to represent their interest through the use of a 5- point Likert scale that ranges from “Very Unlikely” to “Very Likely.”

### **Results**

The subsequent analysis (Figures 2–7) presents the average treatment effect for each of the experimental conditions and the control. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test relative to the respective controls. For example, the Democratic candidate post-racial condition is compared to the Democratic candidate control. Thus, when we discuss “Democrats” in our analysis, we are referring to the Democratic respondents’ evaluations of the Democratic candidate. The same is true for our analysis and discussion of Republicans. We provide indication of statistical significance above the corresponding experimental condition. The relative controls are separated from the experimental conditions by a black vertical line. Each experimental condition had approximately 100 participants. All dependent variables are scaled from 0 to 1.

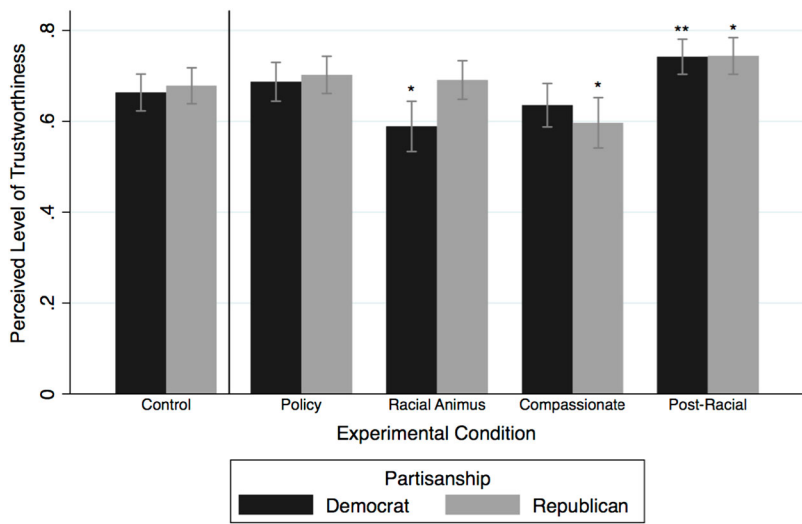
### **Partisanship**

The main effects of the treatments (pooling both the black and the white candidate of the same party) on respondents feeling thermometer evaluations are presented in Figure 2, and show that Robert Perkins is rewarded significantly by co-partisans who were randomized into the post-racial rhetoric condition (H3).<sup>8</sup> Democrat Robert Perkins has a significant .10-point increase in his feeling thermometer rating in the post-racial treatment ( $p \leq .01$ ) relative to the control. Republican Robert Perkins also experiences a .10-point increase in his feeling thermometer rating in the post-racial condition ( $p \leq .01$ ) relative to the control. Republicans rate Perkins equally as favorably when he uses racially

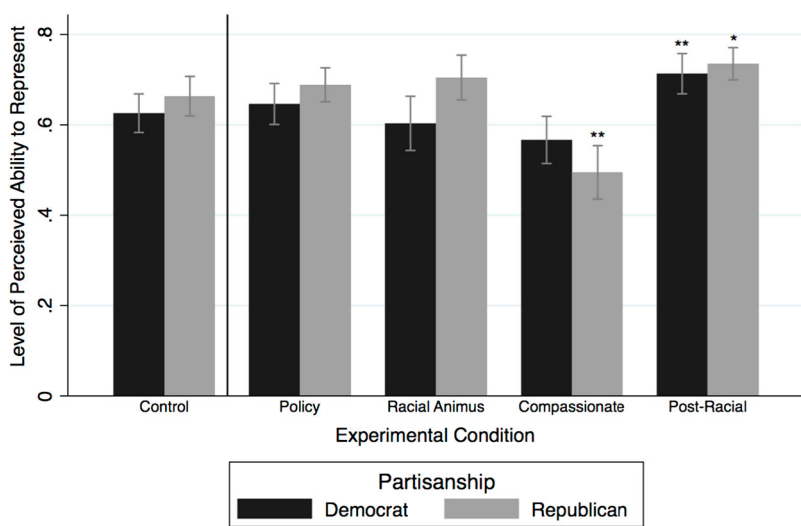


**Figure 2.** Average effect of experimental condition on feeling thermometer ratings by partisanship ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).  
Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence intervals relative to the respective control (i.e., Democrat control is compared to Democrat candidate conditions). \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , + $p \leq .10$ .

inflammatory language (.72). Democrats rate Perkins more favorably in the post-racial condition relative to the control condition (.73,  $p \leq .01$ ) while we see a decrease in evaluations in the racial animus condition (.59) relative to the control, although it is not statistically significant (H2). Generally, partisan stereotypes would predict that the

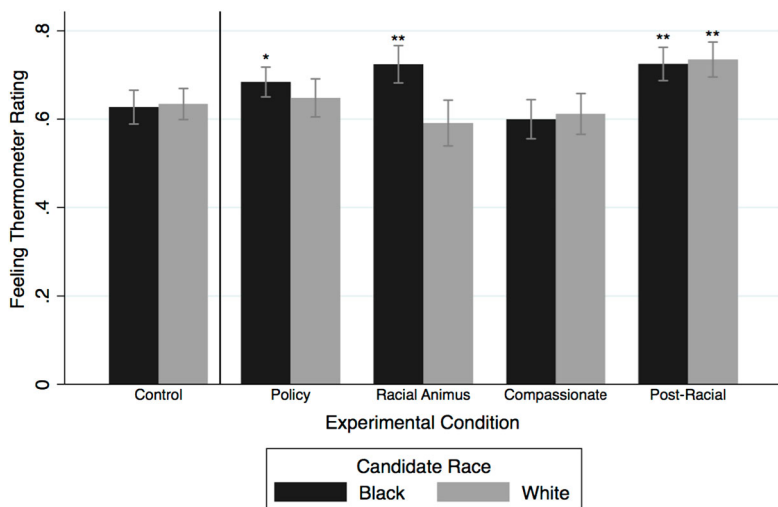


**Figure 3.** Average effect of experimental condition on perceived trustworthiness by partisanship ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).  
Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence intervals relative to the respective control (i.e., Democrat control is compared to Democrat candidate conditions). \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , + $p \leq .10$ .

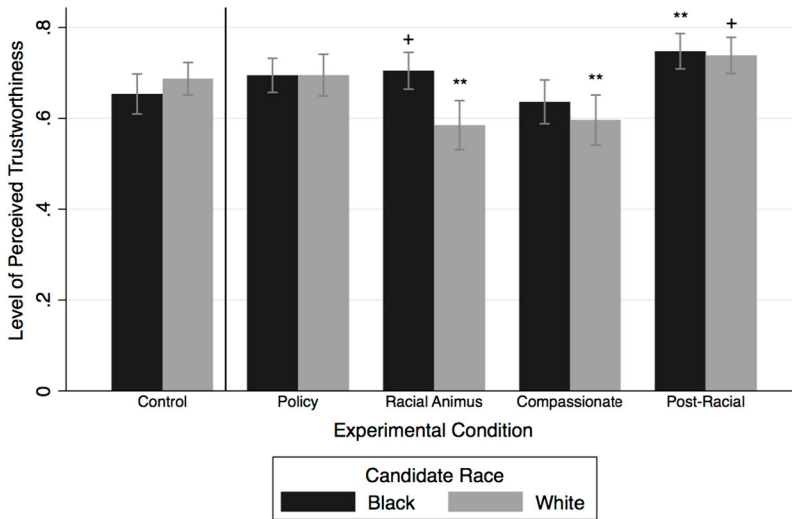


**Figure 4.** Average effect of experimental condition on perceived ability to represent by partisanship ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).  
Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence intervals relative to the respective control (i.e., Democrat control is compared to Democrat candidate conditions). \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , + $p \leq .10$ .

compassionate appeals would favor the feeling thermometer ratings for the Democratic candidate yet they are not statistically different from the control. For the Republican candidate, we see a decrease in thermometer ratings for compassionate rhetoric, but again, it is not significant (H4).



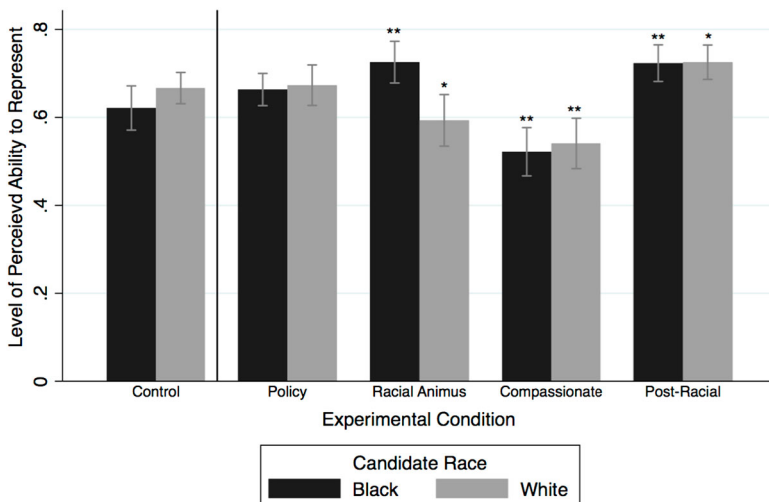
**Figure 5.** Average effect of experimental condition on feeling thermometer ratings by candidate race ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).  
Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence intervals relative to the respective control (i.e., Black candidate control is compared to Black candidate condition). \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , + $p \leq .10$ .



**Figure 6.** Average effect of experimental condition on perceived trustworthiness by candidate race ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).

Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence intervals relative to the respective control (i.e., Black candidate control is compared to Black candidate condition). <sup>\*\*</sup> $p \leq .01$ , <sup>\*</sup> $p \leq .05$ , <sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

In Figure 3, co-partisans give higher assessments of trustworthiness in the post-racial condition (Democrats .74,  $p \leq .01$ ; Republicans .74,  $p \leq .05$ ) compared to their respective controls (H3). Republican evaluations of trustworthiness also drop significantly relative to the control in the racially compassionate condition (.59,  $p \leq .05$ ). Assessments of



**Figure 7.** Average effect of experimental condition on perceived ability to represent by candidate race ( $N = 1019$ ; 95% CIs).

Note: The dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1. Statistical significance is a two-tailed test with 95% confidence interval relative to respective control (i.e., Black candidate control is compared to Black candidate condition). <sup>\*\*</sup> $p \leq .01$ , <sup>\*</sup> $p \leq .05$ , <sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ .

trustworthiness are also higher in the post-racial condition for Republicans and Democrats relative to their respective racial animus conditions (.69 and .58, respectively) (H2). Racially compassionate language is consistent with our expectations based on partisan stereotypes (H4) in which the Republican candidate received a decrease in their evaluations of trustworthiness (.60,  $p \leq .05$ ) while the Democratic experienced a decrease in their evaluations, but it was not statistically different from the control.

Figure 4 presents respondents' perception of Robert Perkins' ability to represent their political interests. Similar to the previous dependent variables, post-racial rhetoric leads to a .08-point increase ( $p \leq .05$ ) in evaluations of representation for both Democrats and Republicans ( $p \leq .05$ ) relative to their respective controls (H3). Co-partisans also assess the ability for the candidates to represent their interest at levels equal to the racial animus condition or higher (Republican .70; Democrats .60) (H2). The racially compassionate condition results offer some confirmation for H4. Regardless of party, both candidates receive lower representation evaluations from using compassionate rhetoric, but the decrease relative to the control is larger for the Republican (.49,  $p \leq .01$ ) than the Democrat (.57,  $p \leq .10$ ).

The data examining partisanship demonstrates that whites view candidates who call for society to move beyond race more favorably than when a candidate uses any other kind of racialized rhetoric. The exception being for Republicans who rate Robert Perkins as equally favorable when he uses racially inflammatory language, which is consistent with the findings of Hutchings, Walton, and Benjamin (2010), which finds that Republicans benefit from the use of racially derogatory language. We argue that white individuals see getting past racial division as a societal good and evaluate those candidates who promote this sentiment favorably. We contend that the favorability towards post-racial rhetoric is due to the political context in which the first black president has been elected and, at the time of this study, was still serving in office. Akin to Pinder (2015), we think that the election of President Obama is a significant moment where whites are able to look at the political environment and conclude that race relations have improved enough that society no longer needs to give deference to racial distinctions and the issues often associated with race.

The race of the candidate should also have significant effects on their evaluations of co-partisan candidates based on their rhetoric. In particular, candidate stereotypes based on race should play a significant role in respondent's evaluations of the candidate; however, post-racial rhetoric will lead to high evaluations for the candidate, regardless of their race.

### ***Race of candidate***

In this analysis, we pooled the data based on the race of the candidate regardless of partisanship. Again, the vertical black line indicates the relative control for the black and white feeling thermometer models.<sup>9</sup> In Figure 5, we observe that once again, post-racial rhetoric is an effective alternative to other types of politically racial rhetoric. Similar to our partisan analysis, the feeling thermometer ratings for both the black and white candidates increase by approximately .10 point in the post-racial treatment (H3). Consistent with Stephens (2013), when Robert Perkins is black and defies racial stereotypes by invoking racial animus he receives a higher feeling thermometer evaluation (.72,  $p \leq .01$ ). Furthermore, our results provide strong support for H2, and reveal that respondents in the condition

where Perkins is black and uses post-racial language yields roughly the same evaluation that he receives from those participants in the racial animus condition. We also see that the white candidate's usage of racially animus rhetoric results in a decrease in their feeling thermometer evaluations (.59), but is not statistically significant compared to the control (H1). This difference between the evaluations of black and white Robert Perkins when he invokes racially inflammatory language in the racial animus condition is an indication that whites do not see violations of the norm of equality by white candidates very positively. However, the promotion of the same rhetoric by a black candidate helps to alleviate stereotypes that whites may have about the candidate based on their race like the candidate being too liberal or more likely to align with their racial group interest. The high evaluations for Robert Perkins when he is black and using racially offensive language are consistent with the findings of Stephens (2013), and suggest that the application of the norm of equality is contingent upon the source of the racialized rhetoric. We see consistency in this finding on our two other indicators of candidate evaluation: trustworthiness and representation of interest.

Our expectations are supported by the analysis of the candidate's trustworthiness based on the race of the candidate (Figure 6). Post-racial rhetoric performs equally as well, if not better, than other types of racial rhetoric relative to the control. The black candidate experiences approximately a .10-point increase in their evaluation of trustworthiness in the post-racial condition (.75,  $p \leq .01$ ) relative to the control (H3). The rating in the post-racial condition is also comparable to the racial animus condition (.71) (H2). Although the difference between the control and racial animus does not reach conventional levels of significance, we think that this finding is another indication that black candidates make similar gains in their evaluations if they use either racial animus rhetoric or post-racial rhetoric. Post-racial rhetoric is an alternative for black candidates to explicitly engage racial politics without having to disparage their co-racial group members. Instead, they can speak to the progress that society has made where it is now acceptable to "move beyond race." This finding provides some evidence for why Dr. Ben Carson garnered so much online support after making his post-racial assertion during the Republican Primary debate.

The white candidate is also perceived to be more trustworthy in the post-racial condition relative to the control (.74,  $p = .06$ ) (H1). However, the perception of trustworthiness in the racial animus condition (.58,  $p \leq .01$ ) and the racially compassionate condition (.59,  $p \leq .01$ ) suffer a significant decrease compared to the control (H3 and H4). The use of racial insensitive rhetoric in the "Racial Animus" condition is, as expected, violating the norm of equality. However, it appears that racially compassionate language also seems to violate expectations that whites have about white candidates. This result stems from the perception that a white candidate who shows compassion for black individuals is working against the group's interests and thus is not positively evaluated by co-racial voters. We also find that in the absence of any racialized rhetoric the black candidate has a lower baseline evaluation than the white candidate suggesting that whites are more inclined to trust a co-racial candidate than a candidate from the outgroup. White respondents could be using stereotypes about the black candidate against him by assuming that he will work harder for minorities than for whites, and thus whites are less inclined to find him to be trustworthy. This finding confirms that the hurdle for black candidates is higher when they are trying to gain the support of white voters.

Post-racial rhetoric and evaluations of the candidate's ability to represent the respondent's interest leads to the same racial pattern that we have observed with our other dependent variables (Figure 7). The black candidate receives a higher rating in the post-racial condition (.72,  $p \leq .05$ ) relative to the control (H2 and H3). Consistent with our expectations (H4), this rating is comparable to, and just as significant as the racial animus condition (.73). When the black candidate invokes racially compassionate rhetoric (.52,  $p \leq .01$ ) they receive a significantly lower rating compared to the control (H4). In the case of the compassionate condition, the black candidate is demonstrating behavior that is consistent with black stereotypes and they are punished for it in their evaluations. The white candidate receives favorable evaluations in the post-racial condition (.73,  $p \leq .05$ ) relative to the control (H3). The size of this difference shows that post-racial rhetoric is a reasonable alternative for discussing race without violating the norm of equality or showing compassion to communities of color. We observe that the white candidate suffers a significant decline in their evaluations of representation in the racial animus condition (.59,  $p \leq .05$ ) (H1) and the compassionate condition (.54,  $p \leq .01$ ) compared to the control (H4).

To this point, we have shown that post-racial rhetoric serves as a viable and comparable form of racialized rhetoric for both black and white candidates as well as Democrat and Republican candidates. As the goal of this paper is not only to show the post-racial rhetoric's effect on candidate evaluations, but also understand how this type of racialized rhetoric compares to other ways in which we see politicians discussing race, we will, in the next section of analysis, investigate the relationship post-racial rhetoric has with racial resentment.

### ***Racial resentment and race of candidate***

Existing literature has provided substantial proof on the significant influence racial resentment has on white racial attitudes and evaluations of candidates of color (Stephens 2013; Krupnikov and Piston 2015). As our exploration into how post-racial rhetoric fits into this line of research, we follow the lead of other scholars in this area by examining how racial resentment and the type of racialized rhetoric affect candidate evaluations. The argument we offer posits that post-racial rhetoric operates differently than other racialized language strategies in that it purports feelings of equality and progress as opposed to resentment. Thus, we expect that racial resentment should not affect the evaluations of a candidate that promotes the notion of "moving beyond race."

To test this expectation, we run a pooled OLS regression and ordered logit to analyze the relationship between candidate rhetoric and our three indicators of candidate evaluation (feeling thermometer, trustworthiness, and ability to represent political interests). We expect that in the post-racial condition there will be no interaction effect with racial resentment because "moving beyond race" taps into a different set of emotions than racial resentment. One can be resentful of other groups, but still desire the idea of the "racial progress" being referenced in the post-racial rhetoric. This appreciation for progress and equality, we argue, is what informs the evaluations of those candidates who use post-racial language as opposed to a resentment for perceived socio-political benefits, which tends to drive feelings of racial resentment. The notion of being post-racial suggests a certain level of equality that leads whites to believe that the need for policies that benefit



people of color are no longer necessary because of the progress society has made. These directional effects should occur regardless of the race of the candidate.

Table 2 shows the results of two pooled OLS models where the baseline condition is the control. As expected, we observe that higher levels of racial resentment lead an increase in feeling thermometer ratings ( $p \leq .01$ ) relative to the control in model 1. The interaction of the compassionate rhetoric and racial resentment results in a substantial decrease in candidate favorability ( $p \leq .05$ ) compared to the baseline. The interaction of the post-racial condition and racial resentment does not lead to a statistically significant effect on feeling thermometer ratings, which is consistent with our expectations. In model 2, the perceived trustworthiness of the candidate is evaluated and we observe a heightened assessment of trust in the racial animus interaction ( $p \leq .01$ ) and a significant decline in trust in the compassionate interaction ( $p \leq .01$ ). We also have a significant decline in candidate trustworthiness when the post-racial condition is interacted with racial resentment ( $p \leq .10$ ). This is somewhat consistent with our expectations for the relationship between racial resentment and post-racial rhetoric. We think that this effect is driven by the race of the candidate. In further analysis, we examine these racial differences to better understand the effect. Model 3 shows the pooled results in which high levels of racial resentment in the compassionate condition cause a decrease in perceptions of the candidate's ability to represent the respondent's interest ( $p \leq .01$ ). Respondents with high racial resentment in the racial animus condition have an increase in their assessment that the candidate can represent their interest. The post-racial interaction does not yield any significant effects. These findings are consistent with our expectations and the findings of extant work that examines racial resentments impact on white racial attitudes.

**Table 2.** Candidate evaluations by experimental condition (Baseline = Control Condition).

	Feeling Thermometer Rating (OLS) (1)	Perceived Candidate Trustworthiness (OLS) (2)	Represent Interest (Ordered Logit) (3)
Racial Resentment (RR)	.06 (.09)	.24* (.10)	1.81* (.92)
Policy Condition	.02 (.07)	.18* (.08)	.42 (.75)
Racial Animus Condition	-.40** (.07)	-.33** (.08)	-3.73** (.74)
Compassionate Condition	.13 <sup>+</sup> (.07)	.22** (.08)	1.73* (.75)
Post-Racial Condition	.05 (.08)	.20 <sup>+</sup> (.08)	1.02 (.77)
RR × Policy	.04 (.13)	-.26 <sup>+</sup> (.13)	-.16 (1.26)
RR × Compassionate	-.27* (.13)	-.47** (.13)	-4.50** (1.26)
RR × Racial Animus	.72** (.13)	.52** (.13)	6.73** (1.24)
RR × Post-Racial	.10 (.13)	-.22 <sup>+</sup> (.14)	-.41 (1.27)
Constant	.49** (.07)	.48** (.08)	
Cut 1			-2.48 (.72)
Cut 2			-.68 (.70)
Cut 3			2.40 (.71)
Log likelihood			207.40
$R^2$	.14	.14	.09
$N$	1019	1019	1019

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. This model includes standardized controls for education, gender, income, partisan identification, and residing in the South. Age is also included as a control. <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . The  $R^2$  for model 3 is the pseudo  $R^2$  from the ordered logit.

The results presented in Table 2 provide strong evidence for the fact that post-racial rhetoric works in a fundamentally different way from racial animus and racial compassion. While the findings for the interactions between those two forms of racialized rhetoric are significant and consistent with past work, post-racial rhetoric, when interacted with racial resentment, does not lead to high evaluations like racially inflammatory language, or significantly decreases evaluations like racially compassionate language. Instead, when interacted with racial resentment it is situated in the middle leaning towards a more negative relationship, which provides some support for our theoretical claim that post-racial language offers a different appeal that white individuals support. These findings also show that, despite not being moderated by racial resentment in the same way as racially offensive language, post-racial language offers black candidates a strong alternative to racially offensive language, and shows that politicians, black ones in particular, do not have to tap into racial resentment in order to garner support.

## Conclusion and implications

Current literature has yet to explore how the growing calls for society to “move beyond race” fit into our understanding of racialized rhetoric and candidate evaluations. This paper expands our understanding of racialized rhetoric by including this brand of language and gaining insight into how it compares to what has been discussed in the previous work about racialized rhetorical strategies. Through the use of an experimental test, across multiple affective measures, we find that post-racial language operates differently than compassionate or derogatory forms of racialized language both because it leads to positive evaluations for candidates, regardless of their partisanship or race, and has a minimal if not negative relationship with racial resentment.

The major finding from this paper is that post-racial language, unlike compassionate or racially inflammatory language, is not affected by partisan or racial stereotypes. Indeed, post-racial rhetoric works for candidates in a way that is comparable or better than racial animus, compassionate, or even race neutral across numerous affective measures (candidate feeling thermometer, perceptions of trustworthiness, and a candidate’s ability to represent). Moreover, some scholars have argued that politicians of color, in particular, could rely on race neutral messages in order to gain support from white voters (Gillespie 2010). The results from this study reveal that while race neutral language does not lead to any decrease in evaluations relative to when no message from the candidate is shown, it does not lead to the increase that comes when a politician’s calls for society to move beyond racial boundaries.

Furthermore, post-racial language is not affected by one’s sense of racial resentment in the same way as racial compassion and racially insensitive language, which provides more evidence that it is a distinct form of racialized rhetoric. Extant literature has shown us that those individuals who are high in racial resentment, or feel that blacks receive unfair advantages in society, support racialized language that is more inflammatory and dislike language that is more compassionate. However, our findings suggest that post-racial language has a minimal and sometimes negative relationship with racial resentment.

Future research should explore why post-racial rhetoric has the observed effect on white voters’ candidate evaluations. We suspect that the promotion of equality, which scholars have said is put forth in post-racial language, washes away the sense of resentment

that some may experience when politicians use language that shows compassion to black individuals. The sense that society has progressed enough to move beyond race purports the notion that everyone is equal and, as such, leads to an increase in candidate evaluations.

Though this study shines a light on how whites respond to post-racial rhetoric, little is known about how black people may respond to this kind of racialized political messaging. Based on what we know of black attitudes when presented with certain messages (see Kuklinski and Hurley 1994), we speculate that black individuals' response to calls for society to "move beyond race" will vary based on the race of the message's source. If the source of the post-racial message is an out-group member, we suspect that black individuals would respond negatively because they may assume the candidate is asking them to disregard an important aspect of their identity. Conversely, if the message comes from an in-group member, black individuals may perceive that message as one of group uplift and respond more positively. This line of inquiry is deserving of in-depth analysis, and should be investigated in the future as scholarship continues to explore how and why post-racial rhetoric affects the American electorate.

We would be remiss not to consider how post-racial language fits into the present political and racial landscapes. Scholars and pundits alike have found that the time of implicit racial attitudes is fading as explicitly racial language becomes more prominent in public discourse (Valentino, Neuner, and Matthew Vandenbroek 2018). How then should we expect post-racial rhetoric to work? We believe this brand of racialized rhetoric will remain effective despite President Obama's departure from office, and the societal changes in race relations, because those who want to believe society can become post-racial can point to his election as a tangible example of America's capacity to do so.

In the wake of Obama's presidency, it is not unreasonable to expect that the use of post-racial messaging will continue. However, the use of this rhetoric is not without consequences. If, as scholars claim, post-racial rhetoric leads to an increased perception of societal progress, it may become easier for individuals to overlook the racial inequality that exists. Indeed, claiming that society has shown the capacity to move beyond race could give some the license to avoid racial egalitarianism without coming across as racially insensitive. These same individuals may assert that the policies and programs meant to increase racial equality are no longer necessary. In short, by making allusions to equality without actually addressing inequality, post-racial language and similar rhetorical strategies have the potential to exacerbate the very differences the rhetoric claims we should move beyond.

## Notes

1. We offer distinctions between race neutral language, which is defined as language that does not reference race or racial issues at all. Colorblind rhetoric, however, is rhetoric that speaks to the desire for racial transcendence, while post-racial language relies on a specific moment (generally the election of Barack Obama) as a signal that race is no longer an issue in the United States (Cho 2009; Pinder 2015).
2. Our decision to focus on white individuals is borne out of the precedent set by the existing literature on responses to racialized rhetoric. Very few scholars use non-white individuals in their analyses, and we seek to both respond and contribute to this existing work. Given that this paper's goal is to understand how post-racial rhetoric works compared to the findings of

previous work on racialized rhetoric we thought it prudent to focus our investigation on the same group as past scholars.

3. We recognize that Donald Trump managed to defy the conventional norms of racial discourse, and argue that his ability to do stems from his constant questioning and critique of the idea of political correctness.
4. Mendelberg (2001) defines the norm of equality as “the social prohibition against making racist statements in public acts,” and their negative feelings toward blacks for their perceived failure to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” (17).
5. This is a chapter from Stephens’s dissertation. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on this particular chapter.
6. Taking into consideration the findings from Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995), we would assume that higher affective evaluations would indicate a stronger likelihood to vote for the candidate. We do not have a measure assessing the likelihood to vote.
7. Graphic depiction of the content analysis can be found in the [appendix](#) in Figure A11.
8. For [Figures 2–4](#), the sample sizes for each condition for the Democratic candidate are Control = 106, Policy = 98, Racial Animus = 100, Compassionate = 100, and Post-Racial = 100. The sample sizes for each condition for the Republican Candidate are Control = 105, Policy = 106, Racial Animus = 105, Compassionate = 97, and Post-Racial = 102.
9. For [Figures 5–7](#) the sample sizes for each condition for the black candidate are Control = 103, Policy = 103, Racial Animus = 96, Compassionate = 99, and Post-Racial = 100. The sample sizes for each condition for the white candidate are Control = 108, Policy = 101, Racial Animus = 109, Compassionate = 98, and Post-Racial = 102.
10. The policy condition language for Democrats is different from the one given to Republicans. The topics of the policy condition are the same (Foreign Powers and the Security of the United States), but we wanted to make sure that rhetoric aligned with the positions that parties have taken on this issue. In order to do this, we used real rhetoric from campaign websites of Ben Carson and Bernie Sanders for the Republican and Democratic policy statement, respectively. See the [appendix](#) for the policy condition language for Democrats.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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