

# The Evolution of Experiments on Racial Priming<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

A large body of research shows exposure to racialized media and racist campaign communication can increase the likelihood that racial attitudes influence Americans' subsequent political evaluations. Recent political trends, however, suggest existing models may no longer adequately explain the effects of racial and racist messages among whites and non-whites alike. Of particular importance for this question is whether implicitly racial messages still prime white Americans' racial attitudes. Additional questions considered in this chapter include the following. Do classic theories of racial priming apply to political messages about other racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups? Who is most susceptible to racial priming? When should researchers measure racial attitudes in survey experiments? How can we design racial messages that are implicit? And do identity-based appeals and attacks commonly used today still prime ethno-racial identity attachments? We synthesize debates in the extant research on racial priming, explain why experiments are the best approach for measuring racial priming effects, discuss how to overcome several design and methodological challenges facing racial priming scholars, and then propose an agenda for future research to help address a variety of outstanding questions in this increasingly important area of scholarship.

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In March of 2014, then House of Representatives Budget Committee Chairman, Paul Ryan (R-WI), called in to Bill Bennett's *Morning in America* radio show to publicize his new report on poverty in the United States. During the discussion, Ryan suggested that work requirements for welfare would address the "real culture problem" plaguing men in "inner cities." The remarks were immediately followed by weeks of backlash accusing Ryan of racism for using racial "dog whistles" (Blow 2014)—subtle, indirect language that many Americans nonetheless understand as referencing race (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). While initially defiant, Ryan eventually yielded to pressure, walking back and clarifying his comments (Lowery 2014).

While the use of racial dog whistles in politics is not new (Haney López 2014), the rapid and loud response from media and political elite to an implicit and ostensibly non-racial message—in this case, coded language only indirectly suggesting racial considerations—is a new and increasingly common development. The rapid response to Ryan shows how activists and the nation's political and media elite were ready to detect and highlight racialized political language that once formed the heart of the Republican Party's "Southern Strategy," an approach to national elections that relied on subtle and more overt appeals to Southern whites' racial hostility towards blacks (Haney López 2014; Kinder and Sanders 1996; O'Reilly 1995). The new political reality that Ryan and others have confronted more recently calls into question whether politicians can still benefit electorally from implicit racial appeals in an increasingly "woke" political era.

Yet just one year later, Donald J. Trump launched his Presidential campaign with a speech that replaced racial dog whistles with a bullhorn (Valentino, Newburg, and Neuner 2019). "When Mexico sends its people," Trump proclaimed in his presidential announcement speech, "they're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." Trump did little to moderate his rhetoric throughout the remainder of the primary and

general election campaigns, or during his first years in office. As a consequence, the president has frequently been accused of using racialized political appeals and openly racist rhetoric (Leonhardt and Philbrick 2018).<sup>2</sup>

These two examples highlight important features of what we argue is the changing landscape of racial messaging and its effects in contemporary American politics. First, it appears that media and political elites are more willing than ever to label and expose racially coded or implicit political appeals as racially insensitive or racist and in violation of shared American values. At the same time, some recent political campaigns have been defined by explicit messages targeting specific racial, ethnic and religious minorities in brazen and sometimes racist fashion, with President Trump being only the most prominent example.<sup>3</sup> While this approach may have cost the president and other candidates some support within certain quarters of the American electorate (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019), Trump may have earned additional votes among citizens who reject political correctness (Conway, Repke, and Houck 2017). Indeed, Trump's racial rhetoric may be one of the reasons support for his presidency has not wavered among his Republican base, and other candidates appear to have recognized the

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, we frequently distinguish between racial or racialized and racist political messages. The former involve references to race or racial minorities but do not rely on negative stereotypes for their persuasive power; the latter, by contrast, associate racial minorities with long-standing, negative stereotypes (McIlwain and Caliendo 2014, 1159).

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, for example, CA U.S. Congressional candidate Duncan Hunter, TN U.S. Senate candidate Marsha Blackburn, and GA gubernatorial candidate Brian Kemp all drew national attention for running explicitly racial television advertisements.

benefits of campaigning on similarly explicit racial messages. Consistent with this possibility, recent trends (predating Trump) indicate declining adherence to egalitarianism and lower ratings of blacks exclusively among Republicans (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019). Thus, explicit racial and racist rhetoric may be far more acceptable to large swaths of the American public than previously acknowledged in the racial priming literature.

Second, it is equally obvious that Donald Trump has helped move the politics of race outside the black-white dichotomy that has until recently characterized much of American political history and scholarship on racial politics. Decades of large-scale immigration from Latin America and Asia (Junn 2007), coupled with declining fertility among whites (Passel, Livingston, and Cohn 2012), are steadily transforming the demographic composition of the United States and increasing opportunities for entrepreneurial politicians to craft new forms of racial, ethnic, and religious appeals that can tap into a variety of prejudices for political gain. Experimental research on racial priming shows these types of political appeals work by making individuals' racial considerations cognitively accessible when deciding which candidate or policy to support (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). When the appeals are subtle and implicit, largely by-passing conscious awareness and thus avoiding being recognized as violating norms of equality (c.f., Mendelberg 2001, ch. 8), they worked by "activating prejudice" and strengthening the links between individuals' racial biases and subsequent political evaluations. Experimental methodology offers the high degree of control researchers need to test these propositions and extend their reach to understand the effects of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-women and other negative, group-based political messages more commonly used today.

Early research on racial priming showed that sustained political communication focused on racial issues can increase the likelihood that Americans' racial attitudes will be an important

factor in political evaluations of the parties, candidates and policies. However, in her path-breaking book, *The Race Card*, Tali Mendelberg (2001) theorizes that racial attitudes will be primed in this way only if the racial content of political appeals is implicitly communicated through subtle visual cues or ostensibly non-racial but coded language that avoids any explicit references to race or racial identity groups.<sup>4</sup> The infamous “Revolving Door” advertisement, aired in support of George H. W. Bush’s presidential run, featured a menacing but only briefly-shown image of Willie Horton, an African American prison inmate, and is the canonical implicit appeal that Mendelberg (1997, 2001) studies. Because it was ostensibly about crime and contained no explicit references to race, most viewers were initially unaware of its racial undertones and deemed it acceptable political discourse that did not violate norms of racial equality. This acceptability, in turn, facilitated its priming power, or the activation of racial prejudice in support of public policies such as affirmative action and welfare (Mendelberg 1997).

*Explicitly* racial or racist political messages, on the other hand, which include direct references to race or racial groups that are often (though not always) portrayed in a negative light, have been understood to violate contemporary Americans’ adherence to shared norms of

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<sup>4</sup> What typically defines ostensibly non-racial but coded language is language that raises the salience of racial considerations in political choice, which may change over time. Often, racially coded language takes the form of common pairings of specific issues and racial groups, such as crime, “inner cities,” or welfare and African Americans (Gilens 1996; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997, 2005), or undocumented immigration and Latinos (Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2018; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013). In these examples of racially implicit coded pairings, the issue is explicitly discussed while the specific racial group is never mentioned.

racial equality. According to Mendelberg's racial priming theory, these explicit messages should fail to prime negative racial attitudes or bias because their explicit content makes most audiences aware of their racial intent, violating norms of equality and leading subjects to guard against the activation of their racial prejudice in political evaluations. While the extant literature has found robust support for Mendelberg's theory (e.g., Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Mendelberg 1997, 2001, 2008a; Nteta, Lisi, and Tarsi 2015; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; White 2007), several studies have raised questions about the theory's universality (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Hutchings, Walton Jr, and Benjamin 2010; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018), contradictions in findings that are only accentuated by Trump's frequent use of explicitly racial rhetoric that has hardly affected his political viability. These complications raise perhaps the most important question in this literature: must racial appeals be implicit in order to prime racial attitudes?

A number of additional, important research questions remain outstanding in this area of scholarship, including: are implicit racial appeals, as they have been commonly operationalized, still implicit today? Is everyone equally (un)likely to detect the racial content of implicit appeals, or are some individuals more apt to recognize the racial intent of such messages? Should researchers more directly measure adherence to norms of equality and test whether they moderate reactions to implicit and explicit racial appeals? Do political messages that reference non-black ethno-racial, religious and gender minorities fit existing models of racial priming? Finally, how do the non-white (and non-black) targets of such appeals (e.g., Latinos, Asians, Muslims, refugees and women) respond to them when they are explicit as well as implicit?

We proceed by synthesizing major debates in the literature on racial priming, explaining why experimentation is the best approach for determining the effects of racial messages and their

power to prime racial attitudes, and highlighting several design and methodological challenges in this area. Finally, we propose an agenda for future research that addresses a variety of outstanding questions about the use of ethno-racial political messages and their priming effects in the current era of rapidly changing demographics and a highly partisan political environment.

### **Major Debates in the Racial Priming Literature**

#### *What is racial priming?*

Racial priming can be more formally defined as the process by which external stimuli activate previously-held racial attitudes (i.e., racial predispositions) and bring racial considerations to the fore when individuals evaluate political objects (Johnson et al. 1997; Mendelberg 2001; Terkildsen 1993; Valentino 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; White 2007). The theory builds off seminal work in political psychology on the priming hypothesis (Iyengar and Kinder 2010 [1987]; Iyengar et al. 1984). This broad literature shows that increased attention to certain issues in public life—whether through media exposure, political campaigning, or a highly salient event—increases the likelihood the mass public will rely on considerations related to these issues when making political evaluations (Gelman and King 1993; Hillygus and Jackson 2003; Iyengar and Kinder 2010 [1987]; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Lenz 2012; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Stoker 1993; Tesler and Sears 2010).

While not all issue attitudes are sufficiently crystallized<sup>5</sup> and salient to be primed by political campaigns (Lenz 2009, 2012; Tesler 2015), attitudes such as those about race and racial groups that develop early in life, are deeply held and imbued with emotion (Banks 2014; Banks

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<sup>5</sup> Crystallized predispositions such as racial attitudes, partisanship, and ethno-racial or religious identities are characterized by stable and well-formed opinion.

and Valentino 2012; Henry and Sears 2009; Sears and Brown 2013; Smith 1993) increase the likelihood of being primed and guiding subsequent evaluations and behaviors (Krosnick and Petty 1994; Tesler 2015).<sup>6</sup>

Ample observational and experimental evidence has shown that political campaigns, particularly presidential campaigns, can and do prime racial attitudes in evaluations of candidates for elected office. In the 1988 presidential campaign, George H.W. Bush's supporters infamously invoked convicted murderer "Willie" Horton, increasing support for Bush's candidacy among racially resentful whites via racial priming (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001). Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008 and 2012 primed racial considerations, increasing support for Clinton over Obama in the 2008 primary, and for McCain and Romney over Obama in, respectively, the 2008 and 2012 general elections among racially resentful individuals (Manzano, Sanchez, and Valenzuela 2014; Segura and Valenzuela 2010; Tesler 2016; Tesler and Sears 2010).<sup>7</sup> Experimental work has similarly shown that racial priming can shape evaluations of Bill

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<sup>6</sup> By contrast, on most issues citizens are poorly informed (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), lack an ideologically coherent worldview (Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), and have many weakly held preferences when it comes to policy (Howe and Krosnick 2017). Thus, when exposed to many types of issue appeals, priming does not occur. Instead, individuals update their issue-attitudes to match the appeals of elites they admire or support (Lenz 2009, 2012; Tesler 2015). Crystallized predispositions such as racial attitudes, however, are sufficiently stable that they can be appealed to and primed without affecting the underlying attitude (Tesler 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Tesler (2017) notes that it was relatively difficult to prime racial attitudes during Obama's presidency because Obama's race made racial considerations chronically cognitively accessible.



Clinton, George W. Bush and Mitt Romney when racial messages are attributed to them (Tesler 2016; Valentino 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002).

A separate strain of work has uncovered consistent evidence that racial messages used to describe some public policies can reinforce individuals' mental schemas linking specific policies to specific social identity groups. These group-centric policy frames increase the likelihood that policies are evaluated on the basis of their relationship to groups and individuals' attitudes towards these groups. Observational and experimental studies have established robust links between media framing, racial-group attitudes, and views on welfare (Gilens 1996; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Winter 2008), crime (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997, 2005; Soss, Langbein, and Metelko 2003), the death penalty (Peffley and Hurwitz 2007), health care (Nelson and Kinder 1996; Tesler 2012), education (Federico 2004), affirmative action (Nelson and Kinder 1996), and social security (Winter 2006). This body of work shows that Americans frequently consider which social identity groups will be most impacted by these public policies, and then use their views about those groups to guide their evaluations of the policies. Importantly, these intertwined issue-group connections also increase the likelihood that calling attention to certain issues can prime racial group considerations without ever mentioning the group explicitly. In short, a substantial body of research has found evidence that racial predispositions are often brought to bear on evaluations of both candidates for political office and attitudes towards racial and seemingly non-racial public policies.

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Because of this, racial considerations spilled over into evaluations of a wide variety of previously non-racial political objects like health care and even the Presidential family dog (Tesler 2016).

### *The Implicit-Explicit Model*

While this previous research broadly supports the racial priming hypothesis, pre-existing racial attitudes or predispositions are not the only considerations that may be activated when subjects are exposed to racial messages. As Tali Mendelberg (2001) argues, white Americans are torn between widely held norms of racial equality and their negative or ambivalent racial attitudes (also see Kinder and Sanders 1996). When exposed to explicitly racial appeals that are recognized as racist or having hostile racial intent, Mendelberg's theory suggests that adherence to norms of equality will lead most Americans to limit their use of racial predispositions in forming attitude-object evaluations. Thus, racial priming should only work when the racial content of political messages is implicitly communicated through subtle visual or coded textual references to race without any explicitly racial language, allowing the racial content to be processed only subconsciously by most recipients. Implicitly racist or racial messages have been shown to make racial biases more cognitively accessible than their non-racial counterparts (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002), and it is this cognitive accessibility that subsequently boosts the power of (i.e., primes) racial predispositions in attitude-object evaluations.

By contrast, explicit racial appeals that use "racial nouns or adjectives to endorse white prerogatives," express "anti-black sentiment," "represent racial stereotypes," or "portray a threat from African Americans" are typically understood as violating shared norms of equality and are subsequently rejected, limiting their power to prime racial predispositions (Mendelberg 2001, ch. 8; 2008a, 110). A series of studies have found support for this Implicit-Explicit (IE) model of racial political messages, with implicit appeals consistently boosting the predictive power of racial predispositions in attitude-object evaluations over and above their predictive power in non-

racial control and explicitly racial experimental conditions (Mendelberg 2001; Nteta, Lisi, and Tarsi 2015; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015; White 2007).

Some research, however, has raised doubts about the universality of priming effects resulting from implicit racial appeals. In a 2006 study based on two experiments fielded on large national samples of whites, Huber and Lapinski find no differences in racialized policy support nor in the activation of racial prejudice across implicit, explicit and non-racial appeals, a finding that launched a pointed critique by Mendelberg (2008a, 2008b), who raised several methodological concerns with their study. These included objections to their placement of racial attitude questions on the survey instrument, problems with their WebTV survey platform that may have led to a massive failure to treat, and manipulation check questions that do not provide evidence of successful treatment. We discuss these design challenges in the next section.

While Huber and Lapinski's (2006) failure to replicate the IE model was exceptional in this early era of racial priming research, several subsequent studies have also found few differences among white Americans in the effects of implicit and explicit racial appeals. A 2010 study (Hutchings, Walton Jr, and Benjamin 2010) reports evidence that explicitly racialized debates regarding state government displays of Confederate flags decreased support for the flag only among Southern white women, but not Southern white men, suggesting norms of equality may not be equally shared across gender groups. More recently, using a variety of treatments across four experiments with samples benchmarked to the national white population, Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek (2018) provide convincing evidence that racial attitudes powerfully and to a similar extent predict opinions on a variety of political objects whether race was evoked implicitly, explicitly or not at all (in the non-racial control conditions), suggesting the absence of racial priming in the modern era. Although these authors also find white respondents more often

recognize the racial intent of explicitly racial communication, they are no more angered or disturbed by the explicit messages than by the implicit ones. These results are reinforced by Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood (2019), who find that a majority of white respondents in their study do not interpret explicitly negative racial advertisements as racially insensitive.

Together, these studies suggest that recent trends may have altered the acceptability of hostile racial rhetoric in politics, thereby limiting the dampening effects of egalitarian norms on the priming of negative racial attitudes in response to explicitly racial rhetoric and calling into question the current applicability of the IE model. These inconsistencies, moreover, pose an important question for scholars of racial politics: are recent failures to replicate the IE model a result of changing political discourse and a decline in adherence to norms of racial equality, methodological and experimental design choices, or both?

There is considerable evidence that race and questions of racial inequality have been thrust to the forefront of American political dialogue in a way not seen in decades (Tesler 2016). The election of the nation's first black president (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010), the rise of the Tea Party movement driven by racial resentment and white perceptions of status threat (Parker and Barreto 2013), highly visible and polarizing racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (Sawyer and Gampa 2018), and the election of Donald Trump (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018) have all helped to usher in a "most-racial" political era (Tesler 2016). While the use of explicit racial appeals in American politics is neither new nor novel, the speed and volume at which they are exposed and labeled as racist does appear to be. Nonetheless, these recent political events suggest that a significant share of white America is not bothered by clear racial demagoguery, calling into question the strength of white Americans' adherence to egalitarian norms—a supposed American "ideal" and central axiom of Mendelberg's theory.

Indeed, several studies suggest that old-fashioned racism, defined as prejudice rooted in beliefs about the biological inferiority of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, may be more widely held in contemporary times than previously understood. In a 2009 study, for example, Huddy and Feldman find a plurality of whites believe that economic inequality between blacks and whites in the United States can be at least somewhat explained by biological differences. Other studies show more than half of whites prefer their family members marry within their own race (Tesler 2013), rate their own racial group as more intelligent than African Americans (Piston 2010), and a substantial number see both African Americans and Muslims as less human than whites (Kteily et al. 2015; Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018). Audit studies of hiring in business, moreover, show white job applicants are called back 34% more often than African Americans, and 24% more often than Latinos, rates that have not changed in 25 years (Quillian et al. 2017).<sup>8</sup>

It should be clear, then, that many white Americans are in fact not very ambivalent between norm-based considerations of racial equality and hostile resentment towards the beneficiaries of racial progress. Indeed, these prior studies provide ample ground to expect explicitly racial or even racist messages to be deemed acceptable political discourse among particular subgroups with weaker commitments to egalitarian norms and higher levels of racial resentment such as Southern white men (e.g., Hutchings, Walton Jr, and Benjamin 2010) or whites with more limited education (e.g., Huber and Lapinski 2006). Instead, such appeals may generate political benefits among these subgroups. Yet despite this possibility, no research to our knowledge has directly measured and tested whether adherence to egalitarian principles moderates the priming effects of implicit and explicit racial appeals.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on audit studies, see Butler and Crabtree's chapter in this volume.

## Racial Priming Experimental Design Challenges

In this section, we discuss four key methodological and design-based challenges scholars face when conducting research on racialized political communication and assessing racial priming effects. We argue that overcoming these challenges is necessary for successfully designing experiments that test the racial priming hypothesis, which posits implicit racialized or racist political communication will activate racial considerations when individuals form evaluations of attitude-objects such as candidates or issues associated with the political communication. To test this, researchers must measure study participants' racial attitudes and determine whether they moderate effects of the implicitly racial treatment message. This approach requires scholars to overcome challenges of when to measure racial attitudes, which racial attitudes to measure, designing racial messages that are still implicit today, and devising effective manipulation checks that are crucial for drawing conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

### *When to Measure Racial Attitudes*

As we previously explained, experimental research testing the racial priming hypothesis typically exposes random subsets of study participants to either an implicit or explicit racial message and then compares their evaluations of an attitude-object (e.g. a candidate delivering the message, a racially-tinged policy proposal, or an ostensibly race-neutral issue such as health care), sometimes also comparing these evaluations with those of a control group.<sup>10</sup> Whether the

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<sup>9</sup> For more on manipulation checks, see Mutz's chapter in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Depending on the interests of the researcher, the control group may be exposed to a non-racial placebo message (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 1997), or to a counter-stereotypic

treatment message is said to have primed racial attitudes depends on whether participants' racial attitudes are a stronger and more consistent determinant of attitude-object evaluations in the treatment group relative to the baseline.

In other words, did exposure to the racial treatment message bring evaluations of the attitude-object more in line with pre-existing racial attitudes than in the baseline group? Successful tests of the IE model show racial attitudes to be stronger and more consistent determinants of attitude-object evaluations after exposure to an implicitly racial treatment message compared to an explicitly racial treatment. Thus, significant heterogeneous treatment effects by racial attitudes are taken as evidence of priming (Mendelberg 1997; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002), while their absence—even when racial attitudes remain a significant predictor of evaluations in treatment and baseline groups—are interpreted as the absence of priming (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).

This approach raises the important question of when to measure racial attitudes. Three possibilities have been tested in prior work: *just before* exposure (e.g., Huber and Lapinski 2006), soon *after* exposure (e.g., Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015), or *well before* exposure to the

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message identical to the racial treatment but featuring a white target (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 2001, ch. 7; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Either choice provides an appropriate baseline for comparison with implicit or explicit racial treatment-group evaluations, though there is some disagreement about this (see Huber and Lapinski 2008, 133 note 20; and Mendelberg 2008b, 138-9). In the most common tests of the IE model, attitude-object evaluations after exposure to an implicitly racial treatment are compared to evaluations among those exposed to an explicitly racial treatment (e.g., Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).

racial treatment (e.g., Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018). The first two measurement strategies are typically carried out in the same survey or point-of-contact in which the implicit or explicit treatment is delivered. The third approach suggests measuring racial attitudes in a prior wave of a multi-wave survey or study, with the racial message treatment delivered in a later wave after some time has elapsed. Each approach imposes some costs on the researcher.<sup>11</sup>

First, measuring racial attitudes just before exposure to a racial treatment carries a significant risk of making racial considerations salient and priming racial attitudes among all study participants, thereby washing out any differences between treatment and baseline groups (Mendelberg 2008a, 2008b). In experiments testing the IE model, priming racial attitudes through pre-treatment measurement may “*both* pre-empt the increased effect of racial predispositions in the implicit condition *and* mask the suppression effect of the explicit message” (Mendelberg 2008b, 137 original emphasis). Mendelberg (2008a, 2008b) argues Huber and Lapinski (2006) failed to find a priming effect of implicit racial messages in part because they measured racial attitudes just before treatment delivery. We recommend against this approach.

Second, measuring racial attitudes soon after exposure to a racial treatment, with plans to use these attitudes as a treatment moderator, carries the risk of bias if the treatment significantly affects values of the racial attitude (i.e., the treatment causes someone to have more negative or positive racial attitudes) (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). If this occurs, which is “possible even for strongly held attitudes like racial resentment after related interventions (e.g., Transue, Lee, and Aldrich 2009),” using the posttreatment variable as a moderator can “ruin your

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<sup>11</sup> Also see Klar, Leeper and Robison (2019) for a related discussion on when to measure social and partisan identities in experimental research.



experiment” by creating imbalance between treatment and control groups with respect to unmeasured confounders (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018, 767). However, if racial attitudes are *not* significantly affected by the experimental treatments, then it is valid to use them as a moderator in statistical models by interacting them with treatment indicators. While it is possible that racial predispositions are sufficiently crystallized that they will not be significantly affected by a racial message (Tesler 2015; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018), one can know with certainty only after data are collected. That said, we are not aware of any evidence that racial messages like those typically used to test the IE model significantly affect racial predispositions, suggesting post-treatment measurement of racial attitudes is a safe approach.

Finally, building on research on survey question order effects, Mendelberg (2001; 2008a) argues that measuring racial predispositions “well in advance of the [racial treatment] message” is the best approach. Indeed, it is frequently the case now that researchers studying racial priming and using racial attitudes as a treatment moderator measure baseline attitudes in a prior wave of a multi-wave survey and then deliver treatments in a later wave after some time has elapsed (e.g., Banks and Hicks 2015, 2019). While this approach eliminates problems associated with the other measurement strategies, it is significantly more costly than single-shot studies because it requires researchers to contact participants twice, and attrition between waves further increases costs because it requires a larger-than-ultimately-needed sample in the first wave.

On the other hand, recent work by Valentino, Neuner and Vandebroek (2018) randomly varying *when* racial attitudes are measured found no differences in their results whether measuring racial attitudes well before, just before, or soon after exposure to the racial treatments (both implicit and explicit), reinforcing the previous finding that racial attitudes are sufficiently stable to not be moved by racialized political communication (Tesler 2015). These researchers

also report, however, no evidence of racial priming after exposure to an implicit racial treatment, which they go on to show is due to their respondents finding the explicit treatment acceptable. This is a notable shift from prior tests of the IE model (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002).<sup>12</sup>

### *Which Racial Attitudes to Measure*

Which racial attitudes should researchers studying racial priming seek to measure? Commonly, standard batteries of racial resentment, laissez-faire racism, modern racism, or symbolic racism are used to operationalize racial attitudes (Banks and Hicks 2019; Mendelberg 1997, 2001; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).<sup>13</sup> These constructs represent indirect but explicit measurement strategies that capture beliefs about discrimination and African American advancement in society. More direct questions asking subjects about their beliefs in racial-group stereotypes, whether blacks have too much political influence, their views on affirmation action and support for welfare spending have also been tested in studies of racial priming (Banks and Hicks 2015; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). All of these measures capture roughly similar underlying levels of racial prejudice (Huddy and Feldman 2009).

However, if Americans are ambivalent about race and racial egalitarianism as posited by the IE model, we might worry that social desirability bias in responses to explicit queries of racial attitudes will limit the expression of these attitudes (but see Huddy and Feldman 2009) and thereby truncate the range of attitudes that may be primed by racial discourse. To address this

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<sup>12</sup> We return to this point below in our discussion of manipulation checks.

<sup>13</sup> See Huddy and Feldman (2009) for a review.

concern, implicit measurement techniques to gauge racial attitudes have also been used (Banks and Hicks 2015; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).<sup>14</sup> In measuring racial attitudes implicitly, approaches such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) use latency scores, or time taken to categorize distinct racial objects, to gauge racial bias (Fazio et al. 1995; Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998; Kam 2007; Pérez 2010). Because these scores are measured in milliseconds, participants' awareness of and control over their expression of racial bias is limited and understood to be implicit, avoiding concerns of social desirability bias.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the measure of racial bias captured by the IAT may be less reliable than explicit measures, and the full IAT is very long and therefore difficult to implement in surveys. However, research using a brief version of the IAT yields heterogeneous treatment effects identical to those using explicit measures of racial attitudes (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).

### *Designing Racial Messages that are Still Implicit Today*

Analogous to implicit measurement techniques that keep the expression of racial bias below conscious awareness (Pérez 2010, 2016), implicit racial messages used in campaigns and in priming experiments rely on visual racial cues or racialized language to evoke race while

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<sup>14</sup> The implicit measurement of racial attitudes is categorically distinct from the implicit operationalization of racial messages used as experimental manipulations; see above and below.

<sup>15</sup> Although the IAT ameliorates concerns about social desirability bias, its procedures are likely to raise the salience of racial consideration because it explicitly discusses race. Thus, concerns about the order of measurement may still apply when using this measurement technique. More research is needed on this point.

keeping the racial content of these messages below conscious awareness. If an implicitly racial message works as expected, the racial content will be received implicitly and go largely undetected despite its visual presence or the use of coded racialized language. Subjects asked directly about the racial content of an implicitly racial message should largely not report any, or at least report significantly less than subjects exposed to an explicitly racial message (c.f., Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).<sup>16</sup>

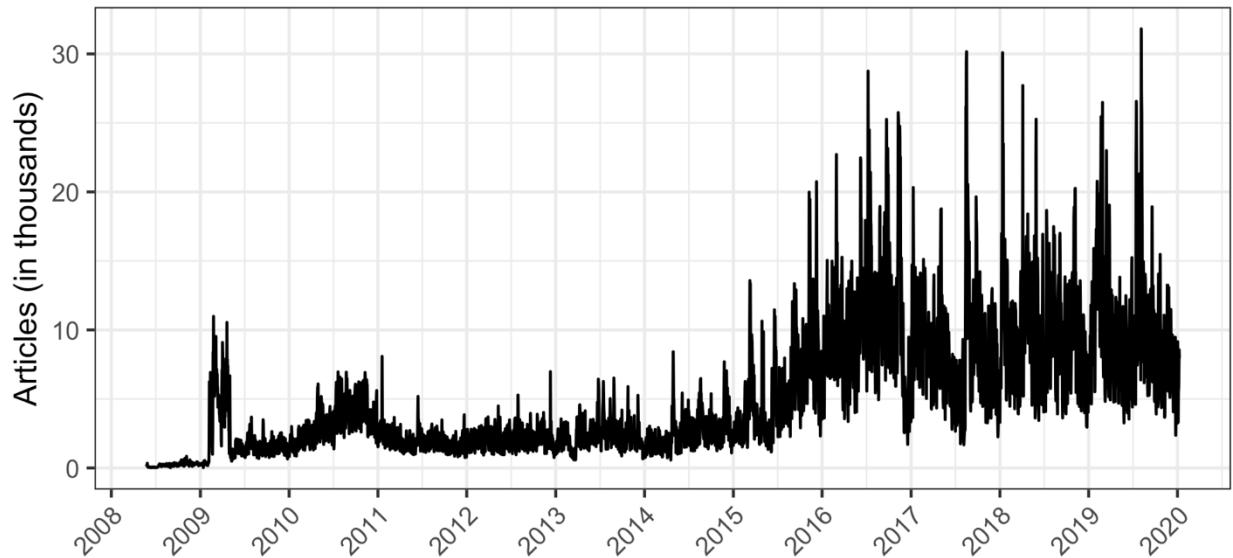
There is considerable and growing evidence, however, that race and racial identities in American politics are increasingly salient and explicitly discussed by campaigns and the media, especially since the election of President Obama (Achen and Bartels 2016; Goldman and Mutz 2014; Parker and Barreto 2013; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Tesler 2012, 2016; Tesler and Sears 2010; Valentino, Newburg, and Neuner 2019). President Trump’s campaign and governing styles appear to have accelerated these trends (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), leading many public figures and media personalities to recognize and point out questionable racial content in the more frequent discussions of race and racial issues. Figure 1 illustrates our point by displaying the frequency of news articles with mentions of “racism,” “racial,” and “racist” over time, showing small spikes during Obama’s presidency but a massive surge during the 2016

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<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, even implicitly racial treatments should activate racial *thinking*, since this is the mechanism by which implicit appeals are theorized to prime racial attitudes in attitude-object evaluations (Diana Mutz, personal communication). Indeed, Valentino, Hutchings and White (2002) use faster response latency in identifying racial words in a lexical task to show that their implicitly racist (undeserving blacks) treatment caused subjects’ racial schema to become more cognitively accessible than did their non-racial or counter-stereotypic treatments.

presidential election and throughout Trump’s first term in office. This increase during Trump’s presidency, the frequent charges of racism leveled against the president, and Trump’s own counter-charges of racism against his opponents is likely to be polarizing views about acceptable racial rhetoric along partisan lines.

**Figure 1: News Attention to Racial Issues**



*Note: Data collected via Crimson Hexagon news content from 2008-2020 and includes any news article that mention “racist”, “racial”, or “racism.” News is defined as fact-based articles by formal news organizations such as CNN, New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. Y-axis is measured in 1000s of articles.*

In this “most-racial” political climate (Tesler 2016), the average American may be accustomed to hearing about and recognizing the racial content and political intent of implicitly racial messages, in part through frequent charges and counter-charges of “playing the race card” now often heard in the media. Correspondingly, the racial content of implicitly racial treatments used in experimental research, operationalized through racial imagery or ostensibly non-racial (but racially coded) language, may no longer go undetected by study participants. Indeed, there is a high likelihood that Americans will recognize the racial content and intent of an implicitly racial message, but almost nothing is known about this possibility and whether it varies by individual characteristics or features of the racial message.

The challenge for racial priming researchers stemming from this new reality is twofold. First, there is now likely to be a much wider range of ostensibly non-racial issues, language, and imagery that has become associated with race and the racial dynamics of the current era. “America first,” “take our country back,” and “illegal aliens” have all been widely used recently by racially conservative interests, and these phrases are likely to be understood as racially coded language. Other recent examples of negative racial language or negative group imagery are easy to recall and should be tested. Second, detecting the racial content or anti-minority intent of implicitly racial treatments is likely to vary by party, with Democrats more likely to be sensitized to racialized appeals than Republicans. Careful pre-testing of racial appeals to determine their degree of implicitness before use in a priming experiment would guard against these concerns, but this requires developing effective manipulation checks, which we discuss next.

### *The Importance of Devising Effective Manipulation Checks*

In part, our limited understanding of the detectability of racial content in implicitly racial messages is due to the paucity of effective manipulation checks in experimental work on racial priming.<sup>17</sup> In this research context, a posttreatment question asking subjects to *factually recall* whether the treatment message contained any racial content is most appropriate to test whether treatments worked as intended; i.e., increased perceptions of racial conflict, racially insensitive intent, or “playing the race card” after an explicit treatment relative to an implicit or non-racial baseline (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). However, because an item like this is itself likely to prime racial attitudes, it should always be

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<sup>17</sup> Also see Mutz’s chapter in this volume.

asked after the substantive dependent variables of interest such as candidate or policy support, or else piloted to test for priming effects on a distinct sample prior to use in a full study.

Yet even asking about the racial insensitivity of a message, as in Valentino, Neuner and Vandebroek (2017), carries the risk of tapping opinion about the message, with predictable vagaries by racial attitudes and party identification. Indeed, these authors find individuals low in racial resentment significantly more likely than high racial resentment individuals to describe an implicit racial message as insensitive. Still, all subjects in their explicitly racial condition were 43 percentage-points more likely to describe the message as racially insensitive, and 54 points more likely to describe the message as focused on racial conflict, than those in the implicit condition, with similarly large differences among individuals both low and high in racial resentment. If the independent variable in racial priming experiments is merely exposure to racial *content*, then this provides evidence confirming their manipulations worked largely as intended. But if the independent variable is closer to a *violation of egalitarian norms* triggered by the racial content, then a manipulation check asking whether the message violates acceptable political discourse may be more appropriate.<sup>18</sup> Asking both types of items—factual recall of the racial content and beliefs about its racial intent or political acceptability—would address both possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Diana Mutz, personal communication.

<sup>19</sup> We note that there will always be some subjects who “fail” any type of manipulation check. Perfect compliance is not necessary to show racial treatments worked as intended; instead, results showing significantly greater detection of racial content or perceptions of racial insensitivity in the explicit condition, relative to implicit or nonracial conditions, is generally

Ultimately, the ability to generate such confirmatory evidence is crucial for determining whether a null finding of no priming effect is more likely to be a true result than due to a poorly designed or underpowered experiment (Mutz 2011, 84-5).<sup>20</sup> This problem plagues Huber and Lapinski (2006), who argue their treatments were successful based on a manipulation check that asks subjects generally about the appropriateness of racial appeals in a democratic system, rather than about the racial content or acceptability of the treatments to which subjects were exposed. On its face, their question does not capture whether subjects detected, nor whether they accepted, the racial content of the treatment messages, and Mendelberg (2008a, 2008b) convincingly argues against its effectiveness as a manipulation check for their experiment.

More substantively, if the racial content of an explicitly racial message is recalled or perceived as insensitive to a significantly greater degree than an otherwise-identical implicit racial message, why might there be no priming effects—i.e., no differential effects of racial attitudes on subsequent attitude-object evaluations as predicted by the IE model? One answer is because explicitly racial messages, despite their obviously insensitive racial content, are no longer deemed unacceptable by the most racially resentful (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018). Such evidence strongly suggests changes to contemporary norms of acceptable political discourse and, perhaps, diminished adherence to racial egalitarianism since the IE model was first pioneered in the 1980s and 1990s.

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sufficient for assessing relative treatment effects, the goal in this experimental context. We recommend researchers report failure rates but retain the entire sample for analysis to avoid posttreatment bias (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Also see Mutz's chapter in this volume.



Researchers seeking to test these possibilities should measure the political acceptability of racial message treatments, or follow Valentino, Neuner and Vandebroek (2018) and ask subjects whether the racial message, specifically, made them feel negative emotions such as anger or disgust. In their study, low and high racial resentment individuals are just as angry or disgusted by the implicit racial message, but only low racial resentment subjects are significantly more angry or disgusted by the explicit racial message. High racial resentment individuals are no more angry or disgusted by the explicit message than by the implicit one, despite agreeing that the former is significantly more racially insensitive. Valentino and his coauthors (2018) interpret this result as evidence that while negative racial rhetoric is now easily recognized as insensitive, only racially unbiased individuals reject it; those who are racially biased are unbothered by insensitive racial content, a stark difference from earlier findings (c.f., Mendelberg 2001, ch. 8).

### **Open Questions for Future Experiments on Racial Priming**

#### *Adherence to Norms of Racial Equality*

A central assumption in the implicit-explicit model of racial priming is that white Americans are committed to norms of racial equality (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001). Yet as we have suggested, racially in-egalitarian rhetoric is prominent in American politics today, and many white Americans are not only expressing comfort with such rhetoric, but also showing high levels of in-egalitarian beliefs. From racially derogatory signs at Tea Party rallies (Parker and Barreto 2013), to the return of old-fashioned biological forms of racism (Knuckey and Kim 2015; Kteily et al. 2015; Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Tesler 2012), widely shared beliefs that people are “too sensitive” when it comes to public discourse around racial issues (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2017), and an increased belief among many white Americans that discrimination against whites has surpassed discrimination against ethno-racial

and religious minorities (Cox, Lienesch, and Jones 2017), evidence abounds that a norm of racial equality is not as widely shared as once supposed (also see Huddy and Feldman 2009).

Furthermore, Mendelberg (2001) suggests that norms of racial equality emerged following the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, in part from an increased recognition among whites that black Americans face structural disadvantages rooted in centuries of slavery and subsequent *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination. These shifts coincided with significant declines in whites' biologically racist beliefs about blacks (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985). It is unclear, however, whether and to what extent white Americans ever saw norms of equality applying to non-black racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups with their own unique histories, and who are often perceived to face fewer structural disadvantages and correspondingly fewer experiences of discrimination than blacks (Chong and Kim 2006; Cox, Lienesch, and Jones 2017).

Despite the changing demographic, political and social landscape, and the centrality of norms of equality to studies of racial priming, no research to our knowledge has directly incorporated measures of adherence to norms of equality into a racial priming experimental design (though see Blinder, Ford, and Ivarsflaten 2013). We believe future research should examine how individual variation in adherence to egalitarian norms, which is conceptually distinct from expressions of symbolic racism or racial resentment that are typically tested, moderate responses to implicit and explicit racial appeals. Such tests could provide more direct evidence of the importance of norm adherence in reactions to racial messages, as well as whether such norms operate differently among different ethno-racial or other identity groups. To wit, recent conclusions about declining American adherence to norms of equality may in fact be limited to white Americans. Alternatively, researchers could study whether priming egalitarian

norms before exposing subjects to racial appeals dampens the influence of racial attitudes on subsequent attitude-object evaluations. This could further illuminate why recent studies are no longer finding evidence supporting the IE model of racial priming.

### *The Detectability of Implicit Racial Content*

As we have discussed, no published research of which we are aware has considered or tested the possibility that implicit racial messages no longer operate subconsciously in the current political climate. Indeed, the racial content in experimental messages intended to be implicit may now be easily detected or consciously understood as having racially prejudicial intent, violating a key axiom of the IE model about the conditions under which racial priming effects should be observed. Yet despite this possibility, and the likelihood that norms against racially insensitive political discourse are weakening, the core of the IE model may still hold in the face of certain types of racialized messages.

That is, some implicitly racial messages may still operate as intended—subconsciously—and if the racial content or insensitivity of these messages remains largely undetected, relative to an explicit version of the same message, we should see a racial priming effect in subsequent evaluations. If we do not, and a manipulation check confirms significant differences in the detectability of racial content or prejudicial intent between the implicit and otherwise-identical explicit messages, then we have good evidence against the IE model in the current era; at least for the message tested. If, instead, we find *a significant priming effect of the implicit message*—i.e., greater predictive power of racial attitudes after exposure to the implicit treatment—then we can conclude that the IE model still holds for certain messages that were tested.

By investigating the detectability of racial content in implicitly racial messages, researchers can vary features of the message to better understand when it is more or less likely to

be detected as racial or racially insensitive, and also test whether individual-level attributes such as partisanship, ethno-racial or religious identities, identity strength, egalitarianism or even age are associated with detecting racialized content. In doing so, scholars would be able to characterize conditions under which the IE model is still applicable today. Testing the boundaries of our theories in this way is critical and often underappreciated for the advancement of knowledge. In this vein, we recommend researchers ask what kinds of implicit appeals, and about which groups, are most likely to be processed subconsciously in a political environment where racial identities and attitudes are chronically salient.

One possibility we have begun to explore is related to the *frequency* of certain types of appeals used in political discourse, and more specifically the frequency of racial group-attitude object pairings articulated by politicians (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019). For example, blacks and crime are frequently paired (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997, 2005; Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997), as are Hispanics and immigration (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013), and the frequency of these pairings makes them more congruent and salient in the minds of many, increasing their likelihood of being exposed as racial or detected as such by experimental subjects. Less frequent or congruent pairings such as Hispanics and crime may still be relatively unfamiliar, at least before the Trump administration's efforts to link the two, reducing their likelihood of being detected as racial or racially insensitive (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019). Are racial images more or less likely than racialized language to be detected and perceived as racially insensitive? Are implicitly racial messages communicated directly by politicians or covered indirectly by the national news media, which only about 1 in 5 Americans say they trust "a lot" (Gottfried, Stocking, and Grieco 2018), more likely to be

interpreted in racial terms? Who is more or less likely to detect the racial content of implicitly racial messages? These questions are ripe for additional experimental research.

### *Racial Content Dose-Response*

The previous discussion raises two related and understudied questions about the dose-response relationship of racial messages. First, would a larger dose (multiple messages) diminish the racial priming potential of implicitly racial messages, perhaps by increasing the detectability of their racial content or intent? Or would a larger dose strengthen racial priming by ensuring the activation of racial attitudes among the most racially biased? We know that some responses to implicit racial messages, which point out and condemn the prejudicial content of these messages, make them explicit and can reduce their priming effects (Banks and Hicks 2019; Nteta, Lisi, and Tarsi 2015; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015), but existing research is silent about the effects of exposure to multiple implicit messages, despite the repeated use of these types of appeals by political actors. An experimental test of repeated primes in a multi-wave study could provide some answers to these questions.

Second, how do experimental racial treatments interact with real world political rhetoric that uses similar racialized approaches? Gaines, Kuklinski and Quirk (2007) point out that subjects enter our experiments with potentially extensive prior exposure to political appeals like those being tested, with unknown implications for the results (also see Druckman and Leeper 2012). On the one hand, successful randomization to treatment and baseline conditions will, in expectation, produce groups with statistically identical shares of subjects pre-treated with racial messages like those being tested and thereby maintain internal validity. On the other, extensive exposure to racial appeals before participating in a racial priming experiment is likely to increase the ability of subjects to detect the racial content of an implicit racial treatment.

But gauging pre-treatment exposure to racial messages is challenging, and potentially biased in self-reports (Prior 2009a, 2009b, 2013). Moreover, real-world exposure to highly salient racial messages may not simply prime subjects' racial views in attitude-object evaluations, but potentially *change* their racial views and bring them more in-line with pre-existing views of the attitude-object. This would represent “learning and opinion change, not priming” (Lenz 2009), and may be especially pronounced in the case of racial messages from political leaders and other elites whom the public tends to follow (Lenz 2012).

This again suggests the utility of an over-time study design, here with identical measures of racial attitudes and attitude-object evaluations before (W1) and after (W2) a highly salient event or series of events focused on the racial rhetoric of leaders (Tesler 2015). Though strictly non-experimental, this approach nonetheless allows tests of within-subject changes and reverse causality to identify causal effects of intervening events between W1 and W2, with promising application to other racialized political domains (e.g., Collingwood, Lajevardi, and Oskooii 2018).

### *Beyond the Black-White Binary*

Last, but with the largest potential for new research, are unanswered questions about the priming effects of non-black ethno-racial, religious and gendered appeals in politics. For example, among whites, do implicit and explicit appeals alluding to and referencing, respectively, these other non-black identity groups follow the IE model? Until relatively recently, negative political messages about the ideological and policy commitments of Latinos, Asian Americans, Muslims and women were scarce, likely limiting the detectability of implicit content in experimental messages about these groups and thereby increasing the probability of priming negative group attitudes in subsequent evaluations.

Similar to the case of anti-black messages, anecdotal evidence suggests that perceptions of illegal or undeserved claims on the state provide “cover” for political elites to use derogatory language or images with few electoral costs. For example, denigrating rhetoric about illegal immigration from Mexico or other parts of Latin America can be justified in terms of national security or other threats to American values. Similarly, in 2019 President Trump criticized Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN-5), one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress and the first to wear a hijab on the House floor, by saying, “take a look at her, take a really good look at her. She’s got a way about her that, I think, is very, very bad for our country. I think she’s extremely unpatriotic...” (Lafond 2019). By never mentioning her religion, Trump’s intent is ambiguous and yet may prime anti-Muslim bias in support of him or opposition to Rep. Omar. There is a dearth of existing research testing the effects of implicit and explicit messages referencing non-black targets (but see Reny, Valenzuela and Collingwood 2019).

On the other side of the ledger, we know relatively more about minority group responses to racialized messages or imagery from research testing the IE model (White 2007), as well as experimental studies of group identities that do not compare responses to implicit and explicit messages but that we nonetheless view as conceptually related to the body of work reviewed here (Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Junn and Masuoka 2008; McConnaughy et al. 2010; Pérez 2013, 2015; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016). As White (2007) convincingly demonstrates, white and black Americans respond very differently to implicit and explicit racial messages. In his experiments, conducted in 2003 and 2006, white Americans’ negative out-group attitudes (anti-black resentment) are primed only by the implicit racial messages, consistent with the IE model; the explicit racial messages dampen effects of negative out-group attitudes, and also fail to prime whites’ in-group identity. However, might white identity today, which is considerably

more salient in politics (Jardina 2019), now be activated by such messages? More relevant to the current point: among blacks, only in-group identity is primed in attitude-object evaluations, and only in response to messages that *explicitly* mention African Americans, with no similar identity priming produced by the implicit messages that do not mention the in-group.

This latter result on explicit mentions of African Americans priming blacks' in-group identity is in line with a nascent body of work targeting ethno-racial, primarily Latino, minorities with both positive (Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Junn and Masuoka 2008; McConnaughy et al. 2010; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016) and negative (Pérez 2013, 2015) political messages that implicitly or explicitly (but never both) cue subjects' in-group identity.<sup>21</sup> Consistently across these works, in-group identity strength variously measured is a significant moderator of the experimental treatments that cue the identity. Individual group members with strong and positive in-group attachments or group consciousness are more likely to be mobilized (Pérez 2013; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016) and persuaded or politicized (Hersh and Schaffner 2013; McConnaughy et al. 2010; Pérez 2013, 2015) by identity-cueing political messages.<sup>22</sup> These works generally do not frame their conclusions as evidence of identity priming, but by bringing attitude-object evaluations more in line with pre-existing identity attachments, relative to a non-identity-cueing baseline message, the identity-based treatments they employ are analogous to the explicit racial messages used in racial priming experiments.

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<sup>21</sup> Because these works never test the effects of both implicit and explicit identity-cueing messages in the same study, they offer limited insight on the applicability of the IE model to non-black ethnic and racial groups. This is another promising area for future research.

<sup>22</sup> Also see Spry's chapter in this volume.



Do identity-based appeals and attacks commonly used today still prime ethno-racial identity attachments? Or is the high salience of identity politics in the current political moment washing out differences between strong and weak in-group identifiers? How do messages that cue Muslim, Jewish, Asian-American, immigrant, and female identities affect in- and out-group responses, and are group biases primed by these messages? Do local population demographics, which consistently affect the strength of in-group identification and the political behavior of minority groups (Bledsoe et al. 1995; Fraga 2016; Gay 2004; Lau 1989; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016; Wilcox-Archuleta 2018), condition these responses? More experimental work can begin to address these questions.

## **Conclusion**

As we have discussed, much has changed in politics since the early racial priming experiments were first conducted. Shifts in the racial content, degree of explicitness, and frequent targets of racialized political communication, as well as the media's and broader public's reactions to these appeals, have added substantially to what remains unknown about the effects of this communication. While present-day politicians continue to exploit racial cleavages and animosities for electoral gain using implicit and explicit racial appeals, racialized political communication will continue to evolve, further complicating the study of racial priming. Nonetheless, as we have argued here, experimental researchers have an important role to play in disentangling the effects of these changes from broader secular changes in racial norms and attitudes. In this challenging and dynamic political context, more experimental research is urgently needed.

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