

“No, You’re Playing the Race Card”: Testing the Effects of Anti-Black, Anti-Latino, and Anti-Immigrant Appeals in the Post-Obama Era

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Despite a sizable literature on racial priming, scholars have failed to account for the shifting nature of racial appeals. First, theories of racial priming have not yet been widely applied to increasingly common anti-immigrant and anti-Latino political appeals. Second, theories of racial priming have not adequately accounted for both an increasingly racialized political climate and increased tolerance for explicit anti-minority appeals. In two survey experiments fielded both before Trump’s rise and after his presidential victory, we find the Implicit-Explicit (IE) model always fails for anti-black appeals, sometimes fails for anti-immigrant appeals, but consistently holds for anti-Latino appeals. While we find the null effects of implicit versus explicit anti-black and anti-immigrant appeals are partly driven by tolerance for the explicit appeals, we also find evidence that white Americans are adept at recognizing the racial content of appeals featuring widely used, congruent issue-group pairs. Our findings shed light on conditions under which the IE model does and does not hold in the current political era.

KEY WORDS: campaign advertising, immigration, Latinos, racial appeals, racial resentment

During his bid for the presidency and first two years in office, President Donald Trump defied conventional wisdom and repeatedly used explicit racial appeals while appearing to incur few political costs. From calling Mexican immigrants “rapists and murderers,” to retweeting anti-Muslim videos from white nationalist activists, to lamenting the arrival of African and Haitian immigrants from “shithole countries” to the United States, Trump has never shied from using a racial bullhorn to express his views and rally supporters. While the use of anti-minority racial appeals is certainly not a new phenomenon in U.S. politics (Valentino, Newburg, & Neuner, 2018), Trump’s candidacy and presidential election victory has made it clear that racial political appeals have recently moved beyond the dog-whistle variety and outside of the black-white dichotomy. How should we understand the current landscape of racial appeals in politics?

We argue that existing racial priming research has failed to keep up with the changing nature of racial politics. First, the political salience of other racial and ethnic minority groups, especially Latinos, has been increasing (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Collingwood, Barreto, & Garcia-Rios, 2014). Indeed, the growth and dispersion of the Latino population have been shown to trigger feelings of racial and cultural threat among whites (Craig, Rucker, & Richeson, 2018; Enos, 2014; Hopkins, 2010; Newman, 2013; Ostfeld, 2018), increase conservative sentiment and Republican Party support (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Newman, Shah, & Collingwood, 2018; Reny, Valenzuela, & Collingwood, 2018), expand support for punitive anti-immigrant policy (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015), and bolster anti-immigrant policy entrepreneurs at the state and local levels (Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015). While politicians continue to capitalize on anti-Latino sentiment for electoral gain, little is known about the persuasive effects of implicit and explicit appeals aimed at denigrating Latinos (although see Hopkins & Ostfeld, 2016).

Second, recent research on racial priming finds no difference in outcomes between implicit and explicit racial appeals, a result attributed to a greater tolerance for explicit anti-minority rhetoric among white Americans (Valentino, Neuner, & Vandebroek, 2018). An alternative, untested explanation for a null effect, however, is that implicit racial cues in an era of hyper-racialized politics and persistent racial dialogue (Tesler, 2016) are easily recognized as racial, weakening their priming effects and violating a central axiom of racial priming theory (Mendelberg, 2001). We argue that this is particularly likely to happen when the issue and group in a racial appeal are commonly paired in politics and therefore highly congruent, as is the case with gang-related crime and African Americans or illegal immigration and Latinos. Both phenomena are likely shaping how racial appeals are being processed in the current political era.

We designed a pair of survey experiments to test how these two processes—increased recognition of and tolerance for racial content in political communication—influence the effects of both anti-black and anti-Latino racial appeals in contemporary politics. In the experiments, we randomly assigned white respondents to one of three racial appeals in a fictitious U.S. Senate candidate's campaign advertisement: an anti-Latino gang appeal, an anti-Latino immigration appeal, and an anti-black gang appeal. Following prior research (Hutchings, Walton, & Benjamin, 2010; Nteta, Lisi, & Tarsi, 2015; Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015), we then exposed random subgroups of each condition to read a follow-up op-ed about the advertisement, unveiling its racial content and rendering the implicit ad explicit.

Across two samples ($n = 1,929$ white respondents), fielded both before Donald Trump's rise as the leading Republican candidate and after his presidential election win, we find little evidence that Mendelberg's (2001) theory of racial priming currently holds for anti-black gang appeals, weak evidence that it holds for anti-Latino immigration appeals, and uncover strong evidence that it holds for the anti-Latino gang appeals. More specifically, we find that in the current era when race is chronically accessible, white respondents are highly adept at recognizing the racial content of implicit appeals with commonly used, and thus highly congruent, issue-group pairings (*Black Gang* and *Latino Immigrant*). Drawing explicit attention to the racial content of these appeals via a follow-up op-ed does little to attenuate their effects. For issue-group pairings that are less common, however, like our *Latino Gang* appeal, white respondents are both less likely to recognize the racial content in the implicit version (increasing its positive impact) and more likely to reject the explicit appeal, consistent with expectations of the IE model. Together, these findings call into question the current applicability of Mendelberg's (2001) racial priming theory, as well as its blanket dismissal, suggesting instead the need for modifications to the original framework for understanding the effects and political consequences of implicit and explicit racial appeals targeting a wider variety of groups with different types of appeals in the current "most-racial" political context (Tesler, 2016).

We make two important contributions to the racial priming literature with this study. First, we extend the IE model to Latinos, the largest nonwhite identity group in U.S. politics today,

who increasingly garner high levels of political attention with respect to the issue of immigration (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015). Second, we investigate an additional explanation for weak or null IE model findings in recent research (Banks & Hicks, 2019; Valentino, Neuner, et al., 2018) by explicitly theorizing about and testing whether implicit racial appeals, as they are frequently operationalized, are in actuality perceived as racial. Our theory and results suggest that they are, and scholars in this area should test whether their implicit racial treatments are in fact implicit. In addition, our findings suggest that scholars should seek to measure adherence to a norm of racial equality. The racial priming literature has long assumed, but never tested, that such a norm is widely held, and that common operationalizations of implicit appeals adequately obscure their racial content. A growing body of literature, this study included, has cast doubt on both of these assumptions.

The IE Model and Anti-Black Appeals

Anti-black racial appeals have long been a centerpiece of American electoral politics. By the mid-1900s, the Civil Rights Movement catapulted racial issues into national politics (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Frymer, 2010; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Implicit anti-black racial appeals, or “dog whistles,” became central to racially conservative politicians’ electoral toolkits (Haney-Lopez, 2014; McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011; Mendelberg, 2001). From Goldwater to George H. W. Bush, national presidential candidates regularly used racial dog whistles, campaigning for “states’ rights,” railing against welfare recipients, and lamenting inner-city crime (Black & Black, 2009; Hillygus & Shields, 2009). In 1988, the Willie Horton ad, perhaps the most famous implicit appeal, was aired by a third-party group on behalf of George H. W. Bush’s campaign (Mendelberg, 2001). The ad motivated research on racial appeals in electoral politics, establishing the dominant theories of racial priming that remain the foundation of research in this area today (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 1997, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002).

Mendelberg (2001) developed a prominent theory of racial appeals, the Implicit-Explicit (IE) model, which argues that white Americans are torn between competing attitudes; they are committed to egalitarian norms but resentful towards African Americans. Thus, only subtle, implicitly racial appeals are able to prime racial predispositions outside of conscious awareness (Kawakami, Dion, & Dovidio, 1998), bringing these racial attitudes in line with evaluations of racialized political objects. When explicitly recognized as racial, however, such appeals activate the public’s adherence to egalitarian norms, which attenuate the influence of racial predispositions on subsequent evaluations. The IE model has held up to numerous empirical tests from the late 1990s to the very recent past (Mendelberg, 1997, 2001; Nteta et al., 2015; Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015; Valentino et al., 2002).

Yet several prominent attempts to replicate the model have failed. A common explanation has been that white Americans are more accepting of explicit racial appeals than in the past. Working with a larger sample, Huber and Lapinski (2006) found inconsistent evidence for the IE model. Later work by Hutchings et al. (2010) similarly found that explicit appeals are sometimes successful at priming racial attitudes, particularly among Southern white men. Finally, across four experiments with varying degrees of explicit racial content, Valentino, Neuner, et al. (2018) find broad acceptance of explicit anti-black appeals among whites, suggesting that Obama’s presidency may have weakened adherence to egalitarian norms.

Increased Acceptance of Explicit Anti-Black Appeals

There are several reasons to expect that explicit racial appeals are becoming more acceptable among some white Americans. First, there is ample anecdotal evidence of increasing use of explicit racial appeals in American society, from racist Tea Party signs to racist memes shared by public officials on social media (Parker & Barreto, 2013; Valentino, Newburg, et al., 2018). Trends in the

use of these explicit racial messages correspond with measurable increases in old-fashioned racism (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Tesler, 2012) and the dehumanization of African Americans (Jardina & Piston, 2017) and other groups (Kteily, Waytz, Bruneau, & Cotterill, 2015) among whites.

There is also evidence of increasing rates of strong white identification, increasing perceptions among whites of discrimination against white people and a drop in perceived discrimination against minority groups (Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2017; Jardina, 2019). A 2017 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that white Republicans are just as or more likely to believe that whites and Christians face as much or more discrimination than do African Americans, LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, or Muslims (Cox et al., 2017). As predicted by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), feelings of threat to an ingroup can result in an effort by group members to assert their worth by reinforcing ingroup favoritism. In turn, this can increase feelings of anger and contempt for outgroups and increase tolerance for outgroup derogation (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Kinder & Kam, 2010; Leach, Rodriguez Mosquera, & Hirt, 2010; Pérez, 2014).

Finally, we find evidence of recent increases in partisan polarization over adherence to egalitarian principles among whites. Since the early 1980s, American adults have been asked their beliefs about equal rights and equal opportunity in the United States. Trends before 2008 indicate that white Republican and white Democratic egalitarian beliefs generally fluctuated in parallel. In 2008, however, white Democrats began moving in a more egalitarian direction while white Republicans moved in a less egalitarian direction, suggesting a weakening of adherence to egalitarian norms among white Republicans specifically. Similar trends are apparent in feeling-thermometer ratings of African Americans, Latinos, and undocumented immigrants.¹

Chronic Accessibility of Race

Failure to confirm the classic IE model with contemporary experiments, however, could also be caused by increased sensitivity to the racial content of implicit appeals. A central axiom of Mendelberg's IE theory is that implicit appeals *must not be recognized as racial* in order to prime racial predispositions. The implicit-explicit distinction has most frequently been operationalized through the pairing of images and words with racialized objects. Implicit appeals pair images of African Americans with nonracial language. Explicit appeals contain overtly racial words such as "Black" or "African American" (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al., 2002). Indeed, Valentino and his colleagues (2002) suggest the distinction between implicit and explicit could be continuous, and the "cut point" where an implicit appeal may pass from automatic processing to conscious awareness, thereby neutralizing its racial priming effect, would likely vary depending on an individual's underlying sensitivity to racial content. This sensitivity, we argue, is also affected by external factors. Among study subjects, a base level of racial awareness should vary depending on both the general salience of race in American politics and the familiarity of the issue-group pairing in a racial appeal (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

As Tesler (2016) shows, mass politics has become more polarized over racial attitudes during the Obama presidency than at any other time in contemporary political history. The election of Barack Obama thrust race into the center of our national dialogue, and racial issues permeated virtually every discussion during his two terms in office. Police-involved shootings, Black Lives Matter, immigration reform, DREAMers, DACA, mass incarceration, and criminal reform were frequently debated over the last decade (Tesler, 2016). Polls have consistently shown that most Americans think race relations deteriorated during Obama's tenure (Dimock, 2017). This heightened attention to race

¹Full analysis of these measures from the ANES can be found in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

is likely to increase the ability of Americans to recognize the racial content of commonly used group-centric policy appeals, even if they are entirely implicit.

Along the same lines, we might expect that the specific issue-group pairing in an appeal affects the likelihood that an implicit appeal will be recognized as racial. Attitudes towards policies are heavily influenced by the groups that Americans believe are associated with or the targets of such policies (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Repeated group-centric framing of an issue increases the association that individuals make between the policy issue and the group (Lodge & Taber, 2013). The link between welfare, crime, and African Americans, for example, has been well documented (Gilens, 1999; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005; Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997). There is strong evidence that the same process is happening with immigration policy and Latinos (Cardona-Arroyo, 2017; Pérez, 2016; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). As Hurwitz and Peffley (2005) and Gilens (1999) posit, group-centric issues and phrases are sufficient to prime racial attitudes without images or explicit racial words. When racial appeals feature issues and images of groups that are frequently linked, what we call highly congruent appeals, respondents should be more likely to “fill in the script” (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000, p. 101) and recognize the racial content of the appeal, violating a central axiom of IE theory and attenuating the implicit appeal’s priming effects. As Hurwitz and Peffley (2005) point out, public debate over the racial content of the Willie Horton ad likely made its content explicit, making it harder for politicians to use coded racial language afterward.²

In sum, there remains substantial disagreement about whether and why the IE model holds for contemporary anti-black racial appeals. While some studies have found that it does (Nteta et al., 2015; Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015), others have found evidence that it does not (Huber & Lapinski, 2006; Hutchings et al., 2010; Valentino, Neuner, et al., 2018). Expanding on this existing work, we posit several factors that could be leading to the null results that we and other scholars have found.³ First, as has been hypothesized by others, there is evidence that white Americans may be more accepting of explicit racial appeals than previously, increasing the priming effects of explicit racial appeals. Second, because race is chronically accessible, and because certain racialized issues and groups are highly congruent (e.g., gang-related crime and African Americans), it may be the case that white Americans are better at “filling in the script” and recognizing the racial content of implicit appeals as they have been operationalized in research, decreasing their priming effects. Both of these possibilities violate key axioms of Mendelberg’s (2001) theory and suggest that, if true, the IE model may no longer hold for anti-black appeals.

Racial Priming and Anti-Latino Appeals

What about other minority groups? Does the IE model also apply to racial appeals featuring other racial and ethnic minorities like Latinos? Building on the literature reviewed above, we argue that whites should be even more accepting of explicit anti-Latino appeals than anti-black appeals for at least two reasons. First, the histories of African Americans and Latinos in the United States are radically different, which shapes how white Americans view their relative experiences and positions in society (Junn & Masuoka, 2013). Second, while some stereotypes are shared between the groups, perceived prototypical members of each group are different and could engender different reactions when images of group members are presented with otherwise identical language in the appeal.

²In Appendix S2 in the online supporting information, we show evidence from news transcripts from 2006 to 2016 that discussion of violent gangs is commonly associated with black imagery or references, yet it is far less commonly associated with Latino imagery or references. Similarly, discussion of immigration is commonly associated with references to Latinos, Hispanics, or Mexicans.

³This could also be due, in part, to methodological differences across these studies, in particular the operationalization of implicit versus explicit appeals, an issue we address at length in the Data and Methods section.

As Mendelberg (2001) argues, norms of racial equality emerged during the mid-twentieth century as segregation came under attack and the Civil Rights Movement discredited antiegalitarian beliefs. Old ideas of biological inferiority and white supremacy were relegated to the fringes as major political institutions aligned themselves against those ideologies and white Americans widely adopted basic tenets of equality and egalitarianism (Mendelberg, 2001; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985). This transformation occurred, however, within the black-white racial dichotomy, with Civil Rights proponents consistently reminding white Americans about the challenges faced by a racial group that was enslaved and terrorized for centuries. It is less clear how egalitarian norms developed for one group, African Americans, may apply to other groups in society. Indeed, scholars have argued that Latinos occupy a higher rung on the racial hierarchy in the United States than do African Americans (Masuoka & Junn, 2013), and the use of explicit anti-Latino appeals has become commonplace in American politics (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011), suggesting that white Americans may be more tolerant of explicit anti-Latino appeals than of otherwise-identical anti-black appeals.

The perceived prototypical Latino group member may also shape how whites view explicit anti-Latino appeals. Researchers have found that media coverage of Latinos is generally tied to immigration (Farris & Mohamed, 2018), negative in tone, and highly sensational (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015; Abrajano & Singh, 2008; Branton, Cassese, Jones, & Westerland, 2011; Chavez, 2001; Santa Ana, 2002; Valentino et al., 2013). These media portrayals matter. Pluralities or majorities of white Americans view Latino immigrants as welfare recipients, less educated than other Americans, and as refusing to learn English, taking jobs from other Americans, and having too many children (Bobo, 2001; Masuoka & Junn, 2013; Reny & Manzano, 2016), though uncommonly as violent gang members, a stereotype that may have existed in the early 1990s in the Southwest but until very recently had not been a dominant part of the national media's narrative on immigration (Suro, 2009). In short, attitudes towards Latino immigrants, specifically among whites, are decidedly negative and driven primarily by culturally threatening stereotypes (Enos, 2014; Huntington, 2005; Newman, 2013).

More importantly, media coverage of Latinos is overwhelmingly linked to illegal immigration. Despite the fact that most Latinos are now second generation, and relatively few Latino immigrants are undocumented, illegality has become a powerful legitimizing myth that serves to justify out-group derogation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The illegality narrative may deflect charges of racial prejudice by offering plausible deniability that anti-(illegal) immigration appeals or attitudes are not racist or do not violate egalitarian norms. When challenged on anti-immigrant views, a common retort is: "What part of *illegal* do you not understand?" It is easy to extend this reasoning from undocumented immigrants specifically to Latinos in general, an extension that prior research has confirmed many whites engage in (Cardona-Arroyo, 2017; Pérez, 2016; Valentino et al., 2013).

Hypotheses

We have argued that white Americans will be more likely to recognize the racial content of implicit appeals in our current political environment, particularly if the issue and group in the appeal are highly congruent like gang-related crime and African Americans, or illegal immigration and Latinos. According to the IE model, this would *decrease* their priming effects because they are recognized as violating egalitarian norms. At the same time, we have argued that white Americans today are tolerant of explicit anti-black racial appeals and should be especially tolerant of explicit anti-Latino appeals in American politics, which would increase the effectiveness of these explicit racial appeals if the IE model is still applicable.

In Figure 1, we present stylized expectations for contemporary racial appeals given our theoretical discussion above. In Panel 1, we display the stylized predictions of the classic Mendelberg (2001) racial priming model. White individuals high in racial resentment would support a candidate using racially conservative implicit appeals but reject racially conservative explicit appeals because

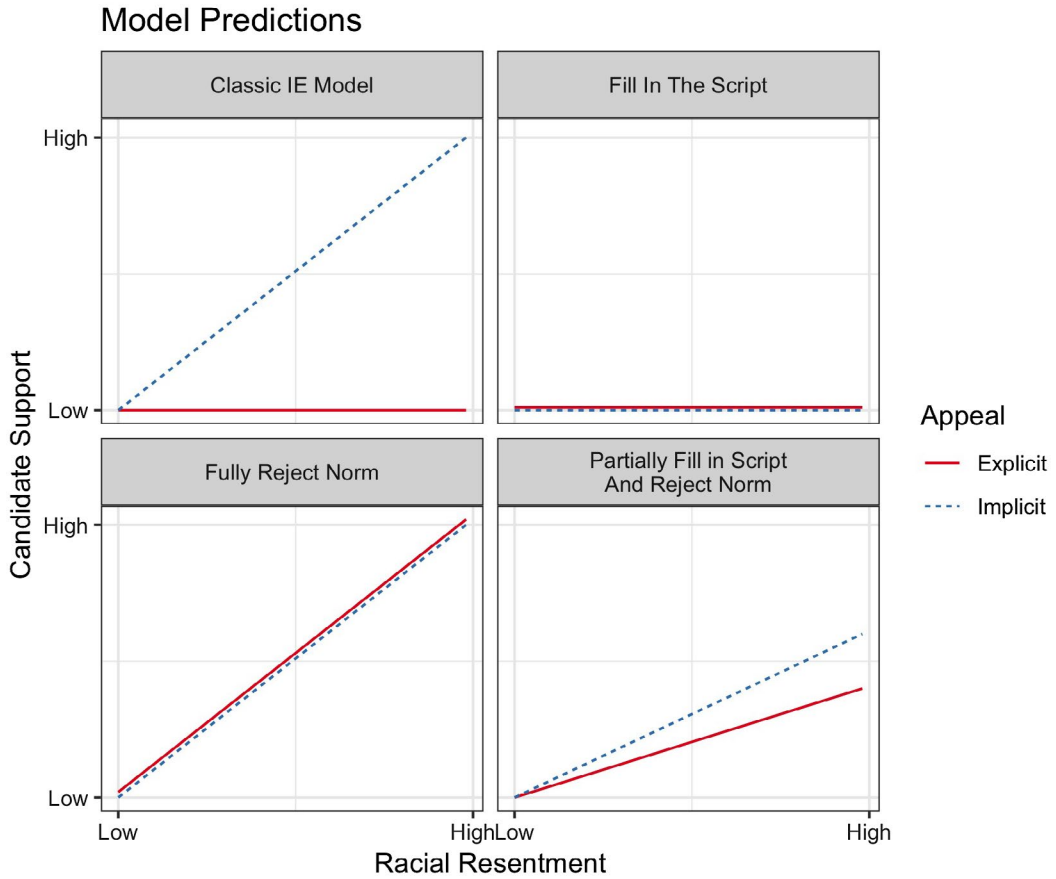


Figure 1. Stylized theory predictions. Diagram of stylized model predictions under (1) classic IE model; (2) if norms are embraced but white respondents “fill in the script”; (3) full rejection of egalitarian norms; and (4) partial filling in of the script and partial rejection of egalitarian norms, as we suggest in our theory.

of concerns of their antiegalitarian nature. In Panel 2, we show what would happen if racially conservative white individuals embraced egalitarian norms but were able to “fill in the script” and recognize the racial content of the implicit appeal, weakening the racial priming effect of the implicit appeal. In Panel 3, we show what would happen if racially conservative white individuals completely rejected egalitarian norms, increasing the priming power of explicit racial appeals. And in Panel 4, which we have argued is the most likely to be applicable today, we show what would happen if white individuals partially “fill in the script” and only weakly adhere to egalitarian norms.

Data and Methods

Manipulations: Congruent and Less-Congruent Implicit Appeals

To test these hypotheses, we constructed three storyboards of implicit racial television advertisements for a hypothetical white U.S. Senate candidate named Scott Ritter. Respondents were first told they would be shown “screenshots of a political advertisement” for Ritter and instructed to “carefully look at each image and read the accompanying text” before advancing to the next frame.

The first, third, and fourth frame of each advertisement were identical. The first frame is of the U.S. Capitol building with the text “The United States is being destroyed...”; the third is of a barn set against an American flag with “It’s time to take America back”; and the fourth shows the candidate sponsoring the ad with “Vote Scott Ritter for United States Senate.” The implicitly racial treatment manipulations were all contained in the second frame. The full treatments used in the experiments can be found in the Appendix S3 in the online supporting information.

We constructed three implicit racial appeal treatments: a highly congruent implicit Latino racial appeal (“Latino Immigration”), a less congruent implicit Latino racial appeal (“Latino Gang”), and a highly congruent black racial appeal (“Black Gang”). While we cannot manipulate the salience of race in some issue-group appeals used in politics, we can approximate it by comparing the effects of a racial appeal featuring a highly congruent issue-group pairing (“Latino Immigration”) and one using the same group image but with a less congruent issue pairing (“Latino Gang”).

Immigration is almost exclusively Latino group-centric, and so Latino immigration appeals are highly issue-group congruent (Pérez, 2016; Valentino et al., 2013). The issue of gang violence is also group-centric, but most frequently associated with African Americans in the United States (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2007; Mendelberg, 2001). However, by pairing the gang text with the same image of Latino males as in the immigration appeal, we present respondents with a less congruent issue-group pairing that is otherwise identical to the more congruent (“Black Gang” and “Latino Immigration”) pairings. While the media narrative of Latino gang criminality, particularly focused on MS-13, is becoming more commonly used in politics, it was not a salient appeal when this study was designed and fielded.⁴

The implicit Latino appeals borrowed an image used by Sharron Angle and David Vitter in their own immigration campaign ads in 2010. The full text of the “Latino Immigration” ad was the following: “The United States is being destroyed by illegal aliens who need to be deported. It’s time to take America back. Vote Scott Ritter for United States Senate.” The full text of the “Latino Gang” ad was: “The United States is being destroyed by criminal gang members who need to be locked up. It’s time to take America back. Vote Scott Ritter for United States Senate.” The full text of the implicit “Black Gang” ad is identical to the Latino gang ad text but features an image of three black men instead of three Latino men.

Across our three appeals, we hold everything but the issue and group pair constant. In the gang appeals, we hold issue constant and vary group. In the Latino appeals, we hold group constant and vary issue. By doing so, we create two appeals that are congruent (“Latino Immigration” and “Black Gang”) and one (“Latino Gang”) that is less congruent, resulting in a design that allows us to make both within and across category comparisons (Sniderman, 2018).⁵

Manipulations: Turning Implicit Appeals Explicit

There are several ways to counter an implicit racial appeal (Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015). According to Mendelberg (2001), implicit appeals work primarily because they are processed automatically and unconsciously. When implicit appeals are made explicit—when their reception by subjects moves from automatic processing to conscious awareness—egalitarian considerations neutralize the priming effect of the appeal. While previous studies have used different approaches to operationalize how implicit appeals are countered, researchers have generally used one of two ways:

⁴In Appendix Table S2.2 in the online supporting information, we show that public interest in MS-13, for example, only spiked after the 2016 election.

⁵Because our dependent variables measure support for a hypothetical candidate, there are no plausible control or placebo treatments that could measure baseline attitudes toward Ritter without introducing other considerations into evaluations of him. We therefore opted not to include a nonracial baseline condition.

either through political communication that directly names the target racial group or by exposing the racial intent of implicit appeals.

The first approach, which has been used most frequently in prior literature, uses explicit racial cues in the appeals themselves. Mendelberg (2001) argues that the presence of racial language (“Blacks,” “African Americans,” “Latinos,” or “Mexicans,” for example) in a political appeal will undermine its ability to prime racial predispositions because of the public’s ambivalence between adherence to egalitarian norms and feelings of outgroup resentment or threat (Valentino et al., 2002; Valentino, Neuner, et al., 2018). Mendelberg (2001) also argues, however, that the media or other elites can and do “call out” the racial content of implicit cues, much in the way that Jesse Jackson did to counter the Willie Horton advertisements and campaign narrative that emerged in the 1988 presidential campaign. By exposing the racial intent of implicit racial appeals, respondents are forced to consciously process the appeals as racial before evaluating a candidate using them. This approach has been tested empirically by several scholars (Banks & Hicks, 2019; Nteta et al., 2015; Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015).

Following Nteta and colleagues (2016), we assign a random subset of our respondents from each implicit condition to read a fictitious follow-up *USA Today* op-ed written as a commentary on the implicit racial advertisement that each respondent had just viewed. We were careful to choose a publication that does not have a perceived ideological stance and was written by a generically named male author, David Jackson, that does not cue any particular partisan affiliation (Banks & Hicks, 2019; Tokeshi & Mendelberg, 2015).

The remainder of the subjects within each treatment group saw no op-ed, instead passing directly to answer posttreatment questions. Thus, for each issue-group appeal, there is an implicit and explicit version. The op-eds are all nearly identical in length and tone, varying only two features, the issue and the group, to match the content of the advertisements to which they refer. Our study therefore takes the form of 3 × 2 design: ad content (“Latino Immigrant,” “Latino Gang,” “Black Gang”) and op-ed or no op-ed (“Explicit” or “Implicit,” respectively). The full design is outlined in Figure 2.

Other Key Variables

Our dependent variable is support for Scott Ritter, a fictitious candidate for the U.S. Senate who sponsored the political advertisement featured in our experiment. For the first study, we asked respondents: “If Scott Ritter, the U.S. Senate candidate who was featured in the advertisement you just saw, was running in an election in your state, how likely would you be to vote for him?” The responses range from “very likely” to “not at all likely” (4-point scale) and were rescaled to range between 0 and 1. For the second study, we also included a general affect question: “How would you say you feel towards Scott Ritter, the candidate featured in the ad you just saw?” The answers ranged from “very favorable” to “not at all favorable” (4-point scale). For the second study, we combined these two questions into a general Ritter support scale ($\alpha = 0.96$) and rescaled to range between 0 and 1.

To assess whether the advertisements were perceived as racial, we asked respondents in the first study whether they agreed (1) or not (0) that Ritter was playing the race card. To measure a more subjective perception of the acceptability of racial appeals in the second study, we asked respondents whether they agreed that the ad was racially insensitive (1) or not (0).

Finally, racial resentment serves as our moderating variable (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). We created the racial resentment index by summing responses to the four items and rescaling the result to range from 0 to 1 (question wordings are in Appendix S4 in the online supporting information). Because we do not assume a linear interaction effect between racial resentment and our treatments (Hainmueller, Mummolo, & Xu, 2019), we dummy racial resentment into terciles and interact mid- and high-levels of racial resentment with our treatments. While racial resentment was developed to measure attitudes toward African Americans, evidence indicates it is associated with generalized outgroup prejudice and correlated with anti-Latino attitudes (Carney & Enos, 2017; Kalkan,

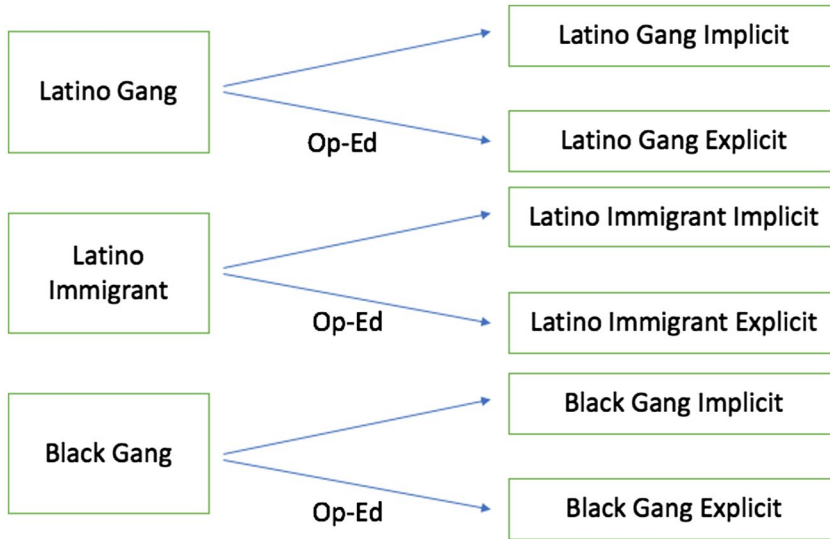


Figure 2. Research design. All respondents answered pretreatment survey questions before being randomly assigned via simple randomization to one of three implicit racial advertisement treatment conditions (left column). Subgroups were then randomized again into reading an op-ed or proceeding directly to the posttreatment survey questions. The six treatment groups are labeled in the right column. The pooled sample is evenly distributed via simple randomization across treatments: Latino Gang Implicit ($n = 333$), Latino Gang Explicit ($n = 316$), Latino Immigrant Implicit ($n = 317$), Latino Immigrant Explicit ($n = 321$), Black Gang Implicit ($n = 327$), and Black Gang Explicit ($n = 315$).

Layman, & Uslander, 2009; Kinder & Kam, 2010). Indeed, Appendix S5 in the online supporting information shows racial resentment is highly correlated with immigrant resentment, immigration policy attitudes, and immigrant and Latino affect.

Data

We conducted our experiment twice, at the start and end of 2016, and in both time periods recruited convenience samples from two sources that were exposed to identical treatments and asked identical survey questions. The start of 2016 marked the start of the presidential primary-election calendar in that year, while subjects interviewed at the end of 2016 had by then witnessed the election victory of Donald J. Trump. Thus, to the extent that our experimental results are similar across these two very different electoral periods, that should increase confidence in their external validity (Druckman & Kam, 2011; McDermott, 2011).

The first experiment was fielded from January 5 to January 9, 2016, on a sample of undergraduate students from a private East Coast university and Internet-using adults in the United States recruited via the online market research company Cint. Cint incentivizes survey participation using a proprietary program so we do not know response rates for this portion of our sample. For the college-student portion, 62.6% ($n = 3,301$) of the university's undergraduate population was randomly selected to participate, and of those, 25.2% completed the survey. Subjects recruited from the private university were incentivized to complete the survey through a prize drawing at the conclusion of the study. The survey instrument contained several experimental manipulations that were unrelated to the current study and came after our manipulations. These two sources yielded a sample of 825 white respondents in Study 1 (student $n = 309$; Internet $n = 516$).

The second experiment was fielded from December 19 to December 31, 2016, again on a sample of undergraduates from the same private East Coast university as in Study 1 and on a sample of Internet-using adults in the United States recruited via Cint.⁶ For the student portion of the sample, 2,502 members of the university's undergraduate population were randomly selected to participate, and of those, 36.3% completed the survey. As in Study 1, the survey instrument contained several experimental manipulations that were unrelated to the current study and came after our study questions. These two sources yielded a sample of 1,104 white respondents in Study 2 (student $n = 233$; Internet $n = 871$).

As has been shown with other Internet-based convenience samples (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012), ours are younger, more highly educated, and more Democratic than the national average. These differences are exacerbated by our partial reliance on university students (37.4% of Study 1 subjects, and 21.1% of Study 2 subjects). In terms of political independence, moderate and conservative ideology, and racial resentment, however, our two study samples are more in line with national figures. Full sample descriptive statistics can be found in Appendix S4 in the online supporting information.

Although our samples diverge from national averages on some characteristics that are likely related to candidate preferences and support, our interest here is not to estimate national levels of support for a particular candidate. Instead, we wish to assess differences in average support across variations in our experimental treatment. Through random assignment, our study maximizes internal validity to the extent that a statistically identical mix of respondent characteristics are present in each experimental condition, allowing us to conclude that any differences across conditions are due to variations in our manipulation (Druckman & Kam, 2011; McDermott, 2011). Indeed, results of balance tests, displayed in Appendix S4 in the online supporting information, show similar covariate distributions in all of our experimental conditions.

In the results below, we present findings for Study 1 and Study 2 separately because they were conducted during very different time periods in the electoral cycle, increasing their external validity if the results are similar. In addition, two sets of previous studies have shown that our convenience samples are likely to produce results that can generalize to the broader American public. One set has shown that experiments conducted on opt-in panels (e.g., Amazon's Mechanical Turk) and undergraduate student populations like ours closely replicate results generated from nationally diverse (e.g., YouGov) and nationally representative probability samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Krupnikov & Levine, 2014; Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, & Freese, 2015).

A second set has argued that in the presence of treatment effect heterogeneity, just so long as there is some variation in the moderator, a convenience sample should generate treatment effect estimates that closely correspond to those generated in a nationally representative sample (Coppock, 2019; Druckman & Kam, 2011). Tests of this claim using numerous identical experiments conducted across samples from different sources have found high correspondence, despite wide variation in background characteristics across samples (Coppock, 2019; Coppock, Leeper, & Mullinix, 2018; Krupnikov & Levine, 2014).

In our experiments, we anticipate there may be homogenous effects (for explicit appeals if the IE model still holds, or for both implicit and explicit appeals if subjects are "filling in the script") and heterogeneous effects (for implicit appeals if the IE model still holds, or for both implicit and explicit appeals if subjects reject the norm of equality) across levels of racial resentment, making variation in this attitude a prerequisite for generalizability. In our two study samples, means (and standard deviations) of racial resentment are remarkably similar to the national average (in the American National Election Studies or ANES) among whites, with Study 1 mean racial resentment less than a third of

⁶Subjects who participated in Study 1 were excluded from possible selection into Study 2.

a standard deviation lower, and Study 2 mean racial resentment slightly higher than nationally but less than a tenth of a standard deviation different. In terms of variability, Study 1 racial resentment's standard deviation is 0.31, and in Study 2 it is 0.22, while in the ANES it is 0.28, indicating quite similar levels of variation in our samples as nationally.

Analysis and Results

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we display results of our IE model test for all three appeals to assess the extent to which implicit and explicit appeals prime racial attitudes for both congruent issue-group and incongruent issue-group appeals. Second, we examine responses to questions that reveal the extent to which respondents perceived the implicit and explicit appeals as playing the race card (Study 1) or being racially insensitive (Study 2). These questions allow us to examine whether white respondents are “filling in the script” and consciously processing the racial intent of the implicit racial appeals.

In Figure 3, we plot average support for Ritter with 90% confidence intervals across racial resentment terciles for each treatment condition. While we display results from linear models with covariate adjustment throughout the article, we include full regression output and difference-in-means tests in Appendix S6 in the online supporting information. Both approaches yield substantively identical findings. Before we address our specific hypotheses, we note that results look remarkably similar across studies. While support for Ritter is slightly stronger in all conditions in Study 2 (December, 2016) as opposed to Study 1 (January, 2016), the patterns between implicit and explicit conditions are consistent and nearly identical, suggesting that Trump's candidacy may have shifted the intercept, increasing overall support for our racially conservative candidate, but did not change how implicit and explicit appeals were processed by respondents.

Returning to our hypotheses, we posited that we would find weak support for the IE model consistent with panel 4 of Figure 1, particularly in the anti-black gang and anti-Latino immigrant conditions, where there would be small differences in support for Ritter between implicit and explicit racial appeal conditions. In Figure 3, we display mean levels of support for Ritter, with 90% confidence intervals, across each level of racial resentment for all treatments. In Figure 4, in order to facilitate interpretation of any differences, we plot conditional average treatment effects (CATE) on support for Ritter using the implicit condition as the baseline.

If the IE model holds, we should expect to find negative and statistically significant CATEs for those highest in racial resentment; if not, the estimates in Figure 4 should be indistinguishable from zero. Consistent with Valentino, Neuner, et al. (2018), we find no differences between implicit and explicit versions of our anti-black racial appeals.⁷ We have somewhat mixed results for the “Latino Immigration” appeals, with no difference between implicit and explicit versions among high racial resentment subjects in Study 1, but a statistically significant difference between implicit and explicit versions of the appeal among high racial resentment subjects in Study 2, suggesting mixed support for the EI model with respect to anti-Latino *immigration* appeals.

In contrast, however, we find consistent evidence that the IE model does hold for our “Latino Gang” appeals. Looking only at those highest in racial resentment, we find that support for Ritter is 0.15 points (about 0.6 standard deviations) lower in the explicit than in the implicit “Latino Gang” treatment condition (90% CI: [-0.23, -0.06]) in Study 1, and 0.13 points (about 0.5 standard deviations) lower in Study 2 (90% CI: [-0.20, -0.06]).

⁷In Appendix S6 in the online supporting information, we go one step further to investigate whether our study is sufficiently powered to rule out substantively meaningful effects for our null findings. Following Rainey (2014), we find evidence that our study is sufficiently powered across nearly every condition to detect negligible effects.

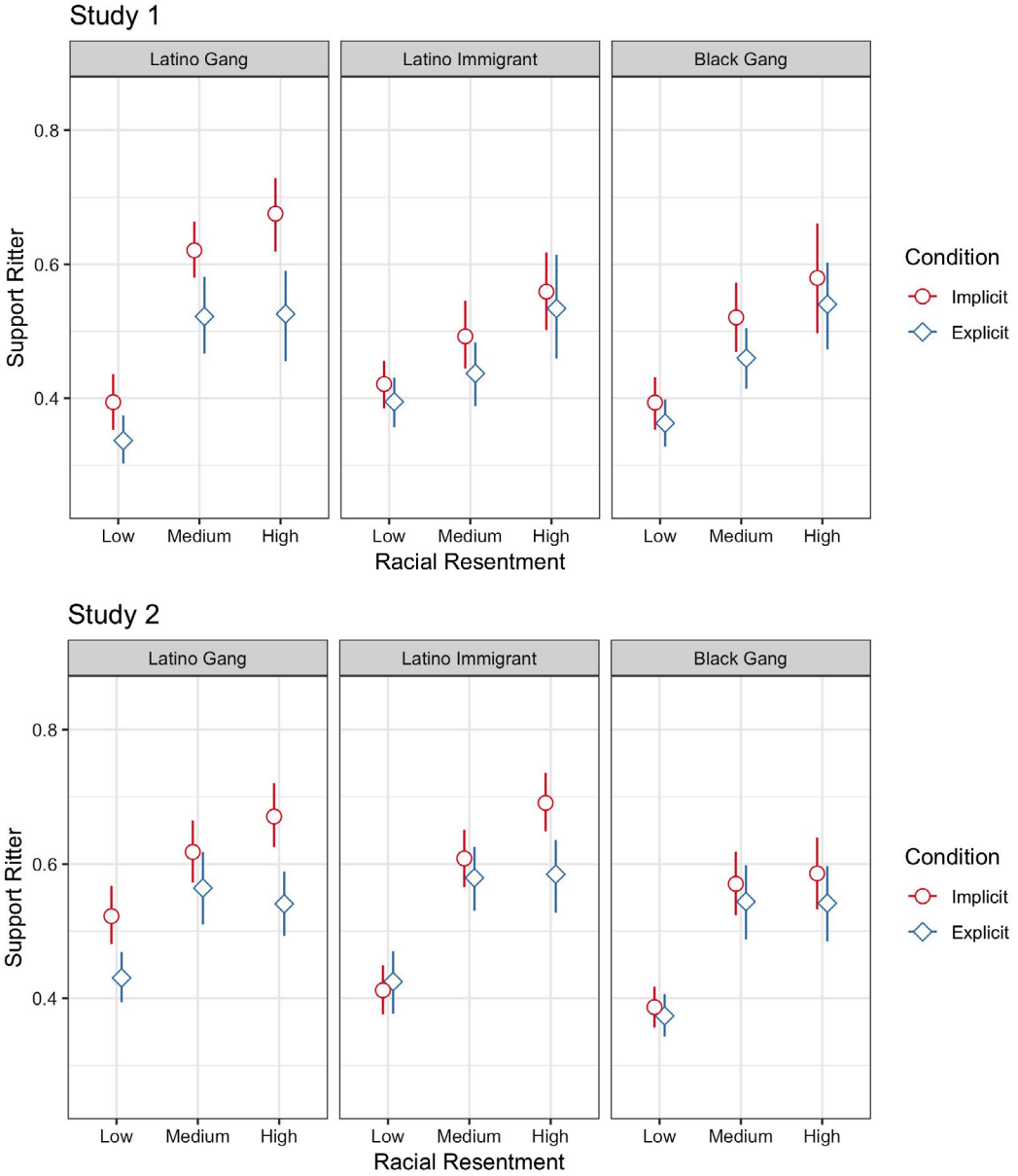


Figure 3. Estimated support for candidate across treatment conditions conditional on racial resentment. Points indicate predicted support for Ritter for each implicit (red circles) and explicit (blue diamonds) treatment condition for those low, medium, and high in racial resentment (split at terciles). Ninety-percent confidence intervals simulated from heteroskedastic robust standard errors.

We argued that the IE model may no longer hold for contemporary racial appeals both because of weaker adherence to norms of racial equality, but also because respondents are more likely to recognize the racial content of highly congruent issue-group pairings (“Black Gang” and “Latino Immigration” appeals in our experiments), thereby attenuating their priming effects. At the same time, subjects should be less likely to recognize the racial content of a less congruent “Latino Gang”

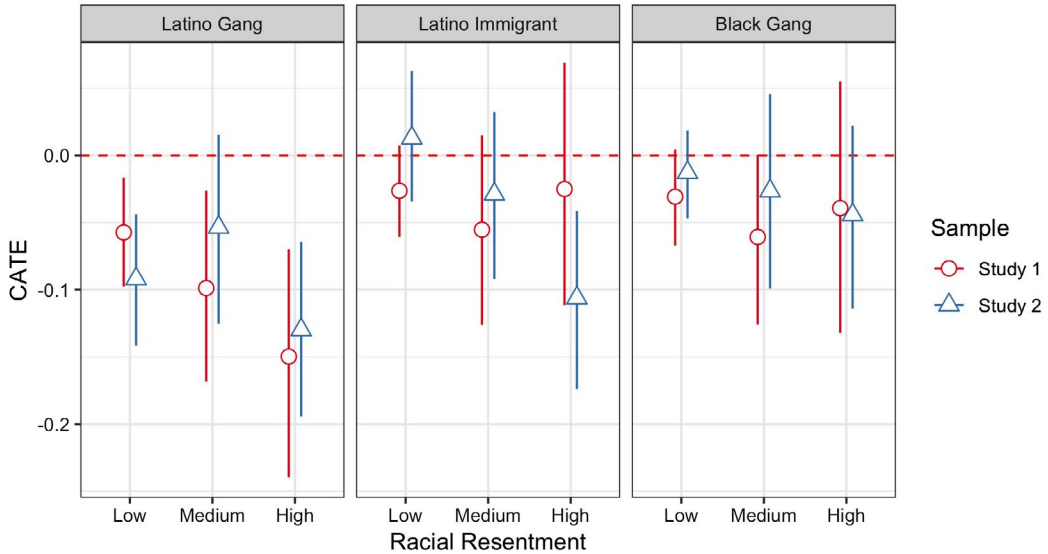


Figure 4. Conditional average treatment effects conditional on racial resentment. Points indicate treatment effect of explicit appeal relative to implicit appeal conditional for national and student samples across all three racial appeals. Lines indicate 90% confidence intervals simulated from heteroskedastic robust standard errors.

appeal. Perhaps the IE model holds in the “Latino Gang” condition because respondents are less likely to recognize its racial intent.

After viewing the racial appeals and answering the dependent variable questions in Study 1, respondents were asked: “Do you think Congressional leaders and the media would agree that Scott Ritter played the race card?” We asked this question to minimize subjective personal perceptions of racial appeals and instead focus respondents’ attention on a third-party assessment of the racial content of the appeals. We display results from this question in the first panel of Figure 5. In the second study, we asked a different question to tap into more subjective perceptions of the appeals. After answering our battery of dependent variables, respondents were asked whether they agreed or not that the advertisement they saw was “racially insensitive.” We display results for this question in the second panel of Figure 5.

A few notable trends are apparent. Starting with the first panel, we see that a majority of respondents appear aware of the racial content of the implicit appeals, suggesting that common operationalizations of racially “implicit” appeals—featuring racialized imagery but no explicit mention of a racial group—might nonetheless enter conscious awareness as racial, contrary to most previous assumptions. For all three implicit treatments, over half of white respondents agreed that Ritter was “playing the race card.” Second, this awareness appears to increase when we move from incongruent to congruent issue-group appeals, a difference that disappears in the explicit condition. This suggests why a less congruent issue-group appeal, such as our “Latino Gangs” pairing, is more successful at priming racial attitudes: because it is less likely to be recognized and processed consciously as racial. When exposed as racial, however, respondents were just as likely to agree that it was “playing the race card” as the other two appeals.

An identical pattern emerges in Study 2 with respect to perceptions of racial insensitivity. Again, similar proportions of white respondents agree that the “Latino Immigration” and “Black Gang” appeals were racially insensitive, providing further confirmation that these highly congruent issue-group pairings are being perceived as racial, even with no explicit racial content. Far fewer

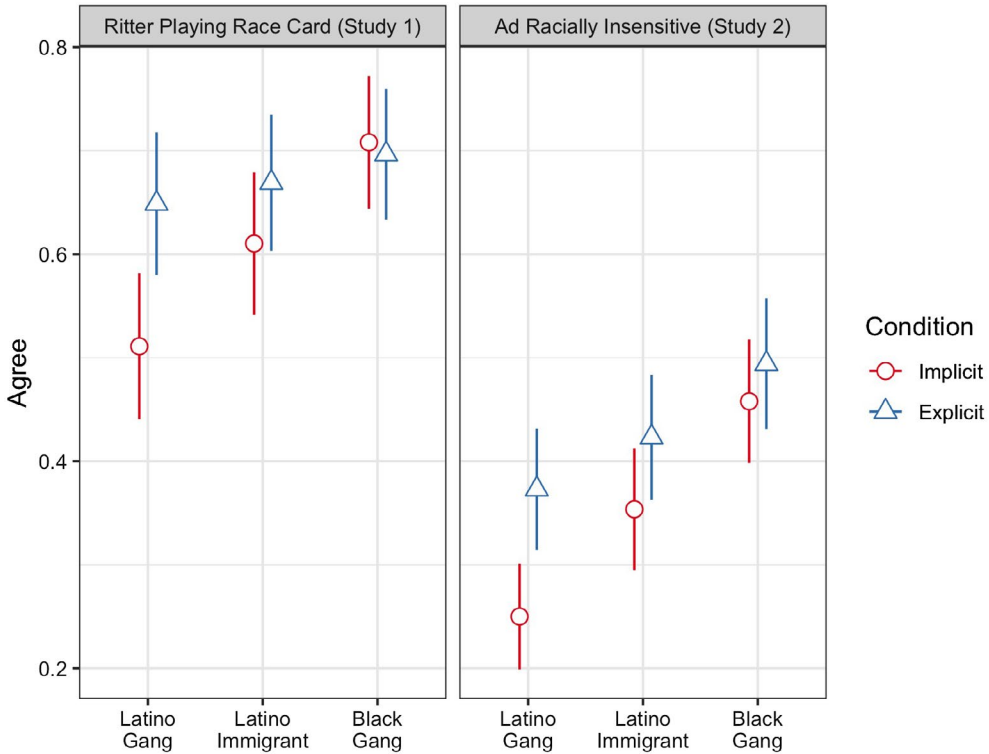


Figure 5. Is Ritter playing the race card or running a racially insensitive ad? Summary of mean agreement among white respondents that Ritter “played the race card” (Panel A, Study 1) or that appeal was “racially insensitive” (Panel B, Study 2). Lines indicate 90% confidence intervals. We find that fewer respondents were aware of the racial content of the implicit Latino Gang appeal and were less likely to say ad was racially insensitive. In its explicit counterpart, however, the proportion agreeing that Ritter played the race card and was racially insensitive increases to the same level as the other appeals. This suggests that the highly congruent issue-group appeals (Black Gang and Latino Immigration) were already perceived as racial, whereas the less congruent Latino Gang appeals was not. Note the ceiling on agreement of racial insensitivity. Despite the clear racial demagogic nature of the appeals, fewer than half of the sample agreed that the Black Gang appeals are racially insensitive.

agreed that the implicit “Latino Gang” advertisement was racially insensitive, however, suggesting that the less congruent issue-group appeal was more implicit. Only 25% of the sample agreed that the implicit “Latino Gang” appeal was racially insensitive. In the explicit condition, however, that increased to 37% ($p = 0.009$), roughly in line with perceptions of the other appeals. We find evidence, therefore, that in an era when race is highly cognitively accessible, white respondents are likely to recognize the racial content of implicit racial appeals, particularly if those appeals feature highly congruent issue-group pairings.

Finally, we highlight the apparent ceiling of agreement with both questions shown in Figure 5. Fewer than seven of 10 white respondents were willing to objectively agree that others would label the appeals in the ads as playing the race card. Even more surprising, fewer than half of white respondents were willing to agree that these appeals, which were fashioned to be particularly egregious in their use of racial stereotypes, were racially insensitive, similar to what Valentino, Neuner, et al. (2018) found in their own set of experiments. While these questions were not fashioned to measure an embrace of egalitarian norms, these findings offer additional evidence in line with our analyses

of ANES data in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information, showing that egalitarian racial norms are polarizing and weaker than previously supposed.

Conclusion and Discussion

At the outset of this article, we highlighted two potential limitations in the literature on racial priming. First, despite the increased use of racial appeals targeting a variety of marginalized social groups in contemporary electoral politics, scholars have almost exclusively examined racial appeals in the black-white dichotomy. Second, with only a few exceptions, scholars of racial priming tend to ignore the evolving context within which racial appeals are being deployed and the effects this racialized context might have on how commonly operationalized racial appeals are perceived. We argued that tolerance of explicit racial appeals targeting racial and ethnic minority outgroups is likely increasing as white Americans begin to perceive their own group as under threat. We also argued that the increasing salience of race has increased the likelihood that traditional operationalizations of implicit racial appeals—appeals with a racialized image but nonracial language or text—are actually being perceived as explicitly racial by most whites. Together, these trends undermine two central axioms of Mendelberg’s (2001) theory of racial priming as currently understood.

Thus as expected, we find no evidence for the IE model with our anti-black gang appeals, mixed evidence with our anti-Latino immigration appeals, and strong evidence that it holds with our anti-Latino gang appeals. In exploring mechanisms behind these differences, we find support for both proposed societal changes. Racially resentful whites are much better at recognizing the racial content of implicit racial appeals when the issue and group are highly congruent and deeply racialized, as is the case with the black gang and Latino immigration treatments. Whites are also fairly tolerant of explicit racial appeals regardless of the issue or group that is featured.

These findings highlight two important limitations in the racial priming literature that should inform work on racial priming moving forward. First, several studies have assumed that egalitarian norms are weakening, and indeed, the existence of these norms underlies a central axiom of the IE theory. While we agree this is likely true, few scholars, including us, directly measure adherence to these norms as a component of their study. We suggest that future work on racial priming incorporate this directly into their research designs. Second, we present evidence that the classic operationalization of implicit racial appeals, a racialized image with nonracial text, is not in fact implicit for most respondents. A majority of white respondents recognize the racial content of these types of implicit racial appeals, particularly when the issue and group pairing is highly congruent. Careful pilot testing can help to ensure that experimental treatments are indeed being received as intended by researchers.

As the United States continues to diversify, political candidates will continue to develop appeals that tap into anxiety over the growth of racial and ethnic minority populations. In fact, since we fielded this study, the Trump Administration and several campaigns, such as Ed Gillespie’s for Governor of Virginia, have focused their campaign messages on the threat posed to the United States by violent Latino street gangs like MS-13. Our research suggests these appeals will be effective in priming racial attitudes but also that their priming effects will be attenuated when the content of these appeals is exposed as racially insensitive. A more elusive but perhaps important goal will be finding ways to strengthen and reinforce societal norms of racial equality among white Americans.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Egalitarianism

Appendix S2. Issue-Group Congruency

Appendix S3. Treatments

Appendix S4. Question Wordings, Sample Characteristics, and Balance Tests

Appendix S5. Racial Resentment as Proxy for Latino and Immigrant Resentment?

Appendix S6. Regression With Covariate Adjustment, Difference-in-Means, and Negligible Effect Tests