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Race and the Moral Character of the Modern American Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is two-fold. A central divide in the race-in-politics literature concerns whether people openly profess racially prejudiced statements or confine themselves to subtle racism. Our first objective is to examine this debate using new data from the 2008 election. Our second – and central – objective is to bring out the opposing forces in the politics of race. To this point, all the emphasis has been on the force of prejudice. We show that an opposing force of good will also exists, and that many Americans hold blacks in esteem. Using data collected after the 2008 election, we find that esteem dramatically increases the likelihood of supporting Obama for partisans who disagree with their party on ideological terms (e.g., conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans), but not for partisans who agree with their party ideologically (e.g., liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans).

KEYWORDS: 2008 presidential election, Obama, race

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This study addresses two questions. The first has to do the nature of prejudice in America, the second with the moral character of the modern American experience. Blatant prejudice, according to many social scientists and commentators on public affairs, belongs to the past. Social norms have changed. What was once permissible is no longer acceptable. White Americans will no longer say something derogatory about blacks for fear they will appear to be racists. It is a taken-for-granted truth that racism now is subtle, guarded, covert. Our findings show that this view is false and represents a profound misunderstanding of the nature of prejudice.

Our second finding goes deeper. For the past 40 years, the study of race in American politics has focused on two questions: How much prejudice remains? And how much does it still matter? The answers have been, an awful lot, and yes, indeed. Prejudice, in the view of racism specialists, remains the dominant force on matters of politics and race. It is not the only factor, but “by a fair margin, [it] is the most important one.”¹

In the light of American history, a concentration of attention on prejudice as a force in American politics is both understandable and puzzling. It is understandable because racism and racial inequality have been part of the American experience from the start. At the same time, this fixing of attention only on ill will toward blacks is puzzling. The fight against racism and racial inequality has been central to American politics at least since the mid 1950s. Over the last half century, a good many white Americans marched hand-in-hand with black Americans in civil rights protests; sponsored, funded, and organized registration drives of black voters; participated in an array of inter-racial community organizations; supported an affirmative policy agenda to assure equality of opportunity and, albeit with more division, to achieve equality of condition.

Substantial numbers of white Americans think well of blacks and wish life to go well for them. It is accordingly the purpose of this study to provide the first empirical demonstration that the moral character of the modern American engagement with race is shaped by a positive force, esteem for blacks, and not just a negative one, prejudice.

Hypotheses and Data

Our concern is politics, and in particular, voting in a presidential election, and in still more detail, in a presidential election in which one of the candidates is an African American. It follows from common sense that racial prejudice will stoke opposition to Obama. Though the level of bigotry now is markedly lower than half a century ago (Schuman, Bobo, and Steeh 1985), bigotry is hardly a scarce

¹ Kinder and Sanders 1996, 124. See also Mendelberg 2001 and Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000.

commodity in America today. If the racially intolerant are riled by public policies to assist blacks, as indeed they are (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sniderman and Piazza 1993), they must surely be fired up at the sight of a black running for the highest public office.

Yet it is a fact, albeit a curiously overlooked one, that many whites have positive feelings toward blacks as well. One may argue about how many have positive feelings, compared to how many have negative ones. One may argue about how many who appear to have positive feelings, in fact, have negative ones. One may even dispute whether thinking well of blacks has the same impact on behavior as thinking ill of them. But it is simply not debatable that some whites think well of blacks and want things to go well for them.

This fact raises the question of how attitudes toward blacks influence political choices. For many years, the answer to this question appeared self-evident. Just as it is true that the more strongly a person identifies with the Republican Party, the more likely he is to support a Republican candidate, other things equal; so it is also true that the more negative a person's feelings toward blacks, the more likely he is to oppose the use of government to help them, again other things equal. What is more, the presupposition is that being a Republican and disliking blacks make independent contributions to opposition to public policies to assist blacks.

As plausible as this presupposition appears, it is false as a matter of fact. Sniderman and Carmines (1997) demonstrated a paradox. On the one hand, conservatives are (modestly) more likely than liberals to be racially prejudiced. On the other hand, racial prejudice plays a larger role in shaping the thinking of liberals than of conservatives on matters of race. Feldman and Huddy (2005) extended this line of reasoning, arguing that racial resentment should likewise be "broadly ideological for conservatives and racially tinged for liberals" (p.171). Using different measures of prejudice and policy preference and carrying out an independent study, they show that prejudice plays a larger role in promoting racial resentment among liberals than among conservatives, while ideology plays a larger role among conservatives than among liberals.

In this study, we explore further the general hypothesis that attitudes toward blacks count for more in political choices on the political left than the right. But the unique step forward is to consider the possibility – obvious, we believe, once it is suggested – that thinking well of blacks as well as thinking ill of them may matter in political choices. For data, we rely on a nationally representative survey conducted by Knowledge Networks.² Two features of this

² For a detailed description of the study and instrument, see http://surveys.ap.org/data/KnowledgeNetworks/AP_Election_Wave6_Topline_W6%20ALL%20weighth5_091808.pdf

survey deserve specific mention. First, the interviews were conducted over the Internet. Respondents thus had no need to doctor their responses to present a socially desirable image to an interviewer. Second, this is the 10th wave of a panel, fielded shortly after the election, and suffers inevitable attrition.

Findings

The most important thing to know about prejudice is this: a bigot does not think that he is a bigot. Quite the contrary. When he tells you that most blacks are violent or lazy, he simply is telling you what is true. What is more, he is telling you not only what he knows is true. He is telling you what every reasonable person knows is true. Virtually without exception, commentators on prejudice in America have failed to understand that the bigot thinks that he is in the right. Because of this failure, it has seemed self-evident to them—indeed, has become a presumption of informed thought generally—that white Americans will no longer openly derogate black Americans.

This is false. Respondents were asked how well a number of words describe most blacks. They could reply: extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not at all. Five of the words were negative. Table 1 shows the proportions of whites, Hispanics, and others agreeing that these words describe most blacks either extremely well or very well.³

It is evident from Table 1 that America faces no shortage of people – whites, Hispanics, others – ready to make frankly derogatory comments about blacks. One in five say that the word “violent” describes most blacks – we repeat for emphasis, “most blacks” – either extremely well or very well. One in five also say they are “boastful.” And nearly one in three say that the word “complaining” describes most blacks either extremely well or very well. It is well to keep these numbers in the foreground, though we note in the background that substantially fewer endorse the old stereotype of blacks as “lazy” and “irresponsible.” This difference may point to a genuine change of heart. Alternatively, it may be one more illustration of how stereotypes come into, and fall out of, fashion.

To have a negative view of blacks in some respect or other is not a proof of prejudice. By racial prejudice we mean a consistent, systematic, predictable tendency to respond strongly and negatively to black Americans.⁴ Figure 1 accordingly shows a summary measure of responses by non-black individuals to the five items. To derive this measure, we first assign numerical values to each of the five response options, ranging from a “1” for a response of “extremely well”

³ For reports on this measure, see Sniderman and Carmines 1997 and Hurwitz and Peffley 1998.

⁴ Sniderman, Peri, de Figuerido, and Piazza 2000. See especially ch.2

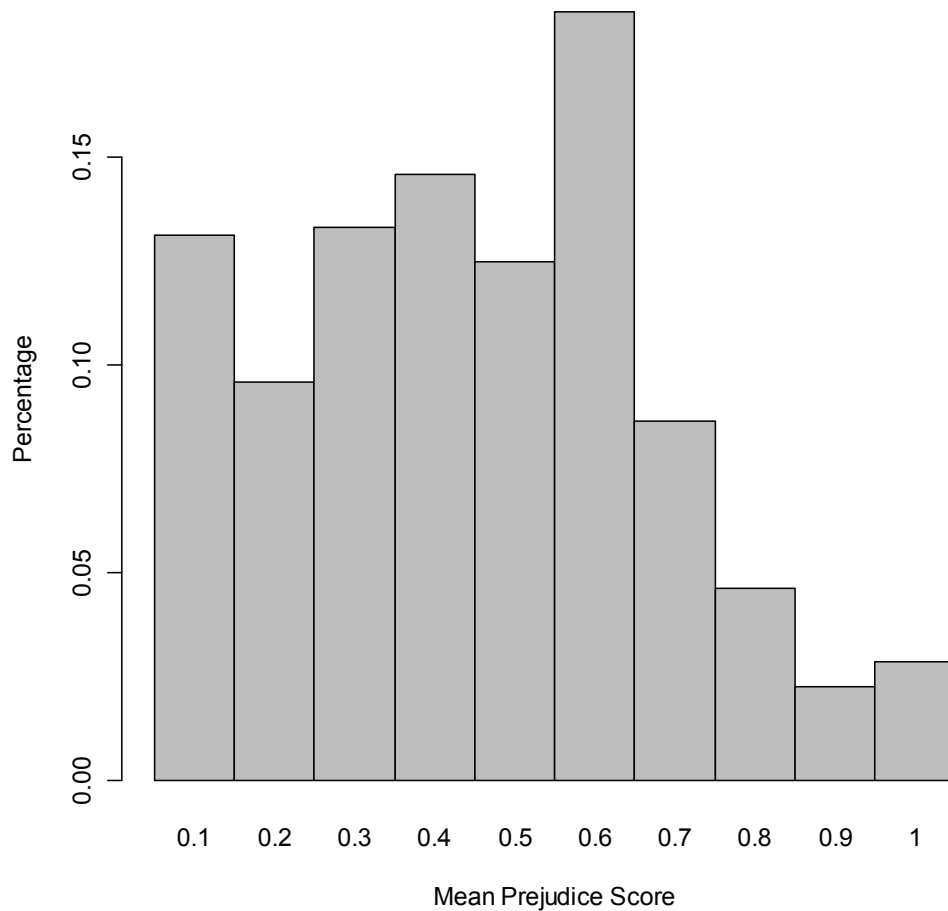
to a “0” for a response of “not at all.”⁵ The summary measure in Figure 1 represents the mean score across the five questions for an individual. Thus, a mean prejudice score of 1 indicates that the individual responds “extremely well” to all answered questions; a mean score of 0, on the other hand, indicates that the individual responds “not at all” to all answered questions.

Table 1: Summary of Negative Feelings Toward Blacks (Prejudice)

% saying that _____ describes most blacks either "extremely well" or "very well"	whites	hispanics	other
	(n = 1866)	(n = 174)	(n = 78)
"violent"	19	18	29
"boastful"	22	25	27
"complaining"	28	27	28
"lazy"	12	15	17
"irresponsible"	12	12	19

Two observations are relevant. First, a nontrivial number of nonblacks systematically derogate blacks. Any cutting point is arbitrary, but defining a score of .7 or more as high on this Prejudice Index is not unreasonable. By this standard, approximately 10 percent of the population is racially prejudiced, where prejudice means a readiness systematically, consistently, and predictably to endorse blatantly belittling evaluations of blacks. Second, the mass of the population scores low on the Prejudice Index. A cut-point defining a lack of racial prejudice is as arbitrary as one defining prejudice. It nonetheless is worth noting that the mean score on the Prejudice Index is .36, well below the scale midpoint of .5.

⁵ More prosaically, we assign a “1” to “extremely well,” a “.75” to “very well,” a “.5” to “moderately well,” a “.25” to “slightly well,” and a “0” to “not at all.”

Figure 1: Summary of Prejudice Scores (Among Non-Black Americans)

By common sense standards, then, a nontrivial proportion are still systematically hostile to blacks, even though the largest proportion of the general population are not. This is the topic we all have fixed on – how much prejudice is there still and how much does it matter. But fixing on this question has had an ironical consequence. It has blinded us to seeing that there is another question. If it is true, as it is, that a substantial number of Americans dislike blacks, is it also true that a substantial number think well of them and wish things to go well for them?

Accordingly, we also asked how well a number of positive evaluations describe most blacks. Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents in three non-black racial categories—whites, Hispanics, and others—who agree that they describe most blacks either extremely well or very well. The views of minorities

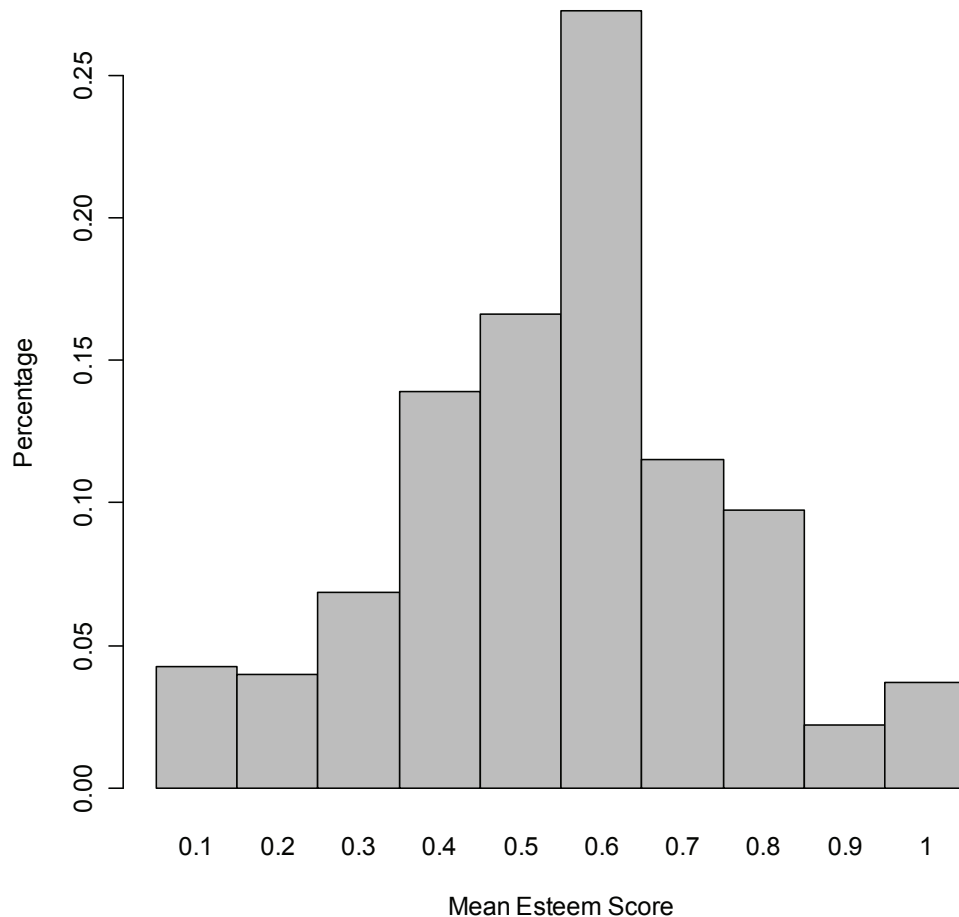
are slightly more positive than those of whites. They are more likely than whites to respond that friendly, determined to succeed, dependable, and law-abiding are apt descriptions. But all in all, the difference between the three groups is small. Never than less than twenty percent, and more typically on the order of thirty percent agree that each of these positive attributes describes most blacks either extremely or very well.

Table 2: Summary of Positive Feelings Toward Blacks (Esteem)

% saying that _____ describes most blacks either "extremely well" or "very well"

	whites (n = 1866)	hispanics (n = 174)	other (n = 78)
"friendly"	36	41	37
"determined to succeed"	22	28	25
"law-abiding"	22	23	22
"hard-working"	29	30	32
"intelligent at school"	22	28	22
"smart at everyday things"	27	32	27
"good neighbors"	32	28	27
"dependable"	26	26	27
"keep up their property"	20	19	15

But as with negative feelings, so too with positive ones – what counts is the consistency of people’s responses. A readiness to attribute one positive characteristic is strongly correlated with a readiness to attribute another. The modal inter-item correlation is about .7. We follow the same method described above for the prejudice score, and derive an esteem score, ranging from 0 (low esteem) to 1 (high esteem). Figure 2 shows the distribution of scores for the Index (excluding blacks). The mean score is higher on the Esteem Index than on the Prejudice Index (.51 versus .38). Still, it is noteworthy how the distribution is bunched up at the mid-range. As relatively few scored at the top of the Prejudice Index, so relatively few score at the top of the Esteem Index.

Figure 2: Summary of Esteem Scores (Among Non-Black Americans)

Attitudes toward blacks can then have an impact on the vote in two different ways: directly, by influencing vote choices independent of other factors, and indirectly, by influencing other factors, for example, evaluations of candidate character, that in turn influence vote choices. Our ultimate concern is the total impact, indirect as well as direct, of attitudes toward blacks on vote choice. However, reasonable people can disagree on the causal ordering of variables and thus the cumulative impact of attitudes toward blacks on vote choice. Accordingly, our immediate focus is the direct impact of attitudes toward blacks on vote choice.

Since the idea we are investigating is new and, if true, throws a new light on the contemporary American condition, we present our findings in the most

transparent way possible. The top panel of Table 3 reports the proportions of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans who said they voted for Obama, conditional on their level of negative feelings toward blacks. The lower panel presents proportions of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans who said they voted for Obama, conditional on their level of positive feelings toward blacks. We divide the indices of positive and negative feelings toward blacks into thirds for the purpose of this table.⁶

Table 3: Obama Support by Party and Racial Attitudes

		Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Prejudice	Bottom Third	0.95	0.59	0.11
	Middle Third	0.84	0.44	0.07
	Top Third	0.62	0.44	0.07
		Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Esteem	Bottom Third	0.77	0.40	0.06
	Middle Third	0.89	0.55	0.09
	Top Third	0.96	0.63	0.13

As the top panel of Table 3 shows, the importance of attitudes toward blacks in voting decisions varies with party. It is strongest for Democrats: among Democrats with the least negative attitudes toward blacks, 95 percent supported Obama, compared to only 62% of Democrats with the most negative attitudes toward blacks – a difference of over thirty percentage points. By contrast, negative attitudes toward blacks had no significant influence among Republicans: of those in the least negative attitudes toward blacks, 11% supported Obama, compared to 7% with the most negative attitudes.

The results for esteem are comparable to those for prejudice. It is strongest for Democrats: 96% with the most positive attitudes toward blacks supported Obama, compared to 77% of those the least positive attitudes. At the same time, positive attitudes toward blacks appear to have had no significant influence among Republicans: 13% with the most positive attitudes toward blacks supported Obama, compared to 6% in the group with the least positive attitudes toward blacks.

These findings are of some importance, we believe. But we want to deepen the broad perspective with which we began in an application to the 2008 election. The core of that line of reasoning is that the impact of attitudes toward

⁶ Results based on pre-election vote intentions closely resemble those reported in this table.

blacks is conditional on the political perspective of the voter. The most important transformation of the American electorate over the last thirty years has been the sorting of partisans. Partisanship and political outlook used to be minimally related. Now, they overlap substantially: Democrats typically are liberal in political outlook, Republicans conservative.

Label, for convenience, partisans who share the outlook of their party as “sorted” and partisans who do not as “unsorted.” Sorted partisans – liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans – have at hand two compelling reasons to vote for the candidate of their party: their identification with a party and their commitment to a broad political outlook.⁷ By contrast, the basic political orientations of unsorted partisans are not congruent. They therefore should be more open to taking account of a quite different consideration – here their feelings toward blacks.

Table 4 presents the results of a logistic regression with support for Obama as the dependent variable and esteem and prejudice as the two predictors, for unsorted and sorted Democrats and unsorted and sorted Republicans. It is among unsorted partisans, if our reasoning is right, that attitudes toward blacks should most influence vote choice:

- This prediction is supported in the data for esteem. Notice that among unsorted Democrats and unsorted Republicans, esteem significantly increases the odds of voting for Obama. At the same time, among sorted Democrats and Republicans, esteem appears to have little influence over vote choice. Thus, in contrast to sorted respondents, citizens in this second category vote for or against Obama regardless of whether they hold blacks in esteem.
- On the other hand, the results for prejudice are not consistent with our hypotheses. In particular, prejudice has a significant influence on the vote choices of both sorted Democrats and sorted Republicans. The only category of voters over whom prejudice does not appear to influence vote choice is unsorted Republicans.

We plot in figure 3 the predicted probabilities associated with increasing esteem over the range of possible values, holding prejudice at its mean. Esteem scores run on the x-axis and predicted probabilities on the y-axis. We use grey shading to denote the 95-percent confidence interval for the predicted probabilities. The figure clearly shows that esteem increases the probability of supporting Obama for unsorted Democrats and Republicans. Whereas an unsorted

⁷ For the most authoritative analysis of the sorting process, see Levendusky in press.

Democrat (Republican) with no esteem for blacks votes for Obama with probability roughly equal to .6 (.1), an unsorted Democrat (Republican) with the maximum esteem score supports Obama with a probability of approximately 1 (.4). For sorted partisans, on the other hand, the probability of voting for Obama is virtually 1 for Democrats and 0 for Republicans—esteem appears to play no role in the vote choices of sorted partisans.

By contrast, Figure 4 suggests that prejudice negatively influences the probability of supporting Obama for all groups. Even among unsorted Republican—the only group for which prejudice returns with an insignificant coefficient—the plot indicates that prejudice decreases the probability of voting for Obama by roughly 15 percentage points over the range of possible values, from about 30 percent to just over 15 percent. This pattern of results is not consistent with our predictions, and it suggests the enduring legacy of prejudice in American politics.

Table 4: Support for Obama Among Sorted and Unsorted Partisans

	Dem (Unsorted)	Dem (Sorted)	Rep (Unsorted)	Rep (Sorted)
Constant	0.67 (0.47)	4.23 (1.24)	-1.81 (0.79)	-1.87 (0.77)
Esteem	2.8 (0.69)	-0.34 (1.56)	1.96 (1.06)	-0.91 (1.21)
Prejudice	-1.51 (0.64)	-3.34 (1.3)	-1.14 (1.01)	-2.67 (1.17)
Pseudo-R ²	.11	.08	.07	.05
N	337	317	158	451

Note: Results from logistic regressions. Dependent variable takes a 1 if the respondent voted for Obama and 0 if he or she voted for McCain. A respondent is sorted if he or she is a Democrat (Republican) and holds left (right) of center ideology, as measured by self-reports.

Figure 3: The Influence of Esteem on Support for Obama

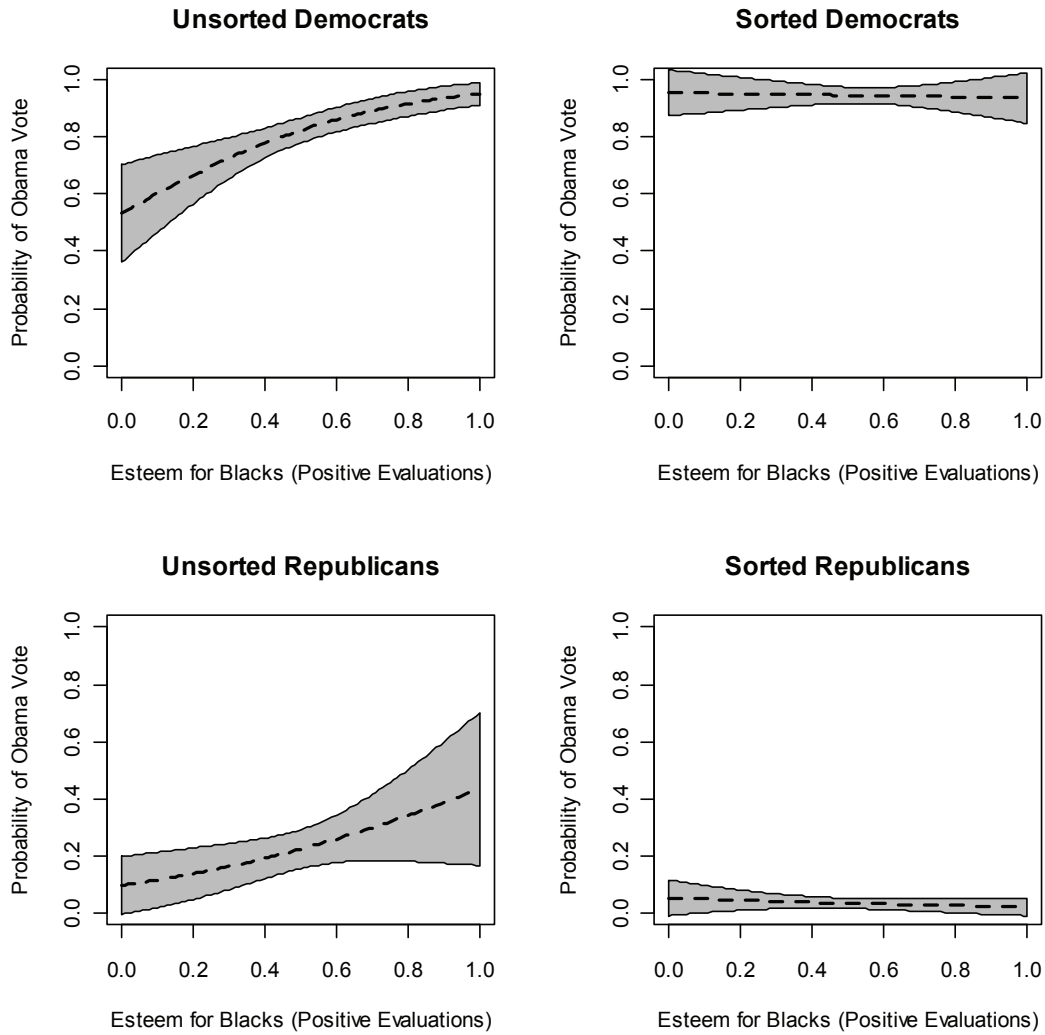
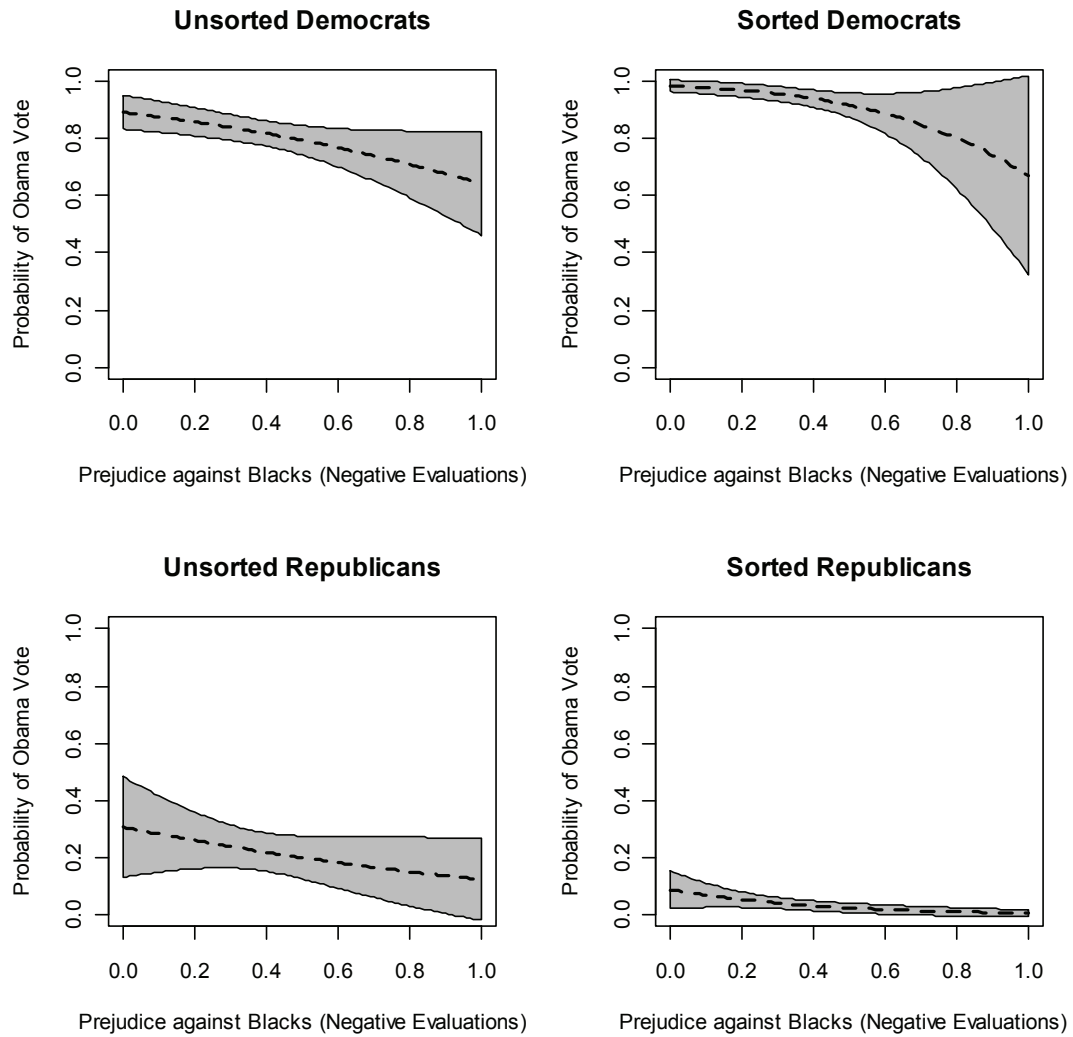


Figure 4: The Influence of Prejudice on Support for Obama

Conclusion

Our objective has been to put forward a simple idea. The idea is that many Americans think well of blacks, and this attitude matters politically. It is unarguable that many also think ill of them. But it gives us a different sense of the conflict over race if there is a force of good will and not just one of ill will. It means that there is a struggle. To the degree that a struggle actually exists, political scientists should rethink their understanding of the politics of race in the last half-century.

It is necessary to rethink our understanding of the politics of race, but not because our understanding is false. This is a point that we cannot give too much emphasis. The concern about subtle racism trivializes the problem. It presumes that blatant prejudice has become marginalized, or as nearly so as makes no difference. Our findings in this study make plain that this presumption is false three times over. There is blatant racism; it is easy to observe; and it is part of the worldview of a nontrivial share of the general population. It has played a role in the presidential election of 2008.

Acknowledgement of blatant racism is not enough, though. It is necessary to move beyond a one-sided view of racial attitudes and recognize that there is a force of good will toward blacks, not just ill. We would not presume at this point in our analysis to claim that we can definitively measure the comparative magnitude of the two forces. And we concede that this idea – that as there are Americans who think ill of blacks, so too there are Americans who think well of them – is embarrassingly simple. But curiously, it is easy to misunderstand. It is analytically profligate, as well as psychologically implausible, to suppose that people walk about with two independent counters in their mind, one registering how much they dislike blacks, the other how much they like them. The more instructive way to think about attitudes toward blacks is to presume that there is a single evaluative continuum, on which people can be ordered, from most negative to most positive.⁸

We proceeded in a way that we ordinarily would not – developing separate measures of positive and negative feelings toward blacks – because it is the most transparent procedure at hand. Transparency matters to us because we believe that our simple idea, if true, is important. The results suggest that esteem for blacks played an important role in the vote choice of many American. In particular, esteem dramatically increases the likelihood of supporting Obama among partisans who disagree with their party on ideological terms. Indeed, among this

⁸ Levine, Carmines, and Sniderman 1999.

subset of voters, which constitutes about 30 percent of the electorate, esteem appears a stronger influence over vote choice than prejudice.⁹

This is a symbolic year. It is the fortieth anniversary of one of the great civil rights tragedies in our country's history—the assassination of Martin Luther King. It also is the year that we elected the first African American president. And just as it is essential to acknowledge fully the force of ill will toward blacks, so too is it essential to recognize the force of good will, if we are to understand the moral meaning of the contemporary American experience.

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⁹ Approximately 75 percent of the electorate identifies with a party, and approximately 40 percent of the partisan electorate disagrees with their party on ideological grounds.

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