



# The “Obama” Effect? Priming Contemporary Racial Milestones Increases Implicit Racial Bias Among Whites

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## Introduction

Plant et al. (2009) suggest that Barack Obama is a positive counter-stereotypical exemplar that has served to shift negative cultural associations with Blacks. However, it is important to consider that the election of Barack Obama could also represent a threat to the position of power historically held by Whites in the U.S.

Group threat theory proposes that members of the societally dominant group will respond with prejudice when they feel that threatened by a subordinate group (Quillian, 1996). It suggests that highlighting the historic importance of the election of President Obama (as a racial milestone) may threaten the dominant position of Whites in the U.S. and increase racial bias.

Internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS; Plant & Devine, 1998) may be a particularly important predictor of response to contemporary racial milestones. Whites that score high on IMS may be less likely to be threatened by the advancement of racial outgroups than those less internally motivated to respond without prejudice (Hausmann & Ryan, 2004).

The current study was designed to examine whether priming the historic importance of the election of President Obama as a racial milestone would increase implicit racial bias. The second goal of this research was to investigate the moderating role of individual differences in motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). We predict that Whites with IMS will be least affected by threats to White privilege.

## References

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## Methods

### Participants

277 Mechanical Turk workers took part in the current study. Of the 277 participants, 68 identified themselves as an ethnicity other than White. Eight of the remaining participants were excluded from analysis. The final participant sample used for analysis included 201 non-Hispanic White adult (69% women) U.S. community members ( $M$  age = 37.47,  $SD$  = 13.36).

### Materials and Procedure

This study comprised a 1-way between groups design with three levels (group numbers threat, power threat, no threat control). Excerpts from two diversity themed articles primed group threat. An article on projected minority-majority population shifts was used to replicate prior findings (Craig & Richeson, 2014) and to provide a comparison for the historic importance of the election of President Obama. Dependent measures included the implicit and explicit motivation to respond without prejudice scales (Plant & Devine, 1998) and the Black-White Implicit Associations Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

## Results

The main effect of IAT block was significant,  $F(1, 30000) = 966.34, p < .001$  95% CI [56.26, 72.47], indicating a general pro-White/anti-Black bias. Participants in the the group numbers threat condition showed higher pro-White/anti-Black bias than participants in the control,  $t(30000) = 3.37, p < .001$ , 95% CI [8.31, 31.49]. In the power (Obama) threat condition implicit racial bias was only marginally greater than in the control condition,  $t(30000) = 1.66, p = .097$ , 95% CI [-1.73, 20.94]. = 20.84,  $p < .001$ .

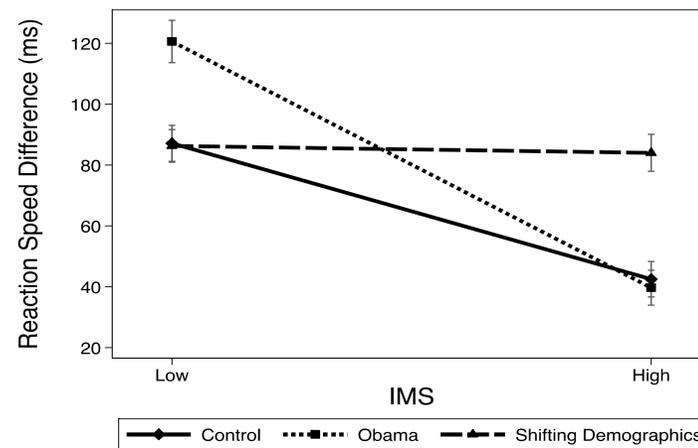


Figure 1. Implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias as a function of internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS), broken down by experimental condition. Higher values indicate stronger pro-White/anti-Black bias.

As IMS increased implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias decreased ( $F(1, 30000) = 73.01, p < .001$ ). IMS moderated the effect of condition on implicit bias,  $F(2, 30000) = 20.84, p < .001$ . As IMS increased, implicit bias decreased in all conditions. At high levels of IMS, implicit bias was no higher in the Obama (power) prime condition than in the control ( $p = .733$ ), but at low IMS levels, participants in the Obama prime condition showed greater implicit bias than the other two conditions,  $ps < .001$ . In the shifting demographics prime condition, IMS was unrelated to implicit bias ( $B = -0.60, SE = 2.00, t(30000) = -0.30, p = .765$ , 95% CI [-4.51, 3.32]).

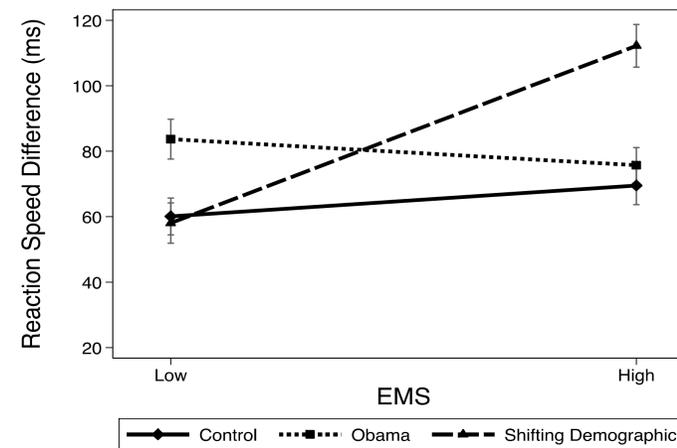


Figure 2. Implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias as a function of external motivation to respond without prejudice (EMS), broken down by experimental condition. Higher values indicate stronger pro-White/anti-Black bias.

We found that, as EMS increased, implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias increased ( $F(1, 30000) = 14.77, p < .001$ ). EMS moderated the effect of condition on implicit bias,  $F(2, 30000) = 12.72, p < .001$ . The shifting demographics prime condition ( $B = 12.81, SE = 2.22$ ) was the only condition in which EMS was predictive of implicit bias,  $t(30000) = -5.76, p < .001$ , 95% CI [8.45, 17.17]. At high levels of EMS participants in the shifting demographics prime showed significantly more bias than those in both the other conditions,  $ps < .001$ . At low levels of EMS, participants in the Obama (power) prime condition showed significantly more implicit bias than participants in either of the other conditions,  $ps < .01$ .

## Discussion

Results of the current study indicate that priming the election of Barack Obama as a racial milestone marginally increases implicit racial bias among Whites. Moreover, those with low internal motivation to control prejudice showed a particularly large increase in implicit bias. Those with low external motivation to control prejudice also showed higher implicit bias in the Obama (power) prime condition. Current findings suggest that among those with low motivation to control prejudice framing President Obama as a racial trailblazer elicits group threat, resulting in elevated levels of implicit racial bias.

Participants that were high in motivation to control prejudice (internal or external) showed increased implicit racial bias in response to the shifting demographics prime. Findings suggest that there are multiple avenues to threaten dominant group privilege and that the election of minority group members to political office is one of them.

It is noteworthy that the moderating role of motivation to respond without prejudice varied quite dramatically between the two threat manipulation conditions. The Obama prime only increased implicit bias among participants with low motivation to respond without prejudice. Moreover, the shifting demographics prime only increased implicit bias among participants with high motivation to respond without prejudice. Thus, contrary to expectations, different types of participants were threatened by different primes.

Given President Obama's status as a well-respected counter stereotypical exemplar, priming participants to think about Obama in general could lead to a reduction in racial stereotyping. If, however, White Americans are primed to think about Barack Obama as a pioneer that has broken down racial barriers, it could elicit group threat, resulting in increased implicit racial bias. Thus, the way that we frame discussions about Barack Obama and other contemporary racial milestones may dictate the effect they have on racial attitudes. Tweaking the framing of such discussions may help buffer group threat experienced by those with low motivation to control prejudice

Our research provides evidence that seemingly pro-diversity media may backfire for some individuals, increasing their negative attitudes toward racial minority group members, despite the equity principles often guiding dissemination of such messages. Future research should address how message framing can inform the general public about important diversity issues without creating adverse consequences.