Race Still Matters: Racial Attitudes and Their Effects on Candidate Evaluations

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Abstract: While there exists a debate on the role of white Americans’ racial attitudes in electoral politics, much of the literature is based on state and local elections, some of which include a white candidate and a candidate of color. We engage in this debate as well as attempt to expand the level of analysis. We analyze the role of racial attitudes in three presidential elections: 1988, 2004, and 2008, using data from the American National Election Study. We find that racial attitudes exert an influence over affective comparisons of candidates and vote choice, even controlling for other relevant factors. Further, the importance of racial attitudes increases with the presence of an African-American candidate on the ballot. Finally, we argue that the inclusion of racial attitudes as a variable in addition to partisanship, ideology, and judgment of candidates’ characteristics serves to enhance the model of candidate assessment and evaluation.
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The 2008 election was the first to have a viable Black candidate, but it was hardly the first U.S. election to be about race. In fact, every national election is about race. Go back as far as you want.
-- Howard Winant (2009)

Barack Obama has just become the first black leader of the free world, winner of an election in which his race was clearly no barrier, and may well have been an advantage.
-- Abigail Thernstrom (2009)

Introduction

2008 Election coverage in the U.S. News and World Report suggests that describing Barack Obama’s candidacy as important was an understatement; instead, the author demands, “That a black man has mounted so successful a charge up the nation’s highest political office speaks volumes about the changes that have occurred in American even since…1988” (Tolson 2008). Similarly, the New York Times’ front page on November 5, 2008, the day after Barack Obama was elected president, proclaimed that Obama’s election was “a strikingly symbolic moment in the evolution of the nation’s fraught racial history, a breakthrough that would have seemed unthinkable just two years ago” (Nagourney 2008). For some, Obama’s election indicates that the United States is becoming a post-racial nation and that America is making tremendous progress towards a time when all candidates will be judged more by their qualifications rather than their race. We attempt to quantify this progress in this article. Here, we aim to gain a sense not only of the extent to which racial attitudes play a role in presidential elections but also to determine whether the presence of a black presidential candidate amplifies the role of racial attitudes in candidate evaluation and, consequently, electoral choice.

Studies have repeatedly shown that whites’ attitudes of black candidates are often influenced by negative racial considerations (e.g. Tate 2003; Terkildsen 1993; Moskowitz 1994;
Gay 2001). These scholars argue that whites, on average, provide harsher evaluations of black candidates than they do of white candidates, and further, that these evaluations stem from symbolic racism and/or the automatic reactions derived from negative racial stereotypes. In many cases in which there is a bi-racial electoral contest, whites may eschew voting when their party’s candidate is African-American, or cross party lines to vote for the white candidate (Bejarano 2007; Gay 2001). On the other hand, some scholars find that whites’ racial attitudes do not work to the detriment of black candidates (Citrin, Green and Sears 1990; Highton 2004; Swain 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2008).

Much of the work on both sides of the debate has focused on the appraisal of black candidates at the local or state level; some of the work employs survey analysis while other findings are derived from controlled experiments. While there does not exist a consensus on whether race is a disqualifying factor in the evaluation of black candidates, it is not disputed that, on one hand, the United States has seen an increasing number of black candidates and elected officials at the state and local levels largely due to Civil Rights legislation, including the Voting Rights Acts (VRA), while on the other hand, many of these elected officials have been won in majority-minority districts. In fact, of the 11,867 non-white elected officials in 2004, 74.2 percent were elected from jurisdictions covered by VRA statutes (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2005; Parks and Rachlinkski 2008). Furthermore, while we continue to see growing numbers of black mayors and state congresspersons, there have been few African-American governors and U.S. Senators; both positions require black candidates to garner a large proportion of white votes as well as develop a multiracial coalition and a substantial “get out the vote” campaign. Nevertheless, we choose to study the effects of racial attitudes on presidential candidate evaluation for two significant reasons. First, while Americans generally pay little attention to politics most of the
time, mass political involvement increases substantially during presidential campaigns (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Secondly, as Paker, Sawyer and Towler (2009) eloquently explain: “Because the president is the personification of the government domestically, the face of the United States to foreign audiences, and the figure of authority for the country, one cannot overestimate the symbolic importance of the office.”

We hope to answer to several questions concerning the role of racial attitudes on presidential evaluations. First, we ask to what extent do white Americans’ racial attitudes affect presidential candidate evaluations. If racial attitudes do play a role in candidate evaluations, we ask more specifically whether racial attitudes directly affect the way voters feel about candidates or whether racial attitudes affect candidate evaluation indirectly, through issue positions. Third, we ask whether the influence of racial attitudes is greater when non-white candidates are present on the ballot. We test hypotheses concerning these three questions in effort to build evidence for our ultimate question: To what degree is the traditional and powerful candidate evaluation model improved by the inclusion of racial attitudes? These models have proven to be powerful, as they include tried-and-true measures of partisanship, issue stance, and various social-cognitive processes of candidate evaluation, but they miss out on one very important aspect of American politics and Americans’ political behavior: racial attitudes. As Valentino and Hutchings (2004) remind us, “racial attitudes, broadly conceived, represent one of the fundamental influences on contemporary mass political attitudes.” We hope to discern whether and the extent to which racial attitudes have played a role in candidate evaluations over the past two decades.

Through a comparative analysis of the 1988, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections, we find that racial attitudes play a significant role in candidate evaluations and, consequently vote choice. We also find that the importance of racial attitudes is amplified in bi-racial presidential
races. Further, we argue, that in addition to the traditional variables—partisanship and issue position—racial attitudes play a major role in predicting candidate evaluations. The inclusion of racial attitudes serves to improve the utility of the traditional candidate evaluation model, particularly in the case where a person of color is a major contender. The implications for such a study are clear. The United States citizenry has increasingly come to be characterized as “post-racial” and “colorblind,” but the extent to which voting an African-American into the presidency constitutes a manifestation of achieving that goal needs to be carefully reconsidered. Racial attitudes do indeed play a central role in the evaluation of and, ultimately, the election of presidential candidates.

This article begins with an overview of the relevant literature concerning the role of presidential evaluations in electoral choice and how these evaluations are developed. We then provide an overview of the ways in which racial attitudes affect candidate evaluation through an analysis of theories of symbolic racism and heuristic processes. Next, we identify our hypotheses. Thereafter, we discuss our data, methods, and finally our results. We close this article with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

**Candidate Evaluation and Electoral Choice**

Traditionally, partisanship and issue stance were believed to serve as the core components of electoral choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Contemporary political scientists, however, argue that the tripartite of voting behavior includes issues, parties, and candidates (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007). Since the 1960s, political scientists have moved from primarily partisan and sociological explanations toward centering candidate evaluations in models of vote choice. Stokes (1966) showed that while macro-partisanship did not change
much, there were wild shifts in winning sides; he attributed these swings to citizens’ reactions to the candidates. Markus and Converse (1979) prominently state:

“The preeminence of the trilogy of party affiliation, issue orientations, and candidate personalities as determinants of electoral choice is firmly established in the literature, and the model developed here is generally in keeping with this perspective… [H]owever, we maintain that these factors are not directly linked to the vote. Instead, their confluence yields a set of overall candidate evaluations, on the basis of which a choice is made” (1057).

Candidate evaluations are the primary determinant of citizens’ vote choice, and these evaluations can be viewed as the summary of information including partisan affiliation and issue stance (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Aldrich, Abramson, and Rohde 2007).

The incorporation of social-psychological research has served to enhance models of candidate evaluation and vote choice. Much of this work serves to ground political behavior in the psychology research programs of schema theory and person perception, showing that the way people respond to candidates is not much different than the way they respond in non-political domains (Kinder 1986; Rahn et al. 1990; Rosenberg and McCafferty 1987). Social and political psychology research also indicates that voters may more heavily use their perceptions of the candidates’ personalities than issue stance in electoral decision making (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). This scholarship is best marked by Kinder, Abelson and their colleagues (Kinder and Abelson 1981; Kinder et al. 1980; Kinder 1986) who determined that voters’ considerations of the personal qualities of the candidates affect their preferences in electoral choice. Here, they ascertained that there exist four dimensions of candidate evaluation: competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. Funk (1999) adds nuance to these findings and shows that while these four dimensions are useful in predicting vote choice, each of them are time, context and candidate specific. That is, some candidate traits are weighed differently for various candidates.
Building on this political psychology literature, Rahn et al. (1990) develop a useful model of the voter’s decision-making process, linking all of the major pieces together: partisanship, issue stance, and cognitive and affective components of candidate evaluation. This model centers individuals’ assessment of each candidate on the relevant dimensions of leadership competence and personal qualities to predict vote choice. This model works well because they incorporate the processes that people use everyday to form impressions of other people. Consequently, while this model is useful and statistically powerful, it omits a very central variable to the workings of American politics and political behavior: racial attitudes. We believe that racial attitudes are thoroughly entangled with all of the variables of traditional models of vote choice. Here we seek to parse these out.

**Racial Attitudes and Candidate Evaluations**

There exists a paradox concerning white Americans’ racial attitudes and their political preferences. On one hand, overt, negative attitudes among white Americans toward Blacks have declined in prevalence, but on the other hand, white Americans typically do not support policies aimed to ameliorate racial disparities (and often do not support black candidates). Students of race and politics often point to one of three major groups of theories. The first group consists of social structural theories, which maintain that competing interests of groups generate intergroup conflict and those in the dominant group develop ideologies to maintain hegemony. The second are politics-based theories, which suggest that as far as whites are concerned, the politics of race has evolved into a variety of policy agendas, all of which are divorced from racial animus. Finally, sociopsychological theories contend that racism has taken on a new form whereby overt prejudice is supplanted by subtle negative attitudes derived from the socialization of negative
affect towards black Americans (Sears et al. 2000). It is under this former category where we find theories of “symbolic racism,” “modern racism” and “racial resentment.”

This last set of theories, and more specifically, the idea of symbolic racism, has proved to be a coherent belief system, and even when political ideology—the main source of politics-based theories—is included, symbolic racism has been found to be an extremely powerful predictor of political attitudes and behaviors (Henry and Sears, 2002). As such, much of the literature concerning whites’ evaluations of black candidates evolves from the intersection of two distinct but linked literatures. The first component is found in these sociopsychological theories of racism. The second component is found in research concerned with heuristics and stereotypes—the effect of cognitive expectations and mental “shortcuts.”

As far as cognition is concerned, racial stereotypes are easily accessible among Americans by adulthood and are often retrieved and used in applicable contexts (Domke 2001). In the context of voting behavior, citizens can use their perceptions about the race of the candidate as well as their racial identity to simplify otherwise difficult decision calculus. For example, when choosing between two white candidates, voters might translate their racial group interests into policy or partisan positions in order to choose a candidate who they perceive to be the best fit for their particular set of interests. When choosing between candidates of different races, however, voters may use the racial identity of the candidate as a proxy for policy or partisan stance of the candidate, whereby the voter can then choose (Harris-Lacewell and Junn 2007).

These heuristics may be employed by voters of all races. There exists a consensus on the extent to which black Americans employ these processes (Dawson 1994), but there is considerable debate on whether white Americans use them. Gay (2001) shows that white
Democrats are likely either to not vote or to cross party lines when their party’s candidate is black. Similarly, Bejarano and Segura (2007) recently showed that white Republicans crossed party lines when Bobby Jindal, a South Asian GOP candidate, ran for governor of Louisiana in 2003, opting instead for the white Democratic candidate. Moskowitz and Stroh (1994), who carefully incorporate both theories of symbolic racism and heuristic processes, find that in biracial elections individual white voters often change their own policy positions on the basis of their evaluations of blacks as well as misconstrue the policy position of black candidates because voters working in “expectation mode” are susceptible to the employment of stereotypes concerning the ideological and partisan leanings of black candidates. Political person-perception literature informs us that most voters construct images of candidates that reinforce their own political views (i.e. Kinder 1978). To compound matters, white voters tend to view black (and Latino) candidates as less competent than white candidates (Sigelman et al. 1995; Tate 2003), and not only are white voters likely to more harshly evaluate black candidates, the shade of African-American candidates’ skin-color also affects evaluations; darker-skinned candidates are discriminated against at higher levels than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Terkildsen 1993). Further, Sears et al. (1980) shows that black candidates do not have to be present in order for racial attitudes to influence voter behavior; they find that symbolic racial attitudes play a more prominent role than self-interest in the voters’ choices.

On other hand, the existence of a stereotype does not necessarily result in its use. Devine (1989) shows that while most people know the stereotypes that correspond to a particular group, low-prejudiced people are not likely to employ these stereotypes as long as their ability to inhibit these automatically activated stereotype-congruent thoughts is not prohibited. Mendelberg (2001, 2008) contextualizes these findings in the realm of race and politics. She argues that the
contemporary norm of equality calls for racial discourse in political campaigns to be implicit rather than explicit; consequently, white voters’ primed racial attitudes are only likely to have an effect on political behavior when messages are implicit rather than explicit. When racist messages are made explicit, many whites prevent socialized attitudes from affecting their political attitudes and behavior.

Nevertheless, scholars have yet to agree on the role that race and racism play in candidate evaluation, and the evidence should be weighed carefully. Highton (2004) and Colleau et al. (1990) argue that whites are neither averse to voting for a black candidate nor does the presence of a black candidate generate significant antiblack affect in the evaluation of candidates. Citrin, Green and Sears (1990) complicate the debate of the role of race on candidate appraisal by suggesting that we need to parse out the two targets of racial attitudes in political races: policy-oriented and candidate-oriented evaluations. These scholars argue that a candidate’s race does not in and of itself cause whites to vote for or against a candidate, that racial attitudes were largely confined to their effects on voters’ issue opinions, and that racial attitudes play no more of a role in bi-racial political races than those which include only white candidates.

It is clear that the role of racial attitudes needs to be both nuanced and expanded. We aim to both synthesize the existing bodies of literature on mass political behavior, political psychology, and racial attitudes as well as to refine our knowledge of the role of racial attitudes in voting behavior and to develop four hypotheses, outlined in the next section.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The preceding discussion leads us to consider four hypotheses concerning the influence of racial attitudes on voter decision-making behavior. First, it is important to consider the ways in which racial attitudes may influence voters’ decisions. We suggest that there are at least two
possible—and testable—ways in which racial attitudes may have an effect of candidate evaluations. On one hand, white American voters may simply feel less warm towards candidates of the racial out-group. These feelings may arise from symbolic racism, whereby blacks are perceived by white Americans as violating the core tenets of American values, including work ethic, self-reliance, impulse control, and obedience to authority (Sears et al. 2000). Alternatively, white Americans’ stereotypes about Blacks may lead them to feel negatively about the candidate herself (Sigelman et al. 1995; Moskowitz and Stroh 1994; Tate 2003). That is to say, if racial attitudes matter in voters’ vote-preference calculus, they may directly affect how voters feel about the candidates apart from the influence of policy considerations, partisanship, and other factors that typically inform citizens’ vote decisions.

{Figure 1 about here.}

But there also exists the notion that white Americans’ attitudes may filter not through their feelings about the candidates themselves but rather through their issue positions. As previously mentioned, politics-based theories suggest that white Americans are not concerned with the race of the candidates, but rather that opposition to candidates has more to do with policies—and more specifically, the role of government and concerns about equality—than the candidates themselves (Citrin, Green and Sears 1990; Sniderman 1997). These theories argue that racial attitudes primarily influence policy evaluations but do not interfere with the way citizens feel about the candidates. We test these claims here.

\textit{H1:} Racial attitudes have an effect on candidate evaluation but only through their influence on voters’ policy positions.

\textit{H2:} Racial attitudes directly affect the way voters feel about a candidate and make their voting decision regardless of their partisanship, issue positions, and perception of the candidates’ personal and leadership characteristics.
Support for the first hypothesis would suggest that the politics of race has evolved into a variety of distinct policy agendas rather than the notion the notion that white Americans’ racial attitudes have a direct effect on their feelings about the candidate herself. To the contrary, support for the second hypothesis suggests that symbolic racism may be a mechanism in voters’ candidate evaluations and, in turn, their vote preferences.

The extant literature provides a plethora of evidence showing that racial attitudes represent one of the basic influences on mass political attitudes, but the literature does not provide a definitive characterization of the circumstances under which racial attitudes may affect political behavior. That is, the question of “when” has yet to be answered. In effort to expand the literature on racial attitudes and their role in candidate evaluation, we also want to gain a sense of whether racial attitudes play a more significant role in political races that include a non-white candidate. As mentioned, Sears et al. (1990) provide evidence that non-white candidates do not have to be present in order for racial attitudes to play a role in voters’ political behavior; these attitudes filter through policy preferences. On the other hand, other scholars argue that the presence of a black candidate does not generate negative racial attitudes (Colleau et al. 1990; Highton 2004). Still, however, the heuristics literature tends to support the notion that racial attitudes are likely to be more salient for white Americans when there is a non-white candidate on the ballot. White American voters’ racial stereotypes tend affect their feelings about the capabilities and characteristics of Black candidates themselves, affect the ways in which they understand Black candidates policy positions to be, and in turn, affect their own issue positions (Kinder 1978; Moskowitz and Stroh 1994; Sigelman et al. 1995; Tate 2003). As such, we posit:

\[ H3: \text{If the race of the candidate is indeed a significant factor, it should be observed that the role of the racial attitudes is more pronounced in contests between candidates of different racial groups than in campaigns featuring two opponents of the same race.} \]
Finally, while we are well aware that partisanship and issue position play a significant role in candidate evaluation and, ultimately, citizens’ vote choice (Abramson, Aldrich, Rohde 2007; Rahn et al. 1990), we aim to gain a sense of whether the traditional models of candidate evaluation and vote choice would be enhanced by incorporating racial attitudes.

\[ H4: \text{The traditional model of candidate evaluation, which centers on partisanship, ideology, issue stance and voters’ judgment concerning the candidates’ character, is enhanced by the incorporation of racial attitudes.} \]

One of the overarching questions that undergird this article is whether the role of race in American elections has declined; the implications of finding support for any of these hypotheses would provide evidence that racial attitudes influence voters’ candidate evaluation, and in turn, their vote preferences.

**Data, Measurement, and Methods**

This analysis uses data from three presidential election-year American National Election Studies (ANES): that from 1988, 2004, and 2008. The year 2008 was selected by virtue of featuring the first African-American candidate fielded by a major political party, and 2004 is included as the most closely contemporary case for comparison, and also as a baseline campaign during which no explicitly racialized issues were brought up. 1988 Serves as another point of reference, with respondents acting from within a very different political climate, but one which was nonetheless racialized, given Jesse Jackson’s relatively strong primary campaign, and the infamous “Weekend Passes” and “Revolving Door” advertisements run against Michael Dukakis. None of these elections featured particularly influential third party candidates, as did the 1992, 1996, and 2000 campaigns.

Rahn et al. (1990) develop arguably one of the most useful and powerful models of candidate evaluation. We attempt to replicate the measures used in their original study, which
links together partisanship, issue stance, and cognitive and affective components of candidate evaluation. Since the “process of deciding how to vote is a comparative one,” (192) we use measures of difference between respondent evaluations of both major party candidates, where applicable.¹

**Issues**

One important component of a voter’s decision is the extent to which she agrees with each candidate’s issue positions, and more specifically, the relative level of agreement with either. We use an issues scale that incorporates ANES responses to four consistently-worded questions across the three elections of interest, covering the level of government responsibility in the realms of general services, defense, medical insurance, and job provision (see Appendix I for specific question wording). Respondents were asked to report their own position on a seven-point scale with respect to each issue, and were also asked to assess the position of several political entities on these same scales.² From this data, we construct an additive scale of issue positions for each respondent, as well as a scaling of each respondent’s perception of the two major party candidates. Our measures of interest, however, concern the simple difference between the respondents’ self-identified position and that they attribute to each candidate, and the difference of those differences.

\[
\text{Issue Distance} = |\text{Democratic Candidate - Voter}| - |\text{Republican Candidate – Voter}| \tag{1}
\]

Thus, lower values of respondent-to-candidate issue distances are associated with greater similarity in issue preferences, and higher values of a candidate distance difference metric are associated with greater similarity to the Republican candidates’ assessed positions relative to the Democratic candidate.

¹ It should also be noted that we focus on the subset of respondents that identify themselves as White.
² The 2008 survey featured an experiment with slightly different response choices, but these were re-scaled to be consistent with the range of responses elicited for all previous studies.
Candidate Quality Assessment and Affect

Another important component of voters’ decision calculus is the assessment of candidate quality, as well as the level of affective feeling toward each candidate under consideration. Using a selection of nine traits, we construct scales of two types of candidate assessment. The first is Competence, comprising affirmative responses to questions of whether respondents would characterize the candidate as intelligent, knowledgeable, inspiring, and/or a strong leader; the second captures Personal Qualities, summing affirmations that the candidate is honest, really cares, compassionate, moral and/or decent. Again, for this analysis, we focus on the difference in assessed levels of competence and personal qualities between the two major party candidates; a larger value on this scale indicates a more positive assessment of the Democratic candidate relative to the Republican.

Affect is captured by a composite of responses to questions asking whether a given candidate had ever elicited any of the following feelings from the respondent: anger, fear, hope, and pride (Kinder et al. 1980). This is in keeping with the Rahn et al. (1990) operationalization, and again, this analysis is primarily interested in the difference between affect toward Democratic and Republican candidates.

Racial Attitudes

Respondent racial attitudes are measured with a standard additive scaling of answers to a slate of questions designed to elicit such attitudes. These questions speak to how respondents characterize the situation of African-Americans and extent to which the respondent attributes this state of affairs to systemic causes. (See Appendix II for specific question wording)

We also take measures of standard 7-point Party Identification, liberal-conservative political ideology, and a binary variable indicating whether or not the respondent reported voting
for the Democratic presidential candidate. There is no evidence of multicollinearity among any of the variables of concern (see correlation matrix in Appendix III).

Analysis and Results

Whether Racial Attitudes Matter: Yes or No?

Our first hypothesis concerns whether the influence of racial attitudes is exerted entirely by virtue of the connection between racial attitudes and issue positions. We test this in two steps. First, we test whether racial attitudes have an effect of issue position, and second we test whether racial attitudes and issue positions have independent effects on candidate affect and vote choice. The results of the first step, as estimated by an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, can be found in the first column of Table 1. These results indicate that racial attitudes do indeed have a significant relationship with issue preferences (relative to assessed candidate positions), even controlling for party identification and political ideology. More specifically, the first column shows that those who have negative views of African-Americans are likely to more closely identify their own issue positions with those they attribute to politically conservative candidates.

{Table 1 about here.}

The second and third columns of Table 1, however, provide the rest of the story concerning the first hypothesis: the extent to which racial attitudes have an effect on candidate evaluation but only through voters’ policy positions. Column 2, an OLS model, illustrates a test of racial attitudes and issue positions on candidate affect—the extent to which candidates made the voter feel angry, fearful, hopeful or proud. Meanwhile, column 3 reports logistic regression estimates of how these variables affect vote choice, as we are concerned with whether the voter chose the Democratic candidate. Both columns 2 and 3 show that racial attitudes and relative issue preferences exert separate and significant influence over respondents’ affective evaluations.
and vote choice, respectively. These findings lead to the rejection of the first hypothesis. Racial attitudes do not simply filter through issue attitudes, as Citrin, Green and Sears (1990) suggest.

The second hypothesis, which is closely tied to the first, concerns the degree of influence racial attitudes have on the way white American voters feel about the candidate himself and, ultimately, how they make their voting decision regardless of their partisanship, ideology, issue positions, and cognitive components of candidate evaluation or perceived “candidate quality.” It is not a given that racial attitudes, which loosely co-vary with ideology, party identification, and positions on political issues, should exert an independent effect on the formation of voter opinions of candidates, and the ultimate determination of vote choice. Columns 2, 3 and 4 help to understand the ways in which racial attitudes affect candidate evaluation and vote choice.

Again, the results shown in Table 1 show that racial attitudes have an independent effect on the positive and negative feelings voters associate with candidates—affect—as well as citizens’ vote preferences. More specifically, column 2 indicates that those who have more liberal racial attitudes tend to feel more positively for the Democratic candidate. The negative sign on the “issue difference” variable suggests that those who believe their policy position is closer to the Democrat feel more positively toward the Democrat (refer to Equation 1). It also shows that, as expected, people who feel good about the candidate’s personal qualities and competence levels also tend to have positive associations with—or positive affect toward—the candidates. The dummy variables for 2004 and 2008 are included to estimate baseline levels of affect and vote probability for 2004 and 2008, relative to 1988.

The test for the extent to which racial attitudes affect white Americans’ vote decision is found in column 3 of Table 1. Again, we see that racial attitudes have a significant effect on vote
decision even controlling for powerful variables such as political ideology, partisanship and candidate quality assessment, providing support for the second hypothesis.

Finally, column 4 provides the hardest test concerning the extent to which racial attitudes play a role in voters’ decision making process. Here, affect is itself included as a predictor. Racial attitudes lose some of its explanatory power, as expected, but the estimated coefficient is still significant at the 0.1 level, despite the fact that affect is itself very much composed of these attitudes. Overall, the results in Table 1 provide strong evidence that the racial attitudes play an important role in determining the voters’ feelings about the candidates as well as how they make their vote decision. Even after controlling for tried-and-true measures of partisanship, ideology, and cognitive and affective components of candidate appraisal, racial attitudes remain an important and formidable predictor of candidate evaluation and vote choice.

When Racial Attitudes Matter

We are also interested in the question of when racial attitudes matter, and in particular, whether the presence of an African-American candidate on the ticket of a major party exacerbates the influence of racial attitudes in the vote-decision process. To identify such an influence, we reproduce our earlier comparative affect and vote decision models, still including “dummy” variables indicating election year, but additionally estimating interaction terms for racial attitudes by election year.

{Table 2 about here.}

The first column of Table 2 tests the extent to which racial attitudes had a different effect in 1998, 2004 and 2008 on voters’ affective evaluations of the candidates. The focus, then, is on the interaction variables. The first column shows that racial attitudes played a significant role in voters’ affect concerning the candidates in 1988 and 2008, but not in 2004. While some may
argue that race matters in every presidential election (Winant 2009), the results here show that race may matter differently in each presidential election. The results here are, in some ways, expected. In 1988, the Bush campaign made an effort to make salient white Americans’ racial animus towards African-Americans (Mendelberg 2001). Meanwhile, the 2004 presidential campaign was largely devoid of racial policies, especially concerning African-Americans specifically. Finally, the 2008 presidential campaign included the first viable African-American candidate of a major political party. Barack Obama’s presence may have cued certain racial attitudes, but the McCain and Clinton campaigns also made efforts to make salient white Americans’ racial attitudes through television advertisements, bringing to issue Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s—Obama’s former pastor—political attitudes, and making reference to Obama as anti- or non-American.

However, in modeling the final voting decision—in column 2—racial attitudes played a significant role in 2008, whereas the same cannot be said about the two previous elections, each featuring two white major party candidates. These results suggest that when whites’ racial attitudes are primed, they have an effect over what feelings are elicited within the voters. Further, the results of Table 2 suggests that white American voters’ racial attitudes are exacerbated by the presence of an African-American candidate, and this presence ultimately affects citizens’ vote choice, supporting the third hypothesis.

Expanding the Traditional Candidate Evaluation Model

Finally, we are interested in comparing models that incorporate racial attitudes to those that do not, in an effort to identify whether consideration of such attitudes improves the validity of models of vote choice. This requires the testing of nested models, each pair of which includes one model with, and one without, racial attitudes as an included independent variable. The
results of these tests are shown in Table 3, and indicate that the inclusion of racial attitudes explains significantly more variance in both differences in affective assessment, and in vote choice.

{Table 3 about here.}

Additionally, when these tests are run separately on each election, we see that there is no such significant improvement in the model in 2004, an election in which racial issues were largely absent. Further, to the extent such a comparison can be made, it should be noted that significance levels of the improvement in model fit are greater in 2008 than in the racialized but exclusively white 1988 candidate decision. This evidence supports the claim that models of candidate evaluation are enhanced by the inclusion of voter racial attitudes, and that this effect is even more pronounced in elections featuring an African-American candidate.

Conclusion

This article is opened by two opposing views concerning the role of race in American elections. On the one hand, some would argue that race matters in all presidential elections. On the other hand, others suggest that race has little to do with how voters make their decisions, and consequently, who gets elected. Determining which side of the debate has stronger evidence depends on what measure one finds appropriate. In the wake of Obama’s 2008 presidential election win, the narrative was one of the transformation of the United States from a country in which judgments were often made on the basis of skin color toward a post-racial nation. Obama’s status as president was cited as justification of such claims. These contentions are based, essentially, on a flawed measure: the binary status of an African-American as president. When more nuanced measurements are used, the evidence indeed suggests that race still matters. More specifically, the results of this analysis indicate that there is evidence to support the notion
that white Americans’ racial attitudes affect their feelings about candidates as well as their ultimate vote decision.

Here, results based on national survey responses suggest that racial attitudes play a direct role in forming candidate evaluations and determining vote choice, and are not expressed exclusively through issue preferences, as suggested by politics-based theories. Instead, it has been illustrated that racial attitudes not only affect the formation of voters’ issue positions but also how they feel about the candidates themselves. If candidate evaluation is the summary of voter information which determines vote choice, it is clear that racial attitudes play a major role in electoral behavior and politics.

Further, racial attitudes play a particularly significant role in racialized and bi-racial campaigns. Extant literature suggests that racial attitudes may not always play a role in voters’ decision-making processes, and this article, to some extent, supports that notion. However, in a more nuanced fashion, this article shows that racial attitudes have an effect on white American voters’ political attitudes and behaviors which can be exacerbated in some situations—particularly when a campaign is racialized or if a non-white candidate participates in the race. Despite the fact that Barack Obama was elected president, it should still be noted that racial attitudes played a significant role in shaping many voters’ attitudes and vote decisions, and that race still matters.
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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Candidate Evaluation Model
Table 1: Predictors of Issues Positions, Candidate Affect and Vote Decision

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Issue Difference (OLS)</th>
<th>Affect Difference (OLS)</th>
<th>Democratic Vote (Logistic)</th>
<th>Democratic Vote (Logistic)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.277</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
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(Pseudo) R²: 0.349 0.689 0.810 0.847

**p<.05  *p<.1
**Table 2:** Estimating Election Interaction Effects for Racial Attitudes

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**(Pseudo) R²**  
0.689 | 0.811
Table 3: Nested Models of Candidate Evaluation

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<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.083</td>
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Appendix I

ANES question wording for issue distance and difference scales (taken from 2008 survey).

Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

V083105
  1. Govt should provide many fewer services
  7. Govt should provide many more services

V083112
  1. Govt should decrease defense spending
  7. Govt should increase defense spending

V083119
  1. Govt insurance plan
  7. Private insurance plan

V083128
  1. Govt should see to jobs and standard of living
  7. Govt should let each person get ahead on own
Appendix II

ANES question wording for racial attitude scales (taken from 2008 survey).

(Do you AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, or DISAGREE STRONGLY with this statement?)

V085143
'Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.'

V085144
'Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.'

V085145
'Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.'

V085146
'It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.'
Appendix III

Graphical Pair-wise Correlation Matrix