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Abstract

How do racial signals associating a candidate with minority supporters change voters' perceptions about a candidate and their support for a candidate? Given the presence of competing information in any campaign or the absence of information in low-salience campaigns, voters may rely on heuristics—such as race—to make the process of voting easier. The information communicated by these signals may be so strong that they cause voters to ignore other, perhaps more politically relevant, information. In this paper, we test how associative racial cues sway voters' perceptions of and support for candidates using two experiments that harness real-world print and audio campaign advertisements. We find that the signals in these ads can sometimes overwhelm cues about policy positions when the two are present together. Moreover, we find that such signals have limited effects on candidate support among black voters but that they risk substantial backlash of up to eight percentage points in reported vote intention among white voters. Our results highlight how voters gather and use information in low-information elections and demonstrate the power of campaign communication strategies that use racial associations.

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Introduction

Political campaigns routinely invoke subtle racial cues in their communications to appeal to voters. The purpose of many of these cues – and, by extension, the focus of much research on racial cues in electoral settings – is to attract support from white voters by linking negative language or fearful images to racial minority groups. That said, racial and ethnic cues can also be used to appeal to members of minority groups by invoking positive group associations. This second strategy includes signaling, through rhetoric or position-taking, that candidates care about members of a minority group. Both strategies have been shown to be electorally expedient.

Distinct from these two strategies of invoking racial signals in political communication is a third strategy using *associative* racial cues. An example of this strategy gained national attention in a November 2013 non-partisan race in Houston, Texas, for the Houston Community College (HCC) board of trustees. A conservative white challenger named Dave Wilson beat the black incumbent of 24-years, Bruce Austin, despite what seemed a favorable electoral landscape for Austin – a largely non-white district where he secured multiple Democratic endorsements.[6] At least anecdotally, the cause of Wilson's surprise win was his use of racial cues in the campaign. Wilson's strategy did not invoke negative racial cues to attract racially conservative voters nor did Wilson's name or photo indicate that he, himself, was black, or that he cared deeply about issues facing the African-American community, both of which may have attracted black support in the district. Instead, he used racial signals to show an association between his candidacy and black voters. Wilson's campaign mailers did not feature any photos of him, but rather included pictures of supposed supporters – all of whom happened to be black. Printed in

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[6] Bruce Austin received endorsements from the: Houston Black American Democrats, Tejano Democrats, and Harris County Young Democrats, as well as the Democratically-aligned AFL-CIO and GLBT Political Caucus (http://www. Baustincampaign.com/endorsements.html).

text below these images were the words "Please vote for our friend and neighbor, Dave Wilson."

Wilson also ran radio ads in which women with stereotypical African-American speech patterns

extolled his virtues. Media accounts of the campaign claimed that Wilson's strategic racial

signals convinced voters he was black. The day after the election, local news sources succinctly

summed up the outcome, writing, "White guy wins after leading voters to believe he's black."[7]

Yet Wilson accomplished this without any direct claims about his race – only via associations

indirectly cued via the race of his supporters.

Dave Wilson used racial and ethnic cues – both visual and auditory – to trigger

associations with a racial group and subsequently garner electoral support from members of

minority groups. He did not use *negative* racial cues often employed by white candidates hoping

to appeal to *white* voters either explicitly or implicitly (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Neuner,

and Vandenbroek, 2018), provide direct informational cues about his race (McConnaughy et al.

2010), or provide cues about his policies in an attempt to invoke policy-related electoral support

(Barreto and Collingwood, 2014; Collingwood, 2012). Instead, Wilson employed a valence-

neutral *associative* cue meant to trigger an association with a racial group. In doing so, he aimed

to garner support from the majority-black district without conveying any policy positions

particularly targeted towards racial or ethnic group interests. Wilson was also not the first to

employ such a tactic: candidates in political races and organizations have used similar

approaches in even more extreme ways, often in an attempt to "pass" as another race.[8]

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[7] Miller, Doug. "White guy wins after leading voters to believe he's black." *KHOU.com*, November 8, 2013.

[8] One well known example is Rachel Dolezal, who wore traditionally African-American hairstyles, adopted black children, and then became president of her local NAACP chapter – despite being white. There are additional examples of candidates "passing" as members of another racial group. In the 1980s, a Stockton, California man with white parents and white siblings told reporters he identified as black, surrounded by his black wife and children. Shortly thereafter, he won a city council seat in a district that was largely black and Hispanic heavily Hispanic Arizona 7th District race in 2014 (Fuller, Jaime. "This

In general, campaign strategies in this vein might feature images of a candidate alongside members of racial minority groups, text or audio in another language or accent, or even a candidate wearing different styles of clothing. These types of cues are commonplace in political advertising: a study of television campaign ads directed at Latino voters during presidential elections from 1984 through 2000 found that over a third featured images of Latinos and three-quarters of the ads were in Spanish (Connaughton and Jarvis 2004). The pairing of the candidate with these images or language links the candidate to certain groups without signaling anything specific about the candidate's policies or political views. We designate this strategy as using "associative racial cues." This strategy can affect voters' perceptions and evaluations of the candidates, including voters who make up the targeted racial or ethnic minority as well as white voters.

Voters may rely on these associative racial signals to construct a picture of the candidate's ideology, partisanship, policy positions, and even basic characteristics such as race. Such inferences can be both rational and effective: in low-salience elections where it is hard to gather this information on their own, voters may save time by relying on the cues from campaigns. But what is rational and efficient is not always correct. Cues can sometimes lead people astray. Political candidates may take advantage of the fact that most voters, especially in local races, do not exert much effort gathering information apart from that provided by the campaign (Bernhard and Freeder, 2018). Low-budget, low-information elections for state legislators, mayors, or city councilors often lack the partisan and ideological cues common in national elections (Oliver, 2012). These subnational electoral contests represent the vast majority

Arizona candidate changed his name. His opponent wasn't happy about it." Washingtonpost.com, June 12, 2014). (Wilhelm, Maria. "Whether he's black or white, voters want Stebbings to stay." People.com, June 11, 1984). Similarly, Scott Fistlet, who first ran for public office as a white Republican, legally changed his name to Cesar Chavez to run in the

of elections in the U.S., and state and local policies profoundly affect the day to day lives of citizens. Yet, we know relatively little about accountability and representation, nor what shapes voting behavior in these elections (Trounstine 2010; Warshaw 2019). Racial cues embedded in the campaign materials for these elections may then lead voters to make incorrect conclusions about candidates and cast ballots that they would not otherwise (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie, 2015b). We explore precisely this proposition in the real-world context of the Wilson/Austin contest described above.

Using both actual print and audio materials from the 2013 campaign, we conduct two experiments to examine what happens when non-minority candidates use racial cues to associate themselves with a minority group in an attempt to appeal to minority voters. Our experiments both mimic the low-information conditions of local elections and employ actual campaign material from one such election. We assess whether these associative cues can change voters' perceptions about the candidate's demographic characteristics and ideological views. We find that associative cues do indeed lead both black and white respondents to believe that a white candidate is black. However, contrary to popular media accounts surrounding the election of Wilson, these signals have only modest effects on support for the candidate among black voters. Furthermore, we find that associative racial cues can cause white voters to turn against the candidate. The gains among black voters may be erased by this subsequent backlash among white voters. Taken together, the results demonstrate both the power and limits of print and audio communication strategies that employ associative racial cues, especially in low-information elections, suggesting that the media coverage attributing Wilson's victory to this strategy may have been overstated. However, our findings on the potential backlash among white voters demonstrate the power of these types of cues to change the outcome of close elections.

Associative Racial Cues

Broadly speaking, group appeals can activate both in-group attachment and out-group antipathy in voters' decision-making. Group-based appeals are politically effective, in part, because racial group attachment can influence how voters form policy opinions, respond to their surroundings, and view political candidates (Barreto, 2007; Dawson, 1994; Gay, 2001; Gilens, 1996; 1998; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Mendelberg, 1997; 2001; Tate, 1993; Valentino, 1999). Not only can racial and ethnic group cues prime racial considerations for voters making decisions, but these cues may also communicate substantive information about candidates' group sympathies and their likely policy positions (Bastedo and Lodge, 1980; Berinsky and Mendelberg, 2005; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1998; 2007; 2009; Mendelberg, 2001; Miller, Wlezien, and Hildreth, 1991; Sigelman et al., 1995).

A great deal of research on racial cues focuses on how images and language can trigger *negative* affect among white voters (Coltrane and Messino, 2000; Dixon and Linz, 2000; Dixon and Maddox, 2005; Entman, 1990; 1992; Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Gilens, 1996; 1998; 2009; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Gray, 1995; Peffley, Shield, and Williams, 1996). For example, implicit racial cues, such as pairing images of African Americans with an advertisement about crime or welfare, can bring racial considerations to the top of the mind when making political decisions (Mendelberg, 1997; 2001; Jamieson, 1992).[9] And while explicit racial cues have been viewed as ineffective – as white Americans are conscious of the racial argument and suppress racial attitudes to conform to a strong norm of egalitarianism (McConnaughy et al., 2010;

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[9] However, the mere presence of African Americans does not necessarily trigger a racialized response. For instance, when African Americans are presented alongside a non-stereotypical narrative, racial priming may be dampened (Valentino, Hutchings, and White, 2002).

Mendelberg, 2001; White, 2007) – norms associated with explicit racial appeals appear to have changed in recent years (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingswood, 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek, 2018).[10]

Underlying the success of these negative racial appeals is that race and ethnicity play an important role in evaluating candidates. A bevy of scholars have found that – all else held equal – voters are less supportive of minority candidates (e.g., Colleau et al., 1990; Krupnikov and Piston, 2015; Terkildsen, 1993), especially when voters are conservative or Republican (Fulton and Gershon, 2018; Jones, 2014) or are cognitively taxed (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2018).[11] Such differences may result from racial prejudice (Krupnikov and Piston, 2015) or because voters perceive minority candidates to be more liberal than non-minority candidates, even when their policy positions are the same (Fulton and Gershon, 2018; Jacobsmeier, 2015; Jones, 2014; Lerman and Sadin, 2016; McDermott, 1998).

A second common strategy of political communication focuses on how *positive* racial cues can shape non-white voters' evaluations. Candidates can use *positive* racial group appeals to increase non-white voters' sense of linked fate (Laird, 2017) in order to garner minority voters' political support and galvanize minority turnout (e.g., Barreto and Collingwood, 2015; Valenzuela and Michelson, 2016), though with some caveats (Burge, Wamble, and Laird, 2019; Garcia Bedolla and Michelson, 2009; Green, 2004). Candidates indicate that their policy positions align with minority racial or ethnic groups' interests as a way to target voters across racial or ethnic lines.[12] One example of this was Barack Obama's Latino-outreach strategy in

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[10] Other research that looks at African Americans (White, 2007) and Hispanic Americans (McConnaughy et al., 2010) shows that explicit racial cues can also affect how members of a minority group think about political issues.

[11] Though see Kam (2007) for evidence that this is limited to instances when party cues are absent.

[12] This type of campaign strategy might also be used to appeal to other politically relevant groups, such as gender (Holman, Schneider, and Pondel, 2015; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993).

which he consistently emphasized his immigration policies as a way of signaling his alignment with the Latino community. This type of strategy, deemed "cross-racial mobilization," may be effective at garnering support from minority voters (Alamillo and Collingwood, 2017; Barreto and Collingwood, 2014; Collingwood, 2012; Collingwood, Barreto, and Garcia-Rios, 2014) by signaling a deep interest in or concern for a particular minority group.[13]

The campaign strategy employed by Dave Wilson that we described at the beginning of this paper, though, relies on a different sort of cueing than those described above that may be especially powerful in lower-salience elections. Wilson's associative racial cueing strategy used racial signals in an attempt to influence voters' decisions by providing indirect cues about the candidate.[14] While the race or ethnicity of the candidate is the "simplest of group cues" that can change what "ingredients" are most important in forming these political evaluations (McConnaughy et al., 2010), Dave Wilson did not offer a direct cue about his race. Instead, he associated himself with African Americans without necessarily indicating that he was, in fact, part of the racial group. Such cues, which are not clearly explicit or implicit – nor easily classified as positive or negative – *associate* candidates with a particular racial or ethnic group. We call this strategy "associative racial cueing," an example of associative priming.

In psychology, associative priming is a construct used to describe the cognitive process wherein one word (a prime) calls to mind a related word (a target) because the words often appear together and are associated with one another, even if they are semantically unrelated (Fischler, 1977; Postman and Keppel, 1967). Through the process of spreading activation, exposure to the prime activates a series of associated networks, which in turn activate the target,

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[13] Of course, this strategy may backfire among white voters (Ostfeld, 2018).
[14] This is also distinct from direct cues about a candidate's personal background such as their name or what they look like (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2018; Fulton and Gershon, 2018; Jones, 2014; Krupnikov and Piston, 2015; Lerman and Sadin, 2016; McConnaughy et al., 2010).

if the target word is in those associated networks (Alaria et al., 2000; Collins and Luftus, 1975; Ferrand and New, 2003; McNamara, 1992; Perea and Rosa, 2002). While trivial examples include word pairs like *dog* and *cat*, or *doctor* and *nurse*, political campaigns also create similar associations between a candidate and concept in campaign materials. Recent examples from presidential election campaigns include both positive associations – such as *hope* and *Obama* – and negative associations, furthered by the opposition – such as *crooked* and *Hillary*. Campaign material juxtaposed the candidates with these terms as often as possible so that seeing the candidates' names would trigger the associated words.

Associative cues in the political context can both change voters' perceptions of the candidate and convey other information by appealing to socially acceptable stereotypes, such as partisanship of an ethnic group, through the logic of spreading activation (Valentino, 1999).[15] This process of activation is similar to the logic in Berinsky and Mendelberg (2005), where the mention of the stereotype that "Jews are shady" activates the "Jews are liberal" stereotype. This kind of direct associative cue can serve as a rational mental shortcut, sometimes sending a true signal about future legislative behavior (Sulkin and Swigger, 2007) and other times sending false signals about the characteristics or politics of a candidate. As a result of these signals, voters may assume that a candidate's policy positions are more in line with stereotypes about the political preferences of groups. The tendency to project these policy positions onto candidates may therefore depend on the ideological predispositions of the person receiving such cues (Lerman and Sadin, 2016; Piston et al., 2018).

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[15] However, these racial cues may be less effective at providing information when presented alongside a conservative candidate because the cue is counter-stereotypic; when racial cues are presented alongside a Democratic candidate, the cues are more effective at transmitting information for the outgroup (Stephens-Dougan, 2016).

Such signals may be especially powerful in the low-information elections that decide the majority of elected offices in the U.S. In cases when associative racial cues run against the actual demographics or positions of the candidate, the media and political opponents often suggest that the associative cues tricked voters. After he lost to Wilson, Austin told the Dallas Examiner that Wilson "plotted from the very beginning to deceive voters. He sent out pieces that had lies and misinformation in them," while local and national headlines referred to Wilson "hoodwinking" and "fooling" voters.[16] This narrative speaks to the perceived power of these associative cues, particularly in low-salience elections: observers (and the candidate's opponent) believed the cues to be so powerful in their ability to associate Wilson with a racial group that voters thought Wilson was actually a different race. Popular accounts aside, however, we know very little about the effectiveness of associative cues in low-information elections.

The experiments that follow address three empirical predictions about how voters – both black and white – respond to two examples of real-world associative cues. First, we expect that the strategic use of cues associating a candidate with a particular racial group in real-world campaigns can affect voters' perceptions of that candidate's race through the mechanisms of associative priming. Second, we expect voters of different racial and political groups use these associative cues to form impressions of a candidate's overall partisanship and ideology, especially when a candidate's positions are ambiguous, but even when information on a candidate's policy stances is available. And finally, while we expect that the use of associative signals should be an electorally expedient strategy among voters who identify with an associative racial cue, we also expect that there is a potential for backlash among voters who do not share an

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[16] Duncan, Cierra. "White candidate accused of fooling Black voters" *Dallas Examiner*, December 2, 2013.

identity with the associative racial cue employed by candidates if the process of spreading activation highlights negative stereotypes as well.

Research Design and Data

To answer these questions, we used the campaign materials from Dave Wilson's 2013 campaign for a local office to develop stimuli for two experiments designed to mimic the real-world effects of associative cues in elections. Crucially, these experiments reproduce mobilization efforts from an actual campaign that made use of both political information and racial cues. Wilson strategically employed associative cues in a low-information environment in order to associate himself with the black community. Running in a predominantly black district, he paired his name in ads with both images and voices of African-American supporters to create an association between his candidacy and African Americans. We examine whether Wilson was successful in creating this association between a racial group and himself. We do this by exploring whether these campaign materials led voters to believe that Wilson himself is African American and whether the association effectively communicated substantive information about the candidate's policy positions, partisanship, and ideological orientation.

For the first experiment, we used altered versions of a print advertisement from Wilson's campaign that contained strong policy positions. For the second, we used altered versions of the radio advertisement, which contained an endorsement of the candidate but no policy information.

Mailer Experiment

We administered an Internet-based survey to a national sample of 3,173 respondents through Survey Sampling International (SSI), an Internet panel company. Additionally, we collected an oversample of black respondents in order to ensure a large enough sample to assess the

differential effects by respondents' race, which yielded a total black sample of 585.[17] We told respondents that we were interested in how voters respond to campaign mailers for local elections and presented an electronic version of a campaign flyer in support of Wilson's candidacy.

The basis for the flyer is the actual mailer that Wilson used during the campaign, which contains Wilson's unambiguously conservative policy positions and religious rhetoric, makes clear Wilson's staunch anti-LGBT and pro-religious values outlook. The flyer also contains six images of African-American supporters. This flyer is presented in Figure 1. We manipulated the presentation of the images in the original campaign flyer to test whether these associative cues shaped viewers' perceptions about and attitudes toward Wilson.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the first condition, respondents saw the original, unedited version of Wilson's campaign mailer, shown in Figure 1. In the second condition, respondents saw the same mailer, except that the six photos at the bottom were of Caucasian Americans.[18] The third condition, which serves as a control group, removed the row of photos entirely. These mailers are presented in Figures B-1 and B-2 in Appendix B.

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[17] A description of the sample with comparison to ANES estimates is included in Appendix A.
[18] To choose the white faces, we followed a procedure similar to Todorov et al. (2005). In a separate survey, we asked respondents to rate the African Americans from the mailer, as well as a series of Caucasian faces. Respondents rated the faces on their attractiveness. We chose Caucasian photos that matched the images they replaced with respect to gender, age range, and attractiveness.
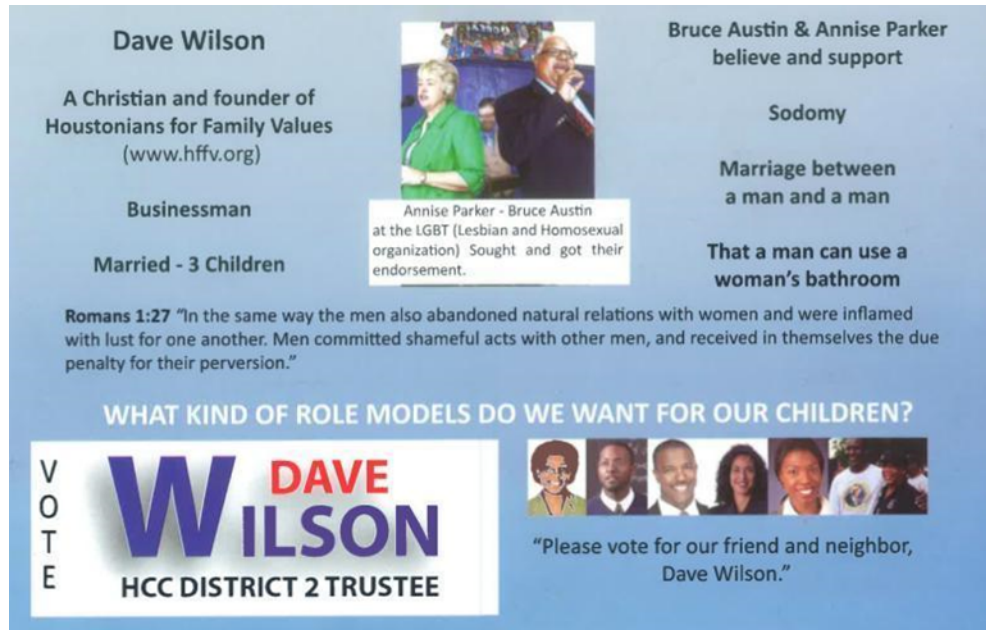
Figure 1: Original Campaign Mailer

After respondents saw the campaign flyer, they answered a series of questions about the mailer and the candidates. First, we asked respondents what they could remember from the advertisement. Embedded within other recall questions, we asked respondents about the candidate's race.[19] Second, we explored how the associative cues affected respondents' perceptions about Wilson's politics. At a general level, we asked respondents to place the candidate along a conservative-liberal spectrum and to identify whether the candidate was likely a Democrat or Republican. On a specific level, we asked respondents to estimate Wilson's policy positions on issues including abortion, economic liberalism, defense spending, gay marriage, and affirmative action. These measures are especially important as Wilson's advertisement details his position on one of these policies — gay marriage — but not the others. Third, we measured

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[19] We also asked about what office the candidate was running for, the marital status of the candidate, and the candidate's profession. While it is certainly possible that asking about the candidate's race could have served as an additional prime of race, the fact that this question was presented in random order in a block of recall questions minimizes this possibility. Full wording of these questions is in Appendix C.

whether the subtle differences in the two treatments influenced respondents' perceptions about Wilson's personal traits by asking how well phrases such as "he is moral" and "he is hardworking" describe the candidate. Finally, we asked whether respondents had a favorable or unfavorable impression of the candidate and how likely they would be to vote for Wilson if he ran in their district.

Radio Experiment

We collected a separate sample from SSI using the same procedure as the mailer experiment, yielding an overall sample of 1,223 respondents, including 396 African-American subjects. At the beginning of the experiment, we told respondents that we were interested in how voters respond to campaign advertisements, and then had respondents listen to a short radio advertisement in support of Wilson's candidacy.

The basis for this radio ad was the actual recording aired in the district, retrieved from the candidate's website. The original advertisement featured stereotypical and distinctively African-American women talking about Wilson and his opponent. We again manipulated the racial associative cues in the advertisement. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the first condition, respondents listened to the original, unedited version of Wilson's radio ad. In the other condition, respondents heard the same ad voiced by two white voice actors we hired.[20] Whereas the print ad included religious rhetoric and offered policy positions on social issues like gay marriage and transgender rights, the radio advertisement focused specifically on attacking Bruce Austin, the incumbent, for supposedly voting against "6 million dollars in scholars for our children right here in our neighborhood" while voting to spend "45 million in Qatar." The advertisement goes on to criticize Bruce Austin for sending money

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[20] The transcript from the radio ad and links to these two versions of the radio ad are in Appendix D.

overseas and claiming that Dave Wilson is the only candidate voters can trust to fight "for our neighborhoods". After respondents listened to the ad, they answered a series of questions about the ad and the candidates that were identical to those in the first experiment.

Results

Throughout the presentation of our results, we separate respondents by race, because we expect black and white respondents to respond differently to the treatments.[21] Furthermore, even though the mailer experiment included a control condition, we compare the condition with black associative cues to that with white associative cues in order to directly compare Experiments 1 and 2.[22] We also account for the respondents' attentiveness throughout the survey through the use of "Screener" questions (Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances, 2014).[23] In the analyses that follow, we present results both for the full sample of respondents as well as the "attentive subsample" – those respondents who were in the upper-half on an attentiveness scale formed from the different screener questions. We focus on the attentive respondents because some experimental stimuli are subtle and might be missed by those hurrying through the survey, but we include the full sample results as well to be transparent in our presentation (following the advice of Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances, 2014).

Figure 2 presents the estimated differences in means between the treatment groups on respondents' recall of Wilson's race, comparing the "black" and "white" treatment conditions among black respondents. The results for the mailer experiment are on the left side and for the radio experiment on the right side of Figure 2.

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[21] Formal significance tests of heterogeneous treatment effects in the form of regressions with interactions between race and treatment condition for all outcome variables are in Appendix F.
[22] Regression results including the control for the mailer experiment are in Appendix F.
[23] The full text of the questions and passage rates are in Appendix E.

We begin by looking at whether the associative cues in the ads convinced voters that Wilson was black. In the control condition, who received no associative cues at all, 27% of black respondents assumed the candidate was black. In contrast, 56% of black respondents in the "black treatment" condition of the mailer experiment reported thinking that the candidate was black, while only 11% of black respondents in the "white treatment" condition reported thinking the same – a statistically significant treatment effect of 45 percentage points.[24] This difference and its 95%-confidence interval for the full sample of respondents is plotted as a triangle and solid line at the top left of Figure 2, and as a circle and solid line for the attentive sample.

The radio experiment yielded similar effects: 59% of black respondents in the "black treatment" condition thought that Wilson was black, while 16% of black respondents in the "white treatment" condition reported that he was black. The 43-point difference between these two proportions is plotted at the top of the right half of Figure 2 and is statistically significant.
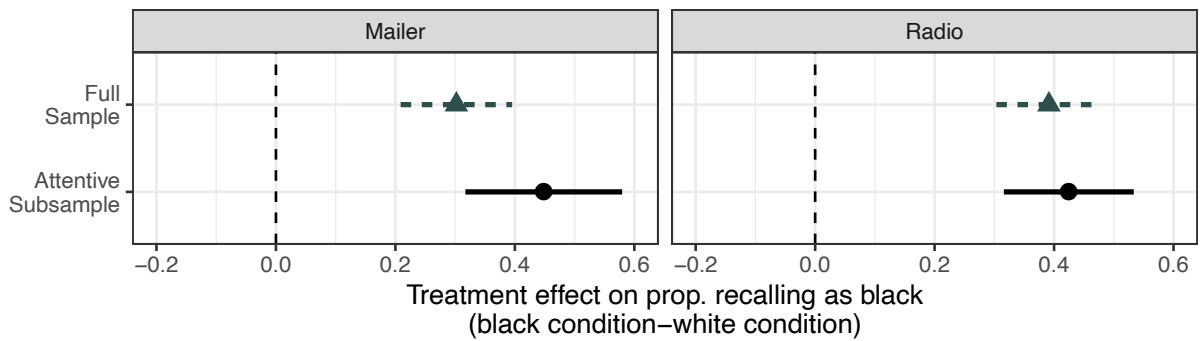

Figure 2: Treatment effects on recall of race, black respondents

We next explore respondents' reported perceptions about Dave Wilson. Figure 3 plots our treatment effects on our other dependent variables, with the mailer experiment on the left side and the radio experiment on the right side, and with the full sample plotted as a triangle and

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[24] Formal significance tests in the form of regressions for all outcome variables, as well as estimates comparing treatment groups to the control condition for the Mailer Experiment, are in Appendix F.

dotted line and the attentive sample plotted as a filled circle and solid line. For both experiments, positive effects indicate treatment effects in the more conservative direction on our political outcome variables and in the positive direction on other variables. Negative effects indicate treatment effects in the more liberal or more negative direction. Each dependent variable ranges between 0 and 1. The first and second lines from the top of Figure 3 plot the treatment effect of the "black treatment" condition relative to the "white treatment" condition on our two measures of support for the candidate. Among attentive black respondents, we see an increase of 11 percentage points in respondents' reported favorability towards Wilson in the mailer experiment, but no such effect in the radio experiment. This pattern repeats across a range of dependent variables: we see small treatment effects in the more liberal direction on respondents' perceptions of Wilson's ideology and political positions in the mailer experiment, but no such effects in the radio experiment. Similarly, on Wilson's perceived character traits, attentive respondents in the mailer experiment were 9 percentage points more likely to respond affirmatively that the candidate "cares about people like me," but across all other traits and in the radio experiment, we see no such effects. Importantly, while there is some evidence that the associative racial cueing strategy did a better job garnering support among black respondents in the mailer compared to the radio advertisement, the mailer with the images of black supporters had a modest effect on respondents' downstream candidate evaluations. This limited evidence appears *despite* the possibility that black voters might have responded positively to the socially conservative and religious messages in the mailer (Abrajano 2010), particularly when the message comes from a black (or assumed to be black) source (Margolis 2018, Chapter 7).
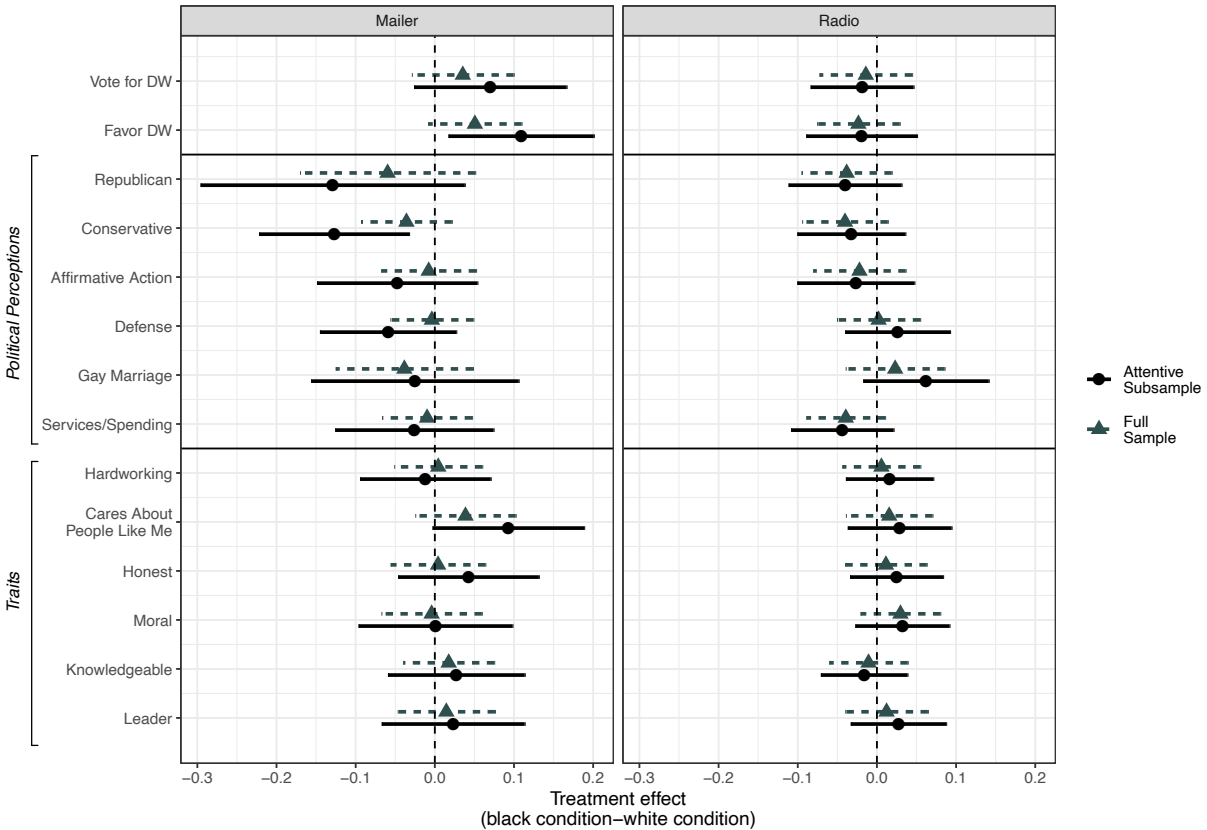
Figure 3: Treatment effects, black respondents

Potential Backlash: White Respondents

We also explored the possibility that a strategy of associative racial cues meant to attract black voters might inadvertently repel white voters (Fraga and Leal, 2004; Frymer, 1999). Figure 4 presents the results for white respondents, using the same presentational strategy we used in Figures 2 and 3. As a baseline, 17% of white respondents in the control group reported the candidate as black, in the absence of any associative cues.[25] White respondents in the "black treatment" conditions in both experiments were more likely to think Wilson was black than those in the "white treatment" conditions. These differences – 27 percentage points in the mailer

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[25]Estimates comparing both treatments to the control condition are in Appendix F.

experiment and 37 percentage points in the radio experiment – are statistically significant and are plotted in Figure 4.
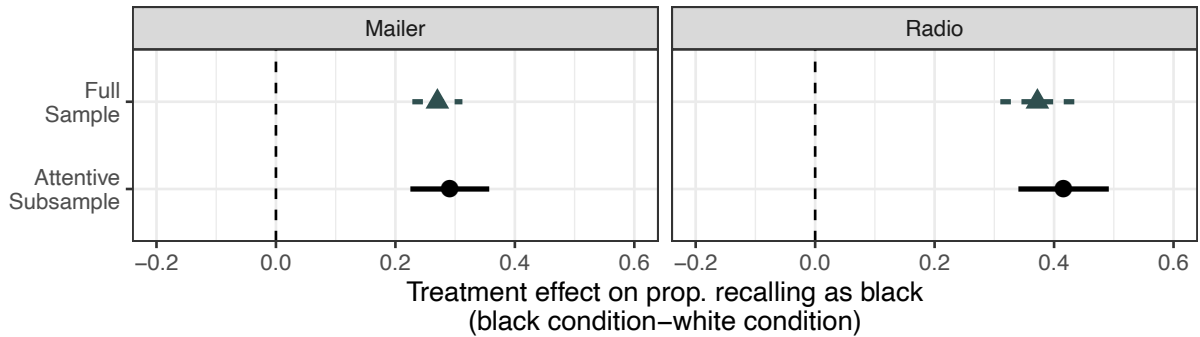

Figure 4: Treatment effect on recall of race, white respondents

The results for the other dependent measures, which we plot in Figure 5, depart from those we found for black respondents. While the mailer experiment affected only perceptions of Wilson's position on affirmative action – attentive white respondents thought Wilson was 0.10 more liberal in the "black treatment" condition – the radio experiment changed perceptions of Wilson across-the-board. Among attentive white respondents who heard the original radio ad with stereotypical black-sound actors were eight percentage points less likely to vote for Wilson compared to those who heard the modified ad ($p < 0.001$). Respondents who listened to the original ad were also less likely to think Wilson is a Republican (difference = 9; p-value < 0.001), less ideologically conservative (difference = 10; p-value < 0.001), and more liberal on a range of specific issues (difference ranging between three and fourteen percentage points). Importantly, the largest policy gap in both experiments appears on the affirmative action question (difference = 10 and 14; p-values < 0.001 and 0.001 in the print and radio ads, respectively), which was the only race-based policy question asked in the survey and was not discussed in either advertisement. White and black respondents clearly internalized the racial cues in different ways on the issue of race. Whereas white respondents in the "black" treatment

condition in both experiments assumed that Dave Wilson would implement policies aimed at benefiting the black community, black respondents made no such assumption. A simple associative cueing strategy was all white respondents needed to make inferences about a candidate's stance on a politically salient issue. Finally, there is some evidence that the associative cues shaped evaluations of Wilson's character, particularly in the radio ad. Respondents in the "black" radio ad condition were less likely to ascribe positive traits to Wilson relative to respondents in the "white" radio ad. These negative effects indicate the potentially powerful backlash that Dave Wilson may have caused among white voters who saw his mailer or heard his radio ad.
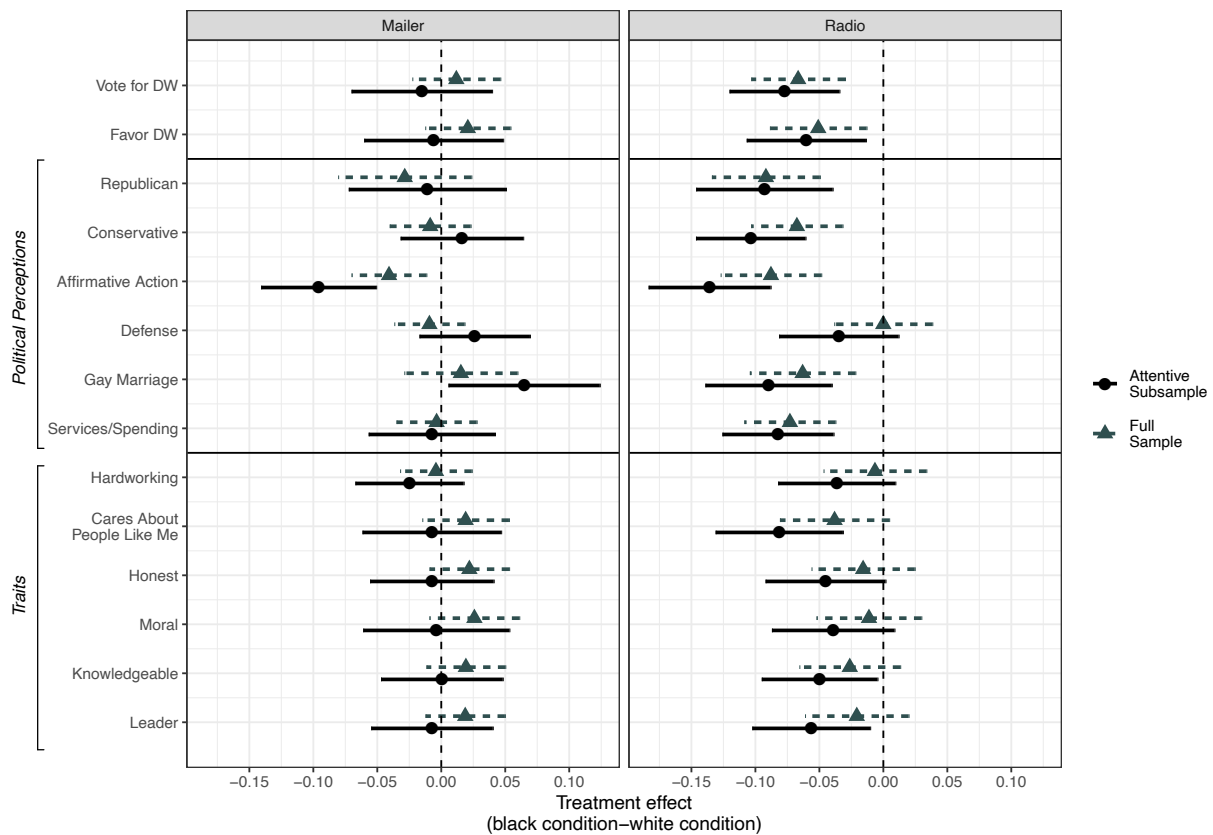

Figure 5: Treatment effects, white respondents

Discussion and conclusion

Dave Wilson used racial cues in a low-information election to evoke an association between his candidacy and a minority group. We examine whether the cues used in Wilson's campaign mailers and radio ads affected support for Wilson or perceptions of Wilson's race and ideological positions. To explore these questions, we ran two large Internet experiments using modified versions of Wilson's actual campaign mailer and radio ad.

Overall, the strategy of using associative racial cues was effective in changing the perception of Wilson's racial identity. The use of black images in Wilson's campaign mailer and stereotypical black voices in his radio ad dramatically increased the number of respondents who believed Wilson was black. In other words, associating a candidate with black supporters swayed voters into believing the candidate was himself black, despite the fact that neither campaign advertisement presented policy positions or employed rhetoric that would suggest that Dave Wilson cared about the interests and well-being of the black community. However, this strategy had small downstream effects on support for the candidate among black respondents. Suggesting his race was black may have altered political perceptions of Wilson slightly, but only among black voters in the mailer experiment in which there were also socially conservative policy cues that may have resonated with black respondents. In this case, associative racial cues, without the additional policy-relevant signaling that may come from cross-racial mobilization (Alamillo and Collingwood, 2017; Barreto and Collingwood, 2014; Collingwood, 2012; Collingwood, Barreto, and Garcia-Rios, 2014), is not sufficient to garner increased support among black voters. These results highlight the limited positive impact of such a communication strategy, even in low-salience elections.

Moreover, white voters responded negatively to these ads. In the radio ad experiment, white voters punished the candidate for using such associative cues, and white respondents were ready to assume that Dave Wilson would prioritize members of the black community—such as by supporting affirmative action. These results build on Piston et al.'s (2018) findings that white voters project their own policy preferences onto white, but not black, candidates in cases of ambiguous position taking, and Lerman and Sadin's (2016) findings that white voters stereotype black candidates to have more liberal issue positions, while black voters do not uniformly do so. Here, we find that white voters are willing to make a cognitive inference about a candidate's policy position when there is a black associational cue without making the same assumption about a candidate associated with the white community. In other words, candidate race—both perceived or actual—plays a major role in how voters fill in the gaps when making judgments about candidates.

More generally, while associative racial cues may have convinced respondents, both black and white, that Wilson was black, the cues depressed support among white respondents and did not appreciably increase support among black respondents. The results highlight that associative racial cues may hurt candidates more than help them, particularly in racially heterogeneous districts.

The empirical results vary somewhat between our two experiments; the mailer and the radio ads worked in different ways. These differences represent an important avenue for future research. While using the actual campaign advertisements as the basis for our experimental stimuli provides our experiment with a great deal of realism, a result of this decision was that the stimuli in the two experiments differed in important ways. The mailer provides a visual cue and race is depicted through photographs. Alternatively, the radio ad offers an audio cue where the

two voices signal the race of Wilson's supporters. Moreover, Dave Wilson's mailer appeared unprofessional while his radio ad had relatively high production value. But these campaign ads reflect observed real-world variation in political communication. Researchers interested in studying campaign effects would benefit from testing their theories in different ways, as a message or cue may have different effects when communicated in different contexts or via a different medium.

Our findings speak to the changing nature of racial cues in American politics. Whereas White (2007) and McConnaughy et al. (2010) find that racial cues can change what identities and beliefs are important when forming evaluations, we do not find consistent evidence of this effect. For example, group attachment is not a more powerful predictor of support for Dave Wilson in conditions where there is a black associative cue among African Americans, as previous research would predict. Similarly, in contrast to explicit ethnic group endorsements (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie, 2019), racial associative cues do not encourage white respondents to rely on party identification or ideology to a greater extent.[26] Our results instead align with the findings from Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek (2018), which show that Americans, both white and black, have changed how they view, interpret, and respond to racial cues in recent years.

Our results also build on and contribute to the growing research on cross-racial mobilization. The changing demographics of the United States make it increasingly important for candidates—both white and non-white—to appeal to non-white voters. Our findings indicate that associative cues are not sufficient to garner support: non-white voters want evidence that the candidate will care about group members' interests. An association between a candidate and a

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[26] We present these results in Appendix G.

racial group—even if the association affects non-whites' perceptions of the candidate's race—does not guarantee support among non-whites. The success of a cross-racial mobilization strategy, therefore, may hinge on the credibility of the racial cue.

The findings from this paper also add nuance to the cross-racial mobilization literature, which largely uses observational analyses to assess the successes and failures of candidates in high-profile elections. The present paper, which relies on experimental analyses and a low-salience election, shows that cues may operate differently in elections of varying degrees of salience (Bernhard and Freeder, 2018; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie, 2015a; 2015b). Most notably, racial cueing strategies in low-salience elections may change perceptions as fundamental as the candidate's race or ethnicity, which is less likely to happen in higher-profile senatorial or presidential contests where more is known about the candidates. Much of the existing theories developed in previous research on political communication and campaigns are drawn from evidence in national or state races alone. The results we observe on the effects of communication in low-information elections are helpful in extending these theories to the broad majority of subnational elections in American politics. Further testing the power of associative cues in high- versus low-salience elections represents an additional avenue ripe for future research.

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