

It's called 'negational identity,' and new study finds it's a powerful political tool

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In the current Presidential campaign it has been said often enough to become a cliché: both candidates will need to reach beyond their respective political bases to appeal to a larger-than-usual body of independent voters. How to do so? Accentuate the negative -- or "negational identity," as behavioral scholars put it.

"Even if individuals cannot agree on who they are, they often agree on who or what they are not," a new study explains. "Simply reminding people of what they are not can transform attitudes towards different groups, shift loyalties, and political preferences, and thus drive coalition building."

"Independents are not likely to be won over by arguments that have the most emotional resonance to core Democrats or Republicans," observes Chen-Bo Zhong of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, who carried out the study with Adam D. Galinsky of the Kellogg School Management at Northwestern University and Miguel M. Unzueta of the UCLA Anderson School of Management. "More likely to be effective, our results suggest, are appeals that emphasize opposition to the other party, so that being non-Republican or non-Democratic become dominant campaign themes."

The researchers tested the power of negational identity in two experiments carried out late last year, just before the first party caucuses and primaries. They found it to have a powerful enough effect to overcome the tendency of two ethnic minorities, Asians and Latinos, to

prefer Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama, a tendency that emerged in polling during the primary season.

In one session, 19 Asian undergraduates at Northwestern University were randomly selected to write how being Asian had affected their life in the United States, while an equal number were asked to write about how being not Caucasian had affected their life here. After completing this 10-minute exercise, participants were asked to respond to the ostensibly unrelated question of whom they preferred between Obama and Clinton.

Among students who were asked to write about being Asian (the "affirmational condition"), 26% expressed a preference for Obama, 68% preferred Clinton, and one was uncommitted; among subjects who were asked to write about being not Caucasian (the "negational condition") the results were totally reversed -- 63% for Obama, 26% for Clinton, and two uncommitted.

When a similar experiment was carried out among 38 Latino students at UCLA, it yielded similar results. Among students who were asked to write about being Latino, 26% preferred Obama, 58% preferred Clinton, and three were uncommitted; among those who wrote about not being Caucasian, 58% preferred Obama and 37% Clinton while one was uncommitted.

"Highlighting one's negational identity as non-White," the authors conclude, "increased Latino and Asian support for a Black Presidential candidate, even without any coordination of interests (given the minor differences between the two frontrunners' policies). Further, we found that activating a negational racial identity made Latinos' attitudes toward other minority groups more positive, and these attitudes partially drove their shift in voting preferences for Obama."

In sum, they add, "negational categorization can be a powerful force in social interaction, even compared to the more conventional categorization strategies that focus on affirmational ties (e.g., we are all Democrats)."

Given the importance of Latino voters in some key states, does emphasizing the fact that he is a non-White offer a winning strategy for Obama? Not likely, the authors surmise, warning that "manipulations of negational racial identity could place a strain on the relationship between racial minorities and the White majority."

Something like this may have happened this summer, Unzueta says, in response to Obama's comment to the effect that his face did not resemble those on dollar bills, a remark that was widely interpreted as calling attention to the fact that he was not White. "The uproar that remark produced makes it unlikely that either candidate will introduce race into the campaign, whether affirmationally or negatively," Unzueta says.

"Where negational identity is playing a major role, Galinsky adds, "is in the way the candidates have sought to define the opposite party -- for example, as typified by unpopular presidents such as Carter or Bush or as tied to powerful social or economic minorities such as the 'wealthy' or the 'elite'."

The study will appear in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.

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