

# The Obama effect: Researchers cite President's role in reducing racism

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President Obama spurred a dramatic change in the way whites think about African-Americans before he had even set foot in the Oval Office, according to a new study.

Florida State University Psychology Professor E. Ashby Plant and University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Patricia Devine have documented a decrease in racial prejudice during the Fall 2008 period between the Democratic Party's nomination of Barack Obama and the Nov. 4 election. They call it the Obama Effect.

"The unprecedented drop in implicit bias observed in our studies indicates that the impact of Obama's historic campaign went beyond his winning the election," the researchers wrote in a paper outlining the study's results that has not yet been published. "It appears to have produced a fundamental change in at least the minds of the American public. Although the full impact of this historic election will play out over time, we are encouraged by the early returns."

About 300 non-black (white, Asian or Hispanic) college students in Wisconsin and Florida participated in a variety of experiments and surveys designed to measure stereotyping and implicit prejudice -- that is, the kind of prejudice that is typically described as "automatic" or "knee-jerk" and, although not directly stated, can influence people's behavior. The researchers found that 51 percent of the participants demonstrated automatic preferences for white people. The others had no preference or preferred blacks.

This is significant because previous research, even Plant's own studies conducted on the same college campuses, typically has found that about 80 percent of white people demonstrate an automatic preference for other whites.

The researchers suspected that the dramatic change could be attributed to exposure to Obama during his presidential campaign and sought to find out if there was indeed, a connection. To do so, they asked participants what comes to mind when they think of African-Americans and what they anticipated would come to mind for others when they think of African-Americans. Participants listed a range of responses, including traits, physical characteristics, food items and people. Almost 22 percent listed Obama on at least one list, and 50 percent named at least one other positive exemplar such as Martin Luther King Jr.

"The fact that close to a quarter of our participants listed Obama indicates that he had permeated many people's consciousness to the point that he was highly accessible," Plant said. "We were able to demonstrate that the accessibility of positive exemplars in people's minds was related to their degree of implicit bias."

What's more: Those who had low levels of implicit prejudice were quick to make an association between race and government -- a connection the researchers believe is directly attributable to Obama. In this experiment, participants were exposed to the word "black" on a computer screen for 55 milliseconds. Although the exposure was too brief for conscious processing, these participants quickly selected government-related words such as president, election or senator rather than neutral words in a lexical decision task.

Although researchers found a decrease in stereotyping of blacks, it is still notable that 51 percent demonstrated a bias against blacks, Plant said.

"Our findings suggest that these people are less likely to have positive exemplars and words related to Obama's campaign come to mind when they think of black people," Plant said. "However, it is not clear why they responded this way. It is possible they were less exposed to the campaign media blitz. Alternatively, the strength and stability of their racial attitudes may have resulted in a resistance to change."

The researchers noted that the longevity of the effects is unclear, and it's also not known whether the positive impact of the exposure to Obama will continue. The success of his presidency may have implications for his future role as an exemplar.

"If his presidency is highly successful, he would activate positive traits, thoughts and feelings for most people," the researchers said. "However, the result may be less positive should his presidency prove to be less successful."

Source: Florida State University

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