

Support for racial equality may be victim of Obama's election

March 23 2009

"You've come a long way, baby." - Virginia Slims cigarette campaign

"We've come a long way, baby." - typical response from American voters after the 2008 presidential [election](#)

Ironically, Barack Obama's election could turn out to have negative consequences in addressing [racial injustices](#) in the United States, according to new research.

"After the election, participants more readily said [racial progress](#) has been made and that we have come a long way. Obama's election really jumps out as a salient example of racial progress," said Cheryl Kaiser, a UW assistant psychology professor.

The researchers administered the same anonymous [online survey](#) to 74 undergraduate college students 10 days prior to and in the week following the election. The survey took about 10 minutes to complete. The students were predominantly white (53 percent) or Asian-American (28 percent) and female (68 percent). The students were asked questions about how they rated progress made toward racial equality, the Protestant work ethic, the need for future racial progress and support for policies that address [racial inequality](#) such as promoting equal access to health care and affirmative action.

They also were asked which candidate they were going to vote for and who they did vote for. At both times, 82 percent supported Obama and

17 percent chose John McCain.

Kaiser characterized the college student sample as predominantly liberal but said, "We think that because with a more conservative sample the findings might have been even stronger."

Sixty-four percent of those who voted for Obama and 58 percent of the McCain supporters reported an increase in how much racial progress the country had made in their answers to the surveys. Fifty-five percent of the Obama voters increased their belief in the ideas embodied in the Protestant work ethic. However, McCain supporters reported mixed attitudes with just under 42 percent reporting increased approval and a similar percentage voicing decreased support.

Support for future racial progress and backing for policies addressing racial inequality both showed steep declines after the election. Seventy-one percent of Obama voters said there was less need for continued racial progress and 75 percent of McCain supporters voiced similar attitudes. Support for policies addressing racial inequalities fell by 62 percent and 67 percent among Obama and McCain voters, respectively.

"Obama cited affirmative action policies as helping him, and some people may be thinking, 'We don't need policies such as affirmative action when a black person has been elected president,' rather than saying, 'Wow, these policies work,'" said Kaiser.

Co-authors of the study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* are Benjamin Drury, Kerry Spalding and Sapna Cheryan of the UW and Laurie O'Brien of Tulane.

Source: University of Washington ([news](#) : [web](#))

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