

Political views may skew perception of skin tone, new study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Political affinity could influence how some people view the skin tone of biracial political candidates, according to a new study from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, New York University and Tilburg University in The Netherlands.

The findings indicate that people perceive lighter skin tone to be more representative of a candidate with whom they share political ideology than darker skin tone.

The research was led by Eugene Caruso, assistant professor of behavioral science at Chicago Booth, with collaboration from Emily Balcetis, assistant professor of psychology at NYU and Nicole Mead, a postdoctoral fellow at Tilburg University. It was published in the latest issue of [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) (December 1).

Caruso and his colleagues showed groups of undergraduate students a set of photos of [Barack Obama](#) that were taken during the 2008 [presidential debates](#) or from his campaign Web site. The subjects were asked which images were most representative of the president, and then indicated their political beliefs.

While some of the photos were unaltered, the researchers digitally lightened or darkened Obama's skin tone in others (unbeknownst to the research participants). The researchers report that self-described liberal students tended to judge lightened photos of President Obama as most

representative of him, while self-described conservative students more frequently picked darkened photos.

The study also found that regardless of their political views, students who rated a lightened photo as most representative of President Obama before the 2008 presidential election were more likely to report having voted for him in the presidential election.

The findings suggest that people's political beliefs can affect how light or dark they perceive someone to be. The authors are planning to explore whether liberal and conservative media outlets depict subtly different images of political candidates, and whether the specific images to which voters are exposed may influence voting behavior, Caruso said.

“Subtle differences in a person's skin tone may affect other consequential decisions in which pictures are part of the evaluation process, such as who we hire for a job,” Caruso said.

The study suggests that discussion should not only concern how people perceive Blacks versus Whites, but also how perceptions of Blacks or biracial people vary within these groups, he said.

Much previous research has demonstrated that people tend to have more negative stereotypes of dark-skinned Blacks compared to light-skinned Blacks, according to Caruso. “Moreover, although the number of Blacks in public office has increased dramatically over the years, there is some evidence that dark-skinned Blacks are under-represented as elected officials relative to light-skinned Blacks.”

Provided by University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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