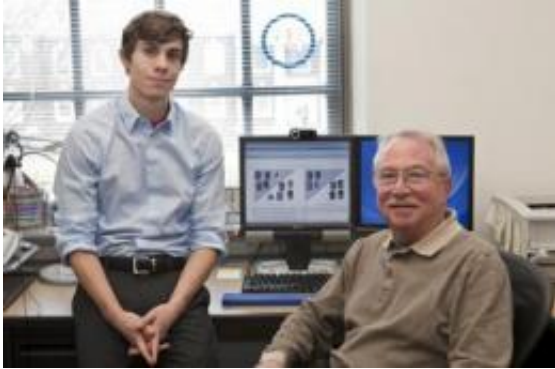


Prejudice and the President

April 28 2011



This is University of Delaware Graduate Student Eric Hehman, left, with Samuel Gaertner professor of psychology. Credit: Ambre Alexander, University of Delaware

Racial prejudice among some white Americans -- even if unintentional -- influences their views of President Barack Obama's "Americanism" and their assessment of how well he is performing in office, according to a University of Delaware doctoral student.

The psychology student, Eric Hehman, recently received the national Albert Bandura Graduate Research Award for his paper detailing a research study he conducted on the subject. The article, "Evaluations of Presidential Performance: Race, Prejudice, and Perceptions of Americanism," was published in the March issue of the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

Hehman, whose adviser and co-author is Samuel Gaertner, professor of psychology, specializes in intergroup relations. He often focuses on such topics as prejudice and discrimination.

The hypothesis for Hehman's paper centered around the possibility that whites' racial prejudices influenced "how American" they perceived Obama to be, which would in turn predict their evaluations of his presidential performance. Furthermore, Hehman predicted that whites would be the only group in which such [racial prejudice](#) would ultimately influence their evaluations of performance and that it would affect only their evaluations of the president. He predicted that when whites evaluated Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., or when African Americans evaluated either Obama or Biden, racial prejudices would not affect their assessments.

Hehman collected responses from about 300 white and black members of the UD community, asking them to evaluate the success in office of either Obama or Biden. "Our predictions were ultimately supported," Hehman said. "Whites who were racially prejudiced against blacks saw Obama as 'less American' and subsequently rated him as performing more poorly as president.

"Non-prejudiced whites, and both prejudiced and non-prejudiced blacks, did not do so. Additionally and importantly, this relationship was only found with Obama, and not in evaluations of Biden."

Hehman, whose won a previous national research award for work exploring what characteristics of a person cause others to remember or forget having seen his face before. That study found that, although people tend to recognize members of their own racial group better than those of different races, they are even better at recognizing people of any race if those people are identified as similar to them in some other way, such as being students of the same university.

The idea for his newest research began about a year ago when, Hehman said, he noticed that the criticisms of Obama seemed to go beyond the kinds of criticisms that are commonly heard about presidents' policies and, instead, included some aspects that were "not really based in reality." He said he particularly noticed questions about Obama's birth certificate, his religion and allegations that he was corrupting children with a socialist agenda.

"I found these controversies fairly strange and wondered if the impetus behind them was rooted in racism, manifesting and rationalizing itself in accusations of Obama's 'un-Americanism,'" Hehman said. "Some of [Gaertner's] previous work had dealt with similar issues of where unintentional racial biases influence behavior, often without a person even being aware of such biases, and so investigating this with regard to Obama was a natural step."

He said he hopes his paper will cause readers to see "that even among people who think themselves unprejudiced, unconscious racial prejudices can manifest themselves with extremely important outcomes, such as evaluations of the leader of our country." In addition, Hehman said, "I hope they examine their opinions and behaviors, both political and otherwise, to ensure they are based on a steady foundation of fact, rather than racial uncomfortability or prejudice."

Provided by University of Delaware

Citation: Prejudice and the President (2011, April 28) retrieved 7 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-prejudice.html>

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