

Obama changed racial identity of black students

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Barack Obama's historic election in 2008 stimulated individual and national reflection on race and changed African-American college students' perceptions of being black, reports a new Cornell study published in *Developmental Psychology* (47:6).

But how these changes will shape [public discourse](#) as the 2012 presidential campaign unfolds or whether the 2012 election outcome will generate similar changes in [racial identity](#) is still unknown, say the researchers.

"Obama's election triggered deep explorations or 'encounter experiences' in which these African-Americans [in our study] were challenged to think through the importance and positive value that can be associated with being black," said Anthony Burrow, assistant professor of human development in Cornell's College of [Human Ecology](#), co-author of the study with Anthony Ong, associate professor of human development at Cornell, and lead author Thomas Fuller-Rowell, Ph.D. '10, now a Robert Wood Johnson postdoctoral fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"We found that those who explored these aspects more fully experienced the most profound immediate and longer-term changes in their sense of racial identity," Burrow said.

To examine the impact of the election of the first African-American president on racial identity, the researchers surveyed more than 300

African-American undergraduate students from two large research universities in the Northeast before and after the 2008 election. They looked at the importance of race to a person's [self-concept](#) (centrality), whether or not they feel good about being part of their [racial group](#) (private regard) and how they perceive their racial group to be viewed by others (public regard).

Racial identity is important, they say, because it influences how a person understands their experiences and can help or hinder how they navigate life's challenges and opportunities.

The team found increases in all three aspects of racial identity immediately after the election. Their results also suggest overall enduring increases in public regard. However, long-term increases in private regard were more likely among those who explored their racial identity more following the [election](#).

"One main message here is that important race-relevant social or political events can shift the way individuals think about their race as well as their perception of how others view their race," said Burrow.

In daily diary entries that were assessed as part of the study, one participant poignantly observed, "Today is a day that I will remember for the rest of my life. I will remember and pinpoint the exact minute that I learned that Obama became president. Today is a day of both pride and awe for me. I am proud because I feel that we have come so far. I am awestruck by the magnitude this will have on history. Sixty years ago, this event would have been unheard of. A black president!"
(Anonymous, 2008)

Provided by Cornell University

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