

Unconscious racial attitudes playing large role in 2012 presidential vote

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After the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, many proclaimed that the country had entered a post-racial era in which race was no longer an issue. However, a new large-scale study shows that racial attitudes have already played a substantial role in 2012, during the Republican primaries. They may play an even larger role in this year's presidential election.

The study, led by [psychologists](#) at the University of Washington, shows that between January and April 2012 eligible voters who favored whites over blacks – either consciously or unconsciously – also favored [Republican candidates](#) relative to [Barack Obama](#).

"People were saying that with Obama's election [race](#) became a dead issue, but that's not at all the case," said lead investigator Anthony Greenwald, a UW psychology professor.

The study's findings mean that many white and non-white voters, even those who don't believe they tend to favor whites over blacks, might vote against Obama because of his race. These voters could cite the economy or other reasons, but a contributing cause could nevertheless be their conscious or unconscious [racial attitudes](#).

"Our findings may indicate that many of those who expressed egalitarian attitudes by voting for Obama in 2008 and credited themselves with having 'done the right thing' then are now letting other considerations prevail," said collaborator Mahzarin Banaji, a psychology professor at

Harvard University.

In the study, a majority of white eligible voters showed a pattern labeled "automatic white preference" on a widely used measure of unconscious race bias. Previous studies indicate that close to 75 percent of white Americans show this implicit bias.

In a study done just prior to the 2008 [presidential election](#), Greenwald and colleagues found that race attitudes played a role in predicting votes for the Republican candidate John McCain.

The 2012 data, collected from nearly 15,000 voters, show that race was again a significant factor in candidate preferences.

In an online survey, Greenwald asked survey-takers about their political beliefs, how "warmly" they felt toward black and white people, and which presidential contender they preferred. Because the survey was conducted in the first four months of 2012, it included the five main Republican hopefuls – Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum – as well as Obama.

Greenwald also measured unconscious race attitude using the Implicit Association Test, a tool he developed more than a decade ago to gauge thoughts that people don't realize they have. Different variations of the test measure implicit attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, ethnicities and other topics.

Greenwald found that favoritism for Republican candidates was predicted by respondents' racial attitudes, both their self-reported views and their implicit biases measured by the IAT. Greenwald emphasized that the study's finding that some candidates are more attractive to voters with pro-white racial attitudes does not mean that those candidates are racist.

"The study's findings raise an interesting question: After nearly four years of having an African-American president in the White House, why do race attitudes continue to have a role in electoral politics?" Greenwald said.

He suspects that Obama's power as president in 2012, compared with his lesser status as candidate in 2008, may have "brought out race-based antagonism that had less reason to be activated in 2008."

Another possibility is that Republican candidates' assertions that their most important goal is to remove Obama from the presidency "may have strong appeal to those who have latent racial motivation," Greenwald said.

Greenwald and his research team will continue to collect people's attitudes about the 2012 presidential candidates as part of their Decision 2012 IAT study. Now that Mitt Romney has emerged as the presumptive Republican nominee, the researchers are modifying their survey to focus on voters' comparisons of Romney with Obama.

More information: They plan to post summaries of the data each month until the November election. Anyone can take the test online: [implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ ... mo/featuredtask.html](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/...mo/featuredtask.html)

Provided by University of Washington

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