

Black and Latinx conservatives 'upshift' competence to white audiences: study

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When communicating in mostly white settings, politically conservative Black and Latinx Americans use words associated with competence more often than their liberal counterparts, distancing themselves from negative racial stereotypes, according to a new study by Yale social psychologist Cydney Dupree.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*, combined several experiments to show that Black and Latinx conservatives, specifically those who are less concerned with social and [economic inequality](#) ("hierarchy-based conservatives"), are more likely to adopt language associated with power, status, and ability than liberals when addressing white people or operating in predominantly white spaces, including the halls of Congress.

"Despite common misconceptions, Black and Latinx Americans hold varied political beliefs," said Dupree, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Yale School of Management. "Those who are more conservative—specifically, those not so concerned about inequality—tend to distance themselves from their racial ingroup.

"I predicted that, when talking to white people, Black and Latinx conservatives would distance themselves from negative ingroup stereotypes, such as those labeling them as lower in competence. My findings supported that prediction. When addressing whites, Black and Latinx conservatives use language associated with competence more frequently than their liberal counterparts, reversing stereotypes."

In the study's first two experiments, Dupree analyzed 250,000 remarks made in Congress and then nearly 1 million tweets posted by Black, Latinx, and white politicians for content associated with competence. She measured the politicians' concern for inequality using a scale based on their voting records. Her analysis showed that Black and Latinx politicians who were hierarchy-based conservatives used more language related to competence than their liberal counterparts—using more words like "determined" or "intelligent"—in Congress and on Twitter. White politicians' views about inequality did not predict their references to competence, she found.

[In a previous study](#), Dupree showed that white liberals tend to

"downshift competence," or self-present as less competent, when engaging with Black (versus white) people. She uses the term "competence upshift" to label the phenomenon revealed in this new study.

To understand whether conservative racial minorities "upshift" competence all the time or only when speaking to white people, Dupree recruited 1,200 Black Americans to participate in an experiment on online communication. She identified the participants' political views on inequality using a scale that measures agreement with statements such as, "Group equality should not be our primary goal." Participants believed they were being introduced to a real online partner who was either Black or white.

Dupree found that Black hierarchy-based conservatives referenced competence more often than liberals, using words like "influential" and "superior," but only when introducing themselves to a white online partner. Hierarchy-based conservatism was the sole predictor of this behavior. Other factors, such as Black participants' general attitudes toward [white people](#), did not predict this phenomenon, she said.

"This finding suggests that hierarchy-based conservatism can predict racial minorities' behavior toward white Americans," Dupree said.

"Black Americans who are more comfortable with inequality portray themselves as anything but disadvantaged. I'm not saying that's wrong. There are situations when reversing stereotypes could save Black and Latinx lives, such as during police encounters. But it's important for us to understand when and why this behavior occurs."

More research is needed to understand whether "competence upshift" is a form of codeswitching, the practice of altering one's speech patterns to be better understood by others, Dupree added. While the competence upshift concerns only a speaker's choice of words, codeswitching

involves other factors, such as syntax and phonology, she explained.

In the study's final experiment, Dupree analyzed 18,000 news editorials about Black, Latinx, and white politicians to test whether politicians' use of words associated with competence influences their press coverage. She found that the more Black and Latinx conservatives use words associated with "power" in Congress, the more journalists adopted language referencing power while describing them in editorials, suggesting that competence upshift is effective in reversing stereotypes.

"This final test provides initial evidence that [conservative](#) Black and Latinx politicians may gain favorable coverage from referencing [competence](#)," Dupree said. "Black and Latinx people must overcome negative stereotypes about their ability, status, and power to be accepted as valuable employees or worthy friends. This phenomenon suggests that Black and Latinx conservatives may be better at reversing these stereotypes, to their advantage."

More information: Cydney H. Dupree, Black and Latinx conservatives upshift competence relative to liberals in mostly white settings, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01167-9](#)

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