How Does Obama Match-Up?
Counterfactuals & the Role of Obama’s Race in 2008

Simon Jackman\textsuperscript{1} and Lynn Vavreck\textsuperscript{2}

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\textsuperscript{1}Professor, Department of Political Science, Stanford University. e-mail: jackman@stanford.edu
\textsuperscript{2}Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles. e-mail: lvavreck@ucla.edu
Abstract

Would the outcome of the 2008 election have been different if Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, or a past Democratic nominee (like John Kerry or Al Gore) had been the nominee? In this paper we treat the counterfactual model earnestly and compare 33 different presidential elections, some real and some hypothetical, in order to understand how candidate traits and election-level characteristics affect outcomes. We do this paying particular attention to the role of racial prejudice and whether it helped or hurt Barack Obama at the polls. Our findings suggest that “old-fashioned” racial stereotyping was singly important in decisions about Obama in 2008, relative to its role in past elections or in 2008 choices substituting Clinton or Edwards for Obama. Its impact, however, was steady over the course of the campaign relative to the dynamic effect of “new” or symbolic racism, which gained in importance over the year prior to the election and was also exceptionally important when Obama was in the choice-set. Obama balances the losses due to racial prejudice with gains from cross-partisan appeal, doing better than Clinton or Edwards (and better than most past Democratic candidates) at attracting Republicans and independents. The Democrats would have won the 2008 election regardless of who they nominated, but that the average Democratic party nominee from the last 16 years, and either of Edwards or Clinton, would have done better against McCain than Obama, although in Clinton’s case, not by much.
Contrary to the claims of some of my critics . . . I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy – particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

– Barack Obama, March 18, 2008

On March 18th, 2008, Barack Obama asked Americans to engage in a conversation with him about race in America — and specifically, not to sweep the events of the last few days under the rug and “hope they will fade away.” Obama was leading the Democratic race to be the party’s presidential nominee by only 148 pledged delegates. The Pennsylvania primary was right around the corner, and his Pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was becoming famous for his incendiary language about the endemic nature of white racism in America.

As hard as he tried, Obama could not separate his message of hope and unity from his opponents’ signals about race\(^1\) and the media elite’s frame of polarization and division. Despite Obama’s vision of a “colorblind America,” we argue in this paper that voters’ attitudes about race played a critical role in the 2008 presidential election, structuring and defining political behavior with unprecedented magnitude and a heretofore unappreciated dynamic over the course of the campaign.

Relative to previous Democratic party nominees and others who ran for the nomination in 2008, the effects of attitudes about race, both old-fashioned, stereotypical views and more subtle symbolic prejudices, are exaggerated in 2008 when Obama is the Democrat on offer.\(^2\) Despite this Obama exceptionalism, we conclude that a Clinton nomination would not have resulted in a dramatically different share of the two-party vote (among whites) since Obama attracted many independent and Republican voters who Clinton could not draw to the party. John Edwards, however, or the average Democratic party nominee (since 1992), would have

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\(^1\) On January 26th just after Obama won the South Carolina primary, a reporter asked former President Bill Clinton, who was helping his wife Hillary campaign for the nomination, “What does it say about Barack Obama that it takes two of you to beat him?” Clinton, clearly bemused by the question, responded by saying “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina twice in ’84 and ’88; and, he ran a good campaign, and so has Obama ran [sic] a good campaign.”

\(^2\) In the analyses that follow, we hold the set of voters who make up the electorate constant. See Pasek et al (2010, p. 981) for a different approach. Their mobilization analyses conclude, however, that “switching candidates was much more common than moving into or out of the participating electorate” in the 2008 general election.
fared better than both Obama and Clinton by roughly 3 percentage points, making gains relative to Obama on racial attitudes and economic retrospections and relative to Clinton on cross-partisan appeal.

The Importance & Impossibility of Counter-Factuals

Speculation abounds as to the role of Barack Obama’s race in the 2008 election. Some argue that Obama’s race “cost him” roughly 5.5 percentage-points of vote share, making the election much closer than one would expect on the basis of the economy (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008); others suggest the number could be as large as 12.5 points (Pasek et al. 2009). These attempts to pinpoint the cost of Obama’s race highlight the furtive difficulty in assessing the role of an election-level characteristic like a candidate’s race — election level findings require election-level analyses. But even multiple-election analyses will not be enough to identify, with causal clarity, the role of Obama’s race. Ideally, to pinpoint this effect, we need to know what the same white voters would do in the same election, at the same point in time, if Obama was exactly the same candidate in every way except white, not black. This counter-factual is critical if our aim is to say something about how Obama’s race affected the outcome of this election. Of course, this is impossible to know. And since we cannot randomly assign Obama’s race for experimental purposes\(^3\) the analysis of race and the 2008 election necessarily centers on the role of attitudes about race and their effects on vote choice. The move away from the potential outcomes framework, however, complicates the construction of causal states. If we are not assigning the candidate’s race, what are we assigning? Different scholars have different answers to this question.

Tesler and Sears (2009), writing in Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America, demonstrate the power and importance of cross-election analyses to the study of election-level phenomena. They conclude that the 2008 election illustrates, for

\(^3\)Although, see a working paper by Iyengar (2010), reporting the results of an experiment that tints Obama’s skin tone for an interesting attempt at counter-factuals.
the first time since measures of subtle racism were used, the “other side” of symbolic racism. By shifting voters on various dimensions — typically assigning all respondents to average values of control variables — they isolate the role of changing attitudes about race on the average survey respondent in their data. Tesler and Sears argue that voters with low levels of prejudice are more likely to vote for Obama in 2008 than for other Democrats because Obama is black.

By evaluating the role of racial resentment on the average respondent, Tesler and Sears create a counterfactual state made up of outcomes that would have been observed if the electorate were made up of average people across the entire range of the racial resentment distribution. This kind of “ceteris paribus” assumption is what leads Morgan and Winship (2007) to caution against causal states that are “too metaphysical to justify the pursuit of causal analysis.” In other words, because there are very few voters who are otherwise“average” while being extremely liberal (or conservative) on race-related matters, the creation of this causal state looks more like an unreal electorate, not a counterfactual one. And since Tesler and Sears’s argument rests largely on what happens in the tails of the racial resentment distribution, we are left wondering what to make of their results.

Similarly, Pasek et al. (2009) attempt to present plausible counter-factuals using a cross-sectional survey and a slightly different type of electorate reassignment. They use two measures of racial prejudice: the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) and symbolic racism. The authors calculate changes in support for Obama under two conditions: one in which they redistribute the American electorate such that there are no racially prejudiced voters casting ballots and the other in which all voters hold prejudicial opinions. The final analysis is straightforward: How many votes would have changed from their observed values under both of these conditions? The authors state one of their goals is “to estimate how many more net votes Obama might have gained if anti-African-American racism hadn’t

4 Unlike Tesler and Sears (2010), these authors do not reassign all explanatory variables in the models to their means, instead allowing each respondent to maintain his or her expressed/observed values on other predictors.
existed, (p.950).” Thus, the counter-factual election in this case is one in which the *voters* are different, not the candidates on offer.

Pasek et al. (2009) conclude that Obama would have gotten more votes if there were no “racists” in America. They write:

“The presence of an African-American candidate on the ballot . . . raises the possibility that the election outcome might have been influenced by anti-African-American racism among voters.”

The logic is clear — the black candidate primes attitudes about race, and as we change voters’ values on those attitudes, we see how Obama’s race cost him votes. Except, attributing the vote loss to Obama’s race in this case is purely an assumption, albeit one that appears reasonable. Consider, however, how the implications of this finding change if we also know that John Kerry, Al Gore, and Michael Dukakis — or better yet, Hillary Clinton had she been the nominee, would have similarly lost voteshare by moving the same explanatory variable from end to end. Suddenly, Obama’s apparent exceptionalism disappears, and the result is about the relationship of prejudicial attitudes to vote choice in general, not about the decision to vote for a black candidate conditional on different levels of prejudice.

*The distinction is critical.* Election-level findings (like the effect of a candidate’s race) need election-level analyses. Obama’s similarity to other Democratic candidates on this dimension would indicate the *absence* of priming due to his race, not the profound impact of his race. Without the comparison to other elections we cannot know whether Obama is exceptional or typical.

**Plausible Counterfactual Comparisons**

We do not learn anything about whether Obama’s race affected the outcome of the 2008 election without comparing the choice between McCain and Obama to other similar choices among actual voters with a given set of attitudes. And even then, making the case will not be straightforward. Instead of a counterfactual election in which no racists exist in
the electorate (a counter-factual electorate, if you will), we construct a counterfactual set of elections with a series of other Democrats as the nominee. We do this because we are interested in knowing what this electorate would have done if faced with a black Obama or white Obama, not what some other electorate would have done when faced with a black candidate. Comparing Obama as the democratic nominee to other possible (white) nominees is, of course, not the same thing as re-assigning Obama’s race, but it does provide leverage on the question of whether Obama was exceptional on any dimensions of choice in relation to other candidates who have been Democratic nominees in the past or who could have been the nominee in 2008. Our strategy is to take the electorate as we find it and randomly change the pairs of candidates on offer.

In this paper, we analyze individual-level vote choice over the last 16 years of U.S. presidential elections, paying particular attention to the choices voters make in the year leading up to the 2008 general election. We move from this individual-level investigation to an analysis of presidential election outcomes, using data from the last five presidential elections in the U.S. along with outcomes for 29 candidate pairings asked at varying points in time leading up to the 2008 election. We use these data in an attempt to distinguish the effects of racial attitudes from other factors like partisanship and economic evaluations over the year leading up to the election. We present a novel analytic strategy by using a randomly assigned set of head-to-head match-ups as counter-factual contests to the Obama-McCain contest in the year leading up to the election and ANES data on previous elections for comparisons to the period just before election day. Additionally, we use a multi-level approach to the analysis, which allows us to use the individual-level data to compare — at the election level — the effects of a set of predictors when Obama is in the choice-set and when he is absent. Finally, the structure of the modeling allows us to make inferences not only about the effects of attitudes about race on the outcome of the election, but also how

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5Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that factors other than race are important as we compare different sets of candidates. As much as possible, we attempt to stay very close to the data mindful of the limitations on our ability to ascribe causality to Obama’s race alone. For example, in some cases we observe differences among the same-race candidates that affect outcomes.
well Obama did relative to other candidates who might have won the nomination and how the effects of fundamental considerations changed over the course of the campaign.

Our findings indicate that measures of racial stereotyping are consistently important over the course of the campaign and measures of racial resentment are of increasing importance in choices between Obama and any one of four Republican contenders relative to their importance in choices between Hillary Clinton or John Edwards against the same Republicans; and relative to their role in past presidential elections. We see no such pattern among Republican candidates, none of whom are black. We attribute this “Obama-specific exceptionalism” — the heightened and increasing salience of racial attitudes in match-ups involving Obama — to a racially relevant characteristic unique to Obama among the candidates: his race — but we want to be very clear that attributing this exceptionalism to Obama’s race is an assumption on our part, not a finding. We further demonstrate that the increased importance of these attitudes results in a loss of support for Obama in comparison to his challengers, Clinton and Edwards, and a loss of support when compared to other Democratic nominees who ran at some point over the last two decades. But the story is not that simple. What racial attitudes take away, cross-partisan appeal gives back to Obama. The Democrats would have won the 2008 election whether they nominated Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, or even Bill Clinton; but the nominee — and his or her particular attributes — affect the margin.

Prejudice and Politics

To what degree does racial prejudice affect political behavior in America? Forty-five years after the Voting Rights Act, this question continues to generate considerable interest. But, while America may be less segregated de jure than it was before key legislative enactments of the 1960s, it is not clear that these steps have been accompanied by declines in racial prejudice or in the political relevance of prejudicial attitudes. The election of Obama may serve more to illustrate the strong role of racial attitudes in structuring public opinion and
political behavior than in dismissing its importance. Instead of moving away from a racialized America, we may in fact be moving toward an America in which attitudes about race are better predictors of political behavior than at any time in the recent past.

“Separate but equal” was a legal doctrine that reflected real geographic and political disconnection and prejudice. The early empirical demonstrations of the relationship between prejudice and political behavior were laid out by Key (1949), who showed that conservative politicians (those supporting lower taxes and business interests) received disproportionately more support from Southern U.S. counties with higher proportions of blacks than from counties with fewer blacks. Key’s interpretation was that the closer white voters lived to blacks, the more likely white voters were to cast ballots for conservative (non-redistributive) candidates. A white groups’ proximity to a group of blacks is positively related to vote choice at the aggregate level. Social or biological inferiority seemed to imply physical or spatial distance. Or perhaps the opposite — social psychologists turned the relationship around and pushed it to the individual-level showing that intergroup contact promotes reductions in prejudice across groups (Allport 1979; Pettigrew 1988; Levin, Van Laar and Sidanius 2003) and some of the work leveraged the causal clarity that comes from randomized experimentation (Wright et al. 2004). These overt forms of prejudice, often called “old-fashioned racism” remain quantifiable, even today (Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1995; Feldman and Huddy 2005).

As legislation and government action eliminated the physical barriers to integration, white opposition to these actions remained steady (see for example Sears and Kinder (1971); Hajnal (2007)). Two things seemed to be happening simultaneously. There was support, in theory, for policies advancing and protecting civil and voting rights of black-Americans, but white opposition to the government action needed to facilitate these rights remained strong. In an effort to explain theoretical support for equality and opposition to the means of securing it, scholars posited a new theory of prejudice — symbolic racism — with a more subtle

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6Key’s spatial patterns hold even in the contemporary period (Shafer 2005; Enos 2010)
mechanism (Kinder and Sears 1981; Kinder and Sanders 1996; McConahay and Hough Jr 1976). Symbolic racism is based on the notion that the disadvantages blacks experience are due mainly to their poor work ethic, not to discrimination (which most whites believe has largely disappeared according to the theory). And that because the government fails to recognize this, blacks demand too much and have gotten more than they deserve (Henry and Sears 2002). Kinder and Sanders (1996) operationalized symbolic racism in the well-known racial resentment scale.  

Racial resentment has been the focus of many discussions about construct validity, survey methodology, social desirability bias, and measurement (for example, see Sniderman and Tetlock (1986), Sniderman and Carmines (1997), and Sears and Henry (2003)). Moreover, there is an implied tension between concepts and measures named “old-fashioned” racism and “new” racism. On the one hand, it seems plausible that blatant prejudice belongs mainly to the past. Indeed, it is nearly second-nature to assume that racism now is subtle, guarded, and covert. On the other hand, Sniderman and Stiglitz (2008) argue that this “common sense” approach to thinking about the role of prejudice is misguided because of one very important fact: “The bigot does not think that he is a bigot,” they write. “When he tells you that most blacks are violent or lazy, he simply is telling you what is true . . . what every reasonable American knows is true (p.3).” Self-censoring only works if people understand that what they are about to say is socially inappropriate, and Sniderman and Stiglitz claim that some people with prejudice do not think their attitudes about blacks are out of step with the mainstream. Sniderman and Stiglitz’s data confirm that a small portion of the electorate will openly provide extremely prejudicial comments about blacks when asked.

Obama is the first multi-racial candidate on a major party presidential ticket. He is

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7The four questions in the racial resentment scale are: (1) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for African Americans to work their way out of the lower class. (2) Many other minority groups have overcome prejudice and worked their way up. African Americans should do the same without any special favors. (3) Over the past few years, African Americans have gotten less than they deserve. (4) It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if African Americans would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites. Respondents could answer: agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly.
black — and that is a racial signal *par excellence*. In this context, what do voters do with this information about Obama? Sniderman and Stiglitz’s old-fashioned bigots are likely to stereotype Obama as lazy, boastful, and irresponsible because that is how they think of all blacks. But symbolic racism will be important, too, and perhaps in a more subtle manner. For example, a good deal of recent scholarship has demonstrated how evaluations of explicitly non-racial policies or candidates can become “racialized” depending on the context in which they are discussed (Gilens 2000; Mendelberg 2001, 2008; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2004; Valentino and Sears 2005; Tesler and Sears 2009). And this, it seems to us, is relevant to the 2008 general election — because although the campaigns were not explicitly about race or equality, the presence of a black nominee is a racial cue that cannot be ignored. If Obama’s presence in the race works as a “subtle” cue for some voters, much like the presence of black actors in Valentino, Hutchings, and White’s (2004) advertisements do, or if the McCain campaign uses implicitly racial cues to describe Obama, then we should observe vote patterns that mimic attitudes about race (i.e. racialization) even for people who are not explicitly stereotyping Obama in derogatory ways.

Both types of racism — old and new — strike us as viable factors in evaluating the candidates in the 2008 presidential election for very different reasons; yet studies using both measures and characterizing their similarities and differences are missing from the literature in general, and even in specific analyses of the 2008 election (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2008; Tesler and Sears 2009; Pasek et al. 2009). We are in the unique position of having a dataset of 20,000 respondents interviewed at six different times in 2007-8 with measures of both types of racism at several points in time. These data allow us to appreciate and define the unique impact and the dynamics of each measure of prejudice and link each to the candidates and their campaigns.

Similar to Tesler and Sears (2009) and Sniderman and Stiglitz (2008), we expect to find a negative relationship between increasingly prejudicial attitudes and Democratic vote. But

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8 In the general case, it is most likely a data problem that renders the closely tied concepts difficult to parse with only 1,000 or so cases.
our approach differs from their’s in that we assess how levels of racial prejudice — both old fashioned and symbolic — affect vote decisions when the black candidate is in the contest and when he is NOT in the contest. It is these counter-factual comparisons along with a healthy assumption that Obama’s race is not conditioning the way people react to everything about him\(^9\) that give us leverage — so much leverage, in fact, that we are able to characterize what a 2008 election without Obama as the Democratic nominee would have looked like and which potential Democratic nominee would have fared the best against John McCain.

**Design & Data**

In 2007 and throughout 2008, we directed the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) (Jackman and Vavreck 2009), a six-wave, nationally representative panel study of registered voters. CCAP had six waves, which were conducted in December (2007), January, March, September, October, and a post-election survey in November after the election. A total of 20,000 respondents were interviewed in at least three of the waves. We rely on these data in the analyses that follow. For details on the structure of the cooperative projects, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008) and Jackman and Vavreck (2010). Details on the construction of the sample and comparisons with other election studies are presented in Jackman and Vavreck (2010). For this paper, we use data from the “Common Content” portion of CCAP.\(^{10}\)

**Head-to-Head Match-ups**

Over the five pre-election waves of CCAP, we presented our respondents with 29 general election “head-to-head match-ups” between specific Democratic and Republican candidates. The questions took the following form:

\(^{9}\)His abilities as a campaigner or his speaking style, for example.

\(^{10}\)The Common Content portion of CCAP is the first 10 minutes of every respondent’s survey. The total length of the survey is 20 minutes. After the common part of the survey respondents are routed to any one of the many team studies, which make up the second half of the survey. For details on the mechanics of how this works, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).
Thinking about the general election in November, who would you vote for if the election was a choice between [Democratic candidate] and [Republican candidate]?\footnote{Respondents could also indicate that they were “not sure” who they would vote for given these choices.}

For Democratic candidates, we randomly chose among Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and Barack Obama; for Republican candidates we randomly chose among Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. These sets comprised the candidates who were leading the intra-party polls as the most likely party nominees in November 2007. As candidates dropped out of the race, we eliminated them from the set. We administered the full set of 12 match-ups in our December 2007 and January 2008 waves (4 Republicans against 3 Democrats). In these early waves, no single respondent was presented with every possible match-up: there were simply too many to administer. We randomly assigned match-ups to respondents in the December and January waves such that each respondent answered four hypothetical head-to-head questions. By March of 2008 the Republicans had settled on McCain as their nominee and no other Republican candidates remained. In our March wave, therefore, all respondents were administered two general election match-ups, between McCain and each of the remaining Democrats (Clinton and Obama).

By the Fall 2008 waves of CCAP, both nominees were known, thus we only asked respondents about the actual choice they would face in November: Obama versus McCain. Thus, we fielded a total of 29 matchups over the multiple waves of the project (12 in December, 12 in January, 3 in March, and one each in September and October.) Since we have relatively few matchups from the later stages of the campaign, we augment our analysis with data from the 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 pre-elections surveys of the American National Election Study (ANES). We use these ANES data sets since they also contain instrumentation for other predictors in our model (e.g., retrospective economic evaluations, racial resentment, racial stereotypes, etc).\footnote{In 1996, the survey did not administer the racial resentment items, but many of the 1996 respondents were impaneled from the 1992-1994-1996 panel-study. We follow Tesler and Sears (2010) here and use the racial resentment measures from 1994 for those 1996 respondents who were impaneled.} The extra data from these pre-election ANES studies supplies data
for another four matchups, spanning three Democratic candidates (Bill Clinton, Gore and Kerry) and three Republican candidates (George H.W. Bush, Dole and George W. Bush) and some 3,356 additional respondents. For simplicity, we treat the ANES pre-election matchups as “October” data points, coinciding with the fifth wave of our 2007-08 panel study.

Figure 1 shows levels of support among white, registered voters for Democratic candidates across the 33 match-ups available for analysis, as a percentage of two-party vote intentions (or reports). There is considerable variation in the share of two-party vote intentions across candidates and phase of the 2008 campaign. The best recorded showing by a Democratic candidate is in the Edwards-Huckabee match-up in December 2007 (Edwards wins 56% of the two-party intentions in this particular match-up), in contrast Obama wins just 40% of two-party support among white registered voters when paired against Romney in January 2008. Obama also fares relatively poorly in a number of other matchups: against McCain in March 2008 (42%) and against Giuliani in December 2007 (42%). In our pre-election (October 2008) wave we estimate the Obama wins 46% of the two-party vote (among white registered voters); the corresponding figure is 47% in our post-election wave. Obama’s support varies from the low of 40% noted above to 50% against Huckabee (January 2008). Hillary Clinton’s support displays less variability, ranging from a low of 43% against McCain in March 2008, to a high of 48% against Huckabee (December 2007). More generally, support for Democratic candidates in these data spans some 16-percentage points, with Edwards’ performance in match-ups administered in December 2007 and January 2008 easily the best Democratic performance we observe. That is, there is substantial candidate-specific variation in the vote intention self-reports that any modeling ought to address.

These 33 head-to-head matchups are the foundation of our design. We view the 29 match-ups from 2008 as counter-factual observations of the same election – the 2008 general

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13 After subsetting the ANES studies to white, registered voters who expressed a preference for one of the major party candidates.
Figure 1: Support for Democratic candidates across 33 match-ups, among white, registered voters. Match-ups involving Obama appear in black. Horizontal lines cover a 95% credible interval around the estimated Democratic share of the two-party vote. Sample weights applied in computing point estimates and credible intervals.
election, differing from the actual election in terms of the candidates on offer and the time at which the vote question is asked. The four earlier elections supply information about the determinants of vote choice in general elections specifically. This is critical since we only have the McCain-Obama match-up after our September wave of CCAP in 2008.\textsuperscript{14} We are interested in how the determinants of reported voting intentions vary over the 33 match-ups; in particular, we are interested in whether there is any evidence that match-ups involving Obama generate systematically different sets of parameter estimates than those not involving Obama, particularly for the measures of racial prejudice.

We investigate this heterogeneity with a hierarchical model, letting the model parameters vary over the match-ups, but as a function of the identities of the candidates, and the stage of the campaign. But before turning to the modeling, we introduce our measures of racial prejudice.

**Racial Attitudes: Stereotypes & Racial Resentment**

We operationalize racial prejudice with two alternative measures popularly used to study the effects of race. The first asks people about group stereotypes and assesses a somewhat more overt form of prejudice by comparing respondents’ ratings of different groups. According to Sniderman and Piazza (1995) and (Sniderman and Carmines 1997) one strength of this measure is that it does not ask about race at the same time as other political attitudes, like preferences over equality or affirmative action. The measure is separate from politics, party, and ideological signifiers. The stereotype question works as follows: respondents may be asked to evaluate a number of groups (blacks, whites, young people, lawyers) on a scale ranging from “hard working” to “lazy” or “intelligent” to “unintelligent.” The racial stereotype literature shows that the items are robust predictors of political attitudes (Peffley,

\textsuperscript{14}For example, if the effect of racial resentment increases in 2008 from September to November we might conclude that Obama’s candidacy was somehow priming racial attitudes. We could not, however, rule out the possibility that this progression occurs in every post-labor day campaign, regardless of a candidate’s race. The inclusion of the ANES data on past elections allows us to compare the McCain-Obama general election effects with other general election effects in which no black candidate was running. These cases are of critical importance.
The question reads:

Now, some questions about different groups in our society. Rate each group on the following scale, where “1” means you think almost all of the people in that group are “lazy”; and “7” means that you think almost everyone in the group is “hardworking.”

We asked respondents to rate seven different groups: whites, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Southern whites, women, and men. A follow-up question asked, “Do people in these groups tend to be unintelligent or do they tend to be intelligent?” Respondents were instructed to use the same scale in the same manner as in the previous question. We present average ratings by whites of whites and blacks in Table 1.

White respondents’ average ratings of whites are higher than the average ratings on blacks. We use these data as an individual level indicator of racial prejudice by combining the two questions into a binary indicator of negativity toward blacks vis-à-vis whites. We form a combined score across the two stereotype measures and code our binary indicator “1” for respondents who rate blacks lower than whites on either item. We refer to people in this category as having negative stereotypical views of blacks. Just over 45 percent of white respondents fall into this category. We use this dichotomized form of the stereotype ratings as a predictor of general election vote choice across the different sets of head-to-head match-ups.

Table 1: Cell entries are averages on a 1 (negative stereotype) to 7 (positive stereotype) point scale for 12,351 registered white voters interviewed in the September 2008 wave of CCAP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Lazy/Hardworking</th>
<th>Unintelligent/Intelligent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent rating Whites Above Blacks</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent rating Whites Above Blacks (either)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Democratic Share of Two-Party Vote Intentions, by matchup and racial stereotypes, white respondents to CCAP. Dark plotting symbols indicate matchups involving Obama; open plotting symbols indicate the level of Democratic support among white respondents with positive or neutral stereotypes of blacks relative to whites (see Table 1); solid plotting symbols indicate Democratic support among white respondents with negative stereotypes of blacks.
Racial stereotypes are strongly associated with two-party vote, as shown in Figure 2. Across the 33 matchups we consider, white respondents with neutral or positive stereotypes of blacks are always more supportive of the Democratic candidate than are white respondents with negative stereotypes. In fact, with only a few exceptions, Democratic candidates win majority support among respondents with neutral or positive stereotypes of blacks, while Democratic candidates struggle to break 40% among white respondents with negative stereotypes of blacks. However, when Barack Obama is the Democratic candidate, Democratic support falls to around 30% among white respondents with negative stereotypes. Obama’s candidacy appears to prime this predictor of two-party support relative to other Democratic candidates. We investigate this further in our multivariate model, below.

The second general measure of racial attitudes we bring to bear on our analyses is symbolic racism as operationalized with the standard racial resentment scale (Kinder and Sanders 1996). The scale predicts political attitudes and vote choice extremely well — see Tesler and Sears (2009) for demonstrations of the pattern. We fielded the four questions listed earlier that make up the racial resentment scale on the September wave of CCAP. We scale these items using a one-dimensional factor analysis, assigning scores on the recovered dimension using regression scoring (Thurstone 1934). The resulting scale is oriented such that higher scores denote higher levels of racial resentment or antipathy toward blacks; further, the scale is normalized to have mean zero and unit variance.

We present the distribution of symbolic racism for registered white voters and white Democrats and Republicans separately in a series of histograms in Figure 3. The “bump” in the middle of the top two histograms correspond to one reasonably large group of respondents who consistently give the “neither agree nor disagree” response on the four racial resentment

\[15\] We recover scores on a single factor after a maximum likelihood factor analysis of the four indicators. Prior to the factor analysis we impute missing data on the indicators by looking for a temporarily proximate non-missing score from a particular respondent on a particular indicator, and then using the EM algorithm to impute the remaining indicators, assuming a saturated multinomial model for the categorical responses, using the R functions in the cat package (Schaffer 1996). In this way a complete data set of indicators is passed to the factor analysis, yielding factor scores for all but 450 respondents providing no data on the racial resentment indicators in either March, September or October.
items; the “bump” at the high end of the scale is generated by a substantial number of respondents giving a consistent pattern of “(dis)agree strongly” responses such that they attain the maximum score on the measure. Democrats tend to score to the left of the scale (lower than average levels of resentment); Republicans to the right. As with the stereotype questions, we will contrast the predictive power of this scale across match-ups, paying careful attention to its role conditional on whether Obama is in a given match-up.

Modeling the Match-ups

We fit a relatively spartan model to these matchups, modeling the probability of a white respondent’s intention to vote for the Democratic candidate as a function of four covariates, via logistic regression: (a) a binary indicator variable coded one if the respondent offers a negative retrospective evaluation of the nation’s economy over the last 12 months; (b) a binary indicator variable coded one if the respondent ascribes negative stereotypes to blacks; (c) three categories of party identification (“leaners” grouped with strong and weak identifiers), and (d) the racial resentment index. Fitting this simple logistic regression model to each of the 33 match-ups yields “percent correctly classified” statistics that vary from 82.9% to 92.4% (median = 88.7%); the area under the ROC curves for the 33 logistic regressions range from .89 to .97 (median of .94). Over the 33 matchups we observe over 125,000 reports of two-party voting intentions, spanning the 16,423 white respondents in CCAP, and another 3,356 white, registered respondents from the 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004

16 We again exploit the panel structure of the CCAP data to help deal with missing data on the party-identification indicators. We administered the conventional party-identification instrumentation in each of the six waves of CCAP. For respondents skipping a wave or skipping the party-identification questions on a particular wave we first look for a valid party-identification response on a previous wave (using responses from the most temporally proximate wave, if available) and then, if necessary, look ahead at responses from subsequent waves (again, using responses from the most temporally proximate wave, if available). This action drastically reduces missingness on party-identification over the panel. Before the “look-ahead”, “look-backwards” procedure we are missing between 10% of party-identification responses on post-election wave, to a high of 33% in the January 2008 wave. After imputing party-identification with the procedure described above, we lack party-identification data falls to just 0.3%, or 69 out of 20,000 cases.

17 We modeled alternate specifications that included differences in squared distances on important issues and ideological self-placement with no substantive changes in the pattern of results.
Figure 3: Distribution of Racial Resentment Scores, White Respondents, September wave (CCAP), by Party Identification.
pre-election ANES surveys.

How do the parameters in this model vary over the 33 match-ups we presented to our respondents? In particular, is there any evidence that match-ups involving Obama generate systematically different sets of parameter estimates than those not involving Obama?

We investigate this with a hierarchical model, in which the model parameters vary over the match-ups, but as a function of the identities of the candidates. Let $p$ index the 125,068 binary survey responses available for analysis, where $y_p = 1$ if a Democratic vote intention or report is reported, and $y_p = 0$ if the reported vote intention is for the Republican candidate; all other responses are dropped from the analysis. Let $i$ index the set of 15,240 unique respondents supplying these 125,068 vote intentions/reports, and let $j = 1, \ldots, 33$ index the match-ups. With this notation, response $p$ is provided by respondent $i \equiv i(p)$, who chooses between the candidates appearing in match-up $j \equiv j(p)$. Match-up $j$ involves a Democratic candidate $d \equiv d(j)$, where

$$d \in D = \{ \text{“Edwards”}, \text{“Hillary Clinton”}, \text{“Obama”}, \text{“Gore”}, \text{“Bill Clinton”}, \text{“Kerry”} \},$$

and a Republican $r \equiv r(j)$,

$$r \in R = \{ \text{“Huckabee”}, \text{“McCain”}, \text{“Romney”}, \text{“Giuliani”}, \text{“George H.W. Bush”},$$

$$\text{“Dole”}, \text{“George W. Bush”} \}.$$

Further, let $t \equiv t(j)$ indicate the wave of the panel study sample in which matchup $j$ is

\footnote{In the 2008 data, due to missingness, panel attrition and replenishment, our randomization strategy, and the fact that most of the match-ups are presented to respondents in the early waves of the study, the data are quite unbalanced across match-ups and respondents. No single respondent generates data on all 29 match-ups spanned by our 2008 data; the highest number of match-ups observed per respondent is 13 (2,978 white respondents). An additional 2,681 white respondents supply 12 responses, 1,704 supply 11 responses, 1,186 generate responses to 10 match-ups, and so on. After loses due to missing data, the December and January primary season match-ups have data from 1,700 to 3,200 white respondents, with the exception of the January and March Clinton-McCain match-ups, which have 8,412 and 9,478 white respondents, respectively. The March, September, October and post-election Obama-McCain match-ups have 10,297, 10,884 and 9,732 and 11,147 responses, respectively.}
administered, with

\[ t \in T = \{ \text{“December”, “January”, “March”, “September”, “October”, “Post-election”} \}, \]

with the ANES pre-election surveys considered as “October” surveys.

The hierarchical model for the binary responses is as follows: \( y_p \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\pi_p) \), where

\[
\ln \left( \frac{\pi_p}{1 - \pi_p} \right) = \mathbf{x}_i' \mathbf{\beta}_j; \tag{1}
\]

with \( \mathbf{x}_i \) is a vector of length 6, containing 3 mutually exhaustive and binary indicators spanning the 3 party identification categories, measures of the economic retrospections, racial stereotypes and level of racial resentment of respondent \( i(p) \); and \( \mathbf{\beta}_j \) is a vector of 6 unknown logistic regression coefficients.

The coefficients \( \mathbf{\beta}_j \) vary across matchups \( j \) via the following hierarchical model. Letting \( j = 1, \ldots, 33 \) and \( k = 1, \ldots, 6 \), (where \( k \) indexes the covariates),

\[
\beta_{jk} \sim N(\mu_{jk}, \omega_k^2), \tag{2}
\]

\[
\mu_{jk} = \lambda_k + \delta_{kd}^D + \delta_{kr}^R + \eta_{tk}, \tag{3}
\]

\[
\lambda_k \sim N(0, 2^2) \tag{4}
\]

\[
\delta_{kd}^D \sim N(0, \tau_k^2), \quad d \in \mathcal{D}, \tag{5}
\]

\[
\delta_{kr}^R \sim N(0, \nu_k^2), \quad r \in \mathcal{R}, \tag{6}
\]

\[
\eta_{tk} \sim N(0, 1), \tag{7}
\]

\[
\eta_{tk} \sim N(\eta_{t-1,k}, \sigma_k^2), \quad t = 2, \ldots, 6, \tag{8}
\]

\[
\omega_k \sim \text{Unif}(0, 2) \tag{9}
\]

\[
\sigma_k \sim \text{Unif}(0, 2) \tag{10}
\]

\[
\tau_k \sim \text{Unif}(0, 1) \tag{11}
\]

\[
\nu_k \sim \text{Unif}(0, 1) \tag{12}
\]
where:

- \( \lambda_k \) is the “average” parameter for covariate \( k \), where the averaging is across matchups \( j = 1,...,33 \);

- \( \delta_{kd(j)}^D \) and \( \delta_{kr(j)}^R \) are candidate-specific offsets, tapping the way that a parameter \( \beta_{jk} \) differs from the “average” value \( \lambda_k \), conditional on the presence of Democratic candidate \( d(j) \in D \) and Republican candidate \( r(j) \in R \) in match-up \( j \). These parameters can be interpreted as “offsets” in that they are constrained to have mean zero within each party group; i.e.,

\[
\sum_{d \in D} \delta_{kd}^D = \sum_{r \in R} \delta_{kr}^R = 0, \forall \ k = 1,...,6. \tag{13}
\]

- \( \eta_{tk} \) are period-specific and covariate-specific offsets, tapping the fact that the effect of a given predictor may vary over the course of the campaign, irrespective of the particular candidates in any given match-up. The \( \eta_{tk} \) have a Gaussian random walk prior with innovation variance \( \sigma_k^2 \), but are normalized to sum to zero over time periods (i.e., \( \sum_{t \in T} \eta_{tk} = 0 \forall \ k \)) such that \( \lambda_k \) remains interpretable as the “average” effect of predictor \( k \).

- \( \omega_k^2 \) are error variances, tapping the extent to which coefficients \( \beta_{jk} \) vary in ways not captured by the simple addition of candidate-specific and period-specific terms in equation 2. Errors in this level of the hierarchical model can arise, say, if a match-up is literally “more than the sum of its (candidate-specific) parts” (e.g., the presence of candidate \( d \) and \( r \) in match-up \( j \) generates an interactive effect).

We assume that conditional on the respondent-specific and candidate-specific covariates in the model, the binary vote intentions \( y_p \) are independent both within and between respondents. With this assumption we form a likelihood for the observed responses as the product of the probabilities of each observed response, as given in Equation 1: i.e.,
\[ p(y|X, \theta) = \prod_p \pi_p^{y_p}(1 - \pi_p)^{1-y_p}, \] where \( \theta \) is a place-holder for the substantial collection of parameters introduced above, and \( X \) denotes observables other than \( y \) (i.e., respondent-specific characteristics such as party-identification, the racial prejudice measures, etc).

We adopt a Bayesian approach to inference for \( \theta \).

Results

Our primary interest is in the way that the structure of vote choices varies conditional on whether Obama is the Democratic candidate. We first inspect estimates of the various \( \beta_{jk} \) parameters generated by the model, looking for systematic evidence of Obama’s distinctiveness as a candidate.

The lower panel of Figure 4 provides a graphical summary of the 33 logistic regression parameters for the effects of racial resentment on voting intentions, along with 95% confidence intervals, matchup-by-matchup and over the course of the campaign. Larger values of this parameter indicate a greater salience of racial resentment, with the negative coefficients indicating that as racial resentment increases, the probability of voting Democratic falls. The parameter estimates have been sorted from largest to smallest, and matchups in which Obama appears have the corresponding parameter estimate shown with a darker shade.

The relationship between racial resentment and the probability of supporting a Democratic candidate is always negative, irrespective of the particular candidates in the match-up, or campaign period: all the 33 parameters lie well below zero. But what is distinctive here is the set of consistently larger effects of symbolic racism when we examine match-ups involving Barack Obama. The logit coefficients on symbolic racism are much larger when Obama is the

\[ ^{19} \text{As such, we seek the posterior density for } \theta, \text{ which via Bayes Rule is } p(\theta|y, X) \propto p(\theta)p(y|X, \theta), \text{ where } p(\theta) \text{ is the prior density for } \theta. \text{ Note that the hierarchical structure of the model supplies a prior for the } \beta_j \text{ (equation 2), and in turn, equations 3 through 12 specify priors and hyperparameters for the components of the model for the } \beta_j. \]
Figure 4: Racial resentment parameters, hierarchical logistic model of Democratic-Republican presidential election match-ups (means of the marginal posterior densities for $\beta_{jk}$ in equation 1). Black dots indicate parameter estimates from match-ups where Obama is the Democratic candidate. Horizontal lines indicate 95% credible intervals.
Figure 5: Negative racial stereotype parameters, hierarchical logistic model of Democratic-Republican presidential election match-ups (means of the marginal posterior densities for $\beta_{jk}$ in equation 1). Black dots indicate parameter estimates from match-ups where Obama is the Democratic candidate. Horizontal lines indicate 95% credible intervals.
Figure 6: Negative Economic Retrospection parameters, hierarchical logistic model of Democratic-Republican presidential election match-ups (means of the marginal posterior densities for $\beta_{jk}$ in equation 1). Black dots indicate parameter estimates from match-ups where Obama is the Democratic candidate. Horizontal lines indicate 95% credible intervals.
Figure 7: Democratic Candidate Offsets over the Year Prior to the Election ($\delta_{kd}^D$), hierarchical logistic model of Democratic-Republican presidential election match-ups (means of the marginal posterior densities). Horizontal lines indicate 95% credible intervals. Note that these parameters follow the “sum-to-zero” constraint in equation 13).
Figure 8: Republican Party Identification parameters, hierarchical logistic model of Democratic-Republican presidential election match-ups (means of the marginal posterior densities for \( \beta_{jk} \) in equation 1). Black dots indicate parameter estimates from match-ups where Obama is the Democratic candidate. Horizontal lines indicate 95% credible intervals.
Democratic candidate, more than double the magnitude we observe with other Democratic
candidates. The middle panel of Figure 4 displays the candidate-specific offsets $\delta_{Dk}$ added to
the average effect $\lambda_k$. The Obama-specific effect here is quite distinctive, and unambiguously
leading to larger-than-average racial resentment effects than we observe averaging over all
the Democratic matchups.

Further evidence of Obama’s distinctiveness as a candidate appears in Figure 5, where
we use an identical graphical format to display the estimated effects of negative racial stereo-
types. Across the 33 match-ups we analyze, the average effect of negative racial stereotypes
is indistinguishable from zero (see the point labelled “Average” in the lower panel of Fig-
ure 5). Yet, in every matchup in which Obama appears as a candidate the estimated effect
of negative racial stereotypes is unambiguously negative and sizable. *Obama is alone among
all candidates in this regard.* The two top panels of Figure 5 show that on average, adding
the Obama-specific offset to the average effect results in an unambiguously negative effect, of
around -.25. The magnitude of the estimated effect is small but noteworthy, especially when
we recall that on average, negative racial stereotypes play no role in shaping vote intentions
(net of the effects of the other predictors in our model). Consider a hypothetical respondent
who is otherwise indifferent between the candidates, but holds negative racial stereotypes of
blacks; when Obama is the Democratic candidate, this respondent is estimated to have a .44
probability of voting for Obama — a six-point drop in support.

Figure 6 shows the estimates of the effects of holding negative retrospections of the
national economy. This coefficient is always unambiguously positive, meaning that negative
views of the state of the economy lead to increasing probability of voting for the Democratic
candidate (we flip the direction of this variable for the two match-ups in which the incumbent
president is a Democrat, the Clinton-Dole and Gore/George W. Bush match-ups). Al Gore
appears in just one match-up in these data, and so the Gore-specific offset for the effect
of economic evaluations is estimated imprecisely (as is the effect of economic evaluations in
the Gore/Bush match-up, due to the relatively small sample of the 2000 ANES), but both
Gore and Obama appear to receive less credit for the state of the economy than the other Democrats. That is, when Gore and Obama are the Democratic candidates, it appears that economic conditions are less salient factors in determining vote choice than we typically observe.\textsuperscript{20}

But the story is slightly more complicated than it first appears and we turn to Figure 7 for help understanding the way the economy affected Obama’s vote share over the course of the entire year. In Figure 7 we present the Democratic offset parameters, $\delta_{kd}$, plotted over the course of the year before the election; recall that these parameters follow a “sum-to-zero” constraint (equation 13); hence, tests of whether these parameters differ from zero are tests of the distinctiveness of the parameter estimates for this candidate at this point in time versus those obtained with “average” Democratic and Republican candidates at this point in time. Obama’s off-sets on economic evaluations are the product of the 12 times Obama appears in the match-ups. Elsewhere (Jackman and Vavreck 2010), we have discussed the evolution of these effects over the course of the primary campaign, but it is worth noting here that in the period after Labor Day, the salience of retrospective economic evaluations increases steadily for Obama — such that he finishes the campaign period in late October with a coefficient on retropsections that is indistinguishable from the average Democratic coefficient — although the large credible intervals on the ANES data play a role here (see the first panel of Figure 7 for illustration of the dynamic trends for this coefficient). In other words, on Election Day alone, Obama is not statistically exceptional on this dimension — he makes up a bit of the difference between himself and his 2008 competitors as summer passes into fall and the nation’s economy collapses — enough that we cannot conclude he is different from the typical party nominee running in October. Even in the dire financial context of 2008, however, Obama looks more like Gore in 2000, a candidate who did not stress the economy in his campaign even though doing so might have helped him, than like Bill Clinton in 1992, whose internal campaign mantra was “It’s the economy, stupid.”

\textsuperscript{20}Interestingly, Obama stressed the economy in crisis as the most important issue in his campaign advertising appeals while Gore did not, instead stressing domestic policies (Vavreck 2009).
Obama gets more benefit from the declining economy during the general election than he does during the first half of the year, but he is still below the typical nominee substantively, and never quite achieves the high level of reward on this dimension that Edwards and Clinton get early on. Something is depressing Obama’s ability to leverage retrospective economic evaluations, and it is not that he was avoiding talking about the economy. In truth, Obama talked about the economy more than anything else in his campaign (Vavreck 2009).

We return in Figure 8 to present one more important plot of match-up by match-up logit coefficients and candidate off-sets for an indicator of Republican party identification. The coefficients are unambiguously negative in every case, demonstrating that respondents who self-identify as Republicans are less likely to vote for Democrats in general election match-ups regardless of who the Democrat is on offer.21 Rather unexpectedly, however, the Democratic candidates cluster along the Y-axis in terms of their appeal to Republican voters. Examining the coefficients for Hillary Clinton, Edwards, and Obama from December and January, the pattern is striking: regardless of when we asked people who they would vote for in the general election and with no regard to who the Republican is on offer, self-identified Republican voters are more likely to support Obama than they are to support Edwards or Clinton in 2008. The effect of Republican identification on support for the Democrat was roughly 75% larger in the January Clinton-McCain match-up than in the January Obama-McCain match-up. These differences persist into the March wave as well.

Several other patterns emerge in Figure 8 relative to time. Averaging over a candidate’s entire set of match-ups, over the years from 1992 to 2008 Republican identifiers are increasingly less likely to report support for the Democratic candidate. This is most easily appreciated by examining the Democratic candidate off-sets in the middle panel of the figure. With the exception of Obama, as each election passes, Republicans become less likely to defect to the Democrat. Moreover, within the 2008 election Republican identifiers are increasingly

21 The coefficients for independent respondents look similar to those with the exception that the X-axis ranges from -1.5 to +.5. All of Obama’s credible intervals cover zero for the independent indicator. The other candidates’ coefficients are squarely below zero.
less likely to support the Democrat. This trend is evident in the lower right-hand panel of Figure 7, which shows the coefficient on Republican identification becoming increasingly negative for both Obama and Clinton beginning in March of 2008, and continuing through to September for Obama. Obama was a more attractive than average Democratic candidate for independents and Republican identifiers in late 2007 and early 2008, but this exceptionalism wanes as the general election begins and by Election Day, Obama looks fairly typical of previous Democratic nominees, with Bill Clinton and Al Gore faring better among Independents and Republican identifiers than Obama but John Kerry doing worse. In the early part of 2008, Hillary Clinton and to a lesser extent John Edwards fare quite poorly among independents and Republicans, unambiguously less attractive to these groups of voters than the average Democratic candidate (and less attractive than Obama), and for Clinton, far and away the least attractive Democratic candidate for independents and Republicans among the set of Democrats considered in our analysis. The difference between Obama and Hillary Clinton on this score is striking.

Interestingly, no Democratic candidate clearly outperforms any other Democratic candidate among Democratic identifiers; none of the candidate-specific offsets can be distinguished from zero, consistent with Democratic identifiers not being particularly discriminating with respect to Democratic candidates in match-ups with Republicans, although there is a slight trend toward increasing offsets once the general election campaign begins.\footnote{These partisan dynamics are consistent with many accounts of the interaction between the electorate and the presidential campaign. Perhaps most obviously, these trends illustrate Gelman and King’s (1994) claim that one of the things presidential campaigns do is focus the electorate on the fundamentals (partisanship and the economy).}

We shift our focus to the remaining effects presented in Figure 7 – the measures of prejudice. The most dramatic trend is on the offsets for racial resentment. Over the year prior to the 2008 election, racial resentment increases in importance for one Democrat — Barack Obama. This increase is in addition to the fact that Obama’s offsets are significantly below the other Democrats offsets in terms of levels. Racial resentment does not get more important over time in every campaign, just in 2008. And in 2008, it does not get more
important for every candidate, only for Obama. We assume this Obama-specific dynamism is due to his multi-racial background.

The increasing importance of racial resentment for Obama culminates in the largest racial resentment coefficient we estimate over 16 years of presidential elections. The parameter estimate of -1.5 is roughly 50% larger than the magnitude of the average Obama estimate in the baseline wave (in December of 2007) and more than 3 times the size of Bill Clinton’s average estimate from 1992 and 1996. The other general election estimates for resentment are in line with the primary season estimates from 2008, suggesting that there was something about the 2008 general election campaign that made it different from previous general election campaigns. Racial resentment plays a steady role over the last 16 years of presidential elections in America with a logit coefficient of about -1.0 (and a relatively stable distribution in the electorate). But as early as December of 2007, this measure has more of an impact on vote choice when people think about voting for Obama in the general election than in the previous 16 years for any other Democrat; and, the magnitude of the impact increases as the campaign wages on and Obama becomes the nominee.

The increasing importance of racial resentment in 2008 is a campaign dynamic that could be attributable to a number of factors, none of which we can isolate with our data alone. Nevertheless, one plausible explanation for its increasing importance centers on changing campaign messages in the year prior to Election Day. In the first half of 2008, Hillary Clinton painted a negative portrait of Obama by explicitly priming racial attitudes. Her attacks focused on linking Obama to Reverend Wright, Jesse Jackson, and the Muslim faith.

After both party nominations were secured, John McCain took Clinton’s place as Obama’s opponent — and like his predecessors Bush (1988) and Nixon (1968), McCain’s appeals to racial prejudice were subtle and implicit. McCain tied Obama to the Weather Underground, made advertisements calling Obama a “risky” choice for president, and claimed Obama was more interested in being a celebrity than a president. These links prime symbolic attitudes about race through themes of entitlement and lack of judgment — and they are powerful be-
cause people do not realize they are being “tricked” into a racialized judgment (Mendelberg 2001).

The increasing importance of racial resentment over the course of the 2008 campaign is striking in light of the steady role played by racial stereotypes. Even as racial resentment becomes more important to vote choice, racial stereotypes remain a steady, modest predictor of vote choice in Obama contests, but only in Obama contests. The effects of racial stereotyping are greater for Obama and for him alone; and they remain so throughout the campaign. Again, we attribute this Obama-specific impact to his race.

The results of negative racial stereotypes and racial resentment taken together paint a picture of the 2008 campaign in which a set of voters who hold negative views of blacks vis-a-vis whites are less likely to vote for Obama in the general election and maintain this disposition throughout the campaign and up to election day. Meanwhile, symbolically racial attitudes are important at the beginning of 2008 and increase in impact over the course of the general election. The takeaway, we believe, is a fundamental difference between these two types of prejudice: one appears suggestible or compliant — able to be turned on and off by elites who manipulate the information environment, while the other seems anchored and non-nuanced; rooted in such a way as to be immutable. We are agnostic about whether this difference is due to something essential about each concept or to subtle racial priming by the McCain campaign or other parties. Although we cannot uncover the cause of this pattern, the difference in the dynamic effects of these concepts is plain to see.

**A Coda: What if the Democrats Nominated Clinton or Edwards?**

We use our hierarchical model to generate predictions for a counter-factual scenario in which Hillary Clinton (or any other Democratic candidate in our setup) is running against John McCain in the 2008 election. To do this, we treat each respondent’s scores on the
covariates as fixed, but swap Obama for the other Democrats in the October 2008, “pre-election” match-up. Consider the case of Hillary Clinton, our hierarchical model can generate predictions for this hypothetical scenario as follows:

The 2nd level of the hierarchical model (equation 2) is used to predict coefficients for each of the 6 covariates in our vote choice model (equation 1), for a hypothetical Hillary Clinton/McCain matchup in the pre-election, October 2008 wave of CCAP. Specifically, in a hypothetical Clinton-McCain matchup, each of the \( k = 1, \ldots, 6 \) predictors in our model has a coefficient \( \tilde{\beta}_k \). Conditional on these parameters and the fixed values of the predictors, it is straightforward to compute predicted probabilities of supporting Clinton over McCain via equation 1, which we denote \( \tilde{\pi}_i = g(x_i' \tilde{\beta}) \), \( g(\cdot) = \exp(\cdot) / [1 + \exp(\cdot)] \).

Since we do not observe an actual Clinton/McCain pre-election match-up (October), we rely on the model to generate predictions for \( \tilde{\beta}_k \); these predictions are functions of the hyperparameters in the model, as laid out in equations 2 through 8. Posterior uncertainty in the hyperparameters induces a posterior predictive density over \( \tilde{\beta} \).

Summaries of the posterior density for the Obama coefficients and the predictive posterior densities for the Clinton and Edwards coefficients appear in Table 2. We also compute and summarize the posterior predictive density of the coefficients for the “average” Democratic presidential candidate in our set — a candidate with the “average” Democratic coefficients we observe over the candidates considered here.\(^{23}\) Note again the distinctiveness of the structure of support for Obama, relative to Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and a hypothetical “average” Democratic candidate. Racial attitudes garner considerable weight when Obama is the candidate; observe that racial stereotypes have zero effect when Hillary Clinton or John Edwards is the Democratic candidate in 2008; and similarly for the “average” Democratic candidate before 2008 (see also Figures 4 and 5).

\(^{23}\)We do not include Obama in the average calculation since he is the candidate against whom we want to compare the average candidate’s performance. We also eliminate Bill Clinton’s elections from this calculation since the two-party vote shares in those elections are non-symmetrically affected by the presence of Ross Perot.
Table 2: Coefficients for the Logistic Regression predicting vote share. “Obama” entries are from the model fitted to the Obama-McCain matchup presented to CCAP respondents in the pre-election, October 2008 wave (fitted to white respondents, with the hierarchical model in equations 1 and 2); “Clinton” and “Edwards” entries are summaries of the posterior predictive density for each candidate’s coefficients, had they been the Democratic presidential candidate in the October 2008; the column labelled “Average Democrat” shows coefficients for the average Democrat (with all Democratic candidate-specific offsets set to their average value of zero). In each instance the Republican candidate is John McCain. Ninety-five percent credible intervals appear in brackets.
Echoing the discussion about the evolution of the coefficient on economic retrospections and Edwards’s and Clinton’s relative advantage, Obama has a logit coefficient on economic retrospections that is the lowest for any Democratic candidate we observe (1.20). The average Democrat is predicted to have a coefficient of 1.43, although this prediction comes from a large predictive density due to the small number of cases in the ANES data we use to predict it. We predict Hillary Clinton to have a slightly larger coefficient than average (1.49) and Edwards even larger (1.64). Uncertainty about the average estimate notwithstanding, we conclude that Obama did not get the credit he should have for the declining state of the national economy – at any point in 2008.

We also see evidence of Clinton’s relatively poor standing among independents and Republicans, with larger (more negative) intercepts specific to these groups than either Obama or the average Democrat (-1.54 among independents for Clinton, versus -.50 and -1.18 for Obama and the Edwards, respectively; and, -4.62 among Republicans for Clinton, versus -3.19 and -4.01 for Obama and Edwards).

We explore the political implications of these different patterns of coefficients by comparing observed levels of support for Obama with predicted levels of support for Clinton, Edwards, and the “average” Democratic candidate. We do this by using the posterior densities summarized in Table 2 to generate a posterior predictive density over the probability that a given respondent reports voting for the Democratic candidate \( \tilde{\pi}_i = g(\tilde{\beta} | x_i) \). For instance, conditional on (a) the Democratic candidate being Hillary Clinton (the 2nd listed Democrat in the set \( D \), above), (b) the Republican candidate being John McCain (the 2nd listed Republican in the set \( R \)) and (c) the match-up occurring in October (\( t = 5 \)), predictions for \( \tilde{\beta}_k \) depend on the hyperparameters \( \varphi_k = (\lambda_k, \delta^D_{k2}, \delta^R_{k2}, \eta_{5k}, \omega^2_k)' \). Conditional on \( \varphi_k \) we have the following (posterior) predictive density for each \( \tilde{\beta}_k \),

\[
\tilde{\beta}_k | (\varphi_k, y, X) \sim N(\lambda_k + \delta^D_{k2} + \delta^R_{k2} + \eta_{5k}, \omega^2_k), \quad k = 1, \ldots, 6.
\] (14)
These densities over $\tilde{\beta}_k$ are summarized in the square brackets in Table 3 with methodological details appearing in the Appendix.

We convert these predicted probabilities into a predicted vote share by summing the probabilities over respondents, recalling that our analysis here is subset to respondents who are white, registered voters. This yields an estimated Clinton two-party vote share of 46.9%, with a 95% credible interval ranging from 45.3% to 48.5%. Critically, observe that Obama received 46.4% support among white, registered voter respondents in the October wave of our study, a level that is .5 percentage-points below the prediction for Hillary Clinton, outside the interior of the 95% credible interval around the prediction of Clinton’s vote share. That is, we conclude that Hillary Clinton would have obtained a higher vote share than Obama in 2008, by about .5 points, had she been the Democratic nominee, but we cannot rule out the possibility that she could have done worse than Obama. The margin is too close to rule this out.

Our best guess is that Edwards would have outperformed Obama by almost 3.0 percentage-points of vote share; our confidence around this estimated increase is such that we can rule out a fall in vote share relative to Obama. Edwards would have fared better than both Obama and Clinton in 2008 against John McCain. His additional support comes from gains he makes relative to Obama on racial attitudes (both stereotyping and resentment) and relative to Clinton among independents and Republicans.

We estimate that the “average” Democrat who ran over the last 16 years would have done about 3.3 percentage-points better than Obama had this person run against McCain in 2008; the 95% credible interval for this estimated increase lies above zero.

We present the results on observed and predicted Democratic vote share graphically in Figure 9 broken out by deciles of racial resentment, with the low end representing liberal attitudes on race. The robust and strong relationship between resentment and Democratic vote share is on display in Figure 9. More people vote for the Democrat, whether white or
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prediction</th>
<th>Change from Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edwards:</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[47.4, 51.5]</td>
<td>[-5.1, -1.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton:</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[45.3, 48.5]</td>
<td>[-2.1, 1.1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (excluding Obama and Bill Clinton):</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>-3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[46.7, 52.8]</td>
<td>[-6.3, -0.3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama (observed):</td>
<td>46.4</td>
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Table 3: Predicted vote share, October 2008 General Election. “Clinton” and “Edwards” entries are summaries of the posterior predictive density for each candidate’s coefficients, had they been the Democratic presidential candidate in the October 2008; the column labelled “Average Democrat” represents the average Democrat (as defined earlier). In each instance the Republican candidate is John McCain.
Figure 9: Obama reported levels of support (in black) and predicted levels of support for Clinton, Edwards, and the average Democratic nominee, by decile of racial resentment; white, registered voters only, pre-election, October 2008 wave of CCAP.
black, if they have low levels of racial prejudice. The solid line without hash-marks represents Obama’s observed voteshares in our data. The line with hash-marks is the predicted voteshare for Clinton, Edwards, and the average Democrat since 1992. There are some appreciable differences across the candidates.

The Clinton and Obama lines nearly converge across all levels of resentment, with Obama doing ever so slightly better at the low end and Clinton doing better among those with the highest levels of resentment. The differences between Obama and the other candidates are greater. Edwards and the average nominee do notably better than Obama among people in the higher half of the resentment distribution, although the differences may be small in magnitude — about 3-4 points over half the electorate — presidential elections can turn on less than that. Again, we see very little difference between Obama and Edwards or the average candidate on the liberal end of the scale. Conditional on being in the bottom half of the racial resentment scale, the Democratic voteshare is about 90% regardless of who the nominee may be.\(^{24}\)

We note the similarities across the candidates: there is impressive structure to the two-party vote in presidential elections, but the candidate’s characteristics move the margin by a few points in different segments of the electorate. With the right combination of characteristics and voters, these minimal effects may be pivotal.

\section*{Conclusion: Understanding the role of Obama’s race in the 2008 election}

We have presented much evidence to suggest that Obama’s candidacy prompted the electorate to use a different political calculus than is typically deployed when assessing

\(^{24}\)The difference between our results and Tesler and Sears (2010) findings is explained by many factors, including but not limited to the following: we use October match-ups while they use March observations; and, we present observed/predicted voteshare by decile of resentment, they present predicted probabilities of vote for Obama generated by holding everyone at mean levels of controls and varying levels of resentment. These are two fundamentally different sets of effects.
Democratic presidential candidates for president over the last 16 years. In short, racial attitudes are far more salient when Obama is the Democratic candidate than when he is not. “Old-fashioned” racial stereotyping drains votes from Obama but does not do so for other candidates in 2008 or any other candidates dating back to 1992. Its effects are steady over the course of the campaign and significant only in choices in which Obama is the Democrat.

“New” or “symbolic” racism, on the other hand, drains votes from nearly all the Democratic candidates running in 2008 and those who ran since 1992. In every year since the questions have been put to respondents, increases in racial resentment are correlated with decreasing votes for the Democratic candidate, regardless of who that Democrat is. But, its impact on Obama in 2008 is exceptional — and its importance to the vote calculation is increasing over the course of the general election campaign. Something about Obama made racial stereotyping and racial resentment more important to voters when evaluating his candidacy vis-á-vis John McCain; and makes the importance of resentment grow over the general election campaign. We assume that “something” is Obama’s race.

It is one thing to demonstrate that attitudes about race play a larger role in decisions about vote choice when Obama is the Democrat than when anyone else who ran in the last 16 years is the candidate. But what about the main effect? Is this racialization of political support for an Obama candidacy among white voters necessarily a net minus for Obama? In general, the answer is yes, although the story does have some subtleties. Tallying up all those increases and decreases leads us to conclude that replacing Obama with a white Democrat in 2008 leads to modest net improvements in Democratic vote share, on the order of 3.0 percentage-points.

And this raises a larger point. Assessing the distinctiveness of Obama’s candidacy — and the possibility that his nomination “racialized” the 2008 presidential election — begs the question as to what is the “baseline” state of affairs? In short, just what is the counter-factual?

Here we have considered two possibilities; one, quite concrete, a Hillary Clinton or John
Edwards candidacy, and another more abstract, an “average” Democratic presidential candidate made from the candidates who ran over the last 16 years of presidential elections. In both cases it bears pointing out that racial resentment is always a significant predictor of two-party support in American presidential elections, although the effects of this variable are much larger when Obama is the candidate. The specific counter-factual of a Hillary Clinton candidacy — a possibility that remained on the table until quite late in the electoral cycle — is not without its complications either. Clinton appears to have been particularly disliked by independents and Republicans, at least relative to Obama or an average Democratic candidate. Accordingly, while (a) Clinton would have been the beneficiary of a higher-than-average weight attaching to generally negative economic retrospections, and (b) Clinton did not suffer any of the negative consequences of the heightened salience of racial attitudes accompanying Obama’s candidacy, we nonetheless predict that Clinton would have received essentially the same level of support that Obama did (Table 3). What the attitudes about race take away, something else gives back, at least when we compare Obama and Clinton in the specific context of 2008.

On the other hand, the “average Democrat” (in our dataset) would have done very well in 2008, at levels comfortably exceeding the vote shares we observe for Obama, and the predicted vote shares for Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. “Racialization” is the leading culprit here, with the “average” Democratic candidacy generating smaller effects for both racial resentment and negative racial stereotypes, while not suffering from quite so large a drain in support from independents and Republicans as Clinton experienced. In the end, this probably did not matter, in that Obama won the election, and indeed, so too would have any Democrat (as best as we can tell). Nonetheless, we predict white voters might have given the Democratic candidate even greater support — perhaps even majority support — had someone other than Barack Obama (or Hillary Clinton) been the Democratic nominee. The 2008 electoral context may well be special, in that the electoral consequences of Obama’s “racialized” candidacy were muted, as they had no impact on which party ultimately won
the presidency. The 2012 election may well be a different story, with the electoral context being one in which the heightened salience of racial attitudes — and the resulting large and negative impact on Democratic vote share among white voters — is in fact pivotal. *If neither party has an obvious advantage in terms of the economy in 2012, candidate traits that affect three or four-points on the margin may determine which party wins.*

Finally, we draw attention to our empirical strategy. In assessing whether Obama’s candidacy was hampered by racial prejudice in the electorate, what is the relevant counterfactual? We pose this question fully acknowledging the fact that it is literally impossible to identify the causal effect of Obama’s race in the 2008 election, but also wanting to offer an analysis that makes the argument that his race mattered in as persuasive, yet careful a way as possible.

Counter-factuals are just that, and so subject to some degree of whimsey. But to the extent researchers can consider more plausible counter-factual scenarios, they should. We asked what if someone other than Barack Obama had been the Democratic presidential nominee? We do not consider fantastic recreations of the American electorate in which there is no racial prejudice or racial resentment (Pasek et al. 2010), or arbitrary shifts of subsets of voters on various attitudinal dimensions (Tesler and Sears 2010). In our view, the relevant counter-factual is to consider a change on the “supply side” of the ledger, to ask what if someone other than Barack Obama had been the Democratic nominee, *ceteris paribus.* In this approach, we take the state of the world and the dispositions of voters as we find them. Underscoring this strategy is our belief that candidates and campaigns matter in how they *prime* some dispositions and elements of political reality more so than others, rather than how they *change* voters’ dispositions or other political facts. Few studies of elections acknowledge this premise. Even fewer studies are designed around it.

This approach has clear implications for research design. To gain empirical traction for our counter-factuals, we put a series of “head-to-head” matchups to our survey respondents over the six waves of the CCAP panel, and borrowed strength from analyses of recent presi-
dential elections. We recommend this approach to scholars designing and analyzing political surveys and note that in terms of electoral strategy — taking the electorate “as it is” and considering variation on the “supply side” of the vote choice is a superior way to learn about potential election outcomes. We contend that this approach has greater political realism than assuming fundamental attitudes in the general population (indeed in some cases attitudes that are thought to be acquired through pre-adult socialization) are likely to change dramatically during the period of a campaign.
Appendix

Generating Posterior Predictive Densities

In turn, elements of \( \varphi \) depend on other hyperparameters: e.g., \( \delta_{k2}^D \) is a function of the other offset parameters (via the sum to zero constraint in equation 13) and the variance parameter \( \tau_k^2 \) in equation 5. We denote these “parent” hyperparameters of \( \varphi \) as \( \varrho \).

With these definitions, the posterior predictive density for each \( \tilde{\pi}_i \) is

\[
p(\tilde{\pi}_i | y, X) = \int \int \int p(\tilde{\pi}_i | \tilde{\beta}) p(\tilde{\beta} | \varphi, y, X) p(\varphi | \varrho, y, X) p(\varrho | y, X) \, d\varrho \, d\varphi \, d\tilde{\beta}.
\] (15)

We perform the integration via Monte Carlo marginalization, using the output from the MCMC algorithm to generate samples from the posterior density of the hyperparameters \( \varphi \). Letting \( m \) index iterations of the MCMC algorithm, with each sampled draw \( \varphi^{(m)} \) we sample \( \tilde{\beta}^{(m)} \) from the conditional predictive densities in equation 14. In fact, the quantities \( \tilde{\pi}^{(m)}_i = g(x_i' \tilde{\beta}^{(m)}) \) are samples from the posterior predictive density in equation 15. We work with the averages of these sampled values (averaged over many iterations of the MCMC algorithm), Monte Carlo estimates of the means of the posterior predictive densities, to form a “Bayes estimate” of the probability that a given respondent would express a preference for Hillary Clinton over John McCain in a hypothetical, pre-election match-up.
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