Anti-egalitarians for Obama? Group-dominance motivation and the Obama vote

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The election of the first Black president was a watershed moment in American race relations, and many Obama voters saw their choice as affirming and furthering the dream of racial equality. However, the present study provides evidence that Obama also garnered votes from an unlikely source: those wishing to maintain racial disparities. Data from a longitudinal study of the election suggest that, while some anti-egalitarian voters opposed Obama due to his perceived “foreignness,” others voted for him in order to underwrite the hierarchy-enhancing claim that US racism has been eliminated. Anti-egalitarianism was only associated with an increased tendency to vote for Obama among individuals who claimed that his victory signals the end of racism.

Perhaps more than any presidential election in recent memory, the 2008 contest between Barack Obama and John McCain engaged voters’ hopes, fears, and motivations concerning the future landscape of American society. Without doubt, Mr. Obama drew support from individuals who hoped his victory would symbolize, and even facilitate, the dissolution of White-over-Black dominance in the United States. We suggest, however, that those wishing to maintain the hierarchy did not uniformly oppose Obama.

Anti-egalitarian desires can motivate individuals to embrace policies and candidates they regard as “hierarchy-enhancing,” or likely to preserve existing patterns of intergroup inequality (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Thus, the relationship between anti-egalitarianism and support for a given candidate should vary as a function of the perceived social consequences of his or her election. We argue that ambiguity concerning President Obama’s effects on the hierarchy may have produced conflicting preferences among voters motivated to maintain the hierarchy. The present longitudinal study suggests that anti-egalitarian motivation functioned—through distinct pathways—both to increase and decrease voters’ preferences for Mr. Obama.

The dominance–vote relationship

To many voters, an Obama victory promised a symbolic and substantive challenge to the racial hierarchy. The mere existence of a Black president would undermine the prejudicial belief that African Americans are incapable of ascending to the highest echelons of power. Moreover, Mr. Obama’s subordinate-group status might have created an expectation that he would pursue policies designed to undermine the racial hierarchy (e.g., affirmative action). Thus, many of those interested in maintaining the hierarchy may have been motivated to oppose, or at least not support, Obama’s candidacy. This proposition is consistent with research linking dominance motives to anxiety over minority gains in political power (Bobo, 2000) and to support for conservative political candidates (Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997).

Anti-egalitarian sentiment may have led many to oppose Obama; yet these individuals likely would not wish to recognize, or have others recognize, dominance motives as the basis for their opposition. Social dominance theory suggests that individuals rationalize opposition to hierarchy-attenuating policies or candidates in terms of “legitimizing myths” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, 2004). Consequently, voters may have cloaked their motives in more “legitimate” objections to Obama, including the notions that he is an Arab (Babington, 2008), a socialist (Lind, 2008), unpatriotic (Powell, 2008), or a Black radical (Brown, 2008). Such beliefs, which together express a suspicion that Obama is “foreign” (either to American values or literally), may mediate any relationship between dominance motives and opposition to Obama (cf. Federico & Sidanius, 2002).

While some anti-egalitarian voters likely opposed Obama, we suggest that others might have found his candidacy appealing. An Obama victory might be seen to support the claim that racism has been eliminated and racial equity achieved in the United States. Indeed, Ward Connerly, a prominent social activist, took Obama’s support among Whites as proof of racism’s demise: “How can you say there is institutional racism when people in Nebraska vote for a guy who is a self-identified black man?”
Similarly, former US Secretary of Education William Bennett claimed that Obama’s victory meant that “[y]ou don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘The deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that’” (Neiwert, 2008).

Those motivated to maintain the hierarchy might see value in assertions concerning the potential “postracial” implications of Mr. Obama’s victory. If widely embraced, claims that Obama’s victory demonstrate the end of racism would undercut efforts to increase equality, by denying the conditions that would justify those efforts (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Winant, 2001). Moreover, such claims might be seen to obviate the need even to discuss race or racial issues (Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). Thus, for those who regard electing a Black president as justifying postracial assertions, group-dominance motives may be positively associated with voting for Obama. While this would represent a sophisticated legitimizing maneuver—requiring, as it does, anti-egalitarian individuals to aid a subordinate-group member’s elevation to the nation’s highest office—recent research suggests that legitimizing strategies can be quite sophisticated (Hogan, Lowery, & Chow, 2009; Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Hogan, 2009).

The present study

We predicted that the link between group-dominance motives and the tendency to vote for Mr. Obama would be multifaceted. On the one hand, electing a member of a subordinate group to the nation’s highest office could be seen to erode the racial hierarchy, yielding a negative relationship between dominance and voting for Obama. Given the prominence of myths concerning Mr. Obama’s “foreignness,” we expected that adoption of such beliefs might mediate this relationship. Having accounted for this, we expected a very different pattern to emerge. For those who regard electing an immigrant or a member of a subordinate group to the nation’s highest office could be seen to erode the racial hierarchy rather than genuine admiration for Obama. Those motivated to maintain the hierarchy might see value in assertions concerning the potential “postracial” implications of Mr. Obama’s victory.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 294 individuals, 201 women and 93 men, ranging in age from 18 to 78 years (M = 35.2, SD = 12.3). The sample consisted of 246 self-described Whites, 30 East Asians, seven Latinos, four Southeast Asians, two South Asians, one Pacific Islander, and one Native American, with three participants not reporting their race or ethnicity. Participants were recruited from a database, maintained by the Stanford Graduate School of Business, of individuals interested in completing online studies. As compensation, each participant received a $10 gift certificate to an online retailer, as well as a chance to win an additional gift certificate in a random drawing.

Measures

Measures of group dominance motivation

Following previous research (Federico & Sidanius, 2002), three indices of group dominance motivation were obtained: a six-item subset of Pratto and colleagues’ (1994) social dominance orientation (SDO) scale (x = .86), Bobo’s (1998) intergroup threat scale (x = .87), and McConahay and colleagues (1981) modern racism scale (x = .89). Together, these items formed a reliable scale (x = .80).

Measures of political orientation

Again following Federico and Sidanius (2002), two indices of political orientation were collected: a self-report of conservatism and a self-report of Republican party identification (x = .80).

Participants rated Barack Obama on six adjectives relevant to his purported foreignness to America and American values: “un-American,” “unpatriotic,” “radical,” “Muslim,” and “socialist,” and “unpresidential.” Together, these items formed a reliable scale (x = .92).

Vote

Participants were asked to report for whom they voted. The response options were: Barack Obama/Joe Biden, John McCain/Sarah Palin, Other, and I did not vote.

Belief that racism is over

To gauge participants’ beliefs about what Obama’s election means for race in the US, two items were administered: “To what extent does the election of Barack Obama show that race relations are no longer a problem in the US” (five points ranging from Definitely shows race relations are no longer a problem to Definitely does not show race relations are still a problem, reverse-scored) and “Now that Barack Obama is President-Elect of the US, to what extent do we live in a color-blind society?” (Definitely do not live in a color-blind society to Definitely do live in a color-blind society) (x = .44).

Reactions to the oath of office

On inauguration day, January 20, 2009, mistakes were made in the conduct of the oath of office. These stumbles were widely noted in media reports, and necessitated a private re-administration of the oath the following day (“Obama retakes oath of office after flub,” 2009). In order to gauge participants’ perceptions of where the fault for these problems lay, two items were administered: “Who made mistakes during the oath?” (five response options, including Only Barack Obama, Mostly Obama, Obama and Roberts equally, Mostly Roberts, and Only John Roberts) and “What happened during the oath reflects shortcomings of Barack Obama” (five points ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree) (x = .56).

Procedure

For each of the four assessments in the longitudinal design, participants received an email containing a link to survey website. In each case, emails were sent just before the assessment was to begin.

Assessment 1

The first assessment ran from October 28–30, 2008. After linking to the survey website, participants were presented with information describing the research as a multipart study of “social views.” They then completed the measures of social dominance orientation, intergroup threat, modern racism, political conservatism, as well as additional demographic items, in fixed order.

Assessment 2

The second assessment ran from November 1–3, 2008. For this assessment, participants completed the six-item measure of Obama’s perceived foreignness.
Assessment 3

The third assessment ran from November 19–21, 2008. This assessment had participants report their vote in the 2008 presidential election and their beliefs concerning the implications of Obama’s victory.

Assessment 4

The final assessment ran from January 22–February 4, 2009. Participants listened to a 30-s audio clip of the oath of inauguration, after which they completed the items measuring their perceptions of who was at fault.

Results

Structural equation models

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are shown in Table 1. Structural equation models were created to represent the hypothesized direct and indirect effects of group dominance on two dependent variables: voting for Obama (Fig. 1A) and blaming him for problems during the oath of office (Fig. 2B). The predictors were identical across the two models: a latent variable representing group dominance, indicated by social dominance orientation, intergroup threat, and modern racism; a latent variable representing political conservatism, indicated by self-reported conservatism and Republican party identification; and a latent variable representing Mr. Obama’s perceived foreignness, indicated by the six foreignness-related descriptors. Both models were fitted using MPlus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2008). As required to analyze dichotomous outcome variables in SEM, we used polychoric correlations and weighted least squares estimation procedures to generate and test the vote model (Byrne, 1998).

Vote model

In the model predicting voting behavior, self-reported vote was an observed variable. Because we were interested in who did and did not vote for Mr. Obama, we recoded the variable into two possible values: 1 = voted for Obama and 0 = voted for someone else or did not vote. Model fit was satisfactory ($\chi^2/df = 2.53$, RMSEA = .07). As shown in Fig. 1A, we observed a positive effect of group dominance on perceptions of Mr. Obama’s foreignness and a negative effect of perceived foreignness on the tendency to vote for Obama. While this pattern leads to negative indirect (i.e., mediated) relationship between group dominance and voting for Obama, the direct (i.e., unmediated) effect of group dominance on voting for Obama was positive (Table 2). Thus, group dominance appears to have discrepant direct and indirect effects on voting for Obama.

Blame model

In the model predicting individuals’ tendency to blame Obama for problems during the oath, blame was a latent variable indicated by the two fault items. Model fit was satisfactory ($\chi^2/df = 1.98$, RMSEA = .06). As shown in Fig. 1B, the direct effect of dominance on the tendency to blame Obama was positive. We also observed a positive indirect effect of dominance on blame, via Obama’s foreignness, indicating that the direct and indirect effects of group dominance on the tendency to blame Obama were congruent with one another (Table 2).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Group dominance</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conservatism</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Obama foreignness</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Vote for Obama</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Blame Obama for oath</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Notes:

- N = 225 for statistics involving the blame variable.
- a $N = 225$ for statistics involving the blame variable.
- b The vote variable was coded such that 1 = a vote for Obama and 0 = a vote for someone else or no vote.
- *p < .05
- **p < .01

Postracial assertions and the dominance–vote relationship

The hypothesis that dominance motives would have the direct effect of increasing the tendency to vote for Obama rests on the possibility that some anti-egalitarian voters regarded an Obama
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Effect</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote for Obama (N = 294)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect (via Obama Foreign)</td>
<td>−0.37</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame Obama for oath (N = 225)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect (via Obama Foreign)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>.17*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .10.
** p < .05.
*** p < .01.

dress racism are no longer necessary. As noted earlier, some pundits have used Mr. Obama’s election to question the very existence of racial inequity. Moreover, some conservative organizations have explicitly used Mr. Obama’s election to challenge policies designed to address institutional racism, such as the Voting Rights Act and affirmative action (Williams & Negrin, 2008). Considered in the context of our data, these developments suggest the prescience of high-dominance individuals that voted for Mr. Obama.

The vast racial disparities in American life did not disappear after the election of Mr. Obama. Furthermore, our data provide evidence that Americans’ willingness to vote for a Black candidate for the President of the United States is not necessarily evidence of their racial egalitarianism. Thus, there is reason to question whether Mr. Obama’s election even signals the beginning of a post-racial era, in which racial disparities will simply wither away. While the historic nature of Mr. Obama’s election provides a powerful symbol of change, we suggest that those interested in substantive change still have work to do.

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References