Barack Obama, Implicit Bias, and the 2008 Election

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With notable exceptions, conscious or explicit racism was not part of the 2008 campaign. But social psychologists argue that unconscious or implicit biases have a powerful effect on how people evaluate each other. Implicit racial bias is widespread; the vast majority of adult Americans, for example, more closely associate White faces with positive imagery and Black faces with negative imagery. Implicit bias induces dangerous assumptions; White Americans more readily associate Black Americans with weapons and White Americans with tools than the opposite pairing. Implicit bias is crude and ugly; White Americans associate apes and animals with Black Americans.

White adults also more frequently associate the concept of “American” with being White, and showing White adults subliminal images of the American flag increases their anti-Black bias. This last finding particularly shows the contrast between explicit beliefs and unconscious associations; African-Americans are obviously American, but they seem less so to most adult White brains.

Furthermore, implicit biases influence how people evaluate others. White interviewers who harbor strong anti-Black unconscious biases make less eye contact with Black job applicants, exhibit hostile body language, and report that these interviews are
The blogs and the pundits may laud
Obama’s win as evidence that
we now live in a “post-racial America.”

But is it accurate to
suggest that race no longer
significantly influences
how Americans evaluate
each other?
uncomfortable. White interviewers who do not harbor such biases do not exhibit the same effects. And implicit biases have a documented neurobiological component. Those who evidence a strong association of White with good and Black with bad use a part of their brain associated with the fear response (the amygdala) to process Black faces. And at least one study also shows that unconscious racial biases can affect how people vote.

But did this landscape of unconscious bias affect the course of the 2008 election? Researchers have struggled to demonstrate the influence of unconscious biases in the real world. Ironically, several aspects of the election of the first Black president of the United States provide that demonstration.

First, throughout the campaign, criticisms abounded that Obama was unpatriotic or insufficiently American. These attacks began early, when a news story that Obama failed to place his hand over his heart during the singing of the national anthem at an Iowa fair prompted negative associations toward Black people and apes. At his restaurant, a White Georgia bar and grill owner began selling T-shirts depicting the image of Curious George, a cartoon monkey, with the slogan “Obama in ’08.” In June, a Utah company began making a sock monkey (doll) of Obama. During the fall, a man at a McCain rally carried a monkey doll with an Obama sticker wrapped around its head. At various points, both Democrats and Republicans used milder racial slurs to refer to Obama. Clinton surrogate, Andrew Cuomo, used the phrase “shucked and jived” in an indirect reference to Obama’s campaign strategy. Republican congressman Tom Davis, in discussing how Obama would have difficulty handling the immigration debate, described this issue as a “tar baby.” Even when charging Obama with being an “elitist”—a charge that would seem to be inconsistent with stereotypes about Black Americans—many of his detractors used the more racially tinged word, “uppity.”

Third, the primary elections exhibited what has been called the Bradley Effect—the tendency of polls to overestimate support for a Black candidate in an election against a White candidate. Although commentators denied that the Bradley Effect occurred, a clear pattern emerged in the spring primaries. States that held primaries and reported small percentages of Black voters (California, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island) exhibited the Bradley Effect. By contrast, polls were basically accurate in states with Black populations in line with the national Black population of 12.3% (Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas). A reverse Bradley Effect—whereby pollsters underestimate support for Obama—occurred in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, all of which are 19% or more Black. Of the eighteen states with open primaries and available data, only Wisconsin was inconsistent with this trend.

The pattern of polling error suggests strongly that voters either lied to pollsters or changed their minds at the last minute. White voters flinched at the last moment, unwilling to pull the lever in favor of the Black candidate. Black voters did the opposite: finding themselves unable to resist the prospect of voting for a viable Black candidate when the time came to
cast their ballots (or turning up at polls in numbers greater than expected). That this pattern did not persist in the fall is an interesting and promising development. But no pollster who assesses the spring primary data carefully will advise a future Black candidate to ignore the possibility of the Bradley Effect occurring.

Fourth, the election was marked by deeply racially stratified voting. Obama won among Black voters by 91 percentage points; among Latinos by 36 points; among Asians by 27 points; but he lost among White voters by 12 points. The spring Democratic Party primaries (which obviously control for political party preferences) were even more stratified. Exit polls showed that Obama never fared better among White voters than Black voters. Although he won overwhelmingly among Black voters everywhere, only in Iowa, Illinois, Vermont, Indiana, and North Carolina did he win among White voters. After the news reports about his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, surfaced, he performed even less well among White voters. He lost White voters in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky by 26, 30, and 49 points, respectively. All of this occurred even as less than 10 percent of voters indicated to pollsters that race influenced their vote, suggesting that voters might not understand their own motives well.

The campaign was thus a reflection of how contemporary racism works. Modern racism does not produce an overt smoking gun marking its influence; one has to look fairly carefully. It operates not as an absolute barrier, but as a kind of tax on members of racial minorities. It facilitates certain negative assumptions through an invisible influence. McCain, after all, did not face a fair fight. Obama’s success arose in large measure from his success in raising significantly more money than McCain and from the specter of an unpopular Republican president presiding over a horrific financial crisis that induced great demand for the kind of government intervention more closely associated with Democrats. And of course, implicit and explicit biases against older Americans’ abilities are common as well.

Obama navigated the racial waters well. He spent a great deal of time and money creating positive imagery to combat the negative associations that are so common. For most of the spring campaign, his message was one of raw optimism, unadorned with details. Wisely so, as studies of implicit racial bias suggest that details concerning resumes and qualifications are influenced by unconscious associations. Once Obama created his own set of associations, he was rarely seen without a bevy of American flags behind him. Although campaign leaders now report that they only rarely discussed race, they ran a campaign well-suited to combating unconscious bias, just as McCain ran one well-suited to taking advantage of it.

But, of course, Obama had an army of strategists and pollsters backing his lengthy job interview with America. The ordinary Black job applicant faces the same racial environment without such assistance. Affirmative action and antidiscrimination laws can hardly be said to be unnecessary in a world in which the enormous resources Obama had available are necessary to combat bias. The 2008 campaign thus teaches us that America is not so virulently racist as to reject outright a Black applicant for a serious position. The nature of the campaign, however, shows that race continues to play a complex and profound role in how Americans judge each other. The post-racial American may be on its way, but has yet to arrive.

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1. Except where noted, the work described in these paragraphs is documented in full at www.projectimplicit.net/.
4. www.abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/ExitPolls2008#Pres_All.