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Subtle Bias in the Ballot Box: Examining the Impact of Race and Negative Campaigning in Local Elections

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intersection of racial bias and negative campaigning in shaping voter preferences during local elections. While overt prejudice has declined in many democratic societies, implicit racial attitudes continue to influence electoral outcomes in nuanced ways. Through a mixed-methods approach combining experimental survey data and content analysis of campaign materials, the research reveals how negative messaging—especially when racially coded—can subtly activate bias among voters without explicit racial appeals. Findings indicate that minority candidates are disproportionately affected by such strategies, often experiencing diminished voter support when targeted by negative campaigns. These results underscore the persistent role of race in local political dynamics and the ethical implications of campaign strategies in democratic societies.

Keywords: Racial bias, negative campaigning, local elections, implicit attitudes, voter behavior, political communication, minority candidates, electoral strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of modern political campaigns is increasingly complex, with factors such as candidate race and campaign messaging playing significant roles in shaping voter perceptions and, ultimately, election outcomes. While overt forms of racial prejudice have become less socially acceptable, a subtler form, known as aversive racism, may still influence voter behavior, particularly in contexts where clear, non-racial justifications for decisions exist [16, 17, 20]. Aversive racism describes a phenomenon where individuals who consciously endorse egalitarian values unconsciously harbor negative feelings and beliefs about racial minority groups [15, 16, 20]. This can manifest in discriminatory behavior when a non-racial justification for that behavior is available, allowing individuals to maintain a non-prejudiced self-image [19, 31]. This article explores how candidate race, particularly for Black candidates, interacts with negative campaign information to affect voter support in local elections, utilizing a field experimental design to capture authentic voter responses.

The presence of Black candidates in local, state, and national elections has grown significantly over the past decades [29, 61]. Despite this progress, research consistently demonstrates that Black candidates often face unique hurdles compared to their White counterparts [2, 1, 29, 36, 42, 43, 61]. Studies have shown that White voters may exhibit lower support for Black candidates, even when controlling for policy preferences and partisanship [31, 39, 52]. This "racial penalty" or "racial gap" in support is a consistent finding in political science research [31, 36, 42, 61]. For example, studies on presidential elections have indicated that even highly qualified Black candidates, like Barack Obama, faced a discernible racial cost in terms of voter support [1, 52, 60]. This suggests that racial bias, even if subtle, continues to influence electoral dynamics.

A key area where aversive racism may be particularly salient is when negative information about a candidate is introduced. Aversive racists, who strive to appear unprejudiced, may seize upon non-racial negative information as a justification to withhold support from a Black candidate, thereby rationalizing their underlying discomfort or bias without consciously acknowledging it as racial discrimination [17, 20, 31, 39]. This phenomenon is consistent with findings in other domains, such as employment and housing, where discrimination against minority groups increases when ambiguous or negative information provides a convenient excuse [4, 7, 14, 21, 54, 72].

For instance, a meta-analysis of field experiments on ethnic discrimination in rental housing markets found that discrimination is more likely when there are plausible non-ethnic justifications for denial [3]. Similarly, labor market studies have shown that identical resumes are treated differently based on racially distinct names, with the disparity often explained by subtle cues or ambiguous qualifications [7, 60].

Conversely, the impact of negative campaigning itself is a well-established area of research in political science [35]. While some studies suggest negative campaigns can decrease voter turnout or alienate voters, others argue they can effectively highlight candidate weaknesses and mobilize supporters [35]. However, the interaction between negative information and candidate race, especially within the framework of aversive racism, introduces a nuanced dynamic. When negative information is provided about a White candidate, voters might process it based on its content and relevance. When the same negative information is provided about a Black candidate, aversive racist voters might use it as a readily available, "acceptable" reason to vote against them, even if they would have otherwise supported a White candidate with similar negative attributes. This subtle cognitive process allows prejudiced individuals to maintain their self-perception as fair-minded, avoiding the discomfort of confronting their own implicit biases [17, 20, 53].

Previous research often relies on survey data or experimental settings that may suffer from social desirability bias, where respondents may be hesitant to express racially biased attitudes directly [38, 55]. This makes field experiments particularly valuable for studying sensitive topics like racial bias in political behavior, as they observe behavior in a more naturalistic setting, minimizing the impact of social desirability [2, 11, 22, 28, 44, 54]. By randomly assigning voters to receive different types of campaign messages (varying candidate race and negativity), we can more accurately assess causal effects on voting behavior.

This study builds upon existing literature by employing a field experiment to investigate the combined effects of candidate race and negative campaign information on voter support in local elections. We hypothesize that negative information will disproportionately harm Black candidates compared to White candidates, consistent with the tenets of aversive racism. Specifically, we anticipate that White voters, who may harbor unconscious biases, will be more likely to withdraw support from a Black candidate when negative information is present, as it provides a convenient "justification" for their decision.

METHODS

Participants and Setting

The field experiment was conducted during a real local election campaign in a mid-sized American city. The target population consisted of registered voters residing in precincts deemed competitive for the local election, ensuring a diverse and politically engaged sample. Voter rolls, publicly available, were used to select households for treatment and control groups. No demographic data on individual voters was collected to maintain anonymity and comply with ethical guidelines for field experiments [13, 27, 40, 68]. The campaign context, a local election for a city council seat, was chosen because local elections often have lower voter turnout and less nationalized political discourse, which can make the impact of individual-level factors, such as candidate race and campaign messaging, more pronounced.

Experimental Design and Stimuli

A 2×2 factorial experimental design was employed, manipulating two independent variables: candidate race (Black vs. White) and campaign information (positive/neutral vs. negative). This resulted in four experimental conditions:

1. **White Candidate, Positive/Neutral Information:** Voters received campaign materials featuring a White candidate with generally positive or neutral biographical information and policy stances.
2. **White Candidate, Negative Information:** Voters received campaign materials featuring a White candidate, but with an added piece of credible, non-racial negative information (e.g., a past minor ethical lapse, a controversial vote, or a public gaffe).
3. **Black Candidate, Positive/Neutral Information:** Voters received campaign materials featuring a Black candidate with generally positive or neutral biographical information and policy stances.
4. **Black Candidate, Negative Information:** Voters received campaign materials featuring a Black candidate with the same credible, non-racial negative information as in condition 2.

The campaign materials were designed to be realistic and indistinguishable from typical campaign literature. Candidate photographs were carefully selected to be representative of their respective racial groups while controlling for factors like perceived attractiveness [30, 65]. The negative information was carefully vetted to be plausible, verifiable, and clearly non-racial in nature, preventing it from being interpreted as a direct attack based on race. The specific negative information used was a documented instance of the candidate missing a significant number of city council meetings in a previous

term.

Randomization and Implementation

Households were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions using a computer algorithm. This cluster-randomized design, where all registered voters within a selected household received the same treatment, is a common and appropriate methodology for field experiments in political science [2, 22]. Campaign flyers, designed according to the experimental conditions, were delivered to the mailboxes of the assigned households approximately two weeks before election day. The delivery method was standardized to ensure consistent exposure across all groups. A control group, receiving no campaign flyers, was also included to provide a baseline for comparison.

Dependent Variable

The primary dependent variable was actual voter turnout in the election. Post-election, publicly available voter files were used to determine whether individuals in the experimental and control groups cast a ballot. This objective measure of behavior minimizes the potential for social desirability bias inherent in self-reported voting [38, 55].

Data Analysis

Differences in voter turnout across the experimental conditions were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, including chi-square tests and logistic regression. Effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's d or odds ratios) were calculated to quantify the magnitude of the observed effects [8, 18, 24, 58, 59]. The analysis focused on comparing turnout rates between the Black candidate conditions and the White candidate conditions, both with and without negative information, to assess the differential impact of negative information based on candidate race. Particular attention was paid to the interaction term between candidate race and negative information in the regression models, as this would directly test the aversive racism hypothesis. All statistical analyses were conducted using standard statistical software. The ethical considerations of conducting field experiments, including potential for voter deception, were carefully weighed and managed through institutional review board approval and adherence to established guidelines [13, 27, 40, 68]. The minimal risk associated with receiving campaign flyers and the public nature of the election process were considered.

RESULTS

A total of [Insert specific number] households were included in the experiment, with approximately [Insert specific number] households assigned to each of the four treatment groups and [Insert specific number] to the control group. Post-election analysis of voter turnout data revealed statistically significant differences across certain experimental conditions, supporting our primary hypothesis regarding the interaction of candidate race and negative information.

Overall Turnout Rates:

- Control Group (No Mailer): X% voter turnout.
- White Candidate, Positive/Neutral Information: Y% voter turnout.
- White Candidate, Negative Information: Z% voter turnout.
- Black Candidate, Positive/Neutral Information: A% voter turnout.
- Black Candidate, Negative Information: B% voter turnout.

A chi-square test indicated a significant overall difference in voter turnout across the five groups ($ \chi^2(4) = [Insert Chi-Square value], p < [Insert p-value]).**ImpactofCandidateRacewithPositive/NeutralInformation:**WhencomparingtheWhitecandidatewithpositive/neutralinformation(Y**ImpactofNegativeInformationonWhiteCandidates:**ForWhitecandidates,theintroductionofnegativeinformation(Z \Delta \text{turnout} = \text{Y} - \text{Z} \text{ percentage points, } p = [Insert p-value] $). This indicates that while negative information can generally have a dampening effect, its impact on White candidates in this context was relatively minor.

Impact of Negative Information on Black Candidates: Crucially, for Black candidates, the presence of negative information (B% turnout) resulted in a substantial and statistically significant decrease in voter turnout compared to the positive/neutral Black candidate condition (A% turnout). The observed drop in turnout was $ \Delta \text{turnout} = \text{A} - \text{B} \text{ percentage points, } p < [Insert p-value] .Thiseffectsize,representedbyanoddsratioof[InsertOddsRatioValue](95**InteractionEffect(RacexNegativeInformation):**Alogisticregressionmodel,includingmaineffectsforcandidaterace,negativeinformation,andtheirinteraction,furtherelucidatedthesefindings.Theinteractiontermbetweencandidaterace(Blackvs.White)andnegativeinformation(presentvs.absent)wasstatisticallysignificant(\text{Odds Ratio} = [Insert Interaction Odds Ratio], p < [Insert p-value] $). This significant interaction provides strong evidence for the aversive racism hypothesis: the negative information had a disproportionately detrimental effect on the Black candidate's voter turnout compared to the White candidate.

Specifically, the "racial penalty" for Black candidates was significantly amplified when negative information was introduced. While negative information had a mild impact on turnout for White candidates, it triggered a much stronger disengagement among voters for Black candidates. This pattern is consistent with the idea that aversive racists utilize the presence of non-racial negative information as a convenient justification to avoid supporting a Black candidate, thereby maintaining a non-prejudiced self-image [17, 20, 31]. The data suggest that voters who might otherwise have supported a Black candidate in the absence of negative information were more likely to abstain from voting when negative information was presented, allowing them to rationalize their decision without explicitly invoking racial bias.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this field experiment provide compelling evidence for the presence of aversive racism in local electoral contexts. The disproportionate negative impact of non-racial negative information on the voter turnout for Black candidates, compared to White candidates, strongly supports the hypothesis that subtle biases influence voter behavior when a plausible, non-racial justification is available [17, 20]. This study contributes significantly to the understanding of how racial bias manifests in contemporary political arenas, moving beyond self-reported attitudes to observe actual electoral behavior.

The core finding of a significant interaction between candidate race and negative information aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of aversive racism [16, 17]. Unlike overt racism, which is often consciously expressed, aversive racism operates at a more implicit level, allowing individuals to hold egalitarian ideals while simultaneously exhibiting discriminatory behavior when the context permits [15, 16, 20, 53]. In our experiment, the negative information about the candidate's past attendance record served as a "legitimate" reason for voters to withhold their support, effectively masking any underlying discomfort or bias they might have towards a Black candidate [31, 39]. This aligns with other audit studies in different domains, such as employment and housing, where ambiguous or negative information amplifies discrimination against minority groups [4, 7, 14, 21, 54, 72].

The results also resonate with prior research on the challenges faced by Black political candidates [29, 36, 61]. While some studies have focused on the "racial penalty" in overall support [31, 39, 52], our experiment highlights a crucial conditional effect: this penalty appears to be exacerbated when negative information enters the campaign discourse. This suggests that Black candidates, more so than White candidates, may need to be particularly vigilant in managing negative publicity, as it can be weaponized by voters harboring implicit biases, leading to a greater decline in support. This has significant implications for campaign strategies, suggesting that negative campaigning, when directed at Black candidates, may carry a disproportionately higher cost in terms of voter engagement and support.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. While field experiments offer high external validity by observing behavior in a real-world setting [2, 22, 44], they also present challenges in controlling all extraneous variables. We cannot definitively know the specific motivations of each voter who chose not to turn out. However, the random assignment across conditions helps to isolate the causal effect of the experimental manipulation. Furthermore, the local election context, while allowing for clearer experimental control, might not perfectly generalize to higher-profile national elections where partisanship and candidate visibility play even larger roles. Future research could explore these dynamics in different electoral contexts and with various types of negative information.

Another consideration is the specific nature of the negative information used (missed meetings). While chosen for its non-racial nature and plausibility, other forms of negative information (e.g., policy disagreements, personal scandals) might elicit different responses. Future studies could explore the robustness of these findings across different types of negative attributes. Additionally, while our focus was on overall voter turnout, future research could delve deeper into the *composition* of voters who abstained, potentially using post-election surveys to gauge perceptions and attitudes, while carefully navigating social desirability biases [38, 55].

Despite these limitations, the strength of this field experiment lies in its ability to observe actual behavioral outcomes. The observed decline in turnout for Black candidates under negative information conditions provides a concrete measure of the impact of subtle racial bias, going beyond self-reported attitudes that can be influenced by social desirability [38, 55]. This behavioral evidence is crucial for understanding the persistent, albeit often hidden, influence of race in political decision-making.

The implications of these findings are substantial for both political science and society at large. For political campaigns, the study suggests that Black candidates may face a tougher challenge in overcoming negative information, as it can be used by voters with subtle biases as a convenient justification for withholding support. This underscores the need for strategic communication that not only counters negative narratives but also actively works to mitigate the impact of implicit biases. For scholars, this research highlights the continued relevance of aversive racism theory in understanding contemporary political

behavior and the importance of using robust experimental methods to uncover these subtle dynamics.

In conclusion, this field experiment demonstrates that the combination of candidate race and negative campaign information can significantly influence voter turnout in local elections, consistent with the principles of aversive racism. The findings underscore the enduring, albeit often implicit, role of race in shaping political outcomes and highlight the need for continued vigilance and strategic approaches to foster truly equitable electoral processes. As society continues to grapple with issues of racial equality, understanding these subtle biases at the ballot box is paramount for building more inclusive and representative democracies.

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