Effects of Anti-Black Political Messages on Self-Esteem

Monique L. Lyle*

Abstract

This study examines how anti-Black political rhetoric affects race-specific collective self-esteem (R-CSE) and internal political efficacy among African–Americans and Whites. Results from an experiment in which subjects received an anti-Black stereotype-accentuating message attributed to either a political figure or an "ordinary American," or no message at all, demonstrate that the political message undermined how African–Americans regard their own racial group, activated beliefs about how others regard African–Americans as a predictor of how African–Americans regard their own racial group, and undermined internal political efficacy. For Whites, the results demonstrate that the political message moderated the relationship between how they regard their own racial group and beliefs about how others regard their racial group, though the political message did not significantly increase or decrease racial group-regard or political efficacy overall. These results provide empirical confirmation of the role that government and politics can play in self-esteem.

Keywords: Self-esteem, race-specific collective self-esteem, internal political efficacy, anti-Black political rhetoric.

In their capacity to define groups and confer status, governments inevitably affect citizens' self-esteem (Lane 1982). Yet, as research on self-esteem has grown and evolved over the last several decades, the ways that government and politics facilitate, stifle, and otherwise affect how individuals regard themselves and the groups to which they belong received little empirical examination. This study examines how political rhetoric that devalues one racial group affects self- and group-regard among the group's members and non-members. In particular, this study examines the effect of anti-Black political rhetoric on two components of self-esteem—race-specific collective self-esteem (R-CSE) and internal political efficacy—among African–Americans and Whites.

SELF-ESTEEM AND POLITICS

Self-esteem is constructed situationally and, thus, can fluctuate in response to different events (Crocker and Quinn 2003; Leary 2012). In addition to the idiosyncratic factors that endow particular situations with particular meanings for an individual's sense of self, self-esteem is also a function of the collective representations that are brought to situations. The range of collective representations that may be important to self-esteem includes ideologies, stereotypes, and beliefs about prejudice and discrimination (Crocker and Quinn 2003)—phenomena that are well-established as political. However, whether people use particular collective representations to evaluate themselves or their groups depends on features of the situation that make those collective representations salient.

The ability to make particular considerations more or less salient is among political leaders' most politically expedient skills (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Nelson et al. 1997); and political leaders' use of this skill to invoke anti-Black affect is well-documented (Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al. 2002). Because the effect of political communication on self-esteem is most pronounced among members of low-status groups, particularly in situations in which their group memberships are salient (e.g., see Quinn and Crocker 1999), I predicted that political rhetoric accentuating anti-Black sentiments would undermine self-esteem among African–Americans, yet have no effect on self-esteem among Whites, given that Whites occupy a higher position in the racial hierarchy and are not the object of this rhetoric. The specific components of self-esteem that I expected to be affected by such rhetoric are collective self-esteem and internal political efficacy, as these elements of self-esteem are especially relevant to anti-Black political rhetoric.

Collective self-esteem is conceptually rooted in social identity theory, which posits that essential components of the self-concept derive from the social groups to which individuals belong; and, because individuals strive to have a positive self-concept, they also strive for a positive collective identity (Crocker et al. 1994; Luhtanen and Crocker 1992; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Collective identity and, hence, collective self-esteem, is positive to the extent that one's social groups are valued and regarded favorably in comparison with other relevant groups. Political information that derogates African–Americans suggests that Africans–Americans are not valued or favorably regarded relative to other racial groups and, thus, may be injurious to African–Americans' collective self-esteem. Further, sociometer theory suggests that cues from the social environment are critical to self-esteem, and cues that signal social disapproval or rejection are known to undermine self-esteem (Leary 2012). Though African–Americans are adept at separating how they regard their own racial group from their beliefs about how others regard African–Americans (Crocker et al. 1994), social identity theory and sociometer theory suggest that the effectiveness of this self-protection is weakened when directly confronted with information that marginalizes African–Americans, especially when that information proceeds from a

socially influential and authoritative source. Accordingly, I predicted that exposure to anti-Black political rhetoric would undermine how African–Americans privately regarded their racial group and activate beliefs about public regard for their racial group (i.e., beliefs about others' evaluations of African–Americans) as a predictor of private regard. Because such rhetoric does not directly speak to the value of Whites' collective identity relative to other groups, I predicted that anti-Black political rhetoric would be of little consequence to collective self-esteem among Whites.

Internal political efficacy is the self-assessment of one's personal capacity for politics and, as such, reflects an explicitly political component of self-esteem (Finkel 1987; Harris 1994; Shingles 1981). Consistent with the aforementioned social psychological research on self-esteem (e.g., Crocker and Quinn 2003; Leary 2012; Quinn and Crocker 1999), internal political efficacy is also responsive to salient situational factors, particularly among members of low-status groups (e.g., see Stout and Tate 2013). Hence, I predicted that exposure to political information that derogates African–Americans would be particularly consequential for this political component of self-esteem among African–Americans, but exert a negligible effect on Whites.

METHODS

To test my theoretical expectations, 50 African–American and 46 White participants from three southern universities were recruited for this study. They were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions and told that either "a prominent political figure" or "an ordinary American" was recently quoted as saying that "*African Americans should stop making excuses and rely much more on themselves to get ahead in society*,"[1] or they were assigned to a control condition and not told of any statement. The "ordinary American" condition was included to distinguish the effect of *political* rhetoric on self-esteem from the effect of mere exposure to an anti-Black message.

To measure racial group-regard, participants completed the R-CSE scale (Crocker et al. 1994). The private R-CSE subscale ($\alpha = 0.7035$) was used to measure participants' private regard for their racial group, or participants' *esteem* for their own racial group; and the public R-CSE subscale ($\alpha = 0.8063$) was used to measure participants' beliefs about public regard for their racial group, or participants' assessments of the esteem that others hold for their racial group. (See the Appendix online for the questions that compose the private and public R-CSE subscales.) To measure internal political efficacy, participants were asked to indicate on a four-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the

---

[1]This treatment is based on the experimental treatments used by Kuklinski and Hurley (1994) in their examination of how African–Americans and Whites responded to elite cues. It clearly accentuates negative racial stereotypes by implying that African–Americans are inclined to "make excuses" and less committed to the value of self-reliance.

Table 1
OLS Regression Results Predicting Private Race-Specific Collective Self-Esteem

Variable	African–American respondents		White respondents	
Political message	− 0.146*	− 0.459**	− 0.066	0.893**
	(0.093)	(0.191)	(0.096)	(0.394)
Ordinary American message	− 0.109	− 0.122	− 0.091	− 0.141
	(0.097)	(0.206)	(0.077)	(0.322)
Public R-CSE		− 0.019		0.954***
		(0.254)		(0.309)
Political message × public R-CSE		0.683**		− 1.238***
		(0.364)		(0.510)
Ordinary American message ×		0.027		0.104
Public R-CSE		(0.384)		(0.409)
Constant	0.870***	0.879***	0.739***	− 0.010
N	50	50	46	46
F Statistic	1.25	1.84*	0.72	5.54***
R-Squared	0.0504	0.1729	0.0324	0.4092

***$p < 0.01$ (one-tailed test) **$p < 0.05$ (one-tailed test) *$p < 0.10$ (one-tailed test).
Note: The dependent variable, private race-specific collective self-esteem, ranges in value from 0 (the lowest private race-specific collective self-esteem) to 1 (the highest private race-specific collective self-esteem). Standard error estimates are in parentheses.

statements "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics" and "I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people"; and responses to these two questions were added together to form a unified measure of internal political efficacy.[2]

RESULTS

Private R-CSE and internal political efficacy were each regressed onto the treatment conditions separately for African–Americans and Whites. In addition, private R-CSE was regressed onto public R-CSE,[3] the treatment conditions, and interactions between public R-CSE and the treatments for African–Americans and Whites. The results appear in Tables 1 and 2.

As expected, when the anti-Black message was attributed to an ordinary American, it did not have statistically significant main or interaction effects on either self-esteem measure for African–Americans or Whites. Consistent with my expectations, however, when the anti-Black message was attributed to a political

[2]Because this study was part of a larger omnibus study, space did not permit including additional measures of internal political efficacy. The two items used in this study to measure internal political efficacy, however, are among the most robust and consistently reliable and valid measures of internal political efficacy used in social scientific research (Morrell 2003; Niemi et al. 1991). The two items used to measure internal political efficacy were correlated at $r = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$.

[3]Neither message had a statistically significant effect on public R-CSE for African–Americans or Whites.

Table 2
OLS Regression Results Predicting Internal Political Efficacy

Variable	African–American respondents	White respondents
Political message	− 0.183**	0.062
	(0.085)	(0.101)
Ordinary American message	− 0.062	0.043
	(0.089)	(0.081)
Constant	0.611**	0.549***
N	50	46
F Statistic	2.60**	0.23
R-Squared	0.0997	0.0107

***p < 0.01 (one-tailed test) **p < 0.05 (one-tailed test) *p < 0.10 (one-tailed test).
Note: The dependent variable, internal political efficacy, ranges in value from 0 (the lowest internal political efficacy) to 1 (the highest internal political efficacy). Standard error estimates are in parentheses.

figure, it was significantly associated with lower private R-CSE among African–Americans, but did not significantly affect private R-CSE among Whites.

Also as predicted, the anti-Black political message activated a positive relationship between public R-CSE and private R-CSE among African–Americans, as indicated by the significant two-way interaction. As illustrated in the right panel of Figure 1a, this finding suggests that only African–Americans who believed others have high regard for their racial group had some immunity to the undermining effect of the political message on their private racial self-esteem. Among Whites, however, exposure to the anti-Black political message weakened and reversed the relationship between public R-CSE and private R-CSE. This unexpected finding, illustrated in the left panel Figure 1a, suggests that anti-Black political messages may boost private racial self-esteem among Whites who believe that others have low regard for their group, but undermine it among those who think others regard their group highly.

As predicted, the anti-Black political message also had a significant effect on internal political efficacy among African–Americans. As illustrated in the right panel of Figure 1b, African–Americans exposed to the anti-Black political message reported feeling significantly less competent to participate in politics than those in the control group. Among Whites, as expected, the political message had no significant effect on internal political efficacy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research provides empirical confirmation of the role that politics can play in determining how individuals feel about themselves and the groups to which they belong. It demonstrates that invoking anti-Black stereotypes in politics can undermine how African–Americans feel about their racial group and even their personal capacity for politics; and it demonstrates that, for both African–Americans
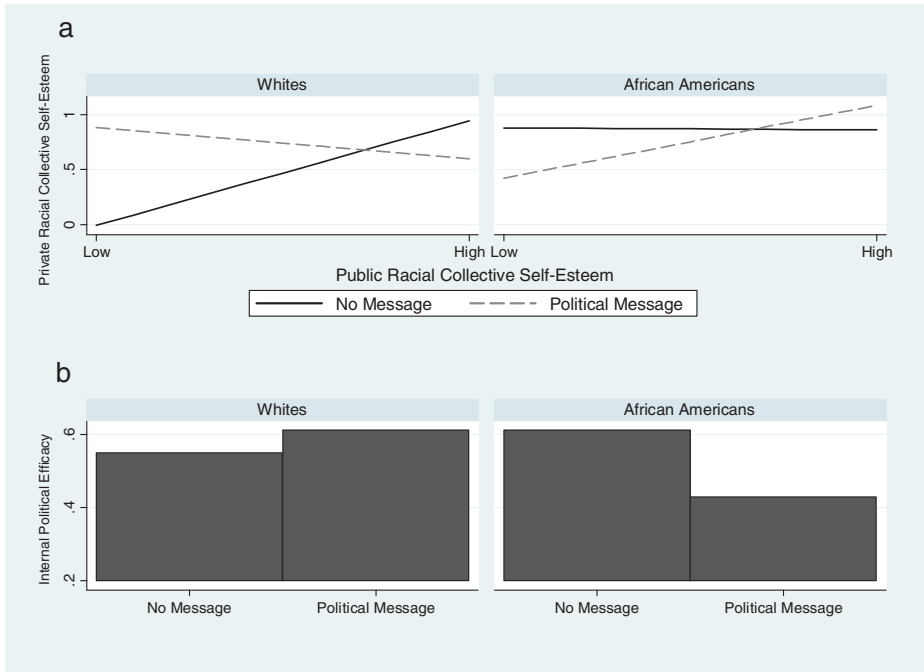
Figure 1

(a) Private R-CSE as a Function of Public R-CSE and (b) Internal Political Efficacy by Experimental Condition for African–Americans and Whites. (Color online)

and Whites, political rhetoric can alter the relationship between beliefs about public regard for one's racial group and how individuals privately regard their group.

This study, however, is not without its limitations. Chief among these limitations is the fact that the duration of the effects of anti-Black political rhetoric on self-esteem is not clear. As with many experimental studies in political science (Gaines et al. 2007), going forward it will be useful to clarify the extent to which the effects of anti-Black political rhetoric on self-esteem endure. Whether these effects last for only a fleeting moment or persist over a lifetime, however, understanding the extent to which government and politics are potentially injurious to citizens' self-concept and psychological well-being is nonetheless critically important.

A second limitation is the fact that no contextual information was provided about the source of the anti-Black message other than that it was from a "prominent political figure." In future studies examining how political discourse affects self-esteem, it will be useful to also examine the role of various attributes of the source of the political messages—e.g., race, gender, and party identification—as well as other features of the political environment. In the present study, however, the fact that participants were so responsive to a non-descript "prominent political figure,"

with no other attributions, speaks volumes about individuals' potential vulnerability to political influence.

A final limitation worth noting is the fact that this study was conducted in the American south, which is known to have a particularly contentious racial history (and present). It is possible that this particular racial context colored the results of this study and further limited their generalizability. As with most non-population-based social scientific experiments, however, my expectation was not that this study would be high in external validity. The fact that political discourse stands to undermine self-esteem among *any* segment of the population is meaningful and suggests that the extent of political influence over the lives of citizens is broader than most scholars previously considered and worthy of further examination. Nevertheless, given the limitations associated with the context in which this study was conducted, in future research it will be critically important to examine the effects of political rhetoric on self-esteem in a variety of contexts and, ideally, on nationally representative samples.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2014.27.

REFERENCES

Crocker, J., Luhtanen, R., Blaine, B., and Broadnax, S. 1994. "Collective Self-Esteem and Psychological well-being Among White, Black, and Asian College Students." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20(5): 503–13.

Crocker, J., and Quinn, D. M. 2003. "Social Stigma and the Self: Meanings, Situations, and Self-Esteem." In *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, eds. T. F. Heatherton, R. E. Kleck, M. R. Hebl, and J. G. Hull (pp.153–83). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Finkel, S. E. 1987. "The Effects of Participation on Political Efficacy and Political Support: Evidence from a West German Panel." *Journal of Politics* 49(2): 441–64.

Gaines, B. J., Kuklinski, J. H., and Quirk, P. J. 2007. "The Logic of the Survey Experiment Reexamined." *Political Analysis* 15(1): 1–20.

Harris, F. C. 1994. "Something within: Religion as a Mobilizer of African-American Political Activism." *Journal of Politics* 56(1): 42–68.

Hutchings, V. L., and Jardina, A. E. 2009. "Experiments on Racial Priming in Political Campaigns." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 397–402.

Iyengar, S., and Kinder, D. R. 2010. *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kuklinski, J. H., and Hurley, N. L. 1994. "On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking." *The Journal of Politics* 56(03): 729–51.

Lane, R. E. 1982. "Government and Self-Esteem." *Political Theory* 10(1): 5–31.

Leary, M. R. 2012. "Sociometer Theory." In *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, eds. P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, and E. T. Higgins (Vol. 2, pp. 141–59). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Luhtanen, R., and Crocker, J. 1992. "A Collective Self-Esteem Scale: Self-Evaluation of One's Social Identity." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 18(3): 302–18.

Mendelberg, T. 2001. *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Morrell, M. E. 2003. "Survey and Experimental Evidence for a Reliable and Valid Measure of Internal Political Efficacy." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 67(4): 589–602.

Nelson, T. E., Oxley, Z. M., and Clawson, R. A. 1997. "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects." *Political Behavior* 19(3): 221–46.

Niemi, R. G., Craig, S. C., and Mattei, F. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85(4): 1407–13.

Quinn, D. M., and Crocker, J. 1999. "When Ideology Hurts: Effects of Belief in the Protestant Ethic and Feeling Overweight on the Psychological Well-being of Women." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(2): 402.

Shingles, R. D. 1981. "Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link." *The American Political Science Review* 75(1): 76–91.

Stout, C., and Tate, K. 2013. "The 2008 Presidential Election, Political Efficacy, and Group Empowerment." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1(2): 143–63.

Tajfel, H., and Turner, J. C. 1986. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior." In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. W. G. Austin, and S. Worchel (2 ed., pp. 7–24). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Publishers.

Valentino, N. A., Hutchings, V. L., and White, I. K. 2002. "Cues that Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Attitudes during Campaigns." *American Political Science Review* 96(1): 75–90.