

# **OTHER, UPPITY OBAMA**

## ***A Content Analysis of Race Appeals in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election***<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Until 2008, only White candidates represented either of the two major parties as presidential nominees. Hence, little is known about how race appeals are framed by or against non-White presidential candidates. Barack Obama's election as the Democratic Party nominee allows us to investigate this issue. In this article, we conduct a content analysis of over 160 advertisements from the 2008 U.S. presidential election to examine how race appeals were framed (or countered) by each campaign. We find that the Republican campaign employed implicit racial appeals that played upon stereotypes of non-Whites as "un-American" and "other" and Blacks as "dangerous," "criminal," "incompetent," and "uppity." In contrast, the Democratic campaign de-emphasized race, portrayed "other" as positive, reinforced American identity, and spoke out against negative advertisements.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, John McCain, Presidential Elections, Race Appeals, Political Advertisements, Priming, Stereotypes, Subliminal Messages

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1860s, American political parties have aligned on the issue of race. Race markedly splits voters, as the majority of Blacks are Democrats (Tate 1994). Meanwhile, political campaigns have employed race appeals and used phrases such as "Negro supporters" or "welfare queens" to sway voters against candidates (Mendelberg 2001; Westen 2007). While there is extensive literature on framing race appeals against non-White political candidates at the state and local levels (Citrin et al., 1990; McDermott 1998; Mendelberg 2001; Terkildsen 1993; Zilber and Niven, 1995), there remains little understanding of how race is framed against non-White *presidential* candidates.

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The recent candidacy of Barack Obama, the first non-White presidential nominee from either of the two major (Republican and Democratic) parties, raises important questions about the appearance and effectiveness of race appeals in presidential campaigns. Namely, how do political campaigns frame race when there is a non-White presidential candidate? Or, on the contrary, did the 2008 U.S. election mark a new postracial era in which political campaigns did not make any appeals regarding race?

This article analyzes race appeals in Obama and McCain 2008 presidential election advertisements. We employ content analysis to examine over 160 campaign television and web advertisements from the general election period. We find that neither candidate made overt racial appeals. While McCain ads mirrored traditional race appeals used in political campaigns—attaching Obama to stereotypes of Blacks and non-Whites—Obama ads emphasized national solidarity and made efforts to distance Obama from Blackness.

Research on how race appeals are framed in presidential elections against non-White candidates will contribute to our understanding of how racial messages are used in presidential elections. It will also add to our knowledge about race and political media in this contemporary era of race relations.

## RACIAL PRIMING: IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT APPEALS

State and local political campaigns have strategically employed race appeals to sway White voters against non-White candidates (Citrin et al., 1990; McDermott 1998; Mendelberg 2001; Terkildsen 1993; Valentino et al., 2002; Westen 2007; Zilber and Niven, 1995). These racial messages activate or prime preexisting attitudes towards an out-group by introducing racially charged schemas that play on racial fears, resentments, and/or stereotypes. This activation of racialized information makes racial schemas more accessible in memory during the decision-making process (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al., 2002; Westen 2007).

The process of racial priming operates differently depending on whether or not the individual is conscious that racial predispositions are being primed. Thus, scholars have differentiated between racial appeals as *explicit* or *implicit*. Explicit appeals express negative sentiment towards an out-group by *directly* referencing race (Mendelberg 2001). Implicit appeals do not directly mention race or ethnicity. Instead, these messages employ more subtle racial references and appear to be race-free (Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Mendelberg 2001). Whereas individuals can consciously reject explicit appeals (Westen 2007), implicit appeals operate subconsciously. In the context of voting behavior, when racial schemas are unnoticed, individuals introduce other criteria they had previously disregarded into the decision-making process (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al., 2002). Moreover, since implicit appeals are not overtly suggestive of race, individuals using them can easily employ *plausible deniability*, arguing that the messages are either not racial or *unintentionally* racial (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al., 2002; Westen 2007). This strategy allows campaigns to subconsciously prime voters' negative attitudes towards African Americans while simultaneously denying knowledge of racial undertones and appearing to be race-free.

Implicit and explicit race appeals can be textual, visual, and/or subliminal. Textual appeals reference racially tinged issues like crime and poverty or racial stereotypes like the hypersexuality and untrustworthiness of Blacks. Visual messages entail techniques such as presenting images of African Americans with negative connotations, juxtaposing racial images (e.g., Black attackers and White victims), adding

shadows, and darkening or distorting images (Terkildsen 1993). Some race appeals take the form of subliminal messages (Weinberger and Westen, 2008; Westen 2007). Most notably, the Bush campaign denied using the subliminal word *rats* in a political advertisement during the 2000 presidential election; they claimed the word *bureaucrats* was unintentionally split into different frames (Westen 2007). However, in an experimental study testing the Bush campaign's allegedly inadvertent use of the subliminal word *rats*, Weinberger and Westen (2008) found that using the subliminal word *rats* generated more negative ratings of an unknown politician than did other control messages. Using subliminal images of known politicians also affected voter behavior.

## RACE APPEALS AND THE BLACK CANDIDATE

### Framing the Race Appeal

Prior race appeals applied negative group stereotypes of Blacks to political candidates (Citrin et al., 1990; McDermott 1998; Mendelberg 2001; Westen 2007). On the issue of crime, Blacks are portrayed in the media as perpetrators, while Whites are portrayed as victims (Mendelberg 2001). Furthermore, Blacks are characterized as poor, lazy, sexually intemperate, violent, shirking responsibility, dangerous, unintelligent, and untrustworthy (Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Ferguson 1998; Jamieson et al., 2000; Schuman et al., 1998; Sears et al., 2000). Regarding upward social and economic mobility, upper-class or elite Blacks are characterized as “uppity.” Synonymous with the term “presumptuous,” *uppity* is a racially tinged term that references historical relationships and power dynamics of subordination and domination between Blacks and Whites characterized by Jim Crow segregation and the ideology of White supremacy following the U.S. Civil War (Sears et al., 2000, p. 9). In the contemporary era, the term alludes to Whites' resentment towards Blacks who hold high-status positions of power and thus *do not know their place* in a society dominated by Whites. Drawing on these stereotypes, political campaigns aim to sway White voters away from candidates.

Moreover, Blacks are labeled as *other* and perceived as less American than Whites (Devos et al., 2008; Devos and Banaji, 2005; Ferguson 1998; Schuman et al., 1998). Devos et al. (2008) further explored this “White equals American” finding using an implicit associations test to examine the roles of ethnicity and national identity in individuals' perceptions. The authors found that respondents viewed Obama as less American than former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair when focusing on the candidate's race/ethnicity. However, when respondents focused on names, or personal identity, this result was significantly reduced. Thus, focusing heavily on a non-White candidate's race could increase voters' perceptions of the candidate as un-American.

The consequences of being perceived as un-American or other have worsened since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The proportion of negative portrayals of American Muslims in news magazines has increased since the September 11 attacks (Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2007). Meanwhile, due to the War on Terror, “browned bodies”—namely Muslim and African Americans—are increasingly associated with terrorism and perceived as threats to the United States, while their patriotism and *Americanness* is questioned (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodworth-Lugo, 2008, p. 112). These studies suggest that a candidate who is perceived as foreign or Muslim American could also face stereotypes regarding fear of terrorism.

Though less is known about presidential elections (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2008) compared to state and local political contests (Citrin et al., 1990; McDermott 1998; Mendelberg 2001; Terkildsen 1993; Westen 2007; Zilber and Niven, 1995) regarding how campaigns frame racial appeals against non-White candidates, these stereotypes of Blacks suggest various ways in which racial appeals could be framed in presidential election advertisements. Since race still remains a prominent political, social, and economic issue (Charles 2003; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995; Wilson et al., 2008; Zuberi 2001) and explicit racial appeals would not have been tolerated with the current social norm of racial equality (Mendelberg 2001), we argue that implicit appeals rather than explicit appeals or no race appeals dominated the 2008 presidential election advertisements.

Building on these previous studies, we examine whether the McCain campaign attached racially charged stereotypes regarding African Americans—such as being prone to “criminality” and “sexual deviance”—to Obama’s personal image. In particular, we examine implicitly racial ads that allude to Obama being “uppity,” elitist, or being in the wrong place in politics. Given that Obama’s middle name is Hussein (Westen 2007) and given the similarities between the names Obama and Osama (the first name of Saudi Arabian-born former leader of the Al-Qaeda terrorist group, Osama bin Laden), we investigate whether ads tied Obama to stereotypes linking Muslim Americans and terrorism to being un-American and other. We also examine whether ads played upon an ambiguous location between groups due to Obama’s multiracial background.

### Framing Counterracial Appeals

Using counterracial appeals and rendering an opponent’s implicit racial appeals explicit are effective methods to express images counter to those constructed by the opposing party (Jamieson et al., 2000; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino et al., 2002; Westen 2007). Mendelberg (2001) found that rendering implicit messages explicit—and thereby moving the racial intention from the subconscious to the conscious mind—changed voters’ behavior and that racial resentment had less impact on attitudes towards candidates when implicit appeals were made explicit.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Westen (2007) suggested that making racial content explicit brings out cognitive dissonance, or the disconnection between the stereotypes held and a person’s beliefs (Jackman 1994; Myrdal 1944; Wilson 1980). This awareness may evoke moral outrage for some and guilt for others, perhaps causing voters who feel cognitive dissonance to change their voting patterns (Westen 2007).

In response to racial attacks, Westen (2007) argues that it is vital for Democratic campaigns to “frame the we” and privilege American identity over membership within a particular racial group:

When dealing with issues of race, you have to *control the we*—to define who *we* are in a way that fosters identification with the person who has been wronged. The issue is not about being respectful to people who are *different*. It is about being respectful to *one of us*, a member of our community (p. 223).

Since voters more actively support candidates who embrace the American identity (Devos et al., 2008; Westen 2007), we examine to what extent the Obama campaign balanced Obama’s racial identification—emphasizing American identity and de-emphasizing race to prevent the appearance of being overly racial yet embracing his racial identity enough to satisfy African American voters. We also examine the Obama campaign’s efforts to

render implicit appeals explicit and offer counterstereotypical messages. Finally, we investigate ways in which the Obama campaign countered appeals by attacking the Republican candidate. As McCain would have been the oldest president to be elected into office, we examine attacks on McCain's aptitude of holding a presidential office based on his status as an elderly White man.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

The data consists of television and web advertisements from five online sources: 1) Barack Obama's official Website, 2) John McCain's official Website, 3) both candidates' YouTube channels, 4) Stanford University's Political Communication Lab, and 5) the *New York Times* Election 2008 Political Ads Collection. Television is the dominant medium for political advertising, while the Internet is an emerging communication mode, particularly effective in reaching young voters (Delli Carpini 1996). We do not include other advertising media, such as radio ads and mail brochures, in order to analyze the unique combination of video and audio communications that link words to sounds and images (Westen 2007).

Moreover, this analysis is limited to official campaign messages generated by the candidates themselves, not special interest groups. This study includes only ads that Obama or McCain *verbally approved*, in a statement similar to: *I am Barack Obama/John McCain and I approve this message*. Preceding the general election, both candidates expressed interest in running a straight-up campaign that would avoid petty attacks and focus on issues. Having approval from one or the other of the presidential candidates, the ads in this study offer a true reflection of the two candidates' campaigns and can be used to test whether each candidate upheld his promise to run a clean campaign.

In addition to the ad being an official candidate-approved campaign ad, we applied three other rules for inclusion. First, the ad's earliest release date had to fall between June 3, 2008 and November 3, 2008, the dates of the general election period.<sup>3</sup> Second, ads included in the analysis were national ads, or ads that were not used in a single state. Finally, we excluded all Spanish-language ads from the analysis, specifically because we were interested in ads targeted towards the entire population of American voters and not a specific subsection of the electorate.

Using these criteria, the sampling frame was narrowed down to sixty-nine McCain campaign ads and ninety-four Obama campaign ads. Next, we transcribed the ads. Several ads on the *New York Times* site included written transcripts; for these ads, we included the *Times*' transcripts after proofreading the texts for accuracy.

### Methods

#### **Advocacy/Attack/Comparison**

The next steps of the analysis involved categorizing ads. First, we categorized each ad as non-negative/advocacy, comparison, or attack (Jamieson et al., 2000). A non-negative/advocacy ad favors a party's candidate, focusing solely on that individual: "John McCain stood up to the president and sounded the alarm on global warming five years ago." A comparison ad weighs two credentials, characteristics, or policy stances: "Governor Palin's credentials as an agent of reform exceed Barack Obama's." Attack ads criticize the opposing candidate without referencing the sponsoring party's candidate: "Obama is not ready to lead."

Categorical distinctions between non-negative/advocacy, comparison, and attack ads are mutually exclusive, as each ad falls into only one of these categories. Some scholars do not draw distinctions between comparison and negative ads, stating that they are both negative appeals. However, unlike negative appeals, comparison ads allow candidates to advocate for themselves. Though these distinctions are necessary, differentiating between non-negative/advocacy, comparison, and attack ads provides only a partial picture of how ads are classified in political advertising.

### **Issue/Image**

Next, we classified each ad as: issue, image, or both (Benoit et al., 1997; Jamieson et al., 2000; Kaid and Johnston, 2001). Issue ads address political issues: “Barack Obama. He’ll put the middle class ahead of corporate interests to grow the economy.” In contrast, image ads focus on a candidate’s image, characteristics, or personality traits: “Barack Obama learned the same lessons being raised by a single mom and his grandparents. Responsibility, determination, respect, to stand up for the dignity of all our families.” Jamieson et al. (2000) noted the importance of distinguishing between issue and image ads, especially in analyzing attack ads. It would be unwise for a candidate to refrain from attacking his opponent’s stance on policy issues. However, attacking personal characteristics amounts to an entirely different criticism of an opponent’s character. Hence, the differentiation between issue and image ads is particularly vital to this study.

### **Appeals and Counter Appeals**

Next, we analyzed explicit, implicit, and counter appeals. In examining ads for explicit racial appeals, we looked for words or phrases that explicitly referred to race, such as African American, Black, White, race, ethnicity, majority, and minority. Examining ads for implicit or counter appeals, we grouped the ads into six categories: 1) racially charged social issues, 2) fear, 3) judgment/mistrust, 4) aptitude, 5) visual cues, and 6) responses to false/negative advertising. Appeals to racially charged social issues contained references such as crime, welfare, poverty, sexual deviance, and intemperance. Fear ads included those that referenced Whites’ fears regarding an African American holding office as president and instances in which the McCain campaign labeled Obama as “the other” or un-American. Here, we also include ads in which the Obama campaign responded to Republican appeals about fear and violence, such as by reinforcing Obama’s identity as an American. Ads in the judgment/mistrust category<sup>4</sup> referenced stereotypes that Blacks associate with the wrong crowd of people or lack judgment and therefore can not be trusted. Aptitude ads referenced Whites’ resentments towards Blacks as being out of their place, or not knowing their place historically under a White supremacist ideology. These ads also referenced Whites as being out of place due to age. Visual cues referencing race included racial juxtaposition, distortions of photographs, darkened images, and the use of shadows. Finally, we looked for ads that responded to negative/false advertising. As the above categories are not mutually exclusive, ads fell into more than one category.

### **Reliability**

In order to establish intercoder reliability and validate the coding schema, we performed Cohen’s kappa reliability test. A high percentage of agreement suggests external validity of the coding mechanism. Researchers generally consider a resulting



Cohen's kappa of greater than 0.80 to 0.90 to be an adequate intercoder reliability measure (Bakeman 2000; Neuendorf 2002). For this reliability test, two coders coded a sample consisting of 84% of the total population of ads. The resulting Cohen's kappa (0.956) established an adequate intercoder reliability level (Neuendorf 2002).

## RESULTS

The majority of both candidates' ads were attack ads, the bulk of which aired in September and October, 2008.<sup>5</sup> Attack ads composed 59% of McCain ads, compared to 51% of Obama ads. Obama ran 28% comparison and 21% attack ads compared to McCain's 20% in each of these categories (for all percentages, refer to Table 1).

Early on in the election, both candidates pledged to run campaigns focused on the issues. Results show that the majority of Obama ads (57%) were issue ads, 15% were image ads, and 28% combined issue and image. Most McCain ads (41%) tackled both issue and image, with only 30% solely issue, and 29% solely image ads.

Obama ran no image attacks and McCain ran relatively few image attacks before August (Fig. 1). For Obama, the focus on issues increased from month to month throughout the campaign. In contrast, the McCain campaign's focus on ads combining issue and image increased steadily throughout the campaign. McCain's image ads similarly increased over the course of the campaign.

Candidates made no explicit racial appeals. Instead, as Mendelberg (2001) suggested, political campaigns primed racial resentments of voters implicitly, without directly mentioning race. In the next few sections, we describe how both campaigns constructed ads pertaining to racially charged social issues, judgment and mistrust, aptitude, and fear. We also describe how the Obama campaign de-emphasized race, redefined "other" as positive, and countered negative advertising.

**Table 1.** Ads in Each Category by Candidate

Category	McCain	Obama
Total # of Ads	100.0% (69)*	100.0% (95)
Advocacy	20.3% (14)	21.1% (20)
Comparison	20.3% (14)	28.4% (27)
Attack	59.4% (41)	50.5% (48)
Issue	30.4% (21)	56.8% (54)
Image	29.0% (20)	14.7% (14)
Both (Issue and Image)	40.6% (28)	28.4% (27)
Racially Charged Social Issues	21.7% (15)	6.3% (6)
Judgment/Mistrust	46.4% (32)	46.3% (44)
Fear	46.4% (32)	29.5% (28)
Out of Touch	30.4% (21)	13.7% (13)
Not Ready to Lead	36.2% (25)	N/A
Responding to Negative Ads	2.9% (2)	16.8% (16)
Other as Positive	N/A	8.4% (8)
Visual (Racial Juxtaposition, Shadows, Darkened Images)	54.4% (37)	N/A

\*Numbers in parentheses represent actual numbers of ads.

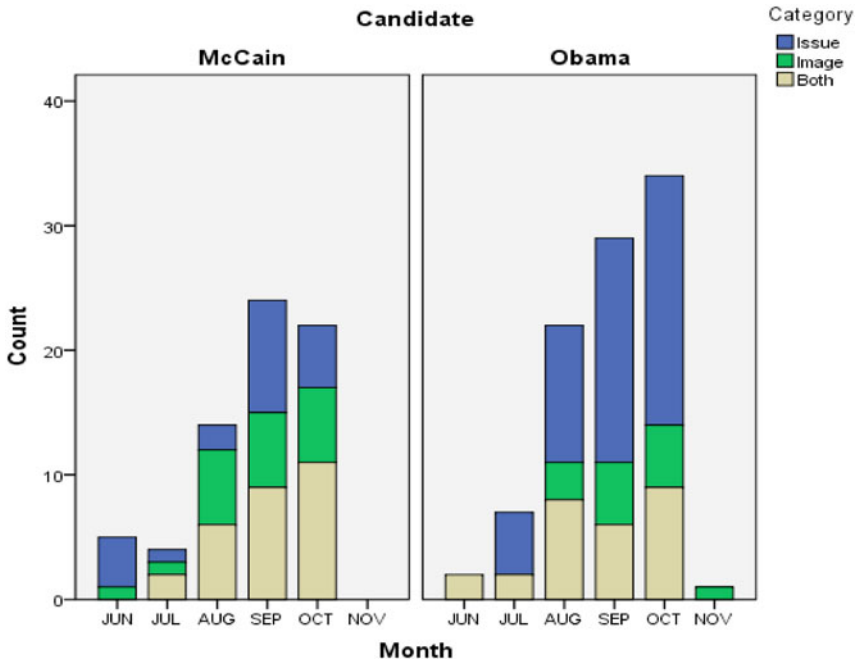


Fig. 1. Issue/Image by Candidate.

## RACIALLY CHARGED SOCIAL ISSUES AND ASSOCIATIONS

### Sexual Behavior and Welfare

Out of sixty-nine total McCain ads, fifteen (22%) contained references to racially charged social issues. Only 6% of Obama ads focused on racially charged social issues. The majority of these ads were released relatively close to election day, in September and October, and focused on sexual behavior, welfare, and crime.

The “education ad” linked Obama to stereotypes of African Americans as sexually intemperate predators, suggesting that Obama advocated teaching “comprehensive sex education to kindergarteners.” The accompanying visual showed a large image of Obama’s face juxtaposed with smaller images of young White children. While on the surface this ad may appear to address Obama’s education policies, the underlying message linked him to fears of African American men as sexual predators, suggesting that he was a sexual predator who could not be trusted with young children and consequently was unfit for leadership.

In addition to sexual intemperance, welfare is another racially charged social issue employed in political advertisements, as previous Republican campaigns linked welfare to helping African Americans. An example of this occurred in the “sweat equity ad” during which only White Americans identified with Joe the plumber<sup>6</sup> by stating “I’m Joe the plumber.” In contrast, the sole Black individual stated: “I’m supposed to work harder?” (A White male saying, “just to pay more taxes,” immediately followed this statement.) Evidently, the Black man was not making the same grievances as Whites. The statement “I’m supposed to work harder” triggers stereotypical images of Blacks exploiting welfare and government assistance programs, which McCain implicitly suggested are supported by White taxpayers (Joe the plumbers).



Furthermore, McCain expanded the traditional definition of welfare to include Obama's slogans and tax policies by linking catch phrases in the Obama campaign like "spread the wealth" and "redistribute wealth" to welfare and socialism. This quote from the "Joe the plumber ad" exemplifies this issue: "Leading papers call Obama's taxes: welfare. Government handouts. Obama raises taxes on seniors, hard-working families, to give welfare to those who pay none." Regarding welfare, McCain suggested that Obama's tax policies rob the rich (Whites) to pay the poor (Blacks). In contrast, Obama emphasized moving people from welfare to work and argued that McCain would cut welfare and Medicare benefits drastically, hurting millions of Americans. He also emphasized toughening penalties and sentences for sex abusers. These ads portrayed Obama as a candidate who fought against, rather than embodied, racially charged stereotypes.

### Crime, Judgment, and Mistrust

Nearly half of each candidate's ads employed appeals relating to judgment and mistrust. The McCain campaign tied Obama to *political criminals*, suggesting that Obama was *guilty by association*, meaning that although Obama may not be a criminal himself, he surrounds himself with criminals and consequently cannot be trusted. The "Ayers ad" stated Obama was friends with Bill Ayers and his wife, both of whom were pictured in police mug shots and portrayed as terrorist bombers wanted by the FBI. The "Chicago Machine ad" linked Obama to Emil Jones, Tony Rezko, Rod Blagojevich, and William Daley, political criminals depicted as alternating shadows in a police lineup. Since Jones was the only African American, the ad's creators may argue that the ad was less about race and more about Obama's associations with criminal behavior. However, Jones's presence also linked race with corruption, while the presence of White criminals increased plausible deniability of any racial intent.

Similarly, the "advice ad" suggested that Obama received advice from another Black man, Franklin Raines, a once successful businessman later convicted of fraud. Here, the campaign insinuated that Obama—a Black man like Raines who was once held in high moral and ethical esteem—might also be found guilty of fraud or corruption and turn out to be a criminal after all. What is more telling is that Raines was not the individual centrally responsible for the fraud, nor did he receive the longest sentence for the corruption charge, yet the McCain campaign chose him as the face for the advice ad. This suggests that Raines's race influenced his selection as a central figure in the ad. Moreover, the strategic release of the advice ad on the same date as a similar ad about Jim Johnson, a White man, makes plausible deniability factors higher for the McCain campaign, since it is more plausible to deny the intentionality of race with Raines if multiple races are presented as examples of criminal mischief.

The Obama campaign denounced ties to political criminals and linked McCain to controversial individuals. For instance, the Obama campaign refuted McCain's claims that Bill Ayers and Obama were connected: "Trying to link Barack Obama to radical Bill Ayers? McCain knows Obama denounced Ayers' crimes, committed when Obama was just eight years old." Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden also denounced alleged relationships with political criminals: Obama "condemned the acts of those people. They won't work in our campaign, and they won't work in our White House." Furthermore, Obama ads linked McCain to convicted felon Jack Abramoff and individuals who "stole from" the American people, such as Carly Fiorina, "the fired CEO who left with forty-two million." The Obama campaign also frequently tied McCain to then President George W. Bush, arguing that

McCain voted with Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney over 90% of the time and using slogans like “We can’t afford more of the same.” With voters’ support for Bush decreasing, tying McCain to Bush was likely an effective strategy for the Obama campaign.

## APTITUDE FOR THE PRESIDENCY

### Out of Touch, Out of Place

Less than 14% of Obama ads attacked McCain’s aptitude for presidency. Most of the Obama campaign’s image attacks targeted McCain’s age and personality, labeling him as “out of touch” and “erratic,” respectively. In the “this year” ad, the Obama campaign stated McCain was “erratic in the crisis, out of touch on the economy.” Similarly, the “erratic” ad suggested McCain’s behavior was “careening from stance to stance.” Thus, the Obama campaign depicted McCain as unsteady and unable to handle the financial crisis. Other ads questioning McCain’s aptitude subtly referenced his age. For instance, the “still” ad suggested McCain was *out of touch*, since he allegedly cannot use a computer or send an e-mail. Similarly, the Obama campaign referenced McCain’s twenty-six years in Washington, where he practices the same *old* politics, same *old* games, and the same *old* Washington dance to the same *old* tune as four years ago. It is likely that the Obama campaign’s references to age prime stereotypes of elderly individuals in voters’ minds, causing them to access predispositions about elderly individuals in their voting decisions.

In contrast, 30% of McCain campaign ads made textual references to Obama as being *uppity*, a term suggesting Blacks are out of their place of subordination. Most uppity ads portrayed Obama as an international celebrity who was out of touch with voters and out of his place as an African American running for president of the United States. Attacking Obama’s ego, one ad depicted Obama on the covers of numerous magazines, with the only legible magazine title being *Vanity Fair*. Another stated: “Maybe the applause has gone to his head.”

Arguably, the most effective ad attacking Obama as uppity was the “celeb” ad,<sup>7</sup> which showed clips of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton amidst paparazzi and crowds. Republicans suggested that linking Obama to Spears and Hilton was valid since they were international celebrities. As quoted in Stein (2008), McCain’s campaign manager Rick Davis remarked:

Will people think of this as negative advertising? Look, it is the most entertaining thing I have seen on TV in a while . . . It is not our campaign that is trying to make him into an international celebrity. It’s his campaign . . . I don’t know Paris Hilton and Britney Spears but they are international celebrities, so, you know, apples to apples (p. 1).

Although Obama, Spears, and Hilton were well known figures, the celebrity ad implicitly suggested that the comparison was more about intellect, personality, and sexuality rather than popularity. Both Spears and Hilton were known for being vacuous blondes—self-absorbed, “self-important, and intellectually hollow”—all characteristics that the ad ascribed to Obama’s character (Stein 2008, p. 1). Featuring young White women, the ad also referenced stereotypes of taboo sexuality between Black men and White women. At the same time, the McCain campaign likely used Spears and Hilton because plausible deniability factors are higher when comparing

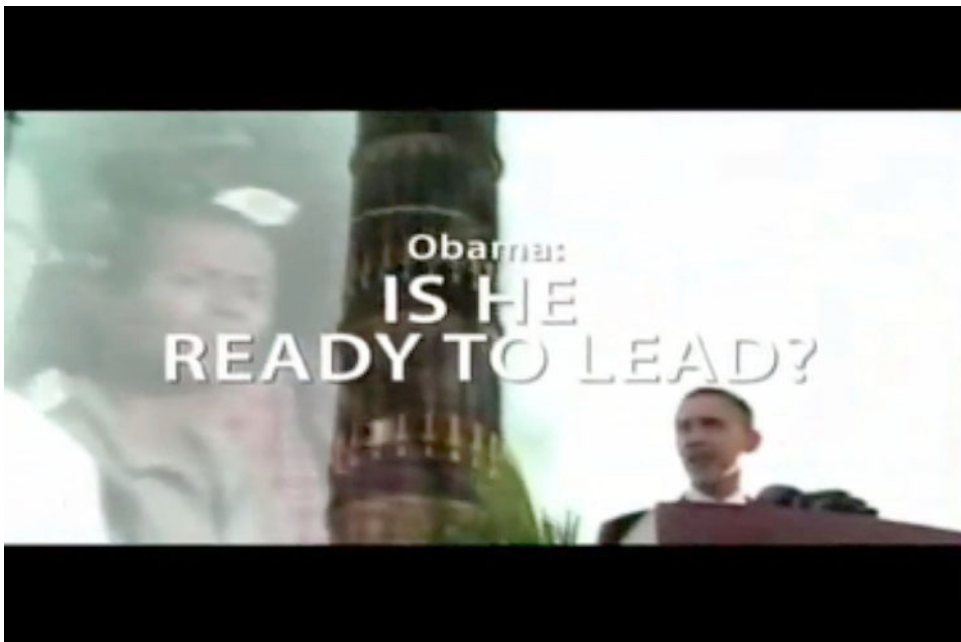
Obama to Whites instead of Blacks. In other words, had the campaign used two African American celebrities, the ad would have been less implicitly racial.

### Not Ready to Lead

Over 37% of McCain ads questioned Obama's ability to lead the country, labeling Obama as "not presidential" and "not ready." Denying the racial tinge to this argument, Republicans pointed out that the brevity of Obama's experience in government demonstrated his inability to lead Americans out of the economic crisis. However, a close analysis of McCain's advertisements, in particular the celeb ad, showed that the *not ready to lead* slogan tied Obama to stereotypes of African American inaptitude.

As discussed earlier, the celebrity ad gained popularity for connecting Obama to international celebrities Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. The ad also contained an implicit racial attack on aptitude that yielded less media attention and was likely a more effective message. As pictures of Spears, Hilton, and Obama appeared in succession, the narrator stated: "He's the biggest celebrity in the world. But is he ready to lead?" As that last sentence was being spoken, Obama's image shrank to cover just a small fraction of the bottom right corner of the screen while a larger image of a subliminal Black male filled the screen's left side (Fig. 2).

The word "he" in the phrase "is he ready" appeared to target the Black male figure. Instead of asking whether Obama was ready to lead, the McCain campaign questioned: *Is a Black man ready to lead?* Moreover, between the two images stood a darkened version of Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa, perhaps suggesting that a Black leader would serve as an unsteady figure amidst the current economic crisis.



"Celeb" Ad, John McCain, July 30, 2008. The subliminal image of a Black man's face appears as the narrator says: "Is he ready to lead?"<sup>8</sup>

Fig. 2. Not Ready to Lead.

## FEAR OF THE “OTHER” PRESIDENT

Using racial appeals relating to fear, the McCain campaign linked Obama to images of destruction, terrorism, and the notion of being un-American or “other.” Almost half of McCain ads (46%) referenced fear, compared to about 30% of Obama ads.

### Danger, Violence, and Destruction

The McCain campaign associated Obama with terrorism and destruction and characterized him as being threatening, violent, radical, dangerous, and risky. Describing Obama as “dangerously unprepared to be president” and “too risky for America,” these ads played on Whites’ preconceived attitudes of fear towards African Americans and questioned whether a Black man was capable of protecting America. For instance, the “three AM” ad posed the question: “Who do you want answering the phone?” In other words, whom do you trust to protect American children and citizens when a national crisis emerges? This ad linked Obama to uncertainty and dangerous aggression, evoking White fear of a Black man protecting White women and children. Similarly, the “dome ad” played on these racial fears by showing a dark shadow—ominous, and perhaps symbolic of death—passing over a sleeping White baby. In contrast, the “foundation ad” showed McCain answering the red phone, implying that a White man could be trusted to protect White children and White America.

Other notions of fear emerged in visual depictions of Blacks as dark, violent, and destructive. Of all McCain ads, 54% employed visual appeals that were suggestive of race. These ads employed darkened and distorted images, shadows, and racial juxtaposition to appeal to voters’ racial predispositions of fear towards African Americans. For instance, the “Ayers” ad implicitly referenced race, juxtaposing a darkened image of Obama’s face with a White face. Obama’s complexion was visibly darkened, as his ear lobe is a different color than his face.

The “fact check” ad stated that Obama “air-dropped a mini army of thirty lawyers, investigators, and opposition researchers into Alaska to dig dirt on Governor Palin.” In the accompanying visual, a pack of wolves scoured a wooded forest, searching for prey. Next, the ad showed a wolf in profile—open-mouthed with sharp fangs and tongue hanging—immediately followed by a parallel profile image of Barack Obama, open-mouthed with his tongue showing (Figs. 3 and 4). Meanwhile, the narrator said: “As Obama drops in the polls, he’ll try to destroy her.” Similar to stereotypes of Blacks, this ad depicted Obama as dangerous and destructive, while also implying that that he was predatory, savage, and animalistic.

Moreover, advocacy ads that appear to have no racial references included racial appeals. For example, the “safe” and “love” ads showed the image of a Black woman holding a large rifle as the narrator said McCain was “shot down” in war. This image evoked racial stereotypes linking African Americans to violence. It also allowed for plausible deniability, as it featured a Black woman and not a Black man. Such ads heightened viewers’ visual perceptions of Blackness by subtly warning voters to regard Obama’s race.

### Other and Un-American

In addition to depictions of danger, violence, and destruction, McCain ads invoked fear by portraying Obama as other and characterizing him as uncertain, elusive, and unknown. These ads questioned: *Who is Barack Obama?* The “tax cutter” ad answered



**“Fact Check” Ad, John McCain, September 10, 2008.** The subliminal image of a wolf appears after the narrator says: “The journal reports Obama air-dropped a mini-army of thirty lawyers, investigators, and opposition researchers into Alaska to dig dirt on Governor Palin.”

**Fig. 3.** Wolf.



**“Fact Check” Ad, John McCain, September 10, 2008.** Following the wolf image, this image of Obama appears as the narrator says: “As Obama drops in the polls, he’ll try to destroy her.”

**Fig. 4.** Wolf Mimic.

this question subconsciously with Obama's darkened image: "He's a Black man" was the visual answer; although in the next frame, Obama responded, "I'm a tax cutter." Yet the pause between the question and the verbal answer allowed the viewer to focus on Obama's darkened image, revealing an implicit message about a Black man in a position previously dominated by White men. Similarly, the "dangerous ad" answered the aforementioned question by displaying various contradictory faces of Obama, suggesting that his identity was unknown, constantly changing, or unstable.

Another depiction of Obama as other occurred in the "special" ad. While the narrator said, "Behind the fancy speeches, grand promises, MTV specials, lies the truth," a black shadow concealed half of Obama's face and the words *the truth* appeared in broken-up frames above his image. Two interpretations of this sequence are worthy of discussion. First, the McCain campaign attempted to characterize Obama as the other, un-American candidate by employing the subliminal word *other*. A second interpretation highlighted the subliminal words *the rut*, which might also trigger voters' negative predispositions towards Blacks. Evidently, the McCain campaign would argue that the intended message was *the truth*. However, the presence of broken-up frames in ads that cost millions of dollars is rarely unintentional (Westen 2007).

McCain ads focusing on foreign policy and international relations played on the notion that Blacks are less American than Whites by portraying Obama as un-American and having a false notion of patriotism. Several ads suggested that Obama does not support American troops. For example, the "troops" ad suggested that Obama would rather visit the gym to play basketball than attend to wounded troops. Instead of supporting troops, Obama and Biden called paying higher taxes patriotic and misunderstood what it really meant to be American. The McCain campaign also identified Obama as anti-American, linking him to terrorists and terrorist allies. For example, the "tiny" ad suggested that Obama was lax on terrorism and thus dangerous for Americans. Moreover, this ad also implicitly linked Obama to the Middle East and played on fears of having an Arab leader.

## COUNTERING IMPLICIT RACIAL APPEALS

While both campaigns accused the other as being the most negative, the Obama campaign devoted significantly more attention to calling out negativity in advertisements. About 17% of Obama ads compared to 3% of McCain ads accused the other campaign of airing false or negative ads. In fact, the Obama campaign constructed a few ads solely for the purpose of addressing McCain's negativity. The "subject" ad exemplified this tactic:

John McCain wants to tear Barack Obama down with smears that have been proven false. Why? McCain's own campaign admits that if the election is about the economy, he's going to lose. But as Americans lose their jobs, homes, and savings, it's time for a president who will change the economy, not change the subject.

Obama's general reaction to negative McCain ads was to bring the discussion back to the issues. Taking the moral high ground, Obama attacked McCain for circulating false information and urged him to focus on the issues that were of greater importance, namely, the economic crisis. In contrast to McCain's "low-road" approach, Obama packaged himself as a candidate who cared more about policy issues and less about personal attacks.



The act of rendering implicitly negative McCain ads explicit was important because it allowed voters to consciously recognize that the McCain campaign was introducing other criteria into the decision-making process that voters may not have otherwise considered. For instance, the Obama campaign rendered implicit racial appeals of fear explicit in the “what I believe” ad by stating that: “John McCain wants to scare you.” Rendering implicit negative ads explicit likely increased awareness of the priming of voter predispositions (though voters may still consciously have had feelings associated with fear of Blacks). During the general election period, the Obama campaign spent millions of dollars on ads that recognized McCain ads as negative in order to disprove his attacks and to take voters’ subconscious attitudes regarding fears of African Americans and render them conscious.

Other strategies the Obama campaign employed to counter McCain’s appeals include: 1) emphasizing American identity, 2) questioning McCain’s Americanness, 3) linking McCain to fear, 4) turning the notion of the “other” into a positive, and 5) de-emphasizing race. First, Obama ads framed and controlled the “we” to identify Obama as a member of the American community and not an outsider (Westen 2007). While McCain depicted Black as un- and anti-American, Obama focused on the fact that he would track down terrorists in order to eliminate their networks before they attack *us* Americans, and the “single most important national security threat that *we* face is nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists.” These ads stressed that Obama was not a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer; instead, *we* as Americans face the problem of terrorism. Obama also emphasized his American identity in this excerpt from the “grandfather ad”:

*Obama:* One of my earliest memories—going with my grandfather to see some of the astronauts being brought back after a splashdown, sitting on his shoulders and waving a little American flag. And my grandfather would say: boy, Americans, we can do anything when we put our minds to it.

*Narrator:* His grandfather fought in Patton’s Army. His grandfather worked on a bomber assembly line. But it was his mother who would see his promise.

*Obama:* My mother, she said to herself, you know, my son, he’s an American, and he needs to understand what that means.

Similar ads also used the phrases “we’re Americans” and “Barack loves his country” and featured pictures of Obama’s White mother and grandparents to reinforce his American identity.

Second, the Obama campaign attempted to undermine the assumption that White is inherently American (Devos and Banaji, 2005) by showing how McCain’s actions violated American ideals and were disconnected from American industries. For example, the “foreign vehicles” ad stressed that McCain did not support the American auto industry because he owned three foreign cars: a Lexus, a Volkswagen, and a Honda. Likewise, according to the “mills ad,” McCain stated that buy-American provisions were “disgraceful.” These ads reinforced Obama’s patriotism and questioned McCain’s American identity.

Third, the Obama campaign linked McCain to fear. For instance, the Obama campaign labeled McCain as dangerous for wanting to dump nuclear waste in Nevada and called his economic policies “disastrous.” The ads also described McCain as a “risk we just can’t afford to take.” In addition, Obama ads portrayed Obama as friendly and harmless. In Obama’s “the country I love” and “grandfather” ads, an

elderly lady fondly embraced him and whispered in his ear. These ads reversed the stereotype of Blacks as dangerous and marked McCain as the candidate to fear.

Fourth, Obama used difference to his advantage by turning the notion of “other” into a positive. A substantial number (8%) of Obama ads showed the notion of the “other” as positive. These ads suggested that Obama will take America in a *new direction* away from the *same old politics* of past presidents. Hence, the campaign employed this notion of the other and his difference as an advantage by turning a negative into a positive.

Finally, the Obama campaign de-emphasized race in order to distance Obama from racial stereotypes. There was no explicit mention of African Americans or Blacks in Obama campaign advertisements. Though the ads contained numerous visual images of African Americans, the majority of these ads featured African Americans *in the background*. Yet only the “no third term” ad featured African Americans *in the forefront*. This strategy of de-emphasizing race attempted to lessen Obama’s connection to racial stereotypes associated with African Americans and to appeal to all voters as the American president and not the Black president.

## CONCLUSION

Examining how race was framed in political advertisements during the 2008 presidential election, we found that neither candidate ran a campaign that explicitly identified race, suggesting that overt racial messages are not acceptable in a society with a professed egalitarian norm of racial equality. During the election, McCain’s campaign implicitly tied stereotypes of Blacks to Obama’s character and underlying policy issues regarding crime, sex education, foreign affairs, and the economy. The Obama campaign responded to implicit race appeals by making them explicit and labeling McCain ads as negative. The Obama campaign also balanced race by de-emphasizing race to satisfy White voters while including images of Blacks (primarily as background characters) to satisfy Black voters.

Though it is evident that racial appeals still matter at a strategic level, further research is needed to determine the precise effect of implicit racial messages on voter behavior in the 2008 election. Future research on whether approval or favorability trends correspond with ad patterns would contribute to understanding the extent to which race appeals affect voter decisions.

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## NOTES

1. The authors are grateful to Michael X. Delli Carpini and David C. Wilson for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.
2. Huber and Lapinski (2006) and Valentino et al. (2002) argued that rendering messages explicit did not necessarily change voters’ minds, and that Mendelberg’s (2001) theory was only valid for less-educated respondents.
3. Although June 3 was before the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, it was on this date that Obama won enough delegates to clinch the Democratic nomination. McCain had long since clinched the Republican Party nomination. Consequently, after June 3 both parties could officially focus their efforts (and advertisements) on the party nominees.
4. To make comparisons between candidates, for Obama ads, we coded references to McCain’s ties to former President George W. Bush.

5. McCain ran a greater percentage of attack ads than Obama during these two months.
6. During the campaign, Joe the plumber was the White small business owner who symbolically represented small businesses earning over \$250,000 per year.
7. In direct response to the “celeb” ad, the Obama campaign named McCain “Washington’s biggest celebrity” and showed clips of McCain on late-night talk shows.
8. Images in Figs. 2, 3, and 4 from campaign ads “Celeb” and “Fact Check” are available at (<http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/2008/>) (accessed October 23, 2012).

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