

*Race and Gender as Cues for Blacks and Whites:
A Survey-Based Experiment*

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This research compares the impact of party, race, and gender cues and their interactions in a population of white Americans and a population of black Americans. An experiment embedded in a survey measures the effects of these cues on inferences made about the policy positions of a fictitious legislator. The cues of party and race have greater impact among whites, but the cue of gender has greater impact among blacks. Other findings indicate that blacks view Republican white male officials as particularly conservative and that female officials moderate the respondents' tendency to attribute liberalism or conservatism on the basis of race and party cues.

Introduction

This study examines the impact of race and gender cues, and their interactions, when making inferences about the issue positions of public officials. In addition, it compares the impact of these race and gender cues on white citizens v. black citizens.

Race has been shown to be a particularly powerful cue influencing perceptions of candidates and officials. White candidates are perceived as more likely to possess traits such as intelligence, competence, strength, fairness, and experience (Colleau et al. 1990; Williams 1989). Black candidates are perceived as more liberal on domestic policies (Moskowitz and Stroh 1994; Sigelman et al. 1995). However, the existing research is mixed as to whether to expect the racial cue to have more impact on white v. black citizens.

On the one hand, volumes of research on racial stereotypes suggest that race is a powerful cue for whites (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Reeves 1997; Terkildsen 1993; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Peffley et al. 1997; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Dowden and Robinson 1993). On the other hand, race is a major voting cue in biracial elections for both blacks and whites, implying that both racial groups utilize the cue in a similar fashion (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Dawson 1994; Engstrom 1985). Also, in an experiment with northern adults, Judd et al. (1995, 476) found blacks to have stronger stereotypes even though both groups tended to homogenize the other group. Furthermore, the importance of racial group identification for black Americans (Dawson 1994) suggests that the cue of race might be more influential among blacks.

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Gender as a Cue

Like blacks, female political figures are the objects of stereotypic expectations. Women are seen as lacking in the “masculine” traits of aggression, ambition, and rationality, while, at the same time, they are seen as more warm, compassionate, and empathetic than men (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Bernstein 1986; Schneider 1994). Regarding issues, research indicates that women are perceived as less competent to handle issues such as the military, business, labor, and crime, but they are more competent to handle education, health, child care, and poverty (Schneider 1994; Sapiro 1981-82; Iyengar et al. 1997). The implication of these findings is that women political figures will be perceived as more liberal than men, *ceteris paribus*.

In contrast to the cue of race, where it is an open question whether blacks or whites are more affected, *it is hypothesized that the cue of gender will have more impact among blacks than among whites, but only when viewing white public officials*. The basis for this expectation lies in the greater conservatism and racism of white males in America compared to white females (Miller 1991; Gilens 1988; Hunt 1996; Roper Center 1996; Kuklinski et al. 1997). Southern white males in particular have shifted significantly to the Republican Party (Miller 1991), and they have demonstrated their sympathy with racially conservative viewpoints (Howell 1994; Kuklinski et al. 1997). This being the case, black respondents are expected to draw a larger distinction between white male officials and white female officials than white respondents because they have experienced higher levels of anti-black sentiment from white males than from white females.

Party as a Control

The well-established cue of partisanship is the baseline in this study for assessing the impact of race and gender cues. Party is *expected* to guide the issue inferences of both black and white respondents, and the methodology is designed to produce a strong effect of party (see Method section). By using party cues as an anchor, we can more accurately estimate the independent effects of gender and race cues because party inferences will be controlled.

It should be emphasized that the dependent variable is *perceived liberalism* of a public official, not acceptance or rejection of that official. However, this study was conducted in a highly racially polarized setting where whites and blacks have distinct positions on most of these issues (see Method section). Thus, it is not an unreasonable inferential leap to say that the less liberal black candidates are more acceptable to whites and the less conservative white candidates are more acceptable to blacks.

Method

The data are a general survey of Louisiana registered voters during the 1996 presidential campaign (white $n = 494$; black $n = 354$), including a black over-sample. Louisiana provides an appropriate setting because 28 percent of its registered voters are black and because of the extreme racial polarization of biracial contests there. For example, the black candidate received only 12 percent of the white vote in the 1995 gubernatorial race, and the winning black candidate received only nine percent of the white vote in the 1994 New Orleans mayoral contest (Engstrom and Kirkland 1995). Furthermore, the only black Congressman from the state is from a dominantly minority district.

At the time of the survey the only state contest of any importance was a U.S. Senate race between a moderate white female Democrat and a conservative white male Republican. Thus, there were no particularly unusual candidates to affect the inferences drawn about our hypothetical Congressman. Of course, any results from a single southern state must be qualified. It is possible that the impact of racial and gender cues would differ in a national sample.

Most of the poll questions were standard questions about respondent presidential and senate candidate preferences, demographics, and issue positions. As indication of the issue differences between whites and blacks in the sample, the gammas between respondent's race and economic issues ranged from .47 to .65; however, there were no racial differences on the abortion issue.

Embedded in the traditional survey was a survey-based experiment in which respondents were presented with different party, racial, and gender cues. The survey-based experiment, as opposed to an artificial experimental setting, can create greater comfort for respondents when they encounter the difficult experimental question (cf. Sigelman et al. 1995; Reeves 1997), and it can increase the generalizability of the findings (Kinder and Palfrey 1993). After a question about the respondent's own Congressman, the following question was asked:

“The next questions are about a Congressman from another state whom you may not have heard of—Congressman Miller. He is a white man who is a Democrat and has been in Congress eight years. Even though people around here may not have heard of Congressman Miller, some people can guess where he stands on certain issues. We'd like to know where you think he stands on some of these issues. It's ok if you don't know who he is.”

“For each statement I read, please tell me if you think Congressman Miller, a white man and Democrat, would support that position. We'd like your educated guess.”

Following this introduction, five issue positions were read and the respondent answered whether Congressman Miller “probably would/definitely would/probably would not/definitely would not” support that position (see Appendix). The experimental treatment (cue) was manipulated by making Congressman Miller either a Republican or a Democrat, a woman or a man, and a black or a white, resulting in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with eight types of Congressmen or Congresswomen. The eight types were randomly assigned to respondents by a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system, so that the interviewers did not know in advance which type of Miller would appear on the screen. Randomization of the cues ensures orthogonality among the cues so that, for example, being black is not empirically associated with being a Democrat. A test of orthogonality showed that the three cues, party, race, and gender were indeed unrelated, with correlations of -.03, .02 and .01, all insignificant at the .05 alpha level. The experiment also can create combinations of characteristics that might be rare in a real group of Congressmen or women, such as a black Republican Congresswoman.

The five issue positions were selected through a pretest of 23 issue statements to identify the most partisan statements (see Appendix). Explicitly racial issues were excluded so as not to drive the results by the racial content of issues, a factor found to affect whites’ responses in other survey-based experiments (Reeves 1997). The final five issue statements were the most clearly identifiable among the 23 statements as Republican or Democratic positions. These five statements covered health care, abortion, spending cuts, job guarantee, and aid to immigrants. Notice that 4 of 5 statements are worded in a liberal direction. This is purely a function of the pretest; apparently liberally worded statements bring out partisan differences in this population more effectively than conservatively worded statements.

The pre-test purposely was designed to produce partisan differences between the fictitious Democratic and Republican Congressmen for three reasons. First, it is not our purpose to re-establish the power of party as a cue for attributing issue positions. Rather we are using partisan differences as an anchor against which to measure the impact of race and gender cues. Second, since this experiment does not provide the “real” issue position of Congressman Miller, it has no accuracy criterion in contrast to some more controlled experiments. An accuracy criterion means that subjects are told certain “facts” about the fictitious candidate in advance. These experiments are intended to measure biased memory (see Judd and Downing [1995] for problems in the absence of an accuracy criterion). We use party cues as a pseudo-accuracy criterion, and we fully expect strong partisan influences on the perceived issue positions.

Third, the partisan differences in issue positions serve as a validity check on the experiment. If respondents are interpreting the question

correctly, clear differences will emerge between the Democratic and Republican Millers, meaning we can have more confidence that the racial differences, gender differences, and interaction effects are genuine.

Respondents were quite willing to provide “educated guesses” about what issue positions Miller would support. Over the 40 individual items (8 Miller types x 5 issue positions), the average percent “don’t know” was 22.8, with a range of 16 to 28 (these respondents were excluded from the analysis). This amount of “don’t know” response is comparable to the “haven’t thought much” response to ideological identification (21% in the 1996 NES), but double the don’t know response to standard issue items (average of 12% in 1996 NES). Thus, even with the difficulty of the survey experiment, the majority of respondents felt somewhat comfortable applying the three cues without any further information about Miller.

A scale of perceived liberalism was constructed from all five issue statements. This scale ranged from -10, indicating Miller was perceived as very conservative, through 0, indicating neutrality, to +10, indicating Miller was perceived as very liberal. The reliability of this scale cannot be tested directly because the questions have different referents. However, using the respondents’ own issue positions, these issues produce a scale with a Cronbach’s alpha of .57, not high, but respectable. The alpha could be increased to .65 by eliminating the one social issue, abortion, but it was decided that liberalism across a range of issues was the desired dependent variable.

A first look at the partisan cue indicates that respondents were placing the Democratic Millers at a more liberal position on the scale than the Republican Millers (2.31 v. -0.60). It may seem somewhat surprising that the Republican Millers were not perceived as being more conservative, but other research has uncovered a similar liberal bias in perceptions. Judd and Downing (1995), in their study of stereotypes, found a tendency of respondents to see all target groups as relatively liberal. Specifically, Democrats were seen as more liberal and Republicans were seen as less conservative than they were in reality. Nonetheless, the partisan cue is producing clear differences in perceptions in the predicted direction.

Race and gender cues also produced significant effects independent of the partisan cue. Female Congressmen, regardless of race or party, are perceived as more liberal than male Congressmen (1.21 v. 0.38), a finding which echoes the current research on the gender gap in the electorate (Roper 1996). Finally, black Congressmen were placed at a more liberal point on the scale than white Congressmen (1.42 v. 0.23). None of these differences are particularly large given the range of twenty points, but all are statistically significant. In sum, at first glance we have meaningful cues that respondents are using to “fill in the blanks” about a Congressman’s issue positions. We

turn next to the relative strength of these cues and their interaction effects in both a white majority and black minority population.

Cues and Perceived Liberalism: Interactions with Respondent's Race

In Table 1, Model 1 estimates the effects of all three cues on perceptions of the liberalism of "Miller." Three controls are added for the respondent's party, ideology, and own issue positions in order to remove any projection effects, effects known as bias towards the self or "false consensus" repeatedly uncovered by researchers in the absence of other information (for a summary see Marks and Miller 1987). These controls also minimize the effects of measurement error that occurred when a few respondents did not fully understand that the question was about Congressman Miller, so they answered with their own opinion on the issue.

As expected, and confirming previous research, party is the most influential cue in estimating a Congressman's issue positions. Beyond party, the racial cue also has substantial impact; a black Congressman Miller is placed 1.25 points more toward the liberal end of the scale than a white Congressman Miller. Gender effects, while significant and in the hypothesized direction, are smaller than those of party or race.

Interaction effects with respondent's race are added in Model 2, and two emerge as significant. The interaction term between respondent's race and the black cue indicates that, controlling for other variables in the model, the black cue has a greater impact on white respondents. Whites have a greater tendency than black respondents to perceive black public officials as liberal and as distinct from white public officials, a finding which is consistent with the power of racial stereotypes among whites.

The second significant interaction effect is between the respondent's race and the Democratic cue, and the sign indicates that party has more impact among white respondents than black respondents. While this finding is not central to our research question, it may be a consequence of higher educational levels of whites in the sample, enabling them to better connect specific issue opinions to political parties.

Interactions between respondent's race and the female cue are not significant, but an examination of the issue scale means for all types of "Millers" in Table 2 suggests that, as suggested in the original hypothesis, these two way interactions may not capture the full effects of gender. Notice the unique placement of the Republican white male Miller by both blacks and whites (-2.44 and -2.92). While he defines the conservative extreme for both races, the difference between the Republican white *male* Miller and the Republican white *female* Miller is greater among blacks than whites (difference = 3.59 v. 1.12). The perception among blacks of female officials as

**Table 1. Model of Perceived Liberalism:
Interactions with Respondent's Race**

Y=Issue Scale ^a	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
			Whites	Blacks
Democratic Cue	2.99*** ^b	3.51***	4.16***	3.40***
Black Cue	1.19***	1.70***	1.85***	1.82**
Female Cue	.93**	.70*	1.52**	2.66***
R's Race ^d *Black Cue	— ^c	-1.67**	—	—
R's Race*Dem Cue	—	-1.75**	—	—
R's Race*Female Cue	—	.48	—	—
Female Cue*Dem Cue	—	—	-1.33*	-1.69*
Female Cue*Black Cue	—	—	-.36	-2.19**
R's Gender	-.11	-.108	-.06	-.43
R's Race	.41	1.80**	—	—
Interviewer's Race	-.78*	-.80*	-.55	-.56
R's Issue Position	.07*	.07	.05	.04
R's Party ID	.22*	.22*	.16	.37
R's Ideology	-.12	-.12	-.12	.17
R's Education	-.32*	-.28*	.16	-.41*
Adj R ²	.190	.207	.249	.144
N	663	663	466	399
Sig. of F	.000	.000	.000	.000

^aScale range -10 (conservative) to +10 (liberal).
^bCell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.
^cVariable not included.
^dR's race is coded with black as the high value.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

friendlier to liberal causes is particularly apparent in the case of white Republican female officials. Amazingly, *white Republican females are not perceived as conservative by black respondents*; the white Republican female was placed at 1.15 indicating a slight liberal leaning. In contrast, white respondents placed the same white Republican female at a conservative -1.80. This implies that, net of other factors, black voters would be more receptive to a Republican female candidate than would most white liberals! Of course, much depends on the election situation, but there may be untapped potential for Republican female candidates to receive black support.

Two additional interactions, those between the female cue and the Democratic cue and those between the female cue and the black cue are added in Model 3 (Table 1). For ease of interpretation, white and black models are estimated separately. Both of the additional interactions are

Table 2. Perceptions of the Liberalism of a Hypothetical Congressman

Issue Scale Means for Eight Types of Congressman ^a				
WHITES	Democratic Miller		Republican Miller	
	Male Cue	Female Cue	Male Cue	Female Cue
White	2.03 (61) ^b	2.68 (57)	-2.92 (73)	-1.80 (61)
Black	2.98 (61)	2.28 (61)	-0.33 (60)	1.07 (60)
BLACKS	Democratic Miller		Republican Miller	
	Male Cue	Female Cue	Male Cue	Female Cue
White Cue	2.17 (42)	1.94 (34)	-2.44 (39)	1.15 (65)
Black Cue	2.35 (40)	2.51 (39)	0.73 (41)	0.15 (54)

^aScale range -10 (conservative) to +10 (liberal). ^bNs in parentheses.

larger in the black model than in the white model, and the signs indicate substantively that the Democratic and black cues are more powerful in the case of a male Congressman, confirming the unusual placement of the white male Republican “Miller.” An estimation of the significance of the differences between the coefficients in the white model and the black model can be provided by adding three-way interactions between respondent’s race and the two additional gender cue interactions. These results (not shown) indicate that the racial difference between the female cue/Democratic cue interaction fails to reach significance ($p = .16$), but the racial difference between the female cue/black cue interaction is significant at $p = .002$. Again, all of this evidence points to the unique perception held by black respondents of the issue positions of a white male Republican official.

The racial differences in reaction to the gender cue also suggest a moderating effect for the female cue (Table 2). *Both blacks and whites, when faced with a public official of the opposite race, reinforced by partisanship, view the female official as less partisan or extreme than the male official.* Blacks view the white Republican female as less conservative than the male (1.15 compared to -2.44), and whites view the black Democratic female as less liberal than the male (2.28 compared to 2.98). Thus, the female cue suggests some degree of moderation for both black and white respondents, a

phenomenon which could be an advantage in electoral situations where the ideological center of the electorate is pivotal, not an uncommon occurrence.

Conclusions

Above and beyond the well-established effects of party as a cue to infer issue positions, race and gender also affect these inferences. That is, in the absence of other information, Republicans and Democrats are placed differently on issues depending on whether they are male or female, black or white. Furthermore, the impact of these cues is conditioned by the race of the respondent; race cues have more power to predict perceptions of liberalism among whites than among blacks. This greater impact of the race cue among whites is consistent with whites' use of stereotypes to characterize minorities.

The gender cue was found to have more impact among black respondents than among white respondents, and much of this difference can be attributed to perceptions by blacks of the conservatism of Republican white males as opposed to Republican white females. This conservative perception was apparent on policy issues that were not explicitly racial, so the perception of conservative white males is over a broader range of policies other than those directly threatening to blacks, consistent with Koch (2000). White Republican males also suffer from the same "extremity bias" among blacks that black Democratic males endure among whites, a phenomenon reinforcing the difficulty Republican males have appealing to black voters despite well-meaning attempts. Both blacks and whites perceived females as less partisan than males when race was reinforced by partisanship, e.g., a white Republican official or a black Democratic official. Thus, gender may be a cue that can soften or moderate racial differences.

APPENDIX

The Survey

The survey of registered voters in Louisiana was conducted by a public university survey research center. An RDD sample of residential phone numbers was purchased from Survey Sampling, Inc., in Fairfield, CT. Interviewers were paid students under the supervision of trained, experienced graduate students. All telephoning was done from a central phone bank using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. Four attempts were made to reach each phone number before it was abandoned.

The response rate was 48 percent of contacted households, computed as the ratio of completed interviews to a sum of the completed interviews, the refusals, terminated interviews and callbacks. Adding unanswered telephone numbers and busy signals to the denominator reduced the response rate to 37 percent, however, there was no assurance that a registered voter lived in those households or that it was actually a residence. This

Appendix (continued)

lower than normal response rate is due to the large number of minority respondents sought. Lower status groups are more difficult to reach and less likely to comply with telephone surveys.

Interviewers screened for registered voters, and they used the “recent birthday” method to select a respondent among the registered voters in the household. The final cross-sectional sample was 29.3 percent black and 54.1 percent female, a close reflection of the population of registered voters in the state (28.8 and 54.4%).

The Partisan Issue Statements

The goal of the pre-test was to identify which of a list of twenty-three issue statements were perceived as most partisan, i.e., most clearly defined as Republican or Democratic. The original 23 statements were taken from ANES issue questions. Two paper and pencil questionnaires were administered to two hundred undergraduate students in introductory American Government classes at the public university. The first questionnaire asked respondents how typical each statement would be of the Republican Party, and a second questionnaire asked how typical each statement (shuffled) would be of the Democratic Party. The five chosen statements had the largest differences between their means on the two questionnaires, and they met the criterion of not being explicitly racial issues. This assured a strong effect of the partisan cue which could serve as a baseline for assessing the impact of race and gender.

The five issue statements are as follows:

1. “There should be a government health insurance program.”
2. “We should give the children of illegal immigrants services such as public education and Medicaid.”
3. “The government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and good standard of living.”
4. “Women have a right to have an abortion.”
5. “The government should provide fewer services in order to reduce spending.”

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