



Is Barack Obama American Enough to Be the Next President?

The Role of Ethnicity and National Identity in American Politics

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Introduction

Recent research has demonstrated a tenacious propensity to more readily ascribe the American identity to Whites than to ethnic minorities (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Ma, in press; Nosek et al., 2006). Interest in this American = White effect is timely given that a front runner in the 2008 presidential election is African American. The aim of the present research was to determine the role of ethnicity and national identity in the perception of political candidates, as well as identify correlates (behavioral, attitudinal, individual differences) of the American = White effect.

Study 1. Obama vs. Blair

In Study 1, we examined the extent to which Barack Obama was explicitly and implicitly viewed as being more or less American than Tony Blair (former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom). Our goal was to document the impact of construal processes on the ascription of the American identity. Capitalizing on prior research (for a review, Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007), we manipulated the frame through which the targets were construed.

Participants

Participants were 238 undergraduate students. In terms of political orientation, the sample was slightly polarized toward Democrats or liberals (rather than Republicans or conservatives). The sample reflected the ethnic diversity of the student population at San Diego State University. Data were collected in spring 2007.

Procedure

Explicit American Identity. Single-Item: Participants indicated which statement best describes their belief among the following options: "I (-4) strongly (-3) moderately (-2) somewhat (-1) slightly consider Barack Obama to be more American than Tony Blair," "(0) Both are equally American," "1 (1) slightly (2) somewhat (3) moderately (4) strongly consider Tony Blair to be more American than Barack Obama." **Independent Ratings:** Participants indicated to what extent they perceived the two targets as being American ("In your mind, how American is Barack Obama/Tony Blair?"). Responses were provided on 7 point scales ranging from (1) Not at all American to (7) Absolutely American.

Implicit American Identity Participants completed two Implicit Association Tests (IATs, Nosek et al., 2007) assessing the direction and the strength of the association between the targets and the concept American (relative to foreign). Six pictures were selected for each target and were used as stimuli (see sample stimuli below). Stimuli representing the concepts American and foreign were borrowed from previous research (Devos & Banaji 2005).

- Personal Identity IAT** For this task, the targets were categorized based on their personal identity. The labels used were "Barack Obama" and "Tony Blair."
- Ethnic Identity IAT** In this case, the targets were categorized based on their ethnicity. The labels used were "Black" and "White."

Except for the label manipulation, the 2 IATs were identical. In one block (60 trials), participants categorized, as quickly as possible, the pictures of Barack Obama and American symbols on one side and pictures of Tony Blair and foreign symbols on the other side. In another block (60 trials), the opposite pairing was presented. This time, pictures of Tony Blair were combined with American symbols and pictures of Barack Obama were grouped with foreign symbols.

- Willingness to Vote for Candidates.** Participants indicated to what extent they would be willing to vote for Barack Obama and Tony Blair if they were both candidates to a presidential election. Responses were provided on 7-point scales ranging from (1) Not at all willing to (7) Very willing.
- Explicit Prejudice.** Participants completed the Attitude Toward Blacks (ATB) scale (Brigham, 1993).

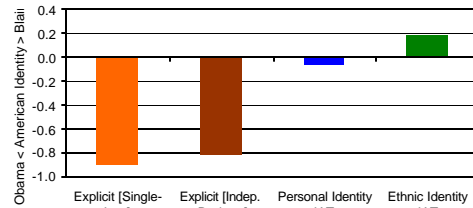
Sample Stimuli



Results

Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for the explicit and implicit measures are reported in the figure below.

- Explicit American Identity.** Participants considered Barack Obama to be more American than Tony Blair on both the **single-item measure**, $M = 0.89$, $t(237) = 13.79$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.90$, and on the **independent ratings**, $M = 2.13$, $t(237) = 12.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$.
- Implicit American Identity** Performances on the IAT varied as a function of the labels used to categorize the targets, $F(1, 234) = 15.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The concept American was more strongly linked to the White target than to the Black target when **ethnicity** was made salient, $M = 0.07$, $t(237) = 2.85$, $p < .006$, $d = 0.19$, but not when the targets were categorized based on their **personal identity**, $M = -.02$, $t(237) = 0.86$, $p > .35$, $d = -0.06$.



- Willingness to Vote for Candidates.** Participants would be more willing to vote for Barack Obama than for Tony Blair if they were both candidates to a presidential election, $M = 0.79$, $t(237) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.37$. The constructs assessed explained a significant portion of variance in behavioral inclinations, $R^2 = .23$, $F(4, 233) = 17.01$, $p < .001$ (see table below). More precisely, the *relative* implicit and explicit ascriptions of the American identity to the targets accounted for participants' *relative* willingness to vote for them, over and above the effects of political orientation and explicit prejudice.

Willingness to Vote (Blair-Obama)	r	β
Political Orientation	.27**	.15*
Explicit Prejudice (ATB)	.25**	.12*
Explicit American Identity (Blair-Obama)	.34**	.21**
Implicit American Identity (Blair-Obama)	.36**	.24**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Study 2. Obama vs. Clinton

Gender has never been studied in conjunction with ethnicity to determine if the American = White effect emerges when a White woman is compared to a Black man. The goal of Study 2 was to examine the role of gender and ethnicity on the construal of two candidates in the upcoming 2008 presidential election.

Participants

Participants were 159 undergraduate students. Here also, the sample was slightly polarized toward the Democrat and liberal end of the political spectrum. Data were collected in fall 2007.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Study 1 except that participants completed three (not two) IATs assessing the direction and the strength of the association between the targets and the concept American.

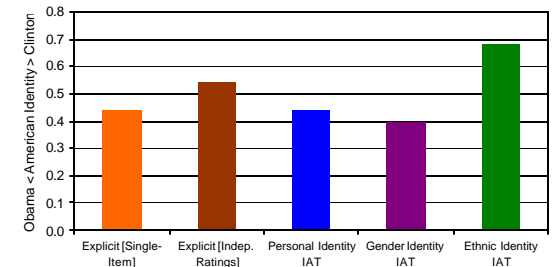
- Personal Identity IAT** The targets were categorized based on their personal identity. The labels used were "Barack Obama" and "Hillary Clinton."
- Gender Identity IAT** The targets were categorized based on their gender. The labels used were "Man" and "Woman."
- Ethnic Identity IAT** The targets were categorized based on their ethnicity. The labels used were "Black" and "White."

- Willingness to Support the Candidates.** In addition, participants completed a series of items assessing to what extent they would be willing to support the political candidates through various actions (e.g., join a group, donate money, make phone calls, rally, vote, etc.). Responses were provided on 7-point scales ranging from (1) Not at all willing to (7) Very willing.

Results

Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for the explicit and implicit measures are reported in the figure below.

- Explicit American Identity.** Participants considered Hillary Clinton to be more American than Barack Obama on both the **single-item measure**, $M = 1.62$, $t(158) = 13.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$, and on the **independent ratings**, $M = 0.63$, $t(158) = 6.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.54$.
- Implicit American Identity** Performances on the IAT varied as a function of the labels used to categorize the targets, $F(2, 316) = 5.93$, $p < .005$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The concept American was always more strongly associated with Hillary Clinton than with Barack Obama, but the effect was more pronounced when targets were categorized based on **ethnicity**, $M = 0.22$, $t(158) = 8.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$, than based on **gender**, $M = 0.12$, $t(158) = 5.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.40$, or **personal identity**, $M = 0.14$, $t(158) = 5.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$. The gender identity and personal identity tasks did not differ reliably.



- Willingness to Support the Candidates.** Overall, participants were more willing to support Barack Obama than Hillary Clinton, $M = 0.40$, $t(159) = 4.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.33$. The constructs assessed explained a significant portion of the variance on the *relative* willingness to support candidates measure, $R^2 = .23$, $F(4, 154) = 8.29$, $p < .001$ (see table below). The more participants denied the American identity to Barack Obama (both explicitly and implicitly), the less they were willing to support him. It is important to note that the implicit and explicit ascriptions of the American identity accounted for participants' willingness to support the candidates, over and above the effect of explicit prejudice.

Willingness to Support (Clinton-Obama)	r	β
Political Orientation	.02	-.06
Explicit Prejudice (ATB)	.24**	.17*
Explicit American Identity (Clinton-Obama)	.34**	.22**
Implicit American Identity (Clinton-Obama)	.30**	.21**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Conclusion

- These studies reveal the impact of construal processes on implicit responses evoked by political figures. A Black candidate is implicitly conceived of as being less American than a White candidate when perceivers focus on the targets' ethnicity (Studies 1 & 2). This effect is reduced or eradicated when the targets' personal identity (Studies 1 & 2) or gender (Study 2) are emphasized. At least under some circumstances, these effects may strongly deviate from assessments of responses that are more consciously controllable (Study 1).
- The more candidates are construed as embodying the American identity, the more they are likely to be actively supported. This is further evidence that implicit associations predict behavioral responses that presumably involve deliberative processes (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, in press).
- Ethnicity and national identity may play a larger role than often realized in how political candidates are perceived and, more broadly, in American politics. The present findings have intriguing implications for the role that the media and political campaigns may have on the outcome of presidential elections.

References

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