

A Black Man in the White House: Racial Rally Effects and the Obama Presidency

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Paper presented for the annual meeting of the 2013 Western Political Science Association, Hollywood, CA.

Americans woke up to a different nation yesterday. In place of old victories built upon the politics of bitterness and division, in place of the old scourge of racial enmity, a new maturity and responsibility had found its majority. Real change is now not so audacious a hope.

Although some disaffected souls were up to the challenge, any American worthy of the name could grasp -- regardless of political affiliation -- the significance of what had occurred in the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African-American president. (Editorial, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 6, 2008)

The 2008 election, in which American voters elected their first black president was viewed by many as a historic and momentous event that would change America forever, finally leaving behind a long legacy of racial discrimination and antagonism and, as the editorial board of the *Post-Gazette* put it, usher in “a new maturity and responsibility” on race relations. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman went so far as to hail the election as one in which we finally closed the book on the Civil War (Friedman 2008). In the immediate afterglow of the election the dream of a “post-racial” America that had been discussed so much before the election seemed as though it might be coming true.

At the same time, however, there were indications that Barack Obama’s election could have the opposite effect of those predicted above. As soon as Obama clinched the nomination in June, 2008, white power groups cited a dramatic rise in interest in their message of white supremacy, causing concern in many quarters (Saslow 2008). And in fact, according to the *Chicago Tribune* (and other newspapers) Obama’s election was closely followed by an unprecedented rise in hate crimes – such as public displays of nooses, vandalism and racist graffiti – across the country (Witt 2008). The FBI reported an 8% increase in hate-crime attacks on African-Americans from 2007 to 2008 (Bello 2009). While perhaps on a relatively small scale, fears of a white backlash against Obama’s election also seemed to be coming true.

Scores of studies in political science and political psychology have taken on the question of what effect, if any, Obama’s election has had on racial attitudes in America, and they too have reached conflicting conclusions. Among other studies, research shows that racial attitudes have remained pretty much the same as before Obama’s election (see, for example, Hutchings 2009), or that they have polarized by party, creating more potential racial animosity (Sears and Tesler 2010), or that negative stereotypes about blacks have actually decreased following the election (Welch and Sigelman 2011). These somewhat contradictory findings leave open the question of what really happened to Americans’ racial attitudes before and after Obama’s election.

We take a different approach in this paper, one that allows for the possibility not only that either of the two possibilities above occurred – decreased antagonism or increased antagonism – but also that both may have occurred. Most studies set out to find unidirectional effects, not allowing for the possibility that the effect of Barack Obama as candidate and President may be more complicated than a unidirectional shift (decreased or increased racial antagonism) or one isolated effect (such as partisan polarization).

Given the fact that Americans’ feelings about Obama and his presidency are inexorably tied to racial attitudes (which we demonstrate), we look at two different elements in traditional political science and how they speak to resulting attitudinal effects: first, the momentous nature of the Obama election and its potential effect as a major political event, or a “rally event”; and

second, the nature of presidential popularity cycles in general. We demonstrate that the racial attitude shifts seen over the course of the 2008 campaign through the 2012 election are consistent with these existing theories. After each election – more so in 2008 – Americans’ rallied around their president and reached brief moments of “post-racial politics.” At the same time, as all honeymoon periods, these rally periods were short-lived, and racial attitudes followed the path of presidential opinion, growing steadily more negative and more polarized over time.

In order to test such an idea, we need data that not only measure the relevant variables, but that also give us flexibility over time, measuring the variables at key time periods. One thing the conflicting findings cited above have in common is that each relies on the American National Election Studies (ANES) for its data (and for Sears and Tesler also the General Social Surveys). The ANES surveys provide a wealth of data on numerous topics in political science and are an invaluable resource to any politics researcher. They are also, however, limited in their ability to capture fast-moving events or opinion evolution. The size and breadth of any single ANES survey precludes in-depth focus on any single issue (with the exception of occasional selected topics surveys) as well as the ability to conduct repeated surveys in short time frames. Studies relying on major academic surveys are forced to operate within these confines.

In an attempt to sort out what has happened to racial attitudes over the course of Obama’s 2008 campaign and his first term in office, this paper uses data that are free from these restrictions, although they are admittedly accompanied by their own, different constraints. We analyze data collected by one of Obama’s campaign pollsters over the course of the 2008 election and through the election of 2012. These surveys were designed and conducted, in part, to analyze the evolution of white attitudes in response to Barack Obama. As a result they contain a stronger and more statistically reliable measure of racial attitudes, as well as questions that reflect the changing nature of American politics over this time frame.

At the same time, however, these data have their own limitations. First and foremost, these are not nationally representative surveys but rather surveys of whites in the presidential battleground states (although nationally representative samples demonstrate similar effects to the extent that the two can be compared). Second, they were constricted at some points by the needs and demands of a presidential campaign. That said, they provide a unique opportunity to analyze whites’ racial attitudes over the course of the Obama campaign and his first term in office in a way that existing public datasets cannot.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First we briefly discuss the relevant literature on rally events and presidential popularity cycles to establish our hypotheses for what effects Obama’s candidacy and election should have had on white Americans’ levels of racial antagonism. Second, we lay out our method, focusing primarily on the surveys we are using for our analysis and the measurement of our key dependent variable: racial antagonism, which is a twist on traditional racial resentment. Next we analyze the data, testing the hypotheses spurred by the rally and cycle theories. And finally we conclude with a few thoughts and caveats for what we have found and where future research might be productive.

RALLY ROUND RACIAL GOODWILL, FOR A WHILE ANYWAY

When thinking about the election of Barack Obama – America’s first African-American president – it is hard to think of it as anything other than monumental. Given our nation’s troubled history with slavery, civil rights, and race relations in general, it was in some ways unbelievable. As Paul Krugman wrote immediately following the election:

Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2008, is a date that will live in fame (the opposite of infamy) forever. If the election of our first African-American president didn't stir you, if it didn't leave you teary-eyed and proud of your country, there's something wrong with you. (A35, 2008)

Granted, Krugman is a liberal stalwart, but his point is no less true because of his ideology. It was a truly historic moment.

Political scientists have long studied important moments in American politics and the effects they have on public attitudes. These are referred to as “rally events” because they involve the American people rallying round the flag (or the president, or an ideal, etc...). Scholars typically study events that involve foreign, and especially military, affairs as rally events. John Muller’s original characterization of a rally event was one that met three criteria: 1. The event was international; 2. It directly involved the President; and 3. It was a specific, dramatic and focused event. (1970) Since the early days, the restrictions have been tightened some by adding a requirement that the event receive significant national news coverage (front pages of national papers). At the same time criteria #1 has been abandoned in order to include major domestic events, and even elections. For example, Reagan’s landslide reelection in 1984 has been classified as a rally event (Newman and Forechimes 2010).

Rally events affect Americans’ opinions by causing them to coalesce, usually positively, behind the president. As a result, presidential popularity increases following rally events, sometimes dramatically: President George W. Bush’s approval rating jumped by as much as 37 points (from 55% to 92%) in the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (ABC News polls; www.pollingreport.com). Presidential approval is not, however, the only element of public opinion that responds to major events. Americans not only unite behind the President as the symbol of the nation, they also can become more positive in other, related ways. For example, Parker (1995) finds that in response to the Persian Gulf War, Americans’ perceptions of both the economy and their own personal finances improved. Additionally, feelings that are “deeper than mere approval of the policies and personalities in the current administration...” like trust in government overall, can also receive a boost (Gaines 2002, 535; Parker 1995). Rallies affect a whole host of attitudes related to the specific event.

There are nevertheless important limits to rally effects. Effects on opinion from major events are not permanent, and are frequently not even long-lived. John Kennedy’s boost from the Cuban Missile Crisis lasted eight months, and George H.W. Bush’s approval bump from Operation Desert Storm lasted less than a year (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). The most dramatic event for which we have reliable public opinion data – the September 11th attacks – increased presidential popularity for Bush for two full years, hovering back around the 50% mark leading into his reelection in 2004.

In addition to their temporary nature, rally effects are not distributed evenly throughout the population – another limitation. Research demonstrates that the effects are strongest among those already predisposed to approving of the president, meaning his fellow partisans. Independents and out-partisans also exhibit opinion bumps, on average, but of substantially less magnitude (Edwards and Swensen 1997, Oneal and Bryan 1995).¹ Additionally, Baum (2002) finds that education levels, as a surrogate for political awareness, make a difference in the extent to which an individual rallies. Specifically, the most educated (politically aware) individuals are the least likely to rally.

¹ Although Baum (2002) finds the opposite effect, that out-partisans respond more than in-partisans.

While it may be unorthodox, we argue that the election of America's first black President was a rally event, at least for the purposes of racial attitudes in America. The event certainly fits the criteria for a rally event – it was well-publicized and occupied the front pages of all of the national newspapers for an extended period of time. It involved the president, or in this case, the president-elect. And it was a very dramatic and focused event. In other words it was important, obvious and easy for people to grasp, exactly the type of event that should affect public opinion in a significant way.

As a result, we expect public opinion to react to Obama's election the way Americans typically react to rally events: by rallying around the individual and attitudes related to the event. In this case, we are focused on the latter – racial attitudes. The election of Obama should cause whites' attitudes towards African-Americans to become significantly more positive immediately following the event. These relatively positive effects, however, should recede within the year or two following the 2008 election, as rally effects do.

We also believe that a similar effect should follow the 2012 election. To some extent, the 2012 election of Obama was even more about America and racial attitudes than was 2008 because of the lack of improvement in long-term racial attitudes during Obama's first term (as we will see in the analysis section below). As a *Washington Post* op-ed writer put it:

[I]t could be argued that Barack Obama's first term will be regarded as disastrous for U.S. race relations. This is precisely why a second term could be seen as one of the most important steps forward in this country's race relations since the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. (Goff 2012, B2)

Also, in line with rally event theory, we expect racial attitudes to change according to the disproportionate pattern found in international events – with in-partisans responding more strongly and positively than out-partisans, and the less politically aware rallying more than the aware.

The second political science model that we believe bears on racial attitudes during Obama's presidency is the presidential popularity cycle. Presidents usually come into office during a "honeymoon" period in which their popularity is at relatively high levels, the likes of which they are unlikely to see again (absent a major rally event). These high levels are destined to erode over time, in what Norpoth (1984) dubs the "inauguration-erosion cycle" (he also argues that an inauguration is akin to a rally event, hence the inaugural bounce). (253) As part of this cycle, partisan polarization in opinions of the president also increases over the course of a presidency as out-partisans are invariably disillusioned more, and faster, than in-partisans (Tatalovich and Gitelson 1990).

These research findings reinforce the expectations derived from the rally events model. We expect racial attitudes to be relatively positive in the immediate post-election period, but to then erode after the "honeymoon." Relatedly, the presidential popularity cycle research leads us to one further expectation: opinions on racial attitudes will polarize by party across the course of his presidency.

To recap, our hypotheses are as follows:

- *H1 – Obama's 2008 and 2012 elections were rally events for the white American electorate, causing views towards blacks to become significantly more positive following the elections, but then fade back to status quo.*

- *H1a – In-partisans (Democrats) should be more affected by the rally than independents or Republicans, or out-partisans.*
- *H1b – Less politically aware individuals should be more affected than the more aware.*
- *H2 – Racial attitudes should follow the presidential popularity cycle in which out-partisans (Republicans and independents) become more negative over time, relative to in-partisan Democrats.*

METHOD

To test these hypotheses we use survey data collected by brilliant corners Research and Strategies, a Washington DC based Democratic polling firm that worked for the Obama campaign in both 2008 and 2012. There are five surveys in total. The first was conducted in June of 2008 and the final in November 2012. The Appendix contains the field dates and other relevant data for the surveys. The surveys were conducted in what were, at the time (summer of 2008), defined by the campaign as presidential election battleground states, namely: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin. Each survey contains white voters in all of these states.²

The surveys all included questions designed to measure racial antagonism. Based on the idea of symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears), more recently called racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders), the questions asked respondents their feelings about the position of blacks in society, and government efforts to help them. The Appendix contains the nine questions used, and each one's modal category (aggregated from all five surveys).³

We chose to use more questions than the standard ANES four question racial resentment scale to capture more variance in a vital measure such as this, and to more accurately measure these attitudes for the campaign of the first black major-party nominee for the White House. The goal at the time was to measure whites' antipathy toward blacks, and thereby candidate-then-President Obama, as accurately as possible. The resulting scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .84, well above typical reliability floors for index variables as well as the ANES four-question racial resentment index (.73 for all years asked in the cumulative data file).

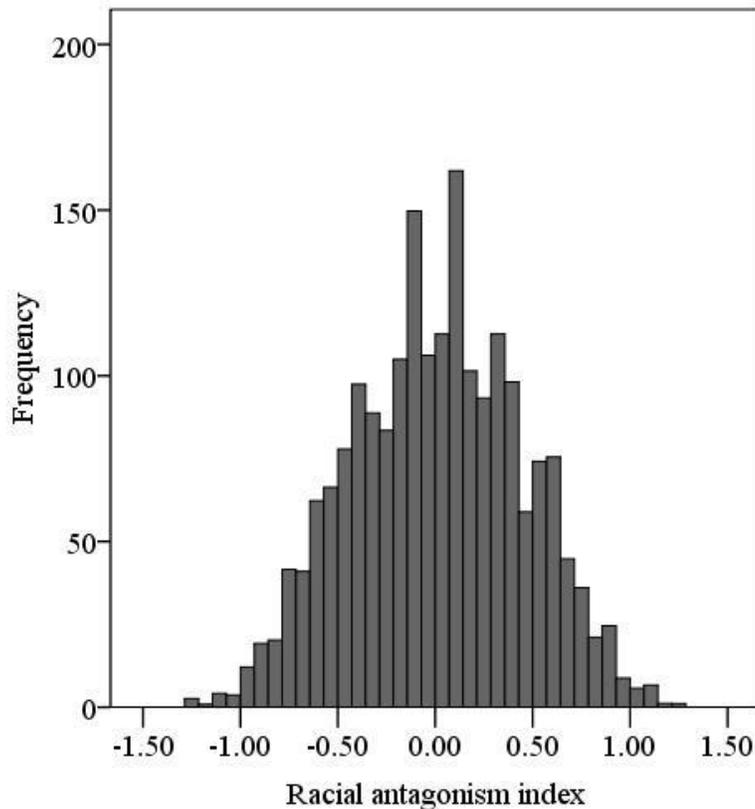
The measure also differs from typical racial attitudes scales because we have removed the effects of ideology from the measure. Despite its persistence – some might even say dominance – over the past thirty years, symbolic politics theory has its critics. Perhaps the strongest critique comes from Paul Sniderman and his colleagues (1991, for example) who argue that aspects of symbolic racism – namely its partial measurement through questions about individualistic values – are actually aspects of conservative principle, rather than any sort of racism or antagonism. As such, critics hold that the attitudes do not represent “racist” views at all, whether symbolic or otherwise. In other words, symbolic racism measures potentially conflate ideology and racism, and as a result, conservatives may be labeled racists by merely answering questions in a principled ideological manner.

² The November 2008 post-election survey was a national sample from which we have eliminated respondents from all but these 14 battleground states.

³ There is a possibility that answers to these questions could suffer from a basic agree-response bias, inflating the overall measure. Since the measure is a relative one, however, any such aggregate inflation should not affect the results or analysis. Additionally, as Table 2 shows, modal answers do demonstrate variance.

In an effort to address this criticism, as well as the possible counter claim that liberal racial attitudes are skewed positive due to principled policy stands, we regress our index on respondent ideology (as well as interviewer race, to control for any possible effects) and use the residuals from the equation as our final measure of racial antagonism. We then re-center the measure to a zero midpoint. The resulting scale ranges from -1.24 to +1.24 with higher values indicating higher levels of racial antagonism. Figure 1 presents the distribution of index values over all surveys among whites in the battleground states.

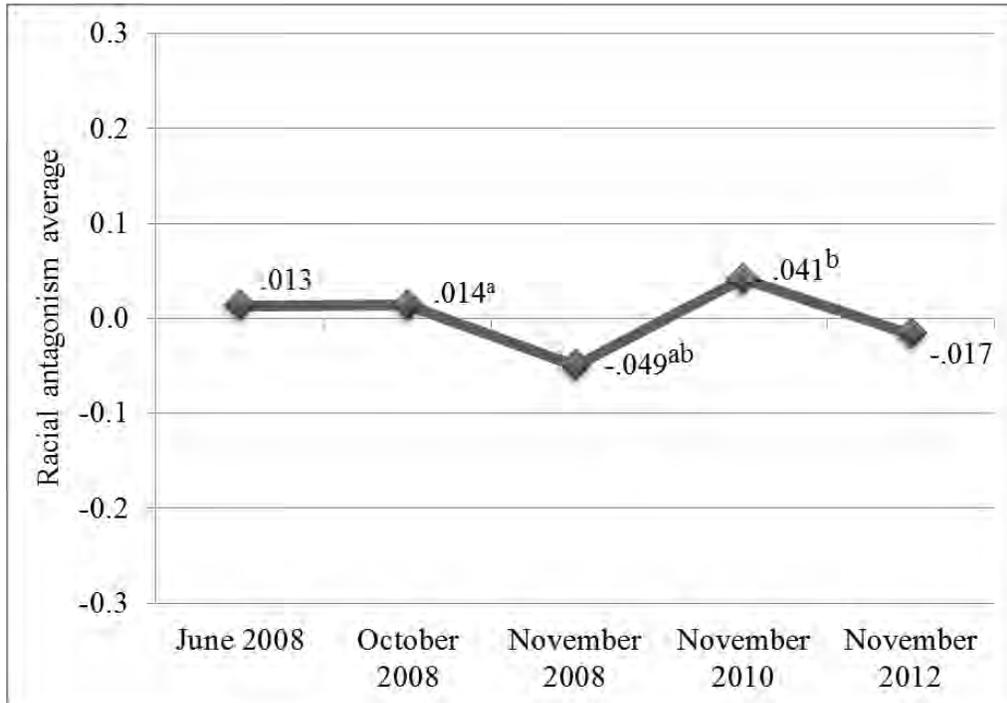
FIGURE 1 – Distribution of the Racial Antagonism Index



ANALYSIS

To test Hypothesis 1 we look at average racial antagonism scores for each survey. From a merged data file we test the differences in antagonism from survey to survey with independent samples means tests. Figure 2 presents these data and results.

FIGURE 2 – Racial Antagonism Levels from June 2008 – November 2012



Surveys that share a subscript are significantly different from each other at $p \leq .05$ (one-tailed).

As expected, levels of racial antagonism drop significantly immediately following the 2008 election, from an average .014 to -.049. Not only demonstrating an overall drop, but also moving the average level of antagonism below the midpoint of the scale – placing battleground white Americans on the *positive* racial attitudes side of the measure for the first time that year. This was perhaps the “post-racial” America some had hoped would come to be after Obama’s election.

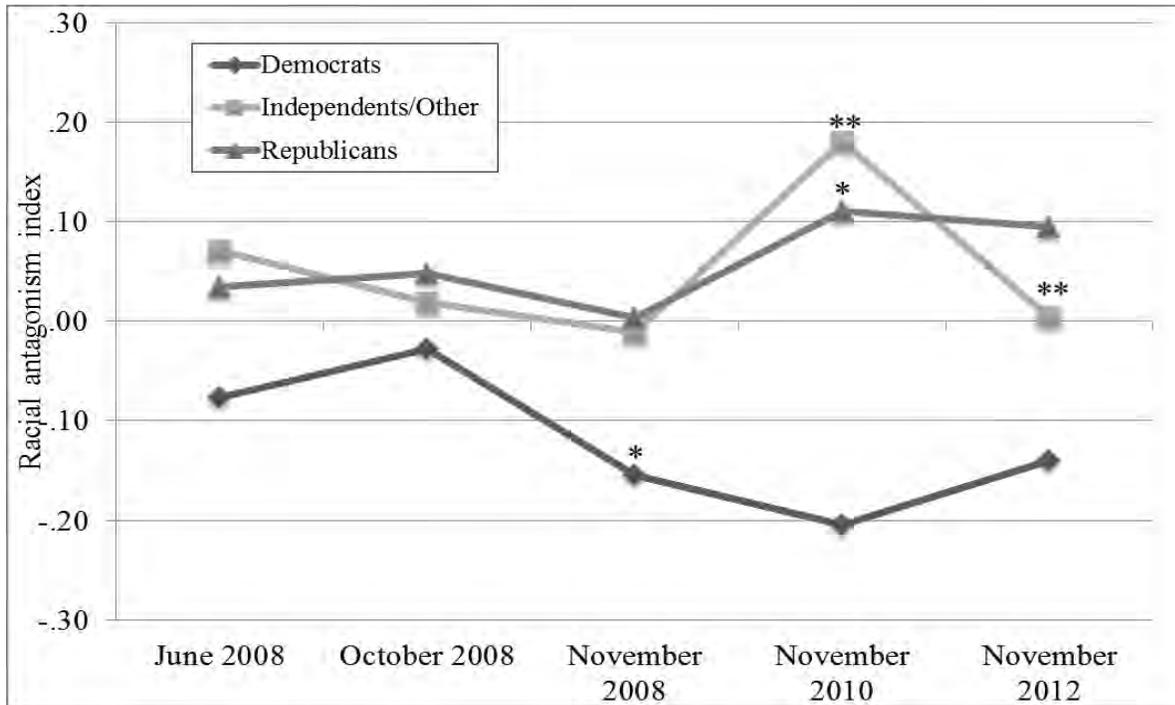
Also as predicted, however, the diminished racial antagonism effect was not long-lived. Within two years of the rally effect, levels had not only rebounded, but had gotten more antagonistic than prior to the election of Obama. (We expect that the unprecedentedly high level of antagonism is due to the reality of having an African-American president in office, rather than merely winning an election, but we leave that demonstration for another analysis.)

In further support of the rally hypothesis, levels of racial antagonism drop again following the 2012 Obama election, indicating another potential rally effect. This drop, however, is not statistically significant, although it is relatively substantial – a drop of .058 compared to the .063 decrease in antagonism following the 2008 election, but dealing with smaller N sizes in the later surveys (as indicated in Table 1).

These data patterns present an ideal picture of a racial attitudes rally effect for the election of America’s first black president. There are, however, still further hypotheses – H1a and H1b – to test regarding the rally hypothesis. First (H1a), we examine whether or not in-partisans and out-partisans rallied to different extents. Second (H2a), we examine the potential effects of political awareness or involvement on the magnitude of the rally effect.

To test the in-partisan / out-partisan effect we analyze the levels of racial antagonism for each survey, within party identification, using a simple three-way measure of Democrats, Independents and others, and Republicans. Figure 3 contains the chart of these data.

FIGURE 3 – Racial Antagonism Levels by Party Affiliation



**Significantly different from previous time period at $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed); * $p \leq .10$ (two-tailed)

According to previous findings in the rally effects literature, in-partisans should show more of a rally effect than out-partisans, which is what we see in Figure 3. While all three party groups decrease their average racial antagonism directly following the 2008 election, the effect among Democrats is more substantial than independents and Republicans (-.18, compared to -.03 and -.05 respectively), as well as significant. When it comes to the resumption of pre-rally attitudes, however, it is independents and Republicans who move back to more racially antagonistic views, while Democrats remain at their same low levels. In other words, in-partisans rallied heavily, but out-partisans bounced back.

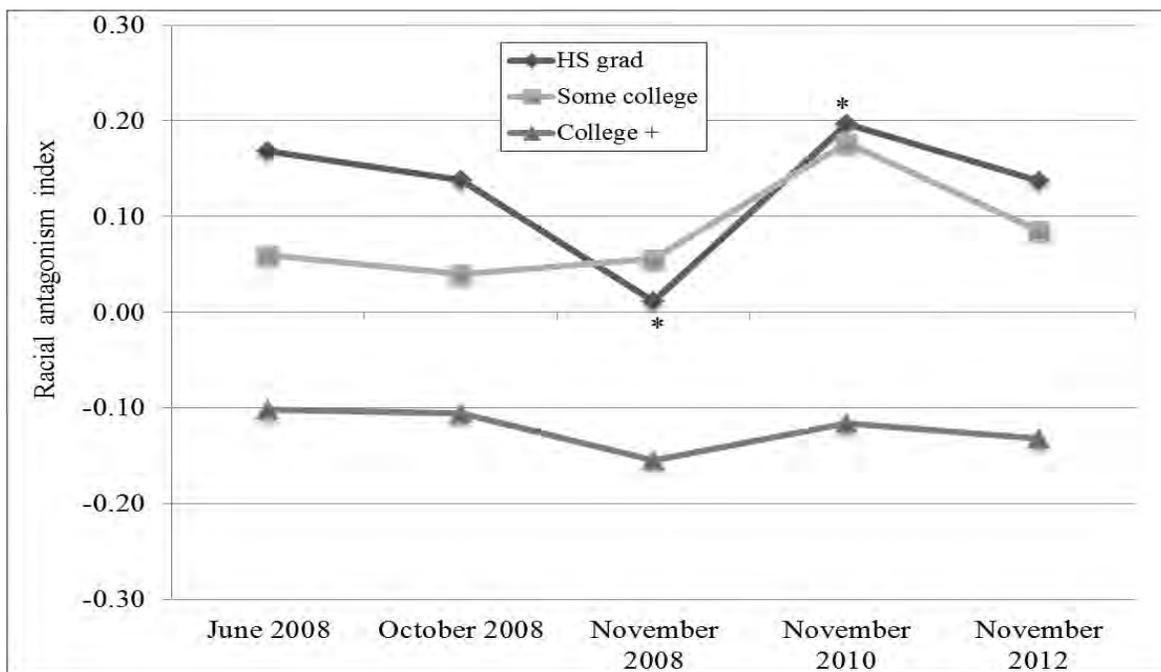
One final, unexpected effect in Figure 2 is that independents showed the strongest rally after the 2012 election, becoming significantly more positive racially, and resuming their post-2008 position at the midpoint of the racial antagonism scale. Democrats, on the other hand, remain the same after 2012 (if anything becoming slightly, albeit insignificantly, more antagonistic). Overall the data show some support for the expected in-partisan rally effect, although primarily in the immediate 2008 post-election period.

This leads us to our next hypothesis about the less politically aware being the most susceptible to rally effects. Given that independents and those claiming no party affiliation whatsoever were the most mobile group post-election, it stands to reason that the least politically aware will show similar patterns. After all, independents are well-known to be among the less politically aware and active in American politics.

To test the awareness hypothesis directly, however, we use respondent education level (as does Baum 2002). While we would prefer to use a more exact measure of political awareness we do not have such a variable available in all of our surveys. We divide the education variable into three categories: those with a high school diploma or less education; those with some college coursework but no degree; and those with a Bachelor’s Degree or more.

Figure 4 shows that it is indeed the least educated – and presumably then, the least politically sophisticated – who rally the most in response to Obama’s elections. In addition it is these same voters who bounce back from the rally the strongest. The middle education group shows a similar, if less dramatic, pattern. In strong contrast, and as predicted, the most educated are the least responsive to the rally effect of the election. In fact those with Bas or more education not only do not move substantially at any point, they are also, by far, the least antagonistic throughout. They are significantly less racially antagonistic than either of the other education groups in every single survey.

FIGURE 4 – Racial Antagonism Levels by Education



*Significantly different from previous time period at $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed).

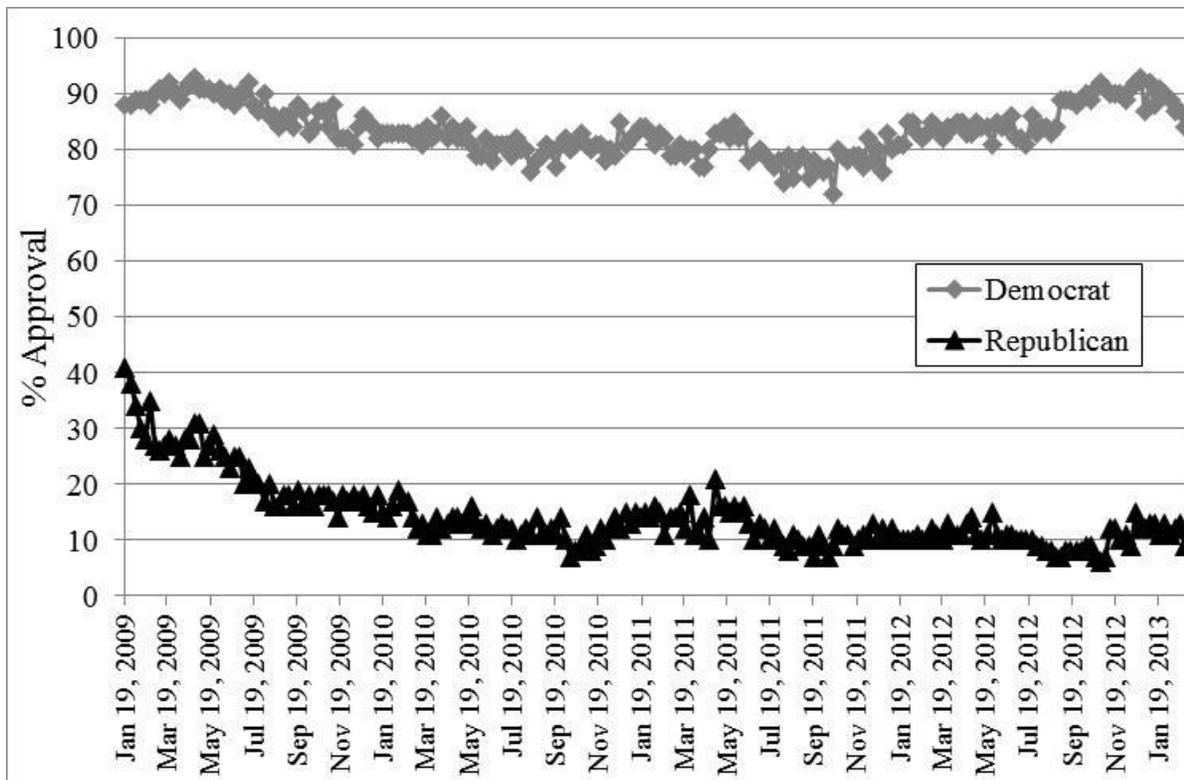
Our second full hypothesis – that views should polarize by party over the course of Obama’s presidency can already be seen, to some extent from Figure 2. The racial attitudes gap among the party groups clearly widens from November 2008 to November 2010, coming slightly back together after the second election. Unfortunately, the best way to test this hypothesis would be through regular and frequent measures of racial attitudes during this period, but such data do not exist (to our knowledge). The potential rally effect of Obama’s second election muddies the water some in terms of measuring the patterns of attitudes during only his first term. Alternatively, of course, a final measure at the end of his second term could capture the entire, as of yet uncompleted presidency. For these reasons we use various data sources and methods to test the polarization theory.

Tesler and Sears (2010) analyzed data from the 2006-2008 General Social Survey panel and found that the correlation between racial attitudes and party identification increased significantly over that time period, with the second measure coming after Obama sewed up the Democratic nomination. These findings lend support to the idea that these same attitudes may have polarizes by party over the course of Obama’s first-term, as we hypothesize here.

Our first stab at this hypothesis comes from a much more frequent data source than either the ANES, GSS or our racial antagonism data in this paper – Gallup presidential approval ratings. The popularity cycle model is, after all, about presidential popularity. We will therefore analyze Obama’s approval ratings for the polarization effects before moving on the less frequent measures. We must re-emphasize, however, that our overall hypothesis is about racial attitudes and party, not presidential approval.

Figure 5 shows Gallup’s weekly approval ratings for Barack Obama from directly post-inauguration in 2009 to early 2013. Not surprisingly, the graph shows party opinion polarizing over time on how well Obama is doing his job as president. While Democrats bounce slightly up and down over time – showing distinct upwards bumps at election time, in-line with the rally effect – Republican average demonstrate a clear downward trend over time.

FIGURE 5 – Gallup’s Obama Presidential Approval Trend among Democrats and Republicans



In Gallup’s repeated measures we also see a strong statistical relationship. The party differential – Democratic approval minus Republican approval – correlates at a very strong 0.72 with the week number of the presidency (from 1 to 216). Presidential approval is becoming more polarized over the course of Obama’s presidency, as one would expect.

Given the strength of Obama’s popularity effect, it seems even more likely that individual’s racial attitudes will follow this same pattern. While we have far fewer time points with which to work, we do have individual-level data. In order to test the relationship between party, racial attitudes and polarization we regress our racial antagonism measure on party identification, the number of the survey (increasing over time, as polarization should), and the interaction of party and survey. Table 1 contains the results.

TABLE 1 – The Effects of Time and Party on Racial Antagonism

	B	s.e.
Survey	-.054*	.021
Party ID	.012	.025
Survey * Party ID	.025*	.010
Constant	-.008	.054
R-square	.02	
N	2019	

* $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed)

The results show that party polarization in racial attitudes increases over time, as expected. The interactive variable for survey and party is significant and positive while the baseline temporal effect (survey) is also significant, and negative. The result is that Democrats and Republicans are moving away from each other on racial attitudes over the course of Obama’s time in the national spotlight.

CONCLUSION

The data in this paper, taken from surveys of white voters in presidential battleground states demonstrate strong support for the idea that one the effects stemming from America’s election of its first black president was a strong rally effect. These voters became significantly less racially antagonistic immediately following the 2008 election. While this effect was long gone by two years into the Obama presidency, it did provide at least a brief glimpse of the “post-racial” America some had hoped would result from the election.

In addition, also in support of a rally theory for racial attitudes, it was both in-partisans and the least educated that responded the most to the rally effect. Finally, we showed that there was a racial attitudes polarization by party over the course of Obama’s campaign and presidency. As with arguments for a presidential popularity cycle, in-partisans remained relatively positive on racial attitudes while out-partisans become more negative over time.

There are serious implications from these findings for typical research into racial attitudes. Standard research treats racial attitudes – specifically resentment – as a relatively fixed sentiment that does not change, on average. As a result, there is very little research into whether or not these attitudes actually shift over time in response to events or national debate. The focus is typically on the relationship of these attitudes to other variables – even variables that themselves change over time such as party affiliation – but not on the racial attitudes themselves. The analysis presented here makes a strong argument for the variability of these attitudes, specifically in response to a major shift in national racial politics.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1 – Survey details

	Field dates	N
1	June 25 – July 1, 2008	732
2	October 9-14, 2008	1,073
3	November 6-11, 2008	552
4	November 19 – December 7, 2010	424
5	November 9-13, 2012	351

TABLE A2 – Question wording and modal response for the racial antagonism index elements

Question statement	Most frequent answer
Reverse discrimination, where whites are put at a disadvantage in order to benefit minorities, is a growing problem today.	Agree somewhat
Blacks and other minorities who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.	Agree somewhat
Often people like me feel like we are losing out or being disadvantaged because of racial preferences like Affirmative Action	Disagree strongly
Too often minorities use racism as an excuse for their own failures	Agree strongly
As the result of racial preferences, less qualified minorities too often get hired and promoted	Agree somewhat
The government has gone too far in helping minorities to the disadvantage of other groups	Disagree somewhat
It is unfair for us to have to sacrifice and pay the price, through government funded programs, today for discrimination that happened decades ago.	Agree strongly
African Americans have just as many opportunities as white people these days	Agree strongly
The government has done enough to eliminate racial discrimination	Agree somewhat