



How Apparently Unpopular Racial Rhetoric Can be Politically Effective

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Journalists and academics alike have pointed to racial and xenophobic tensions in the 2016 election, as Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump rhetorically denigrated Mexican-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and others – and got support for such attacks from elements on the extreme right. Studies suggest that only a shrinking minority of white Americans still espouse extremely negative views on race and immigration. But even if Trump’s racially charged statements do not simply reflect broader public opinion, could they nevertheless have a broad impact once his administration is installed in the White House?

My research indicates Trump’s rhetoric has the potential to activate underlying racial views and deep biases against undocumented immigrants held, sometimes subconsciously, by virtually all white Americans – young and old, Democrats and Republicans, college-educated and not. Incoming President Trump may be well-positioned to exploit white anxieties to push policies that increase rather than decrease racial and ethnic gaps; and beyond the political realm, Trump’s rhetoric could influence how Americans treat one another in schools, jobs, and neighborhoods.

A Study of How White Americans Think about Race and Immigration

In 2015 – before Trump announced his candidacy – I conducted a survey experiment that asked a nationally representative sample of about 1,350 native-born white Americans to select preferred neighbors from among hypothetical individuals with randomly varied racial backgrounds, citizenship status, jobs, English language ability, and other key social characteristics. Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate how interested they were in being friends with the various types of people, and were also asked to rate how similar they thought these individuals were to themselves. This experimental design allowed me to measure how much each of the tested characteristics contributes to white American views of immigrants and minorities. The results are striking:

- Apart from racial and other social characteristics, **undocumented immigrant status elicits the most negative reactions from white Americans.** All else equal, the hypothetical undocumented immigrants in my experiment were a full 29 percentage points less likely to be selected as neighbors than native-born U.S. citizens. Such negative reactions came almost identically from self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.
- **Job statuses mattered much less.** Cashiers – workers in jobs that do not require a high school degree – were just five percent less likely to get a negative reaction than accountants – workers in posts requiring a college degree. Given considerable economic segregation in American life, it was surprising to find that job status differences mattered so much less than citizen versus undocumented immigrant

standing.

- Interestingly, **race plays only a small independent role in shaping neighbor preferences.** Black neighbors were selected by white respondents only four percentage points less often than white neighbors; and selections of Latino and Asian potential neighbors were not statistically distinguishable from selections of whites.

Although the results I found for race may seem startling given continuing U.S. racial segregation, it is important to remember that the experimental design already accounted for differences in socioeconomic status and citizenship that are often conflated with race. Outside of the experimental context, Latino-Americans are often stereotyped as undocumented – a fact that highlights the racial *consequences* of bias against undocumented immigrants.

Furthermore, while I found that non-white profiles were only slightly more often rejected when white respondents were asked to select potential neighbors, the racial disadvantage grew when white respondents were asked about potential friends, invoking a more intimate social tie. Furthermore, white negativity toward subjects of other races was largest when respondents were asked *how similar is this person to people like you?*

From Subtle Discrimination to Public Scapegoating?

An important shift has occurred over the last several decades in the racial attitudes of white Americans. Explicit discrimination has given way to subtler, under-the-surface ways of understanding racial distinctions. Although whites accepted potential non-white neighbors, they still rated non-white profiles as “less similar” to them than profiles of native-born whites, even when Blacks, Latinos, and Asians were described as native-born American citizens who spoke fluent English, or had white-collar jobs, or volunteered regularly, or were married to white spouses. This unique impact of race emerged even though at no point in the survey were participants urged to consider race in their evaluations, or told what “similarity” meant. Without any such prompting or instruction, white Americans – regardless of their age, education level, political party, or geographic location – overwhelmingly relied on racial characteristics to assess similarity, much more so than they relied on other characteristics except undocumented status.

Overall, my findings suggest that white Americans still consider race as a fundamental characteristic marking differences among people. Of course, labeling someone as racially different is not inherently biased – and it is a far cry from the explicitly prejudiced claims trumpeted by Donald Trump in 2016. However, I did find evidence of strong bias against undocumented immigrants, even those proficient in English or holding white-collar jobs.

How might the views I uncovered be publicly manipulated? When people consider certain groups to be fundamentally dissimilar, they can more easily be convinced that such “different” groups are to blame for societal problems like unemployment or crime – especially when political elites declare this to be true. In the past, American politicians have gained broad support by scapegoating minority groups. Today, Trump is trying for similar political gains by being much more explicit in the use of racially derogatory rhetoric than other recent national politicians – and especially by mounting strong verbal attacks against immigrants. The long-term effects remain to be seen, but they could be significant, because – despite the considerable racial progress America has made in modern times – Trump is tapping into very real white beliefs about racial differences and very real hostilities toward undocumented immigrants

Read more in Ariela Schachter, "**From 'Different' to 'Similar': An Experimental Approach to Understanding Assimilation.**" *American Sociological Review* (October 2016).