The Racist Card: Denial of Racism as a Conservative Counterstrategy[1]

Rachel Brown-Weinstock[2] (PhD Candidate, Sociology Department, Princeton University)

Derek Wakefield[3] (Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Emory University)

Abstract:

After decades of keeping their racial language implicit, what has allowed Republican candidates like Donald Trump to use explicitly racial language with apparent impunity? We hypothesize that Republican candidates have effectively weaponized the "racist" label and persuaded many voters that Democratic racial callouts are disingenuous. As such, many conservative voters simultaneously support candidates using (at face value) racially conservative rhetoric while denying that such rhetoric is genuinely racist. We test this argument using a survey experiment exposing respondents to this conservative counterstrategy, which we dub the "racist card." We assert that this discourse causes white conservatives to discredit Democratic accusations of racism, which allows Republican candidates to effectively neutralize claims of racial bias. We discuss implications for future studies of racialized political appeals, which we argue must be grounded in the actual experiences and values of conservatives, who (genuinely or not) reject the application of the "racist" label.

[1] This research was funded by grants from Princeton Research in Experimental Social Science (PRESS) and by Princeton's Center for the Study of Democratic Politics (CSDP).

[2] rachelmb@princeton.edu

[3] djwakef@emory.edu

Introduction

On a Fox News appearance in March of 2021, Senator Lindsey Graham voiced opposition to President Joe Biden's pronouncement that Georgia's new elections law, Senate Bill 202 (SB 202), is "Jim Crow in the 21st century." SB 202 instated voting restrictions, including ID requirements and constrictions to the absentee voting process, that are disproportionately burdensome for minority and poor populations. Graham condemned Biden, asserting, "What's sick is for the president of the United States to play the race card continuously in such a hypocritical way." Graham soon continued:

> To my friends in Georgia, they had the highest turnout in the history of Georgia. We had 150 million something people vote. So every time a Republican does anything, we're a racist. If you're a White conservative, you're a racist. If you're a black Republican, you're either a prop or Uncle Tom. They use the *racism card* [emphasis added] to advance a liberalism agenda and we're tired of it.

This rhetorical appeal—that Democrats and allied left-leaning groups are over-applying the "racist" label and playing the "race," "racism," or "racist" card disingenuously for political gain—is becoming a common defense among Republican politicians and allied media institutions. Likely in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and racialized partisan sorting, Democratic politicians and allies have increasingly vocalized how systemic racism shapes American society, its institutions, and its policies. Many, too, have called out the racism and xenophobia underlying the campaign appeals and policies of former president Donald Trump and allied Republicans. To combat these claims, Republican politicians have deployed the rhetorical appeal that we term "the racist card." At the 2021 New Hampshire Republican Dinner, former Vice President Mike Pence declared, to roaring applause, "America is not a racist

country...it is past time for America to discard the left-wing myth of systemic racism." In the official Republican rebuttal to President Joe Biden's first congressional address—which challenged Congress to pass legislation on police reform before the anniversary of George Floyd's murder—Senator Tim Scott declared that "It's backwards to fight discrimination with different discrimination. And it's wrong to try to use our painful past to dishonestly shut down debates in the present…Race is not a political weapon to settle every issue the way one side wants."

We conceptualize these and other usages of the "racist card" as a Republican counter-strategy, deployed against Democratic politicians' own counter-strategy for defusing the political utility of Republicans' implicit racial appeals. The implicit-explicit (IE) model of racial priming suggests that White voters, wanting to uphold the norm of racial egalitarianism, will self-monitor and limit the impact of their racial resentment on their support for implicitly racist policies or appeals once they are called out as racist by other, often Democratic, politicians (see Mendelberg 2001). While experimental and survey-based research has supported this theory, especially using data collected before the 2016 election of Donald Trump, several recent studies failed to replicate the IE model (Banks and Hicks 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). One study, attentive to heterogenous effects, found that the IE model failed only among racially conservative White voters (Banks and Hicks 2019). Some scholars attribute the model's recent failure to weakening norms of racial egalitarianism (Valentino et al. 2018), even though interview-based research suggests that most White Americans continue to believe that racism is wrong and Black and other non-White Americans should be afforded equal rights with White Americans (see Bonilla-Silva 2017). Other scholars point to universal psychological mechanisms

that cannot account for recent changes in the putative acceptance of explicit and implicit-made-explicit racial appeals (see Banks and Hicks 2019).

We instead theorize that the IE model no longer holds for the most racially conservative White voters, who are typically registered Republicans, because Republican politicians and pundits have successfully used racist card rhetoric to counter Democrats who call out Republican appeals and policies as racist. This rhetoric may have diffused through the White Republican electorate. Republican politicians' rhetorical counter may be successful, we believe, because it taps into Republicans' "negative partisanship" (Abramowitz and Webster 2018) or "affective polarization" (Iyengar et al. 2019) their negative feelings about and hostility toward Democrats, Democratic candidates, and the Democratic party. Unlike other explanations for new failures of the IE model, our theorization accounts for recent changes in the acceptance of explicit racial appeals. Rates of negative partisanship have increased dramatically since the IE model was initially tested (see Abramowitz and Webster 2018), making racist card rhetoric that frames Democratic politicians' accusations of racism as disingenuous more resonant. Our theory also explains how explicit racial rhetoric is becoming politically acceptable despite the persistence of racial egalitarianism norms: the racist card strategy may allow racially resentful Whites to feel like they are upholding norms of racial egalitarianism because it gives them reason to assert that an appeal is not actually racist. Democrats are just using the racist label as a "political weapon," in the words of Tim Scott.

We offer an initial test of our novel argument about the effectiveness of this "Racist card" discourse. We exposed a sample of White registered voters to one of three randomized treatment conditions. In the first "implicit" condition, respondents are shown a Tweet from a fictional Republican member of Congress who discusses his opposition to looters. He uses charged and

racially coded language, such as "thugs," and also shows an image that only includes Black looters caught on camera. In the second "explicit" condition, respondents see the same first Tweet and a subsequent callout from a Democratic member of Congress (similar to Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015; Banks and Hicks 2018) who calls out the original Tweet for using racially inflammatory language such as "thugs" and for being "racially insensitive" at best and "racist" at worst. In the third "Racist card" condition, respondents see the same first two Tweets followed by a response from the same Republican candidate where he delivers the "racist card" discourse. We ask respondents afterwards to evaluate the messages, share whether they believe the Republican's message was racial or not, and share their views about both parties and how they discuss race.

Our results support our arguments about how Republicans can use the "racist card" discourse to avoid being as severely penalized when their implicit racial rhetoric is made explicit through a callout. We also find evidence that the IE model continues to have predictive validity. We find that the "explicit" condition is associated with an overall decrease in approval of the Republican's message relative to the "implicit" condition regardless of an individual's partisanship or levels of symbolic racism, suggesting that an implicit-made-explicit racial appeal may not be as successful as previous research suggested. For respondents exposed to the "racist card" condition, meanwhile, we find that the relationship between message evaluations and symbolic racism becomes significantly sharper: respondents high in racial resentment are significantly more favorable to the Republican's message compared to the "explicit" condition. These findings align with our arguments that. By weaponizing the "racist" label, Republicans can mitigate the potential effects of racialized counter-appeals by casting Democrats and racial

callouts in general as disingenuous. Such a strategy may explain the apparent lack of a penalty for Republicans who use racially inflammatory rhetoric.

The IE Model Revisited: The Growing Acceptability of Explicit Racial Appeals

The norm of racial egalitarianism became hegemonic in the post-Civil Rights era: White Americans became less morally comfortable with overt racism and were less able to be overtly racist in public without receiving social censure (Bonilla-Silva 2017, Mendelberg 2001). Conservative politicians had to reconcile this new norm of equality with their desire to mobilize racially conservative White voters. Mendelberg (2001) famously argues that conservative candidates responded by using implicit racial appeals: messages that do not use explicitly race-related terms like "Black" or "racial" but nonetheless attempt to prime racial attitudes through racially-coded language such as "inner-city" and "looters." The implicit appeal, Mendelberg contends, allows White voters to feel moral in upholding the norm of racial egalitarianism while unconsciously letting their racial resentment impact their political decisions. Explicit racial appeals—and implicit appeals if not subtle enough—become politically dangerous for candidates when the racial nature of their appeal is called out by other politicians or pundits as "racist." Not wanting to be racist, White voters temper their racial biases and adjust their vote choices, candidate evaluations, and policy preferences accordingly. Several studies have supported this IE model of racial priming (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Nteta, Lisi, and Tarisi 2015; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015), with some significant caveats. For example, Tokeshi and Mendelberg (2015) find that call outs are only effective at tempering Whites' racial resentment when made by White politicians, not Black politicians. Still, these theories and findings generally coincide with sociologist Ashley Doanne's contention about the power of the

"racist" label: "charges of 'racism' – or the use of the label 'racist' – carry an extremely negative connotation and serve as perhaps the ultimate rhetorical weapon in public discourse on racial issues" (2006: 257).

Recent studies, however, show that some subpopulations of White voters are less likely to reject explicitly racial appeals, and ignore accusations of racism, than original formulations of the IE model would suggest. In a series of survey experiments, Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek (2018) find that White respondents are no more likely to self-monitor and temper the effect of their racial resentment on policy or candidate preferences when exposed to an implicit racial appeal than an explicit one; that is, they did not find the implicit premium suggested by the IE model. Banks and Hicks (2020) likewise observe that racially conservative Whites are no less likely to support a candidate when their implicit racial appeal is made explicit through a racialized counterstrategy—when a Democrat (Bernie Sanders) or Republican (Paul Ryan) points out the racial content of the message. This finding directly contradicts Mendelberg's initial assumption that racial appeals have less political utility among racial liberals *and racial conservatives* when their racist content is revealed via political counterstrategy.

Indeed, Mendelberg (2001) initially formulated that White voters are more responsive to implicit appeals because they do not want to violate widely accepted norms of racial egalitarianism. One explanation for the Valentino et al. (2018) and Banks and Hicks (2020) results may be that norms of racial egalitarianism are fraying, particularly among racially conservative Whites. This is the argument made by Valentino and colleagues: "norms of racial rhetoric have changed substantially [in the post-Obama era], rendering explicit racial criticism more acceptable in mainstream political discourse" (2018: 760-761). They offer two factors that

have reshaped racial norms. On the supply side, political campaigns have less incentive than in the past to make implicit appeals because voters are increasingly sorting themselves into mainstream political parties based on their racial attitudes. Campaigns have been more likely to use explicit racial appeals since Obama's initial candidacy: an analysis of news coverage during each presidential election year between 1984-2016 reveals spikes in explicit anti-Black campaign rhetoric preceding Obama's 2008 election and Trump's 2016 election (Valentino, Newburg, and Neuner 2018). Further, one study experimentally found that Trump's inflammatory, explicit racial appeals emboldened White Americans with high levels of racial resentment to express and act on their prejudices, especially when other elite co-partisans did not sanction him (Newman et al. 2021). This finding supports Valentino et al.'s (2018) contention that norms of racial egalitarianism are fraying, particularly through the effect of elite communication on mass opinion.

On the demand side, Valentino and colleagues (2018) hypothesize that White in-group identification has increased such that disparaging political claims about out-groups may be more acceptable. White identity has become more politically salient in response to perceived "racial threats," like the election of the first Black president, growing levels of non-White immigration, and census projections that America will soon become a majority-minority nation (Jardina 2019). However, Whites' increasing in-group identification does not necessarily precipitate reciprocal increases in out-group animus; in-group identification and out-group animus are distinct types of White racial attitudes (Jardina 2019). Further, White Americans as a collective have exhibited net declines in racial resentment since Obama's election. However, if levels of racial resentment increased among specific subgroups, like Republicans or those with already higher levels of racial resentment, this may explain how explicit appeals have become more acceptable among a

select group. Given that Banks and Hicks find that a racialized counterstrategy is effective for Whites' with low levels of racial resentment but not Whites with high levels of racial resentment, this seems plausible. However, the aggregate racial resentment scores of White Republicans increased only modestly (6-points) between 2012-2020, especially in comparison to the large net decrease in racial resentment (30-points) among White Democrats over the same time period (Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022).

Valentino et al. empirically test neither the supply- nor demand-side claims in their study, leaving open the question of how explicit appeals have become more accepted. However, their assertion underlying them—that norms of racial egalitarianism are fraying—implies that Whites are responsive to explicit rhetoric because of its overtly racist content. However, Banks and Hicks empirically document that White racial conservatives do not believe that implicit-made-explicit campaign messages are "about race" at all. This finding aligns with scholarship arguing that colorblind racial ideology, a form of racist rhetoric masked in the language of racial egalitarianism, remains hegemonic in post-Obama America. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2017) contends that despite increases in old-fashioned, explicit racism over the past decade, implicitly racist colorblind ideology is still predominant; politicians like Donald Trump are still compelled to deny claims that they are racist ("I'm the least racist person in the world"). That is, it is still not socially acceptable to be racist or to not believe in fundamental racial equality. We are then left with a puzzle: how do White racial conservatives come to accept explicit racial appeals while the content of the norm of "colorblind" racial egalitarianism remains hegemonic?

Scholars offer psychological mechanisms to explain this paradox. Banks and Hicks contextualize their findings via motivated reasoning theory, which suggests that "Whites are motivated to arrive at conclusions consistent with their existing racial attitudes" (2020: 306).

Racially conservative Whites will look for "evidence" to support their views to maintain a sense of themselves as objective information processors. Likewise, Valentino, Hutchings, and White mention a similarly psychological theory involving rationalization, noting that "[s]ensitizing people to the racial content of an appeal may undermine its persuasive impact, or it may lead to a more involved set of rationalizations to justify support for a prior [candidate] choice" (2002: 88).

We argue that answers to this paradox cannot be purely psychological for two reasons. First, explanations that are solely psychological ignore how social norms affect our psychological processes, a fact that Mendelberg's (2001) initial formulation of the IE model was attentive to. Second, psychological mechanisms, grounded in cognitive universalisms that do not change over time, cannot explain social change in the acceptability of explicit appeals. If we believe that a definite shift in the influence of explicit racial appeals did occur (this is a debate: see Stephens-Dougan 2021), then we must account for a social shift.

A New Republican "Counter-counter-strategy"?

We offer a novel explanation for the increasing acceptability of explicit appeals under an ideological regime of racial egalitarianism: a Republican counter-counter-strategy that we dub the "racist card." In this strategy, Republican politicians and pundits claim that Democratic politicians and allies strategically play the "racist card" to promote their political agenda rather than to expose genuinely racist acts. Republicans can deploy this strategy to rebut Democrats' claims that a Republican appeal or policy is racist. This rhetorical strategy may be particularly powerful because it can defuse the power of Democrats' racial call outs even while the norm of racial egalitarianism remains powerful. To avoid conceptualizing themselves as acting on racial biases, White Republicans can adopt their party leader's rhetorical strategy, consider themselves non-racist, and still act on their racial resentment. This type of appeal may be the "evidence," à la

motivated reasoning theory, that racially resentful Whites cognitively cite to justify their belief that the explicit appeal is not actually racist.

We posit that Republican leaders' "racist card" strategy deploys rhetoric that primes voters' negative partisanship—or hostility towards the opposing party, its members, and leadership—to discredit the motives of the party applying the racial egalitarian norm. Norms have three components: a.) the content and evaluation of the norm, b.) the enforcement of the norm and the legitimacy of the enforcement, and c.) the application of the norm in a specific situation (Horne and Mollborn 2020). Racially resentful Whites may be more accepting of explicit racial appeals despite the hegemony of racially egalitarian beliefs because of growing contention about the second dimension of the norm: who can *legitimately* enforce norm violations. We posit that racially resentful Whites, typically Republicans, are increasingly questioning who can apply the "racist" label and if they are doing so with credible intentions. A USA Today/Ipsos poll conducted in July of 2021, following Trump's tweet that four minority congresswomen should go back to the countries "from which they came," is revealing to this point. While 85% of Democrats and 67% of Independents agreed that Trump's tweet was a "racist statement," only 45% of Republicans did. More tellingly, 70% of Republicans either strongly or somewhat agreed that "people who call others 'racist' usually do so in bad faith." This percentage is significantly lower for Democrats (31%) and Independents (46%).[4] Today, racially resentful White Republicans may doubt the authenticity of the politicized label and labeler even if they do not want to be or seem racist.

[4] https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/trump-tweet-response-2019

Unlike explanations rooted in universal psychological mechanisms, our "racist card" explanation offers a theory that accounts for change over time in the acceptability of explicit appeals: rates of negative partisanship in the American electorate have increased dramatically (see Figure 1) since the IE model was originally published by Mendelberg in 2001, and since the 1988 American National Election Studies (ANES) data she used to evidence the IE model (in the context of Willie Horton case) was collected. Thus, this Republican "racist card" strategy would become more resonant over time given changes in the national political context.

Figure 1:

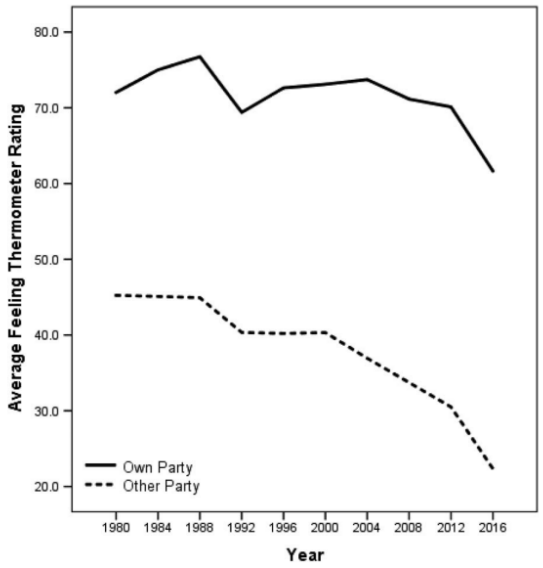


Figure 1. Taken from Abramowitz and Webster (2018: 121): "Average feeling-thermometer ratings of own party and opposing party, 1980–2016. Source: American National Election Studies."

Additionally, Republicans' racist card strategy may be especially effective because the growth in negative partisanship is likely attributed to the growth in partisan polarization along racial attitudes (Abramowitz and Webster 2018). In the decades following the Civil Rights era,

Americans increasingly sorted themselves into political parties based on their racial attitudes and policy opinions. Racially conservative Whites—those scoring high on measures of racial resentment—are now mostly sorted into the Republican party and racially liberal Whites into the Democratic party (Valentino and Sears 2005). Racialized partisan sorting began in the 1960s, though the pace of sorting picked up in the 1980s and was exacerbated leading up to and following Obama's election as America's first Black president (Tesler 2016) and continued with Trump's race-baiting campaign and election (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Schaffner 2022). Scholars have attributed this racial realignment to the Republicans' "Southern Strategy," whereby the Republican party, aided by White evangelical elites (Maxwell and Shields 2019; Miller 2011), courted racially resentful Southern White voters disaffected by Democratic support for Civil Rights legislation (Maxwell and Shields 2019, Valentino and Sears 2005). The role that Southern racial views played in broader partisan realignment and racialized political polarization cannot be understated; White Southerners' levels of racial resentment became more predictive of Republican presidential voting and partisan identification between 1972-2000, while racial resentment is less predictive of Republican support outside of the South and has not become more predictive over time (Valentino and Sears 2005).

The gap in the racial resentment scores of White Democrats and White Republicans was quite small through the 1980s, but started increasing in the 1990s such that the Republican mean was 10 points higher (.1, measured on a scale from 0-1, with 1 being the highest score) than the Democratic mean by 2000. The gap accelerated most rapidly between 2012-2020, an era of Black Lives Matter protests, when it grew to 40 points (Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022). ANES data show that the correlation between racial resentment and feeling thermometer scores for the opposing party (an operationalization of negative partisanship) increased from .26 to .56 between

1988-2016 (Abramowitz and Webster 2018)—the period between the Willie Horton case that Mendelberg empirically drew on and the election of Donald Trump. *Given that negative partisanship and racial resentment are highly correlated, Republicans' anti-Democrat racist card rhetoric may implicitly prime racial resentment and bring it back to bear on White voters' evaluation of candidate appeals and policies that are racially motivated.*

Republicans' use of racist card rhetoric may also have deeper roots in the party's broader "Southern Strategy." It bears resemblance to the Lost Cause rhetoric of post-Reconstruction Southern elites (see Maxwell and Shields 2019). These elites disseminated propaganda to stoke White Southern anger toward "carpetbaggers," "scalawags," and "outrage mills" (newspapers printing "fake news" about the horrors of Southern racism). These groups and institutions were framed as nefarious Northerners that supposedly fueled tension within the South's otherwise harmonious race relations—making racism a problem where it was not before—for the purpose of political or financial gain (see Hale 2010). They were framed not only as social outgroups (Northerners) but also as political outgroups attempting to rankle Black Southerners on behalf of the then-Republican party to advance policies promoting Black political inclusion. This Lost Cause propaganda thus uses the same formula as Republicans' contemporary racist card rhetoric: claim that a political outgroup is making racism a problem in a context where it is not, and attribute the outgroup's motives to their own political gain.

Theory and Hypotheses:

We theorize that a driving force behind this social shift in the acceptability of racialized political appeals is the proliferation of a discursive strategy that we dub the "Racist card." The goal of this strategy is to neutralize any attempted racial callout by framing the source of the

callout (i.e., racial liberals[5]) as disingenuous. By delegitimizing the callout, the implicit nature of the original racial message is then maintained. This actively disrupts the self-monitoring process, as racially conservative individuals do not perceive the original message as racial and thus do not feel like it goes against the norm of racial egalitarianism. The mechanism behind the "Racist card" is as follows. A conservative politician makes a racialized political appeal and is called out by a liberal politician. According to the IE model, the callout should cause even racially conservative individuals to self-monitor and reduce their support for the conservative politician. However, if the conservative politician then calls out the liberal politician by deploying the "Racist card," they inject partisanship and polarization into the conversation. Taken together, this strategy causes racial conservatives to doubt the sincerity of racially liberal callouts and to believe that discussions of racial justice are instead disingenuous attempts to win over voters. Furthermore, this rhetorical strategy also uses the discourse of colorblind racism to frame any discussion of race as inherently unjust (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Racial conservatives can then feel justified in supporting politicians who use racially conservative rhetoric while simultaneously believing that they are not violating the norm of racial egalitarianism.

The lack of self-monitoring due to the "Racist card" discourse is key to account for because it may explain why (ostensibly) explicitly racial messages can remain implicit for many individuals. According to original formulations of the IE model, explicit messages do not affect political opinions because their racial content becomes overt and causes the individual to self-monitor, while implicit messages succeed because their racial content remains covert (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). However, as recent work shows,

[5] While racial liberals in contemporary times are Democrats, in the past the Republican Party was the proponent of racially liberal policies. A version of the "Racist Card" discourse was used by Democrats in the post-Civil War time period while Republicans deploy the strategy in contemporary times (Mendelberg 2001).

even the perception of whether these kinds of messages are racial or not varies significantly among whites and especially between racial liberals and conservatives (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). Rhetoric that to many is clearly explicitly racial might not be perceived as racial by many racially conservative respondents (Banks and Hicks 2019). But rather than viewing this as the failure of the IE model, we assert that these disagreements about the racial content of ostensibly racial messages is a direct result of the Republican counter-discourse described above. We therefore ask respondents to share their sentiments about specific messages, and focus on white Republicans and Independents, as a way to evaluate the role played by motivated reasoning and partisanship.

This discourse also has roots in the rhetorical strategies of white Southerners in the post-Civil War era, who framed efforts by Northern Republicans to provide civil rights for Black people in the South as attempts to sow division and disrupt an (at least to white Southerners) amicable community (Maxwell and Shields 2019; Mendelberg 2001). We examine whether respondents from the South and from rural areas thus behave in distinctive ways when reacting to this strategy.

For our analyses, there are questions about the extent of this discourse already and its potential effects as an experimental treatment. If the discourse has already been widely distributed, which we posit is likely given our claim that Donald Trump and other Republicans are highly effective utilizers of the "Racist card" discourse, then Republican respondents may already behave accordingly regardless of their treatment condition. Independent respondents, particularly those with racially conservative views, would thus be more likely to exhibit significant treatment effects. Conversely, the effect of the discourse may be driven more by partisanship, which would mean that Republicans are the most likely to be affected. We do not

provide specific hypotheses at this time for which group we expect to be more affected, but we do flag that we plan to analyze both average treatment effects and heterogeneous treatment effects for Republicans and independents due to the above discussion.

H1: Respondents in the "Racist card" condition will express significantly greater sentiments for the Republican representative's message, and for Republican politicians in general, than in the other two conditions.

H2: Respondents in the "Racist card" condition will express significantly lower sentiments for the Democratic representative's message, and for Democratic politicians in general, than in the other two conditions.

H3: Respondents in the "Racist card" condition will express significantly less belief that the Republican representative's message was about race than in the other two conditions.

H4: Respondents in the "Racist card" condition will express significantly greater belief that the Democratic politician's callout message is insincere than in other conditions.

Method:

We launched the survey in March 2023 with the survey company Cint. Our sample is of US residents who were 18 or older and only included respondents who self-identified as white (excluding any multi-racial or non-white respondents), who said they were registered to vote (self-reported), and who identified as either Republican or independent (excluding Democrats). We used quotas to sample equal numbers of Republicans (N = 350) and independents (N = 351). The survey was delivered using Qualtrics and data analysis was conducted using R.

Respondents were first asked a variety of screener questions to achieve the restrictions described above. They were then asked important moderator variable questions. Our main

moderator variable is the symbolic racism scale (Henry and Sears 2002). We use the standard four-question scale, which includes questions that range from 1-5, to create a 4-20 scale of symbolic racism.[6] We also collect variables for white identity strength (Jardina 2019), for old-fashioned racism, and for Christian nationalism (i.e., whether the respondent believes that the US should be run according to Christian principles or not). After completing these moderators and additional demographic questions, respondents were shown the experimental portion of the survey.

Each respondent was randomized one of three treatments: an implicit condition, an explicit/racial callout condition, and our novel "racist card" condition. We block-randomized separately for Republicans and independents to ensure even distributions across conditions. Depending on treatment assignment, respondents then viewed a series of Tweets from fictional members of the House of Representatives. The first member is a Republican named Jim Anderson while the second member is a Democrat named Ryan Davis. Both members are white males to avoid potential confounding effects from an individual's race or gender (Banks and Hicks 2019; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015). We use Twitter as the delivery mechanism for these messages because it is commonly used by politicians, including to reply to politicians from the opposing party (Kreiss 2016; Stier et al. 2018). Each Tweet has a low to modest number of likes, retweets and replies—there is some engagement, but the level of support is far below the hundreds of thousands of engagements that the most Twitter-famous politicians can achieve.

[6] These questions include: 1) Irish, Italian, Jewish and other groups overcame discrimination and Blacks should too, 2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have held back Blacks (reverse coded), 3) Black people have gotten less than they deserve, and 4) If Black people tried harder, they would be as well off as whites (reverse coded). See Henry and Sears (2002) for an overview of the scale. Variables for white identity and old-fashioned racism were not as predictive of behaviors as this symbolic racism scale [show this in appendix figures]

Thus, this experiment tests the effect of Twitter messages from less prominent politicians. This is important for maintaining believability as well since the candidates in question are fictional.

In the first condition ("Implicit"), respondents only viewed a single Tweet from the Republican candidate. In this Tweet, he says the following:

> "Chicago PD released photos of looters caught red-handed stealing from privately owned businesses. These thugs are a menace to honest, law-abiding Americans. Republicans like myself are the party that supports law and order and our police."

Below the text, he also includes an image of individuals accused by Chicago PD of looting. The individuals in the picture are entirely phenotypically Black, which gives this condition its implicit racial nature. His message could be perceived as about looting, crime, and policing rather than about race. The exception is when he uses the word "thug" but even this is still fairly subtle.

In the second condition ("Explicit"), respondents view the same Tweet as in the "Implicit" condition and also view a callout Tweet from the Democratic candidate. This design mirrors other studies using callouts as a way to make the racial content of an otherwise implicit racial message to be more explicit (Banks and Hicks 2019; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015). In the callout Tweet, the Democratic candidate says the following:

> "As another member of Congress, I have to call you out. Using coded language like 'thugs' and only showing images of Black people is at best racially insensitive and at worst, simply racist. We can discuss important issues without resorting to racial dog whistles."

This message is meant to heighten a respondent's awareness of the racial content of the first message by directly mentioning the implicitly racial language and imagery (e.g., directly calling out the usage of the word "thug" and only showing images of Black people). This callout mirrors past examples of when implicitly racial appeals were made explicit by the efforts of opposing politicians, such as Jesse Jackson's callout of George H. W. Bush's Willie Horton ad (Mendelberg 2001). Another important factor here is that the callout is delivered by an out-party member who is clearly labeled as a Democrat with the (D), instead of being a fellow Republican (Banks and Hicks 2019). This heightens the partisan nature of this message as well.

In the third condition ("Racist card"), respondents saw the same Tweets from the first two conditions and additionally viewed a third counter-response from the same Republican as the first message. In this message, the Republican says the following:

> "Oh, please. You Democrats say everything is racist. If you're a Republican, you're a racist. If you're a white man, you're a racist. If you're a Black Republican, you're a prop. Democrats use the racist card to advance their agenda and I'm sick of it."

Rep. Jim Anderson (R) @RepAnderson · Dec 11, 2022

Chicago PD released photos of looters caught red-handed stealing from privately owned businesses. These thugs are a menace to honest, law-abiding Americans. Republicans like myself are the party that supports law and order and our police.

33 22 212

Rep. Ryan Davis (D) @RepRDavis · Dec 12, 2022

As another member of Congress, I have to call you out. Using coded language like "thugs" and only showing images of Black people is at best racially insensitive and at worst, simply racist. We can discuss important issues without resorting to racial dog whistles.

12 20 145

Rep. Jim Anderson (R) @RepAnderson · Dec 12, 2022

Oh, please. You Democrats say everything is racist. If you're a Republican, you're a racist. If you're a white man, you're a racist. If you're a Black Republican, you're a prop. Democrats use the racist card to advance their agenda and I'm sick of it.

5 15 87

This language mirrors that used by many conservative politicians, where the emphasis is not on the original language, but instead on the (perceived) disingenuity of the Democratic callout. The language used draws heavily on norms of colorblind racism by implying that Democrats care too much about racial differences—for example, by assuming all whites are racist, or that all Blacks must vote Democratic (Bonilla-Silva 2017). An important note is that the Republican does not reference the original message at all; instead, he is entirely focused on delegitimizing how Democrats discuss race.

After viewing their randomly assigned treatment messages, respondents then answered a variety of outcome variables. The first outcome variable is an evaluation of the Republican's message(s) measured from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").[7] The second outcome variable is the respondent's perception of whether the Republican's message was racial (1) or not (0). These two variables are the primary subject of our analyses for this survey given statistical power constraints. We also collected variables for pre-treatment party/politician thermometers, post-treatment party thermometers, and beliefs about whether Democrats play the racist card and whether Republicans overuse racial dog whistles.

Analyses:

Our analyses focus on the relationship between an individual's level of symbolic racism and their responses to each of the treatments, with additional analyses looking at whether these effects differ between Republicans and independents. Our goal is to determine whether the marginal effect of each treatment is significantly different when considering respondents who

[7] We focus on evaluating messages because the candidates in question are fictional. We do not analyze sentiments towards the Democratic candidate messages because respondents in the "Implicit" condition did not view any messages from the Democrat.

range in their symbolic racism and partisanship. We look specifically at differences in outcomes between respondents in the first "Explicit" condition, which is oftentimes used as a baseline, and those in the other two conditions. Comparing the "Explicit" and "Implicit" conditions provides a test of the IE model by examining whether the Republican candidate's message is evaluated less positively, and is perceived as more racial, when the racial message is made implicit. Then, by comparing this difference with the difference between the "Explicit" and "Racist card" conditions, we can evaluate whether the third treatment condition is evaluated similarly or differently than the other two messages. We first analyze results across the full sample and then examine effects individually among just Republican respondents and just independent respondents.

Results

In Table 1 (below), we first show results for how respondents evaluated the Republican's messages from 1 ("Extremely negatively") to 5 ("Extremely positively"). In Model 1, which estimates pure treatment effects, we observe a significantly negative effect from the "Explicit" treatment condition. This finding corresponds with the original predictions of the implicit-explicit model, which argues that making a racialized political appeal more explicit will result in declining support (Mendelberg 2001). The effect size for the "Racist card" message is about half in size and does not reach statistical significance, although the direction of the effect is in the same direction. In Model 2, we add an interaction term for partisan identity to detect whether Republicans and independents behaved heterogeneously. As expected, there is a significant downward shift for independents relative to Republicans, since Republicans will obviously favor in-party candidates more. Otherwise, we do not observe effects from experimental treatment. This suggests that while independents were less favorable to the messages overall, this did not

differ based on treatment assignment. In Model 3, we add an interaction term for symbolic racism. We observe significantly negative mean shifts for both the "Explicit" and "Racist card" treatment conditions, a very significantly positive interaction effect between symbolic racism and overall evaluations, and a positive interaction effect between symbolic racism and the "Racist card" condition. We do not observe a similarly significant interaction effect between symbolic racism and the "Explicit" condition. When we examine this effect in Model 4, which includes a three-way interaction for partisanship and symbolic racism, we do not observe major shifts from Models 2/3 except for losing some statistical significance.

First, these results demonstrate that differing levels of symbolic racism is a powerful driver of how respondents evaluate these (racialized) political messages, which is as expected. But secondly, and in strong support of our novel arguments about the "Racist card," we find that this relationship between symbolic racism and support for politicians who use racially conservative rhetoric is significantly higher in the "Racist card" condition. What this means is that, compared to the other two conditions, the "Racist card" treatment resulted in a significantly steeper slope (and thus, stronger statistical relationship) between symbolic racism and the outcome variable. We also do not observe differences between the two-way and three-way interaction models: independents were less supportive across conditions, but did not exhibit significantly heterogeneous treatment effects compared to Republicans either in general, and as a function of their level of symbolic racism. This suggests that the mechanism we observe with Model 3, where the "Racist card" condition makes symbolic racism a more salient predictor of the outcome, operates in a relatively similar manner for both Republicans and independents.

Table 1: Effects on Republican Message Evaluation

	DV: Evaluation of Republican's message(s) (1-5)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment: Explicit Callout	-0.270**	-0.168	-0.818**	-0.470
	(0.116)	(0.154)	(0.345)	(0.572)
Treatment: Racist Card	-0.175	-0.152	-1.063***	-1.247**
	(0.116)	(0.155)	(0.355)	(0.597)
Independent		-0.786***		-1.378***
		(0.152)		(0.477)
Explicit x Independent		-0.225		-0.274
		(0.219)		(0.714)
Racist Card x Independent		-0.035		0.450
		(0.218)		(0.740)
Symbolic Racism (4-20)			0.151***	0.103***
			(0.016)	(0.024)
Explicit x SR			0.034	0.016
			(0.023)	(0.037)
Racist Card x SR			0.059**	0.070*
			(0.024)	(0.038)
Independent x SR				0.062*
				(0.033)
Explicit x Independent x SR				0.008
				(0.048)
Racist Card x Independent x SR				-0.028
				(0.050)
Constant	3.722***	4.117***	1.623***	2.580***
	(0.081)	(0.108)	(0.238)	(0.364)
Observations	701	701	700	700
R^2	0.008	0.129	0.336	0.384
Adjusted R^2	0.005	0.122	0.332	0.375
Residual Std. Error	1.259 (df = 698)	1.182 (df = 695)	1.032 (df = 694)	0.998 (df = 688)
F Statistic	2.790* (df = 2; 698)	20.505*** (df = 5; 695)	70.345*** (df = 5; 694)	39.054*** (df = 11; 688)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

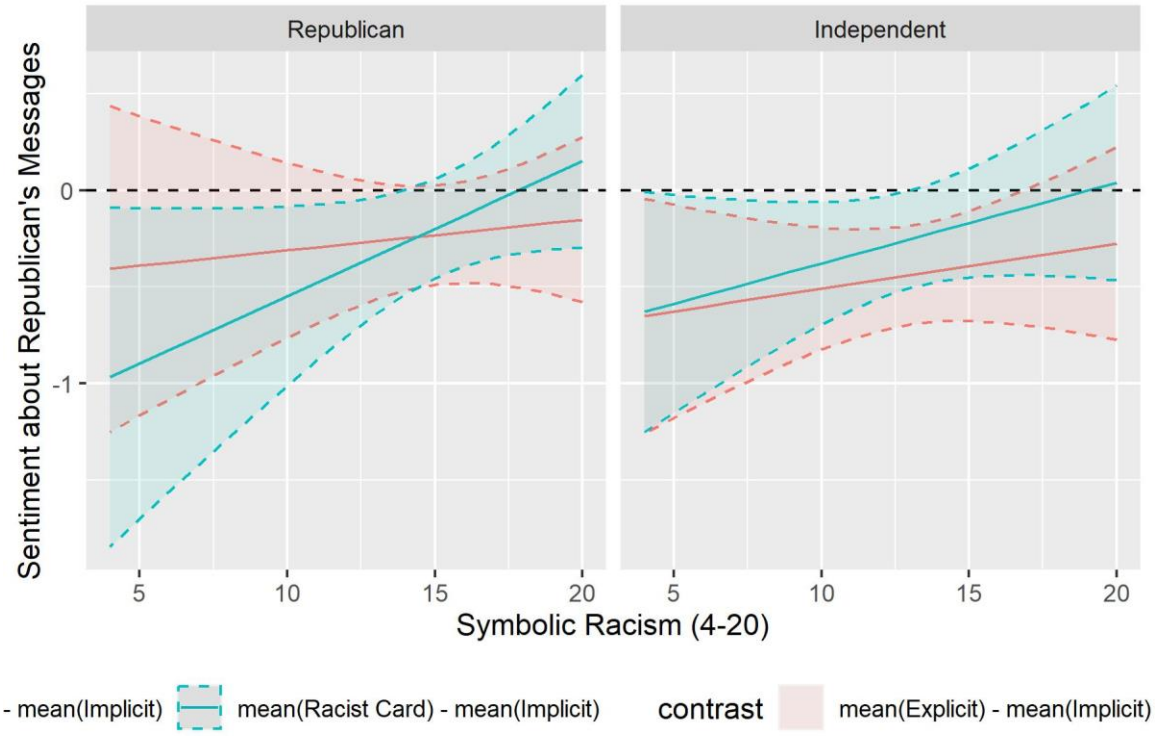
Caption: This table shows a series of linear regression models estimating the relationship between treatment assignment, partisan identity, and symbolic racism on the Republican message evaluation dependent variable (1-5). Model 1 analyzes just the treatment variable, Model 2 adds a partisan identity interaction term, Model 3 adds a symbolic racism interaction term, and Model 4 includes a three-way interaction between treatment, partisan identity, and symbolic racism.

We provide visual estimates of these trends to assess who might be driving these effects. In Figure 1 (below), we show the predicted levels of support for the Republican's messages for respondents in each treatment condition across levels of symbolic racism, with separate graphs for Republicans and independents. Confidence intervals are omitted for visual clarity—statistical significance should be determined using the findings from Table 1. The dotted black line is used as a baseline to show differences from the "Explicit" condition (blue line) and "Racist card" condition (red line). The left graph shows only Republican respondents and the left graph only independents. The graphs can be interpreted as follows: the effect shows the marginal change in evaluations, for respondents in that given symbolic racism (4-20) and partisan identity group, as a function of treatment assignment. For both Republican and independent respondents, we observe that the "Explicit" condition is associated with a mean shift across levels of symbolic racism. Taken together with the lack of heterogeneous treatment effects observed in Table 1, this finding indicates that symbolic racism did not have a significant effect on evaluations of the "Explicit" condition; instead, respondents were simply more opposed to the condition regardless of their symbolic racism and partisan identity. We observe a different trend from the "Racist card" condition, which we know from Table 1 did exhibit a significant relationship when interacted with the symbolic racism variable. Visually, we observe that the slope of the relationship between the "Racist card" condition and a respondent's symbolic racism is much steeper in the positive direction. For both Republicans *and* independents, the estimate for message evaluations actually crosses the zero line at the highest levels of symbolic racism. This indicates that Republicans and independents at the highest level of symbolic racism were *even more* supportive of the Republican's message than even the "Implicit" condition, where there was no Democratic racial callout. Interestingly, at the lower levels of symbolic racism, we

observe that Republicans are actually marginally less supportive of the "Racist card" condition compared to the "Explicit" condition. Independents, meanwhile, reacted equally negatively to the "Racist card" and "Explicit" conditions at the lowest levels of symbolic racism. These results should be interpreted cautiously, however, as the number of respondents in the lowest levels of symbolic racism is very low compared to those with moderate and high levels, especially for Republicans.[8]

[8] See Appendix Figure A1 for a descriptive overview of respondent symbolic racism by partisan identity.

Figure 1: Effects on Republican Message Evaluation



Caption: This graph shows the difference in means for the dependent variable assessing the Republican's messages from "Extremely Negatively" (1) to "Extremely Positively" (5). Each line shows the difference in means between the "Implicit" condition (used as a baseline and denoted with the black dotted line) and the "Explicit" condition (red line) or the "Racist card" condition (blue line). Effects are estimated at different levels of symbolic racism and separately for Republicans (left graph) and independents (right graph). Confidence intervals are omitted for visual clarity; reference Table 1 for significance estimates.

We next show results for our dependent variable asking respondents whether the Republicans message was racial (1) or not (0). In Table 2 (below), we again show a series of linear regression models estimating the relationship between treatment assignment, partisan identity, and symbolic racism. In Model 1, we do not observe any significant treatment effects.

Treatment assignment did not affect whether respondents believed that the Republican's messages were about race. In Model 2, we observe a significant mean increase in these perceptions for independents and a slightly negative and approaching significant ($p < 0.1$) interaction effect among independents. This shows that independents were overall more likely to believe that the message was about race, but were perhaps slightly less likely to believe so when in the "Racist card" condition. While this result is only significant at $p < 0.1$, its substantive effect size is actually quite large. In Model 3, we observe a significant negative effect from symbolic racism on perceptions that the messages were about race, along with a slightly significant positive effect from the "Racist card" condition. This demonstrates strongly that respondents with higher levels of symbolic racism were less likely to believe that the Republican's messages were about race. However, the slightly significant positive effect for the "Racist card" and symbolic racism interaction term presents a more complicated picture, where higher levels of symbolic racism are associated with a greater perception of the message's content (or conversely, lower levels associated with less perception that the message is about race). We explore what is driving this effect visually in Figure 2.

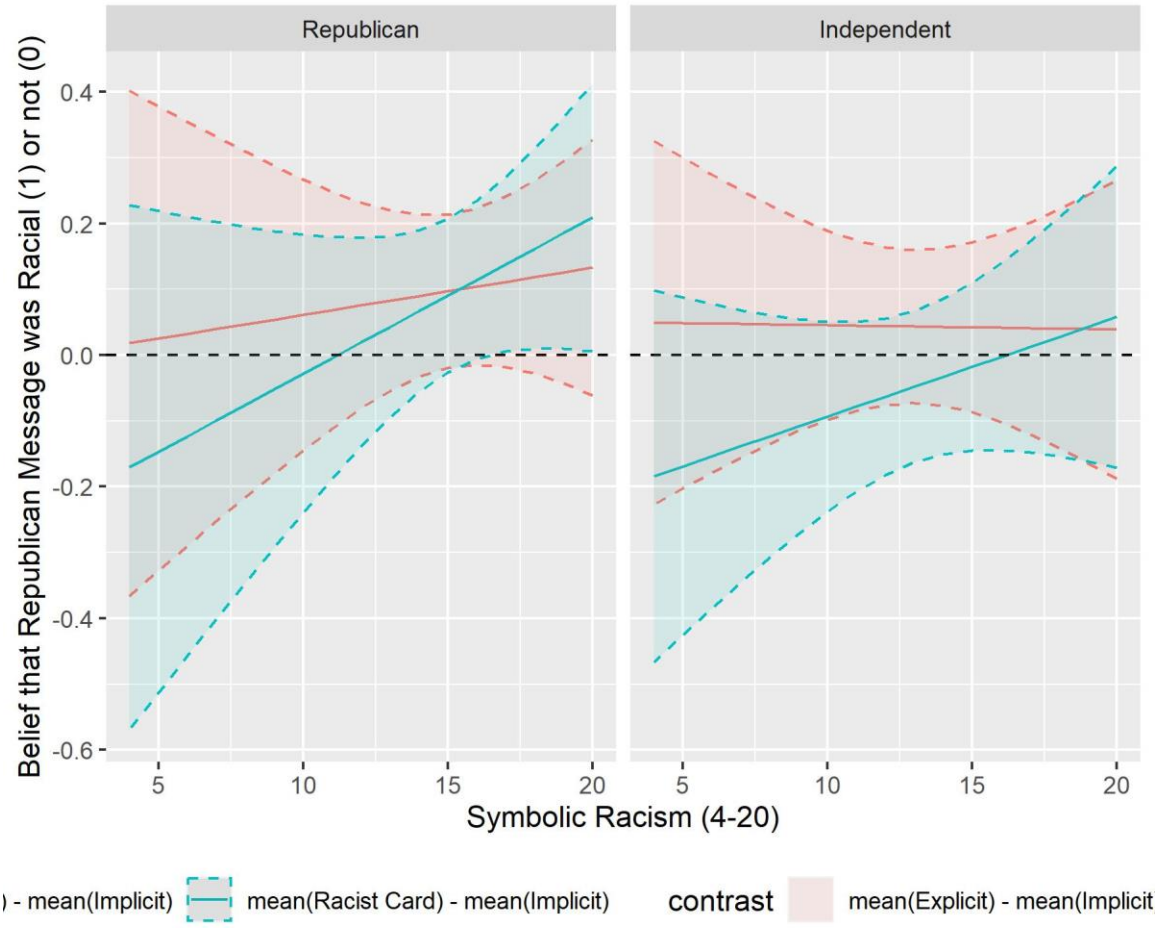
Table 2: Effects on Perception of Whether Republican Message Was Racial

	DV: Perception of whether Rep. message was racial (0) or not (1)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment: Explicit Callout	0.052	0.079	0.046	-0.011
	(0.045)	(0.063)	(0.152)	(0.260)
Treatment: Racist Card	0.010	0.085	-0.250	-0.266
	(0.045)	(0.064)	(0.156)	(0.271)
Independent		0.179***		0.336
		(0.063)		(0.217)
Explicit x Independent		-0.050		0.063
		(0.090)		(0.324)
Racist Card x Independent		-0.150*		0.021
		(0.089)		(0.336)
Symbolic Racism (4-20)			-0.052***	-0.040***
			(0.007)	(0.011)
Explicit x SR			0.002	0.007
			(0.010)	(0.017)
Racist Card x SR			0.019*	0.024
			(0.011)	(0.017)
Independent x SR				-0.019
				(0.015)
Explicit x Independent x SR				-0.008
				(0.022)
Racist Card x Independent x SR				-0.009
				(0.023)
Constant	0.373***	0.283***	1.094***	0.879***
	(0.032)	(0.044)	(0.105)	(0.165)
Observations	701	701	700	700
R^2	0.002	0.020	0.143	0.154
Adjusted R^2	-0.001	0.013	0.137	0.140
Residual Std. Error	0.489 (df = 698)	0.486 (df = 695)	0.454 (df = 694)	0.453 (df = 688)
F Statistic	0.736 (df = 2; 698)	2.790** (df = 5; 695)	23.120*** (df = 5; 694)	11.358*** (df = 11; 688)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Caption: This table shows a series of linear regression models estimating the relationship between treatment assignment, partisan identity, and symbolic racism on the variable measuring whether the Republican's message was perceived as racial (1) or not (0). Model 1 analyzes just the treatment variable, Model 2 adds a partisan identity interaction term, Model 3 adds a symbolic racism interaction term, and Model 4 includes a three-way interaction between treatment, partisan identity, and symbolic racism.

In Figure 2 (below), we show visual estimates based off of our analyses of the relationship between treatment assignment, symbolic racism, and partisan identity, and the dependent variable asking respondents whether the Republican's message was about race (1) or not (0). As with Figure 1, we omit confidence intervals for visual clarity, and as such effect significance should be determined using Table 2. Among Republicans, we observe that the "Explicit" condition is always viewed as more racial, with a slight (but statistically insignificant) increase at higher levels of symbolic racism. The "Racist card" condition, meanwhile, appears to induce more heterogeneous effects among Republicans: those with low racial resentment are less likely to believe the message is about race, while those high in racial resentment are *more* likely to believe so. Among independents, we observe that respondents in the "Explicit" condition is very slightly (but statistically insignificantly) were more likely to view the message as racial overall, with no differences across levels of symbolic racism. Like with the Republicans, though, we find that the "Racist card" condition makes the relationship between symbolic racism and the perception of race significantly steeper, and in the same direction: respondents low in symbolic racism who saw the "Racist card" condition were less likely to believe the message was about race, while those high in symbolic racism were *more* likely. We find that the "Racist card" messages causes symbolic racism to become more predictive of differences in perceptions of whether the Republican's messages were about race, which is not as apparent for the "Implicit" and "Explicit" conditions.

Figure 2: Effects on Perceptions of Whether Republican Message Was Racial



Caption: This graph shows the difference in means for the dependent variable assessing whether respondents believed the Republican's messages were about race (1) or not (0). Lines show differences in means between the "Implicit" condition (used as a baseline and denoted with the black dotted line) and the "Explicit" condition (red line) or the "Racist card" condition (blue line). Effects are estimated at different levels of symbolic racism and separately for Republicans (left graph) and independents (right graph). Confidence intervals are omitted for visual clarity; reference Table 2 for significance estimates.

Discussion:

These findings relate directly to the ongoing debate regarding the predictive validity of the Implicit-Explicit model of racialized political appeals. Our results examining how respondents evaluated the Republican's messages challenge recent studies asserting that this model is no longer an effective way to predict how voters respond to racialized political rhetoric (Banks and Hicks 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). We instead observe that respondents in the "Explicit" condition are less favorable towards the Republican's messages overall even when accounting for variation in symbolic racism and partisanship. Furthermore, when exposed to the "Racist card" condition, we find that respondents—and especially those high in racial resentment—converge towards supporting the Republican messages at similar rates to the "Implicit" condition. What this suggests, in favor of our first hypothesis, is that the "Racist card" condition can help buffer the potential negative effect of a racial callout. This effect is apparent for both Republicans and independents, suggesting that this strategy racialized counter-counterstrategy could be increasing support for Republican candidates among an ideologically broad range of white voters (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Still, we also observe fairly strong negative treatment effects among individuals lower in racial resentment, including among Republicans. Further studies should examine the proportion of voters in each of these groups to determine whether and how the results that we observed among our survey sample might translate into real-world voting behaviors, as our survey sample is not a representative sample of the voting population.

We also provide more detailed explications of the mechanisms behind the effectiveness (or not) of racialized political appeals. Like Banks and Hicks (2018), we examined whether treatment assignment affected whether respondents perceived the messages as racial or not. However, while they found that Democrats with low racial resentment were more likely to

believe that racial appeals were about race regardless of their implicit or explicitness, we observe an opposite trend among respondents (all independent and Republican) in our sample for those exposed to the "Racist card" condition. Respondents low in racial resentment who view the "Racist card" condition are less likely to believe the message is about race, while those high in racial resentment are *more* likely. Taken together with the net-positive effect of such messaging relative to the "Explicit" condition, what this suggests is that the "Racist card" message might serve a dual purpose. Among Republicans, it provides justification for those who are racially resentful to continue supporting racially conservative stances. Even though they are more likely to believe the message is about race, they are not less supportive. Among independents, an opposite effect emerges among those who are racially liberal: those exposed to the "Racist card" message are less likely to believe that the messages are about race.

We will conduct future analyses to examine these mechanisms. Additionally, we will look at other potential moderator variables that could explain these effects, such as old-fashioned racism, being from the South, and Christian nationalism.

Conclusion:

Norms of racialized political rhetoric are constantly shifting, partly because the premium that politicians gain from using such rhetoric comes from its shock factor. It should not be surprising, then, that theories of racialized political appeals ebb and flow in their predictive validity—not just because the world changes, but because politicians and campaigns are themselves constantly trying new strategies and approaches. Studies of the effects of racialized political appeals should also be updated constantly to accurately describe this shifting landscape.

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Appendix

Figure A1:

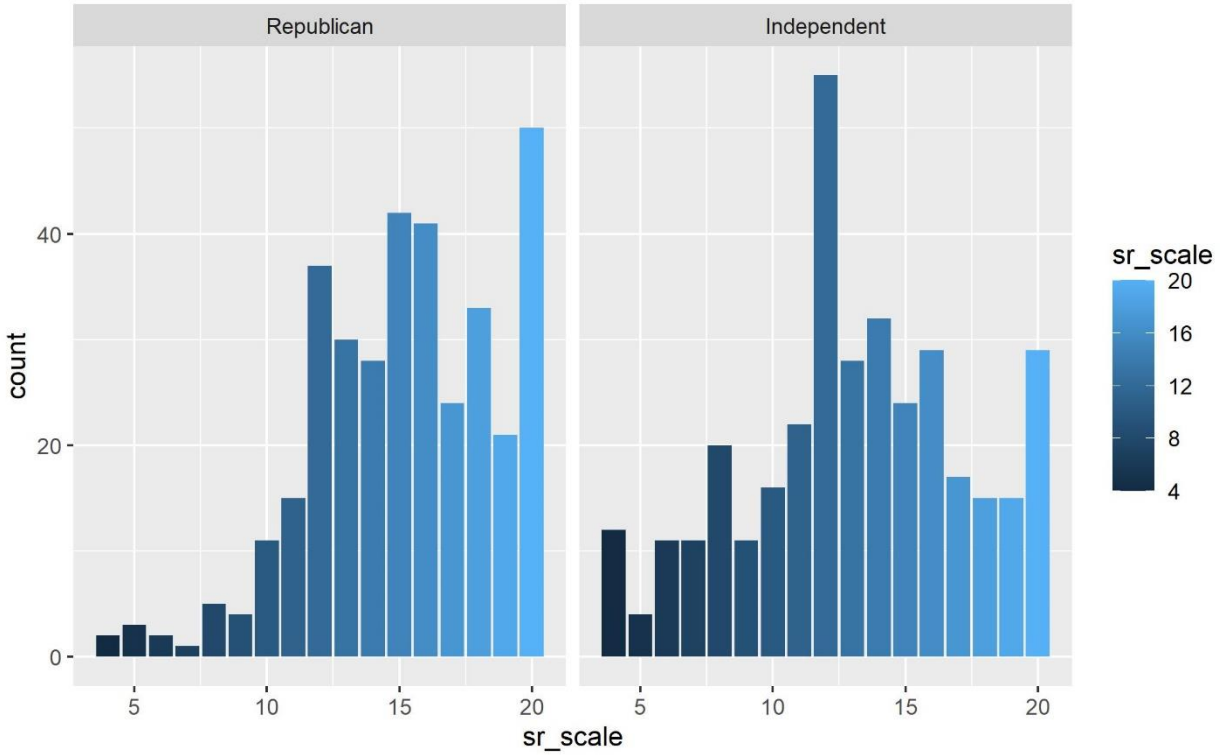
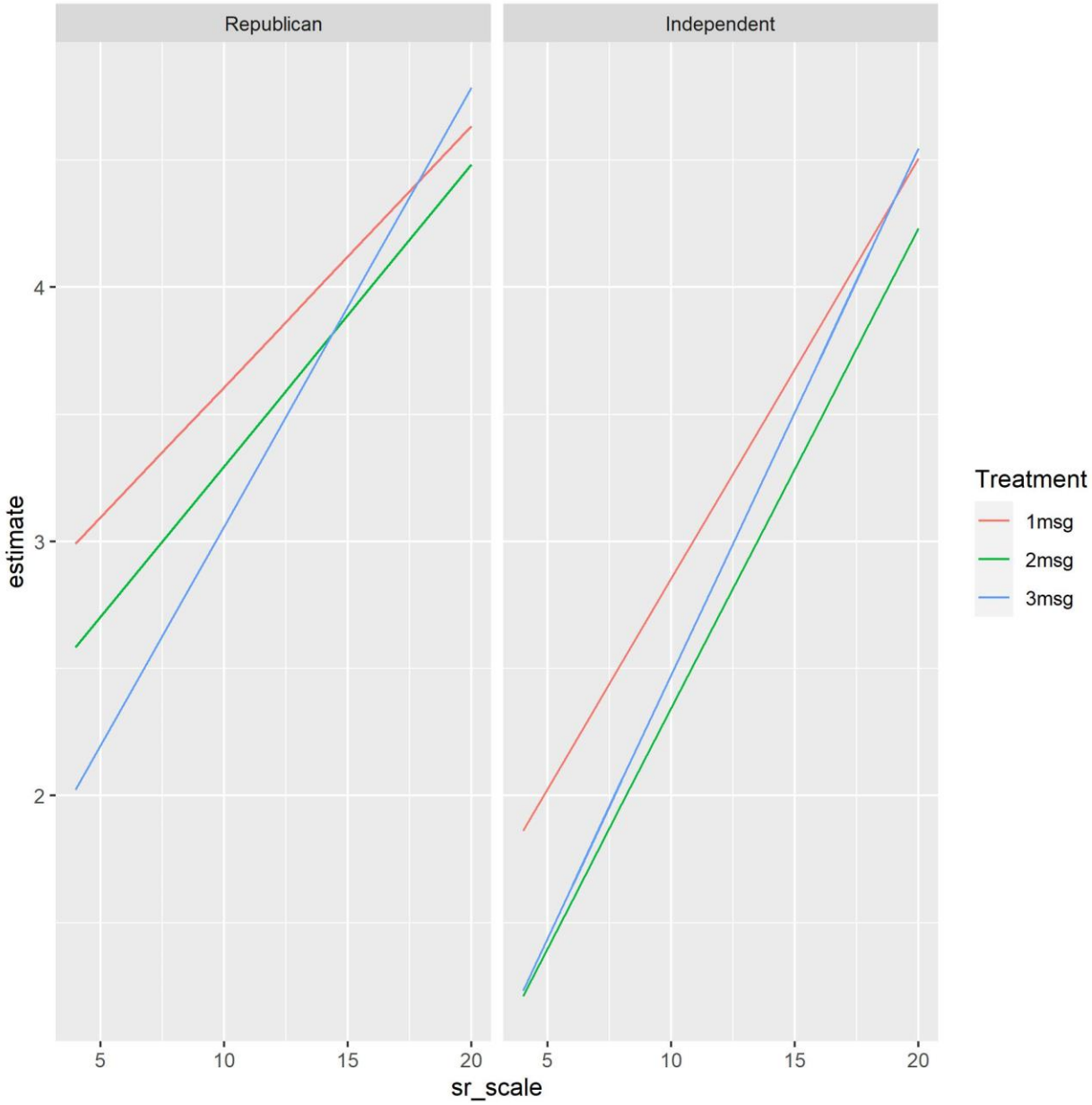


Figure A2:


Republican
Independent
estimate
4
3
2
5
10
15
20
sr_scale
Treatment
1msg
2msg
3msg