



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION  
2020, VOL. 37, NO. 4, 512-529  
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723750>



## The Effect of Associative Racial Cues in Elections

Adam J. Berinsky , Justin de Benedictis-Kessner , Megan E. Goldberg , and Michele F. Margolis

Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA Department of Political Science, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA Politics Department, Cornell College, Megan E. Vernon, Iowa, USA Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

### ABSTRACT

How do racial signals associating a candidate with minority supporters change voters' perceptions about a candidate and their support for a candidate? Given the presence of competing information in any campaign or the absence of information in low-salience campaigns, voters may rely on heuristics – such as race – to make the process of voting easier. The information communicated by these signals may be so strong that they cause voters to ignore other, perhaps more politically relevant, information. In this paper, we test how associative racial cues sway voters' perceptions of and support for candidates using two experiments that harness real-world print and audio campaign advertisements. We find that the signals in these ads can sometimes overwhelm cues about policy positions when the two are present together. Moreover, we find that such signals have limited effects on candidate support among Black voters but that they risk substantial backlash of up to eight percentage points in reported vote intention among White voters. Our results highlight how voters gather and use information in low-information elections and demonstrate the power of campaign communication strategies that use racial associations.

### KEYWORDS

race, voting, heuristics, campaigns, elections

**CONTACT** Megan E. Goldberg ✉ [mgoldberg@cornellcollege.edu](mailto:mgoldberg@cornellcollege.edu) Politics Department, Cornell College, 600 1st St., Mount Vernon, IA 52314, USA.

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi->

