Racial attitudes & political cross-pressures in nationalized elections: The case of the Republican coalition in the Trump era

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have found that Trump was able to capitalize on the racial attitudes of white voters, it is less clear how these racial attitudes influenced vote-choice across partisan and ideological cleavages in the electorate. It is also unclear whether racial attitudes affected voting at the congressional level or electoral outcomes at the aggregate level. Using a novel measure of racial attitudes at the subnational level and survey data, we make three clear findings: (1) Trump and Republican congressional candidates benefited from conservative racial attitudes both at the aggregate level and among white voters, (2) this electoral benefit for Republicans persisted during the 2018 midterm elections, and (3) the effect of attitudes on vote-choice did not significantly vary across partisan and ideological cleavages in the white electorate. Our findings suggest that, even during the era of highly nationalized and partisan elections, racial attitudes are still a mechanism by which Republicans can win significant electoral support among Democrats and relatively liberal voters in the white electorate. These findings have implications for the growing salience of race in the Republican electoral coalition.

The 2016 presidential election featured unprecedented levels of partisan voting. Compared to 2012, partisan voters defected at lower rates, were less likely to engage in split-ticket voting, and viewed the opposing party's candidate more negatively (Jacobson, 2017). Even prior to 2016, partisanship was already known to be by far the strongest determinant of voting behavior (Bartels, 2000; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), so it is worth asking what factors still meaningfully affect vote choice. The research we present in this paper suggests that even in a uniquely partisan era, white voters' racial attitudes can still swing Democratic partisans and other liberal voters to vote for Republican candidates.

The 2016 presidential election placed race and voter's racial attitudes at the forefront of American electoral politics. From calling for a "Muslim ban" to suggesting that undocumented Latino immigrants are criminals and rapists,[2] the Trump campaign repeatedly made high-profile racialized appeals to white voters (Lamont et al., 2017; Schaffner et al., 2018). While there was a robust debate following the election about whether racism fueled Trump's victory, or whether it was largely

economic anxiety,[3] subsequent research has decisively concluded that racial attitudes were a major factor (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Schaffner et al., 2018).

What is less certain is how racial attitudes affect vote-choice across partisan and ideological cleavages. Prior research has found evidence that between 6.7 million and 9.2 million voters switched from voting for Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016,[4] and that racial attitudes were a strong predictor of such switches (Reny et al., 2019). There is also evidence that racial attitudes drove vote choice at the congressional level in the 2016 election (Algara and Hale, 2019). However, it is still unknown whether this effect occurs more broadly among white voters or whether only certain sub-groups are persuadable.

While most existing research examines the effect of racial attitudes nationally (sometimes with regional controls), we develop a new congressional district-level measure of racial attitudes. This approach is particularly useful because it can help us understand how racial attitudes shaped the 2016 and 2018 elections. Furthermore, we improve upon previous methods used in the literature by generating our measure

of racial attitudes from a novel set of national survey questions recently introduced in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) by DeSante and Smith (2020).

We find that Trump beneifted from conservative racial attitudes both at the aggregate level and among individual white voters. We also find that GOP Congressional candidates in both 2016 and 2018 benefited from these same effects. Finally, we also find that the effect of racial attitudes on vote choice in both 2016 and 2018 was not contingent on the partisan affiliation or ideological disposition of white voters. These findings suggest that GOP candidates may benefit from activating racial attitudes as a way of winning over Democratic voters and that there are strategic electoral reasons for the GOP to make racial attitudes a central pillar of the Republican electoral coalition.

1. Racial attitudes & the modern GOP coalition

Capitalizing on whites' racial attitudes has been a major element of GOP national political strategy since the beginning of racial realignment in the 1950s (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Indeed, the infamous Republican "Southern Strategy" pioneered by Barry Goldwater and refined by Reagan strategist Lee Atwater explicitly sought to garner white support by using racialized language around policies that white voters perceived as benefiting blacks (such as school integration, welfare, etc.) (Hillygus and Shields, 2014). However, even the Southern Strategy avoided "old-fashioned" (overt) racial appeals (Kinder and Sanders, 1996), as the overriding norm of racial equality necessitated the use of "dog whistles" to covertly appeal to the racial resentment of white voters (Mendelberg, 2017).[5]

In the Obama era, there is ample evidence that racial attitudes were a major determinant of vote choice. In the 2008 election, Obama received fewer votes as a result of conservative racial attitudes (Piston, 2010; Clarke et al., 2011; Lewis-Beck et al., 2010) and opposition to his candidacy was far more racialized than for ideologically proximate white candidates (Tesler, 2013). Research by Knuckey and Kim (2015) finds that racial resentment cost Obama support among white voters in 2012 and that his election in 2008 primed white voters to view national politics through the lens of their racial attitudes. This effect was not limited to Obama – race "spilled over" into the midterm elections in 2010 (Tesler, 2013; Petrow et al., 2017) and 2014 (Luttig and Motta, 2017), with public opinion polarizing on the basis of racial attitudes in reaction to President Obama.

While the presence of a racially polarizing candidate of color can be sufficient to make race salient for white voters, it is not a necessary condition. When campaigns such as Trump's employ racialized messaging, they can raise the salience of racial attitudes in an election (Tesler and Sears, 2010). Hillary Clinton's embrace of Obama and racially inclusive policy also helped Trump's explicit racial appeals resonate with white voters (Sides et al., 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018). Trump's racial appeals also helped mobilize white voters in the general election and garner support from Republican voters in the primary election (Lamont et al., 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2019; Jardina, 2019). Even absent direct campaign appeals, white voters being

primed to think about the changing demographics of the country increases their support for Republican candidates and conservative policy positions (Craig and Richeson, 2014; Willer et al., 2016; Major et al., 2018; Mutz, 2018). Experimental research by Luttig et al. (2017) even finds that white Trump supporters were less likely to support redistributive policies when they are proposed by a black (rather than a white) man.

While Obama's historic candidacy and Trump's explicit racial appeals both made racial attitudes electorally salient for white voters, it is an open question whether the 2018 midterm featured a similar dynamic. While race undeniably affected the vote choices of whites during the 2010 and 2014 Obama midterms (Petrow et al., 2017; Luttig and Motta, 2017), there is reason to believe that Obama's historical status as the first black president engendered a unique backlash that spilled over to the midterm elections during his presidency (Tesler, 2013; Abrajano and Hajnal, 2015). While Trump also successfully activated racial attitudes in his election (Lamont et al., 2017; Sides et al., 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018; Jardina, 2019), existing research has not yet identified whether this activation also spilled over to 2018 or whether this election signaled a reversion to the relative disassociation between racial attitudes and white partisanship of the pre-Obama era. A major source of this uncertainty is due to persistent debates about the validity of commonly used measures of racial attitudes.

Following the Civil Rights Movement, scholars of American politics sought to explain how voters could profess commitment to equality while simultaneously opposing policies that would realize that belief. From this research agenda emerged the idea of racial resentment. In contrast to "old-fashioned" explicit racism, this new "symbolic" strain of racial resentment relies on the association of blacks with threats to whites' quality of life (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Knuckey and Kim, 2015). Since 1986, the American National Election Study (ANES) has measured racial resentment with the following battery of items: (1) "Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors"; (2) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class"; (3) "It's really just a matter of some people trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites"; (4) "Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve." Respondents are asked whether they agree or disagree with each statement, and how strongly.

While the measure of racial resentment based off these items has been a staple of scholarship on Americans' racial attitudes, it has also been the subject of fierce debate and criticism. As Feldman and Huddy (2005) point out, the scale may be measuring an ideological belief on individualism vs. economic redistribution, particularly among white conservatives. Subsequent work by Kam and Burge (2018) suggests that the scale may be measuring perceptions about the degree to which racial inequality is structural, but may not be directly measuring whites' racial attitudes towards blacks. Furthermore, while the items in the ANES bank seek to measure the affective and cognitive dimensions of racial attitudes, they do not account for the role of emotions like anger, guilt, empathy, and fear that scholars have since identified (Banks and Valentino, 2012). These drawbacks to the Kinder and Sears (1981) racial resentment index have dogged studies of the effect of racial attitudes on political behavior – especially frustrating given the heightened salience of race in politics in the Obama and Trump eras (Sides et al., 2018).

Developed and deployed in the 2016 CCES, DeSante and Smith's (2020) fear, institutionalized racism, empathy (FIRE) scale addresses many of the criticisms of the Kinder and Sears (1981) "symbolic" racism measure. While the questions asked previously in the CCES and ANES

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[5] While party sorting has largely incorporated racial attitudes into voter partisanship (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Lee, 2002; Sides et al., 2018; Engelhardt, 2019), we know that racial attitudes still influence vote choice. A number of survey experiments in recent years have demonstrated that exposing white voters to messages about changing national demographics makes them more supportive of conservative policy positions (Craig and Richeson, 2014), less supportive of the norm of racial diversity (Danbold and Huo, 2015), more supportive of conservative candidates for public office (Willer et al., 2016; Mutz, 2018) and more supportive of Trump in the 2016 election (Major et al., 2018). Outside the lab, research on racialized campaign messaging also finds that activating racial attitudes is effective for altering the political preferences of white voters (Mendelberg, 1997, 2008; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Valentino et al., 2015).

potentially primed respondents to consider policy in addition to race, the FIRE scale attempts to both omit policy considerations and account for the emotional component of racial attitudes. As with the classic battery, the FIRE scale is composed of four items which respondents are asked to either agree or disagree with: (1) "I am fearful of people of other races"; (2) "White people in the US have certain advantages because of the color of their skin"; (3) "Racial problems in the US are rare, isolated situations"; (4) "I am angry that racism exists." The switch to this more nuanced measure of racial attitudes in the CCES in 2016 and 2018 in combination with the large N of these surveys allows us to generate more robust estimates of racial attitudes that we can use to assess the effect of those attitudes on vote choice in both presidential and congressional contests (Ansolabehere and Rivers, 2013).[6] Unlike prior measures, the FIRE scale allows for a holistic evaluation of whites' cognitive beliefs about race in America as well as their emotional reactions to racism.

2. The effect of racial attitudes on voting

We predict that voters with more conservative racial attitudes will be more likely to support Republican candidates for national office in both 2016 and 2018, continuing the trend from the Obama era. We expect that this effect will manifest even when controlling for the voter's relative ideological distance to each candidate, their party identification, their economic evaluations, and demographic factors. Unlike prior research that examines racialized voting behavior in the 2008–2016 elections, we extend this study into the untested territory of the 2018 midterms.

* H_{1A}: More conservative subnational (i.e. district and state) racial attitudes are associated with higher aggregate electoral vote-shares won by Donald Trump in 2016 and House Republican candidates during the 2016 and 2018 electoral cycles.
* H_{1B}: More conservative racial attitudes among individual voters increased their likelihood of supporting Trump in 2016 and Republican congressional candidates in both 2016 and 2018.

Even if the effect of racial attitudes on white voting behavior persisted into the 2018 midterm election, there is reason to believe that this effect could be conditioned by political cleavages in the electorate. This possibility is due to the well-established concept of spatial voting associated with Downs (1957). At its simplest, spatial voting refers to when voters select the candidate closest to them ideologically in an election (Lau, 2013). Given the continued prevalence of spatial voting, even with potentially distorting factors such as party identification, presidential approval, and incumbency (Simas, 2013; Joesten and Stone, 2014; Stone, 2017), we might reasonably predict that voters on different ends of the ideological spectrum may face different psychological incentives when incorporating their racial attitudes into their voting behavior.

Racial attitudes may not condition vote choice identically for voters who are more ideologically proximate to the Republican candidate and those closer to the Democrat. Because of the process of racial realignment in American politics, the Republican Party is firmly associated with conservative racial attitudes whereas the Democratic Party is associated with racial liberalism. Logically then, white voters who are closer to the Democratic candidate who also have more conservative racial attitudes

are psychologically cross-pressured, whereas racially conservative white voters ideologically closer to the Republican candidate are not. As such, the degree to which equivalent racial attitudes affect the vote choice of ideologically conservative and ideologically liberal voters may vary. While it is possible that more conservative racial attitudes have an equal distortionary effect on vote choice no matter where the voter falls on the left-right ideological spectrum, the racially polarized orientation of America's two major parties makes this a proposition worth testing – particularly in the context of the unprecedented ideological polarization that defines the modern era of American party politics (McCarty et al., 2006; Rohde and Barthelemy, 2010).

* H_{2A}: The effect of conservative racial attitudes on vote choice will be relatively smaller for voters who identify as Democrats than those who identify as Republicans.
* H_{2B}: The effect of conservative racial attitudes on vote choice will be relatively smaller for voters ideologically closer to the Democratic candidate than the Republican candidate.

3. Racial attitudes & aggregate GOP performance

3.1. State and district-level racial attitudes

The first axiom of our theoretical framework posits that Donald Trump and Republican congressional candidates benefited from an activation of racial attitudes among the white electorate. In addition to fueling Republican performance during the 2016 presidential election, we also argue that conservative racial attitudes helped mitigate Republican losses during the 2018 midterm elections. We build on individual-level work suggesting that the activation of racial attitudes raises the propensity of voting Republican in both presidential and midterm election contexts (Piston, 2010; Tesler and Sears, 2010; Algara and Hale, 2019).

While the literature identifies voter-level evidence regarding the relationship between racial attitudes and electoral choice, less is known about the relationship between sub-national racial attitudes and observed aggregate electoral outcomes. The challenge in extending this voter-level link between racial attitudes and electoral choice to aggregate electoral outcomes largely centers on measurement of public opinion at the district level. Indeed, scholars note that the lack of public opinion measures at the subnational level (i.e., cities, legislative districts, states) presents a challenge in testing whether individual-level relationships hold at the aggregate level (Caughey and Warshaw, 2018). While representation scholars have overcome these challenges to estimate subnational opinion about policy and ideological preferences (see Warshaw and Rodden, 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014), to our knowledge scholars have not been able to overcome the challenge of estimating racial attitudes at the state or congressional district level.[7]

To test the relationship between racial attitudes and aggregate Republican electoral performance during the 2016 and 2018 elections, our model requires a dynamic subnational measure of racial attitudes at the congressional district and state level. To derive dynamic estimates at these levels, we turn to the Bayesian group-level item response theory ("IRT") model developed by Caughey and Warshaw (2015). This hierarchical IRT model allows us to dynamically estimate subnational racial attitudes as a function of group (i.e, demographic) and contextual (i.e, geographic) traits in a Bayesian framework using multiple survey items

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[6] The large *N* nature of the CCES provides a stark analytical advantage over the cluster-sampling design of the American National Election Study (ANES) to evaluate theories of congressional vote-choice (Citrin et al., 2003). For example, the 2016 CCES (total $N = 64{,}408$) provides respondents for all 435 congressional districts with a mean *N* of ≈ 148 (≈ 1288) respondents per district (state). By contrast, while the 2016 ANES surveys 434 districts, one cannot assume these are remotely representative subunit samples given the small mean *N* of 10 (≈ 84) respondents per district (state).

[7] For a potential exception, see Elmendorf and Spencer (2014) for estimation of anti-black and anti-Hispanic stereotyping at the state and county-level derived from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey and the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project.
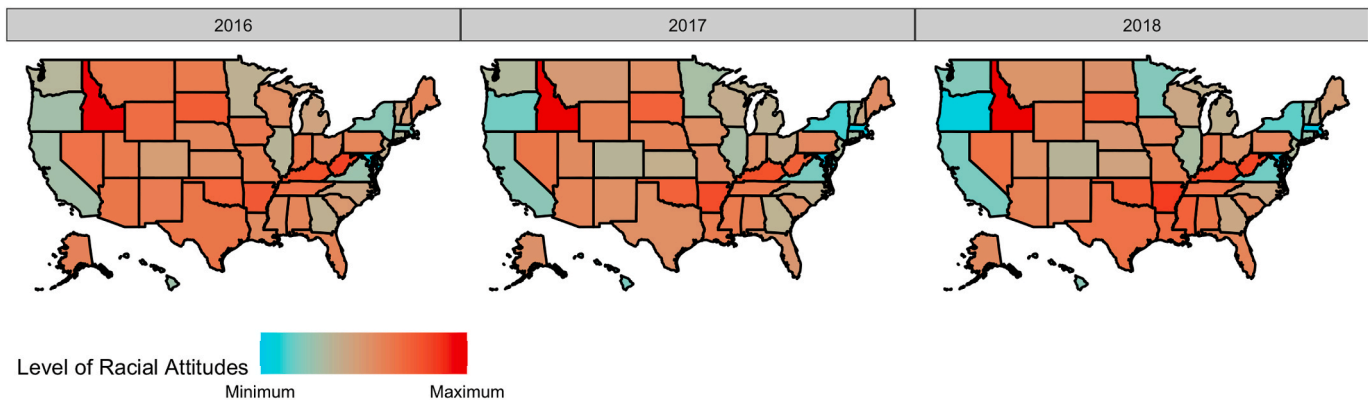
Fig. 1. State-Level Estimates of Racial attitudes in the Mass Public.

measuring latent opinion.[8,9] The appeal of this method for estimating subnational racial attitudes is that it allows for the incorporation of demographic and geographic context, generally from census data, and the usage of multiple survey items measuring racial attitudes in the estimation of a given geographic unit's political attitudes (Warshaw and Rodden, 2012). While previous studies of the effect of voter-level racial attitudes on voting behavior have focused on whites, these aggregate estimates are for all voters in states and congressional districts in order to appropriately gauge the effect of those attitudes on aggregate candidate performance.[10]

To estimate racial attitudes at the state and district level, we rely on survey data provided by the CCES and Caughey and Warshaw (2015) dynamic group-level IRT model. In this setup, we model latent racial attitudes as a function of group-based traits (e.g, education, race, gender) and hierarchical geographic and time parameters. We leverage this model against various survey items in the 2016, 2017, and 2018 CCES tapping into implicit racial attitudes.[11] While previous research has generated state-level estimates of racial resentment using ANES data (Smith et al., 2019), our approach is able to use a broader array of survey items and a significantly larger sample size under an explicitly dynamic framework. This procedure results in estimates of racial attitudes by population demographics in each congressional district and state for each time point, with these estimates being able to change over-time. From there, we derive the state and congressional district specific

estimates of racial attitudes by poststratifying the model results with U. S. Census data to match the population distribution of demographically relevant groups. In other words, we poststratify the model results to match the demographic characteristics of states and congressional districts with respect to gender, race, and education.[12]

An example of our racial attitude estimates is shown in Fig. 1, which maps racial attitudes at the state level for 2016, 2017, and 2018. As Fig. 1 shows, there is a variation in racial attitudes across states. The cross-sectional estimates provide face validity for the racial attitudes estimates, with Idaho, Kentucky, and West Virginia generally exhibiting the most conservative racial attitudes and the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Massachusetts exhibiting the most liberal racial attitudes. Adding to the face validity of our estimates, southern congressional districts have significantly more conservative racial attitudes than non-southern congressional districts ($\rho < 0.001$).[13] This is consistent with previous literature (i.e, Valentino and Sears, 2005; Elmendorf and Spencer, 2014) which finds that conservative racial attitudes are more prevalent in the American south. Fig. 1 also shows dynamic change in racial attitudes, with the states exhibiting the greatest conservative shift in racial attitudes since 2016 (MS, LA, AR, AL, SC) being located in the American south.[14] Taken together, it is clear that our estimates of subnational racial attitudes have a great degree of face validity.

3.2. Aggregate racial attitudes & GOP electoral success

Now that we have our estimates, we turn to establishing a relationship between subnational racial attitudes and support for Republican candidates during the 2016 and 2018 elections. Before specifying a full model of aggregate electoral outcomes, we first explore the bivariate relationship between racial attitudes and Republican vote-shares during the 2016 and 2018 elections in a series of scatterplots displayed in Fig. 2. As Fig. 2 Panel A shows, there is a strong relationship between more conservative state-level racial attitudes and the percentage of the two-party vote won by Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election, with a one-unit conservative shift in state-level racial attitudes corresponding to an average increase of approximately 6.1% in support for Donald Trump. Fig. 2 Panel B confirms the strong relationship between subnational racial attitudes and support for Donald Trump at the

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[8] In an IRT model, a "latent" trait refers to when discrete item responses are treated as observable manifestations of a hypothesized attribute that is not directly observed. Racial attitudes (as measured here by the FIRE scale) are an example of a latent trait. More information and validation of these estimates, derived from the R package dgo developed by Dunham et al. (2018), can be found in the appendix.

[9] This approach is similar to the dynamic multi-level multilevel regression and post-stratification method (MRP) developed by Park et al. (2004) which uses a single survey question to measure subnational public opinion. Caughey and Warshaw (2015) extend this logic to develop their dynamic model estimating subnational latent public opinion over time and using multiple survey items at the individual-level.

[10] In the appendix we re-run the IRT model using only white voters and then generate congressional district and state-level estimates of racial attitudes poststratifying only using gender and education. All of these estimates are highly correlated with the state and district-level estimates presented in the body of the manuscript that include all voters.

[11] This provides for 4 items in the 2016 CCES, 4 items in the 2017 CCES, and 6 items in the 2018 CCES. Note that the 2016 and 2017 CCES leverage the four-item fear, institutionalized racism, empathy (FIRE) scale (DeSante and Smith, 2020) to measure racial attitudes. The 2018 CCES incorporates two of these survey items, in addition to four more traditional racial resentment survey items (DeSante and Smith, 2020). For details regarding these survey items, see the supplemental manuscript appendix.

[12] The census data used to poststratify the model results was obtained using the scraping feature of the acs R package. The data used in the analysis is taken from the relevant American Community Survey C15002 tables articulating educational attainment by gender and race.

[13] Additionally, southern states exhibit significantly more conservative racial attitudes than non-southern states ($\rho < 0.025$).

[14] By contrast, the states with the biggest liberal shift in racial attitudes since 2016 (OR, MA, DC, VT, CO)—with the exception of the District of Columbia—are located in the west and New England.
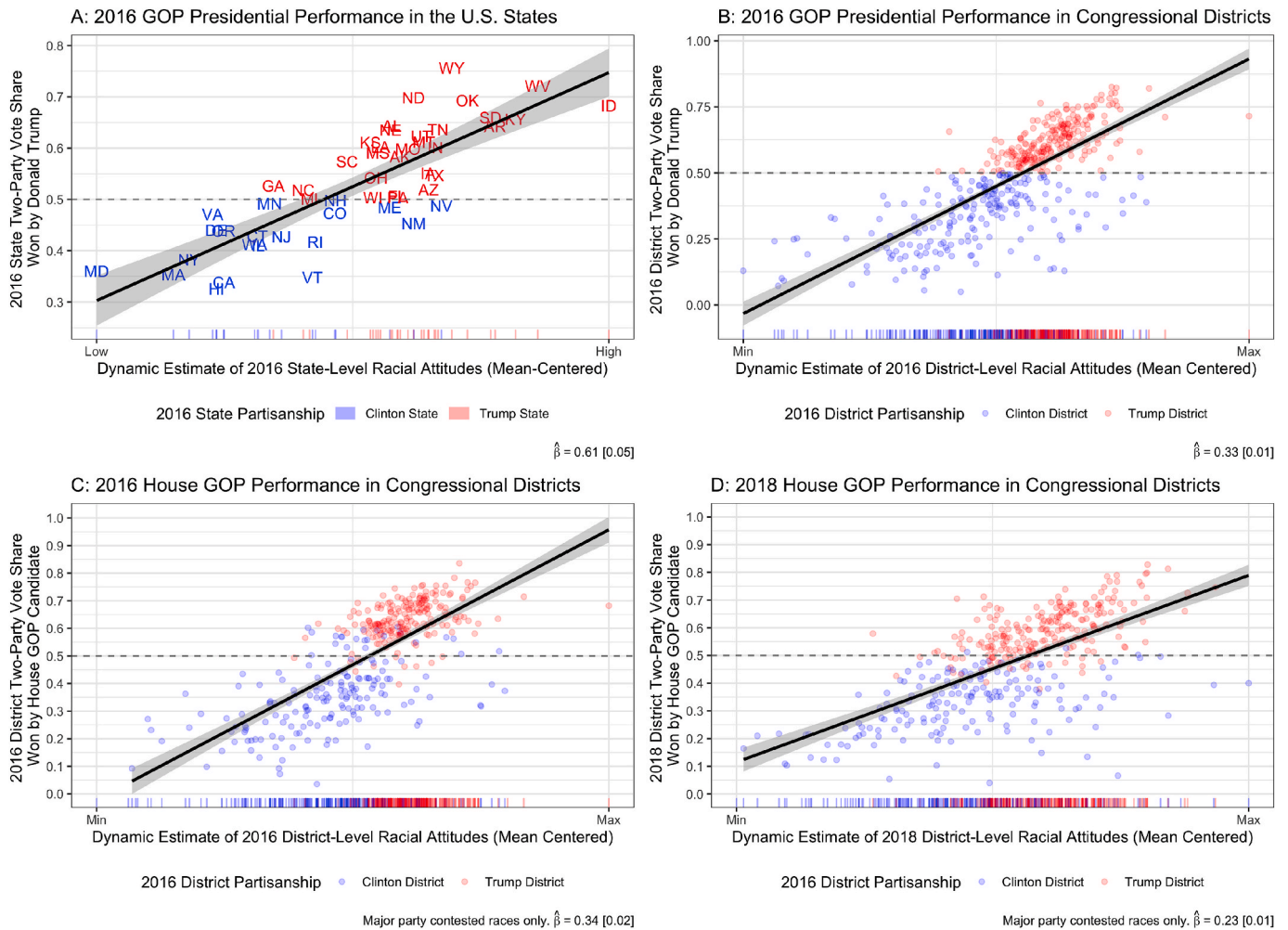
Fig. 2. Bivariate relationship between subnational racial attitudes & GOP vote shares.

congressional district level, with a one-unit conservative shift in district-level racial attitudes corresponding to a 3.3% increase in support for Trump. Fig. 2 Panels C and D also shows a strong relationship between district-level racial attitudes and electoral support for Republican U.S. House candidates during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles.[15] A one-unit conservative shift in racial attitudes at the district-level corresponds to an average vote-share increase of 3.4% for Republican House candidates during the 2016 election cycles, almost identical to the relationship between district attitudes and support for Trump during the same election cycle.[16] This bivariate relationship persists, to a lesser extent, during the 2018 U.S. House elections. Reflecting the 2018 Democratic electoral tide (Jacobson, 2019) and the traditional

over-exposure midterm losses suffered by the president's party (Tufte, 1975), a one-unit conservative shift in racial attitudes corresponds to a modest 2.3% increase in vote-shares for 2018 Republican House candidates, a decrease of 1.1% compared to the 2016 cycle.

Taken as a whole, the bivariate scatterplots articulated in Fig. 2 provide descriptive evidence for a positive relationship between conservative state and district-level racial attitudes and Republican electoral support. However, it is important to consider that racial attitudes may simply be a proxy for aggregate subnational partisan preferences, given the relatively high correlation between partisanship and racial attitudes (Schaffner et al., 2018).[17] It is also important to consider salient determinants of presidential and U.S. House elections, such as constituency demographics, partisanship, and the congruence between candidate and district ideological preferences. To isolate the relationship between racial attitudes and Republican electoral success in presidential and congressional contests, we specify a regression model accounting for these salient predictors of aggregate Republican support at the district and state level.

We first begin by specifying a model of Donald Trump's electoral performance during the 2016 election at the state and congressional district level. The dependent variable of this aggregate model is the

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[15] We also show that this strong relationship between district-level racial attitudes and support for Republican candidates holds during the 2016 and 2018 U.S. Senate elections. Fig. 8 articulating this result can be found in the appendix. It is important to note, however, that this relationship is weaker in the context of U.S. Senate elections given the non-random staggering of Senate elections present during these two election cycles.

[16] This similarity in bivariate relationships between district attitudes and Republican vote-share at the presidential and House level is reflective of the general argument in the literature suggesting that the determinants of congressional elections are increasingly partisan and president-centered during the nationalized era (Jacobson, 2015; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). In other words, this result is consistent with the increasing correlation between the district-level determinants of presidential and co-partisan congressional candidate electoral performance.

[17] Indeed, state-level (district-level) partisanship and racial attitudes are correlated at $\rho = 0.83$ ($\rho = 0.71$) during the 2016 election cycle. During the 2018 election cycle, subnational district-level partisanship and racial attitudes are correlated at $\rho = 0.61$.
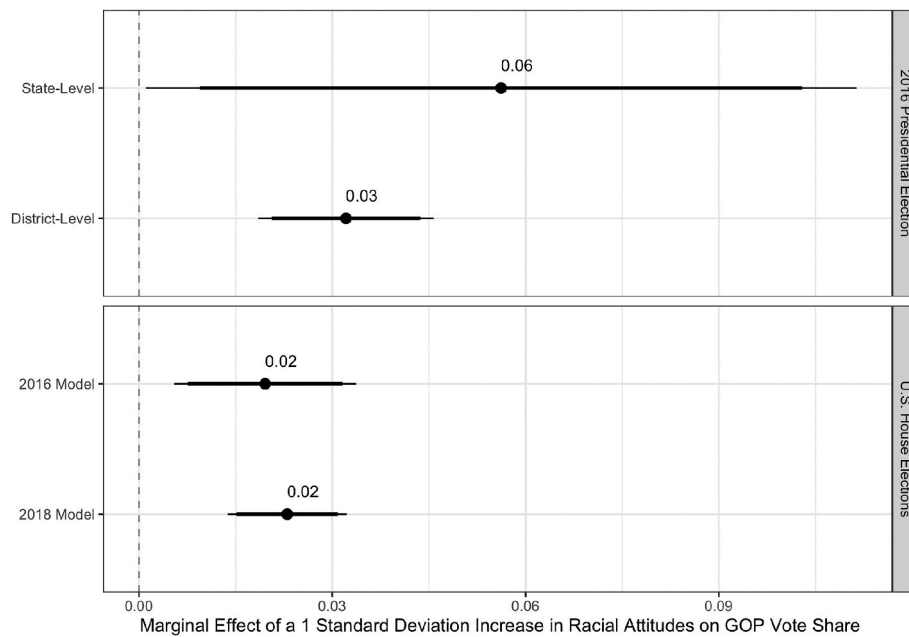
Fig. 3. Marginal effects of racial attitudes on GOP vote share.

proportion of the two-party vote won by Donald Trump and the main independent variable is subnational racial attitudes. We control for constituency demographics by including a variable measuring the proportion of whites residing within the district. We control for district partisanship in the model by including the proportion of the two-party party vote won by Former Governor Mitt Romney (R-MA) during his unsuccessful 2012 presidential bid against Democratic President Barack Obama.[18] Lastly, we control for ideological congruence between the district median voter and the ideological locations of Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton.[19] In specifying our aggregate model of House election outcomes, we build on the presidential model by adding campaign-level control variables to account for differences in candidate quality, incumbency, campaign spending, and the partisanship of the seat heading into the election. The dependent variable of the House elections model is the two-party vote share won by the Republican House candidate and we specify the model for both the 2016 and

2018 election cycles.[20]

Fig. 3 plots the average marginal effect of our variable of interest, subnational racial attitudes, on the two-party vote share won by Republican candidates in presidential and U.S. House races.[21] As shown in the top panel of Fig. 3, we find strong evidence of a positive relationship between more conservative racial attitudes and support for Donald Trump during the 2016 election. A one standard deviation conservative shift in state-level racial attitudes corresponds to an approximately 6% increase in two-party vote share won by Donald Trump in 2016.[22] At the congressional district level, a one standard deviation conservative shift in subnational racial attitudes corresponds to an approximately 3% increase in vote-share won by Trump.

We now turn to the bottom panel of Fig. 3 evaluating the marginal effect of a one standard deviation conservative shift in racial attitudes on the electoral fortunes of House Republican candidates during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles. We find strong evidence that House Republican candidates benefited electorally from more conservative subnational racial attitudes in the aggregate, though to a lesser degree than Donald Trump. During both the 2016 and 2018 election cycles we find that, after controlling for campaign-level covariates and district partisanship, a one-standard deviation conservative shift in racial attitudes corresponds to approximately a 2% increase in the two-party vote share won by House Republican candidates.

4. A new metric for estimating voters' racial attitudes

Taken together, the analysis we have presented provides aggregate

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[18] In the specification of the state-level model, we measure state partisanship as the mean share of the two-party vote won by the Republican presidential candidate during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections. We elect to specify state partisanship in this manner to minimize the salience of national partisan tides in our measure of state partisanship (see Highton, 2000).

[19] We estimate ideological positions for districts, presidential, and congressional candidates using Aldrich-McKelvey scaling methods and ideological perceptual-data provided by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ramey, 2016). This scaling procedure allows for the unbiased estimation of citizen and candidate ideal points in the same ideological space. We take the mean value of citizen ideal points to measure the district median voter and estimate congruence using the following sample spatial model: Proximity = $|RM_j - C_i| - |DM_j - C_i|$ where RM_j (DM_j) is the estimated ideal point of the Republican (Democratic) candidate and C_i is the location of the district/state median voter. Positive (negative) values of this spatial term control variable indicates that the district median voter is closer in ideological congruence to the Republican candidate.

[20] Each of the campaign-level contextual controls are coded in the Republican direction, consistent with the coding of the dependent variable. The full coding convention can be found in the manuscript appendix. The ideological proximity variable is coded using the ideological positions of the House Democratic and Republican candidates and district partisanship is coded in the same way as the presidential model, with district partisanship measuring the proportion of the two-party vote won by Mitt Romney in 2012.

[21] Full results of our aggregate level models can be found in the appendix regression tables.

[22] This standard deviation conservative shift (0.18) in state racial attitudes is qualitatively equivalent as going from a level comparable to Colorado or New Hampshire to a level found in Oklahoma.
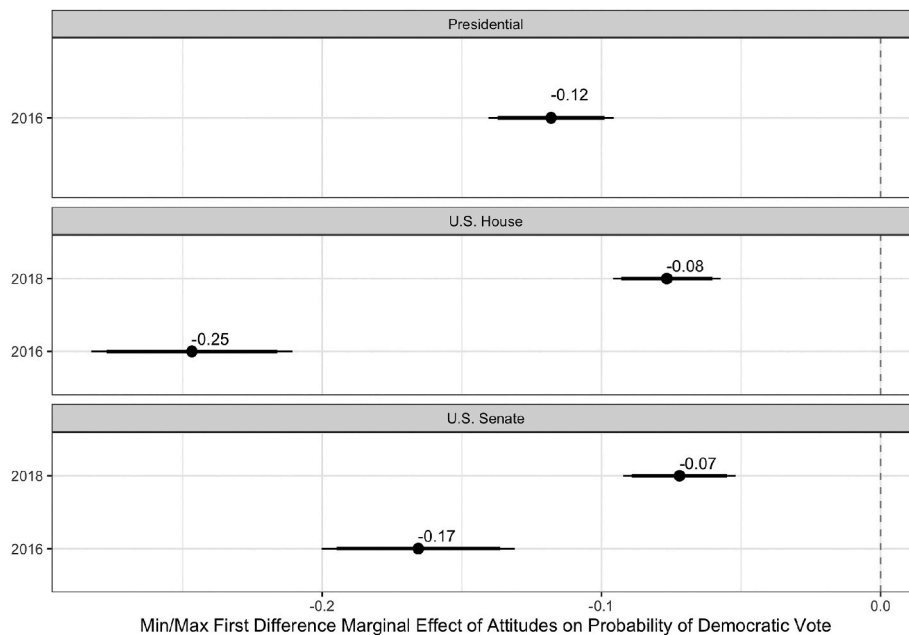
Fig. 4. Marginal effect of conservative racial attitudes on probability of democratic vote by electoral contest.

support for our hypothesis that conservative racial attitudes provided an electoral boost to not only Donald Trump in 2016, but also to House Republican candidates in 2016 and during the 2018 midterm elections (H_{1A}). However, the preceding analysis does not address the influence of racial attitudes on the likelihood of an individual voter supporting Donald Trump or Republican congressional candidates. We posit that not only did Donald Trump and House Republican candidates benefit from conservative racial attitudes among voters (H_{1B}), but that racial attitudes provided a basis by which white voters defected from their partisan and ideological preferences (H_{2A} & H_{2B}).

To specify our models of electoral choices evaluating whether Republican candidates benefited from individual-level racial attitudes, we once again use survey data from the 2016 and 2018 CCES. To begin, we focus on estimating a measure of latent racial attitudes at the voter-level among white Americans. To measure this key independent variable, we rely on the central elements of the fear, institutionalized racism, and empathy (FIRE) scale developed by DeSante and Smith (2020). We use the following questions of the FIRE scale asking respondents their level of agreement, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the following statements:

* White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.
* Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.
* I am angry that racism exists.

These indicators, used in recent work assessing the relationship between racial attitudes and political preferences (e.g., Schaffner et al., 2018; Tolbert et al., 2018; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018), are desirable for assessing racial attitudes given that they do not measure citizen ideological or policy preferences, but rather the intensity of racial attitudes. Following a similar methodological approach to recent studies measuring racial attitudes in the mass public (e.g., Schaffner et al., 2018; Algara and Hale, 2019), we fit a graded scale IRT model on the questions

listed above to estimate racial attitudes among white Americans.[23]

With our primary independent variable generated, we now focus on modeling the effect of white voters' racial attitudes on their likelihood of supporting Donald Trump in 2016 and Republican congressional candidates during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles. As such, we specify five vote-choice logistic regression models assessing the role of racial attitudes in the 2016 elections (presidential, U.S. House, U.S. Senate) and the 2018 elections (U.S. House, U.S. Senate). The dependent variable of each model is a vote for a given Democratic candidate while the key independent variable is the degree of conservative racial attitudes held by a given white voter. In this baseline model, we control for salient determinants of individual candidate choice such as partisan identification, ideological proximity to the two candidates running, presidential approval, retrospective economic evaluations, income, age, gender, and educational attainment.[24] For the House and Senate models, we again include campaign-level control variables to account for differences in candidate quality, campaign spending, incumbency, and the partisanship of the seat.[25]

Fig. 4 shows the marginal effect of racial attitudes on the probability of voting for a Republican candidate. Congruent with what we find in the aggregate analysis, more conservative racial attitudes are strongly associated with greater support for Donald Trump and Republican

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[23] We note that the 2018 CCES provides for only two survey questions comprising the FIRE scale, with those questions asking levels of agreement about whites having certain advantages and racial problems are isolated in the United States. We also note that the 2018 CCES includes four questions found in more standard measures of the CCES, such as the question asking the level of agreement to the premise "over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve." These additional 2018 CCES questions are not included in the scaling of the 2018 racial attitudes for comparability with the 2016 estimates. However, inclusion of these questions into our individual-level analysis does not alter the forthcoming model results.

[24] For full description and coding convention of these individual-level controls, please see the manuscript appendix.

[25] We specify all forthcoming voter-level logistic regression models with relevant survey weights and robust standard errors clustered by congressional district (U.S. House models) or state (presidential & U.S. Senate models).

congressional candidates. During the 2016 presidential election, going from most liberal to the most conservative level of racial attitudes corresponds to a 12% decrease in the probability of voting Democratic. During the same 2016 election cycle, this same marginal effect corresponds to a 17% and 25% decline in probability of voting for a Democratic candidate in the Senate and House context, respectively. This finding provides strong evidence that, at the voter-level, both Donald Trump and his co-partisans down-ballot benefited from more conservative racial attitudes among white voters. This finding is consistent with hypothesis H_{1B} for the 2016 electoral cycle.

Fig. 4 also evaluates whether the positive relationship between conservative racial attitudes and the likelihood of voting Republican persisted during President Trump's first midterm election in 2018. Indeed, our theoretical framework posits that Republicans continued to benefit from conservative racial attitudes among whites during 2018 given the salience of racial attitudes as a central feature of the contemporary Republican coalition. As Fig. 4 shows, Republican House and Senate candidates benefited from conservative racial attitudes held by whites even without Donald Trump atop the ticket. Going from the most liberal to most conservative value of racial attitudes corresponds to a decrease of 8% and 7% in the probability of voting Democratic during the 2018 House and Senate elections, respectively. This suggests that, even without Donald Trump on the ballot, House and Senate Republican candidates were still able to effectively activate racial attitudes to their electoral benefit during the 2018 midterm election cycle. Collectively, the aggregate and individual level models provide strong evidence for the foundational hypothesis of this study (H_{1A} & H_{1B}) that more conservative racial attitudes are associated with an increase in the electoral fortunes of Republican candidates in 2016 and 2018.

4.1. Cross pressuring in the white electorate: the moderating role of partisanship & ideology

Given aggregate and voter-level support for our hypothesis that Republican candidates stand to benefit electorally from conservative white racial attitudes, we turn our attention to evaluating whether partisan and ideological preferences moderate how racial attitudes shape electoral choice among whites. We expect that partisan identity and ideological policy preferences should moderate the influence of racial attitudes on electoral choice. Specifically, we argue that Democratic partisanship and closer ideological proximity to liberal candidates cross-pressure white voters, thus moderating the role of conservative racial attitudes as a voting heuristic. In other words, we expect the role of conservative racial attitudes in shaping electoral choice to be lower among Democrats and voters holding relatively liberal ideological preferences, given the salience of partisanship and ideological preferences in driving electoral choice across multiple levels of candidate competition (H_{2A} & H_{2B}).

To explore whether cross-pressuring occurs—with partisanship and ideological preferences moderating the effect of conservative racial attitudes on vote choice—we return to our individual-level model. We respecify the model by interacting our variable of interest, voter racial attitudes, with a measure of partisan identification and ideological preferences. To evaluate the cross-pressuring hypothesis that partisanship conditions the salience of racial attitudes in shaping electoral choice (H_{2A}), we interact racial attitudes with a dichotomous variable indicating Democratic partisanship and a dichotomous variable indicating independent partisanship (with the baseline category being Republican partisanship). Given the dependent variable of Democratic

electoral choice in the model, we expect that the effect of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of casting a Democratic vote to be smaller among Democratic partisans than among Republican partisans.

To illustrate our logic, consider two white voters, one a Democrat and one a Republican, both with strongly conservative racial attitudes. In this scenario, only the Democratic voter is psychologically cross-pressured by the Democratic Party's association with racial liberalism. As such, we expect that the negative effect of conservative racial attitudes on the likelihood of voting for a Democratic candidate to be lower on this hypothetical Democratic voter than on her Republican counterpart with the same racial attitudes.[26] We expect a similar cross-pressuring effect to diminish the effect of conservative racial attitudes on vote choice for ideological liberals compared to ideological conservatives, given the integration of racial attitudes into left-right ideology in recent decades (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Layman and Carsey, 2002).

To evaluate the role of ideological preferences in conditioning the influence of racial attitudes on candidate choice, we require a measure of ideological preferences of voters and elites. Moreover, our theoretical model frames ideological preferences in Downsian terms, with citizens choosing and evaluating candidates relative to their ideal ideological preferences (Downs, 1957; Joesten and Stone, 2014; Lau, 2013). As such, we specify an Aldrich-McKelvey perception-based scaling model to estimate the ideological space and derive unbiased estimates of voter and candidate ideal points (see Hare et al., 2015; Ramey, 2016, for details regarding the scaling model).[27] Using the method developed by Ramey (2016), we estimate the ideological locations of the presidential candidates and congressional candidates using survey questions asking respondents to place candidates and themselves on the ideological scale ranging from very liberal (1) to very conservative (7).[28] We also

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[26] The logic here works in both directions. Given the alignment of Republican partisanship and conservative racial attitudes as a voting heuristic that benefits conservative candidates, we expect the effect of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic to be *greater* among Republicans than Democrats. This "doubling-down" effect would provide further evidence that Republicans are not cross-pressured between conservative racial attitudes and partisanship like Democrats—with the effect of conservative racial attitudes on vote choice being higher among Republicans than Democrats. The forthcoming results of this hypothesis test are identical if we measure partisanship in three or seven categories.

[27] To this point, we rely on the Aldrich-McKelvey scaling model to correct for differential item functioning and systematic bias in how survey respondents place political stimuli (candidates, MCs, U.S. Senators, Supreme Court, etc.) and themselves. For example, liberal Democratic respondents may place themselves and their party as more moderate than a conservative respondent, who may place the Democratic party as far left (Hare et al., 2015). Indeed, diagnostics of national stimuli finds support for this differential item functioning among survey respondents. As such, we rely on the model to correct for such biases by treating raw self-placements as linear distortions of the "correct" location of stimuli and estimating distortion parameters for each respondent. This method allows for the recovery of unbiased "true" stimuli positions and for correct ideal point estimates corrected for differential item functioning.

[28] Ramey's (2016) model is applied by: 1) estimating the location of the national stimuli (two parties, presidential candidates, the Supreme Court) on the full national sample, 2) estimating the district centered and state-centered stimuli of congressional and Senate candidates, and 3) rescaling the sub-national stimuli to the national space. Following Ramey (2016), we also perform a linear transformation using the estimated party positions in 2016 and 2018 to place all stimuli in the same ideological space over time and account for potential time-varying dynamics. Citizen ideal points are estimated in the first step, the estimation of the national space, and we note that the stimuli of the national space (Donald Trump, both parties, the Supreme Court) is constant in both the 2016 and 2018 CCES, with the exception of the Hillary Clinton stimuli in 2018.

estimate citizen ideological locations using this scaling procedure.[29]

Once we estimate the ideological locations, we specify a proximity model to calculate the distance between voter ideological preferences and the ideological locations of candidates running in a given electoral context. Following the lead of previous models of spatial voting (i.e., Joesten and Stone, 2014), we utilize the following standard spatial model: *Proximity* $= |RM_j - C_{ij}| - |DM_j - C_{ij}|$, where C_{ij} is the estimated voter ideal point and RM_j and DM_j are the ideological positions of the Republican and Democratic candidates running in a given electoral context. The resulting quantity captures the relative proximity between a citizen's ideological ideal point and the ideological locations of the two major party candidates. If the quantity of the spatial model is negative ($|RM_j - C_{ij}| < |DM_j - C_{ij}|$), then the voter is closer to the Republican candidate. If the quantity of the spatial model is positive ($|RM_j - C_{ij}| > |DM_j - C_{ij}|$), then the voter is closer to the Democratic candidate. To allow for a direct comparison with the partisanship hypothesis, we code voters with a positive proximity term as 1, indicating closer ideological proximity to the Democratic candidate. Voters with a negative proximity term are coded as 0, indicating closer ideological proximity to the Republican candidate running.[30]

To finish constructing this cross-pressure model, we interact ideological proximity with voter racial attitudes. As a consequence, this model includes two multiplicative terms evaluating how partisanship and ideological preferences condition the influence of racial attitudes on electoral choice during the 2016 and 2018 federal U.S. elections. Recall that per H_{2B} we expect the effect of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic to be greater among those closer to the conservative candidate (relatively conservative voters) than those closer in relative proximity to the liberal candidate (relatively liberal voters). Such a finding would provide evidence that the salience of conservative racial attitudes as a determinant shaping electoral choice among whites is less among relatively liberal voters due to cross-pressure between ideological preferences and racial attitudes.

We now turn to evaluating the first cross-pressure hypotheses positing that conservative racial attitudes were more important in shaping electoral choice among Republican partisans than Democratic partisans during the 2016 and 2018 federal elections (H_{2A}). Fig. 5

evaluates this hypothesis by articulating the discrete change in the predicted probability of voting Democratic as one goes from being very racially liberal to very racially conservative for each partisan group across electoral context during the 2016 and 2018 cycles.[31] As Fig. 5 Panel A shows, there is no evidence that partisan cross-pressures lowered the salience of conservative racial attitudes in shaping electoral choice among whites during the 2016 elections. During the 2016 presidential election between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump, the effect of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of voting for Clinton was statistically similar for Democrats (−24%), Republicans (−34%), and partisan independents (−23%). This suggests that the negative effect of going from being very racially liberal to very racially conservative on the probability of voting for Clinton was similar for both Democrats and Republicans, thus suggesting that partisanship did not cross-pressure and lower the salience of racial attitudes as a voting heuristic for white Democratic partisans. We also find no evidence of partisan cross-pressuring in the 2016 U.S. Senate elections, but do find that the overall effect of racial attitudes to be stronger among partisan independents (−48%) than for Democrats (−28%) and Republicans (−28%). Moreover, Fig. 5 Panel A shows that the effect of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic was statistically stronger among Democrats (−42%) and Independents (−64%) than Republicans (−25%) during the 2016 U.S. House elections.

We find a similar lack of support for the partisanship cross-pressuring hypothesis (H_{2A}) during the 2018 congressional elections. Turning to Fig. 5 Panel B, we find that the effect of going from being very racially liberal to very racially conservative on the probability of voting for the Democratic candidate running in a given 2018 U.S. house election is similar for Democrats (−27%), Independents (−19%), and Republicans (−21%). However, reflecting the general nature of the Democratic national tide during the 2018 House elections, we note that the loss of electoral support among Democratic House candidates on the basis of conservative racial attitudes was considerably lower in 2018 than 2016, particularly among Democrats and Independents. We find no evidence for H_{2A} in the context of the higher profile 2018 U.S. Senate elections, with the effect of racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic significantly more pronounced for Democrats (−30%) than for Republicans (−13%). Taken together, we find no support for the partisan cross-pressuring hypothesis (H_{2A}) that racial attitudes were less salient as a determinant of electoral choice during the two electoral cycles of the Trump era for white opposition Democrats than white co-partisan Republicans.

In addition to the partisan cross-pressure hypothesis (H_{2A}), our theoretical framework posits that ideological proximity to the candidates also conditions the salience of racial attitudes in shaping the electoral choice of white voters. We specify the hypothesis (H_{2B}), that white voters closer in ideological proximity to liberal Democratic candidates (i.e., relative ideological liberals) rely less on conservative racial attitudes in shaping their electoral choice than white voters closer in proximity to conservative Republican candidates (i.e., relative ideological conservatives). Fig. 6 plots the effect of going from being very racially liberal to very racially conservative on the probability of voting Democratic by voter ideological proximity across the 2016 and 2018 electoral contexts. Contrary to expectations, Fig. 6 Panel A provides evidence that being closer in ideological proximity to liberal candidates did not mitigate the effect of conservative racial attitudes on electoral choice during the 2016 elections. In the presidential contest, going from being extremely racially liberal to extremely racially conservative

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[29] Validation fo the candidate ideological positions and citizen ideal points can be found in Figs. 9 and 10 of the appendix, with the candidate ideal points being highly correlated to conventional measures of candidate ideological ideal points (i.e., Poole and Rosenthal (1997) roll-call based DW-Nominate scores and Bonica (2014) campaign contributions-based CFC scores) and the citizen ideal points being highly correlated with raw ideological self-placements and partisanship. In this validation, we show that our Aldrich-McKelvey of candidate ideological positions are highly correlated with DW-Nominate ($\rho = 0.90$ & 0.95) and CFC Scores ($\rho = 0.90$ & 0.97) for the House and Senate, respectively. Moreover, we show a high correlation between ideal points and raw ideological/partisan identification ($\rho = 0.77$ & 0.65). Note that these correlations are derived for incumbents, given the lack of DW-Nominate for non-incumbent actors and Bonica estimates for non-incumbent primary campaign winners for the 2018 election cycles.

[30] Note that this coding of spatial proximity is included in the specification of the baseline model evaluating the role of racial attitudes in shaping electoral choice during the 2016 and 2018 elections (results are articulated in Fig. 4.) We choose to code ideological proximity as a dichotomous variable (i.e., variable coded as 1 if proximity is closer to the Democratic candidate and 0 if closer to the Republican) for ease of interpretation when assessing how proximity conditions the effect of racial attitudes on electoral choice. A dichotomous proximity variable also allows us to directly compare this conditioning effect with the partisanship conditioning effect posited in H_{2A}.

[31] In other words, Fig. 5 shows the first difference effect of going from the minimum value to the maximum degree of conservative racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic for each electoral context during the 2016 and 2018 cycle (2016 presidential & congressional elections, 2018 congressional elections). Fig. 5 shows the point estimate of the racial attitudes with 90% and 95% confidence intervals.
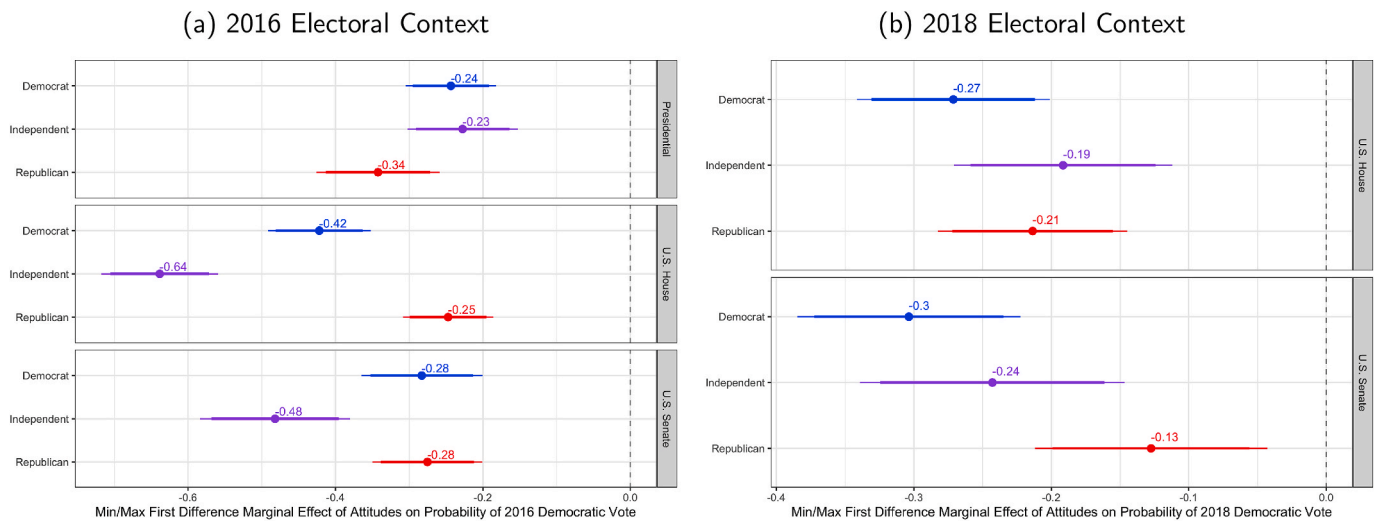
(a) 2016 Electoral Context

(b) 2018 Electoral Context

Fig. 5. Effect of conservative racial attitudes on probability of democratic vote by partisanship.

(a) 2016 Electoral Context

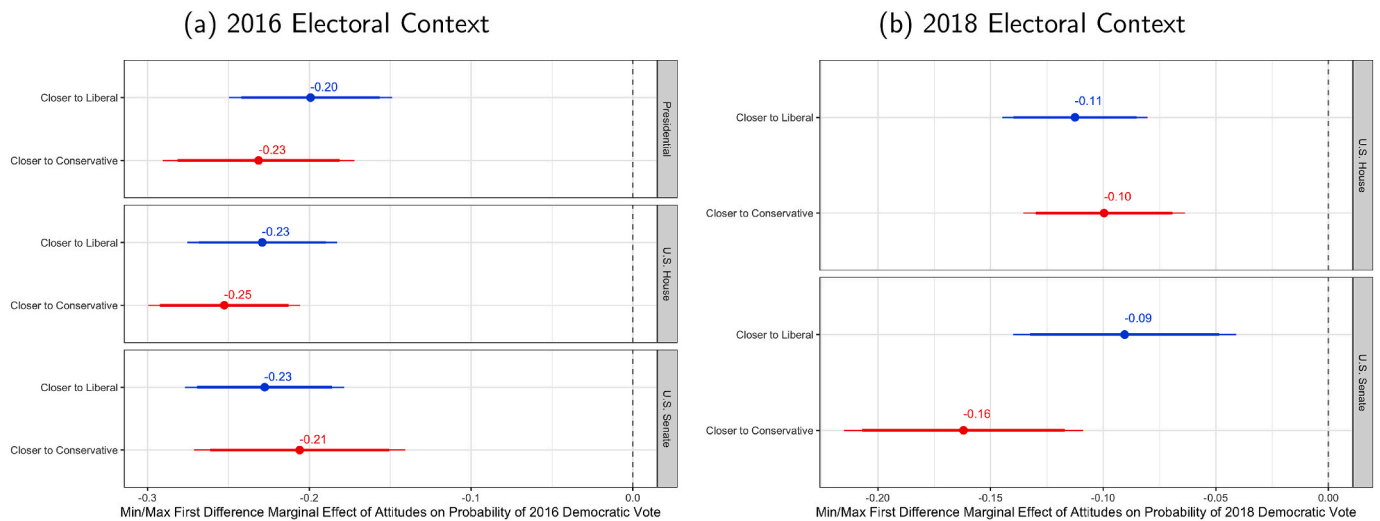

(b) 2018 Electoral Context

Fig. 6. Effect of conservative racial attitudes on probability of democratic vote by ideological proximity.

decreased the probability of voting Democratic by 20% among white voters closer in ideological proximity to Democrat Hillary Clinton. This effect among ideological liberals was statistically similar to the effect of racial attitudes on the probability of voting Democratic among voters closer to Republican Donald Trump (−23%). As with our partisan cross-pressure hypothesis, we find no evidence that ideological preferences closer to Hillary Clinton mitigated the salience of conservative racial attitudes as a determinant of electoral choice among white voters, contrary to the expectations of H_{2B}. These results hold for the 2016 U.S. House and Senate elections, with the effect of racial attitudes on vote choice remaining statistically indistinguishable for both relative liberals and conservatives.

Lastly, we explore the ideological cross-pressure hypothesis in the context of the 2018 congressional elections. Similar to the previous results during the 2016 elections, we find no support for the ideological cross-pressuring hypothesis (H_{2B}) in the context of the 2018 U.S. House elections. Fig. 6 Panel B shows that, during the 2018 U.S. House elections, going from being extremely racially liberal to extremely racially conservative decreases the probability of voting Democratic by 11% for voters closer in ideological proximity to the liberal candidate and by 10% for voters closer in proximity to the conservative candidate. In congruence to the other electoral contexts we assess, we find no support

for the ideological cross-pressuring hypothesis (H_{2B}) in the context of the higher profile 2018 U.S. Senate elections. Going from being extremely racially liberal to extremely racially conservative results in a decline of 9% in the probability of voting Democratic among voters closer in ideological proximity to the liberal candidate. This is indistinguishable from the effect of conservative racial attitudes among voters closer to the conservative candidate, with the effect reducing the probability of voting Democratic by 16% among this subset of voters.

Taken together, with the exception of the 2018 U.S. Senate elections, we find no evidence that ideological cross-pressuring mitigates the salience of conservative racial attitudes shaping electoral choice during the Trump era. Congruently, we also find no evidence that partisanship mitigates this salience of conservative racial attitudes, with the effect being similar for white Democrats and Republicans. On the whole, it appears that racial attitudes shape electoral choice among white voters irrespective of partisan loyalties or ideological preferences on policy during the Trump era.

5. Discussion: the role of racial attitudes in nationalized elections

In this paper we find that Trump's electorally successful activation of

racial attitudes in the 2016 presidential campaign was not a unique feature to that election, but rather emblematic of an electoral benefit reaped by GOP candidates at multiple ballot levels in both 2016 and 2018. We join an emerging body of research that recognizes that white racial identity and racial attitudes are central in contemporary American electoral politics (e.g. Sides et al., 2018; Jardina, 2019). Even in an era of unprecedented partisan and ideological voting, racial attitudes are still a major driver of white voting behavior.

Our results show that conservative racial attitudes among white voters not only benefited Trump in the 2016 election, but also Republican congressional candidates in 2016 and 2018. This effect manifested at both the aggregate level in districts and states (confirming H_{1A}) and at the voter level (confirming H_{1B}). This finding strongly suggests that while Trump may have activated racial attitudes successfully in 2016, it was hardly a unique benefit to his campaign. As shown in Fig. 4, Republican congressional candidates benefited from conservative racial attitudes in both 2016 and 2018 – even without Trump on the ballot.

The consistency of this effect is especially notable in an era where party identification is extremely dominant in determining vote choice and voters are increasingly ideologically sorted into the two major parties. As we can see in Fig. 7, straight-ticket voting among white voters based on partisanship (Fig. 7 Panel A) and ideology (Fig. 7 Panel B) is at its highest point since ANES measurement began. Considering that the rates of straight ticket voting are near 90% for each measure, our discovery that racial attitudes significantly affect that behavior is striking. Our results demonstrate that while partisanship and ideology are still

has incorporated racial resentment into white voters' partisanship (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Lee, 2002; Sides et al., 2018; Engelhardt, 2019), it is not yet clear if the subtler racial attitudes captured in the FIRE scale are sorted on partisan lines. Additional research is needed to determine the extent to which partisan and ideological sorting has occurred with regards to whites' emotional reactions to racism and views on the status of race relations.

While previous research has shown that more conservative racial attitudes made white voters more likely to support Trump in 2016 (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Schaffner et al., 2018; Jardina, 2019) and more likely to support Republican congressional candidates in 2016 (Algara and Hale, 2019), we find that this effect persisted in 2018 and does not significantly vary across partisan or ideological cleavages in the electorate. Even with levels of partisan sorting unprecedented in the modern era – largely based on racial attitudes (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Lee, 2002; Sides et al., 2018; Engelhardt, 2019) – we find that some white Democratic voters are still swayed by racial appeals. This suggests that racial realignment is an ongoing progress, and that we should expect still greater increases in the polarization of racial politics between the two major parties. Indeed, research by Engelhardt (2020) suggests that ideological and partisan sorting have not fully incorporated racial attitudes. The often narrow margins in swing states and districts in federal elections thus give Republican candidates a strong incentive to appeal to racially conservative white Democrats and independents, who, per our study, are just as affected by racial attitudes when making their vote choice as racially
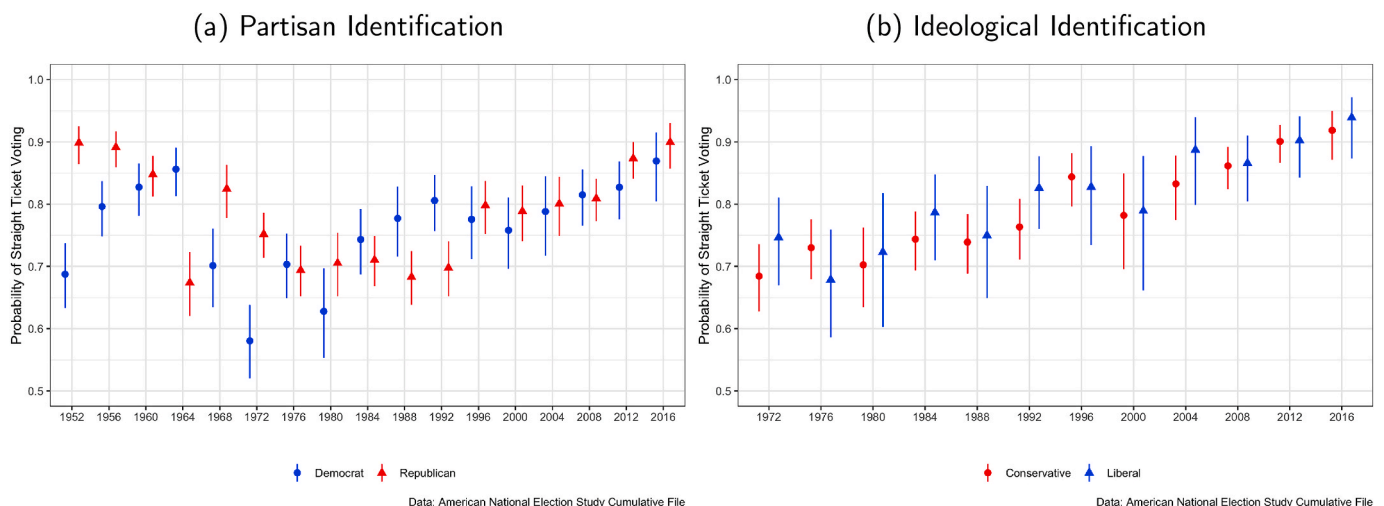

Fig. 7. Historic consistency in white straight ticket voting by political cleavage.

paramount when it comes to vote choice, the effect of racial attitudes cannot be overlooked.

Notably, this effect persists even among Democrats & liberal voters. Contrary to hypotheses H_{2A} and H_{2B}, we find evidence that the effect of conservative racial attitudes is generally not diminished among Democrats or among voters ideologically closer to the Democratic candidate. While we are surprised by this result, we do offer a possible explanation that merits further research. The items we use from the FIRE scale are intended to capture emotional reactions to racism and respondents' views of race relations, unlike the Kinder and Sears (1981) measure of racial resentment. As DeSante and Smith (2020) point out, the FIRE scale better integrates the multidimensionality of racial attitudes, with less measurement error from ideological considerations and social desirability than previous measures. While we know that party sorting

conservative white Republicans. Given the continued salience of racial attitudes in the 2018 election and the explicit racial appeals made by Trump in 2019[32] (which corresponded with an increase in his approval rating among Republican voters[33]), partisan racial depolarization seems unlikely in the near future of American politics.

The question of whether the successful activation of conservative racial attitudes is an electoral tactic limited to Trump is particularly salient in in the 2020 presidential campaign. Democratic nominee former Vice President Joe Biden embraces the view that Trump is an anomaly. On the campaign trail, Biden has said that "history will treat

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[32] *NPR (7/15/19): 'Go Back Where You Came From': The Long Rhetorical Roots Of Trump's Racist Tweets*

[33] *Reuters (7/16/19): Republican support for Trump rises after racially charged tweets: Reuters/Ipsos poll.*

this administration's time as an aberration,"[34] and that after Trump leaves office "you will see an epiphany occur among many of my Republican friends."[35] These statements received blowback from both political observers[36,37] and his 2020 rivals in the Democratic primary,[38] but Biden's assertion raises an answerable empirical question: is Trumpism distinct from the GOP's strategy in electoral contexts besides the 2016 presidential election?

Given the results of our research, it seems likely that Biden's assessment is incorrect. We expect that Republican candidates for federal office will continue to make racial appeals in the 2020 campaign – and reap electoral rewards for doing so. Activating the conservative racial attitudes of white voters has been a successful tactic for Republican candidates (even in elections such as 2018 without Trump on the ballot). As with Clinton in 2016 (Sides et al., 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018), Biden's association with the Obama presidency and his embrace of policy positions such as criminal justice reform[39] that are associated with black voters are likely to help racial appeals from Trump and other Republican candidates resonate with white voters. Given the centrality of race in American political discourse in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and subsequent protests, it seems certain that racial attitudes will have a significant impact on the 2020 election.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102207.

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[34] *The New York Times (6/17/19): Four Years Ago Trump Was Seen as a Sideshow. Now He Is the Show.*

[35] *CNN (5/14/19): Joe Biden predicts a post-Trump 'epiphany' for Republicans.*

[36] *The Intercept (5/6/19): Joe Biden Won't Blame the Republicans for Trump. That Should Disqualify Him.*

[37] *The Atlantic (4/25/19): Unlike His Rivals, Biden Sees Trump as an Aberration*

[38] *The New York Times (6/6/19): Democratic Candidates Go After Joe Biden, but Not by Name.*

[39] *Business Insider (6/2/20): Joe Biden calls Black Lives Matter protests a 'wake up call for our nation' and slams Trump for tear gassing peaceful demonstrators*

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