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Racial Attitudes Through a Partisan Lens

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(Received 19 December 2018; revised 24 April 2019; accepted 11 July 2019)

Abstract

The conventional wisdom is that racial attitudes, by forming through early socialization processes, are causally prior to most things political, including whites' party identifications. Yet a broad literature demonstrates that partisanship can shape mass attitudes. The author argues that this influence extends even to presumptively fundamental predispositions like racial attitudes. The study applies cross-lagged models to panel data from the 1990s and 2000s to demonstrate that whites align their racial attitudes with their party loyalties. The results demonstrate that partisanship has a more pronounced influence in the latter time period, which is consistent with a view that changes in the political context can make partisanship a more likely causal force on other attitudes. Racial concerns not only provide a foundation for political conflict: my results reveal that political processes can increase or decrease racial animus.

Keywords: partisanship; prejudice; racial attitudes; polarization

Race is fundamental to American society and American politics. Racial considerations contributed to the constitution's shape, and subsequently structured party systems (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Schickler 2016; Tesler 2016) and influenced policy making (Katznelson 2006). The politicization of race generated by these institutions facilitates the links between the mass public's racial attitudes and their policy preferences (Gilens 1999; Tesler 2016) and party attachments (Tesler 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005) – links that in turn maintain race as an important institutional feature. Intentioned or not, race helps shape who gets what, when and how.

Undergirding all of this is an assumption that racial animus feeds political conflict. I turn this conventional wisdom on its head by arguing that political conflict can shape racial attitudes – people's views and beliefs about groups understood to be racial.¹ Political scientists have failed to examine this possibility, perhaps because racial attitudes are seen as persistent and influential predispositions that form during childhood, long before most Americans become political animals (Sears and Brown 2013).² According to this line of reasoning, individuals use these early-formed attitudes to make sense of politics; racial attitudes lead to partisanship (Green et al. 2002; Sears and Funk 1999; Tesler 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005).³

I contend that consistently viewing the relationship as unidirectional is unwise. Instead, partisanship might also affect racial attitudes. This is theoretically plausible for two reasons. First, partisanship is perhaps the most important attitude in Americans' political belief systems. Scholars have found that partisanship is causally prior to many individual aspects once thought

¹My argument extends findings that partisanship can shape positions on race-related issues (Carsey and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2011) to consider attitudes about racial groups.

²Recent reviews of prejudice and politics view early-socialized racial animus as an explanation for political decisions (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Kinder 2013).

³Tesler (2016) suggests that evaluations of Barack Obama changed racial attitudes, but does not provide a full account (215, n. 33).

to be causally prior to partisanship, including issue positions (Lenz 2012), core political values (Goren 2005) and economic evaluations (Bartels 2002). Add to this individuals' motivation to adopt party-consistent views (Bolsen et al. 2014), and a dynamic relationship between partisanship and racial attitudes is not only possible, but plausible.

Secondly, because the parties of the early twenty-first century have not changed where they stand on race, party switching on racial attitudes is less likely. People are unlikely to receive information on race that changes which party they believe is more supportive of racial minorities, and fewer people have misaligned partisanship and racial attitudes. Instead, when people receive information on race they are likely to change their attitudes. Party attachments can shape the kinds of information people receive on race and how they interpret it. Party elites, for instance, discuss race in markedly different ways when it becomes salient (Engelhardt *forthcoming*; Haney López 2014; King and Smith 2014), offering one potential source of party-driven attitude change (Zaller 1992).

I demonstrate that partisanship relates to racial attitude change. Using panel data, I compare two different political contexts, the early 1990s and late 2000s. I find that whites' racial attitudes encourage party switching in both periods, but particularly the 1990s. The later period features many more whites aligning their racial attitudes with their partisanship than switching parties. The results paint a normatively mixed picture by showing that politics, through partisanship, can perpetuate negative racial attitudes or encourage whites to adopt more favorable views.

Partisanship, Race And Racial Attitude Updating

The connection between race and partisanship in the modern era has grown stronger over at least the last half century (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Schickler 2016). Before 1964, intraparty conflicts largely kept civil rights off the national political agenda, with Southern Democrats in particular the keystone to maintaining institutionalized racism. This changed when Democrats championed the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and Republicans courted disaffected whites with their Southern Strategy. In subsequent years, Democrats reinforced their commitment to pro-black policies, while Republicans distanced themselves from racial liberalism (Carmines and Stimson 1989, Ch. 2). In part because the growing partisan divide on race gives elites incentives to use racialized campaign messages (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001), the mass public has received clear signals about where the parties stand on issues related to race since at least the mid-1960s.

Changes in the mass public's party loyalties followed this information about where the parties stand, and explanations of these changes contribute to the prevailing characterization of the relationship as one in which racial attitudes shape individuals' partisanship. For Sears and Funk (1999), racial attitudes played a 'unique role' in shaping 'partisan political preferences during the civil rights era and its aftermath' (17) (see also Valentino and Sears 2005). Similarly, Green et al. (2002) contend that the enfranchisement of African Americans changed each party's 'social imagery', motivating whites to switch parties. Tesler (2016) echoes this claim when arguing that Barack Obama's presidency motivated racial liberals and conservatives to become Democrats and Republicans.

The conventional wisdom on whites' racial attitudes also argues that race leads to party. Prior studies contend that racial attitudes form early in life and persist through most of adulthood as a way to understand the world (Goldman and Hopkins *forthcoming*; Henry and Sears 2009; Sears and Brown 2013). The available evidence indicates that children understand racial categories before kindergarten and come to see them as fixed attributes as they grow up (Hirschfeld 1996). People's early social environments, including family and school experiences, contribute morals and values that give these categories meaning (Goldman and Hopkins *forthcoming*).

The evidence of early-acquired racial attitudes encourages scholars to treat them as causally prior to political outcomes including partisanship (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Sears and Funk 1999; Tesler 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005), implicitly reinforcing the conventional view that these attitudes are unlikely outcomes of political processes. The position holds that

when people encounter information on race, they will align some political position with their racial attitudes rather than change the latter. However, I propose that the contexts people find themselves in can motivate racial attitude change. People can re-evaluate racial groups by incorporating additional information, like that provided by political elites when they draw attention to the positive and negative characteristics that define racial categories (Engelhardt [forthcoming](#); Haney López [2014](#); King and Smith [2014](#)).

Changes in which racial attitudes count as socially acceptable offer some initial guidance. For decades, white Americans believed that whites and blacks were innately different. This biological racism persisted among elites at least until World War II when it lost favor among social scientists (Kinder and Sanders [1996](#), Ch. 5). Changes in elites' beliefs precipitated a change in the mass public such that biological racism is decidedly uncommon these days (but see Tesler [2016](#)). As Kinder and Sanders ([1996](#)) detail, how elites talk about race affects how individuals express their attitudes. I extend this thinking to argue that elites, and the information environment more generally, can affect how people express distinct racial attitudes as well as which attitudes they hold.

Why Partisanship Should Matter For Racial Attitudes

To see how partisanship could shape racial attitudes, consider the relationship between the two in terms of attitude centrality. Partisanship is more likely to change orientations that are less important to individuals (Converse [1964](#)). Although racial attitudes are thought to be more central than partisanship, and therefore the more likely causal force, at times even presumptively fundamental orientations may change to align with partisan loyalties (Bartels [2002](#); Goren [2005](#); Lenz [2012](#)). Recent evidence, for instance, suggests that people's party loyalties affect religious affiliations (Margolis [2018](#)) – group orientations thought to contribute to partisan preferences – and that this influence could extend to attitudes about social groups. This is plausible because partisan attachments are so ingrained, they even shape responses to reaction time tasks (Theodoridis [2017](#)) and shape preferences in non-political settings (Iyengar and Westwood [2015](#); Engelhardt and Utych [2018](#)). Partisanship's importance, and evidence that it can influence presumptively fundamental orientations, together suggest it may facilitate racial attitude change.

Partisanship's influence can be seen through several potential mechanisms. It shapes which sources of information people pay attention to and how they process the information they receive. People generally prefer relatively costless information searches, and therefore tend to rely on co-partisan information sources because they value credible and trustworthy messengers (Zaller [1992](#)). Alongside potential differences in information exposure, partisanship's function as a 'perceptual screen' encourages biased information processing (Bartels [2002](#); Campbell et al. [1960](#); Gaines et al. [2007](#)), leading people to hold consistent attitudes (Bolsen et al. [2014](#)). People interpret social and political affairs in ways that fit with their partisanship and modify their attitudes accordingly.

Party-biased reactions to the information environment should most affect whites. Racially segregated geographic and social spaces limit whites' interactions with non-coethnics (Cox et al. [2016](#); Logan and Stults [2011](#)). Whites' information about non-whites may primarily, or solely, come from political elites and other sources (Entman and Rojecki [2000](#)).

Social psychology offers insights into how whites' attitudes may respond to information on race. Signs of racial progress can motivate some whites to bolster the existing racial hierarchy and hold more negative racial attitudes (Norton and Sommers [2011](#); Wilkins and Kaiser [2014](#)). Cues about whether race merits attention can have similar attitudinal consequences. Those emphasizing a colorblind perspective, by proposing that people should ignore race in decision making, can lead some whites to avoid acknowledging their own racial biases (Richeson and Nussbaum [2004](#)) and become less likely to see racism as an explanation for social outcomes (Apfelbaum et al. [2010](#)). Whites thus increasingly de-emphasize race's social reality and deny racial inequality, hallmarks of negative racial attitudes (Kinder and Sanders [1996](#); Tarman and

Sears 2005). But this reverses if people hear rhetoric about racial diversity's benefits or continued discrimination (Apfelbaum et al. 2010; Richeson and Nussbaum 2004).

The information environment could therefore influence attitudes directly or indirectly. First, it may directly shape attitudes by providing information related to race. Secondly, it may shape the perspectives people use to interpret potentially race-related affairs, which in turn influence how information from other sources is processed and thus change views indirectly (Krosnick 1988). Partisanship matters to the degree it affects each potential channel of influence. The evidence indicates that Republican elites typically provide information potentially bolstering negative attitudes and Democratic elites frequently offer perspectives promoting positive views (Engelhardt *forthcoming*; Haney López 2014; King and Smith 2014), which suggests information environments on race that likely differ by party, making party-driven attitude change possible (Zaller 1992).

I examine two explanations of the relationship between partisanship and racial attitudes. The first – the racial attitude influence hypothesis – follows the conventional wisdom that whites' racial attitudes produce changes in partisanship. Whites' racial attitudes in part foster concerns about who the parties support, leading them to change parties or how strongly they identify with their current one. The second – the partisanship influence hypothesis – argues that parties shape racial attitudes. Partisanship changes attitudes by affecting where people get their information from and how they process what they acquire. These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and can jointly describe the link between partisanship and racial attitudes in a given political context. What can vary is which predisposition drives dynamics.

To assess dynamics, I test these hypotheses in two periods: the Clinton era of the early 1990s and the Obama era of the late 2000s. In the first, the parties are still competing over whites who are cross-pressured by their partisan ties and racial attitudes (Hillygus and Shields 2008).⁴ Whites resolve this conflict by sorting into the 'correct' political party. I therefore expect to find more support for the racial attitude influence hypothesis during this period. In the second era, the political landscape has changed and there are fewer whites with misaligned partisanship and racial attitudes to switch parties. I thus expect to find more support for the partisanship influence hypothesis here.

Importantly, my argument for this latter period does not emphasize unique reactions to President Obama and his administration or responses to a diversifying country; rather, it is more about the general context.⁵ For instance, imagine Obama running and governing in the 1980s when partisanship is in greater flux (Green et al. 2002; Hillygus and Shields 2008). His presence would likely not coincide with much, if any, attitude change. Instead, by reinforcing the connection between the Democratic Party and black America it would likely encourage party switching. Indeed, analyses exploring Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination reflect this possibility. His candidacy coincided with a white electorate shifting its allegiances to the Republican Party, changes motivated in part by racial attitudes (Sears et al. 1987). The latter era matters because it is a different political context. While I cannot conclusively demonstrate that changes in context matter, I present evidence that is consistent with a view that changes in context make it more likely that partisanship shapes other orientations (Highton and Kam 2011).

Data And Methods

I test the relationship between whites' partisanship and racial attitudes using panel data from the American National Elections Studies (ANES), the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project

⁴Green et al. (2002) note partisan attachments in the 1990s were less stable even than prior decades.

⁵Some argue that Obama may also matter by shaping the relationship between racial attitudes and party (Tesler 2016). Specifically, people's evaluations of Obama mediate these interconnections. But other mediators may matter or other factors may produce these results. I do not claim evaluations do not matter, but that they may do so because of, or alongside, other factors. In Appendix H I develop this point further, including related analyses.

(CCAP) and the Democracy Fund.⁶ In Appendix B I show descriptively that the relationship between the two may be changing using the 1986–2016 ANES cross-sections.

I measure racial attitudes in multiple ways. Racial resentment serves as my primary measure (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tarman and Sears 2005) and I complement this with group affect. Racial resentment captures structural versus individual explanations for black Americans' social and economic status (Kam and Burge 2018; Tarman and Sears 2005). It provides a reliable, validated construct consistently used in studies examining the relationship between whites' racial attitudes and partisanship (Tesler 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005). By also including affect I speak to racial animus's multi-dimensional nature (Kinder 2013) and address any concerns with the racial resentment construct (Huddy and Feldman 2009; Sniderman and Carmines 1997). Finally, I offer evidence in Appendix I that stereotype measures show similar dynamics.

I operationalize *Racial Resentment* using four items in the Kinder and Sanders (1996) battery.⁷ I sum the items and scale them from 0–1, with higher values indicating greater racial resentment. For *Group Affect* I create a differential affect measure by subtracting how negatively whites feel about whites from how negatively they feel about blacks. I set this to run 0–1, with higher values indicating respondents feel more negatively about blacks than whites.⁸ This procedure accounts for interpersonal differences in how people respond to such items (Brady 1985). I operationalize *Partisanship* using the branched ANES party identification question, present in all data collections. I also set it to run 0 (strong Democrat) to 1 (strong Republican).⁹ In Appendix J I complement this operationalization and use differenced feeling thermometers to measure partisanship; the results show similar attitude change patterns.

Consistent with the existing literature, I focus on non-Hispanic whites (Tesler 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005). Furthermore, when using the 1992–1994 ANES data I restrict the analyses to those consistently interviewed by a white or non-white interviewer across waves (for example, white in 1992 and white in 1994). This holds constant potential variation in responses to the racial resentment items the interview context creates (Kinder and Sanders 1996).¹⁰

I use cross-lagged regression models to evaluate dynamics (Finkel 1995). These assess the effect of lagged racial attitudes ($racial\ attitudes_{t-1}$) on current partisanship (PID_t) and the effect of lagged partisanship (PID_{t-1}) on current racial attitudes ($racial\ attitudes_t$), after accounting for a lagged dependent variable. Equations 1 and 2 show this mathematically:

$$racial\ attitudes_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PID_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 racial\ attitudes_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$PID_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 PID_{i,t-1} + \alpha_2 racial\ attitudes_{i,t-1} + v_i \quad (2)$$

⁶I use the 1992–1994 wave of the 1992–1994–1996 ANES panel, the 2008, 2012 and 2016 CCAP election panels, and the 2012–2016 Democracy Fund VOTER Survey (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group 2017). The 1992–1994 ANES panel conducted face-to-face interviews, while the CCAP and VOTER surveys were completed online. Although survey modes differ, this should not affect my analyses because I look at individual-level change. CCAP and VOTER survey participants came from YouGov's non-random respondent pool with completed surveys then weighted back to population benchmarks. Analyses using more panels spanning different parts of the Obama-era 2000s are in Appendix G.

⁷Answers are recorded on five-point strongly agree – strongly disagree scales. The 2016 CCAP differs from the others because it included only three of the four items. Using only the three items common across surveys does not change the substantive results. Full question wording and descriptive statistics appear in Appendix A.

⁸This measure is available in the 1992–1994 ANES, 2012–2016 VOTER survey, and 2016 CCAP. The first two data collections feature 101-point feeling thermometers while the third has five-point favorability scales.

⁹Using such a reliable measure for partisanship may privilege it in analyses using less reliable racial attitude measures. But racial resentment has similar characteristics, with error-corrected stabilities similar to partisanship (Green et al. 2002; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Alternatively, using a single partisanship item may disadvantage it. I address this in additional analyses. In Appendix E I report the results from structural equation models. In Appendix J I measure partisanship with party feeling thermometers. The substantive results persist.

¹⁰Removing this restriction does not change the results.

This method allows me to assess whether change in a variable over time can be attributed to the other variable in the relationship.¹¹ Here, β_1 and α_2 reflect how much lagged partisanship and racial attitudes correlate with current values of the other construct after accounting for individuals' initial scores and associated weights β_2 and α_1 (which provide estimates of each predisposition's temporal stability). If $\beta_1 > 0$, then the partisanship influence hypothesis receives support: whites' racial attitudes are aligned with their partisanship. Similarly, if $\alpha_2 > 0$, then the racial attitude influence hypothesis receives support: whites' partisan ties shift to match their racial attitudes. Finally, while my argument concerns each predisposition's potential impact, the models can also offer suggestive evidence regarding which predisposition drives the dynamics. If $\beta_1 > \alpha_2$, then this suggests partisanship and attitude change matter more. But if $\beta_1 < \alpha_2$, then this suggests racial attitudes and sorting matter more. I estimate the models using seemingly unrelated regressions to facilitate these final comparisons, and report consistent results from additional estimation and analysis strategies in the appendix.¹²

As *prima facie* evidence that whites' partisanship could change racial attitudes, consider the two-wave correlations for partisanship and racial resentment in each dataset. In all cases partisanship's correlation across waves is heartier, and this increases over time. The correlation for racial resentment is 0.67 in the 1992–1994 ANES, 0.80 in the 2008 CCAP, 0.83 and 0.85 in the March and August waves of the 2012 CCAP, 0.80 in the 2012–2016 VOTER survey, and 0.87 in the 2016 CCAP. The correlations for partisanship are 0.81, 0.93, 0.94, 0.94, 0.90 and 0.95, respectively. Partisanship's greater stability, despite measuring it with a single item, suggests it is a likelier cause in these data (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1988).

Results

Racial Attitudes Matter More in the 1990s

I begin with the 1992–1994 ANES panel. These data shed light on the relationship between whites' partisanship and racial attitudes in a context similar to those used as evidence underpinning the conventional wisdom on the relationship. Given prior work I expect to find more support for the racial attitude influence hypothesis ($\alpha_2 > 0$) than the partisanship influence hypothesis ($\beta_1 > 0$). Further, racial attitudes should be more substantively influential than partisanship.

Table 1 contains the results from applying cross-lagged models to these data, separated by racial attitude operationalization. The first column tests the partisanship influence hypothesis and the second column considers the racial attitude influence hypothesis. The results in Column 1 suggest partisanship's relevance in this relationship. Strong partisans, 26 per cent of the sample, separate by an average of 0.041 points on the racial resentment scale in these two years, equivalent to about two-thirds of a category on an item. But these results are imprecisely estimated ($p = 0.054$). Racial resentment's estimated stability is also noteworthy. The results suggest less stability than might be expected for a predisposition consistently placed near the beginning of the causal chain ($\hat{\beta}_2 = 0.600$). Partisanship's positive, albeit modest and imprecisely estimated, influence offers initial suggestive evidence to support the partisanship influence hypothesis.

The results in Column 2 support the racial attitude influence hypothesis. As expected, racial resentment has a significant influence on later party loyalties ($p < 0.05$). The difference in

¹¹Scholars have used this approach to examine partisanship's relationship with core political values (Goren, 2005) and issue orientations (Carsey and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2011).

¹²In Appendix D I standardize the variables in Equations 1 and 2 to place them on the same metric, addressing distributional differences between partisanship and racial attitudes. Appendix E offers consistent results from cross-lagged structural equation models that address measurement error concerns. The results in Appendix L suggest the patterns I find are not limited to modeling assumptions, and manifest when considering the distribution of cases demonstrating stability and change in each predisposition over time.

Table 1. Relationship between whites' partisanship and racial attitudes (1992–1994 ANES)

	Racial resentment			Affect difference		
	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$
Partisanship _{t-1}	0.041 (0.021)	0.853* (0.025)	-0.086 (0.046)	-0.001 (0.013)	0.868* (0.025)	-0.059 (0.082)
Racial attitudes _{t-1}	0.600* (0.031)	0.127* (0.041)		0.586* (0.065)	0.058 (0.082)	
Constant	0.243* (0.022)	0.011 (0.025)		0.229* (0.033)	0.051* (0.047)	
Observations	592	592		577	577	
R ²	0.424	0.656		0.294	0.648	
Residual std. error	0.158	0.205		0.088	0.208	

partisanship for the 7 per cent of the sample scoring at the poles of racial resentment increases by 0.127 points, about three-fourths of a category on the seven-point measure. Combined, the construct stabilities and cross-lagged effects presented in Columns 1 and 2 explain about 33 per cent of the relationship between each predisposition in 1994. The remaining variation comes from other unidentified factors and causal processes (Finkel 1995).¹³

The seemingly unrelated regression estimation strategy also offers a way to test whether racial attitudes or partisanship are more substantively important. Comparing the effects of min-max changes for each predisposition offers insight into its theoretical possible effect, despite different operationalizations (Achen 1982). Column 3 in Table 1 provides the difference in coefficient estimates for partisanship_{t-1} in Column 1 (β_1 in Equation 1) and racial resentment_{t-1} in Column 2 (α_2 in Equation 2), and this difference's precision. As expected, partisanship is less influential than racial resentment ($\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2 = -0.086$, $p = 0.03$, one tailed). Racial attitudes thus appear to contribute more substantively to the relationship's dynamics. Even so, these comparisons of theoretical influence are affected by each predisposition's variance because the changes relate to vastly different percentages of the sample. Although racial resentment's theoretical impact far surpasses that of partisanship, this potential influence is overstated because relatively few people occupy the scale endpoints. Another test of substantive influence consists of standardizing all variables to place them on the same metric, thereby directly relating variation in the predictor to variation in the outcome (Achen 1982). Analyses in Appendix D using standardized variables point to racial attitudes as more substantively influential in this regard.

The remaining columns in Table 1 extend these analyses to group affect.¹⁴ The results in Columns 4 and 5 suggest that there is no apparent relationship between differential group affect and partisanship in the 1990s. In neither case does the lagged measure produce significant changes in the other variable. If anything, the results suggest sorting on racial attitudes.¹⁵

These analyses offer two important findings. First, they show that at least one dimension of racial attitudes continued to shape party loyalties into the 1990s. Secondly, they offer suggestive evidence that partisanship may shape racial attitudes, although this only fits with the racial resentment operationalization.

¹³The 33 per cent comes from the proportion of the correlation between partisanship and racial resentment in 1994 unaccounted for by the correlation between the models' residuals. To address potentially unaccounted for factors, analyses in Appendix F include economic orientations, culture war attitudes and anti-immigration attitudes. The substantive conclusions change little.

¹⁴Descriptives: mean₉₂ = 0.55, s.d.₉₂ = 0.10; mean₉₄ = 0.55, s.d.₉₄ = 0.10.

¹⁵Affect and partisanship are uncorrelated in these data. Nor does this relationship vary when looking at group affect separately.

Party Matters More in the 2000s

I use the 2008 and 2012 CCAP surveys and the 2012–2016 VOTER survey to assess dynamics in a different political context. I expect to find consistent support for the partisanship influence hypothesis ($\beta_1 > 0$). Secondly, and in contrast to the preceding analyses, I also expect partisanship to be more substantively influential than racial attitudes given changes in context.

I begin with the 2008 CCAP, using the March and October waves and present the results in Columns 1–3 of Table 2. The first column supports the partisanship influence hypothesis. White strong partisans, over 40 per cent of the sample, separate by an average of 0.102 points in racial resentment ($p < 0.05$), about one and a half categories on a scale item. The racial attitude influence hypothesis also receives support. The difference in partisanship between the least and most racially resentful (about 16 per cent of whites) increases by an average of 0.048 points, over one-fourth a category on the seven-point item.

Partisanship also appears more substantively influential.¹⁶ Column 3, which presents the difference in coefficient estimates, shows that partisanship's influence is reliably greater ($\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.054$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, the effect of moving across partisanship's range implicates a much larger proportion of people than that related to the estimated theoretical influence of racial attitudes. Attitude change appears to better explain the relationship between partisanship and racial attitudes than party switching in these data.¹⁷

The remaining columns of Table 2 consider dynamics in 2012. Each week during the campaign a representative sample of the nearly 45,000 respondents who completed the December 2011 CCAP baseline survey were re-interviewed. I focus on the two waves reassessing racial resentment, one in March and the other in August.

The results again support the partisanship influence hypothesis. Column 4 shows that between December and March, the roughly 35 per cent of the white sample who identified as strong partisans separates by an average of 0.074 points on racial resentment ($p < 0.05$). Partisanship also matters for the August group. As the results in Column 7 indicate, strong partisans divide by 0.130 points on racial resentment, over two categories on a scale item ($p < 0.05$).

The results inconsistently support the racial attitude influence hypothesis. Column 5 indicates that the 14 per cent of whites in the March re-interview group placing at the extremes of the racial resentment scale separate by an average of 0.066 points on the partisanship item ($p < 0.05$), two-fifths of a category on the seven-point measure. This effect halves for the August re-interview group. The gap in partisan attachments grows by only 0.032 points, an insignificant difference ($p > 0.10$).

Further, partisanship again appears to be more substantively influential. Its influence on racial attitudes is greater in both waves, albeit only reliably so for the August re-interview group. In addition, in both waves partisanship's influence concerns a group 2.5 times that implicated by a maximal change in racial resentment. Racial resentment's substantive effect is thus, if anything, overstated and the difference in magnitudes indicates a restrictive characterization. Analyses in Appendix D using standardized measures complement this. As with the 2008 analyses, partisanship shapes racial attitudes in this context; but attitude change, not sorting, appears to better characterize dynamics.

But these results only address election year patterns. Although helpful for unpacking attitude change dynamics, particularly for those made salient (Valentino and Sears 1998), a campaign context does not shed light on whether the partisanship influence hypothesis holds over longer periods of time. The results in Table 3 from the 2012–2016 VOTER survey help address this issue. And analyses in Appendix G using data from General Social Survey panels and the 2010–2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study reveal that the dynamics I identify are not merely a

¹⁶Additional analyses in Appendix C also indicate that partisanship's effect reliably differs from the 1990s.

¹⁷The model accounts for about 85 per cent of the relationship between the two predispositions in October.

Table 2. Relationship between whites' partisanship and racial resentment in the 2008 and 2012 elections

	CCAP 2008			CCAP 2012: March			CCAP 2012: August		
	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$
Partisanship _{t-1}	0.102* (0.006)	0.917* (0.006)	0.054* (0.011)	0.075* (0.029)	0.922* (0.021)	0.009 (0.039)	0.130* (0.030)	0.935* (0.018)	0.097* (0.041)
Racial resentment _{t-1}	0.739* (0.009)	0.048* (0.008)		0.812* (0.028)	0.066* (0.027)		0.792* (0.047)	0.032 (0.025)	
Constant	0.120* (0.005)	0.012* (0.005)		0.096* (0.017)	-0.003 (0.014)		0.081* (0.025)	0.012 (0.019)	
Observations	8,866	8,866		726	726		751	751	
R ²	0.660	0.865		0.680	0.885		0.663	0.864	
Residual std. error	0.152	0.138		0.150	0.117		0.149	0.123	

Table 3. Relationship between whites’ partisanship and racial attitudes (2012–2016 VOTER survey)

	Racial resentment			Affect difference		
	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$
Partisanship _{t-1}	0.146* (0.017)	0.792* (0.020)	0.005 (0.033)	0.067* (0.009)	0.832* (0.018)	-0.044 (0.049)
Racial attitudes _{t-1}	0.838* (0.024)	0.142* (0.027)		0.563* (0.036)	0.112* (0.049)	
Constant	0.001 (0.014)	0.036* (0.018)		0.185* (0.021)	0.043 (0.030)	
Observations	6,106	6,106		5,796	5,796	
R ²	0.614	0.683		0.317	0.689	
Residual std. error	0.190	0.202		0.113	0.201	

function of surveys conducted during presidential elections. Midterm election year surveys fielded in this period show similar patterns.

The evidence in Table 3 again supports the partisanship influence hypothesis. Strong partisans (40 per cent of whites) separate by an average of 0.146 points in racial resentment ($p < 0.05$). This is equivalent to three and a half categories on a single scale item.

Racial attitudes also contribute to the relationship’s dynamics. Those scoring at racial resentment’s poles divide by an average of 0.142 points on partisanship, or one response category ($p < 0.05$).

Considering substantive importance, the test comparing the difference in estimated effects offers inconclusive evidence of whether attitude change or sorting drive the dynamics I observe. Column 3 reveals an estimated difference of near 0. But again, this is a comparison of theoretical differences across each measure’s range. Racial resentment’s effect is likely overstated because relatively few whites (13 per cent) populate the scale endpoints, a possibility reinforced by results from standardizing each measure that suggests partisanship matters more. While the evidence indicates that partisanship’s influence can extend beyond campaign contexts, it is mixed as to whether partisanship is more substantively important between 2012 and 2016.¹⁸

The VOTER survey also allows for assessing partisanship’s influence using the group affect dimension of racial animus.¹⁹ The results in Column 4 indicate that partisanship’s influence persists. Partisanship shapes how much more negatively whites feel about blacks relative to whites ($\hat{\beta}_1 = 0.067$, $p < 0.05$). Partisanship’s influence is not confined to a measure that some contend contains racial policy content (Huddy and Feldman 2009; Sniderman and Carmines 1997), making its influence all the more consequential. This is not simply another story of partisans adopting their party’s policy positions (Lenz 2012), but rather one about whites updating their views about a marginalized group in society.

Affect also relates to changing party loyalties. Whites who rate blacks more negatively than whites identify as more Republican ($\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.130$, $p < 0.05$). These results do not support, however, the result that partisanship matters more when comparing theoretically possible changes ($\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2 = -0.042$, $p > 0.1$). But again, the estimated effect for racial attitudes on partisanship is overstated because respondents are not distributed similarly across the measure. Results reported in Appendix D standardizing the variables to adjust for this suggest partisanship has more substantive influence. As with racial resentment, attitude change is thus at least as likely as sorting to explain the growing correlation between racial attitudes and party loyalties, and potentially more so given that the estimated attitude change effect implicates many more respondents.²⁰

¹⁸The model accounts for about two-thirds of the correlation between whites’ partisan ties and racial attitudes in 2016.
¹⁹Descriptives: mean₁₂ = 0.56, s.d.₁₂ = 0.11; mean₁₆ = 0.53, s.d.₁₆ = 0.13.
²⁰Looking separately at evaluations of blacks and whites does not yield different insights. Results in Appendix I.

These results provide substantial evidence to support my argument that partisanship can shape racial attitudes. In the Obama era whites adopted racial views consistent with their party loyalties, and this holds for multiple dimensions of racial animus; partisans are not simply following on racial policy attitudes.²¹ While less clear, the evidence also suggests that attitude change rather than sorting does more to explain the growing correlation between partisanship and racial attitudes.

2016: Sustained Party Influence

As a final test I examine whether these results are unique to President Obama. My argument is not simply about reactions to his administration. While the available panel data do not allow us to conclusively rule out any influence from Obama, I consider a period during which he was a less central political actor – the 2016 presidential election. The election featured Donald Trump, a politician more open than most to denigrating racial and ethnic minorities. Trump's actions, and the media coverage they received, provide considerations on race separate from Obama that whites could respond to by changing their attitudes or partisanship. Similarly, Hillary Clinton's strategy of attacking Trump more than advancing her own platform suggests considerations about Trump and his rhetoric were more plentiful, even if Clinton's platform consisted in large part of strengthening Obama's legacy on race-related issues (Sides et al. 2018). But Trump's ascendance also revealed a fracturing Republican Party. Democrats displayed similar divides, with Bernie Sanders challenging Clinton by appealing to economic dissatisfaction. Therefore during this period there are two possibilities: partisanship could still matter (that is, whites' partisanship could shape their racial attitudes) or other topics could matter more (that is, partisanship no longer changes racial attitudes).

For this test I use data from the 2016 CCAP's June and November–December interviews. The results, included in Table 4, again support both hypotheses. The first column indicates that strong partisans, nearly 42 per cent of whites, separate by an average of 0.089 points in racial resentment, a difference of one scale item category on this three-item version ($p < 0.05$).

That is not to say that whites did not also adopt new partisan allegiances. Column 2 suggests that racial attitudes encouraged changes in partisanship. The 20 per cent of the white sample located at the extremes of the racial resentment measure moves apart by 0.034 points on partisanship, or about one-fifth of an item category ($p < 0.05$).

The results also suggest that partisanship has greater substantive influence than racial resentment. Column 3 shows that the difference between partisanship and racial resentment is positive and significant ($\beta_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.055$, $p < 0.05$). This occurs despite racial resentment's effect being somewhat overstated because it still implicates fewer people than the same shift for partisanship.²²

The partisanship and racial attitude influence hypotheses also receive support when considering group affect. Here, respondents rated blacks and whites on five-point favorability scales rather than feeling thermometers as in the prior affect analyses.²³ Table 4's remaining results show that partisanship changes affect ($\beta_1 = 0.074$, $p < 0.05$), and that affect relates to changing party loyalties ($\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.065$, $p < 0.05$). These estimates offer no clear insight into substantive influence ($\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.009$, $p > 0.10$). But as with the VOTER survey results, racial attitudes' influence is likely overstated because few whites score at the measure's extremes. The dynamic relationship between partisanship and racial attitudes again manifests on a measure that contains no policy content, reinforcing the view that whites are updating their attitudes about a social group rather than merely adopting new policy positions.²⁴

²¹In all cases partisanship matters more in analyses standardizing all variables, and shapes racial attitudes after incorporating additional core attitudes. Analyses in Appendices D and F.

²²Party still matters after including additional core predispositions. Analyses in Appendix F.

²³Descriptives: $\text{mean}_{\text{June}} = 0.55$, $\text{s.d.}_{\text{June}} = 0.17$; $\text{mean}_{\text{Nov-Dec}} = 0.53$, $\text{s.d.}_{\text{Nov-Dec}} = 0.18$.

²⁴Looking separately at evaluations of blacks and whites does not yield different insights. Results in Appendix I.

Table 4. Relationship between whites’ partisanship and racial attitudes (2016 CCAP)

	Racial resentment			Affect difference		
	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$	Racial attitudes _t	Partisanship _t	$\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\alpha}_2$
Partisanship _{t-1}	0.089* (0.010)	0.918* (0.009)	0.055* (0.014)	0.074* (0.008)	0.924* (0.008)	0.009 (0.019)
Racial attitudes _{t-1}	0.792* (0.011)	0.034* (0.010)		0.556* (0.022)	0.065* (0.017)	
Constant	0.069* (0.006)	0.026* (0.006)		0.193* (0.011)	0.007* (0.009)	
Observations	8,116	8,116		8,120	8,120	
R ²	0.725	0.851		0.378	0.851	
Residual std. error	0.151	0.128		0.135	0.128	

That racial attitudes still align with partisanship even when Barack Obama is a less focal political actor suggests the dynamic relationship does not depend solely on him. Partisanship’s relevance persists in a racialized electoral campaign created in part by the rhetoric from both major party candidates (Sides et al. 2018). Further, the evidence again suggests that the growing correlation between partisanship and racial attitudes likely comes more from attitude change than sorting.

Discussion

To synthesize these results, in this section I present each predisposition’s relative effect across data collections. Figure 1 provides the estimated change in the outcome for a one-standard-deviation shift in the lagged predictor (β_1 or α_2). This speaks to substantive effects by focusing on the most likely source of variation in the explanatory variable.

Figure 1 reinforces the insights from the preceding analyses that each predisposition’s substantive primacy varies. While racial attitudes are more influential in one case, with an effect twice that of partisanship, partisanship is more influential in the rest – from 1.5 to nearly 6 times so – and this difference is reliable in three of five instances. Not only is the relationship dynamic, but partisanship has been a particularly potent force in recent years.

Partisan Lenses for All? Awareness Moderates Dynamics

While the evidence I provide indicates partisanship can shape whites’ racial attitudes, I estimate an average effect throughout. Scholarship investigating the dynamics between issue orientations and partisanship suggests individual-level characteristics may condition such dynamics (Carsey and Layman 2006). To address these complexities and offer evidence to support my argument that partisans are likely responding to features in the information environment, I briefly consider whether political awareness conditions dynamics. Awareness captures individual differences in whether people encounter information and can incorporate what they hear into their existing attitudes (Zaller 1992). If partisans are responding to the information environment as I claim, then the most politically aware should change the most.

I focus on the 1992–1994 ANES and the 2012–2016 VOTER survey. I use the same model specification but generate separate estimates for high- and low-awareness individuals who I define, respectively, as scoring at and above, or below, the median political awareness score in each dataset.²⁵ Table 5 presents the results. The first two columns offer no evidence of a dynamic relationship between racial resentment and partisanship for low-awareness whites in the 1990s.

²⁵I operationalize awareness by summing together correct responses to political fact items and scale this from 0 (low political awareness) to 1 (high political awareness) (Zaller 1992). Median_{ANES1992} = 0.50. Median_{VOTER2012} = 0.90.

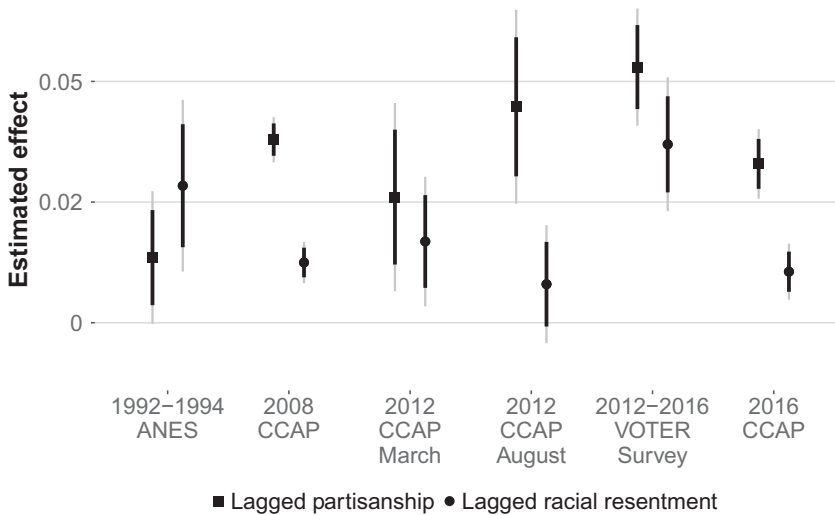


Figure 1. Change in present racial resentment (partisanship) produced by a standard deviation shift in lagged partisanship (racial resentment)

Estimated effect, Lagged partisanship, Lagged racial resentment

Note: figure denotes 84 per cent (thicker) and 95 per cent (thinner) confidence intervals. Results from models in [Tables 1-4](#).

They neither update their racial attitudes nor sort on these beliefs. The next column pair, however, reveals different patterns, and evidence in line with my expectations. The politically aware appear to update their racial attitudes ($\hat{\beta}_1 = 0.057$, $p < 0.05$) and adopt new party loyalties ($\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$), with racial attitudes offering more substantive influence.²⁶ In this context, those who are likely to receive information and have the ability to respond to it appear to be more willing to switch parties than update their views of black Americans. That the politically aware change more supports my claim that individuals are likely responding to the information environment.

The results from the VOTER survey reveal different patterns. Between 2012 and 2016, the least politically aware both change their racial attitudes ($\hat{\beta}_1 = 0.123$, $p < 0.05$) and adopt new party loyalties ($\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.122$, $p < 0.05$). Even the least politically attuned appear willing to update their attitudes. But the results also indicate that the more politically aware are more responsive, suggesting the patterns I identify come from whites responding to the information environment. High-awareness whites' partisanship relates to changing racial attitudes ($\hat{\beta}_1 = 0.167$, $p < 0.05$), a substantively large difference that is also greater than that for low-awareness whites.²⁷ Further, while the results suggest sorting on racial attitudes ($\hat{\alpha}_2 = 0.128$, $p < 0.05$), this is substantively less important than partisanship. Only 7 per cent of the most aware white sample place at racial resentment's poles whereas strong partisans make up 46 per cent of the sample. While the evidence suggests the most aware are more likely to change their racial attitudes, both groups appear similarly likely to adopt new party loyalties.²⁸

²⁶Even so, the difference in effects between the low- and high-awareness groups is imprecisely estimated in both instances ($\hat{\beta}_1$: $p = 0.40$ and $\hat{\alpha}_2$: $p = 0.12$, two-tailed), apparently due to the use of a truncated sophistication measure. A model moderating by the full awareness measure rather than the low-high dichotomy reveals a significant difference across the range of awareness on sorting but not attitude change.

²⁷Partisanship's larger effect is significant ($p < 0.05$). This difference persists when moderating by the full awareness measure rather than focusing on the low-high binary.

²⁸In Appendix K I show that the group affect measure offers broadly consistent results.

Table 5. Political awareness's moderating effect on the relationship between racial resentment and partisanship

	1992–1994 ANES				2012–2016 voter survey			
	Low awareness		High awareness		Low awareness		High awareness	
	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t	Racial resentment _t	Partisanship _t
Partisanship _{t-1}	0.021 (0.038)	0.774* (0.050)	0.057* (0.024)	0.879* (0.031)	0.121* (0.011)	0.786* (0.013)	0.167* (0.011)	0.808* (0.012)
Racial resentment _{t-1}	0.579* (0.061)	0.032 (0.080)	0.595* (0.034)	0.165* (0.044)	0.757* (0.017)	0.119* (0.019)	0.863* (0.014)	0.129* (0.015)
Constant	0.288* (0.044)	0.084 (0.058)	0.227* (0.023)	−0.014 (0.029)	0.087* (0.012)	0.065* (0.014)	−0.047* (0.008)	0.022* (0.008)
Observations	196	196	396	396	2,774	2,774	2,823	2,823
R ²	0.320	0.553	0.471	0.706	0.474	0.619	0.747	0.769
Residual std. error	0.171	0.226	0.151	0.193	0.199	0.223	0.146	0.151

These results support my argument that the information environment facilitates dynamics. With the politically aware the most engaged and attentive, they should be the most responsive to information they receive about race; my findings support this view.

Conclusion

I demonstrate that the relationship between partisanship and racial animus is not unidirectional as prior scholarship at least implicitly believes (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Kinder 2013). Rather, partisanship's centrality in whites' belief systems grounds my claim that it may contribute to racial attitude changes. I offer evidence that partisanship relates to changes on two dimensions of racial attitudes, and report results that it shapes stereotyping in Appendix I. Finally, while partisans of all stripes may update their racial attitudes, the politically aware change the most.²⁹ This aligns with my claim that partisans are responding to the information environment.

My results recast our understanding of the relationship between two predispositions presumed to be fundamental to individuals. Racial attitudes arguably form early in life and persist in much the same form through adulthood (Goldman and Hopkins *forthcoming*; Henry and Sears 2009). Similarly, although partisan allegiances form somewhat later, the evidence suggests they typically shift the most following substantial changes in the party system (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002). Racial attitudes' early development and persistence encourages placing them causally prior to other outcomes, including partisanship, but this conceptualization blinds scholars to potential changes in causal dynamics. That partisanship and racial attitudes appear to have similar cognitive characteristics (Sears 1993) perhaps makes it less surprising that whites' partisan ties can motivate them to update their beliefs about black Americans in response to new information given received wisdom that similar processes motivate party switching (Green et al. 2002).

While less conclusive, patterns in the results I present suggest that variation in partisanship's importance in the relationship may come from changes in the political environment. This is possible because political contexts make some predispositions more central in belief systems than others (Highton and Kam 2011), with greater centrality increasing the predisposition's causal influence on other attitudes (Converse 1964). Evidence that racial attitudes shape party loyalties comes in large part from the 1960s–1980s, a period when many Americans were adjusting their partisanship to account for changes in the party system caused by an issue that was more important to them than their partisan ties (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Green et al. 2002; Sears and Funk 1999). But by defining conflict more in terms of partisanship than other concerns, the current polarized and competitive political environment has made partisanship a much stronger political force (Azari and Hetherington 2016). The results I report here and in the Appendix are consistent with this contextual change influencing dynamics.

By elevating partisanship over other lines of conflict, partisan biases in information seeking and processing become more likely (Henderson and Theodoridis 2018; Mason 2018), giving people few incentives to change their party loyalties and more cause to adopt party-consistent attitudes (Highton and Kam 2011). That partisanship's influence increases in the 2000s relative to the 1990s, and is typically greater than the impact of racial attitudes, is consistent with context affecting dynamics by shaping which orientation(s) people use to understand the world around them. Such context-specific dynamics are also consistent with recent work revealing that partisanship shapes religious affiliations in specific life-cycle moments (Margolis 2018). Partisanship appears to be capable of shaping presumptively fundamental orientations, but the extent of this influence may be conditional.

That whites are likely to change their racial attitudes potentially introduces perverse incentives for political campaign strategy. For decades politicians have faced the 'electoral temptations of race' to generate support through racial campaign appeals (Kinder and Sanders 1996;

²⁹While inconclusive, analyses in Appendices L and M suggest Democrats are unique in the degree of their attitude change.

Mendelberg 2001). Republican candidates may increasingly find success using this messaging because their core supporters' increasingly negative racial attitudes give these tactics greater purchase. Moreover, my results suggest such appeals could lead to additional party-driven attitude change, therefore introducing a vicious cycle. It seems unlikely that these attitude change dynamics are a short-term phenomenon.

Recent work suggests that negative racial appeals could have even more deleterious outcomes because the set of racial appeals available to politicians may be increasing. Whereas prior work demonstrated that social norms shape how politicians talk about race (Mendelberg 2001), new evidence suggests these prohibitions may be changing (Valentino et al. 2018). Whites do not appear to shun explicit racial cues like they used to. If party elites who employ negative racial appeals are not punished, then these appeals may become increasingly common. Such an outcome could produce pernicious consequences because the current party-centric era makes party elites particularly influential sources of social norms. Elites using negative racial appeals, particularly explicitly hostile ones, can validate this same behavior in the mass public (Crandall et al. 2018). Changing norms can lead the racial tensions built into the party system to surface, with normatively troubling consequences.

Conversely, my results also indicate that politics, through partisanship, may reduce racial animus. That white Democrats' attitudes are becoming more positive towards blacks suggests that political processes need not exclusively amplify racial animus. Motivation appears to be a key component of effective prejudice reduction techniques (Paluck and Green 2009), and my results suggest that partisanship may provide some of the encouragement whites need to re-evaluate racial categories. Further, that the politically aware exhibit more attitude change suggests some combination of information exposure and willingness and/or ability to update existing attitudes. Future work could consider the discrete factor(s) at work among Democrats to identify paths for mitigating racial animus.

But all of this assumes that the patterns of change I describe reflect actual attitude change. While changes in survey reports that relate to partisanship could indicate patterns of expressive responding and social desirability concerns rather than true attitude change (Bullock et al. 2015), analyses in Appendix N suggest that the meaning of racial resentment does not appreciably change over time in ways that suggest responses contain additional considerations. Attitude change, not expressive responding, appears to best explain the patterns I present. Left unaddressed, though, is how this likely attitude change relates to behavior. It could be the case that white Democrats look little different than white Republicans when considering observed inter-group behaviors despite having markedly different attitudes. This is an important question, and investigating it will help explore the potential disconnect between stated and revealed preferences.³⁰

These lessons reorient the perspective that race is fundamental to politics by demonstrating that politics are also fundamental to race. Politics shape how whites view black Americans. Despite the Founders' desires, proper institutional arrangements appear insufficient to stifle group-based antagonisms (Hamilton et al. 2006[1788]). In fact, the processes these structures establish can stoke, or quell, racial animus.

Supplementary material. Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/V7TQOZ> and online appendices are available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000437>

Acknowledgements. I thank Allison Anoll, Larry Bartels, Marc Hetherington, Cindy Kam, Efrén Pérez, Ronald Rapoport, Alex Theodoridis, Marc Trussler, the Vanderbilt Research on Individuals, Politics, and Society lab group, and the University of California, San Diego's Race Workshop for helpful feedback and discussions during this project. A previous version of this article was presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

³⁰I thank the reviewers for emphasizing this point.

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