



How Exposure to the Confederate Flag Affects Willingness to Vote for Barack Obama

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Leading up to the 2008 U.S. election, pundits wondered whether Whites, particularly in Southern states, were ready to vote for a Black president. The present paper explores how a common Southern symbol—the Confederate flag—impacted willingness to vote for Barack Obama. We predicted that exposure to the Confederate flag would activate negativity toward Blacks and result in lowered willingness to vote for Obama. As predicted, participants primed with the Confederate flag reported less willingness to vote for Obama than those primed with a neutral symbol. The flag did not affect willingness to vote for White candidates. In a second study, participants primed with the Confederate flag evaluated a hypothetical Black target more negatively than controls. These results suggest that exposure to the Confederate flag results in more negative judgments of Black targets. As such, the prevalence of this flag in the South may have contributed to a reticence for some to vote for Obama because of his race.

KEY WORDS: Confederate Flag, Voting, Automaticity, Priming, Racial Bias

The 2008 U.S. election provided many historical firsts including the first Black nominee of a major political party candidate for president. Ultimately, Barack Obama won the election, becoming the first Black president of the United States. During the months leading up to the election, however, Obama's success was far from guaranteed and pundits and voters alike pondered the role that race might play in the success of his candidacy (e.g., Bigg, 2008; Washington, 2008; Zernike, 2008). Although race relations in the United States have improved considerably over the last 50 years, there is still much progress to be made (Pettigrew, 1996). It was unclear prior to the election whether race relations had improved so much that White Americans would be willing to vote for a Black candidate for president of the United States. National polls fueled this concern, including an AP-Yahoo news poll conducted in association with Stanford University two months before the election suggesting that as many as 40% of White Americans still harbored negative views of Blacks (Associated Press-Yahoo News, 2008).

There was speculation, in particular, about whether Barack Obama's race would affect the voting intentions of Southern Whites (e.g., Balz, 2008; Edsall, 2008; Parsons & Pearson, 2008). Pundits wondered about the voting intentions of Southerners, in part, because of a salient history of interracial problems in the South, including the defense of slavery during the Civil War and resistance to desegregation. These concerns were further fueled by a number of early presidential primary polls showing that support for Obama among Southern Democrats was considerably lower than support for Obama among White Democrats nationally, between 3% and 14% lower, depending on the poll (Pew Research Center Poll, 2008; SurveyUSA election poll, 2008; reviewed in Edsall, 2008). When Obama's candidacy was gaining support at the national level, Southern White Democrats reported greater support for Obama's two most popular White competitors—Hillary Clinton and John Edwards—than they showed for Obama (Edsall, 2008). Although voting preferences are affected by many factors, some interpreted these polls as revealing a reticence on the part of some Southerners to vote for a Black man for president.

We wondered whether there were factors in the South that could impact people's willingness to vote for a Black president. In particular, we focused on the visibility of the Confederate flag in the South. Many Southerners view the Confederate flag as a precious symbol of an honorable Southern culture and heritage (Leib & Webster, 2007). Others view the flag, instead, primarily through its association with a history when Blacks were treated as property rather than as people. Controversies over where the Confederate flag is flown (e.g., Fletcher, 2000; Velde, 2008), how it is displayed within artwork (Sexton, 2007), and even the wisdom of incorporating it into a high school prom dress (Associated Press, 2006) have been heated and have drawn national attention.

While the debate surrounding the Confederate flag has often focused on how people differ in their beliefs about the flag, we are particularly interested in one aspect of the flag's meaning—its association with racial bias and prejudice toward

Blacks. This particular meaning of the Confederate flag has a long history, beginning with its use by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War (Schedler, 1998), reinforced in the 1950s when the Confederate flag was an emblem of those who opposed the civil rights movement and school desegregation, and continuing to this day when the KKK, Aryan Nation, and many other White supremacist groups use the Confederate flag as one of their symbols (Martinez, 2000). Although there are people who argue that the true meaning of the Confederate flag has little to do with racism, these individuals are still aware of the degree to which the Confederate flag is often associated with racism and racist groups within our culture (Kunzman, Plant, Ehrlinger, Columb, & Goplen, 2010). We argue that the concepts associated with the Confederate flag, such as racist behavior and negativity toward Blacks, become accessible in people's minds when they are exposed to the flag. As a result, we predict that individuals exposed to the Confederate flag are likely to subsequently evaluate Black targets more negatively than control participants not exposed to the flag.

Past research on automaticity suggests that objects, situations, and identities are imbued with meaning and associations (e.g., Barsalou, 1999). Exposure to these cues results in priming, or increased accessibility, of associated concepts. In turn, the greater accessibility of these concepts can influence subsequent judgments and behavior (for review, see Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2006). For example, Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) found that participants who were subliminally primed with faces of Black men responded with greater hostility to a later provocation than control participants. They argued that the presentation of the Black faces resulted in the automatic activation of traits stereotypically associated with Black men (i.e., hostility), which resulted in the participants acting consistently with these traits. Priming effects occur at a nonconscious level and, as such, it is possible to find heightened accessibility even for concepts that one would immediately reject were the concept considered consciously (Devine, 1989). For example, Bargh et al. (1996) found that individuals low in prejudice were no less likely to respond with hostility after exposure to Black faces than were those high in prejudice. Thus, even those low in racial prejudice might engage in racially biased judgments and behavior after exposure to the Confederate flag if, as we argue, the flag primes the concept of racism and negativity toward Blacks.

The present investigation is, to our knowledge, the first to explore the consequences of exposure to the Confederate flag. However, exposure to the American flag has been shown to make associated concepts more active and, as a result, influence judgment (for review see Butz, 2009). For example, individuals high in nationalism view the American flag as a symbol of core "American" values including equality and justice. After exposure to the American flag, people high in nationalism make judgments consistent with these activated concepts—they display less hostility toward outgroups relative to peers in a no-flag-exposure condition (Butz, Plant, & Doerr, 2007; see also Ferguson & Hassin, 2007; Porter, Hassin, Balcetis, & Ferguson, 2010).

The Confederate flag, in contrast, is often associated with prejudice and negativity toward Blacks (Kunstman et al., 2010). As a result, we predict that exposure to the Confederate flag will increase accessibility of prejudiced thoughts and negativity toward Blacks. Further, this negativity is expected to spill over to subsequent evaluations, resulting in more negative judgments of Black targets than would occur in the absence of flag exposure. In short, we expect that exposure to the Confederate flag will activate a prejudiced processing bias, whereby people judge Black people through a lens of negativity and, as a result, evaluate them more negatively than individuals not exposed to the flag. Importantly, we expect exposure to the Confederate flag to activate negativity toward Blacks only for non-Black individuals. For Black individuals, as the traditional target of the racism associated with the Confederate flag, we expect that the flag would more often activate feelings of threat and exclusion rather than negativity toward their own group (Goplen et al., 2009).

The 2008 election and, in particular, Barack Obama's nomination as Democratic candidate for U.S. president, presented a timely opportunity to explore the effect of Confederate flag exposure on evaluation of a Black target. Thus, in our first study, we explored the effects of Confederate flag exposure on willingness to vote for Barack Obama, relative to White candidates for president. In Study 2, we sought to examine whether the effect of Confederate Flag exposure extended beyond President Obama, resulting in negative judgments of Black targets, in general. We also explored, in Study 2, whether exposure to the Confederate flag made personally held racial attitudes more accessible or whether the effect of flag priming on evaluation of Black targets might occur as often among individuals both low and high in prejudice.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the effect of Confederate flag exposure on willingness to vote for Barack Obama in the 2008 election. After manipulating exposure to the Confederate flag, we asked White and Black participants to report their likelihood of voting for four candidates who, at the time the study began, had active campaigns for President of the United States—Barack Obama, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Mike Huckabee. By asking participants to make judgments about all four candidates, we were able to explore whether individuals exposed to the Confederate flag made more negative judgments of a Black target, relative to White targets, independent of the candidates' party affiliation. We predicted that White participants exposed to the Confederate flag would report a lower likelihood of voting for the Black candidate (Obama) compared to the three White candidates. We also explored whether the effect of exposure to the Confederate flag on willingness to vote for Obama interacted with Southern identity. Southerners might hold stronger associations with the Confederate flag than non-Southerners by virtue of increased exposure. If so, we would expect that the effect

of exposure to the Confederate flag on judgments of Blacks would be particularly strong for those who identify as Southerners.

Method

Participants and Design. One-hundred-and-eight White students (47% female) and 22 Black students (55% female) participated in exchange for partial credit towards a psychology course requirement. The study was a 2 (Confederate flag vs. control prime) \times 2 (Black vs. White participant) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Upon arrival at the lab, participants completed a short questionnaire assessing their level of interest and knowledge about American politics. In this questionnaire, they rated the degree to which they read or watched the news regularly and the degree to which they would rate themselves as a Democrat and as a Republican on separate 1 (*not at all*)—9 (*very much so*) scales. Using similar scales, participants rated the degree to which they were familiar with the four candidates leading in the 2008 Republican and Democratic primary races at the time of the start of the study—Barack Obama, John McCain, Mike Huckabee, and Hillary Clinton. Note, in asking participants to make judgments about four specific political candidates, we asked them to make judgments about unique stimuli that differ in multiple ways including gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation. It was important to measure willingness to vote for Hillary Clinton, for example, to distinguish an unwillingness to vote for Obama because of his party affiliation from unwillingness because of his race. For this reason, we continued to collect data regarding willingness to vote for both Mike Huckabee and Hillary Clinton after they dropped out of the race (on March 4, 2008, for Huckabee and June 7, 2008, for Clinton). Data collection began in February 2008 and continued until August 2008.

After indicating their willingness to vote for each of the four candidates, participants were randomly assigned either to the Confederate flag or to a neutral symbol subliminal prime condition and asked to complete a lexical decision task. Participants completed 20 trials, each of which consisted of a rapid subliminal presentation of a prime consistent with their condition (the Confederate flag or a neutral symbol made up of colored lines). The image was presented for 15 ms and followed by a large “X” masking image. Earlier studies using this technique demonstrated that participants were unable to recognize the subliminal primes even after numerous trials (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000). Participants were then shown a string of letters and were asked to judge, as quickly as possible, whether the string of letters was a word or a nonword. The sole purpose of this task was to direct participants’ focus to the screen long enough to present the subliminal prime consistent with their condition.

After completion of the lexical decision task, participants rated their likelihood of voting for each of the four candidates—Obama, McCain, Huckabee, and Clinton—on scales from 1 (*definitely will not vote for*) to 9 (*definitely will vote for*). Each question was accompanied by a picture of that candidate taken from their campaign website. Participants then rated the degree to which they would describe themselves as politically liberal and, separately, as politically conservative, again on scales from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so). Finally, participants completed a series of demographic questions and including a question assessing the degree to which they self-identified as a Southerner on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Results

Political Orientation

Although our participants were college students, a group that tends to be more politically liberal than the overall population, they attend a large state school in the South and do not seem to lean predictably Democratic. Indeed, our sample tended to identify more strongly as Republican ($M = 5.03$) than as Democrat ($M = 4.29$), $t(129) = -1.66$, $p = .10$, $d = .27$. However, there was a clear difference in political orientation between our Black and White participants. White participants identified more strongly as Republican (5.56) and less strongly as Democrat (3.77) than our Black participants (2.41 vs. 6.86, respectively), $t_{\text{republican}}(128) = 5.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$ and $t_{\text{democrat}}(128) = -5.35$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.31$. Thus, ethnicity is highly confounded with political orientation in our sample. In order to determine whether exposure to the Confederate flag differentially affects the voting intentions of White and Black participants, we created a composite measure of political orientation, which we controlled for in all analyses. The political orientation composite was created by averaging self-ratings of being a Democrat and, separately, being a Republican (after reverse scoring the latter).

Exposure to the Confederate Flag and Voting Intentions

A 2 (priming condition) \times 2 (participant ethnicity) \times 4 (candidate) repeated measures ANCOVA, controlling for self-rated political identification, the interaction between political identification and flag priming condition, and familiarity with the candidates, resulted in a significant three-way interaction between priming condition, participant ethnicity, and candidate, $F(3,118) = 3.73$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$.¹ Not surprisingly, participants' willingness to vote for the candidates was

¹ The presence of the three-way interaction between priming condition, ethnicity of the participant, and candidate does not depend on these covariates. The interaction is significant when familiarity with the candidates is not included as a covariate, $F(3,122) = 2.93$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, and when not including political orientation, $F(3,124) = 2.75$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Lastly, one might expect that the month of

predicted by main effects of familiarity with three of the four candidates ($F_{\text{Obama}}(3,118) = 7.65, p < .001, F_{\text{McCain}}(3,118) = 2.08, p = .11, F_{\text{Clinton}}(3,118) = 3.31, p < .05, F_{\text{Huckabee}}(3,118) = 4.37, p < .01$) and of political orientation ($F(3,118) = 10.47, p < .001$). However, there was no interaction between participants' political orientation and flag exposure with respect to candidate preference ($F(3,118) = .96, ns$).

Post hoc tests revealed that White participants exposed to the Confederate flag reported a significantly lower likelihood of voting for Obama ($M = 3.74, SD = 2.79$) than those exposed to the neutral symbol ($M = 4.55, SD = 2.68$), $F(1, 104) = 6.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$, see Figure 1a. Exposure to the Confederate Flag had no effect on the willingness of Black participants to vote for Obama, $F(1,18) = 1.01, ns$, see Figure 1b.

We further probed the interaction to explore whether exposure to the Confederate flag affected willingness to vote for White candidates. Participants exposed to the flag might have been less likely to vote for Obama because exposure made them more conservative. If so, exposure to the Confederate flag should also decrease participants' willingness to vote for the other Democratic candidate (Clinton) and perhaps also increase their willingness to vote for Republican candidates (McCain and Huckabee). Exposure to the Confederate flag had no impact on White or Black participants' reported likelihood of voting for either Republican candidate—John McCain, $F_{\text{White}}(1,104) = .39, ns$ and $F_{\text{Black}}(1,18) = 2.21, ns$, or Mike Huckabee, $F_{\text{White}}(1,104) = .07, ns$ and $F_{\text{Black}}(1,18) = .30, ns$. Exposure to the Confederate flag had no impact on Black participants' reported likelihood of voting for the other Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, $F_{\text{Black}}(1,18) = .71, ns$, and led White participants to report a marginally *higher* likelihood of voting for Clinton, $F_{\text{White}}(1,104) = 3.25, p < .10, \eta^2 = .03$. Therefore, we can be confident that exposure to the Confederate flag led White participants to report lowered likelihood of voting for Obama but did not result in an increase in conservatism overall.

Further evidence that exposure to the Confederate flag did not increase overall conservatism comes from participants' ratings of the degree to which they were liberal or conservative, provided after exposure to the flag. We conducted two 2 (priming condition) \times 2 (participant ethnicity) ANOVAs on ratings of liberalism and conservatism after being primed, controlling for the degree to which participants reported identifying as Republican and Democrat prior to the priming task. These analyses reveal no main effects of Confederate flag exposure on reported liberalism, $F(1,124) = .29, ns$, or conservatism, $F(1,124) = .17, ns$, and no

data collection would matter greatly in this study because Huckabee and Clinton dropped out of the race before the end of data collection. However, inclusion of month of data collection in the analyses revealed no effect of month of data collection, $F(1,117) = .87, ns$, and the key three-way interaction between priming condition, ethnicity of the participant, and candidate remained significant when including this as a covariate, $F(3,117) = 3.71, p = .01, \eta^2 = .09$.

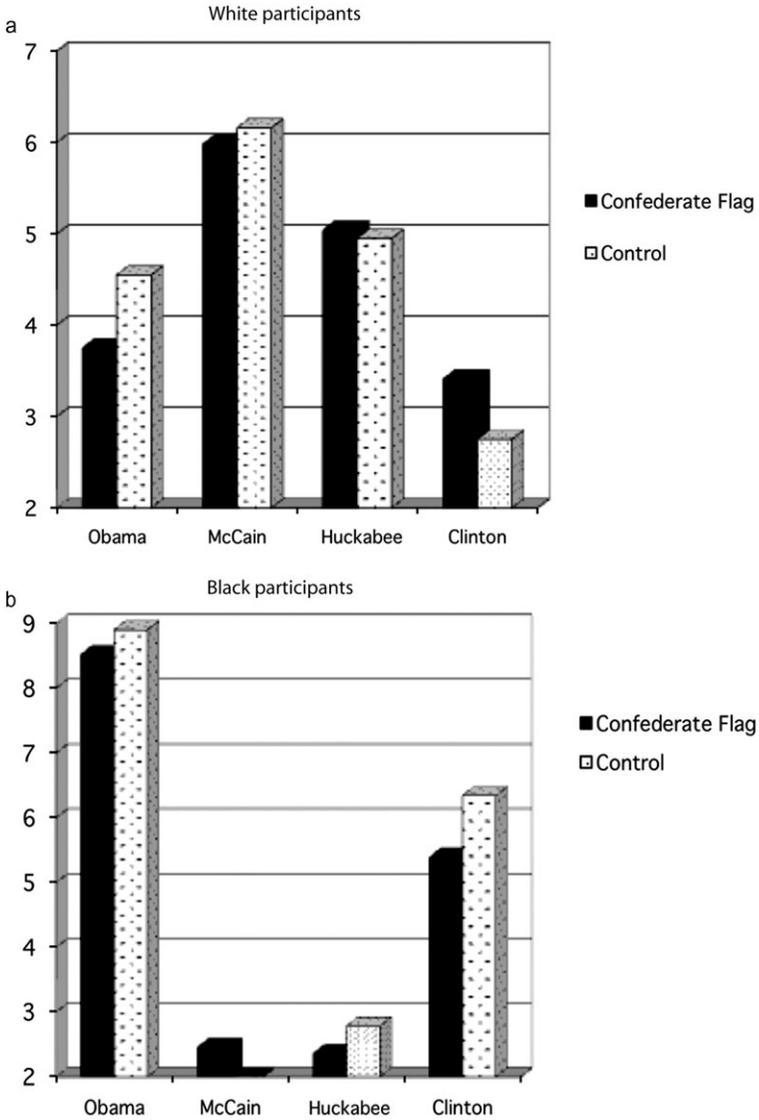


Figure 1. How Exposure to the Confederate Flag Affects Willingness to Vote for Obama, McCain, Huckabee, and Clinton.

interactions between Confederate flag exposure and participant ethnicity, $F(1,124) = .14, ns$ and $F(1,124) = .07, ns$, respectively.

We also explored whether the effect of exposure to the Confederate flag on willingness to vote for Obama was stronger for Southerners than non-Southerners.

The Confederate flag is a symbol highly associated with the South (Kunstman et al., 2010). As such, one might predict that exposure to the Confederate flag would activate identification with Southern culture, including its history of negative interracial reactions. If so, we would expect the effects of exposure to the flag to be particularly strong or perhaps even limited to those who identify as Southern. Alternately, the flag could activate negative evaluations of Black people by virtue of its associations with slavery, segregation, and extremist groups. If so, we would expect to see an effect of exposure to the Confederate flag even among those who do not identify strongly as Southern. To explore the relationship between Southern identity and the effect of exposure to the Confederate flag, we also computed a median split on participants' ratings of the degree to which they self-identified as a Southerner. Participants who rated their Southern identity as between 1 and 3 on the 7-point scale were classified as non-Southern ($n = 52$, $M = 1.94$) while those rating their identity between 4 and 7 were classified as Southern ($n = 78$, $M = 5.62$). An ANCOVA including Southern status based on rated identification rather than participants' home states also revealed no main effect of one's identification as Southern or non-Southern on willingness to vote for Obama ($F(1, 120) = 2.23$, *ns*) and no interaction between the flag prime and being a Southerner ($F(1, 120) = .64$, *ns*).²

Discussion

White participants exposed to the Confederate flag expressed lowered willingness to vote for Barack Obama relative to control participants. In contrast, their willingness to vote for three White candidates was unaffected by exposure to the flag. Indeed, White participants exposed to the Confederate flag were marginally *more* likely to vote for Clinton. Although we did not predict this marginal boost in participants' willingness to vote for Clinton, one could interpret it as consistent with the observed decrease in willingness to vote for Obama. Clinton was Obama's main competitor for the Democratic Party nomination, and she remained competitive through most of our data collection period. A vote for Clinton during the primary season, then, would be more harmful to Obama's candidacy than

² Note that the analysis exploring the role of Southern identity included both White and Black participants. One might argue that a more relevant analysis would focus solely on White participants as Southern Whites might have a different connection to the Confederate flag than might Southern Blacks. Indeed, Southern Whites and Southern Blacks differ more than any other group in their support for the Confederate flag (Cooper & Knotts, 2006). To explore the effect of Southern identity on willingness to vote for Obama among White participants only, we conducted a 2 (priming condition) \times 2 (Southerner vs. Non-Southerner) repeated measures ANCOVA predicting White participants' willingness to vote for Obama, controlling for rated identification as Republican and Democrat and familiarity with the candidates. We find no main effect of Southern identity ($F(1,98) = 1.94$, *ns*) or interaction between flag prime and Southern identity ($F(1,98) = .21$, *ns*) on willingness to vote for Obama among White participants.

would be a vote for either candidate for the Republican Party nomination. Therefore, the tendency to express greater willingness to vote for Clinton after exposure to the Confederate flag might have directly resulted from the decreased willingness to vote for Obama.

Study 1 provides initial support for our argument that exposure to the Confederate flag leads to increased accessibility of negativity toward Blacks. Viewed through the negative lens of this racial bias, participants in the flag condition evaluated Obama more negatively than controls and, as a result, reported less willingness to vote for him than controls. We argue that exposure to the flag activates negativity toward Blacks because the flag is often associated, in our culture, with racism and prejudice.

We argue that, for White participants, exposure to the Confederate flag heightens accessibility of negativity toward Blacks because the flag has salient and well-known cultural associations with racial prejudice. However, one might argue, instead, that exposure to the flag heightens accessibility of one's own racial attitudes and it is the accessibility of these attitudes that led participants to express lowered willingness to vote for Obama in Study 1. If Confederate flag exposure makes personal racial attitudes more accessible, flag exposure might result in more negative judgments of Black targets only or primarily among those participants with negative racial attitudes. Indeed, past research suggests that political ads including race-related primes can heighten accessibility and, thus, predictability of racial attitudes for judgment of political candidates. Political issues, such as crime and welfare, automatically activate thoughts of race in some individuals (Gilens, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; Mendelberg, 1997, 2001). When these topics are paired with stereotype-consistent images in a political advertisement, they make the viewer's own racial attitudes more accessible and, consequently, more predictive of subsequent judgments including preferences for political candidates (Mendelberg, 1997, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). We explore this alternative account in Study 2 by measuring participants' attitudes toward Blacks and relating them to their flag condition and target judgments. If racial attitudes moderate the effect of Confederate flag exposure on judgment, it would indicate that exposure to the flag makes those attitudes more salient.

Study 2 also differs from our Study 1 with respect to the target of judgment. Although our choice to use real life presidential candidates as experimental stimuli in Study 1 was timely, it also made interpretation of our data more challenging. It is difficult to determine, for example, whether the observed decrease in willingness to vote for Obama in the Confederate flag condition was driven by Obama's race, rather than some other quality that differed between him and other presidential candidates. In order to determine whether exposure to the Confederate flag leads to negative evaluations of Black targets in general, including President Obama, participants in Study 2 were asked to evaluate a hypothetical Black target.

Study 2

We argue that the Confederate flag is associated with negative and biased evaluations of and behavior toward Black people by virtue of its use historically by the South in the civil war, by opponents to the civil rights movement, and by modern racist groups. Indeed, when asked to list what the Confederate flag means to them, people frequently mention concepts related to racial bias (Kunstman et al., 2010). Exposure to the flag, we argue, activates racial bias and once activated, this bias results in a more negative impression of and response to Obama. Based on this hypothesis, we would anticipate that exposure to the Confederate flag should elicit biased judgment of any Black target.

In the present Study, we seek to replicate and extend Study 1 by randomly assigning participants to either a Confederate flag exposure or no exposure control condition before asking them to evaluate a hypothetical Black target. We also included a measure of participants' attitudes toward Blacks in Study 2. One might argue that exposure to the Confederate flag would increase negativity toward Blacks only among those who already hold negative racial attitudes. We predict, instead, that participants' racial attitudes will not relate to the effect of Confederate flag exposure on evaluation. While a person's level of prejudice predicts agreement with stereotypes (Devine, 1989) and associations with racial categories such as White and Black (Lepore & Brown, 1997), level of prejudice does not predict the degree to which racial stereotypes are made more accessible by stereotype-based primes or the degree to which this heightened accessibility results in stereotype-consistent judgments (Bargh et al., 1996; Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997). Indeed, Bargh et al. (1996) found that participants both high and low in prejudice responded with more hostility after being primed with Black male faces and that the level of hostility was unrelated to participants' level of prejudice. Participants' level of prejudice does not influence the degree to which they view the Confederate flag as associated with a particular ethnic category and, at best, weakly and negatively correlates with agreement that the flag symbolizes racism (Columb, Ehrlinger, Plant, Goplen, & Kunstman, 2010). Because individuals' racial attitudes do not reliably predict their associations with the Confederate flag, their attitudes should also fail to predict what concepts are primed by flag exposure as well as the consequences of that semantic priming.

In order to examine the impact of exposure to the Confederate Flag, we asked participants to read a story about a Black man and form an impression of him. Half the participants were first exposed to the Confederate flag and half were not exposed to the flag. We then examined whether participants exposed to the flag formed a more negative impression of the target than those not exposed to the flag.

Method

Participants and Design. One-hundred-and-sixteen White (66% female) undergraduate introductory psychology students participated in the experiment in exchange for course credit. The study used a two-group (Confederate flag vs. control) between-subjects design.

Procedure and Materials. In the current study, we exposed participants to the Confederate flag in a way more similar to exposure in the real world than the approach used in Study 1. Upon entering the lab room, participants were seated at a desk with a folder on it. The folder was either blank (control condition) or had a sticker with Confederate flags on it (flag condition). The experimenter then said, "Oh, someone must have left this," and pushed the notebook to the corner of the desk where it remained, visible to the participant, for the rest of the study.

Participants were next provided with a story about a young man named Robert who engaged in ambiguously negative and aggressive behavior based on the popular "Donald" task (Srull & Wyer, 1979). Unlike the typical Donald task, however, participants were provided with a picture of Robert, who was a young black male. In the story, among other things, Robert refused to pay his rent until his landlord repainted his apartment and demanded his money back from a store clerk. After reading the story, participants evaluated Robert by indicating the degree to which a series of traits described him on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much). Included were a series of positive and negative traits (e.g., kind, aggressive, boring, selfish). We created an index of the negativity of participants' ratings of Robert ($\alpha = .88$), reverse coding where necessary.

Finally, we asked participants to complete an abbreviated version of the Attitudes Toward Blacks (ATB) scale ($\alpha = .75$; Brigham, 1993). For the 10-item ATB, participants rated their agreement with items such as "Black and White people are inherently equal" on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Participants' ratings of Robert on the negativity index were analyzed using an independent samples t-test comparing the flag and control condition. This approach allowed us to determine whether exposure to the Confederate flag led participants to evaluate Robert in a more negative manner. The analysis of the negativity index revealed an effect of condition such that, consistent with predictions, participants in the flag condition rated Robert more negatively ($M = 6.95$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 6.47$), $t(114) = -2.30$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.43$. Also consistent with predictions, examination of the participants' ATB scores revealed that there was no difference in more attitudes toward Black people more generally between participants exposed to the flag ($M = 5.55$, $SD = .91$) and control participants ($M = 5.48$, $SD = .79$), $t(112) = -.44$, $p = .66$, $d = -0.07$.

The effect of Confederate flag exposure on judgments of Robert also did not depend on participants' preexisting level of prejudice, $t < 1$. Exposure to the Confederate flag influenced participants' judgment of a new target (Robert) but the size of this effect was not related to participants' preexisting racial attitudes.

Discussion

In Study 2, exposure to the Confederate flag led White participants to rate a hypothetical Black male character more negatively than those in the control condition. Participants' racial attitudes failed to predict the degree to which flag exposure produced more negative evaluations. These findings support the argument that exposure to the Confederate flag activates racially biased responding, by virtue of the flag's cultural associations with prejudice, and results in negatively biased judgments of Black people. Combined with Study 1, these findings suggest that exposure to the Confederate flag might have decreased willingness to vote for Obama specifically because of his race. Further, the effect of flag exposure on judgment was unrelated to personal attitudes regarding race, suggesting that the automatic effects of Confederate flag exposure might lead even people low in prejudice to evaluate President Obama and other Black targets in a more negative light than they would in the absence of flag exposure.

General Discussion

In Study 1, White participants exposed to the Confederate flag reported a lowered likelihood of voting for a Black candidate for President—Barack Obama, relative to controls. However, these same participants were no less likely to vote for any of three White candidates after flag exposure. We argue that the cultural associations between the Confederate flag and racial bias led to greater negativity toward Blacks after exposure to this meaningful symbol. As a result of this increased negativity toward Blacks, exposure to the Confederate flag led to decreased willingness to vote for Barack Obama, a Black candidate. Study 2 lends additional support for this interpretation of the evidence. Participants exposed to the Confederate flag evaluated a hypothetical Black target more negatively than those in a no exposure control condition, suggesting that those exposed to the flag in Study 1 were less willing to vote for Barack Obama specifically because he is Black. Study 2 also revealed that the size of the bias was not predicted by individuals' own racial attitudes. Thus, Confederate flag exposure does not increase accessibility of personal racial attitudes. Rather, it seems to increase accessibility of culturally associated prejudice and results in negative judgments of Black targets among high and low prejudice participants.

The Confederate flag is a ubiquitous symbol in the South. It is visible in prominent places including the Mississippi state flag and the lawn of the South Carolina capitol building but also is incorporated commonly into attire, stickers, and motor vehicle license plates. Southern voters may have shown less support for Obama in early polls because of negative attitudes towards Blacks, as some pundits suggested (e.g., Edsall, 2008). The present research, however, suggests an alternative or additional explanation for the observed reticence to vote for Obama. By virtue of living in a culture that prominently displays the Confederate flag, Southern voters may be exposed to this symbol in a way that activated greater negativity toward Blacks and, consequently, lowered willingness to vote for Black candidates including President Obama even for those low in prejudice. The present research suggests that the effect of exposure to the Confederate flag on voting intentions does not depend on identification as Southern. However, the historical and present day connection between the Confederate flag and the South means that Southerners are more often exposed to this symbol, and, as such, it has a greater capacity to affect political preferences in the South.

Beyond the impact of the Confederate flag on voting intentions, we view this finding as an important contribution to the national discussion regarding display of the Confederate flag. The debates that arise over the Confederate flag largely focus on whether the flag should be viewed primarily as a symbol of heritage or one of hate. We argue that it is equally important to acknowledge and explore the consequences of all that is associated with the Confederate flag in our culture. We argue that the debate over whether it is appropriate to display the Confederate flag in positions of prominence should include a discussion of how exposure to that flag might promote negative judgments of and behavior toward Black individuals, by virtue of its association with racial bias. Our studies show that, whether or not the Confederate flag includes other nonracist meanings, exposure to this flag evokes responses that are prejudicial. Thus, displays of the Confederate flag may do more than inspire heated debate, they may actually provoke discrimination even among those who are low in prejudice. Those who hold the Confederate flag in high esteem might be disappointed to learn about this outcome. However, these findings suggest that the meaning of the Confederate flag is more complex, and more consequential, than some may have previously believed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Rachel DiBiasio, Allison Hebert, Allison Hirschowitz, Jessica Ostrander, and Mary Wilcox for their assistance with data collection and entry. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Joyce Ehrlinger, 1107 W. Call St., Department of Psychology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, 32306. Email: ehrlinger@psy.fsu.edu

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