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Study: Recent Elections Show a Strong Link Between Racism and Political Preference

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As he looks back on his first term, President Barack Obama can take satisfaction from a series of significant accomplishments. But according to a new analysis by a Brown University political scientist, his rise to power has also produced a less-welcome result: A renewed alignment between political preference and “old-fashioned racism.”

Old-school racist beliefs were “unrelated to white Americans’ partisan preferences throughout the post-civil rights era,” writes Michael Tesler. But his analysis of survey data, recently published in the *Journal of Politics*, suggests that changed with the 2008 election—and was also a factor in the 2010 mid-terms. “The election of the country’s first black president had the ironic upshot of opening the door for old-fashioned racism to influence partisan preferences after it was long thought to be a spent force in American politics,” Tesler writes. He adds that this “enhanced polarization of white partisanship” may “leave a lasting mark on American politics that endures after he leaves office.” Understanding his argument first requires clarifying his vocabulary. Political scientists define “old-fashioned racism” as belief in the biological inferiority of blacks, and support for racial segregation and discrimination. In contrast, the new racism is characterized by “a moral feeling that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience and discipline,” Tesler notes, quoting a 1981 paper. To measure old-fashioned racism, Tesler looked at a variety of survey results, led by a key measure: the degree to which whites are comfortable with interracial dating. This data was matched with answers to two questions posed in a 2008 Pew Research Center poll: Who respondents would vote for in a matchup of John McCain and Hillary Clinton, and ditto for a race between McCain and Obama. Not surprisingly, increased levels of racism were correlated with a decreased share of the vote for Obama, compared to Clinton. More significantly, perhaps, is Tesler’s analysis of the 2010 midterms, which found that “old-fashioned racism had a noticeably larger impact on white Americans’ vote choices ... than it had back in 2006.” Specifically, discomfort with interracial dating decreased support for Democratic Congressional candidates in 2010 to roughly the same degree as it decreased support for Obama in 2008. In contrast, racist beliefs had “relatively little impact on white Americans’ voting behavior in the 2006 midterm elections.” Given this alignment between racist beliefs and partisanship, Tesler would not be surprised to see “an

increase in racist political rhetoric, since such messages should be more relevant and resonant now.” He also frets that it may outlast the Obama presidency, since “partisanship typically persists rather stably” throughout one’s life. While we’ll have to wait to see if that prediction pans out, there’s no question that, for the moment, racist leanings make one more likely to conclude that the Democratic party does not represent you or your interests. “The evidence suggests that Obama simultaneously activates both old-fashioned racism and (21st-century) racial resentment,” Tesler concludes. “The most plausible explanation for that dual activation is that Obama independently taps into both the classic symbolic racism theme that blacks have too much influence in politics, and old-fashioned racists’ concerns about the leadership of a president from a racial group whom they consider to be intellectually and socially inferior.”

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