DOES ELECTORAL FOCUS ON PARTY REDUCE THE STRENGTH OF IMPLICIT RACIAL CATEGORIZATION?

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ABSTRACT

DOES ELECTORAL FOCUS ON PARTY REDUCE THE STRENGTH OF IMPLICIT RACIAL CATEGORIZATION?

By

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A long-standing finding in psychology with important real-world implications is that people seem to automatically notice and remember information such as the race or gender of the people they see, in turn leading to the activation of related stereotypes. Some evolutionary perspectives consider the automatic encoding of race at least to be a misfiring of a mechanism for tracking coalition membership, due to racial conflicts in American society making it an accurate shorthand for coaltional conflict. Separating race from coalition has been shown to reduce automatic racial encoding, but not other characteristics like gender. In a political context, it was hypothesized that the focus on the conflict between political parties in general elections would overshadow the influence of race in how people view and remember politicians, compared to primary elections, which lack this dimension of inter-party conflict. Participants completed a Who Said What task, matching statements with the politicians who made them; the patterns of errors were examined to reveal automatic encoding. When reading about a primary election, Republicans but not Democrats automatically encoded politicians’ race. When reading about a general election, Republicans no longer significantly encoded race, but rather encoded party affiliation. The same experimental design was replicated testing if the encoding of gender and then age could be similarly reduced. Both gender and age make
evolutionary sense for encoding, which suggest that separating coalition information should have no effect and this was mostly born out in the data. Gender was encoded very strongly by members of both parties across conditions. Democrats again did not encode party affiliation, while Republicans did. Conversely only Republicans encoded age in the primary condition while both parties encoded age in the general election condition, where party affiliation was not significantly encoded. This somewhat matches previous literature, which finds that party stereotypes overlap with gender but not age. Overall, a focus on party does not seem to reduce this automatic social categorization. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to the current and future political environment (particularly the 2016 Presidential race), including directions for future research.
Background Literature

In psychology, a long-standing finding is that people seem to automatically encode the people they see on varies social categories, such as their race, gender, or age (Devine, 1989; Gawronski, & Bodenhausen, 2006; Hense, Penner, & Nelson, 1995; Hilton, & Von Hippel, 1996; Sears, 1981; Sears & Henry, 2003). This encoding begins very early in development (as early as 4 years old), though there is variation in the type of encoding with racial encoding developing later and more slowly (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Augoustinos, & Rosewarne, 2001; Rhodes, 2012). This encoding, including the differences across social categories, can be explained from an evolutionary perspective, as there are evolutionary benefits to encoding certain types of information (Rhodes, 2012). Tracking gender allows for important probabilistic inferences about people (e.g. potential mates), while age provides useful information such as relative foraging and hunting ability (Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides, 2001; Sanchez, Good, Kwang, & Saltzman, 2008; Walker, Hill, Kaplan, & McMillan, 2002). Complications arise though when discussing racial encoding, which cannot be justified from an evolutionary perspective (Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001). Our hunter-gatherer ancestors would likely never have encountered a member of a different race even once in their lives, so it would be meaningless to evolve a tendency to group people by race. What is evolutionarily beneficial, however, is encoding people by coalition. A coalition is a group of at least two individuals who are involved in repeated, delayed, and reciprocal exchanges of aid and resources (Petersen, Buss, & Wiley, 2014; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Hunter-gatherers lived in tribes that often came into conflict with one another, and it was important to keep track of who was an enemy and who an ally, a
status that was ever shifting and needed to be monitored and updated (Price, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2002; Tooby & Cosmides, 2006). Thus, evolutionary psychologists argue that racial encoding is a by-product of an evolutionarily adaption to track coalition membership; race serves as a shorthand for coalition membership due to historical conflicts and current economic realities in American society (Bass, 1995). When coalition is separated from race as an alternate cue, racial encoding will disappear.

Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides (2001) showed the mechanisms of coalition tracking through the example of two basketball teams, each with two White and two Black players, having a dispute. Participants read a dialogue of the players arguing about a foul that escalated into a fight, with each line of the dialogue accompanied by a photo of a player. When asked to identify which player had said which line, participants were more likely to mistakenly identify a basketball player that was the same race when all the players, regardless of team, wore the same color jerseys. When jersey color was varied by team (such that each team had a different color jersey connected to it) participants were more likely to instead mistake a player for one with the same color jersey (i.e., on the same team). That is, when the context of the situation was changed such that race was separate from coalition, participants no longer used race to guide their answers. However, separating coalition did not reduce the encoding of qualities that are evolutionarily beneficial to track (i.e., gender and age). Since this initial finding, there has been a great deal of research showing that the effects of social categories (even gender and age) can be moderated by the context of the situation, such as how salient they are (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2009).
Automatic Encoding and Coalitions in Politics

In the American political system, the automatic activation of social categories can have a profound influence as voters’ choice of politicians has been shown to heavily rely on numerous non-policy issues (Olivola, Sussman, Tsetsos, Kang, & Todorov, 2012). There has been much debate and research for instance into the role of race and gender, examining issues such as the role a candidate’s race or gender plays in their electability or whether opinion polling is distorted by social desirability biases (Bos, 2015; Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Pasek, Krosnick, & Tompson, 2012; Stout & Kline, 2008). The 2008 presidential election brought the importance of these issues, as well as age, under particular scrutiny (Bass, 1995; Payne et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2008; Seelye & Bosman, 2008). A key point of contention was whether, and to what extent, attacks against Presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were motivated by racism and sexism, respectively (Payne et al., 2010; Seelye & Bosman, 2008). Former President Jimmy Carter even famously said that he believed much of the animosity and opposition to President Obama was motivated by racism (Franke-Ruta, 2009). The vigorous pushback to this statement by some politicians shows that there is not a consensus on these issues, and the issue is complicated by the fact that accusations of racism and sexism are often met with counter-accusations of “playing the race card” or merely a strategy to dodge criticism (Franke-Ruta, 2009; Lee & Morin, 2009; Seelye & Bosman, 2008).

Political parties should be able to provide the context needed to override the automatic encoding of social categories during elections, as a political party meets the evolutionary definition of coalition and there are highly visible identification tools for
membership in that coalition. Political party has also been shown to be the strongest predictor of candidate choice in general elections and one of the most often used heuristics in American politics, strengthening the likelihood people will encode it and it will overshadow the other characteristics of politicians (Bartel, 2000; Dolan, 2014; King & Matland, 2003; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Olivola & Todorov, 2010). Encoding of party affiliation is also related to the level of party polarization, which has been rising over recent years and shows no signs of stopping (Hayes, 2011; Hopkins & Stoker, 2012; Sussell & Thompson, 2015).

The best way to test for party’s effects is to compare an election where party does not play a role to one where it does: comparing a primary to a general election. In a primary all the competing politicians are the same party (equivalent to the same jersey condition), so voters should look to other differences between candidates like race and gender, which should in turn lead to greater stereotype activation and categorization. In a general election, party should serve the same role as jersey color, being a noticeable and relevant indicator of group identification, and may thus overcome implicit categorization. Voters have been found to be able to make fairly accurate inferences about a wide variety of information about politicians simply from their appearance, such as competence, social desirability, and even political party affiliation (Olivola et al., 2012). If people are encoding party affiliation implicitly even when presented with a context-less photo, then a general election’s intense focus on inter-group party competition should make political party a very powerful influence.

The present research will test if a greater focus on party can reduce the automatic encoding of social categories. Study 1 will focus on race, where past research strongly
predicts that party will successfully overshadow race. Despite the mixed predictions on the ability of party to reduce the encoding of other categories, Studies 2 and 3 will examine the encoding of gender and age, respectively.
Study 1

Methods

To model the differences in voter decisions between primary and general elections, this study utilized the implicit measure, the “Who Said What” task (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). The “Who Said What” (WSW) task involves participants reading statements (often framed as a dialogue) made by individuals who differ on multiple characteristics (including the one we wish to examine), with accompanying photos for identification. Then, in a surprise recall test, participants are asked to match each statement with the photo of the person who said it. It is expected that when participants cannot remember exactly which person made the statement, they will make a guess based on the information they do recall, such as the speaker’s race. For example, if all a participant can remember about the identity of who said the statement is that they were Black, then they will likely choose a photo of one of the Black targets as their best guess. The more participants are encoding one type of characteristic, the greater the number of mistakes they should make based on that characteristic. By comparing the number of mistakes made based on each possible characteristic, we can see what characteristics participants are encoding most (Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001; Taylor et al., 1978).

Participants were told they were going to read statements made by various gubernatorial candidates taken from either a past primary or general election. The statements were pro- or anti-stances on the issue of a tariff in the governor’s state. Tariffs were chosen as an issue that most participants would not have pre-existing opinions on, nor is it associated with either political party, a view confirmed by pilot testing. Per the
standard WSW procedure, participants saw eight photos (a torso view of either a Black or White politician) with a statement about tariffs underneath the photo, with the information contained in the background of each photo varying by condition. The photos were images of real members of either state or local governments that were pilot tested to be equivalent on measures of attractiveness, intelligence/competence, trustworthiness, and likeability (Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Riggo and Riggo, 2010). Real politicians were used to better capture the elements that influence voters’ perceptions towards politicians, to increase internal validity (Borkenau et al., 2004; Olivola & Todorov, 2010). These politicians were chosen from more obscure local or state governments to reduce the likelihood that a participant would recognize the politician, breaking the cover story.

In the primary condition, the background of the photos displayed either an American Flag or an eagle (chosen to not arouse participant suspicion as the images are traditionally associated with politics). These backgrounds were meant to be meaningless information, so they would not have an effect on participants’ responses. However, in the general election condition, the background of each photo instead displayed the mascot of either the Democratic or Republican Party (i.e., a blue donkey or red elephant), as a way to classify the photos by party. In the pilot study the vast majority of participants (88%) correctly identified the meaning of these images as referring to a political party in a free-response question. To better compare the two conditions, it was necessary to have a background present in both to increase internal validity. Otherwise, the effect of race may be reduced simply because a new element was added between the conditions. After reading through the dialogue (see Appendix 1), participants completed a distractor task
asking them to spend one minute thinking about the effects of social media on society and write down their thoughts. The task also served as a screening tool for participants who were not paying attention to instructions. Participants were then subjected to a surprise recall test where they were shown one of the statements and asked to select which of the eight photos corresponded to the statement. Figures 1 and 2 show an example of what a participant saw as part of the surprise recall task in the general election condition. After participants tried to match all eight statements, they answered a short demographics section, including questions on their political party affiliation and how important their party affiliation was to their identity.

Participants

Participants were gathered through the online survey site Mechanical Turk in an effort to obtain a more representative sample in terms of political ideology than could be found on a college campus of students, which tend to lean more liberal. Of the 193 participants collected 5 were excluded on the grounds that their responses indicated they had not taken the study seriously or paid attention to the instructions (gauged by their responses to the distractor task or by virtue of them not having answered the questions). Next, participants who answered with a 1 on the measure of identification with their political party (1 being the lowest possible answer) were excluded as if a participant did not identify with their party, they would likely not think of it as a coalition and thus the manipulation would have no effect (or at least a lessened one). Of the remaining 177 participants, 70 identified as Democrats and 107 as Republicans. The sample contained 91 males and 86 females, with an average age of 38.32 (SD = 13.29). All pilot testing was also through conducted on Mechanical Turk.
The new tariff will save our state’s small businesses
Results:

Which features of the politicians’ photos participants encoded was tested by analyzing composites of the possible types of errors through pair a series of mixed model ANOVAs. There were two between-subjects variables, participants’ political party (Democrat or Republican) and the type of election that was varied by condition (primary vs. general election). The types of error participants made were used to create within-subjects variables. There were four types of errors participants could have made in misattributing the statement about tariffs during the Who Said What task (as the goal is to analyze participants’ errors correct answers are not used in calculating the composites): Same background and same race (1 Photo), same background but different race (2 photos), different background but same race (2 photos), different background and different race (2 photos). An example of this coding scheme utilizing the statement seen
in Figures 1 and 2 is shown in Table 1. In the example Politician 1 (a Black Republican) is the right answer, so only Politician 4 shares the same race and background. Politicians 7 and 8 are also Black but their background marks them as Democrats. Conversely, Politicians 2 and 6 are indicated to be Republicans by their background but are White. Politicians 3 and 5 differ in both race and background with Politician 1 being White Democrats.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Scheme Example for Who Said What Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Background and Race Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Background, Same Race Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Background, Different Race Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Background and Race Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 and 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 and 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each type of error was then counted, and then all of the totals except for “same background and same race” were divided by two. This was necessary to account for the lowered probability of that error. To test whether the background was encoded the number of (same background, same race + same background, different race) errors was compared to the number of (different background, same race + different background, different race) errors. Following the example in Table 1, this would be the number of politicians numbered 4 or 2 and 6 selected as answers compared to the number of choices of number 7 and 8 or 3 and 5. To test whether the race was encoded the number of (same race, same background + same race, different background) errors was compared to the number of (different race, same background + different race, different background) errors. In the example figure, this would be the number of politicians numbered 4 or 7 and 8 chosen compared to the number of choices of 2 and 6 or 3 and 5.
There were no interactions between the variables or any main effects of the between-subject variables (all $F$’s ≤ 2.22, all $p$’s ≥ .13). There was a significant within-subjects effect of background information, $F(1, 173) = 17.99, p < .001, d = -.60$, while racial encoding was trending towards significance, $F(1, 173) = 3.87, p = .05, d = -.30$. This suggests that racial encoding in a political context is not particularly malleable, and could not be moderated by the presence of party information. Non-White participants were then excluded, as minority participants may not see Black politicians as an out-group and thus not pay as much as attention to racial information potentially introducing noise into the data. The overall pattern of the data did not change, with all of the interactions and between-subject variables remaining non-significant (all $F$’s ≤ 1.92, all $p$’s ≥ .16). There was a slight increase in the encoding of background information, $F(1, 135) = 15.35, p < .001, d = -.63$, while racial encoding moved to significance, $F(1, 135) = 4.44, p = .037, d = -.40$. To further explore the data, paired t-tests were conducted, looking at what elements Democratic and Republican participants encoded in each condition.

The paired t-tests looked at the same differences in the number of error types as the mixed anovas, with greater encoding being represented by more within-subjects mistakes. Through these, it was found that Republicans significantly encoded race in the primary election condition, $t^*(58) = -2.188, p = .033$, but not in the general election condition, $t^*(47) = -1.639, p = .108$. Background was significantly encoded by Republicans very strongly in the general election condition, $t^*(58) = -3.261, p = .002$, when it was contextually relevant by representing party affiliation. Democrats did not significantly encode race in either the primary, $t^*(34) = .558, p = .58$, or the general
election condition, \( t^*(34) = -1.050, p = .301 \). The encoding of background information never reached significance for Democrats, though the t-value did rise between the primary, \( t^*(34) = -1.311, p = .199 \), and general election condition, \( t^*(34) = -1.772, p = .085 \) when it became contextually relevant.

**Discussion**

The hypotheses were not confirmed, as racial encoding was not moderated by the type of election. The paired t-tests do provide some interesting insights into potential asymmetries between the two parties and present possibilities for future research. It is surprising that Democrats did not encode race, but one potential cause may be Barack Obama’s status as president. With a Black Democrat as president White Democrats may see Black people as less of an out-group, and thus not pay as much as attention to race, compared to Republicans. That Republicans did encode racial information in the primary and that this racial encoding was reduced when the background of the politician photos contained more contextually relevant information may mean that Republicans are paying more attention to coalitional information.

This would be a plausible explanation given the currently divided nature of the Republican Party and the party’s focus on ideological purity, a focus that the Democratic Party lacks, explaining the asymmetries in the encoding of party affiliation (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2014; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2015). The divisions between the older, establishment forces and the newer, more firebrand members led to a great deal of emphasis on determining who was a “real” conservative versus a RINO (Republican in Name Only) in the past few elections. This can be seen in the high number of litmus tests that potential Republican presidential candidates went through to win primaries, as they
needed to assuage voter concerns that they were not expressing conservative values simply to get elected (Zelizer, 2013). Many congressional actions Republicans have taken in recent years can be interpreted as attempts to signal through the use of symbolic gestures (such as votes to repeal Obamacare) that they share their constituents’ values (i.e., that they are in the same coalition; Meagher, 2013). Coalitions were once examined almost exclusively in terms of two or more individuals working together against another party, which further strengthens this reasoning on the cause of the greater encoding by Republicans (Beneson, Markovits, Thompson, & Wrangham, 2009). An alternate explanation, rather than asymmetries between the two parties, is that Republicans encoded party because they are not in control of the presidency and thus are more attentive to partisan cues, similarly to how partisans’ viewpoints of the economy shift when the party in power changes (Gerber & Huber, 2010).

*Study 1b*

The effect of race was smaller than expected considering past research, especially when looking at the paired t-tests, so a follow-up study was done to see if this was the result of a stimulus issue (Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Meissner, Brigham, & Butz, 2005). The background information might have overpowered race, possibly due to being more eye-catching even in the primary condition. If the background is the source of the weak race effect, than having the background be constant throughout the conditions and relatively uninteresting should result in a stronger encoding of race.
Methods:

The same methodology as Study 1 was utilized with the same set of photos, but with all of the backgrounds replaced with the same color (See Figure 3).

Participants

Participants were again gathered through Mechanical Turk. Of the 178 participants collected, only 1 participant was excluded based on their responses to the distractor task indicating they had not paid attention to the instructions. Of the remaining 177 participants, there were 89 identified Democrats and 88 Republicans. The sample contained 115 males and 62 females, with an average age of 35.09 (SD = 18.80).

Results and Discussion:

Participant responses were coded in the same way as the original study, but collapsed across condition and party. A paired t-test across all participants and conditions found an overall race effect of $t*(176) = 3.020$, $p = .003$. This is a relatively strong effect compared to the paired t-tests in Study 1. Mechanical Turk samples are younger and more liberal elements that both may lessen how much they categorize people by race (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). The strength of the race effect implies that the limitations of Mechanical Turk as a source of subjects may not be that severe.
Figure 3:

The proposed tariff would cost our state thousands of jobs.
Study 2

Study 2 tested if gender encoding could be similarly reduced, a topic that has mixed support in the literature (Bos, 2015; Dolan, 2014). Despite the evolutionary arguments for a mechanism to encode gender, at times political party has been shown to supersede gender when it comes to voter perceptions (Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides, 2001; Sanchez et al, 2008). Research in stereotyping has found that gender stereotypes’ influence can be limited by party stereotypes (Hayes, 2011; King & Matland, 2003). Voters perceive politicians as demonstrating the qualities predicted by their party stereotypes (e.g., Democrats are seen as more caring and Republicans as better leaders), but there are no within-party sex differences in these attributions even though there is overlap in trait attribution (women are caring, while men are leaders; Hayes, 2011). That is, Democratic women were not viewed as significantly more caring than Democratic men, even though empathy and caring are stereotypically feminine traits (i.e., sex does not further influence impressions over and above political party). Likewise the same pattern holds for stereotypical male abilities about leadership, with Republican men not being rated as significantly better leaders than Republican women. However, looking across party, gender stereotypes become very pronounced (Hayes, 2011). Female Democrats are seen as both more caring and empathetic than Female Republicans.

Methods:

The same methodology as Study 1 was utilized, but with the WSW task consisting of photos of White male and female politicians (See Appendix B). All the photos were pilot tested and matched on measures of attractiveness, intelligence/competence, trustworthiness, and likeability as in Study 1. The issue of tariffs was once again found to
be a non-partisan issue and that the party symbols evoke membership in their respective
group.

Participants

Participants were again gathered through Mechanical Turk. Of the 188
participants collected, 11 were excluded based on their responses to the distractor task
indicating they had not taken the study seriously or paid attention to the instructions. An
additional 2 participants were deleted as their responses could not be coded (e.g., entering
multiple numbers as answers), another for identifying as a Libertarian (and thus not
relevant to the study), and 10 for answering with a 1 on the measure of party
identification. Of the remaining 164 participants, there were 81 identified Democrats and
83 Republicans. The sample contained 95 males and 69 females, with an average age of
36.01 (SD = 12.14). All pilot testing was also through conducted on Mechanical Turk.
Results:

The same coding scheme and statistical tests from Study 1 were used. There was a
significant within-subjects effect of gender encoding, $F(1, 170) = 41.316, p < .001, d =
.79$, but there were no significant interactions or main effects of the between-subjects
variables (all $F$’s ≤ 1.04, all $p$’s ≥ .309). A two-way interaction between background
encoding and the type of election was trending toward significance, $F(1, 170) = 3.04, p =
.083$, but there were no significant main effects (all $F$’s ≤ 1.05, all $p$’s ≥ .30). As in Study
1, paired t-tests were conducted to further explore the data. Both Republicans and
Democrats significantly encoded politicians’ gender in the primary condition, $t^*(43) =
3.554, p = .001$ and $t^*(42) = 2.709, p = .01$, respectively. In the general election
condition, Democrats did not encode party affiliation, $t^*(37) = -.325, p = .747$ and their
encoding of gender was still significant, \( t^*(37) = 3.605, p = .001 \). Only Republicans in the general election significantly encoded party affiliation, \( t^*(38) = -3.173, p = .003 \), but their encoding of gender was still significant, \( t^*(38) = 2.818, p = .008 \).

Discussion

Gender was encoded much more powerfully and consistently than race (\( d = .79 > d = -.30 \)), in keeping with the evolutionary argument for a cognitive mechanism to encode gender. But though gender’s encoding never fell to non-significance, Republicans did encoded party affiliation when it was contextually relevant. Gender and party co-existing in Republicans minds fits within the logic that the effects of gender and party must be looked at in terms of their interactions (Carpinella & Johnson, 2013; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009; Winter, 2010). Gender may be automatically encoded, but the consequences of this encoding are likely to be shaped by the presence, and relative importance, of party information.
Study 3

Study 2 found that gender was encoded very strongly by both parties regardless of the election context, consistent with the evolutionary argument about the difficulty in lessening the strength of its encoding. Another characteristic that is automatically encoded and has evolutionary logic to explain a psychological encoding mechanism is age (Hense, Penner, & Nelson, 1995; Hilton, & Von Hippel, 1996; Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001). Age is increasingly becoming an issue in politics as the make-up of Congress changes. The average age of Congress rises due in large part to the high incumbency rate (which reached 90% in the 2012 election), but the younger members that have come into office have often done so on the waves of anti-incumbency sentiment since 2008 (Giroux, 2012; Hughes, 2015; Lowe, Wildberding, & Rivas, 2010). Divisions within the parties over the best course of legislative action (e.g., whether to force a government shutdown) seem to have an age component relating to this. The dreaded label of “too old” can also be a significant roadblock to winning over voters, especially younger ones. This was a noted problem John McCain faced in 2008, though feelings of his physical capability for the office varied greatly by party (36% of Democrats felt McCain was too old, but only 11% of Republicans did; Pew Research Center, 2008). Age is also a visible sign of generational membership, which in American today predicts opinions on many current key political issues, such as gay marriage (DeSilver, 2014; Kingkade, 2012). While there was mixed support in the literature for a focus on party to lead to a reduction in gender encoding, it is similarly difficult to predict the outcome of Study 3 due instead to the fact that there has not been as much study into age encoding.
Methods:

The same methodology from the previous studies was utilized, but with the WSW task consisting of photos of young and old White politicians (See Appendix B). Photos were pilot tested on age, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likeability. The politicians were matched on attractiveness, trustworthiness, and likeability, and then divided into two groups (old and young) by age. The “old” group was comprised of politicians whose age was significantly higher than the “young” group. It was also checked there were no outliers on age in either group, that is, none of the old politicians were significantly older than each other while none of the young politicians were significantly younger than each other.

Participants

Participants were again gathered through Mechanical Turk. Of the 227 participants collected, 8 were removed for completing the survey in under one minute (which was deemed to not be enough time to have completed the WSW task seriously) and 1 for taking over 30 minutes. An additional 11 were excluded based on their responses to the distractor task indicating they had not read or chosen to follow the instructions, 3 for identifying with parties other than the Republican or Democratic parties (and thus not relevant to the study), and 34 for answering with a 1 on the measure of party identification. Of the remaining 168 participants, 75 identified as Democrats and 93 as Republicans. The sample contained 88 males and 80 females, with an average age of 37.98 (SD = 13.63). All pilot testing was also conducted on Mechanical Turk.
Results:

There was a significant main effect of the within-subjects variable of age, $F(1, 164) = 15.53, p < .001, d = .52$, but there were no significant interactions or main effects of the between-subjects variables (all $F$'s $\leq 2.53$, all $p$'s $\geq .11$). Unlike in the previous studies, there was a significant three-way interaction between the encoding of background information, the type of election, and participants’ political party, $F(1, 164) = 7.70, p = .006$. There were no significant main effects of any of these variables (all $F$’s $\leq 2.53$, all $p$’s $\geq .11$). Simple comparisons across party and condition were conducted to try to understand this interaction, but they were not significant (all $F$’s $\leq 2.39$, all $p$’s $\geq .12$). Paired $t$-tests were conducted as another way to try to understand this interaction.

Republicans significantly encoded politicians’ age in the primary condition, $t^*(46) = 2.404, p = .02$, while Democrats did not, $t^*(31) = -.205, p = .839$. Both Republicans and Democrats significantly encoded age in the general election condition, $t^*(45) = 2.823, p = .007$ and $t^*(42) = 3.179, p = .003$, respectively. Background information was never significantly encoded by participants of either party, regardless of election type and contextual relevance (all $[t^*] \leq 2.0$, all $p$'s $> .05$).

Discussion

The hypotheses were partially confirmed. Age encoding was not reduced when party affiliation was introduced in the general election context, but the encoding was not as strong or clean as the gender encoding of Study 2 was. Unlike gender, age does not seem to coexist with party status. This may be because age is not conceived of as related to party, like gender is. The leaders and most visible faces of both parties in Congress are older and the incumbency advantage keeps both Democrats and Republicans in office.
Age and party may also be somewhat equivalent in the current political landscape. There are clear generational gaps on many hot-button issues right now, gaps that coincide with party differences. Same-sex marriage has vastly more support among young voters and Democrats, so for Democrats age may be a proxy for political allies and shared issue stances (Pew Research Center, 2014; DeSilver, 2014). This is a possible explanation of why Democrats only encoded age in the general election condition, which could be the driver of the three-way interaction but this is mostly speculative at this point.
General Discussion

All three of the categories studied (race, gender, and age) were shown to be automatically encoded in a primary election and this encoding seems to be difficult to moderate. Separating them from the coalition proxy of party by framing the study in terms of a general election caused only racial encoding to become non-significant, though the encoding of party affiliation did still occur (though not as strong) for gender. These findings have important implications, as primaries inform voters’ views of candidates and affect their choice during the general election (Hirano, Lenz, Pinkovskiy, & Synder, 2015). Primaries are also particularly important in “safe” districts caused by gerrymandering (Hirano & Synder, 2012). The automatic activation of characteristics that mark candidates as outliers to their party’s majority (race, gender, age, or even sexual orientation or religious identity) may set a disadvantage by causing voters to focus on the superficial cues found in candidates’ appearance over the issues (Olivola, Sussman, Tsetsos, Kang, & Todorov, 2012). It may trap a candidate into a pre-established framing that may not match their record. For example, Mitt Romney faced a struggle gathering support among evangelical Christians (a key element of the Republican nomination process) due to his Mormon beliefs, as 20% of Republicans said they would not support a Mormon candidate for president; Powell & Hickson, 2013; Saad, 2011).

This research is especially relevant looking ahead to the 2016 election. Hillary Clinton (the presumptive Democrat nominee) would contend with the encoding of two characteristics, age and gender (Jones, 2014). Hillary Clinton would be the potential first female president and thus the issue of gender has and will receive a great deal of attention, and in addition she has faced accusations of “too old,” as John McCain did
(Boehlert, 2015; Seitz-Wald, 2014). The effects of gender and age were much stronger than race, highlighting the role they play in voters’ minds.

Future research

An interesting finding was that only Republicans encoded party affiliation. One branch of future research will be testing differing potential explanations for this. Certain qualities of the Republican Party (e.g. a greater focus on in-group authority and ideological purity and a tendency to derogate out-group members) may lead Republicans to pay more attention to and encode party affiliation (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2015; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal, & Hare, 2012; Soenens, & Duriez, 2012). Questions measuring these qualities will be added to future versions of the study to serve as control variables. Another possibility to test is to see if party is encoded more powerfully depending on the make-up of the local government. Democrats who live in states predominantly controlled by Republicans may encode party affiliation more than those who live in states that are friendlier to their viewpoints. And the same pattern would be expected of Republicans. To test this, the studies could be re-run in both the bluest (Massachusetts, which has a 20-point lead in party identification) and reddest states (Wyoming, which has a 33-point lead; Lerner, 2015). The instructions of the WSW task would also be slightly changed to make the statements be ostensibly from local politicians to hopefully trigger the appropriate context. Pilot testing would be done to find the best wording.

A final avenue of research would be to test the hypotheses in a more applied setting. Tariffs were chosen as the topic of the WSW task as it was non-partisan and did not overlap with the personal characteristics that would be encoded. A potentially useful
test would be to examine statements that directly relate to the characteristic being encoded and see how the two interact, especially considering the difficulty shown in moderating this encoding. The study would be reframed to be about attack ads levied against a politician during either a recent primary or general election. These attack ads would be either stereotype-congruent or incongruent and tied to public policy to avoid arousing participant suspicion (e.g. the stereotype of African Americans as lazy relates to positions on welfare; Weber, Lavine, Huddy, & Federico, 2014). As the personal characteristics are encoded more powerfully in a primary context, it is predicted that in the primary condition participants would show more correct answers on the WSW task for attack ads that are stereotypes-congruent. Additional questions would be added in the demographic section to measure participants’ knowledge of the stereotypes used, to serve as a control. The stereotypes used in making the attack ads would be pilot tested.

Conclusion

The current studies show that voters do automatically encode social category information about politicians (their race, gender, and age), with gender and age encoding being especially strong. These studies also test a way to reduce that encoding and though it does not seem to have been very effective, it does help shed light on some of the nuances of this process. The complexities of which party encoded what information across the different contexts suggest numerous future avenues of research. Republicans’ greater encoding of party affiliation can be explained as either an asymmetry between the two parties or a result of the greater importance of party information to the minority party. The relative strength of the different types of social categories’ encoding matched the predictions from evolutionary psychology and the present studies seem to echo
findings from stereotyping research about how gender overlaps with party. The data also suggest that age may be related to party in a different way, potentially serving as a proxy due to the increasingly disparate age make-up of the two major parties. The findings are all applicable to the 2016 election, which will present numerous exciting new research opportunities.
References


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Appendix A

List of statements about politicians’ stance on tariffs:

- The proposed tariff would cost our state thousands of jobs
- This tariff will protect American workers from exploitation
- New tariffs will irreversibly cripple our economic growth
- The new tariff will save our state’s small businesses
- The revenue from a tariff would erase our state’s debt
- Tariffs corrode our great nation’s ability to be competitive
- The new tariff will be a catalyst for job growth
- Tariffs go against the free-market principles of America
Appendix B

Example WSW task questions

Study 1:

The proposed tariff would cost our state thousands of jobs
Study 2:

The proposed tariff would cost our state thousands of jobs
Study 3:

The proposed tariff would cost our state thousands of jobs