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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Racial Cues from Unfamiliar Sources and Their Effects on Americans' Policy Preferences

Viviana Rivera-Burgos

Political Science, Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY), New York, NY, USA
Email: viviana.rivera-burgos@baruch.cuny.edu

Abstract

Americans increasingly confront policy messages not from high-profile political figures but from everyday citizens. Much is known about the effects of racial source cues from well-known political figures with salient racial identities. Less is known about how subtle racial cues from non-recognizable sources affect Americans' support for policies that are race-targeted and those that are not. In this paper, I conduct a randomized experiment that varies a cue of the source's racial identity and the type of policy for which the source advocates. I uncover little evidence for the hypothesis that subtle racial source cues activate racial attitudes that lead Americans to racialize policies that are (at least explicitly) race-neutral. I find instead that subtle cues of a Black vs. White source decrease support only for race-targeted policies. I reason that two mechanisms possibly driving this effect are: (1) subtle racial source cues become salient for only race-targeted policies, thereby activating racial stereotypes for these policies but not others, and (2) Black sources are perceived as less objective policy messengers when the policy explicitly aims to rectify injustices against Black Americans. More generally, the paper's overall findings suggest that subtle racial cues of *who* advocates for race-targeted policies matter for whether such policies can garner the public support they presumably need to come to fruition.

Keywords: race; stereotypes; source credibility; public opinion

I wasn't yet well known enough to be the target of caricature, which meant that whatever preconceptions people may have had about a Black guy from Chicago with a foreign name could be dispelled by a simple conversation, a small gesture of kindness . . . . I wondered if any of that was still possible, now that I lived locked behind gates and guardsmen, my image filtered through Fox News and other media outlets whose entire business model depended on making their audience angry and fearful.

—Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*

This article has earned badges for transparent research practices: Open Data and Open. For details see the Data Availability Statement.

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Introduction

As this epigraph from Barack Obama's presidential memoir suggests, much of the opposition to Obama's policy initiatives as president was due to Obama's status as a Black American. Indeed, academic research indicates as much (Tesler, 2012; Knowles, Lowery, and Schaumber, 2010), not only for Obama but also for other prominent Black political figures such as Jesse Jackson, Colin Powell, and Clarence Thomas (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Peffley and Hurwitz, 2010). Yet the epigraph above also points to an earlier phase of Obama's political life, before he was as recognizable and bound up in as much racial symbolism. Obama, the first Black president, may have led Americans to racialize putatively race-neutral policies, ultimately leading to less public support for these policies (Tesler, 2012). But what about Obama the state senator or Obama the political organizer? That is, how do racial source cues from this earlier version of Obama affect public support for social policies?

Developing an answer to this question is important. In today's decentralized media landscape, policy messages from non-famous sources – be they local politicians, political organizers, pundits, or ordinary citizens – are ubiquitous. Consider, for example, Black Lives Matter (BLM), which data from the Harvard Kennedy School's Crowd Counting Consortium suggest is the largest social movement in US history. This movement, which advocates for policies to mitigate racial bias in policing, was initiated by three political organizers – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – all of whom lacked a large public following or high name-recognition. More generally, research suggests that over half of Americans get their news from social media applications (Pew Research Center, 2024*b*), whose algorithms tailor content based on user behavior, frequently introducing users to unfamiliar sources (Thorson and Wells, 2016).

In this paper, I unpack how *subtle* racial source cues – the very sorts of cues Americans are increasingly likely to encounter – affect support for different policies. I focus in particular on how subtle racial cues from non-famous sources affect support for policies that are race-conscious and those that are not. Drawing conclusions from prior research on this topic is difficult because of this research's focus on prominent sources with high levels of racial symbolism (e.g., Barack Obama) and on particular policy types (e.g., the putatively race-neutral policy of healthcare reform).

I conduct a randomized survey experiment that uses either a Black- or White-sounding name to cue the race of a local political organizer advocating for either an explicitly race-conscious or non-race-conscious policy. I draw upon the typology from Bobo and Kluegel (1993), which distinguishes between race-conscious and income-conscious policies, to randomly expose respondents to a short text explaining five (either race- or income-conscious) policy proposals. The respondents receive these proposals from a local political organizer whose randomly assigned name is either DeAndre Jackson, a Black alias, or Connor Smith, a White alias. These names come from the Census Bureau's list of "Frequently Occurring Surnames" and the dataset from Tzioumis (2018) constructed from proprietary mortgage applications.

The experimental results offer little support for the "spillover of racialization" hypothesis (Tesler, 2012) in the context of subtle racial source cues. Such cues have a

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negligible effect on support for the income-conscious policy, consistent with prior survey experiments showing that subtle racial frames have minimal impact on support for policies that are not deeply racialized, such as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Hopkins, 2023). For the race-conscious policy, by contrast, racial source cues are statistically and substantively significant. I find evidence that, for the race-conscious policy, the source named DeAndre Jackson leads to a substantial decrease in policy support, on average, compared to what the level of support would be if the source's name were Connor Smith.

This finding, I argue, is consistent with two mechanisms (and inconsistent with several others) explaining how subtle source cues affect support for policies of specific types. The first of these mechanisms states that subtle racial source cues become more salient, thereby activating anti-Black stereotypes, for specifically race-conscious policies relative to policies that are not race-conscious. The second mechanism states that respondents perceive Black sources as less objective (i.e., biased by in-group favoritism) for specifically race-conscious policies, but not for other policy types. Further research can unpack which of these two mechanisms (among others) has greater explanatory power.

While further research can help parse particular mechanisms, this paper maintains important takeaways: The "spillover of racialization" theory comes up against its limits when the sources are *not* recognizable public figures with salient racial identities. For race-conscious policies, however, subtle racial source cues do matter. Hence, one potential implication of this paper is that advocacy from everyday White Americans is likely to play an important role in garnering public support for race-conscious policies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 develops a theoretical framework for understanding the effects of racial cues from unfamiliar sources, focusing on name-based racial signals. I then distinguish between two broad classes of mechanisms: (1) racial attitudes, including symbolic racism, and (2) perceptions of expertise or trustworthiness. This section concludes with predictions, derived from the preceding theories, about how racial source cues ought to affect support for race- and income-conscious policies. The following sections, informed by the Recommended Reporting Standards for Experiments issued by the Experimental Research Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA) (Gerber et al., 2014), outline the experimental design, provide justifications for key design choices, and present the results. The final section discusses the findings and concludes.

Theory

Racial cues from unfamiliar sources

Americans often rely on cues to evaluate political messages, including cues based on a source's identity. For example, George W. Bush's identity as a born-again Christian may have increased evangelical support for the Iraq War (Jacobson, 2007), while Hillary Clinton's gender may have contributed to opposition against her 1993 health care plan (Winter, 2008). For racial attributes in particular, a range of studies show that whether a source (at least those who are recognizable political figures) is

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Black or White influences Americans' policy positions (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Tesler, 2012; Knowles, Lowery, and Schaumber, 2010; Peffley and Hurwitz, 2010).

The Political Science literature on racial source cues has primarily examined recognizable public figures, for whom racial or other identities are almost always salient. As Kinder and Dale-Riddle (2012, pp. 24–25) note, Barack Obama's racial identity was unavoidable during his 2008 presidential campaign:

> Obama did not need to claim to be a Black American . . . But Obama's effort to neutralize race could not succeed completely, for it was continually subverted by his body—the color of his skin, the features of his face, and the texture of his hair.

Beyond race, Kinder and Dale-Riddle (2012) explain that other identity cleavages are usually salient for public figures, such as former President John F. Kennedy's status as a Catholic.

While much of Political Science research focuses on well-known figures, Americans frequently encounter political content from non-recognizable sources. At the local level, voters are often unfamiliar with candidates running for office. Similarly, political messages in city council meetings, school board hearings, union meetings, and religious gatherings often come from speakers whose identities are not widely known.

The same holds for traditional news media. Television and radio programs frequently feature local activists, organizers, and commentators. Print journalism similarly presents political messages from journalists and columnists who may not be widely recognized. In a period before most Americans consumed news from digital devices (Pew Research Center, 2024*a*), Domke et al. (2000) showed that the racial identity of an article's author could influence public attitudes toward race-conscious policies.

Fast forward 25 years, and exposure to non-recognizable political sources is arguably more widespread than ever. As stated in the introduction, research suggests that a majority of Americans now receive their news from social media (Pew Research Center, 2024*b*), often encountering political content incidentally – at unexpected times and from unfamiliar sources (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi, 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018). Moreover, social media applications algorithmically curate content to maximize engagement. Consequently, individuals are likely to encounter emotionally charged material (Vicario et al., 2016), such as discussions of racial bias in policing during the peak of the BLM movement. In this environment, individuals are perhaps more likely to form impressions of political content based on subtle source cues, including racial identity (Banks, 2014*a*; Banks, 2014*b*).

Whether through local television broadcasts, print journalism, or radio discussions, audiences have long encountered political content from unfamiliar figures. However, the scale and frequency of such exposure appear to have grown in the social media age. This transformation underscores the importance of understanding how people interpret subtle cues from unfamiliar sources, particularly in politically charged discussions. As a result, this paper focuses on how subtle racial cues shape perceptions of political messages, especially when conveyed by non-recognizable sources.

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Name-based racial cues

For non-prominent figures, racial identity cues tend to be subtle, with names being one of the most implicit yet powerful indicators. Research on racial discrimination in political responsiveness and hiring decisions frequently relies on name-based cues to indicate race. For example, studies use contrasts like "Jake Mueller" vs. "DeShawn Jackson" to signal White and Black political constituents (Butler and Broockman, 2011) or "Emily Walsh" vs. "Lakisha Washington" to signal White and Black job applicants (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004).

I understand racially distinctive names as prototypical cues of racial category membership. That is, cues can establish someone as prototypically Black, whereby people categorize others' Blackness based on resemblance to that prototype (Monk, 2022; Rosch, 1973). Given their historical significance (Cook, Logan, and Parman, 2014; Cook, Parman, and Logan, 2022; Lieberson and Mikelson, 1995), a name like "DeAndre Jackson," in contrast to "Connor Smith," serves as a distinguishing social marker that reinforces racial group boundaries, much like the ethnic distinctions described by Barth (1969).

However, names often signal more than just race; they can also indicate class, gender, and other overlapping social categories (Elder and Hayes, 2023; Landgrave and Weller, 2020; Fryer and Levitt, 2004). In some cases, it may be useful to isolate cues of racial membership from cues of other social categories. On the other hand, Elder and Hayes (2023, p. 769) point out that researchers need not focus on "isolating the effects of race independent of other relevant attributes."

This is the premise my experiment builds on, which aligns with what Hu (2023) describes as a "thick constructivist" account of race. Within this framework, prototypical Black cues that also signal other social categories do not confound the role of Black identity, but rather "reveal *what it is* to be Black or what being Black socially *consists in*" (Hu, 2023, p. 4). In other words, the fact that people may associate prototypical White names with high income and prototypical Black names with lower income is itself part of the social experience of being Black in America.

Mechanism class 1: racial attitudes and "symbolic racism"

The literature on racial attitudes and "symbolic racism" suggests that racial source cues may trigger particular racial attitudes, thereby determining public support for various social policies. As Harris and Lieberman (2015, p. 10) write, "overt expressions of prejudice are almost universally considered illegitimate." Nevertheless, many Americans hold negative racial stereotypes that constitute a form of "symbolic racism" (Sears, 1988). Such stereotypes – defined as "projecting assumptions or expectations about the likely capacities and behaviors of members of a racial or ethnic group onto members of that group" (Bobo, 2001, p. 275) – are pervasive. For example, in a seminal piece coining the term "symbolic racism," Sears (1988, p. 57) showed that many Americans agreed with the statements that "the government pays too much attention to blacks" and "blacks who receive welfare could get along without it if they tried."

Such negative racial stereotypes – for example, that Black Americans are "lazy" or prone to criminality – can be activated by subtle racial cues without, as Hutchings and Jardina (2009, p. 397) write, "appearing to violate widely held norms of racial

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equality." Such subtle racial cues, in turn, affect Americans' support for a wide array of social policies, those that are both explicitly race-conscious (e.g., affirmative action in higher education) and non-explicitly race-conscious (e.g., welfare reform) (Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman, 1997; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Gilens, 1999; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Sears and Citrin, 1985; Winter, 2008; White, 2007). However, Bobo and Kluegel (1993) suggest that symbolic racism exerts a greater impact on public opinion about race- as opposed to, for example, income-conscious social policies, a point that subsequent research supports (e.g., Rabinowitz et al., 2009).

Mechanism class 2: proxies for expertise or trustworthiness

As research in cognate fields like social psychology has demonstrated, when the policy under discussion is explicitly race-conscious, a Black as opposed to White source cue may bestow that source with a form of "racialized expertise," ultimately leading to greater policy support. As Crosby and Monin (2013, p. 335) state, for many White Americans making judgments about racial discrimination, "members of target groups appear to be 'prejudice experts' by virtue of their group membership." Hence, a Black source advocating for policies to combat racial discrimination in policing might lead to greater support for that policy compared to if the source had been a White individual. This particular mechanism in which race serves as a proxy for expertise is perhaps underexplored in Political Science but closely related to the large body of research on source credibility, typically understood to encompass both expertise and trustworthiness (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Iyengar and Valentino, 2000; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Hovland and Weiss, 1951).

While Black identity may serve as a proxy for expertise, this same identity might also serve as a proxy for a lack of trustworthiness, particularly when the message pertains to a race-conscious policy. Evidence in social psychology suggests that Black sources delivering messages about racial discrimination are often perceived as less objective in that they are thought to be characterized by in-group bias (Torrez, Dupree, and Kraus, 2024; Czopp and Monteith, 2003; Schultz and Maddox, 2013; Kaiser and Miller, 2001; Rasinski and Czopp, 2010). In perhaps the most relevant antecedent to this paper, Domke et al. (2000) vary the author's race of a magazine article about race relations and show that Black source cues lead to decreased support for government policies to improve race relations. Consistent with the social psychology literature, Domke et al. (2000) attribute this result to perceptions that Black sources advocating for race-conscious policies are, as Burkhart, Sigelman, and Frith (1997, p. 313) write, "lacking in objectivity" due to having a "vested interest in what they are saying."

Predicted effects of racial cues on policy support

The theories above yield predictions about what we should expect to observe under Black vs. White source cues for different policy types:

- If the mechanism of anti-Black stereotypes were at play, then we would expect lower levels of support for both policy types when the source name cues Black

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as opposed to White identity. Nevertheless, it could be the case that the policy must be explicitly race-conscious in order for a subtle racial source cue to be salient enough to activate respondents' anti-Black stereotypes (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Rabinowitz et al., 2009). In this case, we would also expect a more negative effect of the racial source cue, given the race- as opposed to income-conscious policy.

- Two additional mechanisms are those of racial expertise (in which race proxies for expertise on race-conscious policies in the minds of respondents) and in-group bias (in which a Black source cue leads respondents to view that source as less objective about race-conscious policies). If the racialized expertise mechanism has high explanatory power, then we would expect the effect of the Black source cue to be positive for the race-conscious policy, but not for the income-based policy. The mechanism of in-group bias, by contrast, suggests that the Black relative to White source cue should yield less support for the race-conscious policy, but this effect need not be negative for the income-based policy.

Experimental design

To generate evidence that can speak to these theories, I conducted a randomized experiment in April of 2017. The experiment occurred during a period of heightened national attention to racial injustices in policing, following widespread protests in response to the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, and others (2014–2016). It also coincided with the peak of Colin Kaepernick's national anthem protest against racial injustice in policing. The study included 1,211 American participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). I removed three participants prior to analysis due to attrition (missing outcome data). As shown in Table 1, these participants were, on average, more Democratic, more liberal, and more highly educated than the national population.

For the income variable, the 4^{th} level in the MTurk survey was \$30,000–\$40,000, and the 5^{th} level was \$40,000–\$50,000. The national-level data are from the American Community Survey, American National Election Study (ANES) (American National Election Studies, 2017), Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2017), and the Federal Election Commission.

These differences in Table 1 accord with what Huff and Tingley (2015) describe about the differences between MTurk and national probability samples. Despite these differences between the two samples, Coppock (2019) shows that experiments conducted on MTurk and national probability samples typically yield similar results. The principal reason for these similar results is the homogeneity of effects across individuals with different characteristics (Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix, 2018), which helps assuage concerns about the generalizability of experimental findings from MTurk samples.

Experimental conditions

Each respondent observed a vignette explaining five policy proposals. In following the typology of Bobo and Kluegel (1993), distinguishing between explicitly race- and

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Table 1. Comparison of MTurk sample to national sample

	MTurk sample	National
Age	33.00	37.90
Female	0.45	0.51
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.59	0.31
Hispanic	0.10	0.18
White	0.75	0.73
Black	0.08	0.13
Income (9 levels)	4.87	$57,617
Household size	2.57	2.65
Republican	0.21	0.25
Democrat	0.43	0.31
Independent	0.32	0.39
Conservative	0.24	0.38
Moderate	0.26	0.33
Liberal	0.50	0.26
Voted (2016)	0.83	0.55
Voted for Clinton	0.57	0.48
Voted for Trump	0.30	0.46

income-conscious policies, I randomly assign respondents to either a policy that aims to combat racial inequality in policing or a policy that aims to combat income inequality. The first policy type is explicitly race-conscious, referring directly to police violence against Black civilians. The second policy type pertains only to income inequality with no explicit references to race. All explicit racial references are underlined in Table 2 below, though they were not emphasized in the actual texts shown to respondents.

The source in both vignettes is a community organizer, rather than an unknown political candidate or elected official, for two principal reasons. First, a community organizer better aligns with the theoretical mechanisms outlined above – particularly those in which racial source cues may shape perceptions of racialized expertise and trustworthiness grounded in lived experience. In contrast, political candidates or elected officials may be perceived as guided more by party affiliation than personal experiences. Second, using a fictional candidate or official could raise methodological concerns: Highly engaged participants may seek more information or recognize the deception, potentially triggering Hawthorne effects and compromising the experiment's validity. Nevertheless, a valuable direction for future research is experiments that incorporate candidates or elected officials as sources, offering additional insight into the effects of racial source cues.

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Table 2. Policy conditions presented in the experiment

[Race-conscious condition]	[Income-conscious condition]
In a recent interview with *Connor Smith [DeAndre Jackson]*, a local political organizer in Illinois, he argued that the American police force needs to be reformed. US police killed at least 258 Black people in 2016. *Smith* explained the following policies to address police killings:	In a recent interview with *Connor Smith [DeAndre Jackson]*, a local political organizer in Illinois, he argued that the American economic system needs to be reformed. In 2015, there were 43.1 million people in poverty in the USA. *Jackson* explained the following policies to address poverty:
• **End broken-windows policing** → Stop mass arrests for low-level offenses such as loitering and drinking in public. This type of policing leaves thousands of people with arrest records and can lead to unnecessary escalation. • **Increase transparency** → The police should keep a comprehensive record of all fatal incidents and report every stop including location, race, gender, whether force was used, and whether a firearm was found. That data should be made available to the public. • **Training** → Police officers should be trained in the following areas: community policing, de-escalation, engagement with minority and gender-nonconforming communities, and implicit racial bias. • **Film the police** → This proposal calls for mandatory body cameras for police officers and calls for privacy restrictions to protect the identities of people in footage that isn't of public relevance. • **Community representation** → Minority representation within the department should reflect representation in the larger community. It's important that communities see themselves reflected in the police and vice versa.	• **Increase the minimum wage** → Increasing the federal minimum wage and indexing it to the cost of living would increase the wages of millions of workers. • **Better skills training for disadvantaged workers** → The government should fund training programs to help low-skill workers succeed in the labor market. • **Improve safety net** → The USA is the only developed country in the world without paid family and medical leave and paid sick days. Paid leave is an important anti-poverty policy, as having a child is one of the leading causes of economic hardship. • **End income segregation** → Income segregation within a metropolitan region is associated with reduced levels of upward mobility for everyone who lives in that area. • **Expand Medicaid** → Expanding Medicaid would mean more than just access to health care – it would free up limited household income for other basic needs such as paying rent and buying groceries.
I am interested in learning your thoughts on these policy proposals and on the broader issue of police brutality that these reforms seek to address.	I am interested in learning your thoughts on these policy proposals and on the broader issue of poverty that these reforms seek to address.

This experiment's primary target is *not* the average treatment effect (ATE) of the policy type (either race-conscious or race-neutral). Instead, the experiment's primary target is the impact of racial source cues, which may vary depending on whether the policy context is race-conscious or race-neutral. To be sure, the income-conscious policy may not be race-neutral since Americans often interpret income-based social policies through a racial lens (Gilens, 1999; DeSante, 2013). However, the income condition addresses economic inequality without explicitly addressing racial disparities or the absolute level of poverty among specific racial groups. The policing condition, by contrast, focuses on racial disparities in law enforcement, as well as the absolute level of police violence experienced by Black people.

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Table 3. Percent of respondents who view policing and income policies as Black-centered issues

Policing policy	57.95%
Income policy	24.67%

Moreover, this experiment took place during the peak of the BLM movement, a period when activists and media prominently framed police violence in racial terms. By contrast, public debates over income inequality arguably focused more on class divisions than on racial ones. That is, unlike in the Reagan era – when political rhetoric invoked racially coded tropes like "welfare queen" – prominent figures like Bernie Sanders and others tended to emphasize class rather than race in their framing of economic inequality.

Table 3 presents evidence supporting the claim that the policing policy is interpreted by respondents as race-conscious, while the income policy is not. Nearly 60% of respondents perceive the policing policy as race-conscious, which may not seem particularly high on its own. However, this percentage is markedly greater than the roughly 25% who view the income policy as race-conscious. This stark contrast indicates that the policing policy is far more race-conscious than the income policy.

Another crucial feature of the two policy conditions is that they reflect actual debates at the time of the experimental survey. The race-conscious policy is based on the BLM network's actual proposals to mitigate racial bias in policing. The income-conscious policy comes from the Hamilton Project, a policy initiative within the Brookings Institution.

Because the policy conditions are based on actual civil society platforms, both conditions encompass multiple issues rather than isolated topics. As a result, the two policy conditions lack the precise control a researcher might achieve by designing a platform focused on neatly demarcated, standalone issues. This choice is intentional: Citizens rarely encounter policies in isolation; rather, media, partisan groups, and civil society organizations present policies as interconnected. For example, commitments to raising the minimum wage are often bundled with Medicaid expansion, and legislative bills themselves usually combine multiple related issues.

While the ATE of the policy condition is not the primary focus of this experiment, it is worth noting that the bundling of issues would have implications for inference of the effects of the policy conditions: As Clifford, Leeper and Rainey (2024, p. 1233) write, "[r]esearchers frequently develop a general theory and hypotheses (e.g., about policy attitudes), then conduct a study on a specific topic (e.g., environmental attitudes)." To address this gap between general theory and single-topic treatments, Clifford, Leeper and Rainey (2024) define a key causal target as the average across the ATEs of single-topic treatments, which can be estimated through the random selection of single-topic conditions from a full set of topics (Clifford, Leeper and Rainey, 2024; Clifford and Rainey, 2024).

However, despite its advantages, topic sampling may not capture the ATE of policy platforms as they exist in the real world, where issues are typically presented as bundles rather than in isolation. The ATE of a set of bundled topics may differ

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Table 4. Number of respondents by experimental condition (source name × policy type)

	White name	Black name	Total
Race-conscious policy	302	302	604
Income-conscious policy	299	305	604
Total	601	607	1,208

from the average of single-topic ATEs because survey responses may be non-separable (see, e.g., Lacy, 2001). As a result, the overall ATE marginalized over the ATEs of single-topic experiments may not match the ATE of a real-world policy bundle, potentially making the latter more substantively meaningful.

The two policy types may condition the effects of either a Black source cue (signaled by the name DeAndre Jackson) or a White source cue (signaled by the name Connor Smith). Hence, within the two randomly assigned policy types, I randomly expose participants to either the Black or White source cue. The number of respondents in each of the experimental conditions is in Table 4 below.

To increase compliance (i.e., subjects' actually reading the treatment or control text), I disabled the "Next" button for 90 seconds – the approximate time it takes to read through the text – on the Qualtrics page displaying the text. This likely increased the proportion of participants who fully engaged with both conditions. While I did not conduct a manipulation check, although Table 3 could be interpreted as such, I emphasize that both policy conditions are nearly identical in length and layout, differing only in content. If content alone does not affect whether a respondent reads the text, then randomization ensures that, in expectation, reading rates are equal across policy types. If such a difference were to exist, it would be an insightful feature (rather than a bug) of how respondents engage with race-conscious versus race-neutral policy platforms.

The primary outcome of interest is respondents' answers to the following question: "How willing are you to support police-reform (poverty) policies? Support could mean attending a meeting, signing a petition, or voting for a candidate that supports such policies." The answer choices were "Very willing" (1), "Moderately willing" (2), and "Not at all willing" (3). Before analysis, I recoded these responses to 1, 0, and −1, respectively. My primary causal targets of interest are the average difference in policy support if the experimental subjects were to receive the policy message from a Black (relative to White) source given each of the two policy types.

As an anonymous reviewer insightfully noted, this outcome measure cannot distinguish between respondents who oppose a policy and those who support it but are unwilling to take concrete actions to express that support. Therefore, this experiment should be interpreted as speaking to how racial source cues influence respondents' stated intentions to mobilize into action. This measure aligns with the depiction of the source in both policy conditions as a community organizer whose role, by definition, is to rally the community into action.

Nevertheless, this outcome measure may also align closely with the notion of support distinct from the willingness to act on that support: The questionnaire includes examples of actions, from higher-cost ones like "attending a meeting" to

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lower-cost ones like "signing a petition." Consequently, respondents who select "Not at all willing" are plausibly only those who oppose the policy rather than those who support it but are reluctant to act. However, even though policy support and stated willingness to take action may closely align, they are not *necessarily* the same, making this distinction important to emphasize.

Experimental results

In this section, I present the results of the experiment, first for the effect of the racial source cue, marginalized over both policy types. I then do so separately for the effects of the racial source cues against the background of race-conscious and race-neutral policy platforms. I then present inferences of racial source cues' subgroup effects based on race and partisanship.

For all analyses, I use the Difference-in-Means estimator, which, under the experiment's known assignment process, is unbiased for the average effect. For hypothesis testing, I follow the procedure in Gerber and Green (2012, pp. 61–66) in which I test the sharp null hypothesis of no effects (the sharp null) via randomization inference (RI). In brief, this procedure supposes that individual effects are 0 for all subjects and then, in accordance with this null hypothesis, randomly permutes the treatment assignments according to the experiment's actual assignment process while holding observed outcomes fixed. Under each permutation, I calculate the Difference-in-Means and then compare the observed Difference-in-Means to this simulation-based approximation to the Difference-in-Means' distribution under the sharp null. I calculate two-sided p-values via the procedure described by Rosenbaum (2010, p. 33) who states that 'if you want a two-sided p-value, compute both one sided p-values, double the smaller one, and take the minimum of this value and 1.' All p-values presented below are two-sided, reflecting a test of the sharp null against the alternative of either a larger or smaller effect.

Table 5 shows the estimated marginal effect of the racial source cue (marginalizing over the policy type). The direction of the estimated marginal effect of racial source is consistent with the anti-Black stereotypes mechanism. However, this estimate does not rise to the level of statistical significance (at either the $\alpha = 0.1$ or $\alpha = 0.05$ level).

Table 5 provides scant evidence of an effect of racial source cues overall. However, Table 6 shows that, when broken down by policy type, the racial source cue takes on importance for a specifically race-conscious policy.

Table 6 shows that, for a race-conscious policy, the Black source cue yields much less policy support than the White source cue. By contrast, there appears to be no effect of the racial source cue for the income-conscious policy. These results provide strong evidence against the racialized expertise mechanism in which one would expect a Black source cue to cause greater policy support for only a race-conscious policy.

Table 6 provides evidence in favor of the in-group bias mechanism in which a Black source advocating for a race-conscious policy may lead individuals to perceive the source as characterized by in-group bias, ultimately leading to less policy support. Table 6 also supports a racial stereotypes mechanism in which a

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Table 5. Estimated effect of Black source vs. White source on policy support (pooled)

	Dependent variable:
	Policy support
Black source cue	−0.0485
White source cue (control) mean	0.4060
White source cue (control) SD	0.6538
RI p-value (two-sided)	0.2146
Number of observations	1,208

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table 6. Estimated effects of Black source vs. White source on policy support by policy type

	Dependent variable:	
	Policy support	
	Race-conscious	Income-conscious
Black Source Cue	−0.1060*	0.0084
White source cue (control) mean	0.4073	0.4047
White source cue (control) SD	0.6431	0.6645
RI p-value (two-sided)	0.0645	0.9086
Number of observations	604	604

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

racial source cue becomes salient (thereby activating racial stereotypes and consequently determining policy support) for only race-conscious policies. Each of these two mechanisms predicts a negative average effect of the Black vs. White source cue for the race-conscious policy and a negligible effect for the income-conscious policy.

Additional subgroup analyses indicate that the estimated negative average effect of the Black (compared to White) source cue is primarily driven by White and Republican respondents. However, these are not the only relevant subgroups; gender may also play an important role (see Cassese and Barnes, 2019; Hayes, Fortunato, and Hibbing, 2021). Focusing specifically on the respondents assigned to the race-conscious policy, Table 7 shows the estimated subgroup effects by respondent race (White or non-White) and party (Republican or not).

It is unclear whether the results in Table 7 better support the racial stereotypes mechanism (specific to race-conscious policies) or the in-group bias mechanism. If we expect the racial stereotypes mechanism to be more prevalent among White people and Republicans than in-group bias, then Table 7 provides stronger support for the former. However, if both mechanisms are expected to be equally

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Table 7. Estimated effects of Black source on support for race-conscious policy by race and party of respondents

	Dependent variable:			
	Race-conscious policy support			
	White	Non-White	GOP	Non-GOP
Black Source Cue	−0.1122*	−0.0375	−0.2414*	−0.0383
White source cue (control) mean	0.3864	0.4634	0.1569	0.4582
White source cue (control) SD	0.6472	0.6285	0.6678	0.6258
RI p-value (two-sided)	0.0906	0.7454	0.0594	0.4795
Number of observations	468	136	122	482

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table 8. Estimated effects of Black source on support for income-conscious policy by race and party of respondents

	Dependent variable:			
	Income-conscious policy support			
	White	Non-White	GOP	Non-GOP
Black Source Cue	−0.0244	0.0942	0.0102	0.0353
White source cue (control) mean	0.4000	0.4177	0.1765	0.4516
White source cue (control) SD	0.6769	0.6286	0.7059	0.6458
RI p-value (two-sided)	0.6739	0.3771	0.9479	0.5032
Number of observations	441	163	126	478

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

concentrated among these groups, Table 7 does not clearly favor one explanation over the other. In addition, inference of the subgroup effect among Republicans suggests that, since Democratic respondents are overrepresented in this experimental population relative to the national population (see Table 1), one might expect the effect of racial source cues to be even greater (in magnitude) in the national population.

Table 8 shows the same estimates of subgroup effects for the income-conscious policy. In contrast to the subgroup estimates in Table 7, the Black vs. White source cue appears to have a negligible effect (if any) on support for the income-conscious policy. These negligible effects are insightful in their own right in that, even among only White individuals or Republicans, subtle source cues seem to have little bearing for a non-race-conscious policy. Unlike the source cues in, for example, Kuklinski and Hurley (1994), Knowles, Lowery, and Schaumber (2010), and Tesler (2012), this experiment's subtle source cues seem unlikely to lead to the "spillover of racialization," even among subgroups perhaps most predisposed to such spillovers.

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Discussion and conclusion

Researchers have long studied how racial attitudes shape Americans' policy preferences, both for policies explicitly related to race and those that are not. These attitudes can be activated by racial source cues, particularly when the source is a well-known public figure with a salient racial identity. Therefore, such cues may have significant implications for which policies come to fruition, with important consequences for the welfare of Americans of all races.

In this paper, I focus on racial cues from unfamiliar sources – individuals whom Americans are increasingly likely to encounter in social media environments and other settings. The central finding of this experiment is that the negative effect of a Black cue from an unfamiliar source depends on whether the policy in question is race-conscious. This result aligns with prior survey experiments, such as those by Hopkins (2023), which report that racial framing has little to no average effect on support for the ACA. As Hopkins (2023, pp. 121–122) explains, the ACA is not among the most racialized policies: "ACA attitudes prove to be more highly correlated with programs like student loans than with more overtly racialized policies like food stamps."

Like those in Hopkins (2023), my findings suggest that racial source cues do not produce a "spillover of racialization" for policies that are not especially race-conscious – at least when the cue does not come from a highly salient Black political figure such as Barack Obama (Tesler, 2012). Instead, my findings reinforce the possibility raised by Hopkins (2023) that subtle racial cues are more likely to influence public opinion when the policy itself is already strongly racialized, such as food stamps. In my experiment, racial source cues had no effect in the income-conscious condition but did influence attitudes in the context of an especially race-conscious policy: police violence.

Referring back to the two classes of mechanisms in Sections 2.3 and 2.4, my findings cast doubt on the theory of racialized expertise, which would predict a positive effect of a Black source cue for a race-conscious policy. Instead, my findings are consistent with two alternative theories. One is that respondents perceive Black sources as exhibiting in-group bias when advocating for race-conscious policies. The other is that Black source cues are more likely to activate anti-Black stereotypes in the context of explicitly racialized issues. The current evidence does not clearly favor one mechanism over the other.

Future research can improve on this paper's experiment in at least two ways. First, as noted in Section 3, the experiment was conducted in April 2017, during a period of heightened public sensitivity to racial bias in policing and racial issues more broadly. However, public opinion is dynamic and shifts over time. Since support for racial justice movements has declined from its peak around the time of the experiment, the findings presented here may not fully generalize to other sociopolitical contexts. Second, future research could better distinguish between the mechanisms by which respondents either perceive in-group bias or activate anti-Black stereotypes in response to racial cues.

That said, parsing these mechanisms takes on importance because of the findings in this experiment, which shows evidence for a negative effect of Black source cues on support for a policy that is race-conscious, but not for a policy that is not. Subtle

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racial cues do matter, but not in the way one might expect by simply transporting existing results that pertain to well-known public figures with salient racial identities. As Americans are increasingly exposed to policy messages from individuals whose racial identities may be conveyed in the form of subtle cues, this paper's findings point to factors that can determine the public's support for race-conscious social policies.

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The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available at the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ELP2GA (Rivera-Burgos, 2025).

Competing interests. The author reports no conflicts of interest.

Ethics statement. The experiment in this paper was approved by Columbia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol number IRB-AAAR1025. Columbia University's IRB deemed this research as exempt from the requirement of informed consent. This research adheres to the Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research of the APSA.

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