Mitt Romney's Racist Appeals: How Race Was Played in the 2012 Presidential Election

Charlton D. McIlwain[1] and Stephen M. Caliendo[2]

Abstract

This article identifies a marked difference in the type of race-based appeals that dominated Barack Obama's presidential reelection contest in 2012 from his inaugural campaign in 2008. Racist appeals by Mitt Romney and the right in 2012 supplanted the racial appeals by Obama and the left in 2008. We focus our attention on a particularly salient form of racist appeal, one based on the long-standing stereotypes of black laziness and taking advantage. Specifically, we outline the historical underpinnings of these stereotypes. We then demonstrate how Romney and the right wove these underlying stereotypes into a seamless racist narrative—through political advertisements, online messaging, political speeches and debate statements—beginning with the Republican primary and continuing through the general election.

Whether intentionally marshaled to promote his own racial distinction (McIlwain, 2012) or bullied into racial defense mode by opposing forces (Fraser, 2009; Marable, 2009), most scholars agree that race played a significant role in President Barack Obama's historic 2008 election. Explicitly racist imagery circulated in the public sphere. They depicted Obama as a watermelon-and-fried-chicken-eating African darkie who, depending on one's perspective, was either too intellectually apish to perform the duties of president, or a secret Muslim terrorist playing out his plot to turn the United States into a communist nation where wealth and power would be transferred from deserving (White) Americans to a threatening class of undeserving non-Whites hell bent on racial retribution (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011).

[1]New York University, New York, NY, USA
[2]North Central College, Naperville, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Charlton D. McIlwain, New York University, Media, Culture, and Communication, East Building, 239 Green Street, 8th Fl., New York, NY 10003, USA.
Email: cdm1@nyu.edu

Before he was officially the Democratic Party nominee, the news media framed Obama's candidacy as a battle between race and gender (in the context of the Obama–Hillary Clinton rivalry) and as the potential pinnacle of Black achievement, should Obama be successful (McIlwain, 2011; Squires & Jackson, 2010). The candidates themselves traded explicitly racial barbs: Hillary Clinton told Party leaders that only she could woo and win White voters; Obama once charged that John McCain and conservatives were going to try to "scare" people by pointing out that Obama did not look like all the other presidents pictured on dollar bills; and McCain and other conservatives charged Obama with "playing the race card." Then, of course, there was Reverend Wright and Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech that established race as a central feature of the electoral conversation. It is also worth pointing out that both implicit and explicit racial rhetoric continued—even escalated—following Obama's election. Much of this was tied to the rise of the Tea Party (Baretto et al., 2011), Obama's choice to (at least momentarily) speak out about racial profiling (Ogletree, 2010), and criticism he faced by minority communities for taking a race-neutral stance to policy issues such as jobs, the economy, healthcare, and others (see, for instance, Smiley & West, 2012).

We begin our assessment of the 2012 presidential election within the context of 2008 principally because the contests that year provided a sense of uncertainty about the role race might play in 2012. Circumstances in 2012 were different in some respects. The narrative of historic racial achievement largely lost traction, and Obama had weathered the storm of racial attacks that some had hoped would derail him in 2008. On the other hand, the narrative of Obama's otherness persisted and gained renewed traction amidst the economic and healthcare policy debates early in his first term. In 2008, a strong coalition of enthusiasm from communities of color buoyed a divided White electorate. Yet a stark divide between Whites and Blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans, appeared to cast a shadow over the campaign and call into question whether the president could count on an edge generated by his base anchored in minority communities.

Our purpose here is to briefly demonstrate what we saw as the most significant way that race mattered in the 2012 election. More specifically, we argue that while race-based appeals took many forms throughout the 2012 campaign, a specific race-based narrative was particularly salient. In the following pages, we briefly describe the historical underpinnings of this racial narrative, how Republican candidates during the party primary developed its contemporary foundation, and how Mitt Romney and his supporters exploited this narrative through a series of cues mobilized primarily through political advertisements. We begin our assessment with a brief review of the concept of implicit communication and the relationship between race-based cues and its potential influence on voter perception and decision making.

Implicit Bias and Race-Based Appeals

Much of our assessment of race in the 2012 presidential contest rests on our recent work in *Race Appeal* (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011), which focused, in large part, on the variety of race-based messages political candidates deploy to gain strategic advantage over their opponents. There, and throughout the remainder of this article, we

make a distinction between two distinct types of race-based appeals: racist and racial. *Racist* appeals have the potential to prime antiminority racial fear, resentment, and bias. They are deployed through a variety of audiovisual and textual cues that associate persons of color with long-standing, negative, racial stereotypes. By contrast, *racial* appeals, while they also involve race either implicitly or explicitly, do not rely on such negative, antiminority stereotypes for their persuasive power. Thus, while all racist appeals are racial, not every appeal to race is racist.

This distinction lies at the heart of our recent findings about how racist appeals, in particular, get constructed. Furthermore, we build our findings and distinctions around the extant literatures on both the semiotics and psychology underlying how racist appeals get deployed and how they potentially work to affect the attitudes, perceptions, and decisions voters make. Four primary characteristics comprise racist appeals deployed in televised political advertisements (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011): a salient stereotype, most often those of criminality, laziness, taking undeserved advantage, and the charge of liberalism (read, "extreme" liberal, "dangerously" liberal, "radical," etc.); a minority opponent's image; all-White, noncandidate images; and a exposed audience that includes a high percentage of White potential voters.

Racist messages constructed and deployed in this way work to prime racial resentment, negative racial group attitudes, and conservative ideology (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). Race is primed within the subconscious and/or unconscious awareness of exposed individuals whose racist attitudes are sublimated under espoused values of racial equality (Henry & Sears, 2002; Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1986), but, nevertheless become apparent in their processing of racist content such that they make decisions and perform tasks that may either negatively judge people of color or heighten White racial group loyalty (Amodio & Devine, 2006; Amodio, Devine, & Harmon-Jones, 2008; Brown, Bradley, & Lang, 2006; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Plant & Devine, 1998). As such, the potential to appeal to negative racial attitudes is heightened by constructing salient racial cues that activate cognitive processes in which racial biases become more salient. This provides the potential to produce—though certainly does not guarantee—political behaviors and outcomes consistent with those biases.

The remainder of this article focuses solely on the messaging component of racist appeals. That is, we argue that Mitt Romney's campaign and its supporting organizations constructed a potentially effective set of racial cues by targeting a historically salient racial stereotype about African Americans. We further argue that they developed a message strategy likely to heighten the salience of that stereotype in the present moment of the campaign.

A Casual History of Laziness

Post-Reconstruction representations of Blackness were, from the very beginning, replete with images of Black laziness. Figure 1 includes one of the most popular of these images that prefigured and solidified the Black image in the White mind. In it, a Black man lay happily idle while White men all around him are hard at work. The representational work here is twofold: it negatively characterizes Blacks vis-à-vis the

Figure 1. The "Lazy Black" stereotype in Reconstruction America.

idea of labor, and it constructs a binary distinction between Black and White character with respect to work, the former as fundamentally lazy, the latter as intrinsically hardworking, industrious, and responsible (see Winter, 2008). Perhaps more importantly, however, the image interpolates Whites and Blacks in the zero-sum relationship articulated in the heading: "…Negro in idleness at the *expense* of the white man." As such, Black laziness appropriates the White man's economic, civic, and virtuosity vis-à-vis work while retaining his core character of being lazy.

This image of the lazy Black appears throughout antebellum history's popular culture from magazine and newspaper political cartoons (Mendelberg, 2001) to Vaudeville. But again, these depictions had a dual purpose. As scholars such as Lipsitz (1998) and Gross (2010) point out, such representations worked as much to create and sustain an investment in White racial group identity as it did to negatively and explicitly stereotype Blacks. Thus, the most important aspect of the historical representation of the lazy Black is trifold in that it creates the stereotype; institutes the binary, racial distinction on both sides of that stereotype (Black-Lazy/White-working); and engenders a relationship between Blacks who do no work, yet benefit from White labor.

Moving ahead in history—past the institutionalization of New Deal social welfare policies and the creation of AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children) and

forms of welfare fraud that began to be prosecuted throughout the seventies—we arrive at Ronald Reagan's "welfare queen" archetype. Many scholarly works describe the development of this racially iconic image (see, for instance, Gilens, 2000; Hancock, 2004), and so we do not describe it in any detail here. What is important to recognize is simply that the myth of the welfare queen was not a novel construction. Rather, it was the remediation of a long representational history. In the image of the welfare queen resides the three dimensions of the historical image represented in Figure 1: the explicit and implicit representation of Black laziness, the distinction between White labor and working-class outrage, and the effect of Black advantage at the expense of White laborers. Thus, we do not view the history of racial representations of Black laziness as episodic historical moments, but as a continuous representational thread replete within the popular imagination of White America (see for instance Bogle, 2001; Entman & Rojecki, 2001). The image of the lazy Black and its concomitant associations are fundamentally salient within American culture, a stereotype that has fundamentally shaped our historical and contemporary racial common sense. As such, this stereotype provided a strong foundation for message appeal in 2012. Yet, to be potentially effective in a political and electoral context—in the context of a persuasive message campaign—this historical foundation would have to be remediated yet again in order to manufacture and maximize contemporary salience.

The 2012 Republican Primary and the Racial Politics of Work

Early in January 2012, amidst a crowded field of Republican presidential candidates, Mitt Romney began featuring a slogan on both his campaign website and on official banners accompanying him at speaking events across the country. Shown in Figure 2, the slogan is a clever play on words, with a dual connotation: Obama is not engaging in work, and the work he is engaging in is unproductive and ineffectual. The slogan took on a manufactured life of its own on a new website, ObamaIsntWorking.com, which featured the image in Figure 3. This image not only contains the slogan, but depicts silhouettes of a long line of individuals standing at the unemployment office. Their visage, however, is clear enough to recognize that those individuals are all White. Thus, we have Obama who is not working (the message communicated with the slogan), and we have those who are harmed as a direct result: hardworking White people who because of Obama are out of work. In this image we see the full development of the lazy Black stereotype—(Black) Obama's not working, White detriment, and the ostensible message that the Black man in power remains (undeservingly) in that position at the expense of Whites.

This early campaign imagery quickly gave way to more strident, direct, sometimes explicit, other times implicit, racial rhetoric. Interestingly enough, Romney's chief rivals were the source of this rhetoric, while Romney, at the time, became increasingly silent on the issue of work as it related to Obama in particular and Blacks more generally. Rick Santorum (R-PA) addressed an all-White crowd in Iowa on January 12, 2012, with criticisms aimed at Obama. "They're just pushing harder and harder to get more and more of you dependent upon them so they can get your vote," Santorum
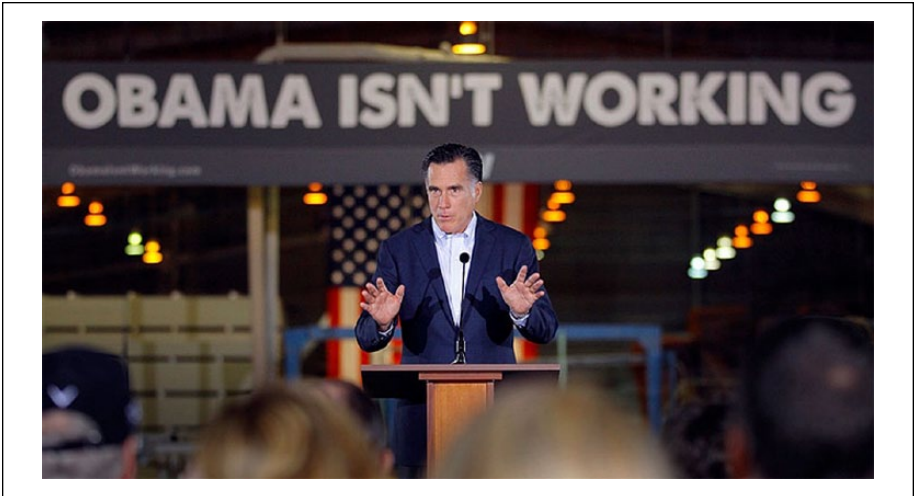
Figure 2. Mitt Romney campaign banner associating Blackness with "Not Working."
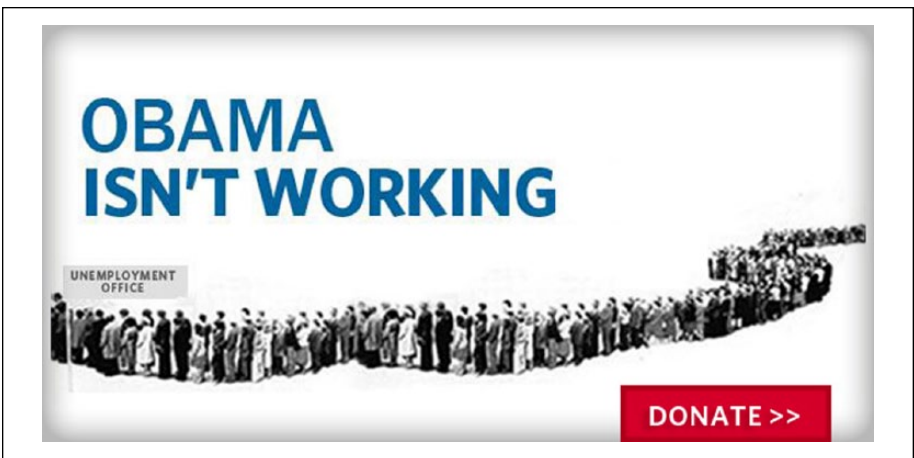
Figure 3. Romney-inspired website associates Blackness with "Not Working" and as cause of economic decline.

began, claiming that Obama ("they") sought to manufacture dependence in return for votes. Santorum's vague "they" references, however, became more specific as he continued. "That's what the bottom line is. I don't want to make Black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money; I want to give them the opportunity to go out and earn the money." The connections here are clear. The fact that Santorum's soliloquy on entitlement reform turned into a referendum on Black dependence in

front of an all-White crowd in a state that is 91% White (Blacks make up just 3%) is revealing. It invokes the lazy Black stereotype while simultaneously and literally linking it to Black advantage and White expense.

While Santorum tried to first deny[1] (and then simply sublimate) his speech's racist subtext, another Republican challenger, Newt Gingrich, fully embraced the racially targeted nature of his message. His first remarks along these lines came during a speech in November of 2011. In the context of talking about how to solve the problem of (racially coded) urban poverty, Gingrich offered this suggestion:

> "You say to somebody, you shouldn't go to work before you're what, 14, 16 years of age, fine," Mr. Gingrich said. "You're totally poor. You're in a school that is failing with a teacher that is failing. I've tried for years to have a very simple model. Most of these schools ought to get rid of the unionized janitors, have one master janitor and pay local students to take care of the school. The kids would actually do work, they would have cash, they would have pride in the schools, they'd begin the process of rising. (*The Atlantic*, 2012)

Gingrich's central contention was that poor urban communities, families and individuals lacked work ethic. Putting them to work at an early age, doing a task that even they were equipped to do, would provide them the opportunity to cultivate such an ethic. But Gingrich's rhetoric on subsequent occasions makes it such that we need not read too much beyond the subtext of his words here. He articulated his meaning more clearly during the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, debate on January 16, 2012. There, African American journalist and debate moderator Juan Williams asked Gingrich about his earlier remarks.

> Williams: Speaker Gingrich, you said Black Americans should demand jobs, not food stamps. You also said poor kids lack a strong work ethic and proposed having them work as janitors in their schools. Can't you see that this is viewed, at a minimum, as insulting to all Americans, but particularly to Black Americans?
>
> Gingrich: No. I don't see that.

Gingrich's response was emphatic. It not only confirmed his belief in the lack of Black work ethic generally, but confirmed how this stereotypical belief gets interpreted as a racial distinction bound up with White investment. Upon hearing Gingrich's response, the almost exclusively White audience erupted in a rousing and sustained standing ovation (*Talking Points Memo*, 2012).

Thus a coordinated—and by coordinated, we mean generally simultaneous, rather than planned—conservative message strategy served to frame the central contrast between the eventual Republican nominee and Barack Obama within the historical framework of Black laziness, dependency, lack of work ethic, and gaining economic advantage (through "welfare" benefits) at White expense. In the process, the issues of both race and work topped the public agenda at a time when welfare policy and spending had not figured prominently in the policy agenda of either party.

Communicating on Cue: The Romney Message

Mitt Romney's campaign again picked up on the message of work early August 2012, in the weeks leading up to the Republican National Convention. On August 7 he released a controversial advertisement about welfare reform.[2] The ad begins with the statement, "Since 1996, welfare recipients were required to work." The opening image features former President Bill Clinton, surrounded by several people (all of whom are Black) as he signs the 1996 welfare reform bill. The frame marks the subjects: When we talk about welfare we are talking about Black people. The ad goes on to flash Obama's image across the screen, claiming that he "quietly" ended this requirement and that his plan would "gut" welfare reform. The announcer says: "Under Obama's new plan, you wouldn't have to work and you wouldn't have to train for a job. They just send you your welfare check." Consistent with the Black-White interpolation around work, every time the word "work" is mentioned, the ad prominently features one or more White people working. Nearly every fact-checking organization in the country demonstrated that the Romney ad was false, erroneous, and deceptive. Yet Romney released an almost identical ad several weeks later.

An ad released on August 14 returned to the slogan that "Obama isn't working," featuring statistics about the number of Americans who are out of work.[3] It ends with statistics about a "forty-five percent increase in the number of people on food stamps." Here, the use of the term "food stamp" is key. Despite the fact that food stamps no longer existed, the term cues race in a way that the program's correct name— Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program—does not.

An ad on August 22 features the issue of health care.[4] It opens with an announcer saying that "some people think Obamacare equals free healthcare." As Obama's image moves across the screen, the announcer says, "But nothing is free." Nothing, apparently, except mobile phones.

In late September, an online advertisement began to circulate amongst conservative websites and web logs that featured an interview with a Black woman (who is missing most of her bottom teeth) claiming that she is voting for President Obama because "he gave us a phone." The ad claims that the footage was taken outside of a Romney event in Cleveland, and the woman appears to take a confrontational tone with the videographer. The message here is consistent with both the "lazy Black" stereotype, as well as more ideologically focused arguments about "tax-and-spend" liberals who want expansive government programs,[5] but it is the former element that is likely to have persuasive power because of the imagery. It confirms White social conservatives' worst fears and suspicions: White folks' ("our") hard-earned money is being taken by the Black president and given to people like her ("them").

The narrative about Black sloth and taking advantage of government largess at the expense of hardworking Whites comes full circle in a final remediation of Ronald Reagan's welfare queen. This welfare queen, circa 2012 (Figure 4), provides a provocative image that completes the narrative thread that began back in Reconstruction-era America.

Figure 4. Romney-associated Tea Party Victory Fund "Obama Phone" TV ad.

Conclusion

In 2008, Barack Obama lost the White vote by 12 percentage points to John McCain (Election Center: 2008). In 2012, he lost the White vote by nearly twice that much, securing 39% to Mitt Romney's 59% (Election Center: 2012). Despite Obama's

attempts to run a campaign that was not centered on race in 2008, he was forced to address race directly during the primaries when the Jeremiah Wright story refused to subside and threatened to derail his candidacy. Explicit and implicit racial messages characterized much of the criticism of his first term, and his reelection bid in 2012, perhaps unsurprisingly, saw a continuation of the trend.

Our work has demonstrated that race-based appeals are not infrequent in contests where one of the candidates is a racial or ethnic minority, and that appeals to race come in a variety of forms. However, the clear pattern in 2012 was for the president to continue to avoid any direct discussions about race while his opponents and critics sought to frame his presidency in implicitly racial terms. If the exit polls are an indication, the strategy worked. If it were not for the high levels of turnout of non-White voters, particularly in key states, he may not have been elected either time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Santorum claimed and some observers agreed that he said "blah" instead of "black."
2. See http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/2012/?adv=Right+Choice+-+Mitt+Romney+-+Aug+7.
3. See http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/2012/?adv=Right+Choice+-+Mitt+Romney+-+Aug+7.
4. See http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/2012/?adv=Right+Choice+-+Mitt+Romney+-+Aug+22.
5. The program in question—called "Lifeline"—dates back to the 1930s and has been supported in various ways by presidents, the Federal Communication Commission, and telephone companies throughout the years; it is, indeed, designed to help low-income Americans establish and maintain communication by providing home telephones and, later, during the George W. Bush administration, mobile phones, at no charge (Legum, 2012; Reeve, 2012).

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Author Biographies

Charlton D. McIlwain is an associate professor of media, culture, and communication at New York University.

Stephen M. Caliendo is a professor of political science at North Central College.