

## *Polls and Elections*

# Do Blacks and Whites See Obama through Race-Tinted Glasses? A Comparison of Obama's and Clinton's Approval Ratings

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*Recent presidential approval trends have led many pollsters to conclude that a “racial gap” exists in President Barack Obama’s job approval ratings. Pollsters have focused disproportionately on the substantial gap between Blacks and Whites. Some political commentators and media outlets attribute this divergence to the fact that Obama is the first ethnic/racial minority to occupy the White House. The existence of a White-Black gap, however, could merely reflect the differences in the political preferences of White and Black Americans. In this article, we assess these two competing arguments by analyzing CNN polling data spanning President Obama’s inauguration in January 2009 to June 2011. For comparative purposes, we examine Time/CNN polling data that begins with President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in January 1993 to June 1995. Our findings suggest that the gap in Black support for President Obama is significantly larger than it is for President Clinton, providing evidence that racial group pride and solidarity appear to play an important role in Blacks’ evaluations of Obama.*

A recent headline from the Gallup Poll hails that, “Obama Approval Sinks to New Lows Among Whites, Hispanics.”<sup>1</sup> The latest Gallup Poll conducted in August 2011

1. Saad (2011).

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indeed reveals that President Barack Obama's monthly approval rating is at an all-time low among all racial groups. The lowest approval rating amongst these groups is from Whites; less than a majority, 44%, approved of Obama's performance. In this same poll, Obama's support among Blacks also dropped by approximately eight percentage points to a new low of 84%. Despite this recent decline, Black support remains nearly double that of Whites.

This discrepancy has led many pollsters to conclude that a "racial gap" exists in President Obama's job approval ratings. In particular, political pundits have focused on the gap between Blacks and Whites, where the difference in support for President Obama has been as much as 51 percentage points in the Gallup Poll. Some political commentators and media outlets attribute this gap to the fact that Obama is the first ethnic/racial minority to occupy the White House. On the other hand, the existence of a White-Black gap could merely reflect the differences in the political preferences and partisanship of White Americans and ethnic/racial minorities. Today, a majority of White Americans identify as Republicans, while most ethnic/racial minorities—and Blacks especially—identify as Democrats. How can we determine which of these dynamics is responsible for the disparity we observe in approval ratings?

One way to do so is to consider the following counterfactual scenario—would we expect to see a similar White-Black gap in the approval ratings of former President Clinton, the last Democrat in office? In addition to being a Democrat, many considered Clinton to be the nation's "first Black president."<sup>2</sup> While there are a number of important differences between Presidents Clinton and Obama in addition to their race, Clinton is easily the best comparison case for Obama because of his high approval ratings among blacks. By comparing Presidents Obama and Clinton, we assess whether the Black-White gap has its roots in individual partisanship or ethnic solidarity. We investigate this question by analyzing CNN polling data spanning Obama's inauguration in January 2009 to June 2011.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with this time period, we also examine *Time/CNN* polling data that begins with Clinton's inauguration in January 1993 to June 1995.<sup>4</sup> We also analyze the differences between President Clinton's and President Obama's job performance ratings at the individual level with a multivariate analysis of presidential approval.

This article proceeds as follows. The following section briefly discusses the literature on racial voting and the partisan attachments of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Next, we discuss our research design and methods, followed with a discussion of our results. The final section concludes.

2. This depiction is often attributed to Toni Morrison, who noted that President Clinton was well liked among Blacks because he "displays almost every trope of blackness" (1998).

3. While CNN has conducted polls beyond June 2011, there is a lag of a few months between when the poll is conducted and when the Roper Center releases the individual-level data. As of writing, June 2011 is the most recent individual-level data we could acquire.

4. We use CNN and *Time/CNN* polling data because the Gallup data, as we note below, are not always in readily accessible formats.

## Variations in Political Preferences by Race and Ethnicity

Historically, Blacks have been strong and loyal supporters of the Democratic Party; their average support for the Democrats hovers somewhere near 90% in both presidential and midterm elections (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Frymer 1999). Up until the 1960s, both parties received at least 90% of their votes from White voters. Shortly thereafter, Democratic defection among largely Southern Whites began in response to the Civil Rights Movement, the increased political participation of African Americans, and growing Black support of the Democratic Party, which fundamentally reshaped the partisan political landscape (Carmines and Stimson 1989, Huckfeldt and Kohfeldt 1989). As Blacks joined the Democratic Party in large numbers, and the Democratic and Republican Parties diverged on racial policies, White identification with the Democratic Party, particularly in the South, declined significantly.

Currently, a larger and larger share of Democratic support comes from racial and ethnic minorities, while the share of Republican support coming from Whites has held steady. According to the most recent American National Election Study (ANES) taken in 2008, over 40% of Democratic identifiers are racial and ethnic minorities. By contrast, only 8% of Republican identifiers report being Black, Latino, or Asian American. The current composition of our political parties suggests that the Democratic Party has become the party of minorities and the Republican Party has remained exceptionally White.

Although both parties have at times moved toward the center on matters of race, there have been—and continue to be—significant gaps on a number of critical racial policy questions. On immigration, welfare, affirmative action, and other issues of particular relevance to racial and ethnic minorities, the Democratic Party has tended to position itself to the left of the Republican Party (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Segura, Falcon, and Pachon 1997).

## Racial Identity and Voting Behavior

The race and politics literature offers several explanations that link ethnic/racial identity with political behavior. In the case of the 2008 presidential election, ethnic/racial minorities may feel compelled to support a fellow ethnic/racial minority for political office out of group pride or group solidarity (Bobo 2001; Bobo and Gilliam 1990). As the research on race-based voting indicates, minorities tend to vote along racial lines when there is a minority candidate on the ballot (Bullock 1984; Grofman 1991; Handley, Grofman, and Arden 1994; Lai 1999). Another reason why minorities might wish to elect a minority candidate could stem from the belief that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation (Swain 1994; Tate 1991).

Blacks are also more likely to support Black candidates based on a perceived shared identity and interests. Dawson's (1994) conceptualization of linked fate stems from Blacks' shared history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. These shared experiences have created a powerful collective or group identity that manifests itself in their political behavior. As such, what affects one individual can influence the overall well-being of the entire African

American community. This therefore means that African Americans make their political decisions based on what they believe would be best for the group overall. Black Americans may have felt—and continue to feel—an especially strong sense of linked fate in their decision to support Obama since he was running for, and now holds, the presidency.

## Hypotheses, Research Design, and Data

Our research examines two related empirical questions. First, are Black respondents more likely to approve of President Obama's performance when compared to Whites?<sup>5</sup> Previous research suggests that the initial election of a Black political executive (e.g., mayor) can be a polarizing event along racial lines (e.g., Howell 2007), but often declines in subsequent contests (e.g., Hajnal 2007; Howell 2007). Since President Obama is the first Black president currently serving his first term, we expect that presidential approval ratings between Blacks and Whites will be significantly different, with Blacks giving a higher approval rating to President Obama.

**H1:** Black survey respondents will be more likely to give a positive job approval rating to President Obama when compared to White respondents.

Our second question is whether this discrepancy holds when we examine the differences between Whites and Blacks with regard to their evaluations of Democratic presidents more broadly. Put another way, do Blacks support President Obama at a greater rate because of his race? Historically, Democratic presidents have received higher support from Blacks than from Whites. Examining the difference between Blacks and Whites in their evaluation of President Clinton provides a baseline to which we can compare President Obama's approval ratings. Thus, if there is a difference between Blacks and Whites in their evaluation of Obama that exceeds the typical gap for a Democratic president, we can conclude that this difference is a result of President Obama's race. We would therefore expect to see the difference between Blacks' and Whites' evaluations of President Clinton *to be smaller when compared to their evaluations of President Obama*. This outcome would suggest that racial solidarity, group pride, or linked fate (or a combination of all three) is influencing Blacks' evaluations of President Obama to a greater extent than partisanship.

**H2:** The differences between presidential approval ratings between Blacks and Whites will be larger for President Obama when compared to President Clinton.

To examine our hypotheses, we use a nonequivalent group pattern-matching design. Specifically, we gathered job approval polling data for the first 29 months of both President Clinton's and President Obama's first terms.<sup>6</sup> With these data, we compare

5. We intended to include other ethnic/racial groups (e.g., Hispanics and Asians) in our analysis, but the sample sizes from these polls are too small to make any reliable inferences ( $n < 50$ ).

6. We limit our data to the first 29 months of the first terms for both presidents since the most recent polling data we can collect from the Roper Center is from June 2011.

support for the two presidents among both Blacks and Whites. To detect whether a difference exists between the two races and to standardize our analysis, we calculate how the difference in approval among Blacks and Whites compared to the overall approval rating of all respondents (e.g., Black Approval of Clinton—Overall Approval of Clinton). In essence, this differential measure allows us to estimate whether Blacks are more likely to approve of President Obama when compared to Whites. It also enables us to compare Blacks' approval of President Obama to Blacks' approval of President Clinton using the same scale. We then compare how approval ratings have changed across these two administrations. We augment these observations with a multivariate logistic regression of presidential approval based on basic demographics that can potentially influence how one assesses the president's job performance.

To evaluate President Clinton's approval rating, we use survey data from *Time/CNN* polls collected from February 11, 1993, to June 22, 1995. Altogether, a total of 45 surveys (about 1.5 surveys a month) were conducted during this time period. For President Obama, we use survey data from CNN polls collected from February 8, 2009, to June 8, 2011. This gives us a total of 39 surveys (about 1.3 surveys a month) over this time span.<sup>7</sup> We chose *Time/CNN* and CNN surveys for three reasons. First, using a single media outlet for survey data ensures similar question wording and placement on the survey.<sup>8</sup> Second, limiting our analysis to a single media outlet makes data collection and analysis manageable.<sup>9</sup> Third, all of the *Time/CNN* surveys were in readily accessible formats from the Roper Center. While gathering all available polling information from all survey outfits would be ideal, it is beyond the scope of this project. Still, we are confident that our data will produce meaningful results that would be validated with additional data.

## Results

As a first cut at the data, we plot President Obama's approval rating among Black and White respondents in Figure 1A.<sup>10</sup> The data show that White respondents consistently give a slightly negative approval rating to President Obama when compared to the overall approval rating for all respondents. For Blacks, however, approval of Obama remains exceptionally high and substantially higher than the population average. In fact, a simple glance at Figure 1A provides evidence in support of our first hypothesis: On average, Black respondents always provide a higher approval rating of President Obama when compared to White respondents.

7. We collected all of our survey data from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>.

8. The questions used were almost identical. For President Clinton, the question asked, "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way President Clinton is handling his job as President?" For President Obama, the only difference in the question is that it did not include "In general." Both approval questions appeared near the beginning of the survey.

9. A larger study could easily expand upon our analysis by incorporating additional survey outfits to construct a more precise measure of presidential approval.

10. We used the weight variables provided in the data sets to calculate all approval ratings.

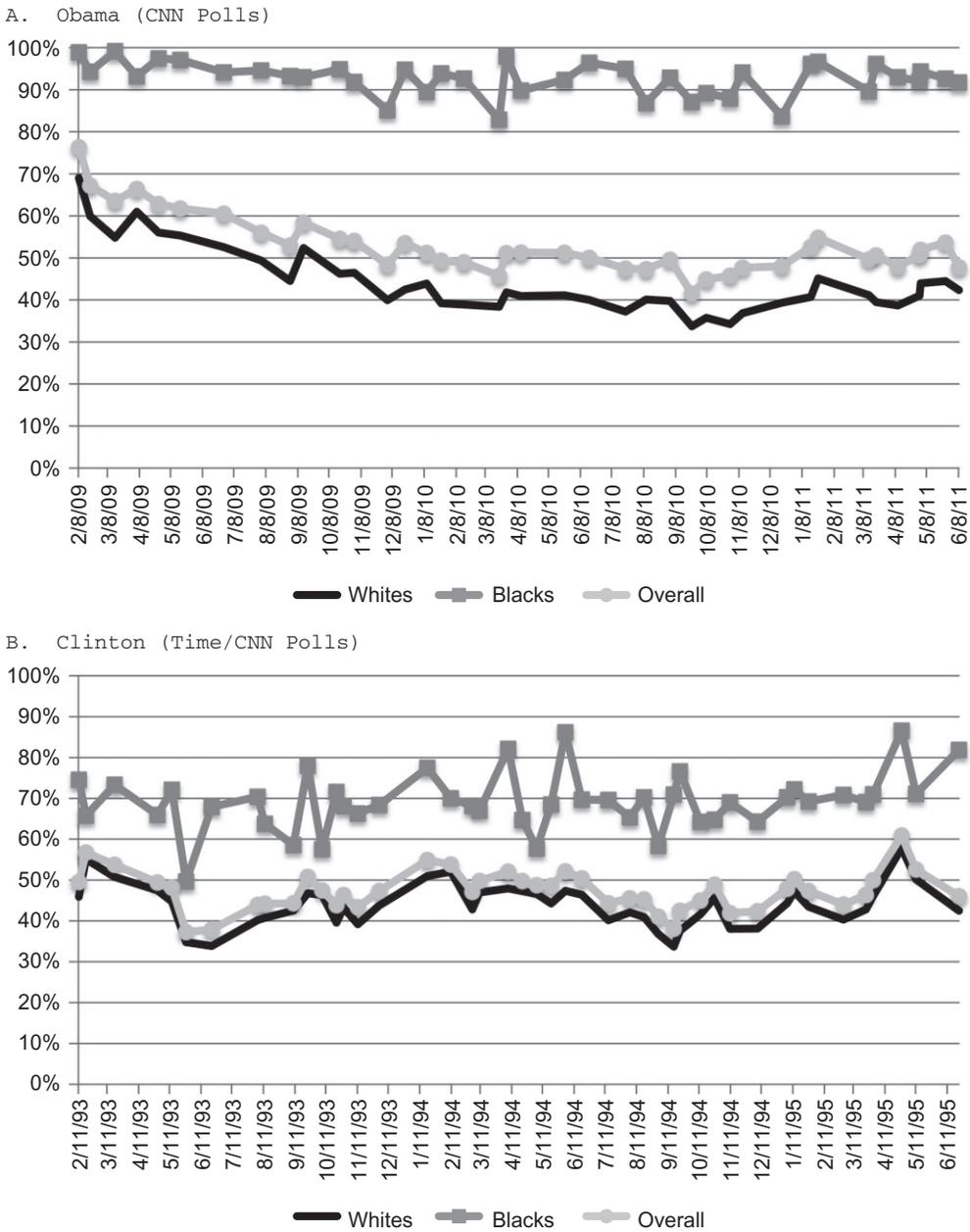


FIGURE 1. Presidential Approval, First 29 Months.

The unanswered question is whether the gap in approval is unique to President Obama, or whether our finding emerges from the fact that Blacks are more likely to approve of Democrats regardless of race? In other words, are Blacks more likely to support President Obama because he is a minority? To evaluate our second hypothesis, we

compare President Obama's approval ratings to President Clinton's approval ratings. As Figure 1B shows, while Blacks were also more likely to support President Clinton than Whites, support among Blacks for President Clinton is not nearly as high as it is for President Obama.

To standardize the approval ratings, we compare the average approval rating of Blacks and Whites to the average overall approval rating of all respondents. Figures 2A and 2B present these calculations. For Obama, Blacks are substantially more likely to provide a positive approval rating when compared to the average overall rating of all respondents. For all surveys, Black approval is, on average, +39.7 percentage points higher than the overall population rating. By contrast, support among Whites is, on average, -8.7 percentage points fewer than the average overall rating.

For President Clinton, Black approval is, on average, +21.9 percentage points higher than the average overall approval rating for all respondents. The difference among White respondents is quite small: White approval is, on average, about -3.4 percentage points fewer than the average overall approval rating. We expected the smaller difference between White respondents and the average overall approval rating as White respondents represented a greater share of the public opinion surveys done during the Clinton years. Indeed, for the Clinton surveys, about 81% of the respondents were White compared to 70% for the Obama surveys. This suggests that White approval should be closely related to overall approval in the Clinton surveys.

Overall, the approval data show both Presidents Clinton and Obama received higher levels of approval from Blacks when compared to Whites. The surveys also reveal that President Obama's approval rating among Blacks is notably higher when compared to President Clinton's approval rating among Blacks. The average approval rating among Blacks for President Obama for all surveys is 92.7%; for President Clinton the average is 68.3%, a difference of 24.4 percentage points. For Whites, both presidents received similar levels of support: Clinton received a 42.9% approval rating while Obama garnered a 44.3% approval rating. Thus, the major difference in approval ratings between Presidents Obama and Clinton is support among Blacks. This supports our hypothesis that group identity and linked fate may be responsible for the differences we observe.

Both metrics confirm what the reader's casual inspection of the figures already told them: Blacks have given a markedly higher approval rating to President Obama when compared to President Clinton. As our surveys cover the first 29 months of each president's first term, we are confident that this difference is not an artifact from any single survey or event. While we cannot be certain that race is the causal force behind the differences we observe, these results are highly suggestive and offer strong support for our second hypothesis.

A natural critique of our analysis is that the differences we observe are due to an increase in partisan polarization of public approval over the last two decades (see, for instance, Cohen and Panagopolous 2011; Jacobson 2011). That is, Democrats, regardless of race, approve of a Democratic president at a higher rate now than they did in the 1990s. If polarization is responsible for our results, then we should see no measureable difference in the approval ratings between Blacks and Whites when restricting our analysis to Democrats. When we reanalyze the data for this partisan subpool, the average rate of

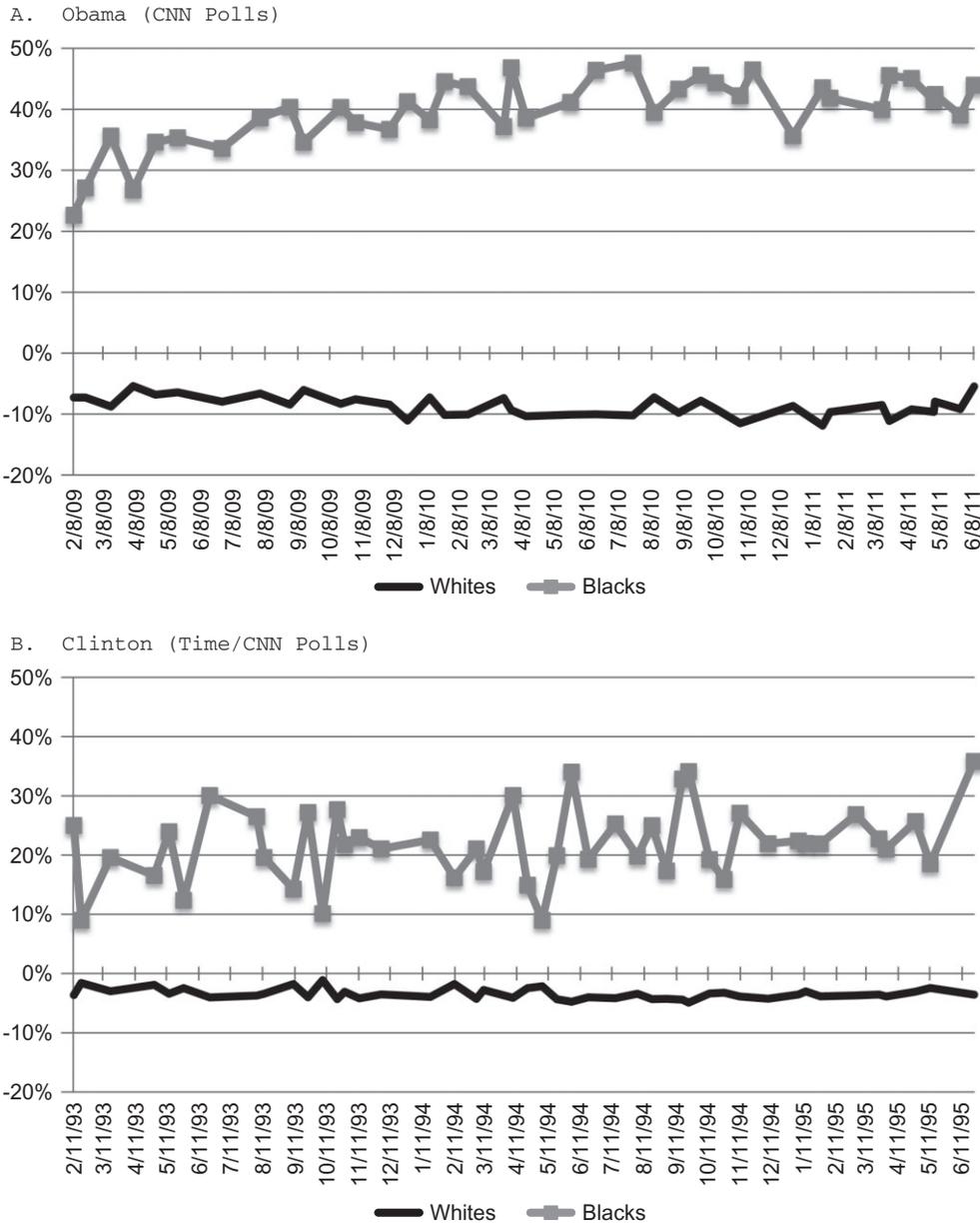


FIGURE 2. Presidential Approval Differential, First 29 Months.

support for President Clinton produced a 66.2% approval rating for White Democrats ( $n = 8,351$ ) and a 74.9% approval rating for Black Democrats ( $n = 2,402$ ), a difference of 8.7 percentage points (the difference is significant above the 99% confidence level). For President Obama, the average survey shows that 81.9% of White Democrats approved of the president's performance, and 96.5% of Black Democrats did the same—a difference

of 14.3 percentage points (this difference is also significant above the 99% confidence level). Comparing approval ratings for Presidents Clinton and Obama reveals that the race gap between black and white Democrats is 5.6 percentage points higher for Obama. The difference-in-differences test produces a z-statistic of 4.11, which is significantly beyond the 99% confidence interval. These results illustrate that—while, in general, Democrats appear to be more enamored with President Obama—polarization cannot account for the additional 5.6 percentage points of approval for President Obama among Black Democrats. This, coupled with the fact that both Presidents Clinton and Obama received similar levels of support among Whites regardless of party, suggests that group identity and linked fate may explain the differences we have observed above.

While these aggregate numbers are suggestive, can other factors—for example, ideology, income, and education—explain Obama’s and Clinton’s approval ratings? To analyze this question, we run two simple logit regressions to estimate presidential approval (the measure is dichotomous, where approve is coded as “1”) using the final survey for both presidents in our time series: June 22, 1995, for Clinton and June 7, 2011, for Obama. Our independent variables are dichotomous measures of partisanship (Democrat and Independent), dichotomous measures of ideology (Liberal and Moderate), ordinal measures of standard demographic variables (age, education, and income), dichotomous measures of race (Black, Hispanic, and Others), and a dichotomous measure of gender (Female).<sup>11</sup> The excluded category is White Conservative Republicans. Table 1 presents the results of these regressions.

As Table 1 shows, both regressions are remarkably similar. In fact, only two differences exist between the two models. First, more education tends to produce a positive approval rating for Clinton, while education is not significant for Obama’s approval rating. Second, individuals with higher incomes lead them to give a favorable approval rating for Obama, while it has the opposite effect for Clinton. The remaining coefficients that reach statistical significance—Democrat, Independent, Liberal, Moderate, and Black—are all positive for both presidents.

To put these results into context and to determine the magnitude of their effects, we calculate predicted probabilities using Tomz, Wittenberg, and King’s (2001) *CLARIFY* program for Stata.<sup>12</sup> These probabilities estimate the likelihood of an individual approving the president’s job performance while varying the partisanship, ideology, and race of the respondent. As Table 2 demonstrates, Obama’s predicted approval rating is higher than Clinton’s for White Democrats of all stripes. For the ever-important White moderate independent category, however, Clinton has a slight advantage (48.9% compared to Obama’s 45.6%). For Blacks, Obama’s predicted approval ratings easily eclipse Clinton’s predicted approval ratings for all partisan and ideological combinations. These individual-level results only further confirm our previous analysis and our hypotheses regarding the role of group pride and shared identity. Thus, holding ideology and partisanship constant, we see that the race of the respondent does influence their evaluation of the President’s job

11. The “other” racial category includes Asians, individuals of more than one race, and those who self-identify as “other.”

12. All other variables are set to the median value.

TABLE 1  
Logit Regression Results of Presidential Approval

	<i>Approve of Clinton's Job Performance</i>	<i>Approve of Obama's Job Performance</i>
Democrat	1.74*** (0.24)	2.98*** (0.43)
Independent	0.59* (0.23)	1.17*** (0.35)
Liberal	0.66* (0.27)	1.83*** (0.42)
Moderate	0.76*** (0.21)	1.15*** (0.30)
Age	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.14)
Education	0.26*** (0.08)	0.10 (0.14)
Income	-0.16* (0.08)	0.20* (0.10)
Black	0.95* (0.37)	3.40*** (0.96)
Hispanic	-0.05 (0.44)	-0.11 (0.52)
Other Race than White	0.64 (0.44)	0.68 (0.55)
Female	0.03 (0.19)	-0.15 (0.28)
Constant	-1.76*** (0.45)	-3.33*** (0.85)
Pseudo- $R^2$	.171	.413
N	727	816

Note: The omitted category is Conservative White Republicans. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

performance. And in particular, *ceteris paribus*, Blacks provide a more favorable evaluation of Obama than they do of Clinton.

A closer look at the results presented in Table 2 reveals just how much race is an important factor for Blacks and their evaluation of Obama. While Blacks—regardless of party or ideology—are more likely to approve of Clinton than their White counterparts, this difference is amplified under Obama. For instance, 33.8% of Black Conservative Republicans approve of Clinton compared to 18.3% of White Conservative Republicans. For Obama, however, 61% of Black Conservative Republicans and 4.9% White Conservative Republicans approve of Obama, respectively. This pattern holds for all other matched pairs (i.e., same party and ideology) of Whites and Blacks, further demonstrating that race is an important perceptual screen for survey respondents, one that is stronger for Obama when compared to Clinton. In fact, it is remarkable that eight out of nine point estimates for Obama's approval rating among Blacks are above 83.8%. As such, these results suggest that most Blacks cross ideological and partisan lines when it comes to providing positive evaluations of President Obama.

TABLE 2  
Predicted Probabilities of Presidential Approval

	Clinton			Obama		
	Point Estimate (%)	95% Lower Bound	95% Upper Bound	Point Estimate (%)	95% Lower Bound	95% Upper Bound
<i>Whites</i>						
Liberal Democrats	75.3	65.6	82.6	94.3	89.8	97.2
Moderate Democrats	73.8	66.0	80.3	84.7	76.5	90.6
Conservative Democrats	55.4	44.9	66.1	59.3	45.9	71.5
Liberal Independents	51.0	39.3	63.3	71.4	60.3	81.5
Moderate Independents	48.9	40.0	58.0	45.6	36.9	54.5
Conservative Independents	29.6	22.3	38.6	18.0	12.3	25.1
Liberal Republicans	35.7	23.6	49.4	37.3	21.4	54.3
Moderate Republicans	33.5	24.8	42.9	16.5	9.4	26.3
Conservative Republicans	18.3	13.0	24.6	4.9	2.7	8.0
<i>Blacks</i>						
Liberal Democrats	87.0	76.7	93.8	99.8	99.0	100.0
Moderate Democrats	86.0	75.3	92.9	99.3	97.3	99.9
Conservative Democrats	73.1	57.6	85.6	97.3	91.0	99.6
Liberal Independents	69.4	50.6	85.3	98.4	94.7	99.7
Moderate Independents	68.0	50.8	82.1	95.5	84.9	99.4
Conservative Independents	48.6	31.1	67.4	85.5	59.5	97.2
Liberal Republicans	55.0	33.1	76.4	93.6	79.3	99.0
Moderate Republicans	52.9	33.7	72.8	83.8	57.9	96.8
Conservative Republicans	33.8	19.4	52.6	61.0	27.0	88.5

Note: All numerical entries are percentages. Predicted probability estimates calculated using the CLARIFY package in Stata.

## Conclusion

Overall, our findings suggest that a White-Black gap appears to exist in the public's evaluations of President Obama's job performance. Over the course of the past two and a half years, Blacks have consistently provided higher approval ratings of President Obama when compared to White Americans. One reason for this gap, as we contend above, could pertain to the feelings of group pride and solidarity that stem from the election of the nation's first African American president. Despite any policy, partisan, or ideological, disagreements that Blacks might have with the president—for instance, significantly higher unemployment rates of African Americans when compared to White Americans—this group is still overwhelmingly supportive of the president and the actions he has taken since his inauguration in January 2009. While President Clinton enjoyed more support from Blacks than from Whites during his presidency, his approval ratings do not approach the same level of support that President Obama has received among Blacks—both within and outside of the Democratic Party. This additional piece of evidence leads us to conclude that feelings of linked fate, as well as group pride and solidarity, may be responsible for these differences.

This White-Black gap has had serious consequences for President Obama. To be sure, Obama has and continues to enjoy a solid base of support from African Americans and liberal and progressive Whites. President Obama, however, has failed to retain the approval of independent Whites. In other words, Obama has lost the support of a key part of the electorate, the same individuals who overwhelmingly expressed their disapproval of Obama in the 2010 midterm elections. Not only does this not bode well for President Obama's legislative goals going forward, it also shines a new light on why Obama has struggled to implement his legislative agenda (e.g., raising taxes on wealthy individuals) since the Republicans took control the House of Representatives in 2010.

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