Racialized Candidate Inferences in American Politics: Perceived Ingroup Favoritism is More Difficult for Black Candidates to Overcome than Ideological Stereotypes

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Abstract

How does a candidate's racial background affect the inferences voters make about them? Prior work finds that White voters often perceive Black candidates to be more liberal, which may undercut support among moderate and conservative voters. We use a series of survey experiments to understand the robustness of this finding and whether a focus on candidate ideology ignores other potentially more consequential outcomes. We provide two major contributions. First, we show that Black candidates are perceived to be more liberal than White candidates who hold the same policy positions, but that Black candidates who adopt more conservative issue positions, particularly on race-related issues, can mitigate this ideological inference. Second, we find that voters believe Black candidates will prioritize the interests of Black constituents over those of White constituents, regardless of candidate positions. These findings contribute to a clearer understanding of electoral biases faced by Black politicians and candidates.

Keywords

Descriptive representation, candidate evaluation, voter perceptions, racial bias

Word Count: 9,332

The underrepresentation of non-White politicians in American politics is often thought to be a consequence of racial discrimination again non-White candidates in elections (Hutchings and Valentino, 2004; Knuckey and Orey, 2000; Sears et al., 1987). Indeed, the creation of majority minority districts was, in part, motivated by a desire to increase the diversity of elected officials under the assumption that White voters would not support Black candidates (Brace et al., 1987). But an electoral penalty for Black candidates need not be rooted in racial animus, it could also arise if (White) voters make inferences about Black candidates on the basis of their race that disadvantage them electorally.

An extensive body of research in political science has focused on one such type of inference: candidate ideology. These inferences, or "ideological stereotypes" (see Jones, 2014), are thought to explain why White voters perceive Black candidates as more liberal and Democratic than otherwise equivalent White candidates. At the same time, the emergence of prominent successful Black Republican candidates (e.g., Ben Carson, Tim Scott, Mia Love) calls into question the assumption that all Black candidates are perceived as similarly liberal. Karpowitz et al. (2021), for example, shows that racially resentful white voters are more likely to vote for a Black candidate who signals they are conservative.

While perceptions of candidate ideology are one potential mechanism by which candidate race candidate may shape voter inferences (and therefore votes), it is not the only one. Of particular interest to the present study, it is also possible that candidate race shapes voters' beliefs about whether the candidate will prioritize the interests of some groups and issues over others. Concerns about which group's interests a candidate may prioritize, what we call "group favoritism" are likely particularly important, because beliefs about the relative attention candidates give to citizens of different races may affect vote choice even when voters believe

that candidates are otherwise ideologically aligned with their own views. Similarly, views about issue prioritization are likely important for expectations about performance in office. But compared to work on inferences about ideology, recent scholarship has given much less attention to whether candidate race affects inferences about group favoritism and issue prioritization.

In this paper, we focus on these three mechanisms and experimentally test whether Black and White candidates are perceived differently in terms of the groups they will favor in office, their issue prioritization, and their perceived ideology. We also test whether candidate positions, particularly espousing conservative positions on a race-related policy, can ameliorate any perceived differences on the basis of candidate race. Across two studies, we find clear evidence that Black candidates are systematically perceived to favor Black over White constituents compared to equivalent White candidates and are perceived to prioritize certain policy issue. Confirming prior work, we also find evidence that Black candidates are perceived to be more liberal than equivalent White candidates, although this difference can be substantially reduced by adopting an explicitly conservative position on affirmative action. By contrast, the inference that Black candidates will favor Black over White constituents and certain policy issues does not diminish even when Black candidates express support for ending race-based affirmative action. Thus, we provide novel evidence that racialized inferences are likely to continue to change how people evaluate Black and White candidates and that such differences appear more persistent than concerns about ideological liberalness alone.

II. Theory and Evidence: Race and Candidate Evaluation

Prior research highlights the role candidate race plays in understanding voter behavior and preference. For example, work on descriptive representation argues that shared racial identity

will increase turnout among voters of the same race, though this evidence is mixed (McConnaughy et al. 2010; Highton 2004). McDermott (1998) finds that liberal survey respondents are more likely to vote for a hypothetical Black candidate than a White candidate, but the mechanism underlying this finding is unclear – both racial and ideological affinity are plausible explanations. Washington (2006) finds that the presence of a Black candidate in an election increases turnout among both Black and White voters, with the latter group less likely to vote for the Black candidate than a White challenger. Along these lines, some studies suggest that racial prejudice among non-Black voters dissuades them from supporting a Black candidate (Reeves, 1997; Terkildsen, 1995). While prior work demonstrates that a Black candidate may garner more support from Black voters and/or less support from non-Black voters, there are a number of potential mechanisms for these patterns. In particular, a Black candidate may affect voter attitudes through mechanisms linked to racial attitudes, racial animus, or by affecting assumptions made about a candidate on the basis of their race, inferences that may in turn affects vote choice.

A large number of studies have considered how a candidate's race affects inferences about their ideology and partisanship. Sigelman et al.'s (1995) early survey experimental analysis shows that Black candidates without party labels who took moderate or conservative positions on issues were perceived to be more liberal than White candidates who took the same positions. Jones (2014) reports the results of an experiment where a candidate's race and policy congruency with the respondent were randomized and finds that non-White candidates are perceived to be more liberal and more Democratic, even compared to a White candidate who takes the same policy positions. Karl and Ryan (2016) confirm that Black candidates are perceived to be more liberal than White candidates when a candidate's partisanship is not specified, but find that these

differences are eliminated when a candidate has a partisan affiliation. From social psychology, Bai (2022) uses a series of survey experiments to show that White respondents are more likely to infer policy congruence with a White candidate, particularly if they express stronger attachment to their White identity.

Undergirding these analyses is the argument that (conservative) voters may vote against Black candidates not simply because of racial animus, but because they infer that Black candidates are more liberal and therefore not ideologically congruent. This effect may not be limited to non-Black voters. Griffin and Keane (2006), for example, find that Black moderates and conservatives were less likely than liberals to turn out for a Black candidate in the 1996 congressional elections because Black candidates were perceived to be more liberal than non-Black candidates.

In addition to ideology, candidate race may affect inferences about a candidate's priorities, both in terms of issues and constituents. Focusing on issues, McDermott (1998) analyzes polls from the Los Angeles Times and finds that among the pool of actual candidates, Black candidates are perceived to be more focused on social issues, such as ending discrimination. Karl and Ryan (2016) also show that Black candidates, regardless of partisanship and other issue positions, were perceived to be more likely to prioritize racialized issues (in their setting, "Aid to Inner City").[1]

Of particular interest to us are beliefs about the constituents a candidate is likely to favor or prioritize in office. Hajnal (2007) examines election outcomes in contests between Black and

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[1] An adjacent line of research extends perceptions of policy prioritization to inferences about a candidate's competence (e.g., Stout (2018) and Sigelman et al. (1995)).

White candidates and finds that Black incumbents do better than Black challengers. Hajnal argues that this is because White voters have initial concerns about whether Black candidates will favor the interests of Black constituents over White constituents, and these concerns are alleviated by observing that candidate's performance if they are elected to office. Baek and Landau (2011) use data from the National Annenberg Election Study to examine voting patterns in the 2008 US presidential election and show that White Democrats who were more concerned about racial favoritism were less likely to vote for Barack Obama.[2] Notably, prior work that considers group favoritism in this vein does not account for confounders between a candidate's race and perceived group favoritism.[3] Inferences about group favoritism may affect candidate preference and voting behavior either because voters want to be part of a prioritized group or because they make inferences about a candidate's likely policy focus based on the constituents they are likely to prioritize (Craig et al., 2022).

Unanswered Questions

While extant experimental research has improved our understanding of the role of candidate race on voter inferences, important questions remain unanswered. In particular, we highlight the importance of more fully exploring the effect of candidates' policy positions on the inferences voters form about them. Not only is this important for concerns about external validity – actual

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[2] "Racial favoritism" is measured as the average rating of four survey items that ask about the perceived likelihood that Black elected officials will favor Black over White interests.

[3] In work that compares across voters (rather than candidates), it is also difficult to isolate causal effects, because there is only one actual candidate and so one needs an explanation for why different voters perceive the candidate in a divergent fashion.

candidates always address policy – but the specific issue positions that a candidate adopts sends important signals to voters. For Black candidates in particular, their issue positions may serve to counteract differences in perceptions that voters might otherwise make on the basis of race. For example, Piston et al. (2018) find that voters are less likely to support Black candidates who remain ambiguous on environmental issues than those who do not. Such a pattern may arise if Black candidates are perceived to be more liberal in the absence of specific policy signals to the contrary, particularly on race-related policy issues. As we discuss below, a key component of our design is the randomization of both the policy position on a racialized issue (affirmative action) as well as whether the candidate addresses racial policy issues at all.

Notably, even prior experimental designs that include candidate issue positions are insufficient to fully understand the effects of issue positions and how those effects vary by candidate race. For example, Karl and Ryan (2016) randomize a candidate's race and party, but candidates do not take issue positions. Jones (2014), by contrast, randomizes policy congruence (with a respondent, based on pre-treatment policy questions), rather than issue positions themselves. Table 1 provides a summary of relevant prior survey experimental work.[4] Whereas this work has estimated the effects of select candidate features (treatments) of interest on their own, we make an important contribution by considering, in tandem, three candidate characteristics– candidate race, positions on non-racialized policy issues, and the presence and position on racialized policy issues– on the three outcomes of interest introduced above– candidate ideology, issues prioritization, and group favoritism. As noted in Table 1, no experimental design to date has

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[4] We review only experimental studies in Table 1 since our primary interest is in addressing common confounders that are correlated with both candidate race and vote choice.

considered group favoritism as a potential inferential consequence of candidate race. We build on these prior experimental designs by randomizing the policy positions partisan candidates take and whether the issues they address include a racial policy position. In a follow up study, we also randomize district partisanship and racial composition, which we detail in the following section.

[Table 1 here]

III. Research Design and Data Collection

Our study consists of two survey experiments which are designed to resolve theoretical and empirical ambiguities that persist in light of prior work. In both experiments, we fix candidate partisanship and manipulate non-policy attributes (e.g., their race/ethnicity), their issue positions on both an economic and social policy, and whether they reveal their position on affirmative action policy. We can therefore estimate how a candidate's race/ethnicity affects voters' perceptions of their ideology in the presence of other relevant information.

A key advantage of these factorial designs is that multidimensional treatments allow us to identify the marginal effects of multiple relevant factors, as well as their relative magnitudes (Hainmueller et al, 2017). Another important advantage of this design is that it better approximates the information environment present in real campaigns for salient offices, where individuals have multiple types of information about candidates. Importantly, we independently randomize whether a candidate takes a position on racialized policy - specifically, affirmative action – and the specific position taken when a race-relevant policy is presented.

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Table 1. Prior Experiments Studies that Randomized Candidate Race by Measured Outcomes

	Randomized Candidate Attributes			Outcome measures		
	Candidate race	Non-Racialized Policy Positions	Racialized Policy	Candidate partisanship or ideology	Issue positions or priority	Intergroup fairness or group interests
Studies randomizing only candidate race						
McDermott (1998)	X			X	X	
Karl and Ryan (2016)	X			X	X	
Karpowitz et al. (2021)	X			X		
Nelson et al. (2007)	X					
McConnaghy et al. (2010)	X					No prior work
Stout (2018)	X					
Tokeshi (2020)	X					
Studies that also randomized at least one policy position						
Terkildsen (1993)	X	X				
Piston et al. (2018)	X	X				
Weaver (2012)	X	X		X	X	
Sigelman et al. (1995)*	X		X	X	X	
Reeves (1997)	X	X	X			
Jones (2014)	X	X	X	X		

Notes: We include experiments from studies that focused on estimating the effect of a candidate's race on inferences voters make about the candidate. While many studies, particularly those that use conjoint-style designs, also randomize candidate race and issue positions, we exclude them from this table if the primary manipulation was not candidate attributes or policy position or if the outcomes were not relevant to our study. *Sigelman et al. (1995) did measure as an outcome whether respondents believed the candidate would "favor people like me", but this outcome was not included in the presented analysis.

Our outcome measures include 1) perceived ideology of the candidate; 2) beliefs about which issue they will prioritize (Study 1 only); 3) and beliefs about which groups they would favor if elected to office. Table 2 summarizes the randomized components of each experiment and the main outcomes of interest. We discuss both designs in greater detail below. Analysis presented was preregistered with AsPredicted and Open Science Framework (OSF).[5]

[Table 2 here]

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[5] Study 1 was pre-registered with AsPredicted: https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=w9bs89.

Study 2 was pre-registered with OSF:

https://osf.io/dujzb/?view_only=caf8bb25d77040c197c6ef1423b1aca3

Table 2. Summary of Experimental Designs

Survey	Randomized Components	Outcomes
Lucid 1	**Race**: Black, White **Sex**: female, male **Non-racialized Issue Position 1**: abortion, tax policy, health care, renewable energy **Non-racialized Issue Position 2**: abortion, tax policy, health care, renewable energy **Position on Affirmative Action**: not stated, expand, keep as is, replace	1) Ideological and policy liberalness 2) Issue prioritization 3) Group favoritism
Lucid 2	**Race/Ethnicity**: Black, White, Asian, Hispanic **Sex**: female, male **Non-racialized Issue Position 1**: abortion, tax policy, health care, renewable energy **Non-racialized Issue Position 2**: abortion, tax policy, health care, renewable energy **Position on Affirmative Action**: not stated, expand, keep as is, end **District Vote for Biden:** Range from 51% to 59% **District Racial Composition:** six different sets of proportions, three majority-minority and three majority-white	1) Ideological liberalness 2) Fairness to groups

Notes: See Appendix A for full wording of the randomized components.

Study 1: 2020 Lucid Experiment

Study 1 was fielded on Lucid Marketplace in early 2020. We recruited survey participants using quotas based on Census population proportions to ensure a demographically representative sample. Approximately 2,400 participants were recruited. A summary of respondent demographic characteristics is provided in the Appendix in Table A1.

In Study 1, we used a vignette survey design where we independently randomize a candidate's race, age, sex, and positions on two non-racialized policy issues. This between-subject design allows us to estimate the effect of candidate race on perceived ideology in the presence of policy positions and candidate party. The first two issue positions each candidate holds are drawn randomly from either a moderate or liberal position in one of four issue areas: abortion, taxes, healthcare, and the environment (See Appendix A for the specific wording for each potential issue position).[6] We refer to these policies as "non-racialized policies". The third policy, which we refer to as a "racialized policy", describes the candidate's position on affirmative action.[7] We randomly assigned the candidate to one of these four conditions, each with probability ¼:

1) No position on affirmative action (i.e., only the two non-racial issue positions are listed);

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[6] The randomization process is programmed to create a vector of the four policies in randomized order, draw one policy area, draw the position for that policy, and then repeat without policy area replacement for the second position.

[7] Here we use "non-racialized" and "racialized" for our policy issues to characterize the fact that affirmative action is a policy perceived to be specifically focused on racial identity. Preferences on other issues may of course be related to racial policy views.

2) A "liberal" position expressing support for expansion of affirmative action programs;

3) A "moderate" position expressing status quo support for existing affirmative action programs; or

4) A "conservative" position expressing support for replacing existing affirmative action programs with ones that use socioeconomic disadvantage as an instead of race/ethnicity or gender.

The inclusion or exclusion of a racialized policy will allow us to account for the fact that voters potentially make inferences about a candidate's ideology on the basis of a presumed position that is not explicitly stated, as well as the possibility that merely discussing racialized policy may affect inferences about a candidate's ideology. Piston et al. (2018), for example, find that Black candidates who adopt ambiguous issue positions are evaluated less favorably than White candidates who do so, perhaps because voters presume this ambiguity masks liberal positions.

A complete vignette therefore takes the following form:

> While it's too early to know for sure, many individuals are now working to raise money to compete in the Fall 2020 elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. In the next section, we will show you one profile that a candidate running for the U.S. House might have, and ask you some questions about this candidate.

> [Name Withheld] is a [age] year old [race] [sex] who has served as a Democrat in the state legislature for the past 8 years. This candidate has taken the following policy positions:

- [Policy 1]

- [Policy 2]

- [Policy 3]

Policies are presented in a random order, and there are only two policy positions for candidates who do not take a racial policy position. Each respondent sees one profile in the survey.

After respondents are presented with their candidate profile, they are asked questions concerning three main sets of outcomes: Ideology, Issue Prioritization, and Group Favoritism. For ideology, we first ask respondents to assess their candidate's overall political ideology, as well as the candidate's economic and social ideology, using a 7-point scale from "Extremely Liberal" (1) to "Extremely Conservative" (7). In addition to ideology, we also asked respondents to predict the position the candidate is likely to take on three other policies not specified in the vignette: TANF (welfare), minimum wage, and race reparations. Analyses for these outcomes are provided in the Appendix due to space constraints.

The second set of outcomes was about issue prioritization. For a set of seven issues (tax policy, job creation, healthcare, environmental policy, abortion, criminal justice reform, and social justice), respondents are asked whether the candidate would give each issue low priority, moderate priority, or high priority.[8]

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[8] In addition to these primary experimental elements, we also designed this survey to allow us to examine treatment effect heterogeneity among two theoretically relevant sub-groups: those who were classified as "racially resentful" and those who expressed "explicit" anti-Black prejudice. Prior work suggests that individuals who are racially resentful are more likely to oppose Black

Finally, to measure group favoritism, we asked respondents to rate the candidate's perceived fairness to different groups. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate "how fair they believe the candidate will be to each of the following groups of Americans:" and provide scores for Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Republicans, Democrats, Men, and Women. The groups were presented in a grid and responses were measured on a scale from "Very unfair" (1) to "Very fair" (7). For simplicity, we focus on *differences* in perceived fairness to White and Black constituents. Therefore, a positive value on the scale means the respondent believed the candidate would be fairer to White than Black constituents. A negative value means that the respondent believed the candidate would be fairer to Black than White constituents.

Study 2: 2022 Lucid Experiment

Study 2 is a replication and extension that addresses potential limitations of Study 1. In this confirmatory follow up study, we refined the design from Study 1 by increased the sample size to improve power for analysis. We also improve the vignette design to include Asian and Hispanic backgrounds as potential candidate races/ethnicities and asking respondents to evaluate

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candidates, even if those candidates do not discuss racialized issues (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994) or take ambiguous policy positions (Piston et al., 2018). However, recent work has also found that resentful individuals are more likely to support Black Republican candidates who take racially conservative positions (Karpowitz et al., 2021). We provide secondary analyses based on these subgroups in Appendix A and find little evidence of effects heterogeneity by these characteristics.

five candidates, thereby creating a within-subject design. Expanding a candidate's possible race or ethnicity beyond Black and White allows us to see whether resulting treatment effects are due to a candidate actually being Black or simply being non-White. We also randomized details about the partisan and racial composition of the district in which the candidate is running. Including district characteristics allows us to control for the possibility that respondents' beliefs are moved not just by candidate characteristics, but also by inferences about the district that produces such a candidate. In actual elections across districts, Black candidates are far more likely to run and win in majority minority district. In the experimental setting, in the absence of explicit exposition, survey respondents may form inferences about district characteristics on the basis of a candidate's race. Given that the outcome of interest is perceived group favoritism, respondents may believe a Black candidate is more likely to favor Black constituents, not because of shared identity, but because the candidate is from a district with a greater number of Black constituents; so, this rules out additional inferences beyond those randomized in the experiment. Finally, we revised the conservative position a candidate could take on affirmative action to be more overtly conservative in light of our analysis of Study 1. Here, we substitute ending affirmative action for replacing race with class-based affirmative action, which the former of which is arguably a more realistic conservative position. Full details on wording and randomization are provided in Appendix A. A complete vignette takes the following form:

Candidate #X

[NAME WITHHELD] is a [Age] year old Democratic [Race] [Sex] who [Experience]. This candidate is running in a district with the following characteristics:

- It is [W]% White, [B]% Black, [H]% Hispanic, [A]% Asian, and [O]% Other.

- In the 2020 presidential election, Democrat Joe Biden received [Vote Share]% of the district's votes.

Additionally, this candidate has taken the following policy positions:

- [Policy A]

- [Policy B]

- [Policy C]

Unlike Study 1, in which respondents only saw one profile, Study 2 respondents see five profiles (with #X taking values 1 through 5 for the relevant profile), with each trait randomized with replacement.[9] Respondents were again recruited from Lucid Marketplace using quotas based on Census population statistics. To address concerns about survey attentiveness and response quality (Peyton et al. 2021; Ternovski and Orr, 2022), we included an attention check item at the beginning of the survey. Respondents who failed this attention check were excluded from the analysis based on a pre-registered exclusion rule. In all, we recruited 1,447 participants for the final sample, equating to an analytic sample size of 7,235 (1447 x 5).

We focus on two outcomes in Study 2. First, as in Study 1, we measured the perceived ideology of each candidate where respondents are asked to place the candidate on a 7-point scale from "Extremely Liberal" (1) to "Extremely Conservative" (7). We asked only overall ideology (rather than economic and social liberalness) in Study 2 to reduce respondent burden given that

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[9] The race of the candidates was assigned with restricted randomization, such that at least one candidate was always Hispanic, Asian, White, and Black, and the remaining candidate was either Black or White. The order in which these candidates were presented was fully randomized.

they rated five profiles and given that the correlation between the three measures in Study 1 is relatively high.

Second, we asked respondents the extent to which they believe the candidate will favor the interests of different constituent groups. Compared to Study 1, we amended the wording of this item to replace the language of fairness, which might be interpreted in different ways for different groups, with the language describing candidate prioritization of each group. Specifically, respondents were asked: "If elected, how much do you think this candidate will prioritize the interests of the following groups in their district: Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Republicans, Democrats, Men, and Women". The groups were presented randomly in a grid and responses were measured on a 5-point scale from "None at all" to "A great deal".

For our main analysis, we again take the difference between the rating respondents give to the perceived prioritization of Black respondents minus the prioritization of White respondents. Therefore, a positive value on the scale means the respondent believed the candidate would prioritize White over Black constituents, negative value means that the respondent believed the candidate would prioritize Black over White constituents, and so on.[10]

IV. Results

Study 1

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[10] We consider alternative codings of group favoritism in robustness specifications provided in the Appendix in Figure S2.

Analyses of the main effects from Study 1 are presented in Figure 1. We focus on three main outcomes: perceived candidate ideology, perception that the candidate prioritizes social justice issues, and the perception that the candidate will favor Black constituents over White constituents. To generate these estimates, we regress each outcome measure on the complete vector of randomly assigned candidate characteristics using OLS with robust standard errors. These results are provided in Figure 1 (we omit estimates for the effects of age – a randomly assigned integer between 40 and 60 – from this figure. Table S1a shows all point estimates and standard errors).[11]

[Figure 1 here]

Panel (a) shows that Black candidates are perceived to be more ideologically liberal than otherwise similar White candidates. This marginal effect of 0.031 ($p < 0.01$) is comparable to the effect of taking certain policy positions. For example, the effects of taking either a moderate (0.036, $p<0.05$) or liberal position (0.041, $p<0.05$) on health care (relative to a moderate position on renewable energy) are slightly larger than the effect of a candidate being Black.

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[11] With restricted randomization of candidate race, respondents have a 3/10 probability of seeing a Black or White candidate and a 1/5 probability of seeing a Hispanic or Asian candidate. Model specifications in which we reweight based on these probabilities do not change regression estimates but can be made available upon request. Additionally, Table S1b presents results for a pre-registered specification where the policy positions are coded in terms of pairs (either Liberal/Liberal, Liberal/Moderate, or Moderate/Moderate).

Figure 1. Study 1 Estimates of Main Effects of Candidate Attributes
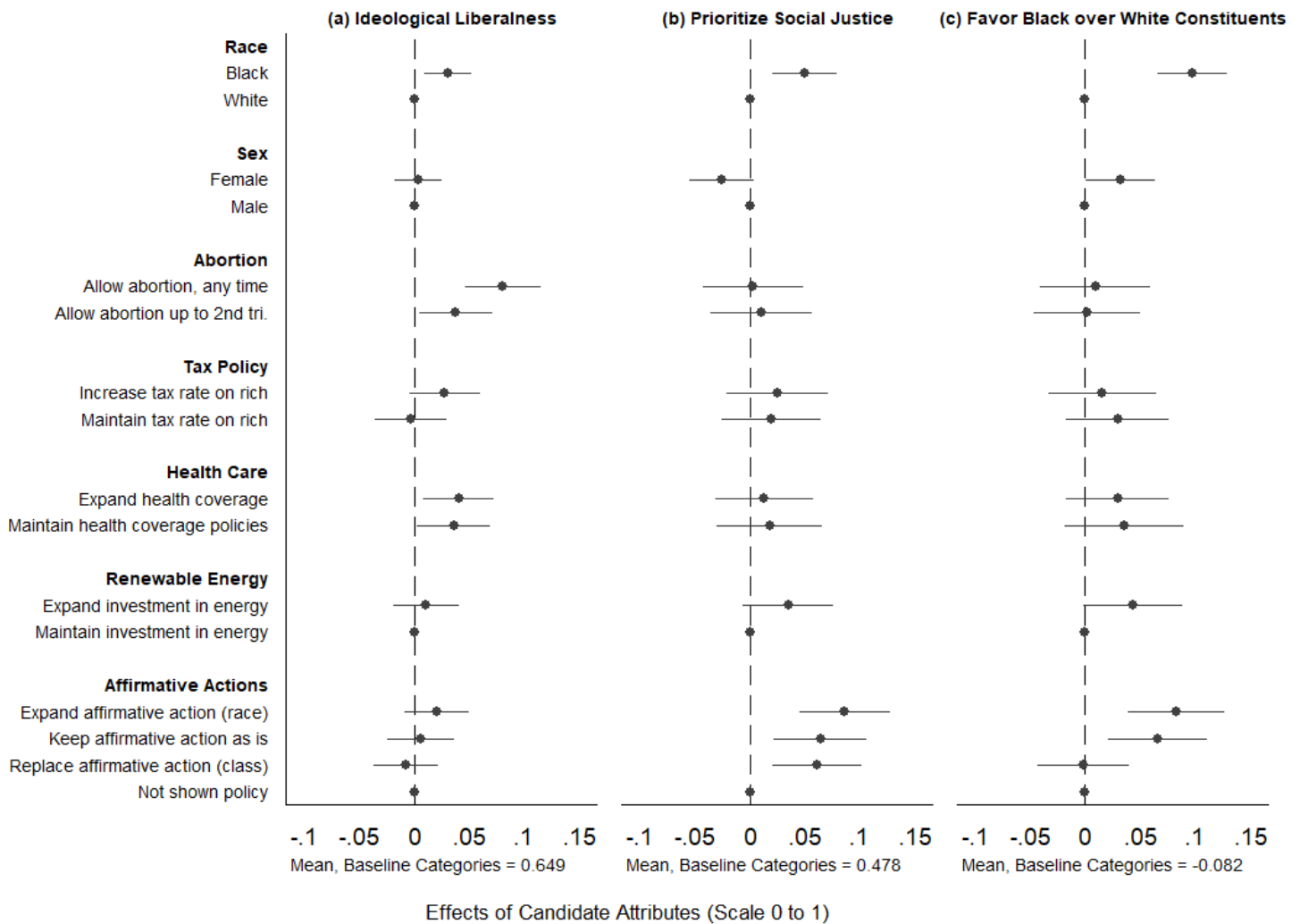
Notes: Data are from Study 1 conducted on Lucid in 2020 (N = 2,467 profiles and respondents). All profiles are for Democratic candidates. Points in each panel are coefficients from single regression, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for candidate age, political experience, and occupation not plotted; See Table S1 for complete regression results.

This means that while one's racial background may indeed signal ideological liberalness, one can also affect inferred liberalness by articulating policy positions. Notably, we see that these affirmative action positions do not on average appear to serve as an important ideological cue – candidates are perceived to be no more or less liberal when they take a position on affirmative action relative to when they do not take any position.[12]

In Panel (b), however, we see that candidates who discuss affirmative action are also perceived to be more likely to prioritize social justice issues, regardless of which position on affirmative action they take.[13] This is perhaps not surprising, because affirmative action falls within the realm of social justice issues and the "conservative" affirmative action position used here includes language about replacing race-based with class-based affirmative action. Additionally, Black candidates are perceived to be more likely to prioritize social justice issues relative to a White candidate (0.05, $p < 0.01$), an effect that is matched in size only by taking an affirmative action position or supporting expanded investment in renewable energy.

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[12] We note that this analysis assumes homogenous effects by candidate race. We relax this assumption in subsequent analysis below.

[13] We present prioritization of social justice issues in the main specification, since it is the issue position that is most closely related to race. We provide results for additional issue areas in Table S3 in the Appendix (which include tax policy, job creation, healthcare, environmental policy, abortion, and criminal justice reform).

Finally, in Panel (c), we present results for group favoritism. Note that the mean outcome for the baseline categories is -0.08, meaning that on average candidates are believed to favor White over Black constituents. Black candidates, who do not take an affirmative action position, are perceived to be significantly more likely to favor Black constituents over White constituents (0.097, $p<0.01$). This is the largest estimated effect for this outcome. At the same time, the effect of a candidate taking a liberal position on affirmative action (0.082, $p<0.01$) is comparable to and not significantly different from that of the candidate being Black. This suggests that, while Black candidates are perceived to favor Black interests over White interests even after accounting for policy positions, White candidates who explicitly take positions that signal prioritization of Black constituents (that is, expanding race based affirmative action) will be similarly perceived to favor Black over White interests. In the following analysis, we show that this signaling effect, though larger for Black candidates, is present for both Black and White candidates.

[Figure 2 here]

We noted above that a key question is not just whether Black candidates are perceived differently than White candidates on average, but also whether Black candidates can attenuate differences in these perceptions depending on the issue positions they take, particularly on race-related issues. In Figure 2, we therefore present similar regression analyses from above but focus specifically on the effect of the interaction between candidate race and position on affirmative action.[14] That is, we estimate regression models predicting each outcome after including the

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[14] Complete estimates for the interacted model presented in Figure 3 are provided in Table S2.

Figure 2. Study 1 Estimates of Interacted Effects of Candidate Attributes
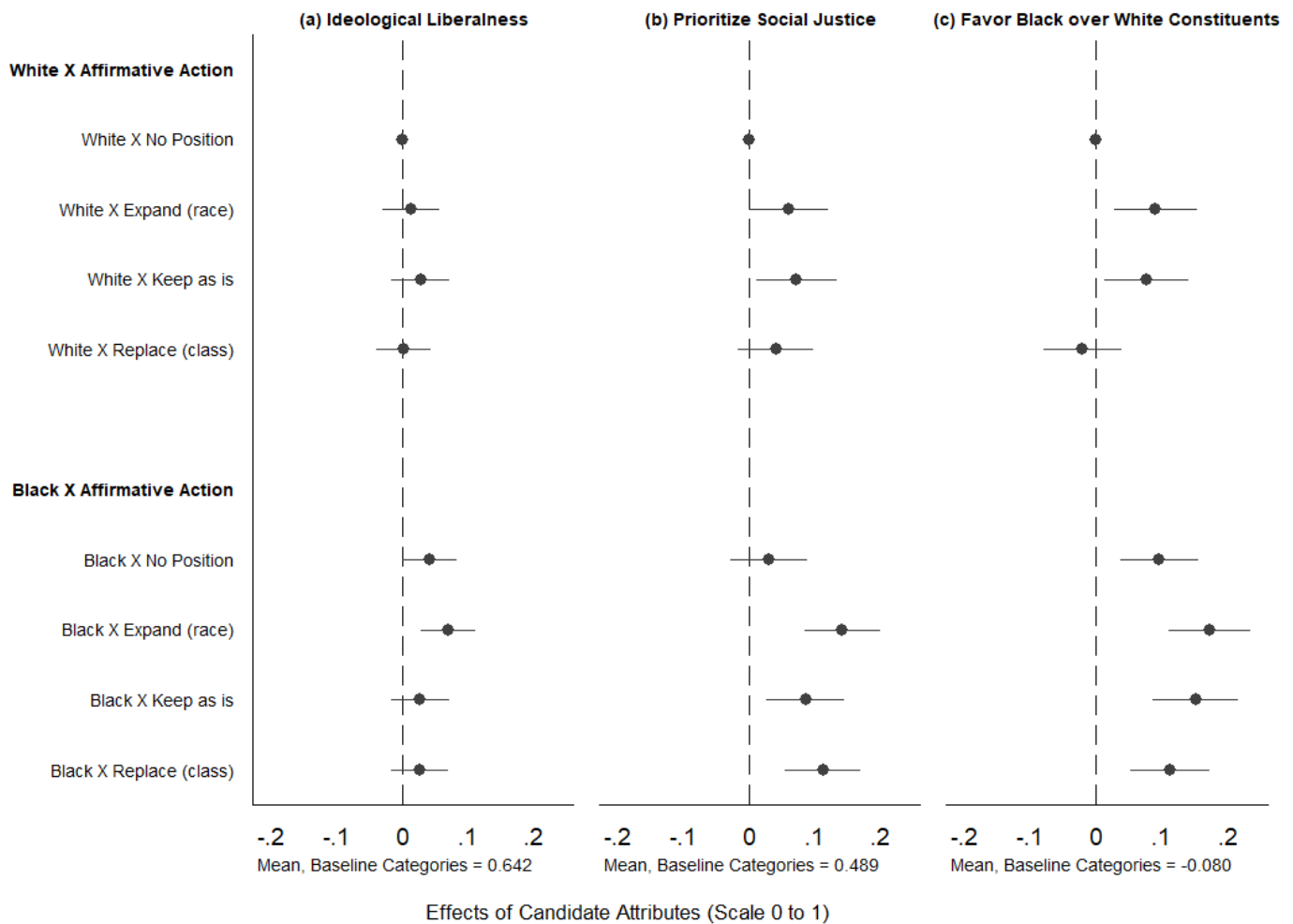
Notes: Data are from Study 1 conducted on Lucid in 2020 (N = 2,467 profiles and respondents). All profiles are for Democratic candidates. Points in each panel are coefficients from single regression, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for candidate age, political experience, and occupation not plotted; See Table S2 for complete regression results.

interaction between candidate race and each potential affirmative action position. Doing so allows us to identify the effect of a Black candidate taking a given position on a racialized policy issue on our main outcomes, relative to a White candidate who does not articulate any position on the issue. Doing so allows the effect of affirmative action positions to vary by candidate race. For example, in Panel (a), if the estimate for the "Black X No Position" interaction is 0.96 units ($p<0.01$), and means that Black candidates who do not take positions on racialized policies are inferred to be more liberal than White candidates who similarly do not takes positions, even after signaling their position on non-racialized issues. For reference, we provide the estimated differences between the conditions of particular interest in Table 3.

[Table 3 here]

Panel (a) of Figure 2 shows that Black candidates who do not take a position on affirmative action are perceived to be 0.042 units ($p < 0.05$) more liberal than White candidates who similarly do not take a position. This specification already accounts for non-racialized policy positions, so this result indicates that Black candidates who do not articulate a position on a racialized policy are presumed to be more liberal regardless of their position on non-racialized policies. However, when a Black candidate takes a moderate or conservative position on affirmative action, they are perceived to be no more liberal than a White candidate who takes no position. These estimates are 0.0269 and 0.0263, respectively, which are statistically insignificant and modest in size (approximately 60% of the effect of the candidate being Black in the absence of a racial policy position, although we note that the estimates are indistinguishable from the effect of candidate race in the absence of a racial policy positions). A Black candidate

Table 3. Study 1 Comparison of Key Marginal Effects from Interacted Model

	Liberalness	Prioritizes Social Justice	Black - White Favoritism
Differences Between Treatment Conditions			
Black, No Position - White, No Position	0.042	0.030	0.096
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Black, Replace - White, No Position	0.026	0.112	0.114
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Black, Replace - White, Replace	0.024	0.072	0.134
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Black, Expand - White, Expand	0.056	0.082	0.080
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Estimates are from a regression model where we interact candidate race and position on affirmative action (see Table S2 in the Appendix for complete model results).

who explicitly takes a liberal position on affirmative action is still perceived to be more liberal than a White candidate who takes the same position (0.056, $p < 0.05$), and this effect is larger than the effect of being Black in the absence of a racial policy position (difference = 0.056 – 0.042 = 0.014, not significant). These results suggest that the ideological stereotypes faced by Black candidates can be somewhat attenuated when they explicitly take non-liberal positions on issues they are ex ante expected to be liberal on.[15] Our design is underpowered, however, to

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[15] In Appendix Figure S1, we provide additional measures related to perceived ideology, two that capture perceived ideology on economic and social issues, and three that capture perceptions of their positions on specific policies. Broadly, we see that respondents do not discern between a candidate's ideological position on economic or social issue. For both dimensions, liberalness is

precisely estimate the magnitude of this reduction, and the conservative affirmative action position may not be conservative enough.

Returning to Figure 2, Panel (b) plots the effect of interacting candidate race and their position on affirmative action on perceived prioritization of social justice issues. In contrast to the ideology result, here we find that a Black candidate who does not articulate a position on affirmative action is perceived to prioritize social justice issues no more nor less than a similar White candidate. However, candidates of either race who take any of these position on affirmative action are perceived to be more likely to prioritize social justice issues. That is, addressing affirmative action with any of these positions we presented is perceived to signal policy commitment.

For example, the estimate for Black candidates who say they would keep affirmative action policy the same is 0.085 (p < 0.01). Notably, White candidates who articulate a position on affirmative action are also perceived to prioritize social justice issues, though to a lesser extent than Black candidates on the same position. For example, the difference between a Black candidate (0.141, p < 0.01) and a White candidate (0.059, p < 0.10) who propose to expand

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significantly different from a White candidate with no position for a Black candidate who articulates a liberal position on affirmative action. Among the specific policies, we see that a Black candidate who takes a racial policy position is not perceived to be significantly more liberal than a Black candidate who does not take a position on affirmative action.

affirmative action programs is about 0.08 and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).[16] The only

comparisons where perceived prioritization does not differ between Black and White candidates

are when no position is articulated or when moderate position is articulated.[17]

Finally, in Panel (c) of Figure 2, we look at the interacted results for group favoritism. Prior work

has suggested that Black candidates are penalized electorally because non-Black voters presume

that the candidates will not focus on their issue concerns, instead focusing on the concerns of

their co-racial constituents (Hajnal, 2007). Here we see that Black candidates who do not take an

explicitly racial policy position are perceived to be substantially more likely to favor the interests

of Black than White Americans compared to a White candidate who does not address race. This

effect is 0.096 units ($p < 0.05$). White candidates who propose to maintain or expand affirmative

action are also perceived to be more likely to favor Black over White constituents by about the

same degree ($b = 0.091$, $p < 0.01$ for expand) as a Black candidate who doesn't address

affirmative action at all. Importantly, for a Black candidate, this effect is present even if they

take a conservative position by proposing to replace race-based with class-based affirmative

action ($b = 0.114$, $p<0.05$). Black candidates who take a liberal or even status-quo focused

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[16] We test the difference between these two interactions using the lincom program in Stata.

Additional comparisons show that the difference between a Black candidate who takes a more

conservative position on affirmative action and a similar White candidate is 0.072 ($p < 0.05$).

[17] In addition to social justice, we provide results for analysis of issue prioritization on the other

policy dimensions in Appendix Table S3. By and large, Black candidates are perceived to

prioritize most of the given issues to the same extent as White candidates, regardless of whether

they also take a position on affirmative action. The notable exception is criminal justice reform.

position on affirmative action are perceived to be even less fair to Whites (b = 0.172, p < 0.01 if taking a liberal position and b = 0.152, p < 0.01 if proposing to maintain the status quo).

Cumulatively, these results are particularly important, because no prior work has experimentally tested whether Black candidates are perceived to favor Black over White interests, nor considered the possibility that adopting racially conservative positions could counteract this inference. We find that regardless of whether and which racial policy position Black candidates adopt, they are perceived to favor Black over White interests. Finally, we note that the difference between a Black candidate who does not take a position on affirmative action and a Black candidate who takes a conservative position is not significant. This suggests that, unlike perceived ideology, Black candidates cannot overcome voters' biased perceptions of group favoritism by taking more conservative policy positions than otherwise equivalent White candidates.

Study 2

We focus on perceived ideology and group favoritism in Study 2, which allows us to account for additional sources of variation that might undercut the inferences we draw from Study 1, and which also includes a revised (and more explicitly conservative) racial policy position. Figure 3 presents regression results for our two main outcomes from specifications where we regress the outcomes on each randomized experimental manipulation and an indicator for the order in which a vignette was seen (i.e., first through fifth). Table 4 presents regression-adjusted means for each outcome corresponding to each treatment condition for reference. Once again, some randomized covariates are excluded for visual convenience (see Table S4 for complete regression results).

Additionally, we cluster the standard errors at the respondent-level because respondents evaluated five different candidate profiles in Study 2.

[Figure 3 here]

[Table 4 here]

We find some notable differences from Study 1 in Panel (a). First, while the estimate for a candidate being Black is positive, it is no longer significant relative to a White candidate in a within-person design with additional information (district racial composition and partisanship). Second, we see that affirmative action positions matter. Relative to a candidate who does not state a position on affirmative action, candidates who take moderate or liberal positions are viewed as more liberal, whereas candidates who take a clearly conservative position are viewed as less liberal. As we note above, the conservative position for affirmative action in Study 2 is more clearly conservative than in Study 1, because it involves abandoning affirmative action altogether.

Moving to Panel (b), however, we do not see the same pattern for perceived group favoritism. In particular, we find that the effect of a Black candidate on group favoritism is positive and significant (0.198, p<0.01). Given that the baseline favoritism score is -0.082, which means the baseline candidate is perceived to favor White over Black constituents, a Black candidate is perceived to favor Black over White candidates by an average score of .12 (0.198-0.082). We also estimate positive effects for Asian and Hispanic candidates, who are perceived to be more

Figure 3. Study 2 Estimates of Main Effects of Candidate Race on Inferred Ideology and Group Favoritism
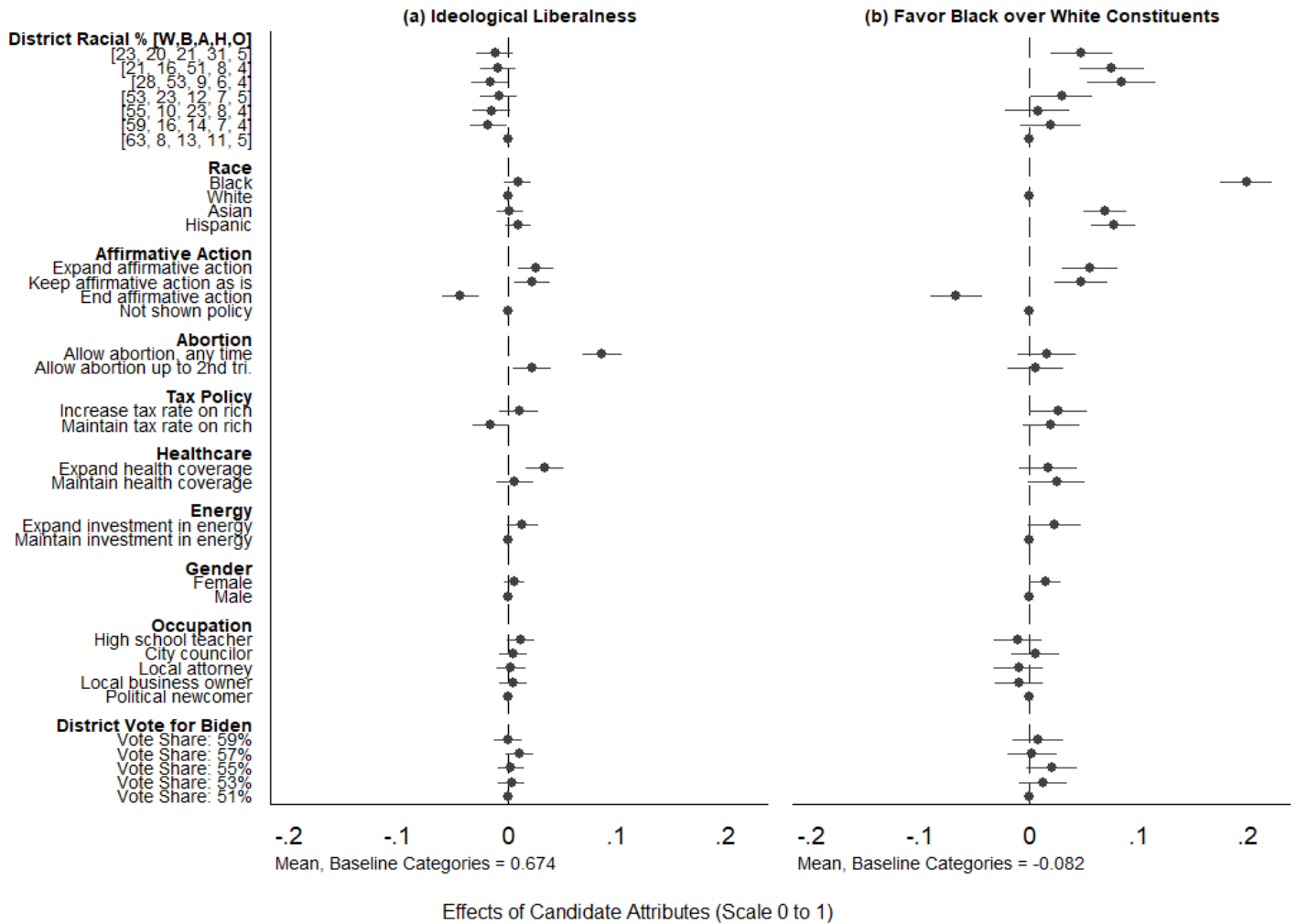
Notes: Data are from Study 2 conducted on Lucid in 2022 (N = 7,235 profiles across 1,447 respondents). All profiles are for Democratic candidates. Points in each panel are coefficients from single regression, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for all other candidate characteristics not plotted; See Table S4 for complete regression results.

Table 4. Study 2 Regression Adjusted Means

	Liberalness	Black - White Favoritism
Candidate Race and Affirmative Action Position		
Black and No Position	0.680	0.118
	(0.03)	(0.04)
White and No Position	0.686	-0.068
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Black and Expand	0.716	0.178
	(0.03)	(0.05)
White and Expand	0.700	-0.022
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Black and Keep	0.700	0.158
	(0.03)	(0.05)
White and Keep	0.696	-0.028
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Black and End	0.646	0.050
	(0.03)	(0.04)
White and End	0.624	-0.172
	(0.03)	(0.04)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Values reflect estimates from Figure 3, where we add the constant to the point estimates of the relevant randomized conditions.

likely to prioritize Black over White interests relative to a White candidate (0.068, p<0.01, and 0.076, p<0.01, respectively), though not to the extent of Black candidates.

We see that the position a candidate takes on affirmative action is likely to signal constituent priority. Candidates who take liberal or moderate positions on affirmative action are significantly more likely to be perceived as prioritizing Black interests relative to a candidate who does not take a position, whereas a candidate who takes a conservative position (-0.07, p<0.01) can entirely offset the effect of being Asian or Hispanic (which is about half the effect of being Black).

Are the effects of racial policy positions that we find in Figure 3 different by candidate race? As with Study 1, we interact candidate race and affirmative action position and present our analysis graphically in Figure 4 (full results presented in Table S5). We focus on four specific comparisons of interest, which are additionally outlined in Table 5. First, as shown in Panel (a) and consistent with Figure 3 results, we see that a Black candidate who does not take an affirmative action position is perceived to be no more liberal than a White who also does not take a position. However, the difference in perceived favoritism towards Black constituents is large and significant (difference = 0.186, p <0.05). Second, while respondents perceived a Black candidate who takes a conservative position on affirmative action (to end it) to be less liberal than a White candidate who takes no position (diff. = -0.05, p<0.05), the difference in perceived group favoritism persists – a Black candidate conservative on affirmative action is still believed to prioritize Black over White interests (diff. = 0.118, p<0.05). Third, we find that when Black and White candidates both articulate conservative positions on affirmative action, both are perceived as more conservative than if they did not take a position, but the Black candidate is perceived as modestly more liberal (diff = 0.02, p<0.05). However, Black candidates who are liberal on affirmative action are perceived to be no more liberal than similarly liberal White candidates (diff. = 0.018, SE = 0.01, p = 0.19). Finally, in either case (when taking conservative or liberal positions), a Black candidate is always perceived to prioritize Black constituents over White ones, regardless of what position they take on affirmative action (diff = 0.22, p<0.05, diff = 0.20, p<0.05, respectively).

[Figure 4 here]

[Table 5 here]

Figure 4. Experiment 2 Estimates of Interacted Effects of Candidate Race on Inferred Ideology and Group Favoritism
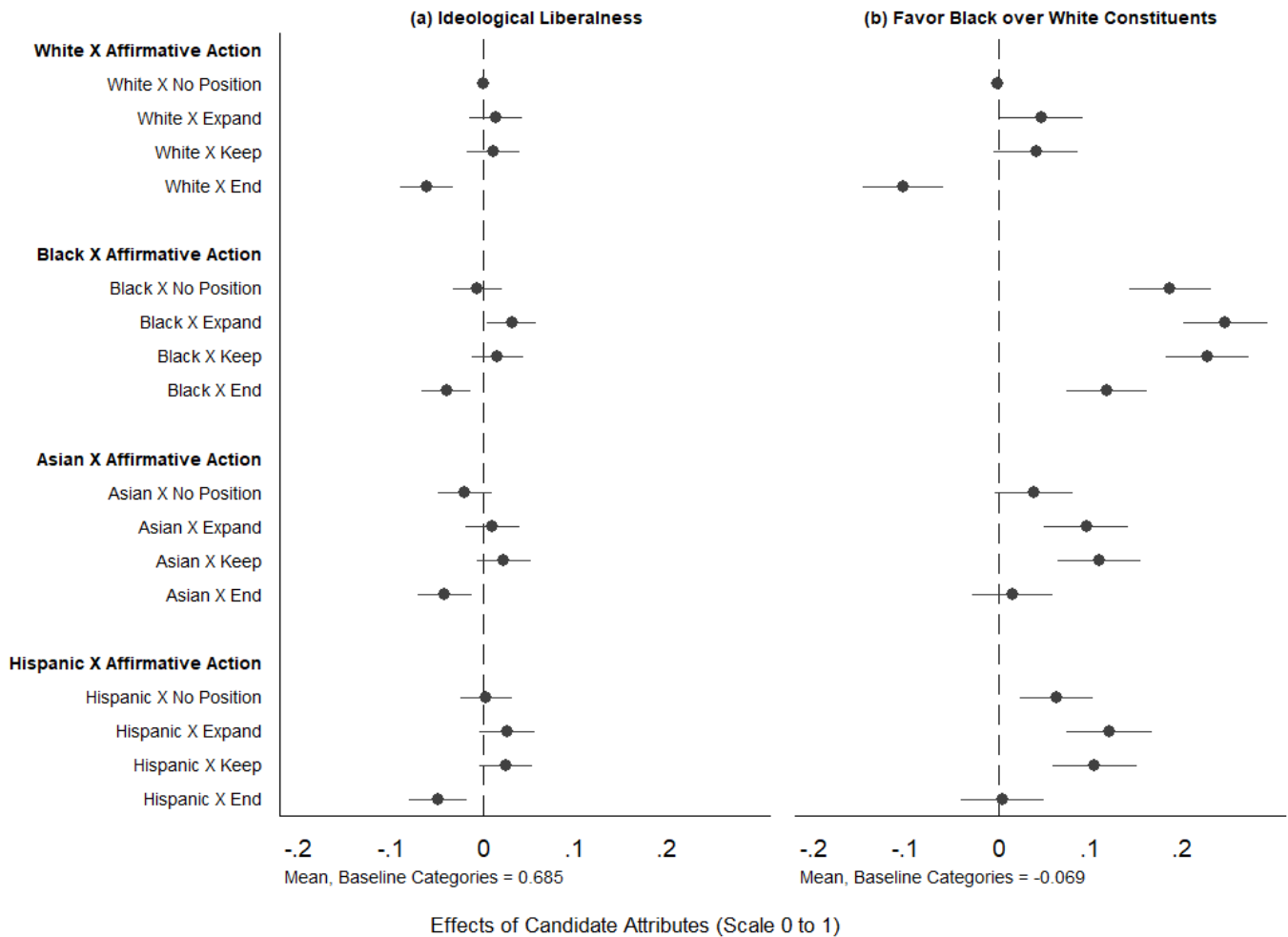
Notes: Data are from Study 2 conducted on Lucid in 2022 (N = 7,235 profiles across 1,447 respondents). All profiles are for Democratic candidates. Points in each panel are coefficients from single regression, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates for all other candidate characteristics not plotted; See Table A4 for complete regression results.

Table 5. Study 2 Comparisons between Treatment Conditions of Interest

	Liberalness	Black - White Favoritism
Differences Between Treatment Conditions		
Black, No Position - White, No Position	-0.006	0.186
	(0.01)	(0.02)
Black, Conservative - White, No Position	-0.040	0.118
	(0.01)	(0.02)
Black, Conservative - White, Conservative	0.022	0.220
	(0.01)	(0.02)
Black, Liberal - White, Liberal	0.018	0.200
	(0.01)	(0.02)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Values reflect differences between treatment characteristics as shown in Figure 4.

More broadly, Figure 4 suggests that candidates are generally perceived to be less liberal when they take conservative positions on affirmative action, regardless of racial background. While affirmative action signals ideology, as suggested by the main effects in Figure 3, Panel (a) in Figure 4 suggests that those ideological cues are not vastly different across candidates of different racial backgrounds. Differences in perceptions based on a candidate's racial identity about their inferred ideology can be attenuated by policy positioning. However, as described above, the same cannot be said of differences in perceived group favoritism.

In sum, analysis from Study 2 affirms the importance of group prioritization in inferences made about candidates. Whereas much of the research in this vein has focused on studying the inferred policy priorities and ideology of a candidate as potential mechanisms for voter preference

towards that candidate, this study shows that beliefs about group representation may also be an important mechanism linking candidate race to election outcomes.[18]

V. Discussion

This paper provides two core contributions. First, we expand on prior work to understand whether and when candidate race affects inferences about candidate ideology. Second, we examine a much wider range of potential mechanisms, beyond perceptions of candidate ideology, that could link the effect of candidate race to changes in electoral performance. In particular, we examine inferences about hypothetical Democratic candidates' other issue positions, the constituent groups they will focus on, and the issues they will prioritize in office.

In two studies, we find that Black candidates are perceived to be more ideologically liberal than White candidates, despite expressing identical non-race policy positions and having a partisan affiliation. This may be in part due to the presumption that Black candidates are perceived to be more liberal on racialized policy issues. Thus, it is important that we find that these ideological stereotypes are attenuated when Black candidates take moderate or conservative positions on racialized policy issues.

However, this attenuation does not extend to differences in perceived group favoritism. Notably, for group favoritism, which has not received attention in extant experimental work, Black

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[18] As shown in Appendix Figure S2, these findings for group favoritism are robust to alternative coding schemes, such as a binary coding of whether the candidate prioritizes Black over White constituents and a disaggregated coding where we take the rating given to Black constituents and White constituents separately (rather than the difference).

Democratic candidates are perceived to be more likely to prioritize Black constituents compared to similar White candidates. This holds even when a Black Democratic candidate signals their (conservative) position on a racialized issue, suggesting that presumed group favoritism cannot be attenuated by addressing racial policy directly or taking less liberal positions, as is the case for perceived ideology. This is true even in Study 2 when a Black candidate proposes ending race-based affirmative action. Importantly, White Democratic candidates who take liberal or moderate positions on racialized issues are also perceived to favor Black constituents over Whites.

Finally, on issue prioritization, we do not observe significant differences between Black and White Democratic candidates in the policies they are inferred to prioritize. Candidates, regardless of race, who take an affirmative action position are perceived to be more likely to prioritize social justice issues.

In summary, while Black candidates are sometimes perceived to be more liberal than White candidates, this difference can be attenuated by signaling (more conservative) issue positions. But perceived group favoritism, rather than generic ideology or issue prioritization, is an important mechanism that likely explains some of the electoral performance of Black Democratic candidates and has been largely neglected in prior experimental work. In the presence of identical policy positions and party labels, and even when expressing racially conservative positions on affirmative action, people infer that Black Democratic candidates will favor Black constituents more than White constituents. People believe that Black candidates will prioritize social justice issues, but they do not seem to be making additional inferences on issue focus based on race.

Notions of group favoritism are thought to be important for understanding the roles of racial resentment and prejudice in candidate evaluation, tapping into beliefs that one's group is losing out relative to another. In so far as some theories of descriptive representation rest on the assumption that co-racial candidates will better represent group interests, it is perhaps not surprising that non-co-racial voters perceive this focus in zero-sum terms. An important question is therefore whether candidates can adopt other rhetorical strategies to avoid the potential electoral consequences of being perceived to favor a group different from that to which a (non-Black) voter belongs. Of course, voters may differ substantially in how concerned they are about issues of group favoritism, an issue distrinct from whether there are differences in such inferences in the first place.

We note that, as with all studies, our research design has a number of limitations. For one, our analysis does not examine how candidate race affects the likelihood of voting for an actual candidate in an electoral setting. We do include a measure of likelihood of voting for a candidate in Study 2. Appendix Table S6 and Figure S3 presents the pooled and interacted specifications for this outcome and shows that, by and large, candidate race and policy position do not significantly affect a respondent's likelihood of voting for a candidate. However, the study is not well-designed to study the voting behavior of respondents for whom these types of inferences would be influential. Instead, we examine perceptions of candidates that are likely causal pathways between candidate race and electoral outcomes. Given our interest in theory testing, we believe these perceptions are of immediate interest. The electoral consequences of these perceptions are ambiguous. For those White voters who prioritize aiding the Black community, for example, Black candidates being perceived as focusing on the interests of Black citizens may be a boon, while for other citizens this perception may decrease their support for Black

candidates. Notably, we show that race is a bundled treatment that affects multiple inferences, but the large effect we find on group favoritism has been largely overlooked in recent experimental work. Second, while we improve on the external validity of prior designs by including candidate partisanship and more specific and varied policy positions in a candidate profile, there are facets of a candidate's electoral campaign that cannot be replicated in a survey experiment. Ultimately, we view these limitations as areas for subsequent research.

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