Abstract: While the last decade has witnessed positive trends in the number of under-represented candidates running for (and often winning) electoral office, such candidates still face obstacles resulting from biases among the electorate. Scholars face hurdles in assessing how bias operates in real elections given pressures of social desirability among the public. Especially problematic for identifying bias is the possibility that citizens who are unwilling to express bias might employ alternative justifications or excuses for opposing a candidate. In this paper, we use experiments to examine how voters use non-biased justifications to cover for racial or religious bias in presidential elections. In particular, we examine the use of the “flip-flop” charge against Romney as a cover for anti-Mormon bias in the 2007 Republican primary as well as the use of the charge that Obama has “no substance” to cover for racial and religious bias in the 2008 general election.

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The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections were noteworthy for featuring candidates from race, religious, and gender backgrounds that have not historically been represented in presidential campaigns. Barack Obama became the first African-American president in 2009 and won reelection in 2012. In 2008 Mitt Romney became the first Mormon presidential candidate to win a presidential primary, and he became the first Mormon presidential nominee for any party when he won the 2012 Republican nomination for president. Hillary Clinton came close to winning the nomination in 2008, and Bill Richardson became the first serious Latino candidate with his campaign for president in 2008.

The presence of such diverse candidates suggests that the country has become more tolerant of groups that have traditionally been left out of presidential contests. This point is a general one, which is supported by public opinion data. Figure 1 shows a steady decline in the proportion of those who say that they would not support a qualified woman, African-American, Atheist, or

\[1\] George Romney, Mitt Romney’s father, was a serious contender in 1967 for the 1968 GOP nomination. But due to a few misstatements, his campaign floundered. He officially withdrew prior to the New Hampshire primary. Senator Orrin Hatch, also a Mormon, launched a presidential bid in 2000, but he also dropped out prior to the New Hampshire primary when he finished last in the Republican Iowa caucuses with only 1% of the vote.

\[2\] We note that “Mormon” is an unofficial nickname given to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Members of the religion prefer to be called by their official title or a shortened version of the official title, “Latter-Day Saints (LDS).” However, few voters recognize the meaning of “LDS” or realize that “LDS” and “Mormon” refer to members of the same organization. Because of the ubiquitous use of the title, “Mormon” by both members and non-members of the religion, we use it in both the survey and throughout the paper.
Catholic for the office of President of the United States. However, there are some notable exceptions to this increase in tolerance. The public’s reluctance, for example, to support a qualified Mormon has not changed much over the last 50 years—even with Romney’s candidacy (Benson et al 2011). Muslims too do not fare well in these kinds of data, nor do Atheists. While bias against atheists has declined, nearly half of Americans would not vote for a candidate who does not believe in God.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Given that the public feels pressure to give socially desirable responses, even the positive trends we tout above may be misleading. Perhaps some bias has gone underground, making it harder for researchers to detect. This concern has led scholars to employ list experiments and implicit attitudes tests to detect negative racial and ethnic attitudes (e.g. Kuklinski, Cobb and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Perez 2010; Sniderman and Carmines 1997). Scholars have employed list experiments to look at opposition to candidates based on gender and religion. For example, compared with survey data, studies using list experiments find a much higher proportion of respondents who are not willing to support a hypothetical female candidate (Streb et al 2008), Jewish candidate (Kane et al 2004), and a Mormon candidate (Benson et al 2011). Additionally, some scholars have found evidence of the influence of implicit racial attitudes on candidate evaluations (e.g., Greenwald et al 2009; Kam 2007; Payne et al 2010; Pasek et al 2009) and the priming of racial attitudes by way of implicit references to race (e.g., Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; White 2007).

Even though voters may suppress their expression of bias because of social desirability pressures and hold implicitly negative attitudes towards other groups, scholars face hurdles assessing how to determine whether such bias operates in real elections to motivate opposition to certain candidates. Especially problematic for identifying bias is the possibility that citizens who are
unwilling to express bias might employ alternative justifications or excuses for opposing a candidate. For example, voters might, consciously or unconsciously, invoke “concern” about other issues or candidate characteristics as a way to cover their religious or racial bias. It may be especially attractive for these voters to appeal to mainstream issues as the reasoning for their opposition. Justifying unfavorable opinions by agreeing with concerns that already have currency in the electorate make it especially difficult for scholars to identify true motives.

Consider that a frequent criticism of Romney throughout the 2008 and 2012 Republican primaries was that he was a flip-flopper, inauthentic, and not a “true” conservative. While such charges are undoubtedly sincere coming from many, others, who actually agreed with his policy positions but hold bias against his religion, either consciously or unconsciously, may have used that argument as a justification for their opposition to Romney. Indeed, that an issue, such as flip-flopping in Romney’s case, was a genuine concern for many might make it all the more salient as an attractive cover for those who wish to mobilize opposition to a candidate they oppose for reasons of religious bias that they may have been unwilling to express explicitly, as well as those who are not even cognizant of their bias.

Another example of an issue that might have been used to cover for biased opposition was the criticism that Barack Obama was too inexperienced to be president. While many may have had sincere reservations about Obama’s record of experience prior to the 2008 election, expressing opposition for his candidacy based on his lack of experience could be disingenuous if the real source of opposition is his race and if social desirability inhibits the open expression of that bias.

We contend, in short, that individuals can avoid expressing explicit bias, while still conveying opposition to a candidate, by adopting non-biased justifications to explain their opposition. This kind of approach to covering up bias has appeal, since it makes the opinion appear principled, not prejudiced. Sorting these matters out empirically is complicated by the difficulties of disentangling
genuine versus biased motives for opposing a candidate. With this specific concern in mind, we have designed two experimental approaches to show evidence of the use of cover issues. First, we design a series of list experiments to see if individuals use these cover issues. Because there are some limitations to list experiments, we also employ a campaign information experiment to see if individuals who are high in bias are more likely to be affected by cover issues. Our data from these experiments allows us to assess whether voters in fact used cover issues in the 2008 Republican primary and the 2008 general election. In particular, we look at whether individuals used the “flip-flop” charge against Romney as a shield for anti-Mormon bias and whether the “no experience” or “no substance” charge was used as a cover for racial and religious bias against Obama during the general election.

Using Cover Issues as a Vehicle to Express Opposition

One problem with taking the Gallup data (e.g. Figure 1) at face value is that many individuals will not want to admit to harboring opposition against some groups in society. Norms have developed over time making the expression of such views socially unacceptable. We can see this quite clearly when looking at the issue of race. Shuman and colleagues (1997) show that white attitudes on racial equality have shifted dramatically over time. For example, an overwhelming acceptance of segregated schools shifted to an overwhelming acceptance of integrated schools. These scholars observed similar trends for attitudes related to equal job opportunities, accommodations, and transportation. However, they note less of a shift when whites are asked for their support over the implementation of policies that would lead to the realization of such principles (e.g., busing and affirmative action). This gap between opinion and policy has led many social scientists to conclude that bias still persists, even if whites have learned to answer questions related to equality in the abstract (e.g., Jackman 1978; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981). Shuman et al (1997) claim that while scholars may debate whether all of the changes they
observe are genuine or not, it appears that norms are exerting an important effect on the expressed attitudes of white Americans on issues of race. In their work on aversive racism, Gaertner and Dovidio (1986, 2000) show more directly the power of norms to suppress negative racial attitudes and behavior given the strong egalitarian values that many white Americans hold. They demonstrate through a series of experiments how biased attitudes and behaviors toward African Americans do not emerge when norms are well defined, but do emerge when norms are ambiguous or conflicting, or when there is a non-racial justification that is salient.

The power of norms is also apparent if one looks at shifts in the racial cues used by candidates. Candidates have long had an incentive to play the race card in order to garner the support of whites that hold negative racial stereotypes. Mendelberg (2001) documents the shift in campaign appeals from being explicitly racial to implicitly racial, starting with the explicit appeals in the 1860s to the disappearance of such direct appeals a century later. She argues that this shift is due to changing norms from racial inequality to racial equality. In the contemporary era, when individuals can easily identify a message as violating the norm of racial equality, they resist such messages, and may even react against them. However, Mendelberg argues and shows that racial cues have an impact when they are implicit: the “implicit nature of these appeals allows them to prime racial stereotypes, fears, and resentments while appearing not to do so (p. 4).” The Willie Horton ad is a classic example of an ad that attempted to present an implicit negative racial cue (Jamieson 1992). There is no explicit mention of race in the ad, but an African-American male pictured as the narrator discusses the murder of a family by Horton when he was released under a furlough program in Massachusetts. The activation of racial attitudes on candidate evaluations via implicit

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3 They argue most white Americans hold given the historical racist culture of the U.S. and cognitive biases in information processing.
appeals has been demonstrated by numerous scholars (e.g., Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; White 2007; but see Huber and Lapinski 2006).4

These examples have tended to be cases where white candidates were trying to undercut support for their white opposition candidate. What happens when we shift to an electoral context in which there is a religious, racial, or ethnic minority candidate? In such a context, individuals who harbor negative racial, ethnic or religious attitudes will be less willing to support the given candidate. In fact, several studies of the 2008 presidential election show a link between implicit and explicit negative racial attitudes and a decreased willingness to support Barack Obama in the general election (e.g., Greenwald et al 2009; Payne et al 2010; Pasek et al 2009) and religious bias and reluctance to support Mitt Romney in the 2008 Republican primary (Benson et al 2011; Campbell et al 2012). For example, in a survey experiment, Campbell and colleagues (2012) found that providing information that Mitt Romney is a leader in the Mormon church, or that Mitt Romney is not Christian, decreased support for his candidacy, most notably among those with medium social contact with Mormons, and countervailing positive messages did little to wash away the negative effects. Negative racial and religious attitudes explicitly and implicitly affect candidate evaluations. However, how do these biases play out during the election? Given the power of norms, such individuals may not say explicitly that they oppose a given candidate because of his or her race, ethnicity or religion. In fact, some people may not even be aware of their biases. Instead, individuals may consciously or

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4See also Hutchings and Jardina (2009) and Mendelberg (2008) for reviews of this literature. While on average individuals in the U.S. have internalized norms of racial equality, Hutchings et al (2010) argue that this is not necessarily the case for all groups in the U.S. For example, they find that white males in the South are less likely to reject explicitly racial appeals using the case of support for the Confederate flag.
unconsciously find some other more socially acceptable avenue for expressing opposition for a minority candidate. Of course, the strength of norms is likely to vary for different racial, ethnic and religious candidates.\(^5\)

In their work on aversive racism, Gaertner and Dovidio (1986) suggest that one way in which people may express biased views or behavior even in the presence of strong norms is when non-racial justifications are present: “…even when normative guidelines are clear, aversive racists may unwittingly search for ostensibly nonracial factors that can justify a negative response to blacks. These nonracial factors, and not race, are then used to rationalize unfavorable actions. Negative racial attitudes can therefore be expressed indirectly, while whites perceive themselves as nondiscriminating and nonprejudiced” (p. 66). They show support for this argument in a series of lab experiments where they randomize whether a nonracial justification is salient in various domains such as helping behavior, hiring decisions, college admissions decisions, and policy decisions (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986, 2000; see also Dovidio and Gaertner 2004).

We argue that a similar process could operate during elections, and not only with respect to race, but other background characteristics of candidates as well. An effective way to express opposition, while not appearing biased, is to adopt socially acceptable criticisms of a candidate that have gained currency during the course of the campaign. Jumping onto cover issues enables voters to express their opposition while appearing to conform to norms of racial and religious equality. Campaign discourse will therefore appear to be unrelated to racial or religious bias, even though such bias may be driving voting decisions for some individuals. Since biased justifications for

\(^5\) Campbell and colleagues (2012) argue that such norms are not as prevalent with respect to religious outgroups, such as Mormons and Muslims.
opposition do not emerge in campaign discourse, it makes it more likely to hear claims that we live in a post-racial or post-religious society.

That individuals who harbor bias against minority candidate use cover issues during real elections may not be particularly surprising, especially to scholars of race and ethnic politics and elections. However, what is more novel is that we show through the use of list experiments in surveys that respondents who adopt such criticisms to mask bias can be identified and separated from those whose concern about the critique is sincere. Our method for determining whether some individuals are using a particular critique as a cover for unexpressed bias begins by asking respondents whether they agree with a given criticism of a candidate. Then we present respondents with a list experiment in which the treatment condition includes a statement that confirms the biased motive and not the stated criticism for opposing the candidate. It is then possible to identify a profile of respondent characteristics that is correlated with support for the cover issue. We then provide another means of accessing the use of cover issues by randomly presenting a non-biased justification (or not) to respondents and seeing whether those who harbor racial or religious bias are more affected by the justification.

We find that cover issues were used during the 2008 primary and general election to mask the fact that many voters really objected to the candidates’ race or religion. Southern evangelicals were especially likely to accuse Romney of flip-flopping but then also to admit in the list experiment that Romney’s Mormonism and not his flip-flopping was the true source of their opposition. Similarly, many Republicans and Independents expressed opposition to Obama’s lack of experience but then also admitted in the list experiment that race or religion, and not Obama’s inexperience, was their true source of concern.
2008 Republican Primaries

In the 2008 Republican primary race, there was a great deal of speculation about how Mitt Romney’s religion would affect his chances of winning the Republican nomination. Many conservative media commentators resisted claims that anti-Mormon bias existed among conservative evangelical voters in the primary. Media discussion of the possibility of anti-Mormon bias among conservative evangelicals increased as Romney lost his front-runner status in the Iowa caucus to Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist preacher. Michael Luo, A New York Times reporter conducted a series of interviews in Iowa and concluded that “a sizeable number [of Huckabee’s supporters] are distinctly uncomfortable with Mr. Romney’s religion and cite it as a major reason they would not vote for him in the state's Jan 3 caucuses.”

According to exit polls, approximately 80% of Huckabee’s supporters in the Iowa caucus self-identified as evangelical or born-again. Romney’s support from evangelicals comprised only about 20% of his total vote share. Exit polls also show that Romney consistently performed poorly in states with dominant concentrations of evangelical voters. In the Bible belt states, Romney ran dead last among the major contenders. By contrast, he either won or took second in all the other

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8 Romney lost to McCain, Huckabee, and Thompson in SC. After Thompson withdrew, he lost to McCain and Huckabee in TN, GA, AL, OK, MO, and AK. The other serious primary contender, Rudy Giuliani, didn’t campaign in SC and withdrew from the race before primaries were held in the Bible belt states.
states he ran in. Based upon exit polls alone, it appears that Romney’s main challenge came from the conservative evangelical voting block. However, as we noted above, uncovering the extent of anti-Mormon bias in the Republican primary is difficult because respondents were often reluctant to admit bias in surveys.

Luo noted in his *New York Times* article that it was common for many of Huckabee’s supporters to cite flip-flopping as the source of their opposition to Romney. But Luo also pointed out those being interviewed could often be pressed into admitting that religion played a prominent role in their decision. If voters harbored bias but were unwilling to express it explicitly, then the flip-flopper accusation, which was already a sincere criticism of Romney among many, was a viable option for a cover issue. It was certainly the issue that seemed to catch fire and dog him the most during the 2008 primary. In a January 6, 2008 interview on ABC’s “This Week” with George Stephanopoulos, Mitt Romney had the following to say in response to Stephanopoulos’ observation that Romney had been labeled a “flip-flopper” in the campaign: “Yeah, I think the McCain campaign from the very beginning did a masterful political job of trying to tag me with that, and it keeps on being promoted and promulgated, and that’s just the way it is. I have to live with that.”

Political candidates frequently change positions on political issues, especially when they move across constituencies with different ideological preferences. Why did the flip-flopper label successfully stick to Romney in 2008? We designed a survey experiment to determine whether the flip-flopper tag could, at least in part, have been used as cover for those voters who consciously opposed Romney’s candidacy because of his religious beliefs. We conducted an Internet experiment via YouGov, which was in the field from November 12-29th, 2007, just before Romney gave his famous speech in Washington DC about his faith. The sample includes 1800 subjects, with an over-
sample of 600 southern evangelicals, given our expectations that bias would be more intense among this group. With proper weights, the sample is representative of the national U.S. population.⁹

In the survey, we asked whether respondents believe Romney is a flip-flopper because he changed his position on certain issues or whether they believe his shift on positions was a result of genuine opinion change. Assessing the results, we find that 30.5% indicate that they believe Romney is a flip-flopper, which is a sizeable percentage of the sample.¹⁰ Of course, one might think that most of this assessment came from Democrats. However, if we look only at Republicans, 24.1% indicate that he flip-flopped on certain issues. Finally, if we look at the group for whom we expect the most intense opposition to Romney because of his faith, southern evangelicals, 29.3% believe Romney is a flip-flopper. In sum, the charge that Romney was a flip-flopper had stuck with a sizable share of the public, in general, and southern evangelicals, in particular, making the matter a plausible candidate as a potential cover issue.

To determine whether some respondents in fact used the flip-flop accusation as a vehicle to express anti-Mormon bias, we included a list experiment, which was designed to tease out individuals’ beliefs about Romney’s religion and his flip-flopping. In list experiments, rather than asking about bias explicitly, subjects are presented with a series of statements and are asked to indicate the number of statements that they agree (or disagree with). A control group is given a list of statements and a treatment group is given the same list plus one additional statement, which pertains to the bias that the researcher is trying to uncover. Since individuals are only asked to

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⁹ We utilize the survey weights YouGov employs based on known marginals of the general population of the United States from the 2005 American Community Survey and the 2004 National Annenberg Survey. See appendix for sample descriptives.

¹⁰ As a point of comparison, 48% said Hillary was a flip-flopper on the Iraq war.
indicate the number of statements they agree with, they do not need to state directly any biased views. If there is no bias, then the average number of statements that the subjects agree with should be the same across the control and treatment group. We get an estimate of bias by subtracting the mean number of statements between the control and treatment group. As we noted earlier, list experiments have been widely used to deal with attitudes related to race (e.g., Kuklinski, Cobb and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski et al 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Gilens, Sniderman and Kuklinski 1998). More recently, scholars have applied list experiments to study propensities to vote for a Jewish candidate (Kane, Craig and Wald 2004), a female candidate for President (Streb et al. 2008), and different religious minorities for President (Benson, Merolla and Geer 2011). In the last study, Benson et al (2011) found that 33% of their sample would not support a qualified Mormon for President, which is higher than the 17% found in Gallup studies at the time.

A control group was given three assertions about flip-flopping and was asked to indicate how many of the three assertions they agree with. A treatment group was given the three assertions plus one additional assertion, which was: “Romney's real problem is not his flip-flopping, it is his Mormonism.” One important thing to note about this list experiment is that it enables us to

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11 One potential limitation to this particular statement is that even those who are not opposed to Mormons may agree with the statement because they perceive that others think that Romney’s real problem is his Mormonism. That is, they thought others would hold it against him and thus make him less electable. In a follow-up study in 2012, we revised the treatment statement: “The accusation that Romney is a flip-flopper is not a concern for me, but I would not support him because he is Mormon.” We found that the flip flop charge no longer served as a cover issue among the general sample or Republicans, but continued to serve as a cover issue for Southern Evangelicals, who were 25.6% less likely to support Romney because he is Mormon (among those who used the flip-flop
estimate the use of the flip-flop justification as cover for Mormon bias among those who are consciously aware of their biases and are reluctant to publicly state it. This method would not however pick up Mormon bias among those who are not consciously aware of their biases since such individuals would not necessarily agree with the treatment statement. If anything, this method may under-estimate the prevalence of cover issues since it only tells us the use among those who are consciously aware of their bias and are reluctant to publicly state it.

We determine the proportion of respondents who agree with the statement in question by taking the difference in mean statements agreed to between the control and treatment conditions. To explore whether the flip-flopping charge was being used as a cover for anti-Mormonism, we focus on those who initially indicated in the survey that they believe Romney is a flip-flopper. We report results for the whole sample, Republicans, and Southern Evangelicals (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Among Americans who accuse Romney of flip-flopping, 26% agree that Romney’s Mormon religion and not his flip-flopping is his real problem. We find a similar pattern if we look at Republicans and Southern Evangelicals: 39.3% of Republicans and 26.4% of Southern Evangelicals who indicate Romney is a flip-flopper admit that his real problem is his Mormon faith and both effects are statistically significant. These data confirm our suspicions. Even so, it is just one case. To charge), an effect almost identical to what we observed in our 2008 study (see full results in supporting materials). Since the studies were conducted four years apart, it is hard to know if the null results in 2012 among the general sample and Republicans are the result of the question wording difference or wider acceptance of a Mormon candidate given that Romney had run four years earlier. Since we find nearly identical effects for southern evangelicals, we are inclined to believe that the latter was the case for the general sample and Republicans.
broaden our empirical base, we will consider the use of cover issues against Senator Obama in his bid to win presidency.

2008 General Election

Barack Obama’s candidacy generated many discussions about potential racial and religious bias during the primary and general election. First, there was speculation about whether the U.S. was ready to elect an African-American to the office of the president. Coupled with the issue of race was whether individuals were likely to elect someone with the middle name of Hussein.

For all of the talk of Obama’s election to the presidency being an example of a post-racial society (Thernstrom 2008), the evidence points to racial attitudes exerting a significant impact on voting decisions in the general election. Scholars have been able to systematically test the effect of both explicit and implicit racial bias on support for Obama during the general election, and have found that higher levels of both types of bias led to reduced support for his candidacy (e.g., Greenwald et al 2009; Payne et al 2010; Pasek et al 2009). Few scholars have looked at how the rumor that Obama is Muslim affected his evaluations. One notable exception is Pasek et al (2009), who find null effects for the belief that Obama is Muslim on voting decisions. However, in an experimental study, Campbell et al (2009) find that providing information of the rumor that Obama is Muslim reduced support for his candidacy.

We have seen how some voters’ accused Romney of flip-flopping as a way to mask bias for Romney’s religion. We suspected that voters would use a similar strategy to cover bias against Obama. But what issues might be used? Among the many lines of attack by Hillary Clinton during the primary, perhaps the most prominent one was the contention that Barack Obama did not have the experience to be President. This issue was famously raised in the “3 a.m.” ad aired by Clinton in which the narrator asks who we want to answer the phone in the middle of the night following a disaster of some sort? As Obama gained ground, Clinton started to add more substance to that line
of attack. On the stump in Ohio, she stated: "Now, over the years, you've heard plenty of promises from plenty of people in plenty of speeches. And some of those speeches were probably pretty good. But speeches don't put food on the table. Speeches don't fill up your tank, or fill your prescription, or do anything about that stack of bills that keeps you up at night."12 The speech led a reporter from Reuters to use the following headline in reporting the event: “Democrat Clinton says Obama Lacks Substance.”13

During the general election, the McCain camp tried to appeal to blue-collar Democrats and Independents by emphasizing Clinton’s claim that Obama lacked experience and substance. His campaign aired an advertisement with sections of Clinton’s 3 a.m. ad that posed a similar question of who the person wants to answer the phone in the White House. The McCain camp went even further on the lacking substance charge in the “celebrity” ad in which Obama was likened to Paris Hilton and Brittany Spears. The message was simple: Obama was all style, lacking substance and experience. It is possible that those high in racial or religious bias may have jumped onto this charge as a cover issue.

To test whether the “lack of experience and substance” concerns were used as a cover issue for racial and/or religious bias, we conducted another list experiment via YouGov during the 2008 presidential election. The study was in the field during the last week in October of 2008, right before the general election. The sample includes 1800 subjects, with an over-sample of 600 southern


We use the general population weights in our analysis, so the sample is representative of the national U.S. population. However, since there is very little variance in support for Obama among African Americans, we drop African Americans from the analysis.

As in the Romney case, we designed a list experiment, which asked survey respondents to identify how many in a list of statements they agree with. A control condition was given a list of three statements about the other candidates in the race, which are as follows:

a. Sarah Palin’s real problem is not that she lacks experience; it is that she is a woman.

b. Joe Biden’s real problem is not that he is too liberal; it is that he represents the old politics of Washington, DC.

c. John McCain’s real problem is not that his judgment is undermined by his bad temper; it is that he is too old to be president.

Treatment groups received the same statements and were randomly assigned to receive one additional statement. Our experiment included two treatments, which are listed as follows:

There were other questions on the survey for which we needed an oversample of southern evangelicals.

We utilize the survey weights YouGov employs based on known marginals of the general population of the United States from the 2005 American Community Survey and the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study. Respondents were matched on gender, age, race, education, party identification, political interest, census region, and born-again Christian status. See appendix for sample descriptives.

Kam and Kinder (2012) do the same in their analysis of data from the 2008 presidential election.

We had two other conditions: 1) “Barack Obama’s real problem is not that he is Muslim, it is that he is African-American”; and, 2) “Barack Obama’s real problem is not that he is African-American,
• Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance; it is that he is African-American.

• Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance; it is that he is Muslim.

These two statements seek to explore whether individuals used the “lack of experience or substance” charge as a cover for racial and religious bias, respectively. We find that 59% of the sample indicated that Obama either lacked experience or substance, leading us to conclude that the issue was salient with the electorate. If we look across partisan sub-groups, there are the expected differences. Unsurprisingly, a full 94% of Republicans thought Obama lacked experience or substance, while 60% of Independents and only 20% of Democrats did. The question is whether this justification is being used by some to shield racial or religious bias.

In Table 2, we show the results of the list experiment among those who indicate that Obama lacked substance or experience for the whole sample, and broken down by partisanship. We first look at the treatment statement “Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance, it is that he is African-American.” Comparing those in the control group to those in the treatment group, we find that 18% indicate his real problem is that he is African American and this difference between the control and treatment group is marginally significant (p=0.054, one-tailed). If it is that he is Muslim.” We used the former to see if some people used the Muslim charge to shield racial bias. The latter would not however serve as a potential cover issue since respondents would be very unlikely to use this as a cover issue given the strength of racial equality norms. With respect to the first, we only find use of this cover issue among Republicans, where 33% who believe Obama is Muslim agree that his real problem is not that he is Muslim, but that he is African American. However, the effect is marginally significant (p=0.08, one-tailed).
we break down the analysis by partisan subgroup, it appears that the results are primarily being driven by Independents. Of independents, 29% who leveled this charge thought his real problem was that he is African American, and the effect is statistically significant, even though the sample size is quite small (p =0.041, one-tailed). Among Independents who are less inclined to support an African American for president, this may have been a particularly useful cover issue since it focuses more on leadership qualities, rather than specific policy stances. One might expect such evaluations to matter more to Independents.

We now turn to the second treatment statement: “Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance, it is that he is Muslim.” Here we find that of those who level the lack of substance or experience charge in the whole sample, 20% agree Obama’s real problem is that he is Muslim and this effect is statistically significant (p=0.032, one-tailed). Turning to the results broken down by partisanship, we see that this effect is being driven largely by Republicans, of whom 30% indicate his real problem is that he is Muslim (p=0.017, one-tailed). Meanwhile, there are no significant differences between the control and treatment group for Democrats or Independents.

It is a bit surprising that such a high percentage of Republicans used this cover issue with respect to religion, especially considering that Obama is not Muslim. In a battery of factual questions about the candidates, 20% of the sample believes that Obama is a Muslim. If we look across partisan groups, the percentages are 10% for Democrats, 19% for Independents, and 30% for Republicans. The differences by partisan groups are consistent with expectations about partisanship and may also in part reflect different exposure to email rumors that were widely circulated during the election, as well as to the media. Conservative news programs such as Fox News were more inclined to say Obama’s middle name of “Hussein,” as were conservative pundits such as Rush Limbaugh, compared to other news outlets. In their experimental research, Campbell and colleagues (2009) also found that that the Muslim rumor was more effective among Republicans. Furthermore, Cruz et al
(2013) found that Republicans were more likely to perceive Obama as Muslim using the American National Election Studies’ Evaluations of Government and Society Survey. It therefore makes sense that Republicans would be more likely to resort to using cover issues to shield for religious objections.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The data above increase, in general, our confidence in the use of cover issues to express bias that individuals are aware of but may be reluctant to state publicly. But the results are often just suggestive and do not take into account individuals who may use such justifications and not be aware of their racial or religious biases. It is possible for example that some Democrats would fall into this camp. To address these limitations, we designed another type of experiment, which we detail below.

**Obama Information Experiment**

One nagging concern we have had with any list experiment that deals with Obama was that social desirability pressures may have been so high as to create a context in which individuals would not admit to bias even when they did not have to directly state it. In other words, list experiments may not work very well in this context. Furthermore, the list experiment does not pick up those who are not conscious about their biases but might still use such justifications to shield unconscious bias.

To consider these possibilities, we adopted a supplementary strategy to explore further the possible use of cover issues. Specifically, we sought to test whether individuals who have more negative racial or religious attitudes are more willing to jump onto non-biased justifications in their evaluations of candidates. The basic strategy for this experiment is to randomly assign a portion of the sample to read about a non-biased justification not to support Obama and then see whether the justification has a stronger effect on his evaluations among individuals who hold negative racial or religious attitudes, compared to individuals who have more positive racial or religious attitudes. This would
suggest that those who have more biased views are using such justifications as a cover for racial or religious bias. And, unlike the list experiment, individuals may do this consciously or unconsciously, though such a design does not enable us to disentangle which it is.

Subjects were randomly assigned to a baseline group or one in which they read an additional paragraph that portrayed Obama as having little experience.18 Both groups read a baseline paragraph about Obama, which was as follows:

“Barack Obama is currently a US Senator from Illinois. Before being elected Senator, he worked as an attorney, taught law at the University of Chicago, and served in the Illinois state legislature. Obama supports increased investment in education and universal health care for children. He advocates ending the war in Iraq, and finding ways to combat global warming.”

Individuals in the justification condition then read the following section:

“Some people say that Barack Obama does not have the experience to be President of the United States. He is the junior Senator from Illinois, and is only serving his first term in national office. Barack Obama has not passed any major pieces of legislation, and does not have any significant military or foreign policy experience. While he may be a flashy speaker, he lacks the experience needed for the office of President.”

18 We had three other conditions. One treatment condition highlighted Obama’s race, while another highlighted his Muslim name. The final group read about his race and Muslim name. In the interest of space, we only focus on the conditions most relevant for this paper, the control group and the justification condition. The findings on the justification condition are consistent in the broader analysis with the other treatment conditions. See appendix.
The justification condition then is similar to the all style and no substance justification that we looked at in the list experiment. After the treatment, subjects were asked to report their feelings toward Barack Obama on a feeling thermometer (0-100), in which higher values mean warmer feelings. We find a main treatment effect for the justification treatment. Individuals in the justification condition report an average feeling of 45 degrees toward Obama, while those in the control group feel 51 degrees on average, and this difference is statistically significant according to a difference in means test (p=0.05, one-tailed). Therefore, exposure to the justification leads to reduced feelings toward Obama, as we would expect given that it is a negative statement.

Our main interest though is in testing use of this justification among those with negative racial or religious attitudes. If individuals who are biased toward Obama due to race or religious reasons are looking for some non-racial or religious dimension to jump onto, then we should find that the justification condition has a stronger negative effect among those higher in negative racial or religious attitudes than it does on those who have more positive attitudes.19

We measure negative religious attitudes against Muslims in two ways. First, we adapted two questions that Kinder and Sanders (1996) designed to measure racial resentment against African-Americans to capture resentment toward Muslims. Subjects were asked for their level of agreement with two statements on a seven-point scale:

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19 We should note that we are looking at cover issues differently than Mendelberg (2001, 2008) or Valentino et al. (2002). They explore whether implicit cues prime the effect of racial attitudes on other evaluations. Instead, we are looking at whether the treatment has a stronger effect among those who have negative racial attitudes. It is unlikely that the message itself will prime racial or religious attitudes since there is no racial content. We do not find that the cover issue treatment activates either religious or racial attitudes, as expected.
“Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Muslims should do the same without any special favors.”

"Over the past few years, Muslims have gotten less than they deserve."

We created an additive scale between the two measures in which higher values indicate more resentment and then dichotomized the measure such that anyone who harbored negative assessments (5 or higher) was assigned a value of 1. About 74% of the sample fell into the negative assessment category. The alpha for the additive scale is respectable, at .718. As a second indicator, we use a feeling thermometer measure toward Muslims, which we dichotomize such that anyone with a cool to neutral feeling is coded as 1 (0 to 50 on the scale) and anyone with a warm feeling (51 to 100) is coded as 0. We find that 68% of respondents report a cool or neutral feeling toward Muslims. Creating the measure in this way means that the groups are not balanced, as they might be if we used a median split. We follow this strategy since we expect the justification condition to have a stronger effect among those with negative attitudes toward Muslims. If we did a median split, we would end up combining into one group those with weaker negative attitudes and those with positive attitudes.

We did not have a racial resentment measure for African Americans, so we only use a feeling thermometer toward blacks to capture whether individuals hold negative racial attitudes. We again dichotomized the measure such that anyone with a cool to neutral feeling is coded as 1 and anyone with a warm feeling is coded as 0. A much lower percentage of subjects fell into the negative category for African-Americans. About 30% expressed a cool or neutral feeling toward blacks.

Finally, to take into account a general aversion to the two out-groups, we follow a strategy similar to Kam and Kinder (2009, 2012) and take the average feeling thermometer toward African Americans and Muslims. We then dichotomize this measure in the same way, with feelings between
0 and 50 coded as 1 and between 51 and 100 coded as 0. About 48% of the sample registers cool or neutral feelings toward both groups, so this measure is more balanced.

We ran four models, the first taking into account religious resentment, the second negative feelings toward Muslims, the third negative feelings toward African Americans, and the final, the average negative feelings toward both groups. The models include a dummy variable for the justification condition, with the control serving as the baseline, the given negative racial or religious attitude measure, and interactions between the justification condition and attitude measure. Support for our argument on the use of the justification as a cover issue would come in finding that the justification has a stronger negative effect on feelings toward Obama among those higher in negative racial and/or religious attitudes. The results for each model are depicted in Table 3. Since interaction terms are not directly interpretable, we display the effect of the justification condition for those low and high in negative racial and religious attitudes in Figure 2.

We first turn to religious resentment (Model 1 in Table 3 and first set of bars in Figure 2). Among those low in religious resentment toward Muslims, the justification condition increases feelings toward Obama by 1.93 degrees (relative to the control group), but the effect is not statistically significant (p=0.737). Therefore, the justification has no effect on evaluations of Obama among those low in Muslim resentment. If we look at the effect of the justification condition among those high in religious resentment, it reduces feelings toward Obama by about 9.27 degrees, and the effect is statistically significant (p=0.009, one-tailed). We claim that this is a sizeable effect, especially considering that the treatment was not very long. We next turn to the model that uses feelings toward Muslims (Model 2 in Table 3 and the next set of bars in Figure 2). The findings mirror those for Muslim resentment. The justification condition has no significant effect among those with warmer feelings toward Muslims (p=0.713), while it significantly reduces feelings toward Obama by
11.3 units (p=.003, one-tailed) among those with cool and neutral feelings toward Muslims. In short, the findings meet with our expectations that the justification condition should have a stronger negative effect on evaluations of Obama among those who hold negative attitudes toward Muslims. The non-biased critique of Obama provides further license to downgrade evaluations of him among this group.

If we turn to the model with the measure for negative feelings toward African Americans (Model 3 in Table 3, next set of bars in Figure 2), the justification condition does not have any effect on feelings toward Obama among those with warm feelings toward African Americans (p=0.223). This finding is therefore similar to what we found in the previous analysis. Among those with cool to neutral feelings, the justification condition is marginally significant and negative, leading to a 9.3 unit (0.06, one-tailed) decrease in feelings toward Obama. This substantive effect is very similar to what we found among those high in Muslim resentment. We again find evidence of an increased inclination to use the justification, this time among those with more negative racial attitudes.

Finally, in the last model, we look at the combination of racial and religious attitudes. Here again we find that the justification condition has no statistically significant effect among those who average warm feelings toward African Americans and Muslims (p=0.574), while it significantly reduces feelings toward Obama by 14 units (p=0.002, one-tailed) among those who average cool to neutral feelings. In short, using a variety of different measures, we find that the justification condition resonates the most with those who harbor negative racial and/or religious attitudes, which we believe suggests that they are being used as a cover issue. These findings likely include individuals who are both conscious and potentially not conscious of these biases.  

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20 Though it would not take into account those who are unconscious of their biases and report very warm feelings toward either group.
Conclusion

We have argued that intolerance exists in the electorate in spite of decreases in explicitly expressed bias in abstract polling questions. Rather than espouse intolerance for groups, biased voters instead respond to social desirability pressures by finding non-biased reasons for opposing candidates who have characteristics they find objectionable. We find that cover issues, which gain traction for negatively targeting the unacceptable candidate for reasons not having to do with intolerance, are vehicles for expressing bias towards a candidate. It is difficult to predict in advance which cover issues will gain the support of voters who either consciously or unconsciously harbor negative racial or religious attitudes. However, we have developed two mechanisms to test ex post whether an issue was in fact used to cover bias. To detect a cover issue among those who are consciously aware of their biases, we identify justifications that negatively criticize a candidate and then look to see if those justifications are supported both by those who legitimately support it and those who support it disingenuously. To determine disingenuous support, we use list experiments to identify the suppressed sources of real support for the justification. As a second mechanism, we also looked at whether those higher in negative racial and religious attitudes were more likely to jump onto such justifications when they were randomly assigned to individuals. This second method can pick up those who are conscious and unconscious of their biases, though the method does not enable us to disentangle which is the case.

We find evidence for the use of cover issues to mask intolerance in the 2008 presidential campaign using the list experiment method. In the Republican primary, some southern evangelical voters rallied behind the accusation that Romney was a flip-flopper to cover for their real source of opposition, which was their bias against a Mormon candidate. In the 2008 general election, the accusation that Obama was inexperienced and lacked substance became a focal cover issue. The issue served as a vehicle for expressing bias among those who opposed Obama for religious and/or
racial reasons. Independents used the issue to cover for racial intolerance, while Republicans used it to cover for religious intolerance.

Support for the use of cover issues as a vehicle for bias was also demonstrated in our second approach to testing for the use of cover issues. We found strong evidence that the justification condition only diminished evaluations of Obama among those with negative racial and religious attitudes. Meanwhile, those with positive racial and religious attitudes were unaffected by the justification condition. That we obtain similar effects with another approach gives us even more confidence for the existence of cover issues in real elections.

Our argument and results present a new way of looking at how we might uncover bias in elections when there is a racial, ethnic, or religious minority running for office. While past work has looked at the effects of explicit or implicit racial cues, we show how individuals who harbor intolerance of racial or religious minorities might jump onto an issue or justification that is not at all related to race or religion as a vehicle of opposition toward a candidate. This is an important finding in and of itself. It will likely grow in importance in the coming years as candidates competing for office become more diverse. If true, the frequency of invoking cover issues to mobilize opposition is only likely to rise.
References


Figure 1. Percentage who would not vote for a qualified candidate with the given characteristic for President, Gallup 1958-2012

Question: If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for present who happened to be [ITEMS A-F], would you vote for that person?
Figure 2. Effect of the Justification Condition relative to the Control Condition by Positive and Negative Racial and Religious Attitudes, 2008 YouGov
Table 1: Romney Flip Flop List Experiment during Republican Primaries among those who say Romney is a Flip-Flopper, YouGov data, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008 Republican Primary</th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean Statements in</td>
<td>Mean Statements in</td>
<td>Proportion who agree that the real problem is that Romney is Mormon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>2.511</td>
<td>2.772</td>
<td>0.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>2.318</td>
<td>2.712</td>
<td>0.393</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Evangelicals</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>2.458</td>
<td>2.722</td>
<td>0.264</td>
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</table>
Table 2: Results from List Experiment of those who accuse Obama of being inexperienced and lacking in substance among Whole Sample and by Partisanship, YouGov 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean Statements in Control</th>
<th>Mean Statements in Treatment</th>
<th>Proportion who agree with statement</th>
<th>P-value (one-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>0.818</td>
<td>0.998</td>
<td>0.180</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1.398</td>
<td>1.303</td>
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<td>Independents</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0.759</td>
<td>1.049</td>
<td>0.290</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.181</td>
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</table>

Treatment: Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance; it is that he is African-American.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean Statements in Control</th>
<th>Mean Statements in Treatment</th>
<th>Proportion who agree with statement</th>
<th>P-value</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Sample</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>0.818</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>0.199</td>
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<td>Democrats</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1.398</td>
<td>1.137</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>0.228</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>0.759</td>
<td>0.893</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>0.219</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>1.061</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.017</td>
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</table>

Treatment: Barack Obama’s real problem is not his lack of experience or substance, it is that he is Muslim.
Table 3: Effect of the Justification Condition on Feelings Toward Obama, by Religious and Racial Attitudes, YouGov 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muslim Resentment</td>
<td>Muslim Feelings</td>
<td>African American Feelings</td>
<td>Combined African American and Muslim Feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover Issue</td>
<td>1.929 (5.751)</td>
<td>-2.182 (5.934)</td>
<td>-5.286 (4.331)</td>
<td>-2.737 (4.868)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Attitudes</td>
<td>-31.218** (4.918)</td>
<td>-23.004** (5.248)</td>
<td>-1.849 (5.303)</td>
<td>-17.735** (5.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Attitudes*</td>
<td>-11.198+ (6.930)</td>
<td>-9.141+ (7.178)</td>
<td>-4.007 (7.591)</td>
<td>-11.287* (6.729)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover Issue</td>
<td>66.575** (4.010)</td>
<td>61.834** (4.340)</td>
<td>46.155** (3.045)</td>
<td>54.921** (3.494)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p≤.05 (two-tailed), *p≤.10 (two-tailed), +p≤.10(one-tailed)