

Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries

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Abstract

Using national survey data, this study examines the political impact of controversial sermons by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's former pastor, which aired during the 2008 presidential primaries. I discuss differences between blacks' and whites' perceptions of the videos and their effects on citizens' opinions. Among whites, the findings demonstrate that Wright's remarks temporarily hurt Obama by causing people to feel negatively toward him and increasing concerns about his ability to unite the nation. Blacks' familiarity with African-American religious life provided a context for understanding the messages and this group was not distracted by the controversy. More generally, this study shows how unflattering news reports influence voters' views of public figures. The results also reveal how differences among the electorate can surface during campaigns through candidates' religious background. Finally, this research illustrates the negative effects of candidates' associations with divisive religious leaders.

“Not God bless America, God damn America...!

“We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki. And we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon—and we never batted an eye...and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is brought right back into our own front yards. America’s chickens—are coming home—to roost!”

Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.

“What Wright was saying was not considered in any way exceptional in the African-American community...And what you were seeing in Reverend Wright’s statements... showed an anger and bitterness...that may be more acceptable in some circles in the African-American community but is never acceptable in mainstream America.”¹

Barack Obama

Several recent U.S. presidential elections have featured news stories that harmed the victory prospects of leading candidates. Included in this list are the infamous Willie Horton ad in 1988, the Gennifer Flowers scandal in 1992, and the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth group in 2004.² The 2008 contest was no different. During the second week of March, ABC News was the first network to air video segments of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., Barack Obama’s former pastor of twenty years, preaching sermons that were deemed offensive by many Americans. At the heart of this controversy were clips from Wright’s messages that claimed the U.S. was controlled by “rich white people,” argued that God should “damn America for killing innocent people and treating her citizens as less than human,” and his suggestion that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were “chickens coming home to roost” in response to past U.S. military actions and foreign policies.³ To be sure, people were shocked and outraged by these “divisive” and “unpatriotic” comments.

¹ From a press interview quoted in Balz and Johnson (2009, 201-202).

² “The Wright Stuff: Obama’s Pastor Corrals Campaign Coverage” by Mark Jurkowitz, May 6, 2008 Pew Research Center-Project for Excellence in Journalism.

³ Wilcox and Robinson (2007) note that Rev. Jerry Falwell suggested the 9/11 terrorist attacks were God’s punishment on a sinful nation. Evangelist Pat Robertson agreed with this statement.

How could Obama have close ties to the “angry,” Black Nationalist Rev. Wright? Given its timing during a historic campaign, this episode garnered significant media coverage and caused a national uproar. Wright’s remarks were especially troublesome for Obama because they fueled public discourse about polarizing racial issues and the uneasy role of religion in American politics. In fact, discussions concerning Wright’s inflammatory statements appeared on television, the World Wide Web, radio, and in print media outlets. Political commentators viewed this event as the most significant of the primary season. In light of the storm caused by Wright’s words, on March 18th Obama denounced the comments, stating they did not represent his own patriotic beliefs and harmonious vision for the country. He argued that Wright’s statements focused on topics that separated blacks and whites. At the same time, however, Obama insisted that the nation was becoming “A More Perfect Union.” In clarifying his spiritual mentor’s remarks, Obama noted that differences in African-American religious expression may have contributed to the misunderstandings many had about the meaning of the sermons.

Although press accounts indicate that Obama’s favorability ratings declined amid this debacle (Rasmussen Reports-March 17, 2008; Fox News Poll Report-April 2008; Balz and Johnson 2009) some political analysts believed the event would do little to harm the candidate’s public image. After all, Barack Obama was a different person than Jeremiah Wright. This puzzle is the subject of the present study. Little empirical evidence documents the fallout from Wright’s statements for the Obama campaign. This paper provides a novel analysis of the negative political effects of unexpected news reports, using the Wright controversy to illustrate how racial and religious forces shape citizens’ attitudes. Explaining how these incidents impact public opinion helps us better

understand candidate evaluations and primary election outcomes. Did Wright's words temporarily damage Obama's image among the electorate? If so, how? Moreover, did African Americans and whites react to the speeches in the same way?⁴ None of these questions have been addressed in the research literature.

Using unique national poll data collected in the immediate aftermath of this controversy, I examine the influence of the Wright clips on American public opinion. The findings point out differences between blacks' and whites' perceptions of the events and their effects on the publics' views. I demonstrate how, among whites, Wright's language momentarily hurt Obama by causing people to feel negatively toward him and increasing apprehension about his ability to unite the nation around common goals. Interestingly, blacks' familiarity with African-American religious life provided a context for understanding the minister's messages and they were not distracted by the videos.

To move beyond this setback, Obama repeatedly denounced the pastor's comments, formally resigned his membership from Trinity United Church of Christ, and continued to run a de-racialized campaign to convince voters that his views differed from Wright's. More generally, this study contributes to the American political behavior literature by showing how unflattering campaign events influence voters' perceptions of public figures. The Wright/Obama story also illustrates how racial differences among the electorate can surface during political campaigns through candidates' religious background. Lastly, the findings document the harmful effects of candidates' associations with divisive religious leaders.

Religion, Race and Primary Campaign Politics

⁴ The 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll does not permit accurate generalizations about the opinions of Latinos and Asian-Americans.

The 2008 election was the year in which Democrats wanted to “loosen” the hold Republicans had on religious and morality issues in American politics. From 2000 to 2008 prominent Republican Party leaders championed these policy topics, portraying their political platforms as consistent with Christian teachings (Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Wilcox and Robinson 2007; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007). After disappointing showings of support from white religious voters in the two previous presidential cycles, Democratic candidates wanted to appeal to people of faith without alienating their secular supporters. Following this strategy, Barack Obama publically talked about his religious experiences and the relationship between faith, churches and democratic governance. In this political climate Obama’s image as a Christian family man may have made him especially vulnerable to the intense media scrutiny that accompanies presidential bids.

As part of the normal election process, political campaigns and news coverage provide the electorate with valuable information about candidates. In a context where leaders are defined by their party affiliation, public service experience, voting record, and accomplishments, one’s personal beliefs complete the image the public holds of office seekers. These individual factors have played an increasingly important role in candidate evaluations since the 1960s as elections transitioned from party-centered to candidate-centered events (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). Indeed, affect toward leaders operates in concert with voter’s political predispositions to shape the impressions citizens hold of contenders.

For presidential nominees, public perceptions are especially important because partisanship is constant across several contenders. Over the course of a primary season, citizens’ assessments of candidates may change as new information about leaders’

background is revealed. If the damage from these events is severe and not properly addressed by office seekers, one's election prospects can be curtailed. In Obama's case, the Wright incident temporarily hurt his popularity ratings and threatened to halt the momentum he was beginning to gain over Hillary Clinton.⁵

Based on the available evidence, the Wright story was not a deliberate or implicit attempt by politicians to inject racial issues into the primaries.⁶ Consequently, one contribution of this study is to shed light on the effects of unplanned occurrences that spotlight racial and religious issues, rather than purposeful campaign advertisements. Wright's notoriety was the result of investigative journalism. Exploring Obama's religious background, ABC News purchased videotapes of over 12 of the minister's sermons from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. After viewing these items, the network's staff excerpted clips from the worship service and these segments were broadcast on ABC News, Fox News, CNN, and posted on the World Wide Web.

Throughout the campaign, Obama and his team side-stepped racial topics to separate him from the civil rights leader stereotype that Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton and other elected officials fit. At one point when Obama was questioned about his views on racial reparations and affirmative action, for example, he responded by commenting on equality and social justice for all Americans, rather than specific groups. Obama clearly wanted to run as a political candidate, not a black candidate. Wright's statements, nonetheless, generated a great deal of public attention and stirred emotions along racial lines.

⁵ See Bartels (1988) for a discussion of the effects of momentum in presidential primaries.

⁶ See Mendelberg (2001) for a discussion of the political effects of deliberate and implicit campaign messages about racial issues.

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll in this period showed that 64% of likely voters were closely following the Wright/Obama story. And 67% of the electorate reported they were disturbed by the preacher's comments. What is more, a March 14-16, 2008 Rasmussen Reports survey of likely voters indicates that 77% of whites and 58% of blacks believed that Wright's statements were divisive. In the context of a historic election, these high levels of interest and strong public reactions demonstrate the importance of Obama's association with Wright. Despite Obama's best efforts to avoid discussing social differences, the ubiquitous videos forced individuals to grapple with the significance of race in American political life.

Media Events, Divisive Themes and Negative Affect Toward Candidates

The controversy regarding Rev. Wright's statements demonstrates how racial and religious forces affect campaigns. Wright's provocative remarks surfaced at a critical moment. From March 14-28, the recordings were looped on television and watched on YouTube by hundreds of thousands of people. Just days before this occurred, former Vice-Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro was criticized for suggesting that Obama's race provided an advantage for him in the primaries. These events, the Clinton's earlier offensive remarks about Dr. King and Obama's "fairy tale" aspirations, and the historic nature of Obama's bid further racialized the 2008 campaign. Wright's words exacerbated this situation by highlighting differences between whites and blacks, emphasizing themes of racism, and portraying the minister as an unpatriotic challenger of governmental authority. In the eyes of numerous voters, Obama was also guilty by association with his spiritual leader.

This was not the first time a black presidential aspirant was criticized for his ties to a controversial religious figure. During the 1984 primaries, Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was seeking the Democratic nomination, was attacked by the media for his relationship with Nation of Islam leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan. At several points before and during the primaries, Farrakhan made anti-Semitic remarks, spoke inappropriately about supporters of Israel, and made unflattering statements about Judaism (Tate 1994). He also commented on the pervasive racism in the U.S. and offered harsh critiques of America's economic and political systems.

Many whites were bothered by these statements. Indeed, it is widely believed that Jackson's connections to Farrakhan, coupled with his own campaign blunders, irreparably damaged his chance of securing the Democratic nomination (Tate 1994). Jackson's ability to reach out to non-blacks was impaired by his alignment with the divisive black minister. Under intense public pressure, Jackson denounced Farrakhan's comments as "reprehensible and morally indefensible" and distanced himself from the preacher (Tate 1994). Interestingly, African Americans' support for Rev. Jackson did not dip because of the controversy. Although most blacks did not agree with all of Farrakhan's views, his overall reputation for improving African-American communities made him highly-regarded by this group. The parallels between the Farrakhan/Jackson and Wright/Obama incidents are striking.

In theorizing about the role of race and religion in campaign politics several points are notable. Since African Americans are a minority group and black elected officials rarely run for president, they are often unfamiliar to most whites and other voters. When candidates seek national office they must first overcome these hurdles to

appeal to large segments of the voting public. To the extent that a candidate's racial and religious background limits his ability to garner broad support, their electoral prospects will be reduced. Because the nuances of black religious life (its theological focus and leadership style) are typically unusual to whites, these cultural factors may highlight distinctions between the groups that have detrimental political consequences.

Some examples of racially divisive statements from Wright's remarks include:

"[U.S.] is a country and a culture that is controlled by and run by rich white people."

"You [black men] are primary targets in an oppressive society..."

At various points in his sermons, Wright commented on slavery and white supremacy, describing the nation as the "U.S. of K.K.K..." (a reference to the Ku Klux Klan). If those comments were not destructive enough, other segments portrayed him as unpatriotic.⁷ He famously stated:

"Not God bless America, God damn America for killing innocent people! God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human! God damn America as long as she tries to act as if she is God and supreme!"

"We have got to change the way we are doing things as an arrogant, racist, military super power."

Wright's disloyal words were particularly hurtful for Obama because they made quite a few whites feel negatively toward him. Earlier in the campaign, Obama's opponents had doubted his patriotism, attacking the senator for not wearing an American flag pin or showing reverence during the singing of the national anthem. For some, Obama's relationship with Wright may have confirmed their suspicions about his lack of

⁷ It is important to note that Wright served in the U.S. Marine Corps.

patriotism. The preacher's polarizing statements about racial issues and criticism of government, consequently, produced anxiety among many white voters.

The jarring videos caused individuals to think more about differences among the electorate. This incident momentarily placed racial considerations in the forefront of evaluative criteria people utilized to assess Obama. In doing so, the divisive sentiments caused whites to express less favor toward Obama and question his ability to bring people together to advance national interests. As expected, Obama's popularity ratings declined after the Wright episode (Rasmussen Reports-March 17, 2008; Fox News Poll Report-April 2008; Balz and Johnson 2009). Responding to the situation in a March 18th speech in Philadelphia, Obama stated that Wright's sermons represented a dated view of social relations in America and encouraged citizens to begin a more constructive dialogue about race. But how did ordinary people feel about Obama and what social and political forces shape their assessment of him in this period?

Explaining Opinions about Obama

Although it is impossible to directly ascertain the impact of Wright's sermons on state-level primary elections, examining citizen's opinions of Barack Obama is feasible. A number of researchers have studied the political evaluation process (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). We know, for example, that the personal traits leaders exhibit, their performance in office, the overall impressions citizens hold of officials, and the electorate's partisan preferences determine how public figures are rated in surveys. Beyond personal characteristics, campaign events can alter the feelings voters have about candidates (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Campbell 2008). Although Americans were becoming more aware of Obama,

many people believed they did not know him very well. The Wright controversy may have added to the trepidation felt by many in this group.

At the start of the primaries, Obama was viewed as a progressive, Democratic candidate who wanted to end the war in Iraq, improve the sluggish economy, and provide healthcare for all Americans. In addition, his multiracial background (white mother, Kenyan father) and persona as a young, “post-racial” politician made him “acceptable” to a large mainstream audience. Minorities were especially excited about the possibility of electing an African-American president. After all, by March 2008 his early primary victories demonstrated that whites would support a black candidate. Obama’s cross racial appeal, his political background, and grounding in the concerns of marginalized communities made him a well-regarded candidate by many African-American voters. Research on race and politics suggests that these cultural and group-based considerations are paramount for explaining how blacks form value judgments about politicians (Walton 1985; Tate 1994; Dawson 1994).

From the perspective of campaigns and elections scholars, the Wright story fits within the category of “non-systematic” campaign effects (Campbell 2008). These events are short-term forces that effect citizens’ political evaluations (Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell 2008). The impact of crises, scandals, and candidate gaffes on election outcomes is often less than voters’ partisanship, the ideological makeup of the electorate, the incumbent president’s performance, or the state of the economy. These unsystematic factors, nonetheless, play an important role in determining how citizens view candidates in competitive elections.

There is some evidence that Obama's dip in popularity may have resulted from the Wright videos. Several national polls indicate that Obama's favorability ratings had slipped by 7-10 percentage points since the Wright spectacle began (April 2008 Fox News Poll Report; Balz and Johnson 2009). These surveys similarly show that Obama's projected support from likely voters diminished by 9-12%. Another potential indicator of Wright's influence appears in the April 2008 Pennsylvania Democratic primary, which Obama lost by more than nine points. Political analysts attributed this outcome to a lack of support from working class whites, many of whom disapproved of Obama's association with Jeremiah Wright. What is more, a Zogby poll administered in late April to Indiana residents before their primary shows that 21% of registered Democrats stated they were less likely to support Obama because of Wright's comments. A separate Fox News poll in the same period measured similar concerns among Democrats nationally- 36% reported they would not vote for Obama because of his fiery Chicago preacher. Thus, unexpected events can be politically consequential because they inform voters about candidates and may alter individuals' attitudes.

Differences in Responses to the Jeremiah Wright Controversy

Blacks and whites responded differently to the Jeremiah Wright clips. Simply put, these groups develop their religious-based political attitudes from different perspectives. Much of the cultural milieu of African-American churches and spiritual life is unfamiliar to non-blacks. The same fiery sermon from a black pulpit, for example, may be seen in another way by whites versus blacks. Two examples may help to illustrate this point. One can imagine a person who has never attended a NASCAR race event or an NHL hockey game in their life. It is likely that the events one witnesses at

the track or arena might produce a jarring reaction. Novices to these outings might be disturbed by the loud, rowdy behavior of loyal race fans or the player brawls that typically occur in the arena. Regulars, however, would regard the sights as common and not think much of them. Clearly, two different descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of the scenes would emerge from fans, compared to those who are not accustomed to these events. This is what happened with the Wright controversy.

One factor that contributed to confusion about Wright's pronouncements is the lack of awareness many whites had about black preaching styles. Political commentators described Wright's sermons as "bombastic," "divisive," "unpatriotic," "angry" and "resentful." These depictions partially result from the segregated nature of Christian worship services.⁸ Despite the racial reconciliation efforts that are taking place in many mainstream denominations, it is well-known that 11:00am Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American life. Indeed, most African Americans attend black congregations and whites worship with others who look like them (Roof and McKinney 1987; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Chaves 2004). For example, 66% of the over 300,000 congregations in the United States have a racial composition that is more than 80% white (Chaves 2004, 226). And white denominations only have about 2-3% black memberships on their church rolls (Roof and McKinney 1987). This pattern holds for African-American churchgoers, over 80% of whom worship in predominantly black religious settings (Roof and McKinney 1987; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Black and white religious adherents, thus, may cultivate their faith in largely "segregated" contexts.

⁸ Melissa Harris-Lacewell made this point in a March 19, 2008 NPR-Morning Edition interview.

The passionate delivery that Wright displays in the excerpts is indicative of African-American homiletics and is common among black clergy. Leading theologians, Harris (1995) and LaRue (2000) have commented on the significance of presentation and “rhetorical flair” in reaching African-American congregations. Growing out of a culture that values oratorical skills, the authors contend that the loud tone of sermons grabs the audience’s attention, conveys the importance of the topic being discussed, and demonstrates the minister’s firm commitment to addressing social concerns. Viewed through this lens, Wright was employing an indigenous communication style to speak to a predominantly black audience about race, religion, and politics. While African Americans are accustomed to hearing messages that discuss social justice and racial issues, Wright’s presentation and socio-political content was considered strange by mainstream media and political pundits.

Another reason blacks and whites responded to the news story differently lies in the theological distinctions between African-American Christianity and its mainstream counterpart. When Wright was attacked by the mainstream press, prominent black ministers, theologians, and commentators rushed to defend his statements as part of a black liberation theology tradition. But, pundits and everyday citizens wondered, what exactly is black liberation theology? Individuals questioned how this particular brand of Christianity might “color” Obama’s views if he were elected President.

Black theologies provide messages of social justice and equality, emphasize connections between religion and black political life, challenge the marginalized status of African Americans, and interrogate the status quo political system to improve it (Roberts 1971; Wilmore 1983; Cone 1986; Hopkins 1999; Calhoun-Brown 1999; Harris-Lacewell

2007). Born from the tumult of the civil rights and black power movements in the late 1960s, systematized black liberation theology provides a fundamental reinterpretation of Christian teachings in light of the African-American experience. While retaining some doctrinal aspects of Protestantism, black theologies focus on the plight of oppressed people as central themes of Christian texts.

Black Americans serve as a prototypical disadvantaged group. Human experiences of daily life are perceived from a religious vantage point. This theological perspective also emphasizes the active role of God and one's faith in the uplifting of marginalized communities. Jeremiah Wright is a leading proponent of black liberation theology and his messages are better understood as a form of black religious expression, rather than the rhetoric of a resentful, unpatriotic spiritual leader. The preacher's comments about U.S. policies and racial inequality fit within theological frameworks that critique democratic society to challenge and better the nation. One must account for these cultural distinctions in explaining attitudes about Barack Obama.

Hypotheses

Drawing upon the public opinion and race and politics literature, I derive four testable hypotheses about citizen's perceptions of Obama during the 2008 primaries.

Hypothesis 1: Whites and African Americans will closely follow the Wright/Obama news story.

Because of its national prominence and the incident's timing during a primary election, I expect both groups to watch media coverage of Wright's remarks and Obama's responses to the scandal.

Hypothesis 2: Whites and blacks will view the sermon clips differently. Whites should be disturbed by Wright's comments. African American will not be bothered by the remarks.

These groups draw upon different religious experiences to evaluate the recorded sound bites. For whites, Wright's words appear divisive, unpatriotic, and critical of mainstream society. Consequently, as whites think more about racial differences their opinions of Obama sour. Blacks, on the other hand, are not outraged by the pastor's comments because they are familiar with black religious expression and do not regard it as harmful.

Hypothesis 3: Whites who are disturbed by Wright's statements will rate Barack Obama negatively and are more likely to say he is not able to unite the country. In contrast, the Wright/Obama controversy will not influence blacks' assessment of Obama.

For some whites, Obama's past relationship with Rev. Wright raises concerns about his fitness to lead the country. Additionally, the racially charged views of Obama's spiritual mentor cause whites to question the candidate's ability to unite different people. For most African Americans, however, the Wright affair does not provide new evaluative information that effect individuals' opinions.

Hypothesis 4: Whites who closely follow the Wright/Obama media reports will be less likely to rate Obama negatively and say he cannot unite the nation to accomplish shared goals. African Americans' media consumption will not affect their evaluation of Obama.

Individuals who pay attention to several media reports of the Wright/Obama story will receive clarifying information about the meaning and context of Wright's theological perspective and Obama's distinct stance on racial issues. Since the controversy is not a distraction for blacks, their feelings about Obama are not influenced by press coverage.

In the next section of this paper, I describe the data and techniques employed to evaluate these propositions.

Data and Measures

I analyze data from the March 24-25, 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll, conducted by Hart and McInturff Research Companies. This unique survey is well-suited for my analysis because the data were collected immediately after the Wright/Obama controversy surfaced during the Democratic primaries. Ideally, one would prefer to use an academic survey that contains numerous social and political variables, along with questions relating to the specifics of the Wright/Obama situation. University-affiliated surveys, however, are often not in the field when important political events occur and time constraints limit the number of questions that are asked to

respondents. In light of these concerns, the NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey is the best alternative for addressing the research questions I examine in this study.⁹ It is a national telephone poll of 800 registered voters in the United States and is statistically representative of voters nationwide, accurately reflecting the gender, age, educational, geographic, and racial composition of the electorate.

The sample was drawn in the following manner: 350 geographic points were randomly selected proportionate to the population of each region and, within each region, by size of place (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey codebook). Individuals were selected following a probability design that allows all telephone numbers an equal chance of being included. One registered voter from each household was included, selected by a procedure that balances respondents by sex. The total sample size includes an oversample of 100 African-American voters, which brings the number of black respondents to 177. This oversampling permits more precise estimates of African-American opinions and facilitates comparison with white respondents. The analyses and results are weighted to conform to the demographic figures of the U.S. population. The total national sample of voters has a margin of error of +/- 3.7 points.

The NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey includes questions about how closely individuals are following the Wright/Obama story, measures of how much, if any, respondents are disturbed by the pastor's sermons, the public's feelings about Barack Obama, impressions of whether the candidate would be successful uniting the country, and traditional political, demographic and socioeconomic characteristic items. These data are available from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

⁹ I examined other surveys that contain limited data on the Wright/Obama affair. None of these instruments are superior for addressing the research questions I explore in this study.

Dependent Variables

I am interested in understanding how Wright's sermons might have damaged Obama's overall image. Specifically, what effect did the news clips have on evaluations of Obama and attitudes about his ability to bring people together? Since two of my hypotheses are worded as expectations about negative perceptions of Obama, both dependent variables are coded so that higher values reflect more negative sentiments. Respondents rated their feelings toward Obama on a five point ordinal scale from 1(very positive) to 5(very negative).¹⁰ Individuals were also asked if they felt Obama would be very successful, fairly successful, not too successful, or not at all successful "uniting all Americans around goals and objectives for the country." Responses are coded on a four point scale from 1(very successful) to 4 (not at all successful).

Key Explanatory Variables

A number of factors influence citizens' reactions to Rev. Wright's sermons. Interviewers posed the question, "How much, if at all, do the past statements of Reverend Wright disturb you?" Responses are coded on a four point ordinal scale from 0(do not disturb at all) to 3(disturb a great deal).¹¹ Another way to gauge the effects of Obama's "pastor problem" is to examine the political attitudes of people who monitored the events as they unfolded in the media. Individuals were asked, "How closely are you following the story about the past statements of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who is the former pastor of Barack Obama's church in Chicago?" Answers are coded from 0(not closely at

¹⁰ Thirteen "Don't Know and Not Sure" answers are treated as missing cases. The multivariate results are identical when these cases are recoded as "neutral" responses.

¹¹ "No opinion and Not Sure" answers are coded as "Do not disturb at all." The results are identical when these cases are treated as missing data.

all) to 3(very closely).¹² The other religious, political, socioeconomic, and demographic measures (and their coding schemes) are described in the appendix.

Analysis

There was much public interest in the Wright/Obama episode. Table 1 shows that 27% of whites reported they were watching the story very closely and 39% monitored the events somewhat closely. On the other hand, about 18% of whites said they were not too closely following the news reports and 16% admitted they were not closely tracking the controversy. Among blacks, approximately 30% indicate they were very closely engaged with the Wright affair and 31% followed details of the turmoil somewhat closely. In contrast, roughly 18% of African Americans were not too closely keeping up with media accounts and 22% showed little interest in this issue. Although majorities in both racial groups were attentive to the story, people had very different reactions to the events.

[Table one about here]

Whites were especially troubled by Wright's incendiary remarks. Table 2 shows that a plurality (38%) of this group said the video clips disturbed them a great deal and 21% were somewhat disturbed by the statements. Blacks, on the other hand, saw these events differently. In comparison, only 16% of African Americans reported they were greatly disturbed and 18% felt somewhat bothered by the controversy. The majority of black respondents (51%) were not at all concerned by the pastor's comments and 15% stated the sermons did not disturb them that much.

[Table two about here]

¹² Thirteen "Not sure" responses are treated as missing data. The multivariate results are identical when these cases are recoded to the "Not closely at all" category.

This more composed response results from the group's familiarity with black religious life. The 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, for example, shows that over half of African-American respondents (53%) indicate they attend religious services once a week or more often.¹³ About 15% said they are present twice a month, 6% participate once a month, and 16% of blacks report being at church once or a few times per year. Most of this involvement occurs in predominantly black congregations where religious messages are often fused with social and political themes (Roof and McKinney 1987; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Many blacks also felt that Rev. Wright's comments about race and government contained grains of truth. The minister's comments about the mistreatment of minorities, for example, compare well with national opinion data that documents high levels of perceived discrimination among blacks (McClain and Stewart 2009). Wright's critiques of U.S. foreign policy are in line with African-Americans' concerns about international policy as well (Walton 1985; McKenzie 2008). Consequently, the sermons were not considered shocking in black circles.

What factors account for individuals' perceptions of Barack Obama? Given the ordinal responses to the two candidate evaluation items, I employ the following ordered probit regression model for my multivariate analyses:

$$\text{Evaluation of Obama} = b_1(\text{Disturbed by Wright Comments}) + b_2(\text{Follow Story}) + b_3(\text{Church Attendance}) + b_4(\text{Partisanship}) + b_5(\text{Ideology}) + b_6(\text{Female}) + b_7(\text{Age}) + b_8(\text{Education}) + b_9(\text{Employed}) + u_1.$$

¹³ These reports may reflect over reporting due to social desirability effects (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993).

I use the coefficient estimates from this specification to compute predicted probabilities of a typical person's negative feelings about Obama and their beliefs about his inability to unite people to address national issues.¹⁴ The results are discussed in a straight-forward fashion that focuses on how key explanatory variables influence assessments of Obama. I also examined diagnostic tests which reveal that multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity are not major problems for my analysis.¹⁵

Several results are noteworthy. Table 3 shows that whites who are disturbed by Wright's comments are more likely to express negative sentiments about Obama. A typical person who is not disturbed by the videos has a small probability (0.03) of reporting very negative feelings about Obama. This probability steadily increases (0.06, 0.11) and peaks at 0.18 for individuals who are disturbed a great deal by Rev. Wright's views. Whites' disapproval of the divisive statements tainted their impressions of Barack Obama. But, attentiveness to media coverage matters as well. A typical respondent who paid a little attention to news about Wright's remarks and only heard part of the story is more likely (probability 0.30) to offer very negative appraisals of Obama, compared to individuals who monitored the story very closely (probability 0.13). This group's more careful following made them aware of differences between Wright's and Obama's beliefs. Additionally, whites who frequently attend church express more antipathy toward Obama, compared to others. This finding is logical since highly religious whites usually favor Republicans, rather than Democrats. Along the same line, partisanship and ideology effect opinions in a predictable manner. Whites who more strongly identify

¹⁴ I utilized the SPost post-estimation analysis of regression models software. Typical characteristics are the mean values for continuous variables and the modal category for ordinal variables. Each value had to be present in the sample for simulation purposes.

with the Republican Party are more apt to report negative feelings about Obama than others. Not surprisingly, conservatives hold more unfavorable views about the liberal candidate, compared to their counterparts. Better educated whites, however, are less negative in their evaluation of Barack Obama.

[Table three about here]

A very different story emerges from the data for African-American respondents. Reactions to Rev. Wright's discourse have no effect on citizens' attitudes toward Obama. Attention to the news story, similarly, does not influence how blacks assess the candidate. These findings confirm hypothesis 2 regarding differences in the political impact of Wright's remarks on whites' opinions, compared to African Americans. While whites' negative reactions to Jeremiah Wright hurt Obama's image among this group, the incident did not harm the candidate's standing among most blacks. Some African Americans, nonetheless, expressed negative sentiments toward Obama. As expected, individuals who closely identify with Republicans rate Obama more negatively than others. This result stems from political differences between parties in the electorate as a whole. It is important to remember, however, that the number of black Republicans is small, so this finding should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

Another topic to consider is whether Americans viewed Obama as a unifying figure, given his association with Rev. Wright. Interestingly, whites who are troubled by the preacher's sermons are more pessimistic about Obama's chances of bringing the country together. A representative person who is disturbed a great deal by the videos has a higher probability (0.19) of reporting that Obama will not be successful, compared to

¹⁵ None of the VIF values exceed 1.30 and the mean VIF is 1.18.

individuals who are not disturbed much (probability 0.09), or not at all bothered by Wright's remarks (probability 0.06). It is likely that these people believe Obama's connections to a divisive, unpatriotic religious leader damaged his credibility as a spokesperson for political unity. In addition, whites who very closely followed the Wright story are less likely (probability 0.20) to say Obama would be unsuccessful uniting individuals to accomplish goals, compared to the least attentive group (probability 0.38). After the Wright videos were made public, Barack Obama delivered a speech which encouraged citizens to work together and was praised for his ability to connect individuals across racial lines. This information became part of the overall impressions that attentive citizens utilized to form opinions about Obama. Partisanship and ideology structure political evaluations as well. Republicans and conservatives are doubtful about Obama's ability to unite different groups. Finally, whites with more education are less critical of Obama's capacity to bring people together.

The results for African Americans are similar to the previous candidate evaluation model. Reactions to Wright's comments and attention to news media have no effect on blacks' opinions. Only one explanatory variable, partisanship, is significant in this model. Black Republican identifiers express more pessimism about Obama's prospects of convincing disparate groups to work together to address national concerns. Together, the results from the multivariate models indicate that Wright's sermons negatively influence whites' views about Obama. Blacks' opinions, however, are unaffected by reports of the minister's messages. In short, blacks and whites took away separate meanings from the clips they saw early in the Democratic primaries. These perceptions had dissimilar effects on evaluations of Obama as a political candidate.

Discussion and Conclusions

A few months after the videos first surfaced, Barack Obama told reporters, “If we had not handled the Rev. Wright episode properly, I think we could have lost.”¹⁶ Clearly, people were concerned about the repercussions from this event. The findings from this study show that Wright’s comments had an adverse effect on whites’ attitudes about Obama. National poll data reveal that the minister’s remarks were viewed differently by whites, compared to African Americans. This was a natural consequence of the two groups’ different religious experiences and worldviews. Wright’s comments highlighted differences between blacks and whites, temporarily damaged Obama’s campaign by causing individuals to feel negatively toward him, and increased concerns about his ability to unite individuals around common goals. In important ways, the Rev. Wright controversy helps us understand how racial and religious matters shape the public’s evaluations of political leaders.

The results also suggest how unexpected media reports can hinder a candidates’ political momentum in the short term. Perhaps, one reason why Obama could not break away from Hillary Clinton until summer 2008 was the inertia caused by the Rev. Wright situation. Although Obama’s early victories and the novelty of his campaign had attracted substantial media attention, these favorable circumstances did not translate into large gains from new supporters in the electorate. The baggage from the Wright affair and Obama’s April “bitter” comments about small town Americans may have harmed his ability to connect with working class white voters. It is plausible that the Wright dilemma increased this group’s concerns about racial differences and partly offset the

¹⁶ From a press interview quoted in (Balz and Johnson 2009).

gains Obama would have achieved from perceptions of his increasing viability as a candidate. This episode, thus, illustrates how our understanding of campaign dynamics may be conditioned by racial and religious considerations.

Another insight of this study for religion and politics scholars merits attention as well. In the last decade, national office seekers have increasingly paid attention to religious voters. Indeed, hot button issues like abortion, stem cell research, and same sex unions are subjects that voters consider important for the country. A leader's religious background, beliefs, and spiritual associates are significant factors that individuals consider when forming impressions of candidates. Beyond one's views on these morality and ethics topics, his personal faith experiences may cause the public to perceive him as an atypical nominee. This was the case for 2008 Republican presidential hopeful, Mitt Romney, whose candidacy never reached fruition, in part, due to the electorate's concerns about his Mormon faith. As the present study shows, for a short time, Obama's image similarly suffered from his connection to Rev. Wright's church. In this same contest, John McCain also had to distance himself from two prominent ministers (Revs. John Hagee and Rod Parsley) who made offensive comments about Catholics, Jews, and the Islamic faith. So, while courting religious constituents is often desirable, public figures must be careful to associate themselves with clerics who aid their chances of electoral success, rather than hinder it. Further research should be conducted on the causes and consequences of these issues for American campaign politics.

This study also leads one to ask if Jeremiah Wright was damaging for racial or religious reasons. Indeed, Wright's comments about racism and systematic inequalities were viewed as very polarizing by many Americans. One wonders, however, if his

statements about racial matters or his “unpatriotic” remarks were deemed more distasteful by some whites? It is difficult to definitely answer this question with available survey data. To be sure, the press highlighted both dimensions of this controversy in their coverage of the story. Untangling the effects of racial and religious rhetoric in political campaigns is a cumbersome, but important task. People may have objected to Wright’s “un-American” words, rather than his racially-tinged statements about whites and mainstream society. But, these domains might represent different types of negative affect toward individuals. Unpacking the sentiments that structure citizens’ evaluations of candidates is paramount for improving upon current research in public opinion.

Although the controversy surrounding Wright’s sermons momentarily hurt Obama’s presidential bid, he ultimately won the Democratic primaries. Despite the short-lived harm from his former pastor’s words, these events unfolded when voters were worried about the failing economy and disgruntled toward the Iraq war. Since Obama’s campaign was perceived to address these issues in a new way, he ultimately regained his appeal among Democrats as Wright’s statements faded from public memory. Clearly, the news story did not strike a decisive blow to Obama’s presidential nomination. In the end, his message of hope and political change appealed to primary voters.

Appendix

March 24-25, 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll-Questions and Response Categories

Religious Measure: The church attendance measure asks, “How often do you attend services at a church, synagogue, mosque, or other place of worship?” Answers are coded from 1(never) to 6(once a week or more).¹⁷

Political Variables: Partisanship is coded from 1(strong Democrat) to 7(strong Republican).¹⁸ Ideology is coded from 1(very liberal) to 5(very conservative).¹⁹

Demographic and Socioeconomic Variables: Women are coded as ones, men are coded zero. Age is coded in 12 ordinal categories from 1(18-24) to 12(75 and over). Education level is coded in ordinal categories from 1(grade school) to 9(Doctoral/law degree).²⁰ Employment status is coded 0(not employed) and 1(currently employed).

¹⁷ Thirty “Not Sure” cases are recoded to the modal attendance category (once a week or more). The multivariate results are identical when these cases are treated as missing values.

¹⁸ “Other and Not Sure” responses are coded as Independents. The multivariate results are identical when these cases are treated as missing data.

¹⁹ Forty-eight “Not Sure” cases are recoded to the modal category (moderate). The multivariate results are identical when these cases are treated as missing values.

²⁰ Fifteen “Not Sure/Refused” responses are recoded to the modal education category (bachelor’s degree). The multivariate results are identical when these cases are treated as missing data.

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**Table 1. Public Interest in Rev. Jeremiah Wright Story
March 2008**

FOLLOWED WRIGHT STORY	WHITES	BLACKS
Very Closely	27%	30%
Somewhat Closely	39%	31%
Not Too Closely	18%	18%
Not Closely At All	16%	22%

Source: March 24-25, 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll. Note: Numerical values are rounded to whole numbers.

**Table 2. Reactions to Rev. Jeremiah Wright's Comments
March 2008**

DISTURBED BY WRIGHT'S REMARKS	WHITES	BLACKS
Disturbed A Great Deal	38%	16%
Disturbed Somewhat	21%	18%
Do not Disturb that Much	14%	15%
Do not Disturb at All	27%	51%

Source: March 24-25, 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll. Note: Numerical values are rounded to whole numbers.

Table 3. Ordered Probit Models-Evaluations of Barack Obama

Negative Affect-Obama			Inability to Unite the Country		
Variable	Whites Coefficient (Std. Error)	Blacks Coefficient (Std. Error)	Variable	Whites Coefficient (Std. Error)	Blacks Coefficient (Std. Error)
Disturbed	0.33*** (0.05)	-0.12 (0.10)	Disturbed	0.24*** (0.05)	0.12 (0.09)
Follow Story	-0.19*** (0.06)	-0.06 (0.09)	Follow Story	-0.18** (0.07)	-0.11 (0.10)
Church Attendance	0.06** (0.03)	0.01 (0.06)	Church Attendance	0.02 (0.03)	-0.07 (0.06)
Partisanship	0.14*** (0.03)	0.15** (0.06)	Partisanship	0.08** (0.04)	0.14** (0.06)
Ideology	0.35*** (0.06)	0.15 (0.10)	Ideology	0.27*** (0.07)	0.01 (0.10)
Female	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.20)	Female	-0.04 (0.11)	0.11 (0.21)
Age	-0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	Age	0.03 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)
Education	-0.11*** (0.03)	-0.03 (0.05)	Education	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.06 (0.06)
Employed	-0.01 (0.12)	0.24 (0.20)	Employed	0.16 (0.13)	0.05 (0.21)
Cut1	0.10 (0.30)	1.04 (0.61)	Cut1	0.16 (0.34)	-0.10 (0.59)
Cut2	1.12 (0.30)	1.70 (0.60)	Cut2	1.52 (0.34)	0.90 (0.59)
Cut3	1.82 (0.30)	2.25 (0.63)	Cut3	2.21 (0.35)	1.48 (0.64)
Cut4	2.52 (0.31)	2.66 (0.63)			
N	506	167	N	477	164
Wald chi2(9)	221.01	22.48	Wald chi2(9)	99.94	19.14
Prob>chi2	0.00	0.01	Prob>chi2	0.00	0.02
Pseudo R2	0.15	0.05	Pseudo R2	0.09	0.05

Source: March 24-25, 2008 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Presidential Election Poll. Note: Entries are probit coefficients and robust standard errors.

***p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, ***p < .01**