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**SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS IN ESTIMATED SUPPORT FOR A  
BLACK PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In December of 2006, a *Newsweek* poll reported that ninety-three percent of registered voters would be willing to support a black presidential candidate, but only fifty-six percent of respondents believe that America is ready for a black president. The discrepancy between individual readiness and perceptions of the nation's readiness may underscore deeper attitudes about race and presidential politics in America. In this paper, we conduct a list experiment to gauge measures of social desirability reporting in individuals' support for a black presidential candidate. We find considerable evidence that, when asked directly about support for a black presidential candidates, respondents significantly over-report support. We find that Democrats and liberals report higher levels of overt support and have higher levels of social desirability reporting than Republicans and conservatives. Our evidence suggests that well-educated and politically active respondents are the least likely to misreport their support for a black presidential candidate. The results presented in this paper question the reliability and validity of public opinion polls on the question of race and politics, while simultaneously presenting a truer portrait of the nation's readiness for a black presidential candidate.

## **INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE:**

In December of 2006, a *Newsweek* poll reported that ninety-three percent of registered voters would be willing to support a black presidential candidate (Alter 2006). The same poll also reported that only fifty-six percent of respondents believe that America is ready for a black president. The discrepancy between individual readiness and perceptions of the nation's readiness is, perhaps, indicative of the state of the electorate's deeper beliefs about race and national politics. Instead of confessing to persisting personal anxieties or prejudices, individuals may be projecting their own hesitations onto their ideas about the American electorate.

Indeed, public opinion polls often paint a rosy picture of the nation's trend toward growing racial tolerance. The General Social Survey, for example, asked respondents repeatedly between 1972 and 1996 if they would support a qualified black presidential candidate if their party nominated one. In 1972, just over 75% of respondents claimed they would. By 1996, the number had climbed 17 percentage points to a high of ninety-two percent. What public opinion polls report, however, is only what respondents will freely divulge. Matters are more complicated, as evidenced from the historical track record of black candidates, when these same respondents make their decisions to vote in the privacy of a polling booth. In the 1989 mayoral election in New York City, for instance, David Dinkins, an African-American candidate, was running 14- to 18- points ahead of his challenger, Rudolph Giuliani, in public opinion polls the days preceding the election. His margin of victory on Election Day was just 2 points (Berinsky 1999). This divergence between expressed support in pre-election polls and actual voting behavior is not confined to local elections. The 1989 Virginia Gubernatorial race pitted the black candidate, L. Douglas Wilder, against a white opponent, Marshall Coleman. Polls indicated that Mr. Wilder had a comfortable 10-point edge, which, on Election Day, dissipated into a tight

quarter-point victory (Traugott and Price 1992; Finkel, Guterbock and Borg 1991). More recent evidence from the 2006 Gubernatorial race in Massachusetts and the Senate race in Tennessee, though, signaled to some observers that the vast discrepancy between pre-election polling and Election Day voting behavior may, in fact, be dissipating.

<< INSERT GRAPH 1 HERE >>

Although social scientists acknowledge the puzzling relationship between race and politics, the literature remains inconclusive on how race functions in elections – and particularly in national elections. How does the race of a candidate affect voters’ decision-making process? More pointedly, how does race play into the decisions of white voters when faced with a black candidate (Reeves 1997)? Research suggests that a candidate’s race may influence a voter’s decision in two ways—through overt racial attitudes or through the indirect, unconscious attribution of competencies and beliefs based on the candidate’s race. Examples of simple, or old-fashioned, racism include a refusal to vote for a candidate based on skin color alone. In an early study, Sigelman and Welch (1984) show that black Presidential candidates face considerable opposition on the basis of skin color alone with 16 percent of respondents rejecting the black candidate outright. More recently, Terkildsen (1993) finds that simple racism remains an important factor in candidate selection. She argues that “regardless of individual prejudice, the candidate’s personal characteristics, issue positions, or experience, [white] respondents were less likely to vote for or positively evaluate...black candidates” (Terkildsen 1993: 1048). The results suggest that simple racism remains salient in American politics.

Alternately, other scholarship suggests that the nature of racism in America has changed

and is now best described by what Krysan (2000) refers to broadly as the “new racism approaches”. The assumed characteristics interpretation posits that voters may use pre-existing assumptions and information about outgroup members to judge potential candidates when individuating information is scarce or unavailable (Sigelman et al. 1995). This research shows that voter choice may be influenced indirectly through unconscious inferences about candidates based on race. In analyzing the 1982 California gubernatorial election, Citrin, Green, and Sears (1990) suggest that race itself did not lead to the defeat of black candidate Tom Bradley. Instead, racial attitudes may have been played a role indirectly with anti-black sentiment being channeled through social and cultural issues. The authors conclude that “black candidates are stereotyped as liberals favorable to ‘big’ government, ‘soft’ on crime,” (Citrin, Green and Sears 1990: 92) regardless of the candidate’s voting record. Similarly, Sigelman et al. (1995) reject the hypothesis that white voters engage in simple racism, arguing instead for interaction effects between a candidate’s race, ideology and issue positions. Like Citrin, Green and Sears, their evidence seems to support a theory of racial prejudice that attributes modern racism to processes of racial stereotyping, whereby ideas about the outgroup provide shortcuts or cues about the candidate’s beliefs and competencies. Sears et al. (1997) argue for the independent explanatory power of symbolic racism, defined as “a blend of anti- black affect with the perception that blacks violate traditional nonracial values” (Sears 1997: 22) such as individualism and morality. Accordingly, white voters may feel that blacks garner too much attention from elites, make excessive demands on the provision of social services, and should instead simply work harder to get ahead (Sears 1997: 22). Their analysis uses voting for a black president, among other measures, as an indicator of old fashioned racism and finds that the explanatory power of symbolic racism – proxied by questions about the deservedness and treatment of blacks – far

outweighs the effects of so-called simple racism. Recent experimental evidence also suggests interaction effects between a candidate's race and political ideology. In an experiment in which candidate literature varied by racial tones and political ideology, Weaver (2005) finds that light-skinned African American candidates are evaluated differently than dark-skinned African American candidates, and that respondents select candidates through a simultaneous evaluation of their race and political ideology.

While the literature on race and politics remains inconclusive on *how* a candidate's race influences individuals' voting behavior, few scholars would dispute the continued salience of racial attitudes in understanding political behavior. Researchers typically rely on public opinion polling to elicit information about American attitudes on race and politics. However, considerable evidence undermines the validity and reliability of estimates measured through public opinion polls. Research suggests that respondents over-report particular activities and attitudes, like voting (Clausen 1968; Traugott and Katosh 1979), support for racial integration (Berinsky 1999; Berinsky 2002) and religious attendance (Presser and Stinson 1998; Hadway, Marler and Chaves 1993). One explanation offered by social scientists concerns respondents' attempt to provide socially desirable responses. This misreporting derives from respondents' desire to gain social approval, or present themselves in a favorable light (Phillips and Clancy 1972). As Krysan (2000) points out in her review of the literature on race and public opinion, using self-reported measure of support for black candidates as a reliable indicator of white racial attitudes poses two serious methodological problems. First, "social desirability pressures operate to suppress self-reports of negative racial attitudes" (Krysan 2000: 138). Moreover, "survey data on racial attitudes have little relevance to behavior outside the survey context" (Krysan 2000: 138). The relationship between survey attitudes and actual behavior is better thought of as

simply correlational, rather than exhibiting a direct one-to-one correspondence (Krysan 2000; Schuman et al. 1997).

Over the last decade, social scientists have developed increasingly sophisticated methodologies for detecting and measuring socially desirable reporting in public opinion polls. In an analysis of school integration data from the National Election Survey (NES), for instance, Berinsky (1999) found that the variables that predict support for school integration are the same variables predicting respondents' willingness to provide an answer. As a result, "it appears that the process by which individuals decide to offer an opinion is not independent of the process by which they decide what that opinion is." (Berinsky 1999: 1216) This selection bias indicates that respondents offering an opinion on the question of school integration are systematically different than those that opt *not* to offer an opinion. By selecting the "don't know" option, respondents in the NES are, in fact, concealing their true opinion through social desirability reporting.

Additional research suggests that Internet-based surveys decrease social desirability reporting by removing the experimenter/interviewer from the research setting. In a controlled experiment, Evans et al. (2003) test whether racial bias in responses from pen-and-paper surveys differs from that of Internet surveys. As a corollary, they test whether unsupervised, in-lab responses to Internet surveys differ from unsupervised, out-of-lab responses to Internet surveys. They present robust findings that the Internet can reduce social desirability reporting in self-administered surveys by removing the interviewer/experimenter from the research setting. Their findings are supported by a meta-analytical review of social science research by Richman et al. (1999). In a systematic analysis of sixty-one studies spanning a thirty-year period, the authors argue that the social context of the experiment, rather than the instrument of measurement, affects social desirability reporting. They note that "using a computer instrument per se has no

consistent effect on distortion; the effect, if any, depends on what the instrument measures and on moderating factors such as whether respondents are tested alone or in the presence of others” (Richman et al. 1999). Nonetheless, the anonymity of a computer-based survey, as opposed to a face-to-face survey, heightened respondents’ willingness to provide true responses.

An alternative technique for uncovering social desirability bias – and the methodology employed in this paper – utilizes a list experiment to measure the magnitude and directionality of the bias. The list experiment asks respondents in a control group and an experimental group *how many* statements in a list they agree with, and then compares the mean number of agreements in both groups to detect true support for the research statement. (An expanded description of this methodological approach is provided in the subsequent section.) Pioneered by Kuklinski, Cobb and Gilens (1997) to understand social desirability bias in reporting racial attitudes in the ‘New South’, the list experiment has become increasingly popular as a methodological tool to both estimate true support for an attitude or policy, as well as measure the magnitude and directionality of social desirability bias (Nederhof 1985). Sniderman and Carmines (1997) used this technique to accurately gauge perceptions of affirmative action programs, while Brueckner, Morning and Nelson (2005) conducted a list experiment to understand respondents’ true opinions on the biological construction of race. Political scientists have used the list experiment to detect social desirability bias in self-reported survey responses about voting behavior. Kane, Craig and Wald (2004) conducted a list experiment to measure bias in voters’ self-reported attitudes towards a Jewish presidential candidate, while Streb et al. (2007) recently reported results of a list experiment gauging social desirability bias in support for a female presidential candidate.

## DATA & METHODS:

### *METHODS:*

Given the hypothesis that respondents hide their true preferences when asked directly about socially sensitive topics like race and politics, we conducted an experiment to gauge the level of true support for a black presidential candidate. As opposed to conventional survey research, experiments enable researchers to overcome problems of reciprocal causation and omitted variable bias present in observational studies (Druckman et al. 2006). This type of experimental research can provide insight into causal processes that are often difficult to sort out through observational studies alone. While our study is not designed to adjudicate between competing causal hypotheses, it does examine the shortcomings of public opinion research in adequately controlling for one form of response bias.

To produce estimates of support for a black presidential candidate purged of social desirability bias, we conducted a list experiment. The list experiment measures social desirability bias by comparing overt support with measures of true support for a research question<sup>3</sup>. To develop measures of overt support, respondents in a poll group are asked directly about their support for a research statement. We anticipate that *some* respondents will affirm their support for a black Presidential candidate because they believe that an affirmative response is *socially desirable*, not because they truly support the research statement. Thus, we use this measure of support as a measurement of overt support.

To develop an estimate of true support, we first randomly assign respondents to either the control or treatment group. Respondents in the control group are shown three statements, all

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<sup>3</sup> We use the terminology of *true* and *overt* support when referencing the results of the list experiment and the poll group, respectively. While we acknowledge complications in claiming that our research provides *true* estimates of support, we elect to maintain this terminology throughout the paper to consistently differentiate between estimates from the experiment and the poll group.

related to American politics but unrelated to our specific research question, and asked to indicate *how many* of the statements they support *without* revealing which statements they support. This phrasing enables respondents to conceal support for answers deemed socially *undesirable*.

Respondents in the treatment group are then shown the *same three statements* as the control group, but with an *additional fourth statement* about support for a black presidential candidate. Again, respondents are instructed not to indicate which statements they agree with, but only how many. After determining the mean number of agreements for each group, we can then compare the mean number of statements to which respondents in the control group agreed to the mean number of statements to which respondents in the experiment group agreed. Based on the assumptions of random assignment to treatment and control groups, any difference in group means may be attributed to the experimental “treatment”—in this case, the research question. For example, an observed control group mean of 2.0 (indicating that, on average, respondents agree with two statements) and an observed treatment group mean of 2.5 (indicating that, on average, respondents agreed with 2.5 statements) would indicate that 50% of respondents truly agree with the additional research question. This difference in means is then treated as the proportion of respondents supporting the research question, and subsequently used in our analysis as a measure of true support.

After estimating the proportion of true support, we compare this number to the proportion of overt support from respondents in the poll group. The difference between overt support and true support provides the estimate of social desirability bias. Using a difference in proportions test, we then test whether the proportion of respondents affirming overt support for the research question was significantly different from the proportion of respondents affirming true support for the research question.

Our nationally representative sample of 1,560 respondents was randomized into three groups: A, B and C. Respondents in Group A (n=514) were asked directly to indicate whether or not they agree with the following statement: “I am willing to support a black Presidential candidate.” Responses in Group A were treated as the equivalent of a public opinion poll to measure overt support for a black Presidential candidate.

In Group B (n=552), respondents were presented with a series of three statements and asked *how many* statements they supported. Respondents were specifically instructed *not* to indicate which statements they supported, but simply to select the total number. The following three statements were presented to respondents in Group B, the control group:

- I think Presidential campaigns are too costly.
- I am willing to support stronger immigration laws.
- I think the war in Iraq will ultimately make the US safer.

The three statements were presented in randomized order to control for the possibility that the ordering of statements would impact responses.

Respondents in Group C (n=494) were presented with four statements. The first three were identical to those presented to Group B, but with an additional fourth statement, our research statement. Thus, their statements were:

- I think Presidential campaigns are too costly.
- I am willing to support stronger immigration laws.
- I think the war in Iraq will ultimately make the US safer.

- I am willing to support a black Presidential candidate

Again, the ordering of the statements was randomized to ensure that the arrangement of statements did not bias responses. Respondents in Group C are referred to here as the “treatment” group since they received the additional fourth statement.

After answering the research question, respondents were asked four questions about their voting behavior, political affiliation, ideological commitment and media interest. Appendix A contains the four questions asked of the 1,560 respondents in the sample. Respondents received the group-specific question *before* being asked about their voting history, political affiliation or ideological commitment to avoid biasing responses to the list experiment and poll questions.

#### DATA:

Our list experiment was conducted in conjunction with Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences, an NSF-funded program enabling social science researchers to collect original experimental data. In conjunction with TESS, samples are fielded by Knowledge Networks. Knowledge Network utilizes random digit dialing (RDD) to recruit a panel of survey participants. Households that agree to participate in the panel are provided with WebTV if they lack Internet access to facilitate completion of the organization’s Internet-based surveys. (For more information on Knowledge Networks, visit <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com>.) From this pool of active participants, Knowledge Networks randomly selects panel members to participate in upcoming surveys and experiments. For our list experiment, a total of 2,184 individuals were chosen to

participate. The overall response rate was 71.4%, ultimately yielding a sample of 1,560 participants. The survey was fielded between June 7, 2007 and June 13, 2007.<sup>4</sup>

Over three-quarters of the respondents in our sample self-identified as white, while fewer than 10% of respondents self-identified as black. Although the sample was randomly drawn from respondents over 18 years of age, only 17% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29. Twenty-eight percent of respondents were between 30 and 44, while nearly thirty percent of respondents were between 45 and 59. Approximately one-quarter of respondents were over the age of 60. On a 7-point ideology scale ranging from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative”, twenty-five percent of respondents identified as extremely liberal, liberal, or slightly liberal, while thirty-six percent of respondents identified as extremely conservative, conservative or slightly conservative. The remaining 39% of respondents identified as politically moderate. A complete description of the sample data is listed in Table 1.

<< INSERT TABLE 1 HERE >>

## **RESULTS:**

By subtracting the mean for the control group from the experiment group mean, we obtain the proportion of true support for a black presidential candidate. For the sample as a whole, the mean for the experimental group is 2.54 and the mean for the control group is 1.84 (Table 2). Subtraction produces an estimated proportion of true support of 0.70 indicating that 70% of respondents would actually support a black presidential candidate. We next run a

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<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted nearly a year and a half before the 2008 Presidential election. Nonetheless, most major candidates – including Barack Obama – had declared their candidacy by the summer of 2007.

difference of means test to determine if the proportion of true support is significantly greater than zero. Our result is highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Next, we estimate the difference in control and experiment means for a variety of subgroups. True support among female respondents (76%) is 12 percentage points higher than among male respondents (64%). Results for income are reported for respondents falling above and below the category in our dataset closest to the national household median. For respondents with household incomes of \$49,999 or below, true support is 68%. The proportion of true support for respondents with household incomes of \$50,000 or above is slightly higher at 71%,

<< INSERT TABLE 2 HERE >>

True support increases monotonically with additional years of education. Only 44% of respondents who have not completed high school expressed true support for the research question. For respondents who have graduated high school, the number increases by over thirteen percentage points to 57%. Over seventy-five percent of respondents with some college education expressed true support (77%), while college graduates have the highest level of true support for a black presidential candidate at 92%.

Having analyzed our results by standard demographic variables, we move to results by measures of political engagement and partisan identification. Respondents who are more informed and most likely to vote far exceed the less engaged in levels of support for a black presidential candidate. While under 50% of respondents who answered that they either followed the news “hardly ever” or “only now and then” support a black candidate (47%), a striking 80% of better-informed respondents do. Those respondents who reported voting in the last

presidential election had high levels of true support—77%—while, again, those who did not vote were much less supportive (28%).

The highest level of true support for a black presidential candidate (87%) appears to be among respondents who identify as Republicans<sup>5</sup>. Independents, broadly conceived, have the next highest level of support at 72%. Results for Democrats suggest that only 60% ‘truly’ support a black candidate. Grouped by ideology, we find very similar results, although the range of proportions is much smaller. Liberals<sup>6</sup> offer the least support for a black president (70%), followed by moderates (71%), and conservatives (73%).

To estimate the magnitude of social desirability bias on reported support for a black presidential candidate, we compare the level of support in the poll or overt group to our calculated measures of true support. For the sample as a whole, overt support for a black presidential candidate is 84% (Table 3). True support, however, is only 70%, which produces an estimated social desirability bias of 14 points. Using a difference in proportions test, we find that the difference between overt and true support is significantly greater than zero ( $p < 0.001$ ).

<< INSERT TABLE 3 HERE >>

Repeating this comparison of overt and true support, we generate estimates of the magnitude of social desirability bias for a variety of subgroups. Although men’s level of overt support is about six percentage points below women’s, we find that the desirability effect among

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<sup>5</sup> Respondents who self-identified as either “strong Republicans” or “not very strong Republicans” are grouped into the Republican category. Respondents who self-identified as “Independent, close to Democrat”, “Independent”, or “Independent, close to Republican” are grouped into the Independent category. Respondents who self-identified as “strong Democrats” or “not very strong Democrats” are grouped into the Democrat category.

<sup>6</sup> Liberals include respondents answering “extremely liberal”, “slightly liberal”, or “liberal” while conservatives include respondents answering “extremely conservative”, “slightly conservative”, or “conservative” to the 7-point ideology question. Moderates are all respondents who self-identified as “Moderate, middle of the road”.

men is nonetheless much higher. For men, overt support for a black presidential candidate is 81%, but true support drops to 64% -- a social desirability effect of 17 percentage points. Women's overt support, however, is only 11 points higher than their true support (87% vs. 76%). Differences between overt and true support are significantly greater than zero for both men and women. By income, we find that those respondents with higher incomes are more likely to provide socially desirable answers when asked directly about their support for a black Presidential candidate. The difference between overt and true support for respondents with incomes \$50,000 and above is 18 percentage points, but only 12 points for those with incomes \$49,999 and less.

We find that more educated respondents are less likely to give socially desirable answers. Our research indicates that the magnitude of social desirability bias decreases with additional education. For example, respondents who have not completed high school have the lowest overt support (74%), the lowest true support (44%), and the highest level of social desirability bias (over 30 percentage points). The level of social desirability bias then steadily drops as years of education increase to high school graduates (24 points), respondents with some college (13 points), and college graduates (-0.06). The negative social desirability bias for college graduates results from a higher proportion of true than overt support. This difference of proportions is significantly different from zero ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Our results indicate the expected directionality of social desirability bias when broken down by measures of political participation. Respondents who were least likely to follow the news were also the most likely to over-report support for a black presidential candidate with a social desirability effect of over 34 percentage points. More informed respondents had just a 5-point gap in overt and true support. Likewise, respondents who voted in the 2004 elections

differed in overt and true support by only 9 points, while respondents who did not vote had a social desirability bias of almost 50 percentage points.

We move finally to estimates of the social desirability effect by partisan affiliation and ideology. While respondents identifying as Democrats had the highest level of overt support, true support plummets to just below 60% -- an estimated social desirability effect of 27 percentage points. Independents' overt support is also high -- about 84% -- but the level of true support drops to 72%, producing a desirability effect of 12 points. As with college graduates, the desirability effect among Republicans is negative due to a higher proportion of true than overt support. It should be noted that, although the desirability effect is negative, Republicans have the highest proportion of true support for a black presidential candidate. We observe similar trends by self-reported ideology. Conservatives have a lower proportion of overt support, but a higher proportion of true support than liberals. The desirability effect among self-identifying conservatives is just over 12 points. Liberals have the highest proportion of overt support, but the lowest proportion true support. The estimate for social desirability reporting for self-reported liberals is 19 percentage points. Independents exhibit only an 8 point discrepancy between overt and true support. Given these counterintuitive results by both partisan identification and ideology, we estimated several alternate models to help explain the low level of support for a black presidential candidate among self-identifying Democrats and liberals and high level of support among Republicans and conservatives. Results from these models are reported in Appendix B.

## DISCUSSION:

In our discussion section, we highlight four key findings of our research with reference to social desirability reporting by education, race, political participation and partisan affiliation. In dialogue with existing literature, our results offer alternative evidence about how social desirability operates at the intersection of race and politics. As reported by education category, our research reveals that social desirability bias *increases* as level of education *decreases* — a relationship in the *reverse* direction than reported by much of the literature. Previous research suggests that the better educated are more likely to conceal their true preferences (Jackman 1973, 1978; Jackman and Muha 1984), as the social norms governing socially desirability reporting are most prevalent amongst the nation's elite. The experimental evidence offered by Brueckner, Morning and Nelson (2005) corroborates this hypothesize. They report higher levels of social desirability reporting for well-educated respondents when queried about support for biological conceptions of racial difference. Our results, however, reveal the opposite trend in the relationship between education and social desirability bias.

Likewise, true support for a black presidential candidate increases monotonically as the level of education increases, a finding again at odds with existing literature and recent experimental evidence. In a similar list experiment, Streb et al. (2007) recently reported that respondents with a bachelor's degree are more likely to express *anger* about a female presidential candidate than respondents without this degree. Our findings, on the other hand, suggest that respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to express *support* for a black presidential candidate. In other words, our findings are the opposite of those reported by Streb et al. (2007). In sum, our results for well-educated respondents lend support to Bobo and Licari's (1989) claim that additional education increases socially tolerant attitudes. Instead of working to artificially inflate support for

racial tolerance, these results suggest that increasing levels of education correspond with declining levels of racially biased political behavior.

Our sample features a significant number of black respondents (n=142), and their responses are particularly noteworthy. Compared to white respondents, African-American respondents expressed greater support for the research statement when asked directly. In the poll group, 94% of black respondents – as opposed to 83% of white respondents – expressed overt willingness to support a black Presidential candidate. In the list experiment, their support remains approximately 10-points higher than white respondents – 79% of African-American respondents in the list experiment expressed true support for a black Presidential candidate, while only 69% of white respondent did so. As a result, we find similar levels of social desirability reporting for black and white respondents – 15% vs. 14%, respectively – despite significantly higher levels of support for the research statement amongst African-Americans. We return to this finding in the subsequent discussion of sophisticated voting.

While the results reported in the previous section may have implications for political candidates seeking federal office, evidence about the magnitude of social desirability bias for likely voters and well-informed respondents adds an important caveat to our argument. Amongst likely voters, our results suggest only a 9-point gap in desirability reporting. Likewise, among respondents that follow public affairs sometimes or most of the time, we report only a 5-point gap in desirability reporting. These results indicate that likely voters and well-informed citizens are less likely to misconstrue their true preferences in public opinion polls. If well-informed and politically-active citizens are the most likely to participate in voluntary public opinion polling, then the results reported in the previous section need not undermine the credibility of political

polling. Selection bias into the sample of poll respondents may, in fact, work in favor of the reliability of public opinion estimates on race and politics.

As reported by political affiliation and partisan ideology, our results present a much more complicated picture. As expected, the measure of overt support for liberals is higher than for conservatives (89% vs. 85%), as it is for Democrats and Republicans (87% vs. 81%). But, compared to measures of true support for the list experiment, we find that it is Democrats and liberals – rather than Republicans and conservatives – who are more likely to misrepresent their true preferences vis-à-vis a black Presidential candidate. Conservatives report a 12-point desirability bias – the lowest amongst our three ideology categories – and the highest level of true support for a black Presidential candidate at 73%. Meanwhile, liberals report a 19-point social desirability bias and the lowest level of support for a black Presidential candidate. These results parallel research by Kane, Craig and Wald (2004), which found that liberals and Democrats expressed greater levels of ‘anger’ at the idea of a Jewish Presidential candidate than conservatives and Republicans. Our research extends these parallel findings by reporting not only lower levels of true support by Democrats and liberals, but also high levels of social desirability reporting. Similarly, our results correspond to previous research examining misreporting of voting participation by partisan affiliation (Traugott and Katoshi 1979) and race of interviewer effects by party affiliation (Finkel, Guterbock, and Borg 1991), both of which find that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to misreport voting behavior.

To explain the puzzling results amongst Democrats, we examined the possibility of an “Obama” effect, in which respondents – and particularly liberal and/or Democratic respondents – assumed that our question about a generic black presidential candidate was a reference to Barack Obama. In order for the “Obama” effect to increase the magnitude of social desirability bias, the

level of overt support must be inflated beyond what we would expect without Obama's candidacy, and/or the level of true support must be similarly deflated. For Obama's candidacy to inflate overt estimates, support for Barack Obama would have to be *higher* than support for a generic black presidential candidate. For this to be true, a segment of respondents would have to offer support for Obama, but not offer support for a generic black presidential candidate. We find this simultaneity of attitudes unlikely. On the other hand, an "Obama" effect may increase social desirability bias by *decreasing* levels of true support, and we can more readily envision this situation. Imagine that respondents in the experiment group, when faced with four hypothetical statements, interpreted the research question – "I am willing to support a black presidential candidate" – as a direct inquiry about Barack Obama, whereas respondents in the poll group interpreted the research question as asking about a hypothetical, generic black candidate. This misinterpretation in the experimental group may result from the fact that the research question was listed alongside three other statements related to current events.<sup>7</sup> If respondents took their cues from the adjacent statements about the war in Iraq, immigration laws and campaign finance, and interpreted our research statement as relating directly to current affairs – and, more specifically to Barack Obama's candidacy – then non-supporters of the Obama campaign would be more likely to disagree with the research statement in the experimental group than the poll group. Although we can offer no evidence supporting this hypothesis, it is one plausible explanation to interpret the findings for Democrats. It also illustrates potential bias of our research, given the current affairs context during June 2007 when the research was conducted.

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<sup>7</sup> One statement was about the cost of Presidential campaigns, and our experiment was conducted shortly after 1<sup>st</sup> quarter Presidential campaign filings in which candidates raised historic sums of money. One statement was about immigration reform, and protests about immigration had swept the country less than two months prior to our experiment. The final statement was about the Iraq War, which has dominated the media for several years.

While an “Obama” effect may explain the unusual results amongst Democratic respondents, an alternative hypothesis -- *sophisticated* (or strategic) voting -- may help explain levels of support in other subgroups, and particularly amongst black respondents. Previous research finds evidence of sophisticated voting in multi-candidate elections, like presidential primaries in the United States, where voters may cast a ballot for their second- or third-choice candidate, rather than wasting their vote on a candidate perceived as unelectable (Abramson et al. 1992). In strategic voting, an individual’s final selection of a candidate reflects her perception of the candidate’s electability, rather than her true individual preferences. Similar to the hypothesized “Obama” effect, respondents may have taken contextual clues from the list statements to make a rational judgment about the plausibility of electing a black presidential candidate, given the current political context of the country. Their non-affirmative response to the list statement may *not* indicate an expression of racial prejudice, but rather underscore their belief that a non-traditional presidential candidate is unelectable. This explanation could clarify the low level of true support -- only 79% -- amongst black respondents. Similarly, strategic voting may explain the 6% of black respondents in the poll group withholding support for a black presidential candidate *if* these respondents believe, even in the absence of contextual clues, that a black candidate is unelectable.

While our substantive findings illustrate noteworthy variation by socio-demographic groups, our methodological approach also merits discussion, as our efforts to reduce social desirability reporting vary substantially from previous research. Key methodological differences may account, in part, for variation in our estimates of social desirability reporting. As opposed to previous list experiments about politics and voting behavior that utilized telephone surveys (e.g., Streb et al. 2007; Kane, Craig and Wald 2004), our research was conducted through an

Internet survey. Given previous research on the Internet as a survey tool, we expect the survey context to affect the degree of socially desirable reporting (Krysan 2000: 138) by removing the interviewer/experimenter from the research setting. Without a live voice on the other end of the phone, respondents on the Internet may feel less social pressure to report answers deemed socially desirable, and therefore our results may underreport the effects of social desirability bias, especially when compared to telephone or face-to-face polls. On the other hand, our sample is drawn from a panel of participants with an ongoing relationship with Knowledge Networks. Given a pre-existing relationship between survey respondents and the research organization, we may expect respondents to make an extra effort to conceal socially undesirable responses.

At the same time, our methodological approach builds on a previous improvement to the list experiment methodology offered by Brueckner, Morning and Nelson (2005), who added a poll group for comparison. Although Streb et al. (2007) compares the result of their list experiment to generic public opinion polls about a female presidential candidate, the inclusion of a poll group in our research design enables comparisons between the list experiment and the poll group by specific demographic groups. Doing so offers more reliable estimates of social desirability bias in reporting political polling questions. We can compare levels of true support for particular socio-demographic groups with their specific levels of over support, rather than comparing them with overt support for the population at-large.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Since the 1970s, social scientists have used public opinion polls to track Americans' willingness to support a black presidential candidate. Evidence from the General Social Survey

suggests that Americans are increasingly supportive of non-traditional candidates, and recent polls reveal high levels of support for a black presidential candidate. Yet, drawing on evidence from a recent on-line experiment, our research suggests that reported levels of support may, in fact, be inflated by social desirability bias. When asked directly about support for the research statement, we find that Americans over-report support for a black presidential candidate, and that social desirability reporting varies by demographic group. Well-educated respondents, for instance, are less likely to conceal their true preferences, as are likely voters and well-informed respondents. We find that Democrats and liberals, more so than Republicans and conservatives, conceal their true preferences, and that black and white respondents have the same magnitude of social desirability bias, although estimates of both true and overt support are approximately ten points higher for blacks. The results urge caution when interpreting survey responses, as expressions of overt support for a black presidential candidate are likely to differ, on the aggregate, from actual voting behavior. Nonetheless, the research offers a truer picture of support for a black presidential candidate.

**GRAPH 1: Willingness to Vote for a Black Presidential Candidate**

**TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics for Selected Subgroups as Percentages of the Sample**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Group A</b>	<b>Group B</b>	<b>Group C</b>
Female	52.12	54.09	48.91	53.64
Male	47.88	45.91	51.09	46.36
White	77.56	78.60	76.81	77.33
Black	9.10	9.53	9.42	8.30
Other, non-Hispanic	5.71	6.03	5.62	5.47
Hispanic	7.63	5.84	8.15	8.91
Less than HS	13.33	14.59	12.14	13.36
High School	31.73	30.35	34.24	30.36
Some College	26.47	25.88	25.54	28.14
College or more	28.46	29.18	28.08	28.14
18-29	17.24	14.79	17.93	19.03
30-44	28.01	27.24	29.17	27.53
45-59	29.55	31.13	29.71	27.73
60+	25.19	26.85	23.19	25.71
Urban	83.78	84.24	83.88	83.20
Non-Urban	16.22	15.76	16.12	16.80
\$49,999 or less	58.33	57.00	57.97	60.12
\$50,000 or more	41.67	43.00	42.03	39.88
Voted 2004	78.99	79.59	77.91	79.57
Didn't vote 2004	17.61	16.91	19.77	15.96
DK vote 2004	3.40	3.51	2.33	4.47
Not well-Informed	27.50	25.39	27.95	29.18
Well-Informed	72.50	74.61	72.05	70.82
Liberal	25.02	26.72	26.79	21.24
Moderate	39.18	39.10	37.25	41.44
Conservative	35.80	34.18	35.96	37.32
Democrat	28.66	28.82	28.47	28.72
Independent	43.43	43.33	44.53	41.91
Republican	24.12	23.73	22.99	25.83
Other Party	3.89	4.12	4.01	3.51

**TABLE 2. Estimated Mean Level of true Support for a Black Presidential Candidate, by various demographics**

	<b>Control</b>	<b>Experiment</b>	<b>Proportion True Support</b>
Total	1.84	2.54	0.70** (0.08)
Female	1.77	2.53	0.76** (0.10)
Male	1.92	2.55	0.64** (0.13)
White	1.96	2.65	0.69** (0.08)
Black	1.41	2.20	0.79** (0.26)
Other, non-Hispanic	2.05	2.92	0.87** (0.26)
Hispanic	1.50	2.05	0.55 (0.32)
Less than HS	1.82	2.26	0.44 (0.30)
High School	1.86	2.43	0.57** (0.13)
Some College	1.78	2.55	0.77** (0.14)
College or more	1.89	2.81	0.92** (0.14)
18-29	1.52	2.51	0.98** (0.17)
30-44	1.90	2.38	0.48* (0.18)
45-59	1.88	2.71	0.83** (0.13)
60+	2.02	2.56	0.54** (0.14)
Urban	1.83	2.54	0.71** (0.09)
Non-urban	1.89	2.53	0.64** (0.19)
49,999 or less	1.77	2.46	0.68** (0.11)
50,000 or more	1.95	2.66	0.71** (0.12)
Voted in 2004	1.92	2.70	0.77** (0.09)
Didn't vote in 2004	1.80	2.08	0.28 (0.23)
DK or can't remember	1.02	2.28	1.26** (0.38)
Hardly or never	1.68	2.15	0.47** (0.17)
Always or often	1.92	2.72	0.80** (0.08)
Liberal	1.70	2.40	0.70** (0.15)
Moderate	1.57	2.28	0.71**

				(0.14)
Conservative	2.29	3.01	0.73**	(0.11)
Democrat	1.63	2.23	0.60**	(0.14)
Independent	1.87	2.59	0.72**	(0.12)
Republican	2.25	3.12	0.87**	(0.13)
Other party	1.25	1.49	0.24	(0.58)

**\*\*p<0.01 ; \*p<0.05**

**TABLE 3. Estimates of Social Desirability Bias in Support for a Black Presidential Candidate, by various demographics**

	<b>Proportion True Support</b>	<b>Overt</b>	<b>Desirability Effect</b>
Total	0.70 (0.08)	0.84	0.14** (0.02)
Female	0.76 (0.10)	0.87	0.11** (0.03)
Male	0.64 (0.13)	0.81	0.17** (0.03)
White	0.69 (0.08)	0.83	0.14** (0.02)
Black	0.79 (0.26)	0.94	0.15* (0.05)
Other, non-Hispanic	0.87 (0.26)	0.70	-0.17 (0.09)
Hispanic	0.55 (0.32)	0.86	0.31* (0.08)
Less than HS	0.44 (0.29)	0.74	0.30** (0.07)
High School	0.57 (0.13)	0.81	0.24** (0.04)
Some College	0.77 (0.14)	0.90	0.13** (0.04)
College or more	0.92 (0.13)	0.86	-0.06 (0.03)
18-29	0.98 (0.17)	0.87	-0.12 (0.04)
30-44	0.48 (0.18)	0.86	0.38** (0.04)
45-59	0.83 (0.13)	0.82	-0.003 (0.04)
60+	0.54 (0.14)	0.81	0.27** (0.05)
Urban	0.71 (0.09)	0.85	0.14** (0.02)
Non-urban	0.64 (0.19)	0.80	0.16* (0.06)
49,999 or less	0.68 (0.11)	0.81	0.13** (0.03)
50,000 or more	0.71 (0.12)	0.89	0.18** (0.03)
Voted in 2004	0.77 (0.09)	0.86	0.09** (0.02)
Didn't vote in 2004	0.28 (0.23)	0.78	0.50** (0.06)
DK or can't remember	1.26 (0.38)	0.70	-0.56 (0.11)
Hardly or never	0.47 (0.17)	0.81	0.34** (0.05)
Always or often	0.80 (0.08)	0.85	0.05 (0.02)
Liberal	0.70 (0.15)	0.89	0.19** (0.04)
Moderate	0.71	0.79	0.08

	(0.14)		(0.04)
Conservative	0.73	0.85	0.12**
	(0.11)		(0.04)
Democrat	0.60	0.87	0.27**
	(0.14)		(0.04)
Independent	0.72	0.84	0.12**
	(0.12)		(0.03)
Republican	0.87	0.81	-0.06
	(0.13)		(0.04)
Other party	0.24	0.85	0.61**
	(0.58)		(0.11)

**\*\*p<0.01 ; \*p<0.05**

**TABLE 4. Estimated Mean Level of true Support and Estimated Social Desirability Bias, by political party.**

	<b>Control</b>	<b>Experiment</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>Overt</b>	<b>Social Desirability Effect</b>
Strong Dems	1.52	2.28	0.75	0.86	0.11
Not Very Strong Dems	1.81	2.13	0.32	0.87	0.56
Not Very Strong Reps	2.20	2.93	0.72	0.84	0.12
Strong Reps	2.30	3.24	0.95	0.79	-0.16

\*\*p<0.001 ; \*p<0.01

**TABLE 5. Logistic Regression Coefficients for “not very strong Democrats” and “strong Republicans” (Robust standard errors in parentheses)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Not Very Strong Democrat</b>	<b>Strong Republican</b>
Age	0.997 (0.009)	1.01 (0.010)
Education	0.916 (0.079)	0.828* (0.075)
Black	0.440* (0.157)	0.293 (0.238)
Hispanic	0.589 (0.249)	1.18 (0.610)
Other, non-Hispanic	0.830 (0.493)	6.11* (5.31)
Gender	1.16 (0.290)	1.02 (0.272)
Household Size	1.01 (0.118)	1.16 (0.108)
Income	0.993 (0.033)	1.04 (0.040)
Marital2	1.10 (0.300)	1.21 (0.370)
Urban	1.13 (0.423)	1.21 (0.408)
Northeast	0.621 (0.235)	1.03 (0.434)
Midwest	0.302** (0.109)	0.975 (0.351)
South	0.609 (0.205)	1.46 (0.474)
Homeowner	1.27 (0.390)	0.910 (0.272)
Ideology	1.54** (0.768)	3.38** (0.503)
Likely Voter	0.77 (0.231)	4.98** (2.29)
Informed	0.800 (0.233)	1.28 (0.406)
Employed	0.86 (0.226)	0.815 (0.254)

\*p<0.05 ; \*\*p<0.01

## APPENDIX A: Demographic Questions

Q1. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?

1. Strong Democrat
2. Not very strong Democrat
3. Independent, close to Democrat
4. Independent
5. Independent, close to Republican
6. Not very strong Republican
7. Strong Republican
8. Other Party

Q2. We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Below is a list of political views that people might hold arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

1. Extremely liberal
2. Liberal
3. Slightly Liberal
4. Moderate, middle of the road
5. Slightly conservative
6. Conservative
7. Extremely conservative

Q3. In 2004, Kerry, the Democrat, ran for President against Bush, the Republican. Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?

1. Yes, I voted
2. No, I didn't vote
3. I was not eligible to vote
4. I don't know, or can't remember if I voted

Q5. Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

1. Hardly at all
2. Only now and then
3. Some of the time
4. Most of the time

## APPENDIX B: Logistic Regression Results

In attempt to better understand our results by partisan affiliation, we estimate a series of alternative models. First, we re-compute true support, overt support, and the social desirability bias separately for respondents who identified themselves as strong Democrats, not very strong Democrats, strong Republicans, and not very strong Republicans. After disaggregating the democratic category, we find that the vast discrepancy between true and overt support is mainly due to the effect of not very strong Democrats. The social desirability effect exceeds fifty-five percentage points for respondents in this category. True support among strong Democrats, however, is still lower than true support among strong Republicans. Similarly, disaggregating the Republican category shows the negative social desirability bias to be isolated among strong Republicans whose true support exceeds overt support. Disaggregated into these categories, there exists a modest social desirability effect among not very strong Republicans.

<< INSERT TABLE 4 HERE >>

Having isolated respondents who identified as not very strong Democrats as the least ‘truly’ supportive of a black presidential candidate and strong Republicans as the most, we run a series of logistic regressions to predict membership in each of these partisan categories. Of course, the results of these logistic regressions merely suggest what might influence self-identifying as a not very strong Democrat or a strong Republican, but cannot tell us if these factors are responsible for the observed proportions of true support or the magnitude of social desirability bias. Nonetheless, table 5 reports the full logistic results. We observe only three significant predictors of membership in respondents’ self-identification in the not very strong

Democrat category. Being black, Hispanic, or other non-Hispanic decreases one's chances of identifying as a not very strong Democrat, although the results are only significant for blacks. A one-point increase on the 7-point ideology scale—where a score of 7 is “extremely conservative”—significantly increases one's chances of identifying as a not very strong Democrat, suggesting that this category of respondents may be more conservative than those that self-identified as strong democrats. On the other hand, additional years of education reduces one's chances of identifying as a strong Republican, while identifying as more conservative and more likely to vote significantly increases one's chances.

<< INSERT TABLE 5 HERE >>

Our logistic regression results offer another avenue for explaining the surprising results, especially with reference to respondents who identified as not very strong Democrats. While we caution that the results of our regression analyses are merely suggestive, we do have some evidence to indicate that white, more conservative Democrats are driving the results by partisan affiliation. While this fits with intuitive explanations, the nature of our list experiment data prevents us from making claims about a direct connection between specific subgroups and support for a black candidate. Likewise, our results suggest that less educated Republicans are more likely to fall into the “not very strong Republican” category, and may therefore be less supportive of a black candidate overall. Again, there may be interaction effects between one's education and partisan affiliation which are hard to detect and isolate within the confines of our data.

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