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Smearing the Opposition: Implicit and Explicit Stigmatization of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Candidates and the Current U.S. President

Spee Kosloff and Jeff Greenberg University of Arizona

Mark Dechesne University of Leiden—Campus The Hague Toni Schmader University of British Columbia

> David Weise University of Arizona

Four studies investigated whether political allegiance and salience of outgroup membership contribute to the phenomenon of acceptance of false, stigmatizing information (smears) about political candidates. Studies 1–3 were conducted in the month prior to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election and together demonstrated that pre-standing opposition to John McCain or Barack Obama, as well as the situational salience of differentiating social categories (i.e., for Obama, race; for McCain, age), contributed to the implicit activation and explicit endorsement of smearing labels (i.e., Obama is Muslim; McCain is senile). The influence of salient differentiating categories on smear acceptance was particularly pronounced among politically undecided individuals. Study 4 clarified that social category differences heighten smear acceptance, even if the salient category is semantically unrelated to the smearing label, showing that, approximately 1 year after the election, the salience of race amplified belief that Obama is a socialist among undecided people and McCain supporters. Taken together, these findings suggest that, at both implicit and explicit cognitive levels, social category differences and political allegiance contribute to acceptance of smears against political candidates.

Keywords: politics, intergroup bias, categorization, implicit and explicit, smear

Campaign propaganda is probably as old as the political process itself, documented as early as A.D. 79 in excavated ruins at Pompeii (Foster, 1967). In the United States, negative political campaigning can be traced back at least to 1796 when journalist James Thomson Callender published lurid political pamphlets lambasting Alexander Hamilton as a defrauder and villainous brothel patron (Durey, 1990; Felknor, 1992). Other claims include that James Madison was a "Frenchman," that Abraham Lincoln was "insane" and "a Negro," that Theodore Roosevelt was "a maniac" and "an enemy of freedom," that Franklin Roosevelt was a "Bolshevik," and that John Adams was "hermaphroditical" (Felknor, 1992). We identify such messages as political smears: widely distributed negative labels intended to slander a prominent political figure. Most recently, prior to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, a surprising percentage of Americans (approximately 94%; Hargrove & Stempel, 2008) were exposed to smears against the candidates, Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John

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McCain. Campaign propaganda, disseminated widely via radio, television, and Internet, alleged on one hand that Obama (an avowed Christian) was a Muslim extremist and, on the other hand, that McCain (a capable, esteemed United States Senator) was diagnosed as senile.

Did individuals believe such rumors? What would motivate individuals to accept smears of a candidate, and at what cognitive levels might such acceptance manifest? Despite the historic prevalence and potentially global consequences of political smear campaigns, almost no research has focused on issues regarding if, why, and how such false information becomes believed. This dearth of research is particularly striking given existing theoretical work suggesting the role that motivation can have in the tendency to stereotype and stigmatize an individual. However, those existing theories are all too often based on experimental paradigms that are poor approximations of the judgments that take place in real-world contexts about known individuals. This chasm between the situations most frequently studied in the laboratory and the questions of utmost practical importance can only be filled by research that adopts a more problem-focused approach-an approach that social-cognitive researchers have been criticized for neglecting (Cialdini, 2009). Indeed, it is our belief that psychological research and theory can have their largest impact when focused on particular social problems studied within the historical context in which they arise.

To address our basic concerns regarding the potential impact smear campaigns can have upon the electoral process, in the present research, we integrate and build upon three decades of empirical research in social, political, and cognitive psychology

Spee Kosloff, Jeff Greenberg, and David Weise, Department of Psychology, University of Arizona; Toni Schmader, Department of XXX, University of British Columbia; Mark Dechesne, Department of XXX, University of Leiden—Campus The Hague.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Spee Kosloff, University of Arizona, Psychology Department, P.O. Box 210068, Tucson, AZ 85721-0068. E-mail: kosloff@email.arizona.edu

(e.g., Devine, 1989; Higgins, 1996; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979; Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Kilts, & Hamann, 2006). We examined the impact of intergroup distinctions on acceptance of false smears in the month prior to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, a time when the false media-borne rumors about Obama and McCain were widespread. Specifically, we assessed whether established political opposition to Obama or McCain, as well as the situational salience of social category differences (e.g., race, age), contributed to belief in widely promoted yet fallacious labels of Obama and McCain. We operationalized smear acceptance in two ways: as the extent to which subliminally priming the candidate's name heightened the cognitive accessibility of smearrelevant terms (implicit acceptance; Studies 1 and 2) and as the self-reported endorsement of a smear's truthfulness (explicit acceptance; Studies 3 and 4). Thus, we hypothesized that political allegiance and salient outgroup categorizations could increase readiness to both implicitly activate and explicitly endorse wildly false accusations about a political candidate. We believe that isolating these effects will not only advance theory and research on motivated impression formation in real-world contexts but that it also has the potential to reduce the impact of broadly distributed falsehoods by preparing citizens with an awareness of the psychological factors that make them vulnerable to such negative campaigning.

Intergroup Bias: A Motivation for Political Stigmatization

Political smearing can be conceptualized as a form of social stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). Although the concept of stigma has typically guided studies of marginalized social groups or medically burdened populations (e.g., people with incontinence, Sheldon & Caldwell, 1994; exotic dancers, Lewis, 1998; people with leprosy, Opala & Boillot, 1996; people with cancer, Fife & Wright, 2000; people with mental illness, Phelan, Link, Stueve, & Pescosolido, 2000), we suggest that smear acceptance is a psychological process by which powerful, socially competent individuals are subjected to negative labeling. Theorists have posited that one critical determinant of stigmatization is "separation"-the identification of a targeted individual as a member of an outgroup. When persons are viewed as distinctly different, negative labeling can be accomplished smoothly because there is little harm in attributing all manner of bad characteristics to "them" (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001).

Accordingly, receptivity to smears of a political figure may arise when categorical differences between voters and the candidates are salient. During election seasons, one highly salient basis for separating oneself from a candidate may be political opposition to him or her. A longstanding body of research on partisan biases in political judgment (e.g.,Campbell & Converse, 1960; Taber, Lodge, & Glathar, 2001) has illustrated that political allegiances motivate biased cognitive processing on a wide range of variables, including perception of objective economic events (i.e., unemployment, inflation; Bartels, 2002), attributions of responsibility (Gomez & Wilson, 2001; Peffley & Williams, 1985; Rudolph, 2006), and neurobiological responses to politically relevant stimuli (Westen, 2007; Westen et al., 2006). Analogously, social psychologists have long observed that individuals justify favoritism of the groups or social categories to which they belong by adopting negative orientations toward opposing group members (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Schaller, 1992; Trope & Thompson, 1997; Turner et al., 1979). Supporting one candidate for election (e.g., McCain) may thus increase motivation to believe slanderous rumors about the opposing candidate (i.e., Obama).

In addition, categorical differences other than the candidate's political affiliation may encourage intergroup bias. Consequently, making differentiating categories salient may be sufficient to increase receptivity to smears. Consistent with this possibility, subtle activation of social categories or identity cues can prompt bias against those viewed as different (Deaux & Major, 1987; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Smith & White, 2002) and function as interpretive frames for the perception and judgment of others (e.g., Darley & Gross, 1983; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Indeed, studies employing minimal group paradigms have shown that simply belonging to a group in name contributes to prejudice against those who do not share that group label (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Thus, we know that even very subtle intergroup differences can instigate negative attitudes and behavior. However, the present research is the first to assess whether such bias extends to accepting blatant falsehoods of specific individuals, and particularly of well-known political candidates just prior to a Presidential election. In addition, the present studies assessed whether simply activating a perceiver's own social identity when it is distinct from the target (e.g., having perceivers think about their own race when the perceiver and candidate are racially different)-rather than directly making salient a political candidate's outgroup statusmight be sufficient to motivate acceptance, at either an implicit or explicit level, of false information about the candidate.

To our knowledge, such an effect has not yet been demonstrated in prior research. Studies have shown that making a dimension of social categorization (such as race or gender) salient to an individual with a stigmatized identity on that dimension impairs performance of that individual (Steele & Aronson, 1999) and promotes self-stereotyping (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006). Other studies have shown that contextually salient categorical information regarding a target or some other third person can increase stereotypic beliefs about the target (Klauer, Ehrenberg, & Wegener, 2003; Pittinsky, Shih, & Trahan, 2006; van Rijswijk & Ellemers, 2002). Furthermore, empirical exploration of selfcategorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) has shown that asking individuals to consider how their ingroup differs from other groups can affect emotional responses to an entire outgroup (Ray, Mackie, Rydell, & Smith, 2008), and studies of the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009) have shown that salient shared ("superordinate") social identities can reduce bias toward other groups (Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989). However, no prior research of which we are aware has assessed whether directly manipulating the salience of a participant's own social identity intensifies negative beliefs about a single targeted member of an outgroup.

Cognitive Manifestations of Smear Acceptance

During election seasons, media bombardments by political propagandists are pervasive and difficult to avoid. Such extensive exposure might have the unsavory consequence of instilling implicit cognitive associations consistent with smear attacks in the

minds of citizens. Although some evaluatively charged implicit associations are relatively fixed within early developmental stages (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004), such associations can be formed through intensive, repeated exposure to linkages between constructs (Betsch, Plessner, Schwieren, & Gütig, 2001; Olson & Fazio, 2001; Ozaki, 2006). One measure of the success of smear campaigns might thus be the extent to which individuals exhibit strong implicit associations between a candidate's name and his or her smearing label.

Research suggests that such associations may be cognitively available in memory to individuals (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Higgins, 1996), regardless of motives for bias against a candidate. For instance, Devine (1989) found that among both high- and low-bias participants, subliminally priming negative outgroup stereotype constructs elicited automatic activation of additional negative stereotype content. Accordingly, during election seasons, people may generally possess stored knowledge structures representing cognitive linkages between a candidate and constructs pertaining to his smear. However, implicit associations between a candidate and his/her smear might be more cognitively active, or accessible (Higgins, 1996; Ratcliff & McKoon, 1994), when individuals possess bias against him/her. This is suggested by findings that priming neutral outgroup constructs (e.g., the mere name of the outgroup)provokes automatic activation of negative labels only among highly biased participants (Lepore & Brown, 1997; see also, Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). Subliminally priming McCain's or Obama's name might thus render smear-relevant constructs highly accessible when individuals are biased against the primed candidate. As previously discussed, preexisting political allegiance and salient social categories on which voters and candidates differ may be two potential bases for such bias.

Heightened accessibility of smearing associations might also signal readiness to explicitly perceive the negative labeling as true (Thrash, Elliot, & Schultheiss, 2009; see also, Cesario, Plaks, & Higgins, 2006). Accordingly, the same motivational factors which contribute to activation of implicit smearing associations might provoke explicit, volitional endorsement of that smear as valid. Although discrepancies between implicit and explicit cognitive processes are often observed (Gawronski & LeBel, 2008; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989), implicit and explicit measures have been found to converge under certain conditions (Karpinski, Steinman, & Hilton, 2005; Thrash & Elliott, 2002), particularly when such measures are well matched in content (Thrash et al., 2009) and when motivation to control the expression of bias is low (Devine, 1989; Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005; Lemm, 2001; Nier, 2005; Wittenbrink et al., 1997). Because individuals appear quite willing to express overt negativity toward candidates during competitive election season, indices of explicit and implicit smear acceptance may converge to reveal similar effects. Specifically, salient group identities that motivate activation of implicit smearing associations might likewise motivate explicit endorsement of a smearing label's validity.

Important Differences Between the "Muslim" and "Senility" Smears

Before proceeding to an account of the present studies, it is important to draw a firm distinction between the two instances of smear under investigation in Studies 1–3. During the 2008 U.S. presidential election, media outlets and political affiliates used two rumors under consideration-that Obama is Muslim and that McCain is senile—as instruments of negative campaigning. These identifications are clearly different: Muslim identity is a religious classification, whereas senility is a medical condition, and, in light of this qualitative distinction, the reason that being labeled Muslim could be stigmatizing differs greatly from the reason that being labeled as senile could be stigmatizing. As Major (2007) has noted, whether a characteristic is stigmatizing or not depends heavily on the specific social context. In the context of the U.S. Presidential election in 2008, each label was likely to be stigmatizing for the targeted candidate. The potential senility of a candidate could be seen as raising legitimate questions about his or her suitability to hold high office. In contrast, having a Muslim identity certainly should not disqualify an individual from holding the office of President. However, for many Americans, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and America's ongoing conflicts within Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a negative bias toward Muslim identity (e.g., Panagopoulos, 2006), setting the stage for this identification as a potentially stigmatizing smear. It is only in the sense that both of these labels were used as smears during the election that we conceptually equate Muslim-related and senility-related terms in this article. It is not our intention to suggest that age and religious affiliation are similarly stigmatizing or inherently negative in a broader way.

The Present Studies

In four studies, we tested the idea that intergroup bias motivated acceptance of smears against Barack Obama and John McCain. We first assessed the possibility that established supporters of one candidate would possess chronically accessible implicit associations between the opposed candidate's name and constructs pertinent to his popularized smear. To do so, among supporters of McCain and supporters of Obama, we measured reaction times (RTs) to identify Muslim-related and senility-related terms after subliminally priming the candidates' respective names (Study 1). We next examined whether the situational salience of cues regarding a social category difference would promote implicit smear activation. To do so, we assessed whether undecided individuals (e.g., those who were unsure of which candidate to support for the Presidency) showed activation of an implicit association between a candidate's name and his smear if first subtly cued to contemplate a social category they did not share with the candidate (Study 2). Finally, we investigated the influence of salient category difference cues on explicit endorsement of smears. To do so, among both established supporters and undecided people, we assessed whether political allegiance and salience of differentiating social categories increased the perceived truthfulness of smearadvocating essays (Studies 3 and 4).

Study 1

Study 1 used subliminal priming and lexical decision procedures to assess implicit associations between Obama's name and constructs related to Muslim culture and between McCain's name and senility-related terms among supporters of either Obama or McCain. Consistent with the idea that preexisting support for a candidate sets up an underlying motivation to draw an implicit

negative association with the opposing candidate, we predicted that McCain supporters would exhibit particularly fast RTs to identify Muslim-related terms if first subliminally primed with Obama's name and that Obama supporters would exhibit particularly fast RTs to identify senility-related terms if first subliminally primed with McCain's name.

Method

Participants. During a mass prescreen 1–2 weeks prior to the study, 1,612 University of Arizona students responded to the question, "Would you identify yourself as a supporter of Barack Obama or of John McCain?" by circling *Obama*, *McCain*, *both candidates*, *neither candidate*, or *not sure*. A majority supported Obama (46.5%), followed by McCain (22.8%), then not sure (undecided, 16.9%), neither (9.2%), and both (4.6%). Those who circled *Obama* or *McCain* were invited to participate, yielding a sample of 64 participants (33 Obama supporters, 31 McCain supporters; 48 women, 16 men). Additional prescreen data verified that no participants identified as being Muslim or older than 24 years.

Design and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain) \times 2 (candidate name primed: "Obama" vs. "McCain") \times 2 (type of word identified: Muslim vs. senility) mixed design, with both candidate name primed and type of word identified as withinsubjects factors. In sessions conducted between September 29, 2008 and October 28, 2008, participants were given a cover story suggesting that the study concerned word recognition. Participants were then escorted to separate cubicles, each equipped with a computer. The experimenter asked participants to follow instructions presented on the screen, and then turned down the light to reduce glare on the computer screen.

Instructions explained that, for each trial, the word "TRIAL" would appear followed by a string of letters, and the task is to identify whether or not the letter string makes a real word by pressing the left Shift key, labeled *NO*, or the right Shift key, labeled *YES*. Participants were instructed to make their lexical decisions as quickly as they could while remaining accurate. In between the presentation of the word "TRIAL" and the string of letters, we briefly flashed the **OBAMA** or **MCCAIN** prime (see the Apparatus and Stimulus Presentation section for details).

To assess awareness of the subliminal stimuli, we examined participants' responses to the following questions upon completion of the task. First, the computer presented the question: "Aside from the word 'TRIAL,' did you ever see more than one word flashed at a time during the word recognition task?" (1 = yes; 2 = no). In total, 84% of the participants indicated "no." Participants who said "ves" were then asked: "Was the word flashed the same or different from the word you made a decision about on the trial?" (1 =*different*; 2 = same). If they responded "different," participants were then asked to "List what you think the flashed word may have been." Participants who responded "no" or "same" were instead directly asked: "Assume that there WAS an additional word flashed on the screen during the trials. Please make a guess about what it was." No participant correctly identified either prime. Accordingly, no conscious retrospective awareness of the masked word occurred.

Apparatus and stimulus presentation. Stimuli were presented on a 15-in. (38.1-cm) KDS color monitor controlled by a PC with an Intel Celeron CPU with 256 Mb RAM and a NVIDIA GeForce2 MX chipset, using DMASTR display software developed at Monash University and at the University of Arizona by K. I. Forster and J. C. Forster (DMDX, Version 3.1.4.3). This program synchronizes the timing of the display and uses normal Windows fonts.

The monitor was placed at a standard distance of 18 in. (45.72 cm) from the edge of the desk. There were then 86 trials, each consisting of a sequential presentation of three stimuli centered on the screen. The first stimulus was always the word TRIAL, serving as a fixation point that appeared for 300 ms. The second stimulus was a subliminal prime, presented at 28.5 ms (two times the monitors' refresh rate; this exposure rate has been used successfully in past subliminal priming research; e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). The third stimulus was the target word/nonword about which the participant was to make a decision, and it was displayed for 4,000 ms or until the participant made a decision. The first and third stimuli also served as forward and backward masks for the subliminal prime, respectively.

The critical portions of the task consisted of two 28-trial series, one during which Obama's name was repeatedly primed on each trial and another during which McCain's name was repeatedly primed. Accordingly, each participant received subliminal primes of each candidate's name, but the primed candidate varied across the two sets of trials. Prior to the first series, participants completed 10 nonprimed practice trials, and prior to the second series, participants completed 20 nonprimed trials to provide a neutral period between the critical series. On each trial within the two critical series, immediately after a candidate's name was primed, participants made a lexical decision about a nonword (n = 14), neutral word (n = 8), Muslim-related word (n = 3), or senilityrelated word (n = 3). These target stimuli were presented in a fixed block-randomized order, and different sets of terms were used in each series. Orders of prime, Muslim terms, and senility terms were counterbalanced across series; no effects of order or of participant sex occurred. Furthermore, neither candidate support nor the prime variable affected RTs to the neutral filler words, which were irrelevant to senility and Muslim culture and affectively neutral. The neutral terms were PASTURE, TRIMMED, RECTANGLE, PACKAGE, LAMP, DANGLE, FURNISH, and WINDOW in one series and DISHWASHER, DRAFT, PINNED, NIGHTLY, NEUTRAL, BRAID, VINYL, and FOREST in the other.

In total, six Muslim and six senility terms were presented, three always occurring in the same series. The Muslim-related terms were ARAB, TURBAN, and MUSLIM in one series and ISLAM, KORAN, and MOSQUE in the other. The senility-related terms were SENILE, FOGGY, and DEMENTIA in one series and FEEBLE, FORGET, and ALZHEIMERS in the other series.

Results

Data reduction. Following a recommendation by Bargh and Chartrand (2000), we cropped outlying response latencies such that any response in the lexical decision task that was more than 2,000 ms was recoded to 2,000 ms (see also Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002; Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007). All

incorrect responses were excluded from the analysis. For Muslim terms, 4.17% of responses were incorrect and consequently dropped, and 1.02% of correct responses were cropped to 2,000 ms. For senility terms, 3.68% of responses were incorrect and consequently dropped, and 1.54% of correct responses were cropped to 2,000 ms. For neutral terms, 3.95% of responses were incorrect and consequently dropped, and 1.05% of correct responses were cropped to 2,000 ms. For each participant, RT composites were computed to create averages of the three Muslim terms following the Obama prime ($\alpha = .68$), the three senility terms following the Obama prime ($\alpha = .67$), the three Muslim terms following the McCain prime ($\alpha = .69$), and the three senility terms following the McCain prime ($\alpha = .66$). Following the method used by Arndt et al. (2002) and suggestions by Kirk (1982; see also Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Winer, 1971), we conducted a log transformation of the individual RTs to preserve the overall distribution of the data set. We then computed new mean RTs for each word type using the log-transformed data.

Implicit smear activation. In a mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), we observed a three-way Candidate Supported (Obama vs. McCain) × Candidate Name Primed ("Obama" vs. "McCain") × Type of Word Identified (Muslim vs. senility) interaction, $F(1, 62) = 4.33 \ p < .05$ (see Figure 1). As predicted, F1 Obama supporters responded more quickly in identifying senility terms after the McCain prime relative to after the Obama prime, $F(1, 32) = 18.47, \ p < .001, \ d = 0.96$, and relative to McCain supporters after the McCain prime $F(1, 62) = 21.28, \ p < .001, \ d = 1.15$. Conversely, McCain supporters responded more quickly in identifying Muslim terms after the Obama prime relative to after the McCain prime, $F(1, 30) = 11.08, \ p < .005, \ d = 0.73$, and relative to Obama supporters after the Obama prime, $F(1, 62) = 4.27, \ p < .05, \ d = 0.52$.



Figure 1. Reaction times (RTs) to Muslim-related terms (A) and to senility-related terms (B) after subliminal OBAMA or MCCAIN primes among Obama supporters and McCain supporters (Study 1). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 confirmed our prediction that, prior to the 2008 Presidential election, supporters of Obama and McCain would possess chronically active implicit associations between the opposing candidate and constructs related to his smear. Obama supporters (but not McCain supporters) exhibited quickened RTs when making lexical decisions about senility-related terms if sub-liminally primed with McCain's name (but not if subliminally primed with Obama's name). Conversely, McCain supporters (but not Obama supporters) exhibited quickened RTs when lexically deciding upon Muslim-related terms if subliminally primed with Obama's name (but not if subliminally primed with obama's name).

These findings are consistent with our broad hypothesis that intergroup bias (in this instance, political allegiance) motivates the cognitive activation of smearing associations. However, Study 1 leaves open the question of what particular motivational processes underlie the observed effects. One possibility is that the implicit smearing associations existed differently between the Obama supporters and McCain supporters because of differences in prior exposure to the smears. Specifically, before the study, Obama and McCain supporters may have been exposed more frequently to information that smeared the opposition candidate than that which smeared their favored candidate. This could have resulted in stronger preexisting negative associations with an opposed candidate, and then, in the experimental session, the stronger associations were more easily primed than the weaker associations (Kunda, 1999; Moskowitz, 2005). Alternatively, Obama and McCain supporters could have received comparable frequency of exposure to the smears of both candidates, as suggested by survey data indicating that the vast majority of Americans were aware of negative campaigning tactics being used against Obama and McCain (Hargrove & Stempel, 2008). If this were the case, Study 1 would reflect a process whereby established supporters, despite comparable prior exposure to smears of both candidates, only cognitively activated a negative association (i.e., smear-relevant constructs) regarding the candidate whom they opposed.

To assess which of these processes was more likely at work in Study 1, we conducted a supplementary study assessing retrospective self-reported extent of exposure to the smears against Obama and McCain in the month prior to the election. In July of 2009, 76 University of Arizona undergraduates indicated how frequently they had been exposed to the smears regarding these candidates: (1) several times a day, (2) once a day, (3) several times a week, (4) once a week, (5) several times that month, (6) one time during that month. Participants were also asked to indicate the source of their information exposure. We analyzed responses among individuals who, on an additional item, indicated either that they supported Obama (n = 39) or that they supported McCain (n = 25), as well as those who indicated that they were undecided (n = 12) because Studies 2 and 3 included undecided participants.

The results indicated that all groups reported high frequency of prior exposure both to the allegation that Obama is Muslim and to the allegation that McCain is senile. Separate one-way ANOVAs on both frequency of exposure items showed no hint of differences between the groups (both ps > .50), and the most frequent response given within each group was "several times that month." Regarding the "Obama is Muslim" rumor, this response was given

among 33.3% of Obama supporters, 32.0% of McCain supporters, and 33.3% of undecideds. Regarding the "McCain is senile" rumor, this response was given among 41.0% of Obama supporters, 40.0% of McCain supporters, and 41.7% of undecideds. In addition, regarding the sources of these rumors, participants consistently indicated that they mainly heard about them in the media (e.g., "media" "TV" "commercials" "news stations" "Internet" "newspaper") but also through "friends" "family" "school" "classmates" and "word of mouth."

It is notable that these supplementary data relied on retrospective accounts, which may have not precisely reflected actual levels of prior exposure. Yet the detail with which groups identified sources of their exposure suggests that recollection was good; and furthermore, if responses were greatly skewed because of recall difficulties, reported exposure frequencies would likely have varied by chance rather than converging as they did upon a particular response (i.e., "several times a month"). Accordingly, these additional findings suggest that, at the time of Study 1, Obama supporters, McCain supporters and undecideds likely had experienced comparably high exposure to the widespread rumors that Obama is Muslim and McCain is senile. It thus is less likely that the results of Study 1 stemmed from group differences in prior exposure to these rumors than from group differences in the motivation to accept smears of a politically opposed candidate. Specifically, these associations were most likely available in memory to all of our study participants but were only maintained in a state of high chronic cognitive activation when individuals possessed political bias against a candidate.

Study 2

As previously discussed, our hypothesis suggests that intergroup bias may motivate smear acceptance even when the categorical basis for a difference between eligible voters and the candidate is subtly activated and largely unrelated to political allegiance. Study 2 assessed this possibility among individuals who were undecided between the two candidates. Specifically, individuals who, on a pretest, indicated that they were unsure whom they supported in the upcoming election were recruited to participate, in addition to established supporters of Obama or McCain. Participants performed a task, similar to that employed in Study 1 but designed particularly to assess implicit associations between Obama's name and Muslim constructs.

Prior to performing this task, we manipulated the situational salience of a social category on which participants differed from Obama: race. Because Obama is African American, we ensured that no participant was African American. Our hypothesis was that triggering thoughts of race, a dimension on which participants clearly differed from Obama, would engender motivation to activate cognitively available information regarding his smear. Specifically, whereas undecideds may possess available knowledge of the widely promoted link between Obama and Muslim culture (Devine, 1989; Hargrove & Stempel, 2008; Higgins, 1996), this association may become cognitively accessible only when situational cues promote a sense that Obama is somehow different from them.

This suggested the following set of predictions. First, as in Study 1, we anticipated that supporters of Obama would show no evidence of an implicit association between Obama and Muslim

terms, whereas among McCain supporters, this association would be quite strong. Second, in light of undecideds' lack of affiliation with either candidate, we predicted that when racial categorization was not salient, they would not show evidence of implicit smear. In this instance, undecideds' RTs in identifying Muslim terms following an Obama prime should be as slow as those of Obama supporters. Third, however, we predicted that if racial categorization was initially made salient, undecideds would exhibit activation of the implicit link between Obama's name and Muslim constructs. In this instance, undecideds' RTs to Muslim terms following an Obama prime should be as fast as those of McCain supporters.

Method

Participants. Using the same mass prescreen measure of candidate preference as in Experiment 1, we recruited 116 participants (39 Obama supporters, 41 McCain supporters, 36 undecideds; 91 women, 25 men). Additional prescreen data verified that no participants identified as either Muslim or African American.

Design and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 3 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times 2 (candidate name primed: "Obama" vs. "McCain") \times 2 (salience: race vs. no race) mixed design, with prime as the within-subjects factor. In sessions conducted between September 29, 2008 and October 28, 2008, we employed the same method as in Experiment 1, with the two following distinctions.

First, we eliminated the senility-related terms from the lexical decision task. As a result, RTs to Muslim terms constituted the primary dependent measure. Orders of prime and of Muslim terms were counterbalanced, and no effects of order or participant sex occurred. As in Experiment 1, neither candidate support nor the prime variable affected RTs to the neutral filler words. Furthermore, error rates and RT cropping were comparable to Experiment 1. For Muslim terms, 3.99% of responses were incorrect and consequently dropped, and 1.01% of correct responses cropped to 2,000 ms. For neutral terms, 3.97% of responses were incorrect and consequently dropped, and 0.94% of correct responses cropped to 2,000 ms.

Second, we added a manipulation of racial category salience. After entering individual cubicles but prior to performing the computer task, participants completed a demographics sheet with or without an item listing six racial categories and asking the participant to circle categories "that are personally relevant to your identity." Participants who received the race item identified as White (73.2%), Latino (19.6%), Asian (3.6%), American Indian (1.8%), and other (1.8%), and none identified as African American.

Results

Data reduction. Data were reduced as in Experiment 1, yielding two log-transformed composite RT scores per participant, representing RTs to Muslim terms following the Obama prime ($\alpha = .65$) and the McCain prime ($\alpha = .68$), respectively.

Implicit smear activation. In a mixed-model ANOVA, we observed a three-way Candidate Supported (Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times Candidate Name Primed (Obama vs. McCain) \times Salience (race item vs. no race item) interaction, F(2, 110) = 3.12,

p < .05 (see Figure 2). In the non-race-salient condition, undecideds and Obama supporters showed no effect of prime, but McCain supporters showed faster RTs in identifying the Muslim terms after the Obama prime than after the McCain prime, F(1, 20) = 5.33, p < .05, d = 0.86. Furthermore, following the Obama prime, McCain supporters showed faster RTs relative both to Obama supporters, F(2, 110) = 4.32, p < .05, d = 0.73, and to undecideds, F(2, 110) = 8.84, p < .01, d = 0.88, whereas the latter two groups did not differ from one another.

In the race-salient condition, Obama supporters again showed no effect of prime, yet both McCain supporters, F(1, 19) = 5.43, p < .05, d = 0.65, and undecideds, F(1, 15) = 5.53, p < .05, d =0.87, showed faster RTs in identifying the Muslim terms after the Obama prime than after the McCain prime. Following the Obama prime, relative to Obama supporters, both McCain supporters, F(2,110) = 6.28, p < .05, d = 0.73, and undecideds F(2, 110) = 7.24, p < .05, d = 0.80, showed faster RTs when race was salient. Only undecideds exhibited an effect of the racial salience manipulation: Following the Obama prime, undecideds showed significantly lower RTs in the race-salient condition compared with the nonrace-salient condition, F(1, 110) = 6.92, p < .05, d = 1.00.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 supported our three predictions. First, Obama supporters showed no evidence of an active implicit association between Obama and Muslim terms, whereas McCain supporters showed evidence that this association was chronically active. This replicated the effect among McCain supporters in Study 1 and thus provided further evidence that political allegiance against a candidate contributes to implicit smear activation. Second, when racial categorization was not salient, undecideds showed no evidence of implicit smear. In the non-race-salient condition, undecideds' RTs in identifying Muslim terms following an Obama prime were as slow as those of Obama supporters. Third, if racial categorization was initially made salient, undecideds exhibited activation of the implicit link between Obama's



Figure 2. Reaction times (RTs) to identify Muslim-related terms after subliminal OBAMA or MCCAIN primes among Obama supporters, McCain supporters, and undecideds, for whom racial identity was salient or not (Study 2). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

name and Muslim constructs. When a situational cue made racial identity salient, undecideds' RTs to Muslim terms following an Obama prime were as fast as those of McCain supporters.

The findings of Study 2 thus supported our hypothesis that salient group identities which distinguish an individual from a candidate, even those bearing little direct relation to political orientation motivate activation of implicit associations between the opposed candidate and smear-relevant constructs. It is important to consider, however, whether the effect of our race-salience manipulation simply reflects an unmotivated cognitive cuing effect. Did race salience simply heighten the accessibility of associations relevant to a cultural group (Muslims), independent of the participants' motivation?

Although this alternative cannot be completely ruled out for this study, several features of our findings render this possibility unlikely. If a simple cognitive link between racial categories and Muslim terms caused our results, race salience should have increased the accessibility of these terms among all our participants, and it should have done so even without the Obama prime. However, it actually did so only for those who were undecided and only when those undecided people received the Obama prime. Furthermore, the full pattern of findings in Study 2 seem aptly characterized by a process through which intergroup differences motivated activation of available negative associations (e.g., Lepore & Brown, 1997; Wittenbrink et al., 1997). As previously discussed, the fact that McCain supporters but not Obama supporters exhibited chronic activation of the Obama/Muslim association likely reflects a consequence of political bias. Although it is possible that the category of race was chronically salient for McCain supporters, it seems more likely that McCain supporters' stable high implicit activation of Obama's smear was a consequence of motivated opposition to a nonpreferred candidate.

The motivational processes were likely similar among undecideds, although spurred by a situationally salient categorical divide rather than a dispositional political bias. Because our prescreen measure distinguishes undecideds from those who liked both candidates or neither candidate, the undecided participants were unlikely to perceive Obama in an especially negative or positive light. Consistent with the idea that individuals will not accept smears in the absence of an initial negative bias, non-race-salient undecideds in Study 2 exhibited no activation of the available implicit cognitive link between Obama's name and his smearing label. However, if a categorical dimension on which undecideds differed from Obama (i.e., race) was made salient, the available negative association between this racially different other, Obama, and his culturally promoted smear was activated.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 suggest that individuals only activate available implicit knowledge of smearing associations when some form of social differentiation from a candidate (political bias or a social category difference) is pronounced. Yet neither of the prior studies examined implications of these factors for explicit appraisals of smears' validity. If preexisting political support and cues to categorical differences motivate activation of implicit smears, might these same factors contribute to explicit smear endorsement?

As previously discussed, although implicit and explicit evaluations differ when individuals are motivated to control expressions of bias (e.g., Gawronski & LeBel, 2008; McClelland et al., 1989), in the absence of motivation to correct for automatic responses, consistency between measures of implicit and explicit bias may occur (Devine, 1989; Hofmann et al., 2005; Lemm, 2001; Nier, 2005; Wittenbrink et al., 1997). During election seasons, norms that might otherwise motivate individuals to control expressions of bias toward candidates seem temporarily put on hold, which may partly explain why blatant unsavory campaign tactics have persisted throughout history (Felknor, 1992). This loosening of normative constraints, combined with assurance that one's responses are anonymous and confidential, may result in convergent findings across implicit and explicit measures of smear acceptance. Just as political allegiances and salient category cues contributed to implicit smear activation in Studies 1 and 2, such factors may amplify explicit smear endorsement.

To test this possibility in Study 3, after making race, age, or no category salient to Obama supporters, McCain supporters, and undecideds, we measured willful endorsement of two opinion pieces, one arguing that McCain suffers from senile dementia and another arguing that Obama is a closeted Muslim extremist. First, we predicted that established supporters of a candidate would show very low endorsement of stigmatizing information about their own candidate but considerable endorsement of stigmatizing information about the competing candidate. Second, we predicted that, in the absence of salient category cues, undecided individuals' endorsement of both candidates' stigma would fall between those of established supporters and opponents. Third, however, we predicted that undecideds' explicit endorsement of either Obama's or McCain's smear would be elevated if cues to a group-level difference were salient. Specifically, among a college-aged sample of undecideds, we anticipated that activating the category of age would motivate heightened endorsement of the smear against McCain, a 72-year-old. Analogously, among this non-African American sample, we anticipated that activating the category of race would motivate heightened endorsement of the smear against Obama. We chose to focus on explicit smear endorsement without assessing implicit smear activation, because presenting Muslimand senility-related terms during a lexical decision task might have heightened suspicion regarding the experimenter's interest in subsequent explicit smear evaluations, or alternatively, having participants explicitly evaluate the smears might then have influenced their implicit activation.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited using the same procedure as in Experiment 2, yielding a sample of 110 participants (39 Obama supporters, 35 McCain supporters, 36 undecideds; 79 women, 31 men). Prescreen data ensured that no participants were Muslim, African American, or older than 24 years.

Design and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 3 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times 2 (smeared article: Obama vs. McCain) \times 3 (salience: race vs. age vs. no category) mixed design, with smear article as the within-subjects factor. In sessions run between September 29, 2008 and October 29, 2008, participants were first informed that the study concerned how individuals process political information. All materials were then presented in a single questionnaire packet, and participants were ensured that their

responses were entirely anonymous and confidential. Social category salience was manipulated via the same demographics sheet procedure employed in Study 2, with the addition of an age-salient condition. In the age condition, participants received a list of 4-year age groups and were asked to "circle the age group which best describes you." Participants who received the race item identified as White (78.4%), Latino (13.5%), Asian (2.7%), and other (5.4%), and none identified as American Indian or African American. Participants who received the age item identified as 15–19 (85.7%), or 20-24 (14.3%) years old.

Subsequently, participants were presented with two articles (order counterbalanced between participants; no effects of order or participant sex occurred). One article, entitled "Obama's 'My Muslim Faith' Gaffe Should Fuel New Round of Pundit Concern," argued that Obama's upbringing and political actions betray an underlying commitment to Muslim culture and Islamist extremism. The other article, entitled "John McCain and Senile Dementia," argued that McCain displays progressive loss of memory and mental abilities and noticeable personality changes, including increased impulsiveness. We composed the articles to make them as similar to one another as possible, except for the pertinent smear message. Both were graphically designed to appear as published opinion pieces printed from Internet websites, were approximately 600 words in length, cited particular gaffes made by the targeted candidate, and conveyed a broad message about the candidate's unfitness to lead the country (because of the connection to Islam and age-related mental deficits attributed to Obama and McCain, respectively).

After reading each article, participants were asked on a separate sheet to indicate the chances that the thesis of the article (e.g., that Obama is a closeted Muslim extremist; that McCain suffers from senile dementia) is true by placing an X on a horizontal line labeled with percentages (at increments of 20%) spaced at 1–in. (2.54-cm) increments. The dependent measure was created by measuring the distance from the nearest (lower) percentage label to the center of the X provided, converting that distance to a percentage (such that each 1/16 in. = 1.25%) and adding that to the near low label.

We readministered the prescreen assessment of candidate preference at the end of the session. Compared with their prescreen response, only five participants (3.45%) changed their preference. Excluding data from these participants did not change the results. Upon completion of the study, each participant placed his or her anonymous materials in an unmarked envelope and then placed the envelope through the thinly slotted lid of an unmarked box that was half full with a barely visible pile of envelops. During debriefing, all participants reported thoroughly believing that their responses were confidential and anonymous.

Results

We conducted a 3 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times 3 (salience: age vs. race vs. no item) \times 2 (smear article: Obama vs. McCain) mixed-model ANOVA on the likelihood ratings, with smear article as a within-subject variable. This revealed a two-way Salience \times Smear Article interaction, F(2, 101) = 13.07, p < .001, such that likelihood ratings of the article smearing Obama were higher in the race-salient condition (vs. the age salient and no-item conditions), F(2, 101) = 7.41, p < .005, and likelihood ratings of the article smearing McCain were higher

in the age-salient condition (vs. race salient and no-item conditions), F(2, 101) = 10.05, p < .001. We also observed a two-way Candidate Supported × Smear Article interaction, F(2, 101) =85.60, p < .001. Regarding the article that smeared Obama, McCain supporters exhibited higher likelihood ratings relative to undecideds and Obama supporters exhibited lower likelihood ratings relative to undecideds, F(2, 101) = 36.39, p < .001. Conversely, regarding the article that smeared McCain, Obama supporters exhibited higher likelihood ratings relative to undecideds, and McCain supporters exhibited lower likelihood ratings relative to undecideds, F(2, 101) = 55.73, p < .001. Accordingly, established supporters of either candidate exhibited readiness to endorse the opposition candidate's smear and resistance to endorsing their favored candidate's smear.

These effects were qualified by the predicted three-way Candidate Supported × Salience × Smear Article interaction, F(4, 101) = 2.59, p < .05 (see Figure 3). As predicted, supporters did F3 not differ in likelihood estimates across levels of the salience manipulation when the article smeared their own candidate. However, supporters' estimates were influenced when the salient category pertained to the opposition. Relative to the no-item condition, McCain supporters thought it was more likely that Obama is a Muslim extremist when their race was made salient, F(1, 69) =8.16, p < .01, d = 1.20. Conversely, relative to the no-item condition, Obama supporters thought it was more likely that McCain is senile when their age was made salient, F(1, 66) =4.00, p < .05, d = 0.81. This suggests that established supporters were more likely to explicitly endorse an opposition candidate's smear after a differentiating social category had been made salient.

Furthermore, undecideds reported greater likelihood that McCain suffers from Senile Dementia in the age-salient condition relative to the no-item and race-salient conditions, F(1, 66) = 17.88, p < .001, d = 1.71, and F(1, 67) = 22.03, p < .001, d = 1.90, respectively, and rated greater likelihood that Obama is a Muslim extremist in the race salient condition relative to the no-item and age-salient conditions, F(1, 69) = 7.34, p < .01, d = 1.09, and F(1, 67) = 8.82, p < .005, d = 1.19, respectively. This suggests that undecideds became more likely to explicitly endorse Obama's or McCain's smear after a differentiating social category had been made salient.



Figure 3. Explicit perceived likelihood ratings that smearing information is true as a function of candidate supported, candidate smeared, and salient social category (Study 3). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 supported our three predictions. First, supporters of Obama or McCain explicitly rated their own candidate's smear (e.g., that Obama is Muslim, or McCain is senile) as very unlikely to be true but rated the opposition candidate's smear as highly valid, with mean likelihoods of being true higher than 50%. Furthermore, established political allegiance and salient cues to social category differences had an unanticipated cumulative effect. Obama supporters for whom age was initially made salient exhibited heightened endorsement of the article smearing McCain, and McCain supporters for whom race was initially made salient showed heightened endorsement of the article smearing Obama.

These findings suggest that political allegiance motivated explicit smear acceptance, and this increases further when salient information signals a social category difference. As in Study 2, the results of Study 3 seem more consistent with a motivational process as opposed to a purely cognitive priming process. If cognitive cueing of social categories was driving the effects of Study 3, then we should have found that category activation heightened explicit smear endorsement among all participants. Yet instead, activating a differentiating category elevated established supporters' endorsement of smears only against a politically opposed candidate, not when the participant's favored candidate was targeted. Explicit smear-endorsement ratings were as low as control participants for race-salient Obama supporters' evaluations of Obama's smear and for age-salient McCain supporters' evaluations of McCain's smear. This suggests a motivational process by which political opposition and social category differentiation increased readiness to endorse overt smearing allegations.

Among undecideds, salient categories heightened endorsement of both candidates' smears. In the absence of salient category cues, undecideds' smear likelihood ratings fell below 50%, which was between those of established supporters and opponents. Just as undecideds in Study 2 did not activate the available implicit cognitive link between Obama's name and his smearing label in the non-race-salient condition, Study 3 undecideds who did not receive category salience appeared hesitant to explicitly endorse the legitimacy of each candidate's smear. Yet undecideds' explicit smear endorsement ratings increased dramatically following exposure to differentiating social category information. Regarding race salient undecideds' evaluations of Obama's smear and age salient undecideds' evaluations of McCain's smear, likelihood ratings heightened to above the 50% midpoint. This suggests that, just as undecideds in Study 2 activated the implicit Obama-Muslim association in the race-salient condition, Study 3 undecideds exposed to differentiating category information became particularly willing to perceive smearing allegations as true. The fact that this effect occurred on evaluation of both Obama's smear and McCain's smear suggests that undecideds were particularly malleable in their readiness to accept both rumors. It appears that undecided individuals can become motivated to accept smears of multiple candidates when situational factors render intergroup differences salient.

Study 4

The preceding studies provided evidence that intergroup divides contributed to the implicit activation and explicit endorsement of smearing associations prior to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that simply rendering salient a social category dimension on which individuals differed from a candidate (i.e., race, age) was sufficient to promote implicit and explicit smear acceptance. But given potential semantic linkages between the salient categories and smears in the previous studies, it could be argued that effects observed were driven by cognitive priming effects rather than motivation from intergroup bias. For instance, it may be that race and religion are cognitively linked in participants' minds (e.g., as "ethnicity-relevant" dimensions), such that making race-salient primed thoughts of available cognitive associations between Obama and an ethnically relevant Muslim label.

As noted previously, some of our data speak against the operation of cueing processes in our effects. For example, in Study 2, race salience did not generally heighten the accessibility of Muslim terms among all participants but only did so among undecideds and only after Obama's name had been subliminally primed. However a more convincing demonstration that the effect of category salience on smear acceptance is not merely the result of an unmotivated cognitive cueing process would be one in which the race-salience induction heightens endorsement of a smearing label that is semantically unrelated to race.

To test this idea, we conducted a fourth study examining belief in a smear against Obama that was semantically unrelated to race: that Obama is a socialist. This rumor gained widespread publicity in the year following the 2008 U.S. election, in response to several of Obama's policy decisions throughout the first year of his Presidency (e.g., Leibovich, 2009). For instance, Obama's endorsement of a bailout for the failing auto industry in the United States, his pursuit of universal healthcare, and his diplomatic efforts to rekindle positive foreign relations with Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez were construed by opponents as evidence for a socialist agenda-as efforts to redistribute wealth, socialize medicine, and warm up to communists, respectively. Such political maneuverings may represent badges of honor in cultures that embrace socialist, communist, or any broadly Marxist form of social policy; yet in the historically capitalistic United States, longstanding antisocialist attitudes originating with the Red Scares of the early and mid 20th Century (and continuing largely to the present day) render the label of "socialist" highly stigmatizing.

This sociopolitical context thus provided an opportunity to assess whether a salient differentiating social category would promote acceptance of a semantically unrelated smear. Specifically, we could examine whether race salience in non-Black participants would heighten endorsement of the rumor that Obama is a socialist. To do so, in November of 2009, we manipulated the salience of race among non-Black individuals who had supported either Obama or McCain during the 2008 election, or who were undecided at that time, and then measured explicit endorsement of a smearing opinion piece contending that Obama is a socialist. Consistent with our previous findings suggesting that political allegiance promotes smear acceptance, we predicted that established supporters of McCain would show high endorsement of the idea that Obama is a socialist, whereas established supporters of Obama would show low endorsement of this rumor. Furthermore, consistent with idea that salience of a differentiating category will motivate acceptance of smears, even when the smear is not semantically related to the category, we predicted that race salience would heighten explicit endorsement of the falsehood that Obama

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is a socialist among undecided participants. We predicted a null effect of race salience among Obama supporters, but we were also interested to see if, as in Study 3, salience of race would heighten McCain supporters' explicit endorsement of the smear that Obama is a socialist.

Method

Participants. Participants were 75 university students (49 women, 26 men). At the conclusion of the study, participants were asked to "think back to the month before the 2008 U.S. Presidential election. At that point in time, were you a supporter of Barack Obama, John McCain, or were you undecided about whom to support?" and to respond by circling OBAMA, MCCAIN, or UNDECIDED. Responses to this item were unaffected by the race-salience manipulation, and no effects of participant sex were observed. This yielded a sample of 33 Obama supporters, 26 McCain supporters, and 16 undecided individuals. Supplementary data verified that responses on this item covaried predictably with current attitudes toward Obama. To measure participants' current attitude toward Obama, we asked them to "indicate your current attitude toward Barack Obama. To what extent do you currently support Obama?" (1 = not at all support, 9 = totally support). After coding responses as MCCAIN = 0, UNDECIDED = 1, and OBAMA = 2, we observed a strong, significant positive correlation (r = .70, p < .001) between this coded variable and the measure of current attitude toward Obama.

Design and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 3 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times 2 (salience: race salient vs. non-race salient) between-subject design. As in Study 3, participants were first informed that the study concerned how individuals process political information; all materials were then presented in a single questionnaire packet. All participants received a demographic questionnaire with a race item, and to manipulate race salience, we varied whether this questionnaire was presented at the beginning of the packet (i.e., before evaluating the smear; race salient) or at the end of the packet (i.e., after evaluating the smear; non-race salient). Participants identified as White (78.7%), Latino (10.7%), Asian (8.0%), and American Indian (2.7%), and none identified as African American.

Akin to the procedures of Study 3, participants were presented with a fabricated article, entitled "Obama Is Pure Socialist," which forcefully argued that Obama is a closeted Marxist, citing as evidence purported efforts on Obama's part to expand government regulation of the economy, redistribute wealth, defer to international institutions, and nationalize medicine. The article also suggested intimate personal ties between Obama and socialist organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America and The Socialist Party USA. The propositions within the article were either entirely false or greatly embellished and exaggerated, and upon completion of the study (as in all of the prior studies), participants were thoroughly debriefed and clearly informed that the contents of the article they read were highly inaccurate.

As in Study 3, the article was graphically designed to appear as a published opinion piece printed from an Internet site and was approximately 600 words in length. After reading the article, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that the thesis of the article (i.e., that Barack Obama is a socialist) is true by placing an X on a horizontal line labeled with percentages at increments of 20%. The dependent measure was created via the same measurement procedure used in Study 3.

To ensure that all groups had comparably negative attitudes toward socialism, we then asked participants to indicate the extent to which they supported a socialist form of government (1 = not at all support, 9 = totally support). Ratings on this item did not differ significantly as a function of candidate supported, F(2, 72) = 0.98, p = .38. The grand mean for the sample was significantly below the scale midpoint, t(74) = -5.50, p < .001, and indeed, all groups showed low levels of support for socialism (Obama supporters: M = 3.58, SD = 1.89; McCain supporters: M = 2.88, SD = 1.77; undecideds: M = 3.38, SD = 2.13). This suggests that, among all groups, labeling someone as a socialist was likely to be stigmatizing.

Results

Likelihood ratings of the "Obama is socialist" smear were subjected to a 3 (candidate supported: Obama vs. McCain vs. undecided) \times 2 (salience: race salient vs. non-race salient) ANOVA. This revealed a Salience main effect, F(1, 69) = 11.85, p < .005, with race-salient participants showing higher likelihood ratings, as well as a main effect of candidate supported, F(2, 69) =19.30, p < .001. These effects were qualified by the predicted two-way Candidate Supported \times Salience interaction, F(2, 69) =4.42, p < .05 (see Figure 4).

Post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction revealed that, in the non-race-salient condition, likelihood ratings among Obama supporters and undecideds were comparably low and did not differ significantly from one another, but non-race-salient McCain supporters showed higher likelihood ratings compared to both groups (both Fs > 6, both ps < .01). Accordingly, as in the previous studies, individuals with an established opposition to a candidate exhibited readiness to accept a smear against him.

We then examined the effect of our race salience manipulation. As predicted, Obama supporters' likelihood estimates did not significantly differ as a function of race salience. Furthermore, race salience (vs. non-race salience) led to higher likelihood ratings among both McCain supporters, F(1, 69) = 5.20, p < .05, d = 1.13, and those who identified as undecided, F(1, 69) = 11.22, p < .005, d = 1.68. Among race-salient undecided participants, likelihood ratings were significantly higher than race-salient Obama supporters, F(1, 45) = 6.78, p < .05, d = 1.33, and in fact were as high as likelihood ratings among non-race-salient McCain supporters. Accordingly, as in Study 3, salience of a differentiating social category heightened explicit smear endorsement both among undecided individuals and among individuals with a prior established opposition to the targeted candidate.

Discussion

The results of Study 4 supported our predictions. In the condition in which race was not made salient, supporters of McCain explicitly rated the smear that Obama is socialist as quite likely to be true, whereas Obama supporters rated this smear as highly invalid. Furthermore, as in Study 3, whereas race salience had no effect among Obama supporters, McCain supporters for whom race was initially made salient showed heightened likelihood rat-



Figure 4. Explicit perceived likelihood ratings that Obama is a socialist as a function of candidate supported and race salience (Study 4). Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

ings of the Obama-is-socialist smear. These findings suggest that political allegiance motivated explicit smear endorsement and again showed that this increases further when salient information signals a social category difference.

Among undecideds in the non-race-salient condition, smear likelihood ratings were below 30% and were statistically equivalent to those of Obama supporters. Accordingly, as in Study 3, undecideds who did not receive category salience appeared hesitant to explicitly endorse the legitimacy of a political figure's smear. Yet race-salient undecideds' explicit smear-endorsement ratings increased dramatically in response to race salience, rising to approximately 60%. These findings support a motivational explanation for the effect of race salience over an unmotivated cognitive cueing account. The salience of a social category dimension on which undecided participants differed from Obama heightened explicit endorsement of a smear which was semantically unrelated to the salient category. Consistent with a motivation from intergroup bias, it appeared that simply thinking of a social category on which they differed from Obama was sufficient to motivate undecideds to endorse a false label of him.

General Discussion

To our knowledge, the present studies present the first experimental demonstrations that acceptance of slanderous rumors about Presidential candidates (smears) is augmented by political allegiances and salient categorical differences. In the month prior to the U.S. Presidential election, established supporters of either Barack Obama or John McCain accepted popularized falsehoods regarding the opposition candidate, and undecided individuals similarly accepted smears if group identities distinguishing them from a candidate were situationally salient. Smear acceptance manifested at both implicit and explicit cognitive levels, suggesting that intergroup biases promoted both automatic cognitive activation and overt, controlled endorsement of pernicious political beliefs. Furthermore, we observed that, for those who were not clear supporters of the current President prior the election, acceptance of a smear against him a year after the election was amplified in response to a situationally salient differentiating social category that had no obvious semantic connection to the smearing label.

In exploring these phenomena, the present research adds to an expanding literature exploring cognitive, emotional, and motivational bases of political bias (Arcuri, Castelli, Galdi, Zogmaister, & Amadori, 2008; Bullock, 2006; Galdi, Arcuri, & Gawronski, 2008; Westen, 2007). Recent work in this vein has explored how implicit and explicit attitudes relate to politically charged decision making (e.g., Arcuri et al., 2008; Galdi et al., 2008). For instance, Arcuri and colleagues (2008) observed that, among both partisan and undecided voters in the 2001 Italian General Election, implicit attitudes toward the candidates significantly predicted voting behavior. Furthermore, Galdi and colleagues (2008) observed that, among individuals with a firmly established preference regarding enlargement of a U.S. military base in Vicenza, Italy, explicit attitudes toward this topic predicted their final preference better than implicit attitudes, whereas the reverse pattern occurred among individuals who were less sure of their initial attitude. This suggests an intriguing topic for future research on the consequences of political smear acceptance: whether, among established supporters of a candidate, explicit smear endorsement predicts voting preference better than implicit smear activation, whereas among undecideds, implicit smear activation is the stronger predictor.

The present studies revealed some clear correspondences between implicit and explicit measures of smear acceptance but also a notable difference. In Study 2, McCain supporters activated Muslim constructs when primed with Obama's name but did not show even more activation of Muslim constructs because of the salience of racial categorization. In contrast, in Studies 3 and 4, explicit endorsement of the smears among established opponents was further increased, such that established opponents generally endorsed the smear and did so even more if a salient category difference had initially been rendered salient. This subtle difference in outcomes on the implicit and explicit assessments is consistent with Devine's (1989; see also, e.g., Gawronski & Strack, 2003) suggestion that explicit, controlled attitudes may be more flexible and more easily changed than are implicit attitudes. Accordingly, the effect of subtle social category activation to heighten explicit but not implicit smear acceptance among established supporters may reflect greater malleability of explicit evaluations and enhanced susceptibility of such evaluations to the

biasing impact of salient group differences. Alternatively, there may have been a floor effect on RTs in Study 2, such that McCain supporters' political affiliation maximally heightened the activation of an implicit smearing association; whereas, in contrast, the wider ranged scale employed in Studies 3 and 4 (0–100%) provided a more sensitive measure, capable of detecting effects of social category activation among those already opposed to the political figure.

Limitations and Remaining Questions

It should be noted that the present studies are not without limitations. Participants were 18- to 24-year-old university students who may have been less politically engaged than adult participants would have been-or perhaps more engaged than adults, in light of the rise in political interest the 2008 Presidential election saw among younger individuals (Fernandez-Pereda & Surowidjojo, 2008). In either case, only future research examining smear acceptance among diverse age groups can address the generalizability of the present findings to the electorate as a whole. A similar question pertains to potential cultural diversity in the potential for smear acceptance. We tested our hypotheses in a very specific cultural place and time, and so, without additional data from other societies during other elections, we cannot be sure the same factors that increased acceptance of political smears in this research would play a similar role at other historical times and in other cultural contexts.

Another remaining question pertains to whether intergroup bias motivates activation and endorsement of smears in particular, or whether this factor could also promote acceptance of any available negative information about a candidate. The present research focused on the issue of smearing because it is a vastly underinvestigated topic, it is of great social relevance, and it involves the puzzling phenomenon of people believing blatantly false information. If patently false stigmatizing characterizations become more cognitively active and endorsed when some basis for categorical differentiation is salient, it seems likely that such circumstances would encourage acceptance of more plausible negative information as well; but research would be needed to verify that. We believe that focusing on broadly disseminated political falsehoods and their psychological consequences, rather than on more idiosyncratic, possibly more truthful or less widely distributed negative claims, maximizes the potential social impact and real-world applicability of the present findings.

An additional remaining question regards the particular motivational processes that produced the effects among established supporters in Studies 1 and 2, who exhibited chronic activation of an opposed candidate's smear but not of a favored candidate's smear. Supplemental data (see the Study 1 Discussion) demonstrated that these groups did not differ in reported frequency of prior exposure to either candidate's smear, suggesting that the effects more likely resulted from motivation to accept smears of a politically opposed candidate than from group differences in extent of prior exposure. But there remain two ways to explain how motivation from intergroup bias produced these effects. One possibility is that both Obama supporters and McCain supporters possessed comparably strong memory representations of both candidates' smears but only maintained chronically active implicit smears against an opposed candidate because, during an election season, political allegiance is a chronically salient intergroup barrier. Accordingly, in this first view, motivation from intergroup bias influenced the situational activation of smearing associations because of the general salience of political identities during an election. A second possibility is that, despite comparable exposure to both candidates' smears prior to the study, perhaps when individuals initially encountered information smearing their favored candidate, they viewed its sources as low in credibility and/or did not attend much to such information (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), resulting in weaker cognitive associations for smears against one's favored candidate. Accordingly, in this latter view, motivation from intergroup bias influenced initial encoding in memory prior to the study, which in turn led to different associative strengths observed among established supporters in Studies 1 and 2.

Our findings do not conclusively illustrate which of these motivational processes was at work, but the data from Studies 2-4 did indicate that salient group identities play a causal role in promoting smear acceptance. This suggests that the implicit activation effects among established supporters in Studies 1 and 2 very likely resulted because salient political identifications engendered motivations for bias against the opposed candidate. In this view, cultural contexts which render political identities salient contribute to motivations for smear acceptance. Still, however, it remains an interesting question whether, in fact, intergroup bias contributes to smear acceptance by skewing basic encoding processes in the service of political allegiances. We are thus hopeful that future research will continue to investigate the subtleties of these processes, further informing precisely how motivated intergroup differentiation processes generate implicit manifestations of smear acceptance.

Another important question pertains to the possible role of cognitive cueing processes in our effects. Study 4 clearly showed that a salient differentiating category (i.e., race) heightened endorsement of a smear bearing no obvious semantic relation to the smearing label (i.e., Obama is a socialist), an effect which cannot parsimoniously be explained by pure priming effects but which fits well with a motivational process rooted in intergroup bias activation. However, it is worth considering the possible role of cueing processes in the previous studies, which occurred a year earlier and where the categories made salient (i.e., race and age) could conceivably have borne a cognitive association with the smears (i.e., that Obama is a Muslim and that McCain is senile, respectively). It is notable, however, that a purely cueing-based explanation for the findings of Studies 1-3 is unlikely adequate to account for our full pattern of findings (see the Discussion sections of Studies 2 and 3). First, from a pure cognitive cueing perspective, race salience, if linked to religious identifications, should have heightened the accessibility of Muslim terms regardless of the presence of Obama primes in Study 2. Such an effect did not occur. Second, because the smears under investigation were likely available in memory to all participants in these studies (see the Study 1 Discussion), the fact that these associations were not activated among race-salient Obama supporters (Study 2) and that racesalient Obama supporters and age-salient McCain supporters did not show heightened smear endorsement (Study 3) makes a pure cueing process unlikely. Rather, established supporters appeared to reject their favored candidate's smear (not activating it in Studies 1 and 2 and giving it low likelihood ratings in Study 3), whereas opponents of a candidate and undecideds were especially likely to

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accept smears when social category differences were salient. Finally, in Study 4, we used the same race salience manipulation as in Studies 2 and 3 and showed clearly that the effect of race salience on smear acceptance occurs regardless of any cognitive link to the smear, suggesting that the effects of category salience in Studies 2 and 3 likely occurred because of intergroup bias. Taken together, these findings suggest that the present effects were driven by motivational processes stemming from ingroup favoritism.

In the present studies, smear acceptance did not increase because of race or age salience among individuals politically allied with a targeted candidate. But would a similar null effect occur in the converse case, for instance, if a person shared a candidate's race but was of a different political party? It is possible that resistance to smear acceptance would occur among individuals who share a social category with a candidate but are unallied with him or her politically. An alternative possibility, however, is that because smears are by nature politically charged, shared nonpolitical identities cannot overpower the influence of political bias on smear acceptance. Because the present studies excluded individuals who shared Obama's racial background or McCain's age group, we could not test these interesting hypotheses. Future research examining whether nonpolitical similarities are (or are not) sufficient to mitigate the impact of political divides on smear acceptance will therefore be quite useful.

A final remaining question pertains to the conditions under which people are likely to consider more than one social category when evaluating a political candidate's smear. In this regard, the results of Studies 3 and 4 showed a cumulative effect of political bias and social category activation on explicit smear endorsement. This suggests that multiple categorical differentiations can contribute to perceptions of a smear's legitimacy when individuals are categorically opposed to a candidate. It is also possible that similar effects could occur among undecided individuals under certain conditions. For instance, had we manipulated the salience of two differentiating social categories (e.g., race and birthplace), perhaps undecideds would have exhibited an additive effect of multiple salient outgroup categories on smear endorsement. Because we manipulated the salience of only one category per participant in Studies 2–4, this remains an intriguing topic for future research.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction, the present research set out to apply known theoretical principles and methodologies to initiate investigation of a manifestly important social issue. It is our hope that the present studies place the issue of political smear acceptance within the theoretical purview of psychologists who will continue to investigate these important processes. We suggest that experimental research in psychology can have its strongest potential to impact social policy when the tools and ideas within various psychology subdisciplines are integrated to advance understanding of processes that can influence history, both on broad political stages and on the smaller stages of individual lives as they are influenced by significant media exposure.

Although interesting questions remain, the present research helps to explain the American electorate's vulnerability to accepting political misinformation, particularly when candidates' political or social category differences are salient. Studies that further address the psychological antecedents of smear acceptance may illuminate paths by which individuals can better resist accepting widespread political lies. For instance, it may be that smear acceptance becomes less likely when commonalities between a candidate and members of the electorate are made salient. Furthermore, similar reductions might occur when individuals prioritize responsibility to superordinate social identifications (i.e., America) over divisive subcategory identities (i.e., race, age, political allegiance; Gaertner et al., 1989). It remains to be seen whether such factors can attenuate the acceptance of political falsehoods during election seasons.

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