

Birther Nation: Political Conservatism is Associated with Explicit and Implicit Beliefs that President Barack Obama is Foreign

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Despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary, a substantial number of Americans believed that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States, even almost two years into his administration (CNN, 2010, July). Both anecdotal and polling evidence at the time suggested that Republicans and political conservatives were more likely to hold these inaccurate beliefs. This study demonstrated that across a variety of operationalizations of political orientation, both explicit and implicit beliefs that President Obama was foreign were related to political conservatism. Potential sources of these beliefs are considered.

“And I wanna know why you people are ignoring his birth certificate. He is not a citizen of the United States, he is a citizen of Kenya. I am American. . . and I don’t want this flag to change, I want my country back!”

—woman addressing U.S. Congressman Mike Castle (R-DE) at a town hall meeting, June 30, 2009

After pausing for the resounding cheers following this statement to dissipate, Congressman Mike Castle affirmed that President Obama “is a citizen of the United States,” a statement his constituents greeted with a chorus of boos. This incident marked the end of Castle’s career in the House of Representatives, and focused media attention on the so-called “birther” movement, which holds that Barack Obama is not a naturally born citizen and is therefore illegitimately holding the office of the Presidency. Despite a host of evidence released by the

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Obama campaign in 2008 certifying his citizenship, this conspiracy theory held sway among a substantial proportion of Americans. According to a CNN poll conducted in July 2010, only 42% of respondents believed that President Obama was definitely born in the United States, and 27% believed that he was either probably or definitely foreign-born. Unsurprisingly, these beliefs broke down by party affiliation: whereas only 15% of Democrats and 29% of independents believed that President Obama was either probably or definitely born outside of the United States, 43% of Republicans believed that Obama was probably or definitely foreign-born.

It is clear from both electoral results and public opinion polling that political conservatism and Republican Party affiliation are related to explicit negative attitudes towards President Obama and/or his policies (ANES, 2011; Gallup, 2011). Beyond these overt attitude expressions, recent evidence demonstrates that political conservatism is also related to implicit negative attitudes towards Obama (Nevid & McClelland, 2010). In contrast to explicitly expressed attitudes, implicit attitudes generally operate outside of one's conscious awareness and control (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). As such, measures of implicit attitudes may capture attitudes and beliefs that one is motivated to conceal on explicit self-report measures (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Fazio & Olson, 2003). One well-known measure of implicit attitudes is the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), which measures the relative strength of association between a target concept (e.g., "Black" or "White") and an attribute concept (e.g., "Good" or "Bad"). For example, relatively negative implicit attitudes towards Blacks are reflected in how quickly and accurately people pair the "Black" and "Bad" concepts (and "White" and "Good" concepts) together, compared with how quickly and accurately they pair the "Black" and "Good" concepts (and "White" and "Bad" concepts) together.

A recent series of IAT studies has shown that people tend to associate the attribute "American" with European American targets more so than with African American or Asian American targets (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Ma, 2008; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2010). Devos, Ma, and Gaffud (2008) observed this so-called "American = White" effect on perceptions of (then candidate) Barack Obama, finding that during the 2008 presidential election season, student participants more strongly associated the attribute "American" with images of former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair than with images of Barack Obama. Moreover, the tendency to make this erroneous association predicted the intention to not vote for Obama, over and above political orientation. Importantly, however, this "Obama = Foreign" effect was only observed when images of Obama and Blair were labeled as "Black" or "White," respectively; no such effect was observed when the targets were individuated by their respective names, suggesting the importance of racial priming and categorization in the "American = White" effect.

Devos et al. (2008) study was conducted prior to Barack Obama's election to the presidency. The present research explored whether implicit associations of President Barack Obama with the "Foreign" attribute would be evident even roughly halfway through his first term in office. To this end, participants completed an IAT in which Barack Obama and Tony Blair were identified by their respective names rather than their racial categories. We expected that both the individuation of the targets (Devos et al., 2008) and the bolstered association between Obama and "American" afforded by his time as president would eliminate the "American = White" effect in general. That said, evidence linking Republican Party affiliation to beliefs that Obama is foreign (CNN, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2009; Wisckol, 2008) suggests that political conservatism, in a variety of its manifestations, will be related to implicit associations of President Barack Obama with the concept "Foreign." Given the strong correlation between explicit and implicit political attitudes (Nosek, 2007), we expected that the relationship between political conservatism and explicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness would parallel that on the implicit measure.

We tested the relationship between political conservatism and explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness across a variety of measures of political orientation. First, we assessed party affiliation, which is strongly related to political orientation and vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Second, we included a single-item measure of left-right ideological self-placement, which has strong predictive validity for electoral decisions (Jost, 2006). That said, other research suggests the importance of using multiple indicators of issue positions to measure political orientation (Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008). Therefore, we also included a ten-item measure of people's positions on an assortment of political issues. In addition to these measures of political orientation, we included the right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1996) and the social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) scales, which are indicators of politically conservative beliefs (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). RWA is the covariation of three attitudinal clusters: authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1996), and is especially related to cultural conservatism (Duckitt, 2001; van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004). SDO reflects support for the dominance of certain socially constructed groups over others (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and is especially related to economic conservatism (Duckitt, 2001; van Hiel et al., 2004). We predicted that each of these five political orientation variables would be related to both explicit and implicit beliefs in President Barack Obama's foreignness.

In addition to these political motives, some scholars and commentators have suggested that "birtherism" is racially motivated (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hartman, 2011), while others have suggested these beliefs are born from religious prejudice and an accompanying inaccurate belief that President Obama is Muslim

(Hollander, 2010; Rutenberg, 2008). We therefore included measures of people's racial attitudes (the Modern Racism Scale) and self-reported religiosity.

Method

Participants

Participants were 27 undergraduates (21 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 19$ years) attending a small public liberal arts college in the Northeast. All were White Americans who received course credit for their participation.

Procedures and Materials

Participants arrived at the research laboratory individually or in groups of two. They first completed a questionnaire administered with online survey software. The following measures were presented in random order: (1) an ideological self-placement item (1 = *Extremely liberal*; 7 = *Extremely conservative*); (2) a party affiliation item (1 = *Strong Democrat*; 7 = *Strong Republican*); (3) a 20-item RWA scale (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006); (4) the 16-item SDO scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999); (5) a 4-item measure of modern racism (Sears & Henry, 2005); and (6) ten political attitude items comprising the issue-based conservatism measure (see Appendix), scored so that higher values indicated more conservative issue positions. The order of items on each scale was randomized, and all scales were measured on 7-point scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*) except RWA, which was measured on a 9-point scale. (RWA was transformed onto a 7-point scale to facilitate comparisons to the other political orientation variables). Averages scores were computed for each scale.

To disassociate these measures from the IAT, participants were told that they would participate in two separate studies. After completing the initial questionnaire, participants were read a bogus debriefing. The original research assistant left the laboratory and a new research assistant ostensibly working in another professor's research lab arrived to administer the remainder of the study materials, under the pretense of a separate study. Only one participant reported suspicion that the two separate sessions were linked; removal of this participant did not affect the results, so he was retained in the analyses.

Implicit association test. We developed an IAT to measure the strength of the association between President Barack Obama and the concept "Foreign." Prior to beginning the IAT, participants were told that they would be viewing images of "Barack Obama, the first Black U.S. President, and Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain." These instructions were included to ensure that regardless of prior knowledge, all participants were aware that Obama was

indeed American and Blair was indeed foreign. Four images of President Obama were drawn from Caruso, Mead, and Balctis' (2009) materials, and four images of Tony Blair, which were chosen to best match the Obama images for pose and facial expression, were drawn from internet resources. Four American landmarks (Grand Canyon, Old Faithful, Niagara Falls, Devil's Tower) were used to represent the concept "American," and four non-U.S. landmarks (Mt. Everest, Amazon River, Antarctica, Costa Rican rainforest) were used to represent the concept "Foreign" (landmark stimuli from Nosek et al., 2007). The location of each landmark was provided below each image (e.g., "Niagara Falls, New York").

The standard IAT procedure was followed. In the first block of trials, the names "Barack Obama" and "Tony Blair" appeared on opposite sides of the screen, while images of the targets appeared individually in the center of the screen. Participants clicked the appropriate key ("E" or "I") to categorize the target image. Trials only advanced when participants correctly categorized the target image. In the second block, the terms "American" and "Foreign" appeared on the top left and right of the screen, while the American and foreign landmark images appeared in the center. In the third block of trials, participants practiced the association between the target categories and the attributes. For example, Barack Obama was paired with the term American on one side of the screen, while Tony Blair was paired with the term Foreign on the other side of the screen. All four image types (i.e., images of Obama, Blair, American landmark, or foreign landmark) would then appear individually in the center, and participants categorized the images as either Obama or American, or as Blair or Foreign. The fourth block consisted of the test of these associations. In the fifth block, the target categories reversed themselves; in other words, if Barack Obama and Tony Blair were originally on the left and right sides of the screen, respectively, Blair was now on the left and Obama on the right. Participants practiced this new arrangement. In the sixth block, participants practiced the pairing of Blair with American and of Obama with Foreign, and were tested on this association in the seventh block. The order in which President Obama was paired with the concept "American" varied across participants: Obama was paired first with "American" and then "Foreign" for odd-numbered participants; he was paired first with "Foreign" and then "American" for even-numbered participants. IAT *D* scores were calculated using the scoring algorithm described in Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003), and were computed so that a higher value indicated a stronger association between President Obama and the category "Foreign" than with "American" (and between Tony Blair and "American" than with "Foreign").

After completing the IAT, participants provided demographic information (e.g., gender, age), self-reported religiosity (1 = *Not at all religious*; 7 = *Very religious*), and self-generated explicit labels of President Obama's race/ethnicity. Finally, participants completed the explicit measure of belief in Obama's foreignness by indicating the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "Barack

Obama was born in the United States" (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*, reverse-scored so that higher scores indicated greater belief in Obama's foreignness).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for each variable, Cronbach's alphas for all measures, and correlations among all measures. The five political orientation variables were strongly correlated with one another (r s from .47 to .91). Therefore, in addition to the individual political orientation variables, we created a composite conservatism measure from these five variables and computed the average (also included in Table 1). Modern racism was significantly correlated with issue-based conservatism, RWA, SDO, and the composite conservatism measure, but only marginally correlated with Republican Party affiliation. Self-reported religiosity was significantly correlated with self-reported conservatism, issue-based conservatism, RWA, and the composite conservatism measure.

A one-sample t -test comparing the sample mean of the explicit measure of Obama's foreignness to the scale midpoint (4) indicated that participants generally agreed with the statement that Barack Obama was born in the U. S., $t(25) = -6.01$, $p < .001$, two-tailed. Similarly, a one sample t -test comparing the sample mean of the IAT D scores to the neutral point (0) indicated that in general, participants more strongly associated Obama with the concept "American" than "Foreign," $t(26) = -4.16$, $p < .001$, two-tailed (and by extension, more strongly associated Tony Blair with the concept "Foreign" than "American"). This failure to reproduce the "American = White" effect when Barack Obama was individuated rather than racially categorized is consistent with Devos et al. (2008) findings. Greater implicit association between Obama and "Foreign" was strongly correlated with greater explicit belief that Obama is foreign-born ($r = .53$), demonstrating the construct validity of the implicit measure.

Primary Analyses

The primary relationships of interest were those between the measures of conservatism and the explicit and implicit measures of belief in Obama's foreignness. All five individual conservatism variables, the composite conservatism measure, modern racism, and self-reported religiosity were significantly related to the explicit belief that Obama was not born in the United States (r s from .40 to .74, one-tailed). Issue-based conservatism, self-reported conservatism, Republican Party affiliation, RWA, and the composite conservatism measure were significantly

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for and Correlations Among Study Variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---------------------------------|--------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|------|
| 1. Explicit belief | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Implicit belief (<i>D</i>) | .53** | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Issue-based conservatism | .74*** | .33* | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Self-reported conservatism | .56** | .37* | .68*** | | | | | | | |
| 5. Party affiliation | .44* | .33* | .63*** | .79*** | | | | | | |
| 6. RWA | .62*** | .37* | .76*** | .77*** | .69*** | | | | | |
| 7. SDO | .48** | .06 | .63*** | .51** | .47** | .49** | | | | |
| 8. Composite political measure | .64*** | .36* | .85*** | .91*** | .89*** | .87*** | .69*** | | | |
| 9. Modern racism | .40* | -.06 | .63*** | .20 | .30† | .34* | .53** | .43* | | |
| 10. Self-reported religiosity | .43* | .29† | .45* | .33* | .25 | .50** | .01 | .35* | .15 | |
| <i>M</i> | 2.31 | -.07 | 2.93 | 3.52 | 3.50 | 2.72 | 2.62 | 3.04 | 2.84 | 4.07 |
| <i>SD</i> | 1.44 | .09 | .84 | 1.40 | 1.66 | 1.13 | .92 | 1.03 | .79 | 1.69 |
| Cronbach's α | — | — | .85 | — | — | .95 | .93 | .90 | .67 | — |

Notes: RWA = right-wing authoritarianism; SDO = social dominance orientation. Higher scores on the explicit belief measure indicate greater belief that Obama is foreign-born. Higher scores on the implicit belief measure indicate greater association between Obama and the concept "Foreign." Higher scores on all political orientation variables indicate more conservative responses.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, one-tailed.

related to greater implicit association between Obama and "Foreign" (r s from .33 to .37, one-tailed). Self-reported religiosity was only marginally correlated with implicit beliefs ($p = .070$, one-tailed). SDO and modern racism were unrelated to the implicit measure (p s $> .377$, one-tailed).

Thus, as predicted, people generally believed that President Obama was born in the U.S. and more strongly associated him with the concept "American" than they did the concept "Foreign." However, political conservatism, in a variety of its manifestations, predicted both explicit and implicit beliefs in President Obama's foreignness. Self-reported religiosity was significantly and marginally related to explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness, respectively; modern racism was significantly related to explicit but not implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness.

Ancillary Analyses

Given our inclusion of both the RWA and SDO scales in these study materials, readers familiar with the dual process motivational model of ideological attitudes (DPM; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) may be curious about their relative relationships with explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness. Briefly, the DPM posits that RWA and SDO are related but distinct ideological attitude dimensions with differential consequences for sociopolitical attitudes and behavior. According to the model, RWA more strongly relates to motives for coercive social control, obedience and deference to legitimate authority, and conformity to traditional and religious norms and values, whereas SDO more strongly relates to motives for intergroup dominance and superiority (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2010 for a review). Although we did not have a priori hypotheses regarding which ideological attitude dimension would more strongly relate to explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness, we did observe that RWA but not SDO was related to the implicit association between Obama and "Foreign." Moreover, although both RWA and SDO were significantly correlated with explicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness (see Table 1), SDO was not a significant correlate after partialling out the effects of RWA ($r = .19$, $p = .183$, one tailed). RWA did however significantly correlate with explicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness even after partialling out the effects of SDO ($r = .48$, $p = .008$, one tailed). These results suggest that at least in this sample, RWA was more strongly related to explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness than was SDO.

Discussion

These findings indicate that at both explicit and implicit levels, people generally believe that President Barack Obama was born in the United States. However,

these results indicate that political conservatism is related to doubts regarding his citizenship. Previous research has linked partisanship with explicit beliefs about Obama's citizenship (CNN, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2009; Wisckol, 2008), and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness with the intention to vote for him during the 2008 campaign season, but only when his racial category membership was salient (Devos et al., 2008). The present results indicate that even close to two years into his administration, and even when he was individuated rather than racially categorized, political conservatism was related to both explicit and implicit beliefs in President Obama's foreignness. Importantly, these relationships were reliable across a number of measures of political conservatism. Specifically, ideological self-placement, Republican Party affiliation, a multi-item measure of issue positions, RWA, and SDO (as well as a composite of these five variables) significantly correlated with explicit beliefs in President Obama's foreignness. With the exception of SDO, all of these measures also significantly correlated with implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness.

Ideological motives often bias how partisans and ideologues evaluate political information (Cohen, 2003; Crawford, Jussim, Cain, & Cohen, in press; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Keltner & Robinson, 1996). When there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary of some political beliefs, as in the case of President Obama's foreignness, ideological motives are clearly sources of such distortion. But exactly what motives? Scholars and commentators have offered multiple explanations for "birtherism," with two of the strongest memes involving the "otherness" implied by his racial and ethnic ancestry (Bai, 2010; Sears, 2011), and the "otherness" implied by his religious ancestry (Hollander, 2010; Hollyfield, 2008). Our study cannot directly answer this question. That said, the finding that RWA was more strongly related to explicit and implicit beliefs in Obama's foreignness than was SDO suggests that birtherism may be more strongly influenced by a motive to maintain traditional and religious norms and values than a motive to maintain intergroup dominance and superiority (Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Such resistant to change, which is at the core of political conservatism (Jost et al., 2003), is embodied in the sentiment of the woman quoted at the beginning of this article who feared changes to both her flag and country as a result of Obama's presidency. Future research should disentangle the potential motivational sources of birther beliefs.

Data collection occurred prior to the release of President Obama's original "long form" Certificate of Live Birth in April 2011. According to a CNN poll conducted shortly after the release of the long form certificate, belief that President Obama was probably or definitely born outside of the U.S. dropped from 27% of Americans the previous July to 17%. This drop in birtherism was especially dramatic among Republicans: 28% believed he was probably or definitely foreign-born, down from 43% professing such a belief in a similar July 2010 poll (CNN, 2011). One potentially interesting result of this change in explicit beliefs among

political conservatives may be that while they now are more likely to explicitly acknowledge Obama's citizenship, their implicit attitudes may continue to reveal a stronger association of Obama with foreignness. Such a finding would be consistent with research showing that the IAT captures implicit attitudes not revealed on explicit measures when the overt expression of such attitudes is unpopular (Devos & Banaji, 2005, Studies 3–4; Greenwald et al., 1998). Future research could explore this possibility.

This data was collected from a convenience sample of college students, and issues with using college students to examine social and political attitudes are well-known (Henry, 2008; Sears, 1986). That said, research using the Implicit Association Test is primarily conducted with college students; in a recent meta-analysis (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009), 89% of samples exclusively used college students, with many of these studies examining students' social and political attitudes. Thus, this sampling method is broadly consistent with extant IAT research. We also made use of a relatively small sample. As noted, explicit expressions of "birtherism" have drastically declined since these data were collected, making an increase in sample size or replication of these exact findings conceptually impossible. Thus, these findings are limited in that they may only provide a snapshot in time of the birtherism phenomenon. That said, the results do suggest the possible utility of using the IAT to examine ideological predictors of implicit belief in other fleeting "fringe" conspiracy theories (e.g., 9/11 Trutherism; Holocaust denial).

Finally, there is some debate regarding what exactly the IAT measures. Whereas proponents of the IAT argue that it possesses strong predictive validity for relevant social attitudes and behavior (Greenwald et al., 2009; Rudman & Ashmore, 2007), some critics suggest that the IAT instead captures culturally held beliefs that the individual is aware of but does not necessarily personally endorse (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004). Although the present evidence certainly does not settle this debate, the fact that implicit associations between Obama and "Foreign" were related to variations in political orientation across a number of indicators supports the contention that the IAT can measure individually held beliefs.

Conclusion

President Barack Obama was born in Hawaii to a White Kansan mother raised as a Christian and a Black Kenyan father raised as a Muslim. Although some hoped that the ascendance of someone from such a culturally rich background to the presidency of the U.S. reflected the emergence of a post-racial America (Crowley, 2008; Steele, 2008), this background has been used by President Obama's political opponents to paint him as alien, foreign, and un-American. This study indicates that even close to two years into his administration, President Obama's political

opponents were more likely to explicitly and implicitly doubt his citizenship, and by extension, the legitimacy of his presidency.

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Appendix

Items comprising the issue-based conservatism measure

1. The use of our military strength makes the United States a safer place to live.
2. Americans who questioned President Bush's motives for going to war in Iraq were disloyal and unpatriotic.
3. America would be a better place if people had stronger religious beliefs.
4. Allowing people to carry guns for protection will lead to more violence and injuries.*
5. Flag burning should be illegal.
6. Gay marriage threatens the sanctity of marriage.
7. The more money a person makes in America, the more taxes he/she should pay.*
8. America's domestic policy should do more to ensure that living and working conditions are equal for all groups of people.*
9. It is about time the United States closed its borders to all illegal immigrants.
10. The government has a moral obligation to ensure that all Americans receive proper health care.*

Note: An asterisk indicates an item that was reverse-scored.

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