

WHEN POLITICIANS ATTACK: RACIST CAMPAIGN SPEECH AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



In many democracies, politicians are increasingly using racist speech. This study examines the effect of explicitly racist campaign rhetoric on the political behaviour of Latinx voters in the United States.

Existing research

Past studies suggest racism on the campaign trail can induce different responses among targeted groups.

Fight responses
(increased participation)

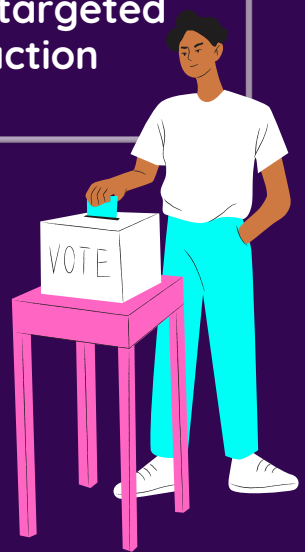
- Political participation is a way of taking direct action against racism
- Racism can lead to strong emotions that motivate political action
- Racism may trigger a reaction to historical oppression experienced by targeted groups

Flight responses
(decreased participation)

- Political participation is not seen as an efficient way to respond to politicians' racism
- Targeted groups may feel alienated from politics and the country
- Fear might dissuade targeted groups from taking action

Methods

The research team created three one-minute campaign videos for a fictitious politician. Speeches and ads from real politicians informed the content of these videos.



Using an experimental approach, the study randomly divided 802 Latinx adult respondents into the study's three conditions. Respondents answered the same questions but were exposed to different videos:

- Economy: the control condition
- Immigration: which used anti-immigrant rhetoric
- Ethnicity: which used negative racially motivated statements about Latinx Americans

After viewing these videos, respondents' political engagement was analysed using three measures:

- Voting: how likely respondents were to vote in the next election
- Vote enthusiasm: how enthusiastic they were about voting
- Political action: how likely they were to be otherwise politically engaged (e.g., donating, volunteering, protesting)

Results

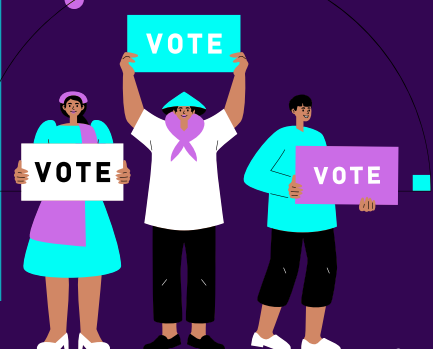


Overall, Latinx Americans who viewed the anti-immigrant or anti-Latinx videos were more likely to say they would vote in the next election and were enthusiastic about doing so.

However, these treatments had no impact on other forms of political participation, perhaps because these activities are less common and thus harder to influence.

Communities of colour show resilience, increasing their vote intention and enthusiasm when exposed to racist campaigns. This makes them a politically potent group. Politicians who rely on racist rhetoric to appeal to their base should beware that their targets will often choose to fight back and become more politically engaged to oppose this attack.

Vote intention and enthusiasm increased the most for those who view their Latinness as an important part of their identity and who generally have low interest in politics. This result could be because high-interest voters vote regardless (a so-called "ceiling effect") while respondents with a weak sense of Latinx identity are less likely to be affected by explicitly racist rhetoric.



Reference:

Randy Besco, Sergio Garcia-Rios, Julius Lagodny, Nazita Lajevardi, Kassra Oskooii, and Erin Tolley. 2022. Fight Not Flight: The Effects of Explicit Racism on Minority Political Engagement. *Electoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102515>

Infographic created by Perri Mazurkewich <https://erintolley.ca/effects-of-racist-campaign-speech>