
Unpacking Our History Article Packet

Dog Whistles

Meaning and History

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14
7–8:30 PM, on Zoom

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Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs

Dog Whistle : State's Rights

Thurs, Dec 12, 7-8:30 p.m.

Dog Whistle : Family Values

Thurs, Jan 9, 7-8:30 p.m.

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Unpacking Our History Interviews

The Unpacking Our History Interviews with national and international academics, authors, and lawyers first focused on the topics raised by the *New York Times'* 1619 Project. Over time, the interview topics expanded to include current events around policing and criminal justice.

The racist roots of the dog whistle

Here's how we came to label the coded language.

Perspective by Adam R. Shapiro

August 21, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

The term “racist dog whistle” is not new. But President Trump may represent the perfection of “dog-whistle politics,” using phrases, symbols and tweets to create plausible deniability whenever his policies seem too overtly racist.

The phrase has become so cliché that we may forget that a dog whistle is more than a style of speaking. It is a specific technology: a manufactured object constructed to make use of both physical laws (acoustics) and biological ones (the hearing abilities of animals). Dog whistles work by producing sounds at frequencies that canines can hear but humans cannot. Over time, the technology has become a stand-in for something uttered publicly but heard privately — a secret signal. And yet the fact that this phrase gets used so often is proof that the metaphor fails. Each time someone calls out acts of coded racism as a “dog whistle,” that's proof that the “wrong” audience heard it.

There are several technologies that can transmit messages to exclusive audiences, from WWII-era Enigma machines to encrypted WhatsApp messages. So why has the dog whistle become the metaphor of choice? The racist roots of dog whistle technology itself point to some answers.

The device we now think of as a dog whistle was designed by Francis Galton, whose most famous work was inventing the term “eugenics” and creating a science of racial differences and race “improvement.” By the 1870s, Galton had developed a whistle whose tube length could be precisely adjusted by a plug that screwed into its base — changing the tone it produced. Galton tested his whistle at London's Zoological Gardens, placing it near different animals and observing their reactions to blasts emitted at different frequencies. He concluded that cats were best at hearing extremely high-pitched sounds, ascribing the feline ability to his cousin Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, arguing that cats had evolved this shrill skill to detect squeaking mice.

But Galton's primary interest was developing a scientific study of human differences. In 1869, he published “Hereditary Genius,” a book arguing that human intelligence and other mental attributes were biologically inherited.

Galton disregarded “pretensions of natural equality” and concluded that high achievers tended to have children, brothers or cousins who were also well accomplished. Galton carried this “science” to an appallingly racist conclusion, asserting that high-achieving Black people could never rank higher than the average Anglo-Saxon, and that statistically the race was inferior.

Galton's whistle was a scientific instrument designed to test his hypothesis that differences among human races were the result of inheritance rather than environment. If race differences (based on his flawed method of measuring intelligence and accomplishment) were the result of an evolutionary process, then they wouldn't disappear by providing equal opportunities and resources. Galton made his trips to the

zoo to reinforce his idea that biological differences were both inherited and attributable to evolution. Animal tests were key to his scientific racism.

In Galton's day, there were already "dog whistles" in use throughout Britain and the United States, primarily for hunting. These produced tones at frequencies most humans could detect, but their sound could reach greater distances than human speech; they aided dogs at hunting foxes or birds. These audible whistles and Galton's whistle coexisted side by side for decades, as distinct technologies.

The use of the original "dog whistles" was shaped by racial dynamics in the United States. Hunting dogs didn't just pursue foxes or birds. Before the Civil War, they were frequently used to track enslaved Black people. Dogs trained to hunt humans were highly prized among enslavers and the slave catchers they employed.

Even after slavery's abolition, dogs continued to reinforce the racial politics of the Jim Crow South. Trained dog packs, used in activities like fox hunting, became a manifestation of White Southern elites' pretensions toward aristocracy and nostalgia for the era of slavery.

It was not until about 1940 that the dog whistle, a tool for signaling and training hunting dogs, and Galton's ultrasonic whistle — mainstay of the psychology lab — were combined into a single technology. The first patent was filed for a dog whistle "of [sufficiently] high frequency so that it may be heard by a dog but not heard by the human ear."

The "silent" dog whistle changed which kinds of dogs were being whistle-trained. No longer were whistles primarily a tool for hunting over long distances. They were for suburban dogs — an increasingly salient feature of the racially segregated and suburbanizing American landscape. As ads for Purina whistles promised, these couldn't disturb your neighbors.

Silent dog whistles also became a tool for training police dogs. Though connections between dogs and policing in America go back to the days of slave catchers, the role of dogs in modern policing gained wider use in the 1950s. According to one 1961 study, "the public has fully accepted the canine corps. There were only three complaints reported, one not described and the other two stemming from the feeling among Negroes that dogs are used in their areas disproportionately to the need for them." The overpolicing of Black neighborhoods — including with dogs — was rooted in ideas about criminality, race and intelligence and morals that go straight back to Galton and the psychologists he influenced.

The introduction of dogs to modern policing took hold just in time for the animals to feature in iconic and violent images of the struggle for civil rights, including police dogs attacking peaceful Black protesters in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963. President Trump evoked this scene earlier this year when he threatened Black Lives Matter protesters with "vicious dogs," a comment that only avoided the "racist dog whistle" label because its motives seemed obvious.

It was in this context that the silent dog whistle, an invention that unified racist scientific equipment with racist cultures of dog hunting, became a technology that facilitated violent opposition to civil rights.

But even during the Civil Rights era, this fraught tool had yet to become a metaphor for a broader category of secret signals or exclusionary communication. In a

2008 book, William Safire claimed that the metaphorical use of dog whistle began 20 years prior in a column by then-Washington Post polling director Richard Morin, who asserted that "dog whistle effect" was a term of art among public opinion researchers. Morin's column was written just weeks after the broadcast of the infamous Willie Horton campaign ad, perhaps the clearest example of a racist dog whistle in American politics before Trump.

Yet the metaphor really only became common parlance in Barack Obama's second term, and has skyrocketed since the 2016 election.

When a technology becomes a metaphor, we recycle knowledge about how it works and what effects it has on us to articulate another part of our lives. Our needs and desires, how something is sold to us and what it says about us when we use technology all help give the metaphor meaning.

If the dog whistle had no historical or cultural baggage, then it wouldn't be useful as a metaphor; we have to define what makes a technology meaningful when discussing something beyond its literal usage. And others must share that definition for the metaphor to have any power of communication.

In fact, one of the ways that dog whistle communication functions is by invoking metaphors that seem literal-minded and straightforward to many, while conveying deeper implications to those few who are in the know.

People may not be explicitly aware of the racist history of dog whistles, but they've tacitly accepted a cultural landscape where this tool evolved a particular usage. The dog whistle became a useful metaphor for political speech acts, not simply because it's a technology of selective communication, but because it reflects a history of racial power combined with scientific authority.

When people criticize racist dog whistles, they're not just objecting to a specific coded speech act; they're calling out a system that makes such acts of coded power possible. And when people knowingly use dog whistles to spread racist messages, they show contempt not just for the people they're speaking past, but to the people they're speaking to. Even if those who leap at the dog whistle revel in the insider knowledge that makes them the intended audience, this still places them not in the role of the master, but the dog.

SWU Blog Series

Dogwhistles

Part 1: Dog whistles - a socially destructive form of discrimination

Understanding how dog whistles work, how they affect vulnerable and marginalised communities, and how to diffuse them are important tools for social workers.

Dr Shawn Major is the Communications, Policy, and Engagement Officer for the Social Workers Union. She earned her PhD in Creative Writing at Aberystwyth University and is a Canadian who now calls the UK her home. Shawn is passionate about social justice and co-chairs the BASW UK and SWU LGBTQIA+ Action Group.

You may or may not be familiar with the term “dog whistle” in a political context, but you most certainly have seen these coded messages in both UK and international media. Here are some dog whistle phrases you may have encountered that aim antagonistic messages at marginalised groups: “race realism,” “benefit scroungers,” “gay agenda”, “trans ideology”, “gold-plating human rights and equalities legislation”, and “invasion on our southern coast”.

The political meaning of “dog whistle” was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2017 and has been defined as “an expression or statement that has a secondary meaning intended to be understood only by a particular group of people.”

Dog whistles cause real and lasting harm. Recognising and challenging discrimination is a key pillar of social work and this blog series aims to give social work professionals the tools to detect and decipher these coded messages. In Parts 2 - 4 of this blog series, people with lived experience will discuss the harm that this type of discrimination and stoking of prejudice has caused to individuals and communities.

How do political dog whistles work?

Dog whistles are a calculated tactic used to manipulate and stoke prejudice in others. Dog whistles are often deployed with the aim to spread and amplify racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, aporophobia, or other antagonistic attitudes towards marginalised groups. Plausible deniability and reliance on “outgroups” not understanding the coded message aimed at the “ingroup” are key components for all dog whistles.

Dog whistles work in two ways: The first type of dog whistle communicates specific views in a coded fashion to a subset of an audience - for example, a politician could use this type of dog whistle to communicate certain views with the intent to avoid alienating potential supporters who do not share these views. Someone could also use this type of dog whistle in a social media post to convey discriminatory views while trying to avoid the appearance of violating social media platform rules that prohibit hateful conduct and hate speech.

Deb Solomon shares the impact that these dog whistles can have on neurodivergent people growing up and in the workplace in Part 3 of this blog series. In Part 4, **Jane Fae** also discusses common transphobic and anti-LGBTQIA+ dog whistles and how to keep up with the evolving language.

The second type of dog whistle aims to activate associations and stoke pre-existing attitudes without the audience’s awareness. **Narinder Sidhu** explores a very contemporary example in Part 2 which takes a more in depth look at racist dog whistles.

When the silent part is said out loud, it’s just a whistle

That all being said, there is a straightforward way to counter dog whistles.

Legal scholar Professor **Ian Haney-López** says, “Dog whistles only work as long as most people don’t know about them.” Dog whistles are diffused when all messages contained in the statement are made explicit because then it’s not a dog whistle anymore; it’s a whistle that everyone can hear.

Political scientist Professor **Tali Mendelberg** wrote, “In the age of equality, politicians cannot prime race with impunity due to a norm of racial equality that prohibits racist speech.” In the UK this “norm of equality” can also be applied - at varying levels - to other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010.

The “norm of equality” is one of the main reasons that dog whistles are used to communicate these messages; the coded message part of the statement could result in widespread social disapproval if it was explicitly stated. If explicitly stated, the discriminatory message could have other repercussions including exclusion from a social media platform for violating terms of service or being considered a criminal offence.

People *do* generally want to avoid perpetuating discrimination like racism or ableism and this is reflected in both UK government legislation and the ongoing moderation of large-scale social media platforms. So in general, when there is a suggestion that a statement might be discriminatory, people will reflect on the statement and “self-monitor” to block antagonistic attitudes from influencing their thoughts on the subject.

Dog whistles work because prejudices exist

Unfortunately, this diffusion tactic only works with accepted norms of equality. If a form of discrimination does not violate an accepted norm of equality - that is to say, if prejudice is harboured towards the group(s) of people alluded to by the dog whistle - then that audience will not engage in "self-monitoring". In this case the dog whistle reaches its target "ingroup" of the audience who either don't find the message problematic or who agree with it to some degree.

The paper [Immigration in the Brexit campaign: Protean dogwhistles and political manipulation](#) gives an example of this with the topic of immigration: "In short, for different portions of the audience, immigration will function differently: for some it may not be a dogwhistle at all. For others, it may be a dogwhistle about any or all of the following: foreigners, Eastern Europeans, refugees, Muslims, Syrians, or dark-skinned people."

Dog whistles are frequently used on social media platforms as a way for people who share certain prejudices to connect and reach out to wider audiences. The paper [Covert Hate Speech: White Nationalists and Dog Whistle Communication on Twitter](#) explains how Twitter has been used as a channel to convey white supremacist ideas to a broader audience and signal belonging among far-right communities while staying under the radar of detection.

In his article [Campaign 2016 Vocabulary Lesson: 'Strategic Racism'](#), Professor Haney-López describes how dog whistling goes beyond the personal prejudices of individuals - even if they are a powerful politician - and how it threatens nations:

"It's socially destructive, intentionally firing the ugliest passions and pitting people against each other. It undermines democracy, manipulating voters through appeals to their worst instincts while distorting the real issues of the day. It's an economic catastrophe, convincing working people to fear other vulnerable populations and instead to cast their lot with the plutocrats. It shatters the 'we,' destroying our commitment to the community and public and instead fostering frightened isolation and anomie."

Leave no one behind in the fight for social justice

The Social Workers Union (SWU) remains [committed to pursuing the concept of social justice](#) through challenging oppression, respecting diversity, advocating for access to and equal distribution of resources, challenging unjust policies and practices and ultimately exercising our duty both collectively and individually to challenge social conditions that contribute to oppression, social exclusion, stigma, or subjugation and to work towards a more inclusive society.

SWU shares a social work value base with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) - as expressed in the [BASW Code of Ethics and Values](#) - with a commitment to act ethically and to protect and promote the rights of people who need to or who access social work services.

SWU and BASW members who have experienced discrimination at work and are in need of employment advice can make an appointment to speak to a duty worker from the [Advice and Representation team](#) to begin with, by contacting aras@basw.co.uk or calling 0121 622 8413.

You may also be interested in reading the SWU blog "[Intersectionality is a valuable tool for Social Work Practice](#)" which is a precursor to this series.

Part 2: Dog whistles at large - racism

Social Workers must be vigilant to dog whistles.

Narinder Sidhu is a Professional Officer for BASW Cymru and a registered Social Worker who has worked in a range of clinical settings as a Forensic Social Worker and Mental Health Practitioner within the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). She is also a specialist lecturer and co-chairs the BASW UK & SWU LGBTQIA+ Action Group. Her areas of expertise include forensic social work, LGBTQIA+, intersectionality, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence, and female genital mutilation.

Thankfully, nowadays it is not considered acceptable for individuals to make hateful statements - for example, statements that are racist, sexist, or xenophobic. This means that politicians or people who want to make such statements need to use coded language, and that's when "dog whistles" are used.

I believe that dog whistles have huge implications for democratic politics and with social work being a politicised profession it is important that we are aware and fully understand the more covert speech acts around us.

Racial dog whistles

Racial dog whistles are often used when people want to speak about race specifically to their target audience but cannot deliver their intended antagonistic message directly. The coded messages in these dog whistles are used to reinforce racist ideology and to inflame racial prejudice.

Ian Haney-López who is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at the University of California, Berkeley explains that dog whistling "simply means speaking in code to a target audience."

According to Haney-López, people using racial dog whistles utilise these three key tactics:

1. The individual forces race into the discussion through "thinly veiled" racist remarks against people of colour.
2. The individual will make sure to not directly reference any one racial or ethnic group so they cannot be accused of direct racism.
3. The individual will shame any critics who try to call them out on the racist comments.

Dog whistles during pandemics

Dehumanising rhetoric around disease is not a new phenomenon. I reflected that the UK has an ugly dog whistle history around healthcare and crises.

Let's think about the 1980s AIDS Crisis. During the height of the AIDS pandemic, people in power used homophobic slurs to ignore the increasing death tolls in the LGBTQ+ community. It was widely called the "gay plague" and mistakenly believed that HIV could be transmitted by any kind of proximity. All sectors of society stigmatised the gay community during this time and many AIDS patients died in isolation. It was not until I reached adulthood that I was able to process these significant events of my childhood through a lens of societal and systematic discrimination.

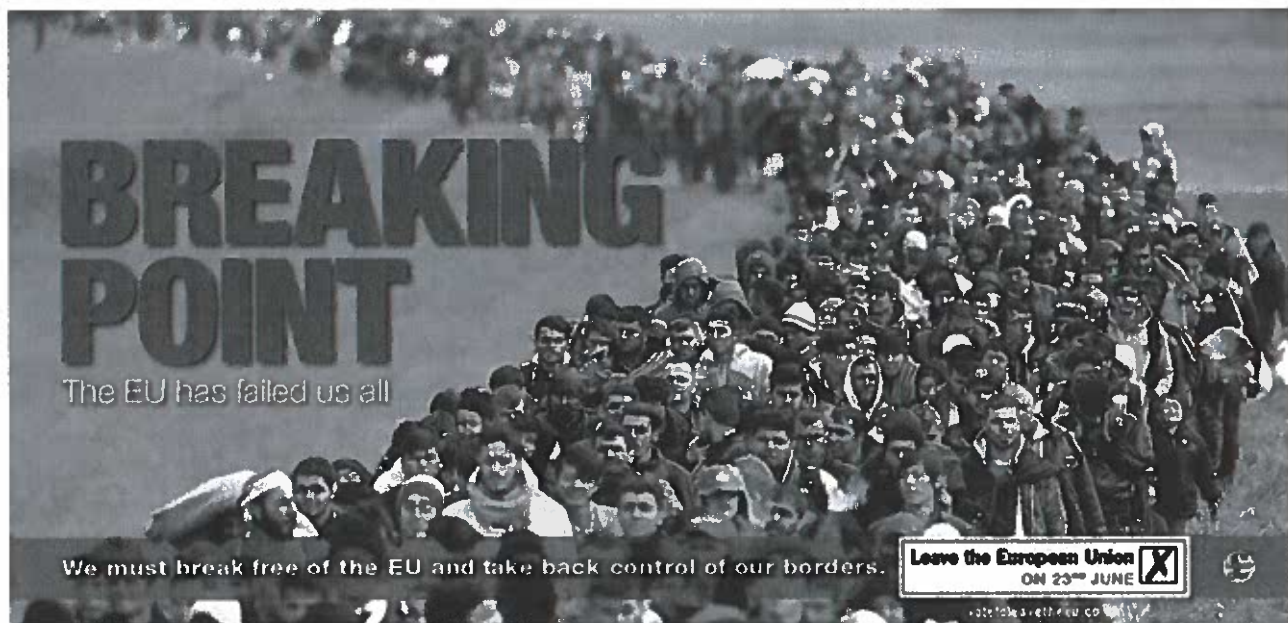
Think about what you have heard about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread apportioning of blame for the disease on China caused racial abuse of people of East and South East Asian (ESEA) heritage to dramatically increase in the UK and western world during the pandemic. A [2020 Ipsos Mori poll](#) found that 1 in 7 people in the UK intentionally avoid people of Chinese origin or appearance.

UK police data suggests a [300% rise in hate crimes](#) towards people of ESEA heritage in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the same period in 2018 and 2019. According to the UK-based advocacy group End Violence and Racism Against ESEA Communities (EVR), this trend continues to this day.

Misinformation is its own form of virus, spreading fear and hate. Stigma spread by misinformation can result in an increase of hate crimes and an increase of preventable morbidity rates for marginalised communities.

The dog whistles of Brexit

[Politicians use dog whistles](#) in an attempt to manipulate people into making decisions they wouldn't normally be morally comfortable with. A contemporary example of a xenophobic and racist dog whistle is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) anti-migrant poster which was unveiled by its leader Nigel Farage in 2016.



This poster is not about immigration; it is about race. Notably, the white box on the bottom right of the image covers the one white face in the crowd, which many have speculated was a deliberate design choice. This poster uses coded messages used to reinforce racist ideas that the UK's societal and economic problems are caused by an influx of undeserving, lazy, and violent people of colour.

This xenophobic messaging suggests that non-whiteness and immigration (including refugees) are the main cause for the UK to be at "breaking point" - however, it avoids being specific about what exactly is breaking. The vagueness suggests that non-whiteness is to blame for any crises including the socioeconomic, health, security, educational, employment, housing, criminal justice, welfare (I could go on) crisis the UK is facing. It sends a strong message that the simple removal of such people will make Britain great again with the implication that a white Britain would be better off.

In an even more recent example from 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, "I'll make Britain great again!" Johnson promised in his first speech to Parliament as Prime Minister that Brexit would make Britain the greatest place on earth. This echoed Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" which is a well-known racial dog whistle used to gain favour with white voters. Johnson was determined to deliver on Brexit and so many backed him and voted for Brexit, despite the thinly veiled attempts of the Brexit campaign to inflame and embolden prejudice.

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022

Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people face not only high levels of prejudice and discrimination, but an increasingly hostile legal environment.

In 2021 the British Association of Social Workers, Social Workers Union, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association and several partner organisations co-signed a letter to the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, opposing inhumane and unlawful draft guidance published in support of the proposed Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. It is unjust for a person or group of people to be targeted because they are judged (on unclear criteria) to be likely to commit a criminal offence and this attempt at predicting criminality sets a worrying precedent.

The Conservative party's bill became the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and effectively criminalises the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller traditional way of life by introducing fines and prison sentences for unauthorised encampments, along with the confiscation of people's vehicles and homes.

I agree with Jo Richardson, Professor of Housing and Social Inclusion when she refers to the Gypsies and Travellers "clampdown" as being less dog whistle and more political fog-horn. Notably, dog whistles have been used in UK politics by other parties too and not just the Conservatives.

When you know, you know - and now you know

Some of these examples overtly demonstrate Haney-López's thinking when he defines the dog-whistle as a "*strategic manipulation of racial ideas for the pursuit of power and material wealth.*" Dog whistles trade in racist ideas but they explicitly avoid naming race directly; they invoke negative racial stereotypes with the hope that the audience will not make a conscious connection of the underlying inflammatory rhetoric.

The power of dog whistles stems from the plausible deniability that they contain coded messages. **Identifying and calling dog whistles out means they lose their power.** Therefore, it's important to call out the coded messages when you see them.

Questioning "*Is there something racist going on here?*" is enough to inform you that it is likely a dog whistle.

Social Workers challenge social injustice and promote human rights so must be able to clearly understand the various ways in which racism and xenophobia can manifest. We must also be vigilant about how people in power can leverage their influence to create and promote the adoption of legislation and social policy which have no regard for human rights, equality, and inclusion.

If we consider the so called "border crisis" in the UK, what are the political lies you are told and what racial dog whistles have you missed?

Offensive political dog whistles: you know them when you hear them. Or do you?

V vox.com/the-big-idea/2016/11/7/13549154/dog-whistles-campaign-racism

November 7, 2016

In her final pitches to voters, Hillary Clinton has been arguing that much of what Donald Trump's says amounts to "a dog whistle to his most hateful supporters" — as she put it in North Carolina last week.

Meanwhile, [reacting to one of Trump's final ads](#), which suggests Clinton is a tool of "the global special interest," Josh Marshall of TalkingPointsMemo, finds it "packed full of anti-Semitic dog whistles."

The phrase "dog whistle" has been around for years. It's political shorthand for a phrase that may sound innocuous to some people, but which also communicates something more insidious either to a subset of the audience or outside of the audience's conscious awareness — a covert appeal to some noxious set of views. Given Trump's racially charged campaign, and the support he has attracted from fringe groups, including the KKK, it's not surprising that the phrase has featured so prominently in the 2016 political lexicon.

To be sure, many people believe there is no shortage of overtly offensive content in Trump's crystal-clear statements — whether he's suggesting that the typical illegal immigrant is a rapist or stating outright that American Muslims know about terror attacks in advance. Additionally, [the philosopher Jennifer Saul has argued](#) that Trump has moved beyond the dog whistle into other forms of barely disguised bigotry.

From "inner cities" to Pepe the frog

Still, every couple of weeks we see a new accusation of dog-whistling leveled against Trump and his supporters — think of "bad hombres," Pepe the frog, "law and order," "inner cities," "America First." One recent and much-discussed example comes from [the October 13 speech](#) in which Trump accused Clinton of "meet[ing] in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty."

While many people might hear "international banks" quite literally, or maybe as an allusion to Clinton's ties to foreign financial interests in general, anti-Semites hear something very different. After all, the supposed existence of a cabal of international Jewish bankers working to undermine US democracy is a recurring theme in American anti-Semitism, from Henry Ford's *The International Jew* to Reddit troll-conventions. Trump's choice of language serves as a signal that he is one of them.

Or at least, that's what many commentators have alleged. The problem is that it's hard to establish whether a piece of speech or writing is a dog whistle. Indeed, it's not obvious what evidence could, in principle, settle a dispute over whether some expression is or isn't one. They are, by their nature, sneaky things.

Every now and again, a politician might, in a moment of candor, fess up. (David Kuo, a White House staffer under George W. Bush, reports — referring to speeches by Bush — that “we threw in a few obscure turns of phrase known clearly to any evangelical, yet unlikely to be noticed by anyone else.” Lee Atwater's infamous remarks on how to imply the n-word without saying it also come to mind: “You say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights...”)

But accusations of dog whistling are generally met with exasperated denials. Some commentators, like the blogger Slate Star Codex, have even concluded that the concept of the dog whistle is often too vague and open to abuse for it to be useful. (He was especially dubious that Ted Cruz was dog-whistling at anti-Semites when he spoke of “New York values,” as opposed to attacking liberal social mores, a staple of Republican rhetoric.)

I disagree. Dog whistle denialists' concerns are real, but we can answer them by getting a better sense of what types of dog whistles there are and how they might work. They fall into at least three families — semantic, contextual, and stereotype-dependent — each of which depends on a characteristic mechanism and is disclosed by a characteristic type of evidence.

How to think about statements that have multiple meanings

Of course, there are some relatively boring ways that a single utterance or act of writing can be used to mean different things to different addressees. Suppose I'm leading a guided meditation and I say, “You are on a beach.” I'm not using “you” to refer to all of the people as a group, and saying that they're all on the same beach. I'm addressing each person separately, asking her to envision her own beach. Or suppose I record a voicemail message saying, “I can't make it to the phone now.” I'm not using “now” once and for all to refer to one particular time. Rather, I'm using it to refer to something different for each person that hears the message.

In both of these examples, it's common knowledge among people listening to me that they will interpret what I'm saying differently, and that all of these interpretations are correct. Part of what makes dog whistles interesting, on the other hand, is that they lack this element of common knowledge.

Semantic dog whistles work by exploiting different linguistic conventions among different subsets of a speaker's audience. It's the stuff of spy movies. My accomplice and I agree before the mission that she will disable the cameras when I say “salt.” At the crucial moment, I say “Please pass the salt” to my mark. The mark hears it, correctly, as a request for salt; my

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accomplice hears it, correctly, as a directive to turn off the cameras. As in the guided meditation and voicemail cases, I use a single utterance to perform different speech acts for different addressees. But in the secret little linguistic community made up of me and my accomplice, “salt” has a special meaning.

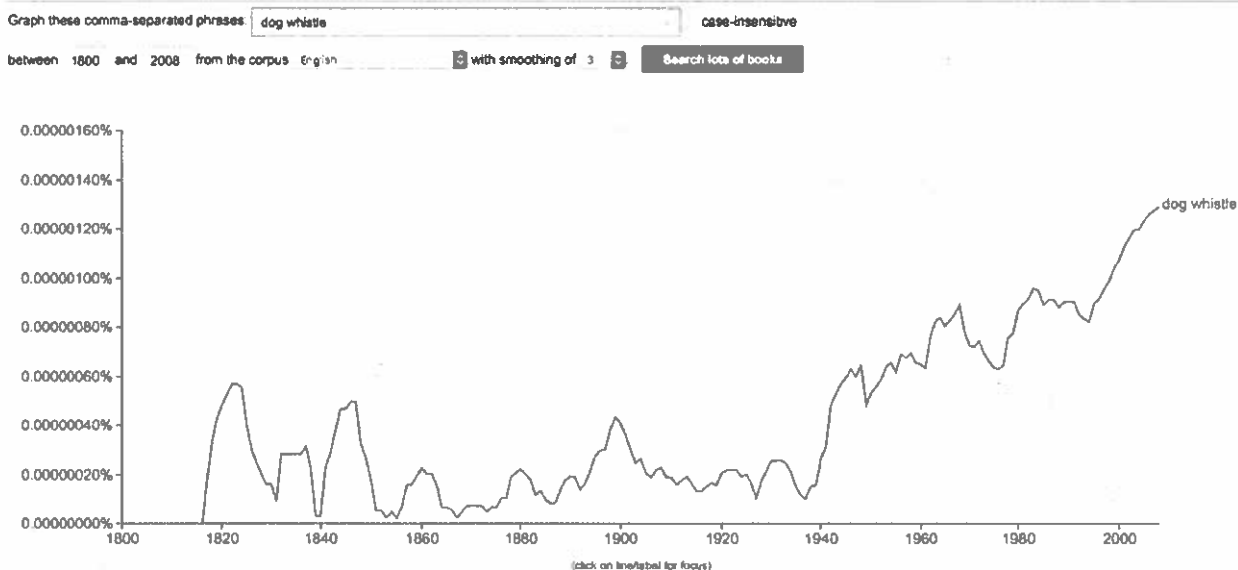
Moving from secret codes to contextual cues

Take the use of the word “coincidence” as a dog whistle. In the recent kerfuffle over the “Coincidence Detector” app, many news readers learned that internet anti-Semites use “coincidence” to mean, roughly, a Jewish conspiracy. Until the story broke, this subculture could go around calling people and events “coincidences” with impunity – pointing to an anti-Trump article by a Jewish author, for example — maybe confusing readers who didn’t share their views, but not raising any hackles.

That said, I would conjecture that most dog whistles don’t work in this way. Dog whistles only work as long as most people don’t know about them. But “coincidence” has been ruined as a dog whistle by a single news story. Semantic dog whistles depend on secret codes, but it seems that those codes are pretty easy to crack.

I would argue that most dog whistles do not depend on a secret code. Rather, many derive their efficacy from features of the context, broadly speaking, in which they’re most at home. In particular, an expression might make an effective dog whistle because of a) the linguistic constructions in which it is especially likely to appear, b) the perceived character of its typical users, or c) the interaction types in which it typically occurs.

Google Books Ngram Viewer



Use of the phrase “dog whistles” has been spiking for a while.

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Some words and phrases acquire a kind of emotional charge from their collocates, linguist jargon for the verbal company they keep. Linguists call this emotional charge “semantic prosody.” Consider the phrase “women and children.” On the face of it, an English language learner might think this is simply a noun phrase referring to a group of people. But look at the larger phrases or sentences in which this phrase is actually embedded. The first three hits in a random selection from the online Corpus of Contemporary American English show that it is typically used to refer to this group of people as the victims of some form of mistreatment – “the connection between women and children and poverty”; “the violence, especially directed at women and children”; “the injured — a majority of them women and children.” Because of the contexts in which it occurs, the phrase is saturated with the emotions we feel about innocent victims of violence and injustice.

The case of “Barack Hussein Obama”

“Women and children” has this type of emotional resonance for all speakers of standard American English. It is likely to be used in victim-related contexts across genres — national print and TV journalism, especially — that are regularly consumed by most American English speakers.

But there might be other words and phrases whose semantic prosody varies across varieties of English to which different people are differentially exposed. I think the right’s use of the president’s full name — “Barack Hussein Obama” — falls into this category (to the extent that it isn’t a shamelessly overt attempt to make people think Obama is a Muslim). Among people who consume media that mentions Muslims primarily in contexts that stoke fear and distrust, the name “Hussein” will evoke those attitudes. Among people whose media diets (and personal experiences) contain more positive representations of Muslims, the name “Hussein” might remind them of the late Iraqi ruler, but perhaps won’t carry the same sort of emotional weight.

Other contextual dog whistles work because of the type of person they are typically used by. They are tools of what the sociologist Erving Goffman called impression management, or what Aristotle called *ethos*— the shaping of an audience’s perception of your character for persuasive purposes. Some expressions are used only (or primarily) by certain groups, and so their use can signal membership in that group. Sometimes it’s common knowledge that a group owns an expression — think of “crony capitalism” (the left) or “nanny state” (the right).

But often only the group members themselves know that they own the expression. In her 2014 study of religious dog whistles, political psychologist Bethany Albertson used fake political campaign messages to compare how people reacted to overt religious appeals and to covertly religious uses of the phrase “wonder-working power” —which appears in the evangelical hymn “There is Power in the Blood” and is known primarily by evangelicals.

Overall, nonreligious subjects disliked the overt religious appeals when they encountered them in political messages, but didn't mind the use of "wonder-working power." Religious subjects, on the other hand, appreciated both the overt and the covert religious appeals.

Some commentators have concluded that the concept of the dog whistle is too vague and open to abuse for it to be useful. I disagree.

"Wonder-working power" seems to be a signal of group membership for evangelicals, which, for the most part, only evangelicals can hear. As the legal scholar Ian Haney-López suggests, this is likely the mechanism at work in Hillary Clinton's recent adoption of insider anti-racist lingo like "implicit bias" and "systemic racism."

Yet other dog whistles might work because they are typically used in certain sorts of interactions. Sometimes speakers will use a certain expression, or even a certain language, in order to "reframe" an interaction — that is, to encourage their audience to categorize the interaction in a certain way, and to act accordingly. Sociolinguists call these devices contextualization cues.

Code-switching doctors and "welfare queens"

One example can be found in Frederick Erickson's *Talk and Social Theory*: a medical intern is giving a report to his supervisor about a patient he's just examined. They go back and forth, in dry, technical language, until the intern mentions the patient's \$30 a week marijuana habit. The supervisor then smiles and asks, "How much is that?" It's clear enough what he's up to. With the switch to casual speech, he's trying, at least for a while, to turn a formal, work-related interaction between medical professionals into a more informal interaction between people who are not just medical professionals and colleagues, but potential weed purchasers. A contextualization cue becomes a potential dog whistle, though, when the cue is picked up on differently by different people.

A last group of dog whistles works by an entirely different mechanism — stereotype activation. If the stereotypical F is a G, by disparaging F's, perhaps one can disparage, or at least appeal to audiences who dislike, G's. I think that this is the mechanism underlying the use of "welfare queens" on the right (although, tellingly, I can't prove it).

For most people, the stereotypical welfare recipient is black, and so politicians can disparage black people, or appeal to anti-black racists, by disparaging welfare recipients. Relatedly, politicians can defend policies favoring an unpopular group by systematically replacing reference to that group with reference to a related group that enjoys a positive stereotype. I suspect this is the mechanism underlying the use of "small business" (as opposed to, say, "international corporations") by capitalists and plutocrats in both parties.

This is a different sort of dog whistle from those above. It works not by the conscious communication of a particular message to a subset of one's audience, but by the (perhaps unconscious) activation of a stereotype that is likely to be shared by much of one's audience. To demonstrate with any certainty that an expression is a stereotype-dependent dog whistle, however, we'd better turn to the methods used by psychologists who study these sorts of things — implicit attitude tests and semantic priming experiments, for example, which allow us to identify when people have subtle negative reactions to certain words and ideas, even if they are unaware of those feelings.

We can see that while it might be difficult to establish whether a politician is blowing a dog whistle on any given occasion, it's not impossible. Exactly what it takes to find out one way or the other depends on the type of dog whistle at work. While we should perhaps use the concept of a dog whistle more cautiously than some headline writers, we shouldn't throw it out altogether.

Indeed, we need the concept in order to make sense of our political discourse. The stakes are high. Think of the women and children.

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Cracking the Racial Code: Black Threat, White Rights and the Lexicon of American Politics

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ABSTRACT. Racially coded language that appeals to racial bias without open bigotry has a long history in the politics of the United States. Politicians intentionally activate the latent racial biases of both racial conservatives and center-left liberals without explicitly talking about race. Conservative positions on significant policy areas have shifted over time on the basis of coded racial appeals. Fundamental rights are coded as white rights. Government actions to aid the poor or reduce discrimination are coded as black threats. The racial dimension explains the changing positions of American conservatism on gun rights, crime and mass incarceration, immigration, the welfare state, federalism, and economic policy. White racial identity, mobilized by coded political talk, restrains the potential for cross-racial coalitions and perpetuates the political repression of nonwhite Americans.

Language gets its power because it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions. Part of its power comes from its unconscious aspects: we are not consciously aware of all that it evokes in us, but it is there, hidden, always at work. If we hear the same language over and over, we will think more and more in terms of the frames and metaphors activated by that language (Lakoff 2008: 15).

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Introduction

The rise of Donald Trump in the politics of the United States came with a torrent of pithy racial insults and resurrected white nationalist slogans. Trump painted an explicit portrait of Mexican immigrants as rapists and murderers; black people lived in a horror landscape with nothing to lose; and Muslims needed to be banned from the country because they might be terrorists. His language was striking because it reenacted essentially the same message U.S. politicians have delivered for decades, but without the usual finesse and intentional ambiguity. Politicians usually invoke race without talking about it. Instead, they talk about crime, drugs, welfare dependence, and big government as a strategy for conjuring negative mental associations in the minds of white voters. When Trump was asked about the conflict between blacks and police during a debate with Hillary Clinton, he was closer to the traditional formula. The country needs “law and order,” he said flatly, recycling a phrase that scholars have long understood as a racialized message to white voters that really means: “Black people are dangerous and out of control—put the Black Lives Matter protestors in jail.” By drawing water from this well, Trump was wholly unoriginal. Neutral sounding comments that invoke racial fear are standard code language in U.S. elections and policy making. Politicians deny racial intent, but voters get the message. The routine of racial messaging from politicians and the fear and resentment of white voters taps into the deep American story of racial subordination and gives racial identity a central role in U.S. politics.

To understand how the forces of racial exclusion endure in the context of legal equality, one must understand strategic language and racial identity. Explorations of racial politics that are aimed at understanding how racially coded language functions often stimulate a defensive reaction from white opinion leaders who do not acknowledge racial exclusion in the daily lives of black and Latino people. Instead, those leaders perceive efforts to talk critically and reflectively about race in politics as the actual problem. There is at least a half-plausible reason why these white leaders might not recognize the racial mechanism in U.S. life. Formal discrimination is illegal. Openly racist talk is culturally forbidden (Mendelberg 2001). Racial equality and fairness

have become the expected standard of appropriate behavior. Yet, explicit racial slander has been replaced by what scholars consider racial code or “dog whistle politics” (Ian Haney-Lopez 2014). Politicians use a special language about race that their followers understand clearly despite the absence of direct racial language. Racial code involves talking about race indirectly while not mentioning it explicitly, which enables the speaker to enjoy plausible deniability. The intentional use of carefully framed and coded race language and symbolism taps into hidden and submerged white assumptions about blacks, Latino immigrants, and Muslims. “Misrepresentation of a marginalized group,” writes racial politics scholar Ange-Marie Hancock (2004: 5), “can predictably stunt the dissemination of accurate information and thus the development of accurate attitudes about them.” President Trump is only the current conduit of this oppressive tradition in the politics of the United States.

Racial exclusion is a central feature of the U.S. political experience. Like South Africa, white supremacy is a primary characteristic of U.S. political development, including the violent displacement of Native American societies, the conquest of Mexican territory in the 1840s, and the enslavement and domination of African Americans. A particular focus on the black experience in the United States acknowledges that the national constitutional bargain was built on racial exclusion and on the continued exclusion of blacks from the full benefits of political equality (A. G. Marx 1998). Effectively repressed since their formal emancipation in the 1860s, blacks have faced a continuum of required obedience to the white agenda, physical terror, and cultural mockery and appropriation (Rogin 1996). They have also endured an industrial prison-labor complex (Blackmon 2008). Racial hierarchy persists through harsh segregation in housing (Massey and Denton 1993). Workforce exclusion and deindustrialization have eroded the socio-economic capacity of the black community (Schmid 2004; Pawasarat 2013). Voter suppression and the compounding force of mass incarceration, which disenfranchises one in 13 African Americans due to felony convictions, pushes blacks away from political participation (Walker 2016; Alexander 2012; Uggen et al. 2016).

In sum, progress toward more racial equality is never guaranteed. Sometimes, the transformational cause of equality loses ground

(Klinkner and Smith 2002; Lowndes, Novkov, and Warren 2008). Deeply rooted negative white attitudes toward blacks support their exclusion, and racial identity remains a “central axis” around which our politics turn (Omi and Winant 1986: 61; Feagin 2010). In this essay, we explain how racial hierarchy, which is socially constructed, produces a pervasive white racial perspective that exists both consciously and subconsciously. Political actors activate and mobilize that perspective by strategically using racially coded language. Political race-laden conflicts, by turns, can activate the white racial perspective to influence actions even among white racial progressives. In this way, racial subordination is both legacy and present tense. We now turn to the game of coded language, identifying its properties and demonstrating its power through a series of relevant policy issues. To conclude, we consider the promise and peril of resisting the insidious effects of racially coded language and racially driven policy debates in the future.

Racial Frames and Code Language

Constructing Race

Race is not a biological category but rather the meaning people attach to physical appearances: the understandings of ourselves and others—our identities. When people act on racial identities, those ideas become consequential, concrete, material, and bodily experiences. Americans in the United States have constructed their racial identities for centuries in the language, practices, and relationships of their daily lives (Howarth 2000; Gee 2005). Humans build racial identities on a daily basis as oppositional, relational, or mutually constitutive, meaning each contrasting identity makes the existence of its opposite possible. Binary or dichotomous terms like black and white are the building blocks of identities in which one is privileged as an insider and the other is excluded as an outsider, or what race scholars refer to as the “other” (Riggins 1997; Milliken). *Othering* means to establish someone or some group as not belonging.

Far from fixed biology, racial identity and the battle to determine it are flexible contests of human struggle. Beginning with slavery,

institutionalized power relationships have created identities between the privileged and the oppressed (Marx 1998: 274). Social oppression generates negative racial identities and thereby justifies continued exclusion. Consider that identities of white superiority and black inferiority were supported by false racial science, now long since disproven, but for decades claimed to measure racial hierarchy (Roberts 1996). Decades of blackface stage entertainment, performed by whites with black paint on their faces, hammered home the identity of blacks as buffoons in the white imagination while constructing a simple binary of black and white that changed European ethnic groups into a single white, superior identity (Rogin 1996). (For examples of minstrelsy, see Figs. 1-2). An intentionally oppressive criminal justice system constructed the white idea of black criminality. Extreme racial segregation in housing created by government policies racializes geography (Judd and Swanstrom 2008; Rothstein 2014). The result, as we see below, is what scholars call a racial frame.

A “frame” is an interpretive psychological device, a perspective, or narrative structure that patterns how people think when they confront information. A particular frame regulates what people think of when faced with an event—and what they do not think of (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Feagin 2010). A “white racial frame” in U.S. politics describes a default position: white people and white attributes are the norm; black and other nonwhite groups and their associated attributes are deviant (Feagin 2010). The orientation toward nonwhites as deviant is maintained through racial stereotypes, which in turn justify discriminatory action. Blacks are viewed as criminal, dangerous, dirty, and irresponsibly hypersexual. The frame paints blacks as “violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding toward the body politics—continually causing problems for the law-abiding, tax-paying majority” (Entman 1994: 29). As deviants, blacks relinquish claims to rights and substantive citizenship. Whites enjoy the presumption of innocence, and African Americans must prove their innocence such that any talk of rights really means white rights. (See Figure 3.)

The white racial frame is an interpretive worldview of a racial identity that dominates all aspects of U.S. society, providing deep support for systemic discrimination and racial economic inequality (Feagin

Figure 3

Paradoxically, the image of African Americans as buffoons has been offset or complemented with another popular image: the angry, savage black male who threatens the social order and particularly white women. After the slave uprising in what is now Haiti in 1791, in which thousands of white slave owners and their families were killed, and similar slave revolts in the United States, the threat of black violence became transformed into a myth of cosmic proportions. The myth of the black, male rapist and killer arose and was used to justify the slaughter of thousands of innocent black men over the next two centuries. That image continues to be invoked implicitly to rationalize police violence against African Americans. Source: Martinet and Masson. (1833).



2006). In the minds of voting citizens, racial conflict must be made to fit an existing story with established characters, good and bad (Lakoff 2008). As Ange-Marie Hancock (2004: 21) explains:

Public identity in the political sphere ... emanates from its location between the macro- and micro-levels of political analysis ... Public identities cue microlevel political thinking because they draw upon long-standing beliefs citizens obtain via socialization.

For example, long-standing beliefs regarding Black mothers' hyperfertility and laziness ... have roots in slavery. The two dimensions act as organizing themes for more recent stereotypes and moral judgments.

Lest one take comfort in the idea that the racist assumptions of the white racial frame only apply to a particular group of hardcore racists, whites across the political spectrum subscribe to the central elements of the white racial frame even as many disavow racism (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Krupnikov and Piston 2015; Banks and Hicks 2016).

Submerging Race and Activating Bias

It is hard to say that, in the postcivil rights era in the United States, formal racism was relegated to the legal wastebasket. Myriad laws, explicitly racist in nature, remained on the books for many years. The state of Mississippi did not ratify the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery until 2013. Yet, the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s gave enforcement teeth to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and promised a coming age of equality. From that time forward, explicit expressions of racial antipathy were relegated to the margins of polite society. Scholars excavating racism during this era tracked the movement of racial attitudes, and found that when asked, many whites no longer held explicitly racist opinions about the inferiority of blacks or believed in formal segregation. However, many instead believe that, in the wake of the civil rights movement, African Americans no longer face discrimination, fail to succeed because of their own lack of hard work, and consequently demand too much of the government, and get more than they deserve (Sears and Henry 2003; Tarman and Sears 2005). Since the 1960s, racial prejudice often expresses itself as anti-black affect, or an aversion to, or fear, of African Americans as opposed to open hostility towards them, known as "implicit bias."

Such racial fear goes along with the value of rugged individualism, which leads many whites to oppose government programs that are intended to support racial equity (Sears and Henry, 2003; Rabinowitz, Sears, Sidanius, and Krosnick 2009). Racial aversion and fear also leads to support for voter identification laws, punitive crime policies, and

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opposition to preventive policies to aid African Americans (Banks and Hicks 2016; Green, Staerkle, and Sears 2006). For historical reasons, reviewed below, opposition to racially progressive policies and support for punitive crime policies became cornerstones of Republican politics. Racially prejudicial attitudes once freely expressed have become submerged in the language of small government and entangled with partisan politics. Yet, fear, anger, and worry, which underlie symbolically racist attitudes, consistently predict public opinion across a variety of issues among whites, both Democrat and Republican (Banks and Hicks 2016). Americans holding implicitly anti-black attitudes account for 55 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Republicans, providing political combatants with a rich aquifer of racial resentment to tap for electoral gain (Hughey and Parks 2014).

The mobilization of racial bias by conservative white politicians has a long history. Speaking in riddles of insinuation, they strive to manipulate, activate, and guide voters toward ostensibly nonracial policy goals using the power of racial suggestion. "In an implicit racial appeal," writes Tali Mendelberg (2001: 9), "the racial message appears so coincidental and peripheral that many of its recipients are not aware that it is there." The politics of weaponized code language is known as "strategic racism" or "symbolic conflict"—a purposeful manipulation of racial resentment to gain money and power (Ansell 1997; Haney-Lopez 2014.) Narrative strategies activate symbolic racism with coded racial framings to manage perceptions and interpretations in the popular political imagination. Political opponents and racially egalitarian alternatives are stigmatized accordingly. More than the denotation of literal meanings, strategic language connotes meaning beyond the words. The meaning of words extends beyond their formal definitions: "There is no intelligible discourse without a code" (Hall 1980). Coded word choices and particular narratives apply racial meaning to previously nonracial topics and thus "racialize" public policy debates (Omi and Winant 1986: 15). Racialization of policy debates is a potent political weapon because racial meaning is never static or fixed. It fluctuates, always in the process of being formed and reformed. As Haney-Lopez (2000) argues, race possesses "plasticity," and is best understood "as an unstable, 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (Omi and Winant 1986: 68).

The manipulation of racialized discourse constructs blacks as dysfunctional and pathological and whites as authentic, moral citizens. It portrays whites as the natural managers of an increasingly diverse society, but somehow oppressed by the taboo against blatantly racist talk (Hughey and Parks 2014: 7). Politicians use hot-button issues to invoke race without speaking directly and specifically. They construct work, poverty relief, crime, immigration, and government efforts to reduce inequality as a racial threat. Code words and the manipulation of the white racial frame are effective political weapons because they connect with an implicit sense of racial superiority among white voters. Indeed, such implicit racial messages work well, where explicit racism does not (Mendelberg 2001). The result is a white electorate activated by racial resentment in the present moment even in the absence of obvious old-school, legal racism.

The underlying mechanism by which latent racial biases drive down support for racially progressive policy issues is most readily observed among white liberals, since conservatives oppose such policies on principle, but white liberals are avowedly racially progressive (Piston 2010). Researchers demonstrate that latent racial biases hurt Obama in 2008 among white Democrats, who were ultimately demobilized by his candidacy, a phenomenon that extends to candidates of color running for offices other than the presidency (Piston 2010; Krupnikov and Piston 2014). The debate around the program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that provides administrative relief for children of undocumented immigrants is another telling example. Researchers demonstrate that among ideological liberals, support for the DACA program declines when it is associated with the leadership of a Hispanic politician as compared to that of white politicians, an effect that does not hold among their conservative counterparts (Garcia-Rios et al. 2017). Thus, while racially coded language is most often leveraged by Republican politicians to mobilize the white racial frame among their constituents, Democrats are incentivized for the same reasons to shy away from explicit support for programs that would enhance racial equality: their white constituents carry internalized racial biases that when activated either demobilizes them or renders them fodder for Republican vultures eager to shore up their shrinking base. In this manner, the Republican mobilization of white

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racial bias through coded language racializes political conflict, which itself activates the implicit biases of even liberal white voters. The result is a wide-open field of fire for constant, top-down, easily denied racial antagonism.

In the next portion of this essay we illustrate several important examples of strategic racism in significant areas of public policy. In doing so, we elaborate on the historical conditions by which various areas of public policy become racialized conflicts and demonstrate racial coding in action. We begin with a policy issue that has a long history of explicit racial bias, gun rights. We then address a classic case in American politics demonstrating the principle of racial coding—social welfare. We take up criminal justice to demonstrate that while white Americans oppose anti-poverty assistance under the guise of small government, they embrace big government intervention when it comes to punishing poor and black Americans. Immigration serves to demonstrate that racial coding, or the transference of racial prejudice to race-neutral language, is ultimately a framework that frees the political uses of implicit bias from being tethered solely to the subordination of blacks. Instead, it is a supple framework that can be flexibly extended to any group cast as deviant, and indeed, as we ultimately conclude, to any force that challenges the fundamental roots of power in the United States.

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