

MESSAGING UNIVERSAL VOTE BY MAIL: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS
THAT INFLUENCE MESSAGE PROCESSING FOR NICHE POLICY TOPICS

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri – Columbia

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

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MAY 2020

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**MESSAGING UNIVERSAL VOTE BY MAIL: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS
THAT INFLUENCE MESSAGE PROCESSING FOR NICHE POLICY TOPICS**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis project could not have been made possible without the support of the following individuals. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Benjamin R. Warner for his valuable advice, guidance, and support throughout this project. In particular, I appreciated his advocacy and flexibility in helping me to complete this project and degree. Working with Dr. Warner has truly been great and has not only been an opportunity to learn from a distinguished scholar of communication but also to learn about mentorship, empathy, and compassion. His guidance has not only allowed me to complete this project and better my own skills at inquiry but to do so in a healthy way. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Julius Riles and Dr. Mike Kearney, for their advice and support in this project.

I am also thankful for the friends I made during my time in Columbia. Though I was only on campus for a year, Jordan and Olivia helped to create positive memories during an academically and personally difficult year. Thank you as well to the friends and family who continued to hold me accountable and encouraged me to complete this project. Finally, I am grateful for my colleagues at the Landscape Architecture Foundation who have allowed me the time needed to finish and defend my thesis project, all while working full-time. This project would certainly not have come to fruition without this network of support.

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ABSTRACT

According to the federal government, the current model of voting in the United States has changed little since the country's founding even as voting has moved from wooden ballot boxes to electronic voting machines and counting from manual to machine ("Voting and election history," 2018). Though the Democratic Party made voting access a major plank of its "A Better Deal for Our Country" plan introduced during the 2018 midterms (Golshan, 2018), these reforms as written into legislation focused on limiting the effects of vote suppressing ID laws, removing money from politics, and strengthening ethics rules for public servants (H.R. 1, 2019). This law seeks to address flaws in the current system but does little to update an electoral process that has remained largely unchanged for the past two and a half centuries, aside from the adoption of Amendment XVII in 1912 which instated the direct election of Senators. Though election management is left to the states, the current system largely privileges those who are able to physically show up to a location on the single day that ballots are cast ("Presidential election process," 2018). The electoral system as it exists now also disenfranchises entire populations with Washington, DC and Puerto Rico, both holding large nonwhite populations, the two most talked-about examples. Though Congress held a hearing on DC statehood in September 2019 and Puerto Rico introduced its statehood bill in Congress (H.R. 4901, 2019), these jurisdictions are likely to remain unrepresented in Congress for the foreseeable future as granting statehood falls along the partisan divide (Marquette, 2019).

The ballots provided on Election Day are often confusing (Ellis, 2018) and the time constraints of casting a ballot in the middle of the work week do not leave much time to process a poorly designed ballot. The problem persists even with mail-in ballots. In 2018, 30,000 ballots

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in Broward County, Florida were undervoted – people forgot to choose a candidate for U.S. Senator – and Georgia’s birthdate requirement nearly invalidated hundreds of ballots.

VBM is especially important for students – a particularly challenging population in the electorate. A VBM policy would help to remind students of an upcoming election, a detail that is easily forgotten under the heavy workload and busy schedule of college life. It would also afford the opportunity to spend time understanding and fully completing a ballot, thereby reducing undervoting and the voiding of ballots. However, VBM is not a well-known policy at present. Voters must first be informed about what VBM is, why it is necessary, and the personal and societal benefits it can have. Extant research suggests that framing affects message processing (Bolson, Druckman, and Cook, 2014), which is especially important during the introduction of a new topic or issue that the audience is unfamiliar with. With this necessity in mind, the below study looks to identify effective message framing for informing college students, the age group with the lowest election turnout, about the potential for the policy to increase access to the polls. I also examine which message framing is most effective in garnering support for the policy.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis project explores the effect that various factors have on support for unfamiliar political issues. More specifically, the below study examines the role of racial resentment on support for universal vote by mail (VBM) policy, an unfamiliar policy nested within the broader racialized issue area of voting rights. Research on expanding voting access is critical in the United States at this time. While many pundits trumpeted the success of get-out-the-vote efforts which led to a record-high turnout of 50.8%, the highest turnout measured in the past 50 years (see McDonald, 2018; Domonoske, 2018) following the 2018 midterm elections, this level of turnout still leaves the United States lagging behind other developed nations when it comes to democratic participation (DeSilver, 2018). Results from the 2016 US presidential election saw the country ranked 26 out of the 32 member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development when it came to turnout (DeSilver, 2018). Further, turnout among young adults age 18-29, the age range which traditional college students fall into, was the lowest among any age group at 23% (CIRCLE, 2019).

Many potential solutions have been put forth to address the United States' comparatively low turnout rates. One proposal suggests making Election Day a national holiday, or, as Senator Bernie Sanders termed the holiday in the bill he presented to Congress, "Democracy Day" (S. 3498, 2018). Those who support the Senator's proposal argue that a national holiday on Election Day would increase access to the polls and demonstrate a federal commitment to promoting democracy. In fact, some local lawmakers are stepping in where the federal government has failed to act. The city of Sandusky, Ohio recently traded the Columbus Day holiday for an Election Day holiday on its municipal calendar (Phillips, 2019). However, critics of this strategy point out that individuals working in low-wage retail and restaurant jobs and are already less

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likely to be able to access the ballot, as well as parents who would have to secure childcare for the new school holiday, would be adversely affected by an Election Day holiday (Nwanevu, 2016). According to a 2019 dataset from the National Center for Education Statistics, 43% of full-time college students are active in the labor market while pursuing their education and one-third of students work part-time. Comparative study has further shown that establishing a federal holiday on Election Day may not even have any significant effect (Franklin, 2004). While some lawmakers have moved to enact this reform, others are turning to universal vote by mail as a more equitable solution to the voter turnout problem.

VBM instituted at the Federal level would address the disparate effects of disenfranchisement as manifested in different states across the union. While the right to vote is granted to each American citizen, the government's own legislation recognizes that many election laws regulating how, when, and where to vote as well as those determining how district lines are drawn have historically been written with racial bias, whether conscious or not (see Voting Rights Act of 1965). In fact, the cited law specifically identified jurisdictions with a history of targeted racial disenfranchisement that were required to obtain preclearance from the Attorney General before changing their election laws (This provision of the law was struck down in 2013 in *Shelby County v. Holder*). There are also individually held attitudes and beliefs related to institutionalized racism that are both informed and affirmed by the status quo. While racism today is not typically embodied by physical violence, the internalized animosity toward people of color has merged with the American ideal of individualism, failing to recognize the historic barriers and lack of access to generational wealth that negatively impact many people of color (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). This *racial resentment* manifests subtly, often leading to reduced support for policies tied to racialized outcomes (Jardina, 2014) and differing expectations of

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candidate behavior by race (Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelberg, Shaker, and Valentino, 2011). However, research suggests these reactions are tied to salience (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) and affect (Lodge and Taber, 2013). Therefore, an unfamiliar policy that lacks an easily accessible racialized frame, like VBM, offers an opportunity to examine the effects of racial resentment with less statistical noise. By sidestepping the highly racialized conversations surrounding voter ID laws, this project can consider a model of message framing that incorporates racial attitudes into how people process messages about election reform without broader exposure to larger conversations taking place in national media.

VBM also offers an accessible solution for college students, many of whom live far from home. Instead of the current system of requesting an absentee ballot by a certain deadline, which may be hard to find and occurs months before an election, a VBM policy would send ballots to the mailing addresses of all eligible voters automatically. Many states do already offer no-excuse absentee voting or have instituted mail-in voting for some elections (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019), but absentee registration still places the onus on the voter to complete the bureaucratic steps necessary to participate.

However, three states (Washington, Oregon, and Colorado) have taken mail-in voting one step farther to institute universal vote by mail in all elections. In these states, every registered voter is sent a ballot that must be returned by mail or placed in an election drop box by election day. Receiving a ballot not only creates an opt-out democratic system instead of an opt-in one, but it also serves as a physical reminder to vote in all elections, not just general elections. In this way, low-wage workers, parents, and busy college students who may be negatively impacted by an Election Day holiday (which only addresses a Federal general election) are able to fully participate in the democratic process. In fact, in Colorado where VBM was recently instituted,

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the state saw turnout improved in the 2014 midterm elections as compared to prior midterm elections as well as the added benefit of a decrease in undervoting (Colorado voting reforms, 2016; Menger, Stein, and Vonnahme, 2018). Further exploration of jurisdictions employing VBM suggests the policy more than doubled turnout compared in Garden County, Nebraska as compared to other counties in the state while results from a city election in Anchorage, Alaska broke past turnout records (Roberts, 2018). Additional research for the National Vote at Home Coalition (2018) affirms that implementing VBM increases voter turnout, based on results from Minnesota and North Dakota. Research also suggests that VBM may be especially beneficial for millennials and young voters (Showalter, 2018). Especially among the historically hard to engage younger generations (Levine and Lopez, 2002; Green and Gerber, 2015), VBM has demonstrated its effectiveness at increasing turnout. Yet, there has been limited public discourse about implementing the policy on a national scale.

Though VBM has a demonstrated record of success in the above-cited cases, media coverage tends to be negative, such as the absentee ballot fraud discovered in North Carolina during the 2018 midterm election (see Haslett, 2018). Discussion of mail-in voting remains largely relegated to policy-centric outlets outside of mainstream media, including *Vox* (see Roberts, 2018), *ProPublica* (see Giwa, 2018), and the Center for American Progress (see Root and Kennedy, 2018). Further, voting reform is generally seen as a Democratic issue, presenting the additional hurdle of partisanship in policy discourse (see H.R. 1, 2019) even when the implementation of VBM has shown similar increases in participation for both Democratic and Republican voters (Colorado voting reforms, 2016).

Finally, as the United States has become unfortunately aware of in 2020, the current model of voting in-person creates spaces in which the transmission of diseases occurs more

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easily. In fact, multiple states chose to postpone primary elections in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rakich, 2020). With a Presidential Election fast approaching and no end in sight to directives to quarantine or social distance, there is greater urgency to enacting systems that promote a more accessible model of democracy. The Democratic Party of Kansas has already chosen to automatically send ballots to all registered party members in the state, something it can do thanks to a vote by mail provision already in place (Shorman, 2020). In this pandemic, identifying the rhetoric that will support a lasting VBM policy so that the United States can build the needed democratic infrastructure to not be caught flat-footed again during a time of crisis.

While the context and reasons supporting VBM outlined above are each important to understanding the need for such a policy, this study specifically examines the effect of education about VBM on policy support among college students as college students continue to be difficult to engage in the democratic process. In fact, election turnout among college students continued to lag behind participation in other age groups in the 2018 midterm elections (DeSilver, 2018). College students face unique hurdles, including rigorous course schedules and domiciling in different cities than they claim permanent residence in (Troy, 2006; Niemi and Hanmer, 2010), thus targeted strategies are needed to enable increased voter turnout in this demographic. Below, I lay out a study to examine a message addressing this need for reform through vote by mail implementation as well as the many variables that affect message processing and are affected by message processing. In the first section, I establish the academic foundation on which I based my inquiry, including literature on racial resentment, the persuasion knowledge model, and the role of relevance in the persuasive process, before laying out ten hypotheses and two research questions to be addressed. In the following section, I describe my experimental design, dependent variables, and manipulation checks. Next, I employ quantitative analysis to investigate

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the veracity of the predictions I made. Finally, the results are discussed, the reason for these outcomes explored, and implications for research and praxis laid out.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The effects of racial bias and the racialization of political messages have been the subject of much research within the discipline of political communication (Jardina, 2014; Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Gracey, 2018; Tesler, 2016a; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2016; Kinder and Mendelberg, 2000). Much of this research has gone further to examine the role of racial framing on specific policies, especially related to healthcare (see Tesler, 2012) and welfare (see Littlefield, 2008; Masters, Lindhorst, and Meyers, 2014). More recent research has examined how racial framing recently evolved with a focus on the rhetoric of the 2016 election and concludes that, though individuals may argue otherwise, the idea of a post-racial society remains a hope, not a reality (Tesler, 2016a; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek, 2018). However, extant research tends to focus on major political figures and policies about which respondents may already hold opinions prior to experimental participation. Here, the experiment instead turns to universal vote by mail (VBM) as the policy of interest. While Federal legislation has previously been introduced to make Election Day a Federal holiday (see S. 3498, 2018), VBM is a less well-known opportunity to promote democratic participation and has received limited media coverage; individuals are likely to have limited familiarity with the concept. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine the effects of framing, particularly racial framing, on support for a policy that has not received marquis media treatment.

Racism, Loss Aversion, and Racial Anxiety

As explained above, racial attitudes can strongly influence their support for political candidates, issues, and policies, including voting reform. Though defending whiteness has not recently been a salient political organizing construct (Sears and Savalei, 2006), groups and candidates advocating alt-Right and neo-Nazi views are becoming increasingly mainstream, as

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are actions inspired by such views (see Kreiss and Mason, 2017), especially following the election of Barack Obama, the United States' first Black president (Jardina, 2014). In fact, recent research has found that racial resentment played a significant role in support for Donald Trump in 2016 and has shown that racial anxiety motivates political behavior (Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Gracey, 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2018a). This identity-based resentment can be observed most clearly in rhetoric and attitudes associated with the resurgence of the GOP in the years following the 2008 election (Cramer, 2016; Tesler, 2016a; Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts, 2016) and the xenophobia that Trump used to gain support in 2016 Republican primary voters (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2018a). Recognizing the racial resentment, loss aversion, and racial anxiety in these examples offers an opportunity to reflect on and understand the theoretical underpinnings of each.

The biological concept of race was developed by a group of mid-19th century anthropologists including Louis Agassiz, considered the father of scientific racism, who attempted to shift race from a taxonomic term to a biological term (Menard, 2001). This group used the biological explanation of race as a 'scientific' justification for a status quo dominated by white, Western values. The concept of the white man's supremacy over other races first codified in the United States in the Three-Fifths Compromise (U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.3) thus gained further support, leading to future violations of the rights of people of color (see The Puerto Rico Pill Trials; Henrietta Lacks; the exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers from FDR's New Deal). The racism embedded in legal and social structures has been termed *structural racism* (powell, 2007) and is prevalent in today's status quo. *Racial resentment*, also termed the New Racism, though not explicitly violent as the biological racism of the Jim Crow-era, ignores structural barriers and merges the animosity toward people of color with American values of

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individualism to suggest that people of color are not successful because they do not work hard enough (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Scholars further suggest that racial resentment is the most accurate predictor of white opinion on issues of race (Kinder and Mendelberg, 2000). Recent popular discourse also points to the growing mainstream discussion of displacement anxiety on the part of white people, termed by some ‘*white extinction anxiety*’ (Blow, 2018; see also DiAngelo, 2018; DeVaga, 2018; Ruiz, 2018; Hochschild, 2016). Further, the racialization of messages can impact how political communications are processed, whether those messages be political advertisements (Valentino, Hutchings, and White, 2002; Banks and Bell 2013), candidate image (Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelberg, Shaker, and Valentino, 2011; Pyszczynski, Henthorn, Motyl, and Gerow, 2010), or issue appeals (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina, 2013). Further, there is evidence that when an individual of color is tied to an issue, individuals’ attitudes after message exposure are strongly tied to racial attitudes are race (Tesler, 2012).

Reflecting on the explicitly racial rhetoric of the 2016 US presidential election, it is prudent to revisit racial priming and its effects. According to recent scholarship, many American voters easily recognize racial rhetoric, both implicit and explicit, however, reactions of anger and disturbance are no longer the norm (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek, 2018). Anecdotal evidence corroborates this finding as, even after making explicitly hostile racial remarks during his 2016 campaign, Donald J. Trump was successful in achieving the American presidency. Valentino and colleagues (2018) posit there is no longer a difference in how implicit and explicit racial cues are processed and that explicit rhetoric no longer caused an effect opposite the intended direction. Though it is unsettling that explicitly racial rhetoric has gained prominence in today’s political climate, implicit racial appeals, such as the use of the word ‘urban’ when describing Black or African-American communities, remain effective at persuading audiences,

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especially liberal audiences who might be more resistant to attitude change resulting from explicit racial rhetoric (Wett and Willer, 2018). Such implicit racial cues often key into individualism to mark groups as deserving or undeserving of support.

When it comes to racial progress toward equity and the removal of structural inequalities, social dominance theory suggests that white people, the dominant social group, view steps toward a more equal society as losses while Black people see the same steps as gains, and that negative framing, or *loss aversion*, causes white people to conceive of the steps taken as having greater impact compared to the perceptions of Black people (Eibach and Keegan, 2006). Additionally, the much-publicized demographic shifts changing the face of the United States (Cohn and Caumont, 2016) subtly suggest that the dominance of whiteness is under threat from not only reforms but also the statistical makeup of the country. This increases the salience of whiteness as an identity (Knowles and Peng, 2005). Meanwhile, in a society that values how an individual is perceived by their peers and considers personal racism to be a negative quality, white people have developed *racial anxiety*, the fear of being perceived as racist (Godsil and Richardson, 2017). Racial anxiety is tenuously balanced with the loss aversion held by the socially dominant white in-group, creating a tension that can be exploited by racial rhetoric.

H1: People with greater racial resentment will (a) perceive messages advocating VBM as less credible and (b) be more likely to oppose VBM.

H2: Racial attitudes will moderate issue support such that messages with a racial component will (a) be seen as less credible and (b) result in lower policy support for those who report greater racial resentment.

Psychological Reactance Theory

Psychological reactance theory (PRT) has been applied widely and with significant explanatory power across a range of concepts and disciplines since first proposed by Brehm more than fifty years ago (Rosenberg and Siegel, 2017). In proposing the theory, Brehm (1966) stated that “individuals have certain freedoms with regard to their behavior. If these behavioral freedoms are reduced or threatened with reduction, the individual will be motivationally aroused to regain them.” In current research, this definition of reactance has been further narrowed to describe *state reactance* while an individual’s propensity toward reactance has been dubbed *trait reactance*. Brehm (1966) further identifies these *free behaviors* as behaviors people have engaged in, are engaging in, and plan to engage in at a future date and posits (Wicklund and Brehm, 1968) that such freedoms exist so long as people think they possess the freedom and feel capable of enacting it. *Freedom* is not cast as something that people will pursue for its own sake but as something that they are motivated to restore when they perceive it has been taken away (Brehm, 1966).

While Brehm (1966) took great care in defining what constitutes a *freedom*, PRT as originally defined did not clearly outline what the reactance process entailed. This ‘black box’ of behavioral processing made an interesting claim but was not directly testable (Quick, Shen, and Dillard, 2013). Over time, researchers tested affective and cognitive components that might describe the claim made by PRT and have settled on the current understanding of reactance as an intertwined model of both affective and cognitive effects that are impossible to separate from one another (Rains, 2013).

In communication research, PRT hypotheses are tested by comparing the effects of high- and low-threat messages, a design that has upheld the assumptions of PRT across a variety of

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communication contexts (Rosenberg and Siegel, 2017). Reduction in freedom in the communication context has been operationalized as the use of certain language in message development and has been cast as a dichotomy between *controlling* (“must,” “ought,” “should”) and *autonomy-supporting* (“perhaps,” “possibly,” “maybe”) language (Miller, Lane, Deatrck, Young, and Potts, 2017, p.223). Prior research also suggests that the way in which a message is presented may affect support for the position put forth by the message even when the audience does not disagree with the content or expertise behind the message (LaVoie, Quick, Riles, and Lambert, 2017). Dillard and Shen (2005) also point to credibility as a key component of reactance. Credibility itself is comprised of expertise and trustworthiness (Wiener and Mowen, 1986, McGinnies and Ward, 1980).

Research also demonstrates that the use of controlling language can cause a *boomerang effect* (Quick and Stephenson, 2007; Quick and Bates, 2010). Brehm and Brehm (1981) identify a boomerang effect as the occurrence of an attitudinal or behavioral change opposite to the intended outcome. In fact, research suggests that a strong message against a behavior may instead encourage its audience to engage in the unwanted behavior, associate with those engaging in the behavior, or engage in another behavior related to the unwanted behavior (Quick and Stephenson, 2007). In addition to acting directly and indirectly against the outcome advanced by a message, an audience may attempt to discredit the message author, therefore discrediting the authority upon which the message is founded (Miller et al., 2007; Grandpre, Alvaro, Burgoon, Miller, and Hall, 2003). To combat the boomerang effect and reactance generally, researchers have employed various strategies. Miller and colleagues (2007) tested lexical concreteness – *must* vs. *probably* – to determine whether these choices might reduce reactance toward health messages. In the former, the researchers found that concrete details may

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help with message acceptance; more concrete messages received greater attention and were deemed more important.

Past research on PRT has defined threats provoking reactance somewhat narrowly as outside actors perceived to be reducing an individual's freedom. However, it is also the case that the perceived necessity to adhere to social norms may be experienced as a threat to freedom. Racial anxiety, as discussed above, could fall into a broader categorization of *freedom threat* (Godsil and Richardson, 2017), as individuals may perceive that their opposition to racism is being used as a cudgel to force them to take positions that they may agree with, but not feel able to fully explore. In these cases, it is not that an individual necessarily would not support the proposed position, it is that they feel voicing opposition may cause them to be labeled a racist or not a strong enough ally. The work of Plant and Devine (1998) suggests that this external motivation for self-regulation pushes individuals to respond to messages without prejudice, potentially going against their preferred course of action. This perspective also ties into *racial anxiety*, the fear of being perceived as racist (Godsil and Richardson, 2017) such that individuals would feel limited in their ability to express themselves for fear of being perceived negatively. When individuals feel limited in their behaviors by fear of social consequences, these social norms become relevant to examine as a freedom threat under the PRT model.

H3: Messages with a racial component will result in (a) a greater number of negative thoughts and (b) greater negative affect.

H4: Reactance will mediate the effects of the condition such that individuals who report (a) more negative thoughts and (b) greater negative affect will report lower issue support.

Personal Relevance

Research suggests that arguments that personally benefit the reader are strong in quality while those that offer benefit for others or offer a cost instead are considered weak. According to Cacciopo and Petty (1984), there are two paths to persuasion in the *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM): the central route and the peripheral route. The central route is associated with greater message elaboration and more resilient change in attitude while the peripheral route is associated with less message elaboration and more fleeting attitude change. By activating the central route, messages open themselves up to greater analytic scrutiny, but also greater potential for lasting impact. The ELM also considers argument quality in parallel with processing type when predicting message effects (Carpenter, 2015). When strong arguments are processed through the central route, the cited meta-analysis suggests they have the largest impact on attitudes. Therefore, arguments that frame a policy as both relevant and beneficial for a population are most likely to move attitudes in the intended direction in a lasting way.

Further, Claypool, Mackie, Garcia-Marques, McIntosh, and Udall (2004) posit that differences in message effects based on personal relevance may be understood through ELM such that messages perceived to hold greater relevance are processed through the central route while messages perceived to be less relevant are processed through the peripheral route. Additional analysis suggests that messages addressing the ability to achieve an important outcome, such as exercising the right to vote, encourages individuals to process messages by the central route (Johnson and Eagly, 1989). According to the cited research, an argument about VBM framed around youth voter turnout and the policy's benefit to college students is likely more relevant to their interests and therefore may activate the central route while a more general message about VBM would not activate feelings of personal relevance to the same extent and

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thus may instead activate the peripheral route. In this way, messages about college students would likely have a greater effect on college students than messages about other groups.

H5: Messages with greater personal relevance will (a) be seen as more credible and (b) result in greater issue support compared to messages lower in personal relevance.

H6: Respondents who report higher perceived personal relevance will record a greater number of thoughts and thus exhibit greater issue support.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This study explores the relationship between the variables of racial resentment, personal relevance, message processing, and message framing on attitudes about voting access as represented by universal vote by mail (VBM). This chapter will elaborate on participant recruitment, procedure, and variables of interest.

Participants

Participants were recruited from public speaking classes at a large Midwestern university. This outreach garnered 243 responses. Incomplete responses ($n = 15$), responses taking an extreme amount of time (fewer than four minutes; more than 4 hours) ($n = 12$), and responses that failed the manipulation check (*‘What was the reading about?’*) were removed ($n = 16$) to ensure respondents engaged with the experiment. Subject mortality was not correlated with a specific condition. Little’s MCAR test (Little, 1988) confirmed values were missing at random in remaining incomplete cases ($p = .177$) and relevant missing values were imputed using expectation maximization set to a maximum of 25 iterations. Fifteen values were imputed across cases, including 8 values for the African-American feeling thermometer.

The final sample size used for data analysis was 200 subjects. Thirty-four percent ($n = 68$) of subjects were exposed to the condition relevant to college students, 30.5% of subjects ($n = 61$) were exposed to the racial priming condition, and 35.5% of respondents ($n = 71$) were exposed to the control condition. A majority of respondents identified as female ($n = 131$, 65.5%) and a majority were white ($n = 159$, 79.5%). Race was dummy coded such that subjects who identified as white were assigned a value of 1 while all others were assigned a value of 0. Gender was dummy coded such that subjects who identified as male were assigned a value of 1 while all others were assigned a value of 0. Of the 61 subjects in the racialized condition, 48

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identified as white and 13 as nonwhite. The average age of respondents was 19.75 ($SD = 1.45$). Fifteen respondents did not report their age.

Subjects responded to a 7-point Likert-type scale asking them to identify their partisan affiliation as ‘*strong Democrat*’ (1), ‘*Democrat*’ (2), ‘*lean Democrat*’ (3), ‘*neither party*’ (4), ‘*lean Republican*’ (5), ‘*Republican*’ (6), or ‘*strong Republican*’ (7) ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.58$) (Lin, 2009). Subjects responded to a 7-point scale asking them to identify their ideological affiliation as ‘*very liberal*,’ ‘*liberal*,’ ‘*somewhat liberal*,’ ‘*neither liberal or conservative*,’ ‘*somewhat conservative*,’ ‘*conservative*,’ or ‘*very conservative*’ ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.61$). Grouping those who answered as strong partisan, partisan, or lean partisan into their respective parties showed that nearly half of subjects were self-affiliated with Democrats ($n = 94$, 47%) while self-affiliated Republicans made up a larger portion of the remainder ($n = 64$, 32%; independents $n = 42$, 21%). The majority of subjects did not have strong partisan leanings nor strong ideological leanings. More than half of respondents ($n = 110$, 55%) identified only as partisan leaners or with neither party while the same proportion ($n = 110$, 55%) identified only as ‘*somewhat liberal/conservative*’ or as ‘*neither liberal or conservative*’ in reporting their political ideologies.

Procedure

Participants were offered extra credit in their course to participate in this study. Students were invited to participate through a survey link distributed over email and the university’s learning management software by course instructors. The recruitment message informed participants the study was about political message processing. Responses were collected from February 24 to March 1, 2019.

Subjects participated independently on their personal devices and were not supervised during completion of the questionnaire. Before beginning the study, participants were asked for

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consent. Responses were only collected from participants who answered in the affirmative. The questionnaire was submitted to the Internal Review Board (IRB) for review and approved before data collection commenced.

Experimental Materials

There were three conditions in the inquiry: *college student relevance*, *racialized*, and *control*. Subjects were randomly assigned to a condition, presented as a newspaper op-ed, which addressed voter turnout in the 2018 midterm elections and offered a solution (universal vote by mail or VBM) to increase turnout beyond that election's record-setting 47% participation rate. All 3 conditions presented the same statistics and examples. In the control condition, the material was presented without racializations or statements about the policy's potential benefits for college students. In the experimental condition relevant to college students, specific ways in which VBM would benefit college students were discussed. In the racialized experimental condition, specific ways in which a mail-in voting policy would benefit Black and urban voters were discussed. None of the stimuli included partisan cues. Questions about various partisan subjects and political news du jour were included in the pretest to limit the potential for subjects to identify the purpose of the study before exposure to the stimulus. See *Appendix 2* to review stimulus materials presented to subjects.

Measures

Racial resentment

Racial resentment is not an explicitly expressed attitude; individuals generally do not express these attitudes freely. Therefore, data collection can be difficult. In order to gather data on this potentially hidden variable, Kinder and Sanders's (1996) validated scale was used. It is comprised of four 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type questions. This scale was recently

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employed by Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, (2018b) in exploring the effects of racial resentment on the 2016 US presidential election (see also Carmines, Sniderman, and Easter, 2011): *‘Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors;’* *‘It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would try harder they would be just as well off as whites;’* *‘Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class’* (reversed); *‘Over the course of the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve’* (reversed). Subjects tended toward low to moderate levels of racial resentment ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .875$). Subjects were also asked to rate their feelings toward African-Americans on a 101-point feeling thermometer with 0 being most negative and 100 being most positive ($n = 192$, $M = 96.2$, $SD = 17.3$).

Voting in the United States

Prior to message exposure, participants’ attitudes toward voting access and policy in the United States were collected. Support for mail-in voting was measure in the pretest with a single 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type question: *‘The government should increase voting access using mail-in ballots.’* Respondents had weak attitudes on these questions, tending toward agreement ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.27$). This pretest question was used as a covariate in analyzing the effect of the treatment. Subjects were also asked to respond to four additional 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type questions about voting in the United States: *‘Every American has a responsibility to vote on Election Day’* ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .80$); *‘Voting is too hard in the United States’* ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.20$); *‘Voter fraud is a problem in the United States’* ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .97$); *‘The government should make voting more accessible’* ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.02$). Respondents were asked again in the posttest whether they agreed voting is too hard in the United States ($M =$

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3.17, $SD = 1.17$) and whether they agreed the government should make voting more accessible ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .95$). The questions on voting difficulty and accessibility were collapsed into one variable for pre- and posttest responses ($M_{pre} = 3.22$, $SD_{pre} = .93$, $r_{pre} = .572$; $M_{post} = 3.63$, $SD_{post} = .96$, $r_{post} = .750$).

Universal Vote by Mail (VBM) Support

Support for VBM was measured in the posttest using four 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type questions: ‘*Universal vote by mail would increase election participation*’ ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .94$); ‘*The US should adopt universal vote by mail*’ ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.23$); ‘*I would support a universal vote by mail policy in Missouri*’ ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.23$); ‘*I would support a federal vote by mail policy*’ ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.23$). These questions were collapsed into one measure, termed *VBM support* ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .944$).

Negative Affect

Individuals’ affect in response to a message influences how they process the content. Therefore, subjects were asked to report how much they experienced the following feelings on a 7-point sliding scale (1 = ‘*none of this feeling*’; 7 = ‘*a great deal of this feeling*’) while completing the reading: anger, irritation, annoyance, aggravation. A higher number indicates more negative affect ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .927$). These questions were adopted from Dillard and Shen (2005) and were designed to capture subjects’ *affective response*, an intertwined aspect of the model of psychological reactance according to Rains (2013).

Counterarguing

Thought-cataloging represents engagement with the message at hand and aids researchers in understanding message processing. Respondents were asked to record up to 10 thoughts they had while completing the reading ($n = 533$, $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.95$) and rate whether these thoughts

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were positive ($n = 322$, 60.4%), negative ($n = 170$, 31.9%), or unrelated to the reading ($n = 41$, 7.7%). Sample size for responses of more than four thoughts was limited ($n_5 = 8$; $n_6 = 9$; $n_7 = 3$; $n_8 = 0$; $n_9 = 0$; $n_{10} = 4$). Rains (2013) demonstrates the number of negative thoughts recorded by each individual is commonly used as a measurement of counterarguing while those thoughts that subjects identified as positive or irrelevant to the message are excluded from analysis (see Dillard and Shen, 2005; Quick et al., 2011; Rains and Banas, 2015).

Credibility

Messages from credible sources are taken more seriously by readers. They have more weight in affecting attitudes and beliefs. Participants were asked to record their agreement with the statements '*The readings were informative*' and '*The readings presented information fairly*' using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Subjects reported generally positive perceptions of credibility ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .82$, $r = .730$). Only a small portion of respondents reported negative perceptions of message credibility ($n = 13$, 6.5%).

Message Relevance

While one of the messages was designed to frame VBM as particularly relevant to college students, subjects still developed their own internal perceptions of message relevance. Therefore, responses were collected for agreement with the statement '*The message was relevant to me*' using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Subjects generally found the message relevant to themselves ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.03$).

See *Appendix 1* for a full list of questions included in the pre- and posttest.

Manipulation Checks

Four manipulation checks were included in the survey. Immediately upon completing the thought cataloging activity, subjects were asked to report what the message they read was about.

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Answers that did not address the topic of the reading were removed from analysis ($n = 16$). Subjects were additionally asked to respond to a 5-point Likert-type question, ‘*How easy to understand was this reading?*’ to ensure that they were able to understand and process the information presented in the message they were presented with (1 = ‘*very difficult*’; 5 = ‘*very easy*’) ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .68$).

Subjects also responded to a 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type question asking whether they found the reading to be personally relevant: ‘*The message was relevant to me*’ ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.03$). Subjects in each condition were compared to subjects in the other conditions. The results of the one-way ANCOVA with a Bonferroni correction were not significant and showed limited effect size when controlling for age, gender, race, partisanship, and ideology, $F(2, 176) = .07$, $p = .931$, $\eta^2 = .001$. The response pools for ‘*strongly disagree*’ and ‘*somewhat disagree*’ were small ($n_{strong} = 7$; $n_{some} = 10$). Still, those in the condition relevant to college students reported the most agreement ($M = 4.02 \pm .13$). Those in the racialized and control conditions reported similar levels of agreement ($M_{race} = 3.97 \pm .14$; $M_{control} = 3.96 \pm .12$).

Subjects responded to a 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type question, ‘*Universal vote by mail would benefit Black voters*’ ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.15$), to establish whether the racialized stimulus increased agreement compared to the conditions relevant to college students and control condition. The results of a one-way ANCOVA suggest individuals who received the racialized stimulus reported no significant difference in agreement when controlling for age, race, partisan identity, and ideological affiliation than subjects who received the control or college student relevant stimuli, $F(2, 176) = .74$, $p = .477$, $\eta^2 = .008$. Those in the racialized condition still reported slightly higher agreement ($M = 3.79 \pm .14$) than subjects in the condition relevant to college students ($M = 3.55 \pm .14$) or control condition ($M = 3.62 \pm .13$). Pairwise comparisons

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did not reveal any relationship approaching significance. A post hoc power analysis showed the observed power of the analysis to be modest ($d = .18$).

Subjects responded to a 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type question, ‘*Universal vote by mail would benefit college students*’ ($M = 4.19, SD = 1.04$), to capture the effect of the college student relevant stimulus compared to the racialized and control conditions. The results of a one-way ANCOVA suggest individuals who received the college student relevant stimulus did not report significantly different levels of agreement when controlling for age, race, partisan identity, and ideological affiliation than subjects who received the control or racialized stimuli, $F(2, 176) = .960, p = .385, \eta^2 = .011$. Those in the condition relevant to college students did still report marginally higher agreement ($M = 4.36 \pm .12$) than those in the racialized condition ($M = 4.16 \pm .13$) or control condition ($M = 4.15 \pm .12$). However, a post hoc power analysis also demonstrated a low level of observed power that may reduce the potential to identify a significant result ($d = .22$).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Multiple linear regressions were calculated to predict VBM support and perceived message credibility based on racial resentment (*H1* and *H5*). A significant regression equation for message credibility was found (*H1a* and *H5a*), $F(12, 172) = 3.36, p < .005, R^2 = .190$.

Participants' reported message credibility as was determined by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Message credibility} = & 2.489 + .057(\text{age}) + .027(\text{male}) + .001(\text{white}) + .124(\text{partisanship}) \\ & + .009(\text{pretest policy support}) + .070(\text{racial resentment}) + .068(\text{feeling thermometer}) + \\ & .014(\text{racialized condition}) - .141(\text{college student relevance prime}) - .196(\text{voting} \\ & \text{responsibility}) - .247(\text{message relevance}) - .042(\text{thought count}) \end{aligned}$$

Perceived message credibility was .001 points higher for each point of racial resentment ($p = .991$). Additionally, each point on the feeling thermometer decreased perceived message credibility by .002 points ($p = .594$). The linear regression did not support *H1a*.

Further, the linear regression did not support *H5a* which suggested high message relevance would lead to increased message credibility. In fact, the model shows a significant negative effect. For each 1-point increase in reported message relevance, perceived message credibility decreased by .247 points ($p < .01$). Therefore, *H5a* is not supported.

A significant regression equation for VBM support was found, $F(13, 171) = 15.24, p < .005, R^2 = .537$. Participants' predicted VBM support was determined by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{VBM support} = & .517 + .047(\text{age}) - .080(\text{male}) + .026(\text{white}) + .006(\text{partisanship}) + \\ & .551(\text{pretest policy support}) - .158(\text{racial resentment}) - .053(\text{feeling thermometer}) + \\ & .257(\text{message credibility}) + .148(\text{racialized condition}) + .045(\text{college student relevance} \\ & \text{prime}) + .004(\text{voting responsibility}) + .044(\text{message relevance}) - .041(\text{thought count}) \end{aligned}$$

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VBM support was .162 points lower for each point of racial resentment reported by participants ($p < .05$). Also of interest, VBM support was .102 points higher in subjects exposed to the condition relevant to college students ($p = .453$) and .345 points higher in subjects exposed to the racialized condition ($p < .05$) as compared to those in the control condition. Additionally, each point of message relevance increased VBM support by .046 points ($p = .455$). The regression model supported *H1b* with a significant finding that racial resentment reduced issue support. The finding remained significant when evaluated using a one-way ANOVA.

Further, the regression model did not support *H5b* which suggested that high message relevance would lead to increased issue support. For each 1-point increase in reported message relevance, VBM support increased by .046 points ($p = .455$). Therefore, *H5b* was unsupported.

Overall, *H1* was not supported and neither part of *H5* was supported by analysis. See *Table 1* below for outputs from the regression models for *H1* and *H3*.

Table 1. Regression Paths for Vote by Mail (VBM) Support and Message Credibility

Path	VBM Support		Message Credibility	
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
<u>Control Variables</u>				
Age	.035(.041)	.047	.032(.041)	.057
Male	-.182(.131)	-.080	.047(.134)	.027
White	.071(.149)	.026	.002(.152)	.001
Partisanship	.004(.050)	.006	.066(.051)	.124
Pretest VBM support	.465(.050)***	.551***	.006(.051)	.009
<u>Test Variables</u>				
Racial Resentment	-.162(.078)*	-.158*	.056(.079)	.070
African American FT	-.003(.004)	-.053	.003(.004)	.068
Credibility	.332(.075)***	.257***	-	-
Racial Stim	.345(.141)*	.148*	.025(.144)	.014
Col. Student Rel. Stim	.102(.136)	.045	-.248(.137)	-.141
Vote Importance	.005(.075)	.004	-.199(.076)**	-.196**
Message Relevance	.046(.062)	.044	-.201(.076)**	-.247**
Thought Count	-.023(.030)	-.041	-.018(.031)	-.042

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

A series of multiple linear regressions were calculated to predict negative thoughts and negative affect based on which message subjects received (*H3*). A nonsignificant regression

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equation for negative thoughts was found, $F(12, 170) = 1.441, p = .152, R^2 = .091$. Number of negative thoughts recorded was predicted by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Negative thoughts} = & -.431 + .184(\text{age}) - .092(\text{male}) + .072(\text{white}) + .074(\text{partisanship}) - \\ & .029(\text{pretest policy support}) - .205(\text{racial resentment}) - .190(\text{feeling thermometer}) + \\ & .064(\text{message credibility}) - .026(\text{racialized condition}) - .017(\text{personal relevance prime}) - \\ & .000(\text{voting responsibility}) - .098(\text{message relevance}) \end{aligned}$$

Subjects exposed to the condition relevant to college students reported .017 fewer negative thoughts ($p = .841$) while those exposed to the racialized condition recorded .026 fewer negative thoughts ($p = .761$) as compared to those in the control condition. Additionally, each year of age increased the number of negative thoughts recorded by .184 ($p < .05$) and, for each point of increase on the feeling thermometer, .190 fewer negative thoughts were recorded ($p < .05$). The regression model did not support *H3a*.

A significant regression equation for negative affect was found, $F(13, 171) = 2.112, p < .05, R^2 = .138$. Participants' predicted negative affect was determined by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Negative Affect} = & 6.322 + .014(\text{age}) - .145(\text{male}) - .068(\text{white}) - .010(\text{partisanship}) - \\ & .032(\text{pretest policy support}) - .056(\text{racial resentment}) - .032(\text{feeling thermometer}) - \\ & .323(\text{message credibility}) + .095(\text{racialized condition}) - .017(\text{college student relevance prime}) - \\ & .054(\text{voting responsibility}) - .058(\text{message relevance}) - .058(\text{thought count}) \end{aligned}$$

Negative affect was .050 points lower in subjects exposed to the condition relevant to college students ($p = .836$) and .290 points higher in subjects exposed to the racialized condition ($p = .253$) as compared to those in the control condition. Additionally, each point of perceived message credibility decreased anger by .546 points ($p < .001$). The regression model did not

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support *H3b*. Overall, no part of *H3* was supported by the analysis. See *Table 1* below for outputs from the regression models for *H3*.

Table 2. Regression Paths for Negative Affect and Negative Thought Count

Path	Negative Affect		Negative Thoughts	
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
<u>Control Variables</u>				
Age	.013(.073)	.014	.157(.064)*	.184*
Male	-.435(.235)	-.145	-.244(.213)	-.092
White	-.241(.267)	-.068	.225(.242)	.072
Partisanship	-.009(.090)	-.010	.059(.081)	.074
Pretest VBM support	-.036(.089)	=.032	-.029(.080)	-.029
<u>Test Variables</u>				
Racial Resentment	-.075(.139)	-.056	-.245(.125)	-.205
African American FT	-.003(.007)	-.032	-.014(.006)*	-.190*
Credibility	-.546(.134)***	-.323***	.096(.121)	.064
Racial Stim	.290(.253)	.095	.070(.229)	.026
Col. Student Rel. Stim	-.050(.243)	-.017	-.044(.220)	-.017
Vote Importance	-.094(.135)	-.054	.000(.123)	.000
Message Relevance	-.080(.110)	-.058	-.119(.100)	-.098
Thought Count	-.042(.054)	-.058	-	-

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Two separate iterations of Model 1 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS v3.3 (Hayes, 2013) were used to examine the effect of exposure to the racialized message on perceived credibility as moderated by racial resentment (*H2a*) and on issue support as moderated by racial resentment (*H2b*). The analysis for perceived credibility (*H2a*) controlled for age, race, gender, partisanship, thought count, pretest support, message credibility, message relevance, voting responsibility, and condition. In step one of the analysis, the regression of the effect of the racialized message, ignoring the moderator, was not significant ($b = -.130$, $S. E. = .139$, $p = .350$), $F(13, 171) = 15.28$, $p < .001$. The moderation model for the effect of the racialized message on credibility as moderated by racial resentment was not significant, $F(1, 171) = 2.89$, $p = .091$, and the interaction itself approached but did not achieve significance ($t = 1.78$, $S.E. = .112$, $p = .077$).

The analysis for issue support (*H2b*) controlled for age, race, gender, partisanship, thought count, pretest support, message credibility, message relevance, voting responsibility, and condition. In step one of the analysis, the regression of the effect of the racialized message,

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ignoring the moderator, was significant ($b = .345$, $S.E. = 1.41$, $p < .05$), $F(12, 172) = 3.36$, $p < .005$. However, the regression model of the racialized message as moderated by racial resentment was measured to be significant, $F(14, 170) = 14.27$, $p < .001$, and the interaction itself did not achieve significance ($t = 1.15$, $S.E. = .117$, $p = .251$). $H2$ was unsupported by the analysis, though the moderation interaction of the racialized message on credibility through racial resentment did approach significance.

Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS v3.3 (Hayes, 2013) was used to examine the effect of condition on issue support as mediated by negative thoughts ($H4a$). The analysis controlled for age, race, gender, partisanship, pretest support, message credibility, message relevance, and voting responsibility. In step one of the analysis, the regression model examining the direct effect of negative thoughts on issue support was significant, $F(13, 171) = 16.07$, $p < .001$. The model found the direct effect of negative thoughts on issue support to be significant ($b = -.109$, $S.E. = .046$, $p < .05$). Step two of the analysis examined whether the racialized message had a direct effect on negative thoughts ($b = .168$, $S.E. = .229$) and found no significant effect ($p = .466$). Though step two failed to achieve significance, Model 4 was still used to examine the indirect effect of condition through negative thoughts as it is possible that an indirect effect may still occur even without these conditions being met. The indirect effect of negative thoughts on issue support was very small and, because the confidence interval crossed zero, can be considered nonsignificant ($b = -.010$; $LLCI = -.073$, $ULCI = .048$). $H4a$ was unsupported.

Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS v3.3 (Hayes, 2013) was also used to examine the effect of condition on issue support as mediated by negative affect ($H4b$). The analysis controlled for age, race, gender, partisanship, pretest support, message credibility, message relevance, thought count, and voting responsibility. In step one of the analysis, the regression

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model examining the direct effect of the racialized message on negative affect, ignoring the mediator, was significant, $F(13, 171) = 2.11, p < .05$. However, the effect of the racialized stimulus was not significant ($b = .290, S.E. = .253, p = .253$). In step two of the analysis, the direct effect of negative affect on issue support ($b = -.012, S.E. = .043$) was also not found to be significant ($p = .773$), $F(14, 170) = 14.08, p = .001$. Because neither the direct effect of the racialized stimulus of negative affect nor the direct effect of negative affect on issue support was significant, was not significant, it was unlikely that the mediation model would return a significant finding but still possible. The indirect effect of anger on issue support as measured by Model 4 was very small and, because the confidence interval crossed zero, can be considered nonsignificant ($b = .066; LLCI = -.007, ULCI = .174$). $H4b$ was unsupported, therefore $H4$ as a whole was unsupported.

Finally, model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS v3.3 (Hayes, 2013) was used to examine the effect of message relevance on issue support as mediated by thought count ($H6$). The analysis controlled for age, race, gender, partisanship, pretest support, message credibility, condition, and voting responsibility. In step one of the analysis, the regression model for thought count was not significant, $F(13, 171) = 1.47, p = .132$. Further, the direct effect of message relevance on thought count ($b = -.086, S.E. = .155$) was not significant ($p = .579$). See Table 3. Step two of the analysis examined the direct effect of thought count on issue support ($b = -.023, S.E. = .030$) and found that thought count had no significant effect ($p = .456$), $F(13, 171) = 15.24, p < .001$. Because the direct effects of both message relevance and thought count were not significant, it was unlikely, but still possible, that an indirect effect was present. The indirect effect of message relevance on issue support as captured by Model 4 was small and the

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confidence interval crossed zero, therefore the indirect effect can be considered nonsignificant ($b = .003$; $LLCI = -.015$, $ULCI = .020$). $H6$ was unsupported.

Table 3. Regression Paths for Message Relevance and Thought Count

Path	Message Relevance		Thought Count	
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
<u>Control Variables</u>				
Age	-.015(.050)	-.022	.303(.099)**	.228**
Male	.046(.163)	.021	-.369(.328)	-.090
White	-.261(.183)	-.102	-.160(.374)	-.033
Partisanship	.063(.062)	.096	.030(.126)	.025
Pretest VBM support	.074(.061)	.091	-.056(.124)	-.036
<u>Test Variables</u>				
Racial Resentment	-.259(.094)**	-.265**	-.401(.193)*	-.216*
African American FT	.010(.005)*	.163*	-.014(.009)	-.126
Credibility	.295(.089)**	.240**	.108(.187)	.046
Racial Stim	.046(.175)	-.021	.321(.353)	.076
Col. Student Rel. Stim	-.031(.168)	-.014	-.102(.340)	-.025
Vote Importance	.015(.093)	.012	.019(.189)	-.008
Message Relevance	-	-	-.093(.189)	-.049
Thought Count	-.023(.038)	-.043	-	-
Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.				

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Racial Resentment and Racial Rhetoric

The literature reviewed above suggested that individuals exhibiting greater racial resentment would demonstrate specific responses to the stimulus in this experiment, and it was also suggested that the stimulus itself would cause certain attitudes. The analysis did not support H1a which suggested that racial resentment would lead to lower reported message credibility. This finding is somewhat in line with extant research that suggests negative affect, in this case, high racial resentment, may lead to different levels of message scrutiny (Bohner and Weinerth, 2001) such that high negative affect leads to lower message scrutiny. However, this finding is also somewhat in opposition to the concept of *watchdog motivation* (Fleming, Petty, and White, 2005; Petty, Fleming, and White, 1999) which suggests that individuals who have neutral implicit prejudice will more heavily scrutinize messages from or about stigmatized groups.

Further, the experiment did not support H2a which suggested that racial attitudes would moderate issue support through the stimulus such that the racialized message would be perceived as less credible. The direct effect of racial resentment on credibility was not significant, as described above, and neither did the moderation analysis find a significant interaction effect. More clearly, the above experiment found no significant difference in the reported credibility of the message whether it was racialized and explicitly addressing a stigmatized group or lacked this feature. This finding, or lack thereof, is supported by watchdog motivation research which suggests that scrutiny of a message addressing a stigmatized group, in this case, African Americans, would be higher in the neutral range of racial resentment and that message scrutiny would be lower among those high in racial resentment (Fleming, Petty, and White, 2005; Petty, Fleming, and White, 1999). In this explanation, consider reported message credibility as one

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measure of message scrutiny. This may be because respondents did not report much variation in responding to questions on racial resentment. But, examining the large value of the standard deviation, a lack of diversity in the variable of interest appears not to be an issue. Instead, it appears to be the case that racial resentment did not have a significant effect on overall message processing as related to message credibility in this experiment.

In examining the moderating influence of racial resentment on exposure to a racialized message, the analysis showed any differences to be random. Thus, it appears racial resentment did not moderate change in issue support in the racialized condition in this study, as predicted by H2b. As discussed by Wilson and Brewer (2014), individuals frequently fall back on heuristics, such as partisanship and race, when processing unfamiliar political messages. This study was not supported by their work as analysis above showed no significant direct effect of racial resentment on issue support. As Roberts (2018) points out, vote at home systems are slowly expanding to new states and municipalities, though the policy reform itself does not get much national coverage. However, this appears to be changing in 2020 as the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic; several partisans have taken to Twitter calling for an increase in access to vote by mail to protect public health. Considering this general lack of coverage at the time of the above experiment in early 2019, it is likely that subjects were unfamiliar with the message topic and may not have known enough about the issue for responses to hold meaning or be tied to existing heuristics.

Finally, the racialized messages did not appear to have a significant effect on the number of negative thoughts recorded or the amount of anger that respondents expressed. The apparent randomness of the effect leaves H4a unsupported. Further, the equation itself for the outcome of negative thoughts was not significant. Overall, the number of thoughts that participants recorded

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was low. With just over two thoughts recorded per participant on average, the number of self-coded negative thoughts was even lower. While it is possible there was not enough data to observe an effect, it may also be the case that psychological reactance theory (PRT) is only applicable in a limited set of circumstances. In the PRT literature referenced above, instances that generated high reactance used strong language (i.e. “must”; Miller et al., 2017) and were designed to limit the subject’s ability to engage in a given behavior (Quick and Stephenson, 2007). In the experiment here, the research instead looked to cause reactance outcomes using racial resentment and racial anxiety indirectly by using a social norm as an internal limitation among subjects. The message proposed to incite reactance did not directly limit the behavior of subjects and thus may not have been interpreted as a threat in a way recognized by the PRT model. In order to consider the message a threat, participants would have had to take many mental steps to move from increased access to voting to considering this access a threat to the status quo and therefore as a threat to their race-based status within the system which could further be considered in partisan terms. In short, the message did not itself place a limit on subjects’ behavior. The proposed reactance would only have occurred through deep engagement with the message and the knowledge that the Black and urban voters described in the reading historically tend to vote for the Democratic Party (Hersh, 2011), which would potentially then lead to partisan-based reactions. Therefore, I argue that the hypothesis has not been disproven and more robust data and examination of potential pathways for reactance are needed to fully investigate the effect that racialized messages may have on negative thoughts and anger.

However, there is also a theoretical argument to be made that a racialized message would not lead to more negative thoughts or anger. Referring again to *watchdog motivation* (Fleming, Petty, and White, 2005; Petty, Fleming, and White, 1999), it may be the case that the racialized

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message led individuals who did not have high implicit prejudice (racial resentment) to more heavily scrutinize the message. In fact, for individuals low in prejudice, research suggests they would process the messages more positively in an effort to overcome negative reactions to a benefit to Black people (Monteith, 1993; Plant and Devine, 1998). More recent research suggests that to fully capture differences in scrutiny, and perhaps in message processing as a whole, it is necessary to separate implicit and explicit bias into different measurements (Johnson, Petty, Briñol, and See, 2017). The researchers in the cited study found that different combinations of implicit and explicit prejudice led to different levels of message scrutiny such that those who were high in both measurements or low in both measurements exhibited low levels of scrutiny while those who reported differences between levels of implicit and explicit prejudice engaged in greater message scrutiny, regardless of the direction of the attitude discrepancy. The findings of Johnson et al. (2017), suggest that the lack of support for H4a in the above study may be due to the variables chosen for measurement and the proposal of a new pathway for reactance that has not yet been clearly identified or mapped, not necessarily due to a lack of effect.

Though racial resentment was not a significant moderator of the racialized message, the racialized message itself did have a surprising effect. First, analysis did find that racial resentment reduced issue support as predicted by H1b. More interestingly, the racialized message had a significant effect in the positive direction instead of reducing policy support as predicted by extant research which instead demonstrates a reduction in issue support when political issues across a variety of contexts are racialized (see Banks and Bell, 2013; Berinsky et al., 2011; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Kinder and Mendelberg, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001; Mendelberg 2008; Pyszczynski et al., 2010; Tesler, 2012; Tesler, 2016a; Valentino, Hutchings, and White, 2002; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina, 2013). Racial cues were not included in either the college student

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relevance message or the control message while messages about urban voters and hourly workers, both often used as racial dog-whistles, and about African American voters, an explicit racial appeal, were included in the racialized condition. Though past scholarship suggests that explicitly racial appeals reduce the effects of racial framing, research produced following the 2016 presidential election in which explicitly racial rhetoric was frequently employed found that there is no longer any noticeable reduction in effect when explicit racial rhetoric is employed in place of implicit racial rhetoric (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek, 2018). Instead of reducing issue support, the racialized message in this experiment significantly increased support for universal vote by mail more so than any other test or control variable. Further, this positive response to the racialized message was the only significant relationship between which stimulus an individual received and their overall support for universal vote by mail measured in this study.

The third hypothesis also focused on the effect of racial messages suggesting that racial messages would lead to a greater number of negative thoughts (*H3a*) and greater negative affect (*H3b*). Neither component of this hypothesis found support in the above experiment. It was suggested that racial messages would lead to a greater amount of counterarguing, here operationalized as negative thought count (see Dillard and Shen, 2005; Quick et al., 2011; Rains and Banas, 2015) and negative affect (Brehm and Brehm, 1966). Reflecting on both the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and PRT, multiple explanations for this arise.

First, under ELM, strong arguments are those that are both relevant and beneficial to the reader (Carpenter, 2015). Strong arguments are more likely to be processed by the central route and thereby receive more scrutiny than those processed by the peripheral route. Considering the racialized message that focused on Black and urban voters, for a largely white population of college students attending a university outside of a major urban area, it is unlikely subjects found

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the message to be particularly beneficial for their experience and needs. Therefore, the message may not have appealed to readers as beneficial. On the other hand, according to responses, subjects found the message to be relevant across conditions. As this was measured by a single response, it may be the case that message relevancy was not fully captured. Returning to the idea of a beneficial message, respondents may not have considered the outcome advocated for in the message to be particularly relevant to their experience and therefore used the periphery route for message processing. If this was the case, it is understandable why message scrutiny through negative thoughts and negative affect was not significantly affected by condition.

Under PRT, again consider that past investigations have relied on direct cues through words such as “must” and “ought” (Miller et al., 2017). This experiment attempted to cue a similar reaction through racial anxiety, expecting that participants’ internalized concern about being called racist would cause a feeling of obligation similar to the aforementioned words. In this experiment, such cues did not prompt feelings of reduced freedom thereby activating PRT. Considering extant research in interpreting this finding, it would then be expected that counterarguing and negative affect, components identified by Rains (2013) as leading to lower issue support, would not be significantly affected by condition, as was the case here, and therefore would further not have a significant impact on issue support, as was observed above. Based on this experiment, it is not clear whether negative thoughts and negative affect caused no observable effect because they were not strong arguments or because they were not direct in their freedom threat.

There are two potential reasons for the positive effect that the racial condition had on issue support that merit discussion. First, universal vote by mail is a niche policy area that the general public may have been unfamiliar with. Compared with healthcare (Tesler, 2012) and

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welfare programs (Federico, 2004), the public likely heard far fewer messages about universal vote by mail, especially outside of cities and states that have adopted the strategy. It is possible that when a message has not been coded with racial rhetoric in the public sphere, the impact that has been observed in the above studies is not applicable. It should also be noted that universal vote by mail appeared not to have strong partisan coding as partisan identity had no significant effect on issue support. This is likely tied to the lack of public conversation on the issue (Roberts, 2018) which may have limited the creation and strengthening of partisan heuristics.

This may be because VBM was a particularly niche policy area that did not receive much mainstream coverage (Roberts, 2018), thus it is unlikely that subjects were previously exposed to racialized messages about the topic. Without such prior knowledge, they may not have had strong enough mental constructs to much influence how they processed the message. Future research should investigate further the effects of racial resentment on the processing of novel political concepts to understand whether this finding was a fluke in the data or instead holds true across different types of policy ideas. On the other hand, practitioners may be able to take advantage of this finding to sidestep racial resentment when working on specific policy projects that the public is unfamiliar with whose general issue umbrellas may be heavily racialized.

Turning back to racial resentment, college students today are members of Generation Z and have come of age in a world that often makes a point to include equity and justice in dialogue, even in spaces as banal as online dating bios (see Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, and Woodhead, 2020). Within their lifetimes, serious conversations about reparations have begun to take place, notably gaining support from longtime skeptic David Brooks (2019), the #MeToo movement has rocked the public sphere (Dastagir, 2019), and indigenous water protectors have taken action to block environmentally and culturally dangerous fossil fuel projects (Upadhye, 2016), all of

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which received major network coverage. Young people today are not only reading about history happening around them and having conversations with those in their immediate physical vicinity, individuals who are more likely to share similar views (Bishop, 2009), they are able to engage in a global conversation that offers opportunities for exposure to different ideas than what was experienced by those who came of age before the communications revolution (Rajan, 2019). This hopeful explanation is, however, based largely on current events and would need significant research in order to recognize such a generational shift.

Identifying the key factors that contributed to the unexpected increase in support for universal vote by mail following exposure to the racialized message suggests multiple opportunities for future research. First, research might seek to compare the effects of a racialized message about a niche policy topic against exposure to a racialized message about a topic that has been widely connected to race, such as healthcare or welfare policy, through a multiple message manipulation. Doing so would allow for a direct comparison of effects and help to better understand the role that public discourse plays in shaping responses to policy representations. Second, researchers might seek to replicate this experiment with a representative sample. By including participants of a broader age range, it would be possible to identify whether there is a true possibility of a generational shift in how people perceive and respond to race or if the finding of increased support is simply an oddity in this particular dataset.

Message Relevance

Interestingly, there were not significant differences in perceived message relevance across conditions. This is further discussed in the limitations section below. Further, perceived message relevance did not have a significant effect on change in issue support following exposure. Based on intentional differences included in the messages, this poses an interesting

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opportunity for analysis. In fact, perceived message relevance overall skewed toward subjects agreeing or strongly agreeing that the message they were presented with was relevant to them, regardless of whether the message included cues targeted toward college students or racialized cues.

In the college student relevance message, the language specifically cited barriers to voting faced by college students and the tangible benefits students would see from a VBM policy implementation. The other two conditions, the control and racialized message, did not have this language and instead focused on a general case for VBM and the specific problems and benefits that VBM would address for Black and urban voters, respectively. However, analysis showed that the condition relevant to college students did not result in a significant difference in issue support as compared to the other two conditions; regardless of condition, respondents reported no significant difference in message relevance. There are a few possibilities as to why college students may not have found the message about their specific situation to be more relevant to themselves.

First, it may be the case that the experimental design was flawed. For instance, perhaps stimulus was not strong enough or the relevance measure was not effective. While possible, message contents for the college student relevance message was specifically written to highlight the challenges college students face when trying to vote and the ways in which VBM would benefit their ability to participate in elections. The other conditions provided general commentary on voting challenges and benefits or specifically pointed out ways in which voting would benefit urban and African American voters. Given that respondents were all college students attending school in a nonurban setting and self-reported that they were majority white, the messaging of the college student relevance stimulus should have appealed most to their

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personal experience. Based on this information, it would be expected that respondents would report this message to be the most relevant. However, the above findings do not support this outcome.

H5 suggested that messages high in personal relevance would be reported as more credible and thus would lead to greater issue support. As cited above, Claypool et al. (2004) suggest that messages relevant to individual experiences are more likely to activate the central route of the ELM (Cocciopo and Petty, 1984) and thus lead to greater, more resilient attitude change. In this case, the data did not support *H5*. As reported above, there was little differentiation in reported message relevance across conditions, thus negating *H5a*. It appeared to be the case that subjects felt all messages were highly relevant, not just the message that specifically discussed the impact universal vote by mail would have on college students. Further, extant research still suggests that messages of high personal relevance would lead to enhanced scrutiny through the central route (Claypool et al., 2004) of Cocciopo and Petty's ELM (1984), so theory supports the hypothesis that a personally relevant message would lead to enhanced scrutiny, as captured by reported message credibility. However, in addition to the lack of differentiation within the variable described above, the measurement for message relevance was not as robust as it could have been. As a significant direct effect for message on credibility was not found and no opposite interaction suppressing the effect on credibility was foreseen, it was expected that *H5b*, which suggested credibility would act as a mediator between message and issue support, also achieved no significant finding. It appears experimental flaws may be to blame for the lack of support for *H5* and the data should not be considered conclusive.

Similar to *H5*, *H6* suggested that subjects reporting higher personal relevance would record a greater number of thoughts and thus exhibit greater issue support. As the direct effect of

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thought count on issue support was not significant and no opposite effect was foreseen that might suppress the direct effect of thought count, it was expected that the mediation analysis would return a nonsignificant result. In fact, the small observed effect, which was reported to be random, was in the negative direction and the confidence interval crossed zero. Once again, the limited variation in reported message relevance may have limited the potential to observe an effect in this case. However, Claypool et al. (2004) still suggest that the central route leads to greater message scrutiny. In this instance, that was not observed as message relevance had no significant direct effect on thought count, one vector for considering message scrutiny. Instead, only racial resentment and age had significant effects on thought count. It is interesting that racial resentment was significant as the analysis controlled for condition, so subjects high in racial resentment in all three conditions appeared more likely to record additional thoughts even without exposure to the racialized message. It is unclear why this was the case as only the racial condition included direct racial cues. It may be the case that respondents activated their own personal experience to connect voting access to race. Research suggests that restrictions to voting access are often racially coded (Bentele and O'Brien, 2013), so perhaps it was the case that these individuals may have made a racial connection themselves even without a written prompt. This would be an interesting connection; however, it was not measured in any form so this explanation is conjecture. Overall, the mediation analysis did not return a significant finding, thereby not providing support for *H6*.

Further, according to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the ability to process includes a number of components with those most relevant to this inquiry being message comprehensibility and prior knowledge. On message comprehensibility, respondents were asked how easy to understand the message was using a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses from 'very easy' to

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'very difficult.' Based on this data, message comprehensibility was not problematic in limiting cognitive processing. Turning to prior knowledge, however, recent trends in civic education in the United States show that respondents may not have had the knowledge necessary to engage in Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) cognitively-driven central path to persuasion.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees a number of rights; however, education is enumerated nowhere in its text, certainly not civics education. In fact, a 2018 report from the Brookings Institution highlighted that civics education in particular is not well-designed to support student learning and retention (Hanse, Levesque, Valant, and Quintero, 2018). Further, as with all facets of education in the United States, curriculum requirements are defined at the state level, so students living in different regions of the country are likely to experience vastly different learning opportunities in their civics education. According to the state code of the testing site, a certain number of units in civics, citizenship, and social studies are required in order to earn a diploma (Mo. H.B. 1646, 2016).

However, as explained by the State Department of Education (2018), the text of this code only requires a half credit of coursework in 'government' that addresses the organizational structures and functions of local, state, and federal government and electoral processes. The activities described in the handbook appear to encourage students to gain a textbook understanding of governance in the United States, but do not explicitly mandate that students be taught their roles as citizens, as voters, and as individuals with the right to petition their government. The code and handbook include American history, economics, and social studies courses in this category as well, establishing a broad range of options for students that may encourage them to pursue their interests but does not mandate they acquire an in-depth knowledge of citizenship. Though students may be required to study the electoral process, they

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may be unaware of how to register to vote, where to learn about candidates and issues, and how to find their polling place; in short, they may understand voting systems, but they never learned how to vote (Strauss, 2018). This lack of student knowledge may play a role in why age had a significant direct effect on thought count. Additional years of life experience also equate to additional years of electoral experience. An individual who may not have learned much about elections in school gains direct experience on a yearly basis voting in federal, state, and local elections. This may have provided older subjects with greater prior knowledge than their peers, thus offering an explanation of the effect.

The absence of civics education has reached new heights in students' consciousness across the country as of late; high school students in Rhode Island are suing their state for violating their constitutional rights by failing to educate them to become effective citizens (Wong, 2018), a case that may soon make its way to the United States Supreme Court. Without a proper civics education that informs students not only on the mechanics of how government works in the United States, but also about the tools they can use to participate in governance from elections to direct advocacy, and teaches students why their participation matters, they may lack the knowledge to engage in cognitive processing on the topic of universal vote by mail. On the other hand, the finding of this study might instead suggest that college students have some understanding of how universal vote by mail would benefit them, regardless of how the message is presented, and their support is only increased by a racial equity lens. Suggestions regarding the role of civics education and knowledge offer another avenue for future research.

Returning to the lack of difference in message relevance across conditions, there are a few theoretical explanations for this outcome. Conventional wisdom argues that students generally don't consider voting to be of primary importance in their lives and thus don't find

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messages about voting to be relevant to their experiences. Young adults aged 18 to 25 are less likely than older generations to cast a ballot in a given election and are not catching up as they grow older, though engagement has also become increasingly episodic in more recent generations (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Each time an election rolls around, political operatives remind the broader public how large of a problem voter turnout is, and specifically reminds audiences of the especially low turnout among college voters (Troy, 2006). It is not just the talking heads worrying about youth turnout. Research suggests that civic engagement among youth has been on a forty-year decline with today's youth exhibiting fewer characteristics of citizenship as compared to youth evaluated in the 1970s (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). The same research suggests that low-income and minority youth at a particular disadvantage.

Further, youth today have access to new communication tools, including Facebook and Twitter, that older generations did not have access to. It is well documented in communication research that social media affects political attitudes and behavior, often in negative ways. Research has found that investing attention in social media increases cynicism and apathy as related to politics (Yamamoto, 2014) and that social media, while positively related to political consumerism, is less so related to political participation (de Zúñiga, Copeland, and Bimber, 2014). Meanwhile, reliance on social networking sites for political talk as opposed to interpersonal communication has been found to be less impactful in driving political behavior (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard, 2010). Further, online tools are best-used by those who are already politically knowledgeable and of higher socio-economic status, creating uneven access to learning and engagement (Brundidge and Rice, 2009); those who would choose to engage in harder political behaviors are more likely to engage in easier political behaviors, such as liking or commenting on a social media post (Bode, 2017). Social media may make interactive

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political discourse more directly accessible, but it appears to muffle political participation for users. Though this survey did not ask about social media use, 80% of U.S. adults who are 18-24 years old use Facebook and 45% use Twitter (Smith and Anderson, 2018). It is likely that survey participants engage in social media environments and thus experience some negative effects on political participation that may affect their perceptions of voting as relevant to their lives, as outlined by the above cited research.

Even with all of opportunities that college students have more to check out of the political process (see Weller, 2014; Slater, 2007), scholars suggest their lack of engagement has more to do with structural barriers than a negative shift in political engagement. As Troy (2006) points out, it is the amorphous legal hurdles that college students must overcome that largely account for low turnout among college voters. Further, more young Americans than ever are facing the specific barriers posed by higher education with 2 in 3 recent high school graduates enrolled in college in 2017 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018) compared with just 49.3% of high school graduates as reported forty years earlier in 1979, according to datasets maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics. With that in mind, analysis may have run into the opposite problem and, instead of finding an apathetic audience, found an audience that recognized these hurdles as relevant to their own experiences, regardless of how the narrative was represented. Based on the observed data, the suggestion of a participant pool excited about civic participation is more likely than the suggestion that they are simply apathetic about voting.

This leads to the question: why? Since the 2016 elections, conversations about civic engagement have been salient in the media and interpersonal communication; according to PEW statistics reported in 2017, 52% of those surveyed reported that they paid more attention to politics since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and 27% respondents aged 18 to 29 reported

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they had attended a political event, rally, or organized protest following the election. Further, research shows that college students are largely similar in their turnout behaviors to other cohorts and their lower numbers may be tied to systemic issues such as residency requirements and distance to polls (Troy, 2006; Niemi and Hanmer, 2010). Weighing subject responses and these heterodox perspectives on political engagement among college students, the data suggests that college students find voting to be universally important. Instead of signifying apathy, the lack of significant difference in perceived message relevance across conditions may represent that subjects as a whole found a message about voting, specifically access to voting, to be relevant to their lives.

Limitations of This Study

First, it is possible that the control condition in this experiment was not differentiated enough from the experimental conditions such that subjects were able to intuit the benefits to college students or Black voters on their own. While it would have been optimal to include a pure control in this study, it was unclear whether there would be enough participants to allow for four conditions. The decision was made to exclude a pure control and instead include a message on the same topic without racial or post-secondary cues. However, the absence of a pure control limits the explanatory power of the null findings related to condition described above.

Additionally, this study did not find a significant relationship between racial resentment and psychological reactance. It may be the case that this lack of finding is related to a missing moderator connecting the expectation of a social norm to perceptions of freedom. A component of psychological reactance theory called *trait reactance*, which measures an individual's disposition to reactance generally (Quick, Scott, and Ledbetter, 2011), may be of interest in seeking out this missing variable. This variable was tested as a moderator in the cited study and

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shown to have a positive effect on perceived freedom threat. In order to better apply psychological reactance to the case of racial resentment and social norms, trait reactance should be considered in future inquiry.

A college student sample also has limitations, including limited variety in socio-economic status, age, and geography. Further, research suggests that college-educated voters may be more racially tolerant than their peers (Tesler, 2016b). Though many students surveyed were in their first year of college, this consideration still remains important and affects the potential for findings tied to racial resentment to carry much explanatory power.

The survey was distributed to students as an extra credit opportunity to be taken on their own personal computers at a time that was convenient for them within the week that the Qualtrics link was active. This design did not create the most effective conditions for the experiment as individuals were able to close and return to the experiment, engage in conversation with others nearby, or shift their focus to a different task during the experiment. This uncontrolled setting allowed for many avenues of distraction that may have affected participant responses. It is not clear what effect this method may have had, but it is still important to note. While not ideal, the lack of control for the experimental setting was required because the researcher was not within close geographic proximity of the experimentation site. Should this experiment be replicated, it is recommended that participants be engaged in the activity in a controlled setting.

Related to this issue, the above study also did not pilot test the stimulus materials to evaluate their effect before commencing with data collection. This shortcoming was due to a lack of time and planning, and should be considered when examining effect differentiation between

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messages. Future inquiry should include a pilot test to verify message manipulations as a necessary step.

Regarding the consideration of message relevance, this was measured by a single 5-item Likert-type scale (*The message was relevant to me*). It is likely this single item did not fully capture respondents' feelings regarding relevancy and did not provide a strong base for analysis and may reduce this study's internal validity. A more robust set of questions including language such as *"The message was relevant to me as a college student," "The message was relevant to me as a voter,"* and *"The message was relevant to me as a person with a busy schedule,"* might provide a more accurate and useful measurement, as would expanding the scale from 5-point to 7-point. While it is too late to redesign the experiment, there are also potential external explanations as to why there was no significant difference in perceived message relevance across conditions. It may be the case that this dataset would support the hypothesis if it had employed a more robust measurement of relevance than the single 5-point Likert-type scale used. Unfortunately, likely because the experiment did not include a more robust measure of perceived message relevance, the analysis does not support the hypothesis.

Upon further examination, the sample size for each number of thoughts submitted under the thought listing variable was not large enough for meaningful analysis. A large majority of respondents input 0 to 4 thoughts while few recorded 5 or more thoughts with none providing 8 or 9 responses. With 11 potential response options, a much larger sample size would be needed to achieve statistically significant response rates for each possible number of thoughts. Though the above-cited research may provide a compelling argument as to why thought cataloging and the cognitive processing it represents had no significant effect on issue support, additional research is needed to confirm the relationship between thought cataloging and issue support is

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truly nonsignificant. However, this outcome appears unlikely to be changed as extant research suggests that subjects' elaboration tends toward simplicity (Niederdeppe, Kim, Lundell, Fazili, & Frazier, 2012) which could also suggest fewer thoughts to be recorded, therefore it may be that a low average thought count is to be expected.

This study also only evaluated a single approach to a single issue. Though the topic discussed above could broadly be described as voting rights, it is unclear how the findings might apply to other voting reforms, such as a voting holiday, voter ID laws, or early voting. Again, universal vote by mail has historically been less discussed, and therefore likely associated with fewer preexisting beliefs than these reforms. Further research would have to be done to determine whether the effects observed in this experiment apply to these other voting rights issues,

Finally, as described above, the observed effect of the racial message may be a reflection of generational differences. Nearly every participant in this study was a member of Generation Z, a generation that has its own social and cultural norms that are different from those before (Katz et al., 2020). While the findings in this study may therefore offer a different understanding of political message in the future, it is unclear whether the observed effects would also occur among a population of Millennials, Gen Xers, or older individuals. As was observed in the experiment, age had a significant impact on thought cataloging, thereby suggesting that, in a sample representing a cross-section of American voters, it is possible an age-related effect on issue support would occur. This inquiry was unable to uncover such an effect simply based on the available participant pool.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to offer both practical and theoretical contributions to communications literature by examining the influence of racial resentment on issue support for what was previously a niche policy topic. The data showed that, contrary to what was expected, racialized messages increased support for universal vote by mail. It may be the case that Generation Z's commitment to racial justice led to higher issue support when exposed to a message directly linking racial equity to the policy. Further, subjects recorded high message relevance across all conditions, demonstrating that relevance was not successfully primed in this experiment. College students identified universal vote by mail as very relevant to their lives, even when not explicitly told how it might benefit them. This may have been due to the limited range of the question used for measurement or due to a lack of pilot testing message differentiation. Both causes point to internal validity as the issue and therefore leave the door open to the potential for personal relevance to play a role in message processing as proposed in the study. Support for such a conclusion will have to come from future inquiry. This study began by examining what could have been considered a niche policy issue, but COVID-19 changed how the United States thinks of elections in 2020 with many states delaying primaries and encouraging voters to request mail-in ballots and the President sharing his own feelings about mail-in voting during a live press conference. It remains unclear what the lasting electoral effects of this ongoing public health crisis will be, but amid the pandemic, mail-in voting is beginning to gain its own chorus of advocates.

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APPENDIX 1

IRB consent:

What the study is about: The purpose of this research study is to learn what considerations people use to process messages.

Why you are invited: You are invited to participate to help better understand what impact personal beliefs have on message processing.

What you will do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your demographic information and your personal beliefs. You will then be asked to read a short article. After the reading, you will be directed to fill out a survey on the topics addressed in the articles.

Compensation: You will receive up to five (5) points of extra credit in Public Speaking for participating in this study. An alternative assignment is available for students who do not wish to participate. The assignment will be to write a 1-2 page response paper on how to increase democratic participation.

Your answers will be confidential. No identifiable information will be collected. Your answers will remain anonymous.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation is voluntary and your decision not to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

Who will see my information? If you choose to participate, no identifying information will be collected about you. After completing the survey, you will be asked for your name and public speaking class. This is for the purpose of assigning extra credit and will not be associated with your answers.

If you have questions: The researchers conducting this study is Rory Doehring. If you have questions later, you may contact Rory Doehring at rory.doehring@mail.missouri.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or email at irb@missouri.edu

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

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Bolded questions below represent variables of interest used in analysis.:

What is your age?

What is your race/ethnicity? (Asian; Black/African American; Hispanic/Latinx; White/Caucasian; Other

What is your gender? (Male; Female; Other)

Do you identify as... (Strong Democrat; Democrat; Lean Democrat; Neither Party; Lean Republican; Republican; Strong Republican)

Do you Identify as... (Very liberal; Liberal; Somewhat liberal; Neither liberal or conservative; Somewhat conservative; Conservative; Very conservative)

Now we are going to ask your opinions on some statements about how you interact with other people.

Social desirability 7-point Likert-type scale: Listed below are statements about personal behavior. Please indicate how well each statement describes you (1 = ‘very much like me’; 2 = ‘somewhat like me’; 3 = ‘neither like me or unlike me’; 4 = ‘somewhat unlike me’; 5 = ‘very much unlike me’)

- It is sometimes hard for me to go on with my work if I am not encouraged
- I sometimes feel resentful when I don’t get my way
- On a few occasions, I have given up on something because I thought too little of my ability
- There have been times I felt like rebelling against authority even though I knew they were right
- No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener
- There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone
- I’m always willing to admit when I make a mistake
- I sometimes try to get even instead of forgive and forget
- I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable
- I have never been bothered when people expressed ideas very different from my own
- There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good fortune of others
- I am sometimes irritated by people who ask favors of me
- I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone’s feelings

Now we are going to ask your opinions on some controversial issues that have received a lot of coverage in the news recently.

New Ecological Paradigm 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale: Listed below are statements about the relationship between humans and the environment. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement:

- The so called “ecological crisis” facing humankind has been greatly exaggerated.
- Humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs.

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- When humans interfere with nature it often produces disastrous consequences.
- Plants and animals have as much right as humans to exist.

Racial Resentment 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale: Listed below are statements about the minority relations. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement:

- **Irish, Italian, Jewish, and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.**
- **Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class. (reverse-coded)**
- **Over the course of the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve. (reverse-coded)**
- **It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would try harder they would be just as well off as whites.**

Voting beliefs pre-test 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale: Listed below are statements about US elections. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement:

- Every American has a responsibility to vote on Election Day.
- **Voting is too hard in the United States.**
- Voter fraud is a problem in the United States.
- **The government should make voting more accessible.**

Policy beliefs 5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scales:

Listed below are statements about foreign military aid. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement:

- Sometimes, the United States must remove foreign leaders for the benefit of their people.
- The United States should use military force to promote democracy abroad.

Listed below are statements about healthcare. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement:

- The government should provide basic healthcare for everyone.
- The healthcare industry regulates costs best through the free market.

Listed below are policy positions. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement.

- The government should create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants
- The government should pass a Green New Deal to fight climate change
- **The government should increase voting access using mail-in ballots**
- The government should use military force to protect civilians in Yemen

Government trust: How much do you trust the government? (1 = 'Only trust the government to do what's right some of the time'; 2 = 'Trust the government to do what's right most of the time'; 3 = 'Just about always trust the government to do what's right')

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Feeling thermometers (0-100): Please rate your feelings on the following with 0 being most negative and 100 being most positive:

- Immigrants
- Evangelical Christians
- **African Americans**
- Muslims
- Catholics
- Green New Deal
- Medicare for all
- Hillary Clinton
- Barack Obama
- Donald Trump
- Supporters of the Democratic Party
- Supporters of the Republican Party
- Trump Voters

Now we would like you to read this article. We are going to ask you some questions about what you think of the argument presented in this article later.

(Control OR Racialized stimulus OR Personal Relevance Stimulus)

Thought cataloging: In the text boxes below, please list any thoughts you had while reading the message, up to 10.

Responding to recorded thoughts: For the following questions, please rate your responses as positive, negative, or unrelated to the reading.

Manipulation check: What was the topic of the reading? (short answer)

I feel like I know more about universal vote by mail. (5-point agree/disagree response)

The message was relevant to me. (5-point agree/disagree response)

How easy to understand was this reading? (5-point response: 1 = ‘Very easy’; 5 = ‘Very difficult’)

Psychological Reactance – Negative Affect: The following questions are about how you felt while completing the reading. (7-point scale: 1 = ‘None of this feeling’; 7 = ‘A great deal of this feeling’):

- **Did you feel angry while viewing this message?**
- **Did you feel annoyed while viewing this message?**
- **Did you feel irritated while viewing this message?**
- **Did you feel aggravated while viewing this message?**

General posttest measures:

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Listed below are statements about the readings you completed. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement. (5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale)

- **The readings were informative.**
- **The readings presented information fairly.**
- The readings taught me something new.

Listed below are statements about voting. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement. (5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale)

- **Voting is too hard in the United States.**
- **The government should make voting more accessible.**

Listed below are statements about universal vote by mail. Please indicate your level of agreement for each statement. (5-point agree/disagree Likert-type scale)

- Universal vote by mail would increase election participation.
- Universal vote by mail would benefit college students.
- Universal vote by mail would benefit Black voters.
- **The US should adopt universal vote by mail.**
- **I would support a universal vote by mail policy in Missouri.**
- **I would support a federal vote by mail policy.**

APPENDIX 2

Control Stimulus

TURNOUT UP BUT MAJORITY STILL NOT VOTING

2018 was lauded as a record year for voter turnout in the United States and yet only 47% of eligible voters cast their ballots in that election. How can we celebrate 2018 as a victory for voter turnout when fewer than 1 in 2 Americans actually voted?

That we are celebrating when a majority of voters stayed home this election makes clear we need to reform the system and make it easier for people to vote.

The one-off nature of Election Day means that traffic, weather, or unexpected circumstances can keep would-be voters from the polls. In 2018, hundreds of polling places across the country closed or were moved, adding additional confusion to an already busy day. That means more people are heading to fewer locations, dealing with longer commutes and lines. Voters today are affected by their own unpredictable schedules and long lines at polling places that make it hard to plan just how much time they need to cast their ballots.

Americans need a system that would allow them the time to make the best choices, an opt-out system instead of an opt-in system. America needs universal vote by mail.

Under a vote by mail policy, every registered voter would receive a ballot in the mail which they fill out and mail in or deposit in a designated ballot drop off box. To ensure election integrity, signatures on the ballot envelopes are matched against signatures on voter registration.

Compared to sending voters to the polls on Election Day, vote by mail has many benefits. Most importantly, states with vote by mail policies have consistently higher turnout. When voting isn't

MESSAGING UNIVERSAL VOTE BY MAIL

a burden, people who might otherwise not feel motivated to head to the polls are more likely to participate. Further, voters have time to research candidates and make informed choices on who they want to represent them instead of voting party-line or by name recognition. Vote by mail also saves states money on purchasing voting machines and staffing polls. Plus, the paper record created by this process makes recounts more reliable.

It is honestly embarrassing that the United States, a country that claims to be the leader of the free world, cannot get a majority of its citizens to the polls on Election Day. It's time to bring the polls to the voters and reinvigorate American democracy with universal mail-in voting.

College Student Relevance Stimulus

TURNOUT UP BUT COLLEGE STUDENTS STILL NOT VOTING

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Existing voting laws disadvantage college students. With their housing in flux while away at school, students often choose to stay registered at their permanent addresses. With Election Day in the middle of the week, many are unable to make it back to their home districts to cast their ballots and unaware of how to request absentee ballots. With today's college students balancing busy class schedules, jobs, and extracurricular activities, it's no wonder voter participation is so low among the 18-29 age group at just 31%.

MESSAGING UNIVERSAL VOTE BY MAIL

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Compared to sending voters to the polls on Election Day, vote by mail has many benefits. Most importantly, states with vote by mail policies have consistently higher turnout. When voting isn't a burden, people who might otherwise not feel motivated to head to the polls, such as young people, have the opportunity to participate. Further, voters have time to research the candidates and make informed choices on who they want to represent them instead of voting party-line or by name recognition. Vote by mail also saves states money on purchasing voting machines and staffing polls. Plus, the paper record created by this process makes recounts more reliable.

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Racialized Stimulus

TURNOUT UP BUT URBAN AMERICA STILL NOT VOTING

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MESSAGING UNIVERSAL VOTE BY MAIL

Existing voting laws disadvantage urban voters and Blacks. As states limit early voting and close urban polling locations voters receive confusing information about where and when to vote. With Election Day in the middle of the week, many voters who previously joined “Souls to the Polls” events during early voting found themselves unable to travel to far away locations and stand in long lines to cast their ballots. In fact, in the 2018 election urban counties lost an average of 7 polling places, diluting democracy.

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