

# **The Effects of Semantics and Social Desirability in Correcting the Obama Muslim Myth**

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## Abstract

We address the question of how social desirability concerns may hinder efforts to counter political misperceptions. When we tested two linguistic approaches to correcting persistent rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim in a 2008 experiment, we found that our results varied dramatically depending on the race of the researchers who were present when the study was administered. When non-white researchers were administering the study, the corrective treatments were somewhat effective among white subjects, but the corrective treatments frequently made misperceptions *worse* when only white researchers were present. These effects appeared to be strongest among GOP self-identifiers. We therefore explicitly manipulated the perceived racial identity of the researcher in a second study conducted in April 2012 and again found that Republicans were more likely to report reduced misperceptions in response to the correction treatments when the study was attributed to a nonwhite researcher. We interpret these results as reflecting social desirability concerns triggered by the interaction of the correction treatments with perceived researcher race.

Decades of surveys have documented the American public's lack of factual knowledge about political issues and controversies, but scholars have largely failed to distinguish the *uninformed* from the *misinformed* people who confidently hold false or unsupported beliefs (Kuklinski et al. 2000: 792). The two groups pose a different set of challenges to democracy. In the case of ignorance, we want citizens to learn new information. By contrast, countering misperceptions requires that citizens first "unlearn" their incorrect beliefs. However, little is known about how to do so. Previous research has shown that political misperceptions are often difficult or impossible to correct (Kuklinski et al. 2000, Nyhan and Reifler 2009).

One possible explanation for the general failure of corrections is that their semantic construction makes "unlearning" false information more difficult. Corrections often take the form of a negation (e.g., "Tom is not a criminal"). However, psychologists have shown that negations can actually *strengthen* associations between the subject and the concept being negated (Mayo et al. 2004, Wegner et al. 1981) and thereby reinforce the original claim. As such, it might be more effective to affirm the truth without reinforcing the false claim (e.g., "Tom is a law-abiding citizen").

We apply this approach to contemporary politics by attempting to dislodge the widespread belief that Barack Obama is (or used to be) a Muslim, which first surfaced during the 2008 presidential campaign and has persisted in the years since (Pew 2008, Pew 2010, Public Religion Research Institute 2011). While a few scholars have analyzed the relationship between the Muslim myth and other variables (Barreto et al. 2009, Block and Onwunlil 2010, Smith 2010), previous studies have not tested whether it is possible to *correct* the misperception. Our first experiment, which was conducted in October 2008, tested the effectiveness of a misperception negation (Obama saying "I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith") and a corrective affirmation (Obama "I am a Christian who has belonged to the same church for almost twenty years now") using a cover story about the personal lives of presidential candidates. The research cited above suggests that corrective affirmations should reduce misperceptions, while negations are likely to fail to dispel the Obama-Muslim linkage.

Unexpectedly, the results of the first study varied dramatically depending on the race of the researchers present, a factor that we did not experimentally manipulate. When only white researchers were present, the corrections frequently made misperceptions *worse*, but this response disappeared when nonwhite researchers were present. Instead, respondents reported much *lower* levels of misperceptions, particularly among Republicans. These findings are consistent with studies showing that social desirability concerns may affect how respondents behave when asked about sensitive topics. The presence of the nonwhite researcher had little effect in the control condition but appears to have triggered social desirability concerns among respondents exposed to the correction treatments, which explicitly target the myth about Obama's religion.

We thus conducted a second experiment in April 2012 that builds on these findings by testing (a) how the effectiveness of corrective information varies depending on its semantic construction and (b) whether researcher race moderates these effects. Our results provide further evidence of differences in the effectiveness of corrective treatments depending on researcher race. Unlike Study 1, the corrections were frequently effective in reducing misperceptions among non-Republicans when the study was

attributed to a white researcher. Among this group, we found that the corrective affirmation was most effective for the question that asked about Obama's religion (where Christianity was a response option) while the misperception negation was more effective for questions that asked if Obama is or used to be a Muslim. Most importantly, as in Study 1, Republicans who were exposed to corrections were more likely to report reduced misperceptions when the study was attributed to a non-white researcher, a finding that again suggests social desirability concerns rather than belief change.

## **Theoretical approach**

### *Previous research*

Only a few studies have directly tested the effects of providing citizens with correct information about political issues or topics about which they may be misinformed (see Nyhan and Reifler 2012 for a review). Most focus on the effects of false information on policy attitudes. Kuklinski et al. (2000; study 1), Gilens (2001), Berinsky (2007), Sides and Citrin (2007), Howell and West (2009), Mettler and Guardino (2011) and Sides (N.d.) all provided experimental participants with correct factual information about an issue and then asked about their policy preferences on the issue. The results have been mixed – Gilens, Howell and West, Mettler and Guardino, and Sides found that correct factual information changed participants' policy preferences, but Kuklinski et al., Sides and Citrin, and Berinsky did not.

Unfortunately, very few political science studies test different approaches to correcting political misperceptions among the public.<sup>1</sup> Among the studies that do directly address correcting misperceptions (rather than policy preferences), the outlook is mixed. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) extended previous research by assessing the effectiveness of corrective information embedded in a mock news article containing a potentially misleading statement by a political figure. Disappointingly, they found that corrections typically failed to reduce misperceptions among the ideological group most likely to hold them. Even worse, Nyhan and Reifler actually found two cases of a “backfire” effect in which corrections actually *increased* misperceptions among the targeted ideological group. However, Berinsky (N.d.) conducted several studies of myths about President Obama's health care plan and found that corrections were generally effective in reducing misperceptions among Republicans (the partisans most likely to hold those beliefs), particularly when those corrections were attributed to a Republican source.

### *The (in)effectiveness of negations?*

Given these inconsistent results, we chose to pursue a new approach that was inspired by psychological research on the cognitive processing of linguistic negations. Several studies have concluded that when people hear a negation (i.e. “Tom is not a criminal”), they process the core supposition first (“Tom is a criminal”) and then negate it by applying a discounting tag such as “not” (Clark and Chase 1972, Just and Carpenter 1976, Grant, Malaviya, and Sternthal 2004). This process may unintentionally associate the subject (“Tom”) with the descriptor (“criminal”), reversing the intended effect of the

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, related literatures on rebutting rumors (e.g., Bordia, DiFonzo, and Schulz 2000, Bordia, DiFonzo, Haines, and Chaseling 2005; DiFonzo and Bordia 2006), inoculating people against persuasion (e.g., Wood 2007, Cialdini et al. n.d.), refuting misleading advertising (e.g., Johar 1996, Petrova

negation. For instance, Mayo et al. (2004) show that negations can backfire for unipolar descriptors (those for which a well-defined opposing schema does not exist like “criminal”), facilitating associations between the subject and the descriptor that are incongruent with the negation. Similarly, Gawronski et al. (2008) tried training experimental participants to negate racial and gender stereotypes. Despite using some bipolar descriptors with well-defined opposites (which Mayo et al. found could be successfully negated), they found that negations actually *worsened* automatic gender stereotypes and automatic evaluations of blacks relative to whites.<sup>2</sup>

If negations are often problematic, what might be a better approach? An alternative strategy is suggested by Gawronski et al., who found that repeatedly affirming counter-stereotypic associations successfully reduced the activation of negative stereotypes and associations. The implication of these findings is that it might be more effective to counter misperceptions by affirming correct facts rather than negating mistaken beliefs.

We apply these findings to the myth that Barack Obama is or had been a Muslim, which first became salient during the 2008 campaign (Pew 2008) and persisted throughout his first years in office (Pew 2010, Public Religion Research Institute 2011). Why has this myth been so difficult to correct? While there are likely to be multiple reasons, one contributing factor may be that corrections have usually been phrased as negations (e.g., “Obama is not a Muslim”). The research described above suggests that this approach is unlikely to be effective, especially given that Muslim is seemingly a unipolar concept.<sup>3</sup> The findings of Gawronski et al. suggests that affirming the correct fact (“Obama is a Christian”) might prove more effective.

To test this proposition, we present results from two studies – one conducted in October 2008 (at the height of the presidential campaign) and a second conducted in April 2012. Both studies contrast a *misperception negation* (Obama “[is] not and [has] never been of the Muslim faith”) and a *corrective affirmation* that contains the truth (Obama “[is] a Christian”) with a control condition. Our manipulations feature Obama using each of these constructions at different points in the same television interview. Our goal is to determine whether affirming Obama’s Christian beliefs or denying that he is Muslim is effective in reducing misperceptions and to determine which approach can dispel misperceptions about his religion more effectively.

We thus test the following hypotheses about the effect of correction phrasing on misperceptions that President Obama is a Muslim:

*Hypothesis 1: Corrective affirmation effectiveness (relative to control)*

Corrective affirmations will reduce unipolar misperceptions about politics.

*Hypothesis 2: Misperception negation effectiveness (relative to control)*

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<sup>2</sup> Related studies by Schwarz et al. (2007, Skurnik et al. 2005) document an “illusion of truth” effect in which false claims may be misremembered as true over time due to their familiarity.

<sup>3</sup> While there are several conceivable opposites for Muslim, such as Christian or atheist, none of them is a clear conceptual opposite. Unlike the bipolar adjectives used by Mayo et al. (tidy/messy, rich/poor, warm/cold), group identifiers such as Muslim do not have obvious opposites. To discriminate between unipolar and bipolar concepts, Mayo et al. used a pre-test to determine which descriptors were unipolar and which were bipolar (see their article for details). We did not perform such a test for the Muslim descriptor.

Misperception negations will not reduce unipolar misperceptions about politics and may make them worse.

*Hypothesis 3: Relative effectiveness (affirmations vs. negations)*

Corrective affirmations will be more effective than negations in correcting unipolar misperceptions about politics.

However, we must account for the fact that our research concerns political figures and issues on which participants have pre-existing views. Numerous studies have found that people tend to resist information that contradicts their beliefs (e.g. Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979, Edwards and Smith 1996, Taber and Lodge 2006, Taber, Cann, and Kuscova forthcoming). In some cases, unwelcome information can backfire and *strengthen* their previous beliefs (e.g. Redlawsk 2002, Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Given that the misperception in question focuses on a controversial partisan figure, we expect that participants' partisanship will influence their reactions to our correction manipulations.<sup>4</sup>

*Hypothesis 4: Party affiliation (interactions)*

Party affiliation will moderate the effectiveness of efforts to correct the Obama Muslim misperception. Specifically, Republicans will be less likely to accept corrections of the misperception than other participants.

To test Hypothesis 4, we include an indicator variable for self-identification as a Republican and interact it with the experimental treatments.

*Race of researcher and social desirability*

An extensive literature examines how social desirability concerns can influence the way survey or experimental participants answer questions, particularly when the questions relate to racial issues or the interviewer and respondent are of different races. In particular, most studies have found that white respondents tend to “give more liberal or pro-black opinions when the interviewer is black” (Hatchett and Schuman 1975/1976: 525) – an effect that is frequently interpreted as an attempt to express opinions that conform to the interviewer's perceived expectations or to societal norms. We therefore designed Study 1 to minimize social desirability effects. Among other things, the experiment was conducted on computers, which increase self-reporting of socially sensitive behaviors (e.g. Baker, Bradburn, and Johnson 1995; O'Reilly et al. 1994; Tourangeau and Smith 1996).

Despite these efforts, we discovered an unanticipated race of researcher effect on participants' responses in Study 1. (Since participants were not interviewed directly, we prefer the term “race of researcher” to “race of interviewer.”) Participant responses to the corrections treatments varied substantially depending on whether one or more non-white experimental researchers were present (see the results below for details). We therefore explicitly manipulated the race of the study's principal investigator in Study 2.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a similar approach to Nyhan and Reifler (2010), who find that participants' reactions to their correction manipulations were moderated by ideology.

The finding that the presence of non-white researchers<sup>5</sup> affected the correction of misperceptions is consistent with previous studies of the effects of race on the survey response. Some studies have found that even the “mere presence” of a person of a different race can induce more socially desirable answers (Krysan and Couper 2003). In this case, however, social desirability concerns may not arise unless the sensitive topic is salient. For instance, Terkildsen (1993) finds that racial prejudice had a greater effect on evaluations of a light-skinned black male political candidate than a dark one. She interprets this finding as the result of under-reporting of negative attitudes by participants who became aware of the automatic activation of stereotypes in the case of the dark-skinned candidate but not the light one. In such cases, social desirability concerns may cause respondents to engage in what is known as overcompensation and report *more* socially acceptable beliefs or attitudes than they would have otherwise. For instance, McConahay (1983) and Colleau et al. (1990) found that fictional black individuals were evaluated *more* positively than whites with equivalent qualifications (job candidates and political candidates, respectively). In our research, the correction treatments seems to function like the dark-skinned candidate in Terkildsen’s study - exposure to the videos of Obama saying he is not a Muslim or is a Christian appears to make some participants unwilling to report their beliefs accurately for fear that a non-white researcher would view them as intolerant. They instead frequently overcompensate and report *lower* levels of misperceptions than equivalent controls.<sup>6</sup>

These effects may be especially likely to occur among Republicans, who in this case are the partisan group that is motivated to hold false negative beliefs about President Obama and thus potentially the most sensitive to social desirability concerns. Polls have repeatedly found that Republicans are the partisan group that is most likely to express belief that Obama is a Muslim in surveys (e.g., Pew 2010).

While we did not randomly assign race of researcher in Study 1, we recorded the researchers who were present for each session. We can therefore test for two possible race of researcher effects in both studies:

*Researcher effect 1: Corrections and researcher race (two-way interactions)*

Researcher race will moderate the effects of the experimental manipulations that are intended to correct misperceptions about Obama’s religion.

*Researcher effect 2: Corrections, party, and researcher race (three-way interactions)*

The moderating effect of researcher race on the effects of the experimental treatments will differ between Republicans and non-Republicans.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to being physically present, researchers gave participants instructions on how to complete the experiment and answered participants’ questions while they were taking it. Sometimes the participants’ computer screens were partially visible to researchers due to the constraints of the public locations at which the experiment was conducted (see below for details on the administration of the experiment).

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation is related to, but somewhat different from, the findings of Kosloff et al. (2010) and Pyszczynski et al. (2010), who find that making race salient can increase receptivity to negative information about President Obama.

To test these hypotheses, we estimate the full complement of two- and three-way interactions between researcher race, treatment indicators, and GOP affiliation.

## Study 1

### *Experimental design and sample*

To test the semantic construction hypothesis, we conducted a between-subjects experiment in October 2008 contrasting what we call a misperception negation (“I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith”) against a corrective affirmation (“I am a Christian”) and a control condition. We recruited 79 white participants at a hospital in the southeast.<sup>7</sup> The study was administered on laptops by experimental researcher who staffed a table in shifts. After consenting to participate, participants were provided with instructions and a laptop computer with headphones to take the experiment. The software platform used for the study is MediaLab. Further interaction occurred during the experiment only if a participant approached a researcher to ask a question. Fifteen researchers administered the study in total – twelve are white and three are non-white.

The cover story for the study was that “presidential candidates receive a great deal of scrutiny during a political campaign” and that we were interested in their reactions to “video clips of John McCain and Barack Obama talking about themselves and their lives.” Each participant first viewed one video clip of Senator McCain discussing his religious faith that was intended to help disguise the purpose of the study. This video clip lasted about 40 seconds. In addition, a key McCain statement from the clip was put on the screen to reinforce the video message (“I do believe that there’s a reason for me being on this Earth, and that’s to serve a cause greater than myself”).

After viewing the McCain clip, participants were randomly assigned to watch one of three different clips of Obama – a misperception negation (“I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith”), a corrective affirmation (“I am a Christian”), or an unrelated control video.<sup>8</sup> Our design is novel in using actual video rather than text and in testing a real correction provided by the target of the misperception. Each clip lasted about 10 seconds and was followed by on-screen text displaying a key quote from the clip. To minimize possible confounds, the negation and affirmation clips were taken from the same interview so camera angle, lighting, video quality, and other technical factors are identical.<sup>9</sup>

After the experimental manipulation, we measured perceptions of Obama’s religion with three different variables, which we call *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim* and *Ex-Muslim*. Each question is coded such that higher values indicate stronger beliefs that Obama is or was a Muslim. *ReligionChoice* was created from a question asking participants “Do you happen to know what Barack Obama’s religion is?” Responses were recoded into a three-point scale where 1=Christian, 2=DK/other, and 3=Muslim. *Muslim* and *Ex-Muslim* are seven-point scales asking whether participants agree or disagree that

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<sup>7</sup> We restrict our attention to the white subjects for whom we expect social desirability concerns to be strongest. However, our conclusions are the same when other non-black participants are included.

<sup>8</sup> The experiment also included an alternate correction treatment that did not have significant effects. It is therefore excluded.

<sup>9</sup> The interview originally aired on Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), but the video that participants saw does not indicate its source (there are no logos, voices of reporters asking questions, or other cues).

Obama “is” or “used to be” a Muslim, respectively (where 1=“Strongly disagree” and 7=“Strongly agree”).<sup>10</sup> Appendix A contains descriptions and text of the materials used in Study 1.

The 79 white participants who volunteered to participate in the study were a mix of patients, patient family members, other hospital visitors, and hospital employees. 32% were evangelical/born-again Christians. Politically, 27% self-identified as Republicans, 26% as independents, and 47% as Democrats (partisan groups include leaners). In terms of education, 10% had a high school degree or less, 19% had some college, 35% had a college degree, and 36% held a post-graduate degree.

### Results

Table 1 reports the results of two sets of OLS models of our dependent variables: *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim*, and *Ex-Muslim*. For each outcome variable, we estimate one model interacting the two experimental treatments and GOP self-identification with an indicator for the presence of one or more nonwhite researchers and a second that adds the full set of two- and three-way interactions between treatments, GOP, and researcher race. All models also control for political knowledge (which was measured as the proportion of correct answers on a standard six-item scale).

[Table 1]

The results suggest that the presence of a non-white researcher substantially changed reactions to the correction treatments. The two-way interactions between the non-white researcher indicator and the correction are negative and mostly statistically significant, indicating that respondents reported *lower* misperceptions in response to the corrections when one or more non-white researchers were present. By contrast, the corrective affirmation term is positive and statistically significant for *Muslim* and *Ex-Muslim*, suggesting that it *increased* misperceptions when only white researchers were present. The positive, statistically significant coefficient for the effect of the misperception negation on *ReligionChoice* ( $p < .05$ ) suggests that it also backfired among non-Republicans if non-white researchers were not present.

Do these effects differ by partisan affiliation? The small sample size necessitates caution in interpreting the three-way interaction models (we have only 79 white respondents, including 21 Republicans). However, we do find substantively large negative three-way interactions between non-white researcher, the corrective affirmation treatment, and GOP affiliation for both *ReligionChoice* and *Muslim* (the former is statistically significant;  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that the decline in reported misperceptions among respondents exposed to a correction when a non-white researcher was present was particularly pronounced among Republicans.

To clarify these findings, Table 2 summarizes estimated treatment effects by race of researcher using the estimates from the three-way interaction models in Table 1.

[Table 2]

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<sup>10</sup> A small number of missing responses were recoded to the midpoint of each scale.

These effects are also plotted in Figure 1, which plots the predicted values from the three-way interaction OLS models in Table 1 for a respondent with median political knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Asterisks in the figure indicate statistically significant treatment effects relative to the corresponding control condition.

[Figure 1]

When only white researchers were present, the treatments were rarely effective. Only one estimated treatment effect in this group is negative and statistically significant (the negation treatment for Republicans on *Ex-Muslim* [ $p < .10$ ]). By contrast, we observe several backfire effects - the positive coefficients for non-Republicans for negation on *ReligionChoice* and for affirmation on *Muslim* and *Ex-Muslim* ( $p < .10$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively) indicate that these treatments appear to have *increased* misperceptions among those groups. By contrast, among those who participated in the experiment when only non-white researchers were present, the estimated treatment effects were consistently negative, though they only reach statistical significance relative to controls for Republicans on *Religion Choice* ( $p < .01$  for both the negation and affirmation treatments).

Finally, when we directly compare the estimated treatment effects, we find that negation was significantly less effective (i.e., more misperception-enhancing) for *ReligionChoice* among non-Republicans with only white researchers present ( $p < .10$ ) and that negation was significantly more effective for *Ex-Muslim* among Republicans with only white researchers present ( $p < .05$ ); all other differences were not statistically significant. We thus find little support for H3.

As described above, our interpretation is that social desirability concerns changed how respondents reacted to the corrective treatments. This finding is consistent with an extensive literature showing how social desirability concerns can influence survey responses, particularly on racial issues. We attempted to avoid this confound by using computers, which can increase reporting of sensitive behaviors (e.g., Baker, Bradburn, and Johnson 1995), but the mere presence of a non-white researcher may have influenced respondents anyway (Summers and Hammonds 1966).

One potential concern with this interpretation is that people in the hospital where we recruited participants may have differed in their willingness to participate depending on the race of the researchers administering the study at that time. However, auxiliary analysis shows that participants did not appear to differ in their observable characteristics depending on whether a nonwhite researcher was present by levels of GOP affiliation, political knowledge, or education (results available upon request). While we cannot rule out the possibility that participants differed in their unobservable characteristics, these results suggest that researcher race influenced *how* participants reacted to the stimuli rather than *who* chose to participate in the study. To help clarify our results, we performed a second study where we did experimentally manipulate researcher race.

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<sup>11</sup> Given the constraints on our sample size imposed by the need to exclude non-white respondents, it is not possible to run ordered probit models (some observations are completely determined).

## Study 2

### *Experimental design and sample*

Though our initial results were intriguing, we did not experimentally manipulate researcher race. As a result, our conclusions were somewhat tentative. In Study 2, we manipulate the race of the experimental researcher directly, allowing us to formally test the observational effects found in Study 1. Specifically, we employ a 2x3 factorial design that manipulates the race of researcher (either white or black) as well as the correction treatments from Study 1 – either a misperception negation (“I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith”), corrective affirmation (“I am a Christian”), or a control condition.

Study 2 was administered in the Qualtrics online survey environment using subjects recruited from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk online labor market.<sup>12</sup> This environment allows us to fully manipulate researcher race while controlling other extraneous influences. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two different fictional Principal Investigator conditions that varied the race of the supposed PI. In the white researcher condition, the principal investigator was said to be Brad Kelly, Ph.D and was depicted as a white man with a shaved head and facial hair using an image purchased from a stock photo website. In the black researcher condition, the principal investigator was said to be Rasheed Jackson, Ph.D. and the survey included a closely matched stock photo of an African American man with a shaved head and facial hair. (See Appendix B for the photos and other Study 2 materials.) The names of the fictional PIs were selected from a list of stereotypically white and black first and last names used in a labor market discrimination field experiment (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Subjects saw the name and picture of the fictional PI at the top of every page in the online survey to ensure that their identity was salient in an online survey environment. We utilize the same dependent variables as in the previous study, measuring perceptions of Obama’s religion with *ReligionChoice* (1-3), *Muslim* (1-7), and *Ex-Muslim* (1-7). Each question is coded such that higher values indicate stronger beliefs that Obama is or was a Muslim.

The design of Study 2 allows us to assess how the effectiveness of corrective information varies depending on its semantic construction (i.e., affirmation or negation) and researcher race. In particular, we test whether attributing the study to a nonwhite researchers make participants more likely to report lower levels of misperceptions in response to corrective information about Obama. As in Study 1, we also test whether this response was concentrated among Republicans.

Prior to collecting our data, we established several exclusion conditions. First, we drop all participants who reported being under 18. Second, as in Study 1, we restrict our analyses to white non-Hispanics in order to minimize heterogeneity in how participants respond to researcher race. (Including non-white respondents would entail adding interaction terms.) Third, because our treatments are administered as online video clips, we only consider respondents who could correctly answer three relatively easy questions about a short non-political video administered before the experimental manipulation. Finally, we drop respondents who do not pass an attention filter (answering at least one of

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<sup>12</sup> Recent studies by economists (Horton, Rand, and Zeckhauser N.d.), psychologists (Buhrmester et al. 2011), and political scientists (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz N.d.) have validated Mechanical Turk as a useful source of experimental participants.

two questions correctly about an email they read that was unrelated to the treatments) – a screening mechanism intended to detect and remove satisficing respondents who do not read study materials carefully (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009).

The resulting respondent population of non-Hispanic whites was relatively well-educated. Only 9% had a high school degree or less, 41% had some college, 31% had a college degree, and 19% had a post-graduate degree. Democrats were again the best represented group (55% including leaners), followed by Republicans (21%) and pure independents (15%). A plurality of 42% self-identified as Christians.

### *Results*

Given that Study 2 focuses on how the race of researcher affects receptivity to corrections, the first question we must answer is whether or not our race of researcher manipulations worked as intended. We thus measured perceptions of the researcher’s racial identity (see Appendix B for question wording). In the white researcher condition, 99% of subjects correctly identified Brad Kelly as white. Though correct identification was not as high in the non-white researcher condition, 67% identified Rasheed Jackson as black and 14% identified him as multiracial (respondents could select more than one category).<sup>13</sup> In total, 71% of respondents identified Jackson as a member of some other racial category than white – a sufficiently high proportion to allow us to examine differences in responses to the treatments by assigned researcher race.<sup>14</sup>

As in Study 1, we present two OLS models for each dependent variable. The first interacts the correction treatments and an indicator for GOP affiliation with an indicator for the nonwhite researcher condition, while the second includes all two- and three-way interactions between the corrections, GOP affiliation, and researcher race. We also control for political knowledge in all models (which was measured as the proportion of correct answers on a standard five-item scale).

The results of these models are presented in Table 3.

[Table 3]

As in Study 1, we again observe evidence of differing responses depending on the involvement of a non-white researcher in the study. Despite the treatment being much weaker (a name and image on a website rather than a nonwhite researcher being physically present), we again find negative and statistically significant interaction effects concentrated among Republicans. In this case, the interactions between non-white, affirmation, and GOP are negative and statistically significant for both *ReligionChoice* and *Muslim* ( $p < .01$  in both cases), suggesting that Republicans are reporting much lower levels of misperceptions in response to that correction treatment when the study is attributed to a non-white researcher. We also observe weaker evidence of a similar effect for negation on *ReligionChoice* ( $p < .10$ ). Again, both findings are consistent with Study 1

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<sup>13</sup> One other respondent identified him as Asian, which was presumably an error.

<sup>14</sup> Our analyses are therefore intent-to-treat analyses estimating the effect of random assignment to a non-white researcher. It would also be possible to analyze the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) using random assignment to the non-white researcher as an instrument for the endogenous variable of perceiving the researcher to be non-white.

and our interpretation that the involvement of a nonwhite researcher is creating social desirability concerns in response to the corrective treatments.

As with Study 1, we also summarize treatment effects by race of researcher. These results are presented in Table 4.

[Table 4]

Finally, Figure 2 displays predicted values for the OLS models in Table 3 for a respondent with median political knowledge. Asterisks indicate statistically significant treatment effects.

[Figure 2]

Encouragingly, we do not find any instances where the treatments are estimated to actually make misperceptions worse (which would be indicated by a significant and positive estimated treatment effect). Indeed, we observe substantial evidence of the corrections reducing misperceptions among non-Republicans when the study is attributed to a white researcher. However, only one estimated treatment effect is negative and statistically significant in the white researcher condition (negation for *Ex-Muslim* [ $p < .05$ ]). By contrast, estimated treatment effects among Republicans are substantively larger and statistically significant for the negation treatment on *Ex-Muslim* ( $p < .01$ ) and for the affirmation treatment on *ReligionChoice* and *Muslim* ( $p < .01$  and  $p < .10$ , respectively). These findings are consistent with the negative and statistically significant three-way interactions for the corresponding models in Table 3.

By contrast, we again find little support for H3. Among participants in the white researcher condition, we can reject the null of no difference in treatment effects between negation and affirmation in only two cases – negation was more likely to reduce misperceptions among Republicans on *Muslim* ( $p < .01$ ) and non-Republicans on *Ex-Muslim* ( $p < .10$ ). The results for the non-white researcher condition are difficult to interpret due to the apparent influence of social desirability concerns. However, we find that affirmation was more effective for non-Republicans and Republicans on *ReligionChoice* ( $p < .10$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively) and negation was more effective for non-Republicans on *Ex-Muslim* ( $p < .05$ ) when the study was attributed to a nonwhite researcher.

We interpret these results as indicating that the attribution of the study to a nonwhite researcher activated social desirability concerns among respondents exposed to the correction. As in Study 1, these effects were concentrated among Republicans. Interestingly, this apparent social desirability effect was most pronounced for the corrective affirmation treatment – differences among Republicans who received the negation treatment are more muted between the white and nonwhite researcher conditions. These findings are consistent both with previous research on how social desirability concerns can affect how people respond to survey questions and how race can play a role in how people evaluate President Obama.

## Conclusion

This study applies psychological research on the ineffectiveness of negations to the misperception that Barack Obama is a Muslim. We test two approaches to correcting the misperception – a misperception negation (“I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith”) and a corrective affirmation (“I am a Christian”). Our experiments have several innovative features, including a focus on the effectiveness of a candidate’s attempts to correct a misperception (rather than a neutral source), the use of video-based corrections as experimental manipulations, and the experimental manipulation of researcher race. Across two studies, we find that corrections were most effective when a non-white researcher was visibly involved in the study, suggesting a social desirability effect. These results were particularly pronounced among Republicans. By contrast, we found little consistent evidence that affirmations were more effective than negations.

Even though we experimentally manipulated researcher race in Study 2, there are several limitations to our results that future research should address. For instance, one might wish to evaluate the relative effectiveness of written corrective treatments relative to video clips or to test the effectiveness of different sources of corrective information. Our use of Obama as the source of the correction allowed us to test video clips and to examine the question of whether politicians can successfully reduce misperceptions about themselves, but it constrains our ability to test the persuasiveness of other sources of information. Since perceptions of Obama’s credibility likely vary widely along partisan lines, other sources may be more effective at reducing misperceptions overall or with important subgroups.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the realistic nature of our experiment makes an important contribution to the study of misperceptions and attempts to correct them. In particular, we demonstrate the key role played by social desirability concerns in reporting one’s belief in politically sensitive misperceptions – a finding that may raise questions about other studies of public opinion about Barack Obama’s religion. In the absence of such concerns, our results highlight the difficulty of correcting misperceptions and the potential for corrections to fail or backfire.

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, John McCain’s response in 2008 to the woman who said she did not trust Obama because “he’s an Arab” might be more effective in correcting misperceptions among Republicans. That being said, politicians should not expect their opponents to correct anything but the most egregious falsehoods)

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## Appendix A: Study 1 materials

### Obama manipulations

*Participants are randomly assigned one of the following four video clips. Each is 10-11 seconds long and contains a close-up shot of Obama talking. The misperception negation and corrective affirmation clips that follow are taken from the same interview and thus have identical camera shots and backdrops.*

Prompt: "You will now watch another video. Please pay close attention, as you did with the last video."

1. Control video ("60 Minutes," Feb. 10, 2008)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I had to think about this long and hard at the beginning of this process and say are you deluding yourself or do you really think that you can do all those things."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I had to think about this long and hard at the beginning of this process."

2. Misperception negation correction video (Christian Broadcasting Network, Jan. 22, 2007)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I'm unequivocal about this – I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith. I think that those who are of the Muslim faith are deserving of respect and dignity."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I'm unequivocal about this – I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith."

3. Corrective affirmation correction video (Christian Broadcasting Network, Jan. 22, 2007)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I want to make sure that your viewers understand that I am a Christian who has belonged to the same church for almost twenty years now."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I am a Christian who has belonged to the same church for almost twenty years now."

### Explicit dependent variables

“Do you happen to know what Barack Obama's religion is?” (*ReligionChoice*)

- Jewish (2)
- Buddhist (2)
- Christian (1)
- Muslim (3)
- Hindu (2)
- Atheist (2)
- Agnostic (2)
- Something else (2)
- Don't know (2)

“Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:”

“Barack Obama is a Muslim.” (*Muslim*)

- Strongly agree (7)
- Somewhat agree (6)
- Slightly agree (5)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Slightly disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Strongly disagree (1)
- Don't know (4)


“Barack Obama used to be a Muslim.” (*Ex-Muslim*)

- Strongly agree (7)
- Somewhat agree (6)
- Slightly agree (5)
- Neither agree nor disagree (4)
- Slightly disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Strongly disagree (1)
- Don't know (4)


## Appendix B: Study 2 materials

Header on all pages of the study:

**Political Attitudes Study  
Mechanical Turk  
Rasheed Jackson, Ph.D.  
April 2012**



**Political Attitudes Study  
Mechanical Turk  
Brad Kelly, Ph.D.  
April 2012**



### Consent document:

Study title: Political Attitudes Survey  
Principal Investigator: [Rasheed Jackson, Ph.D./Brad Kelly, PhD]

### Attention filter

Please carefully read the following message:

Subject: Tomorrow's meeting  
From: "Ginger Holmes" <gholmes@bru.edu>  
Date: Wed, May 13, 2009 8:31 am  
To: "Pat Jones" <patjones@bru.edu>  
Priority: Normal

Pat,  
Since Christi is out of town, the staff council meeting will be held via telephone tomorrow. We will discuss the proposed reorganization of the Human Resources department to better serve the faculty and staff at BRU. During this conference call, we

will also discuss the decisions reached at the 11am meeting of the University Benefits department. It is critical that all attendees of the University Benefits department, especially those who attended the morning meeting, also attend this conference call, to ensure that necessary recommendations of this committee are incorporated into our procedural changes. Details for the conference call are listed below. Also, please confirm your participation via email to me.

Date: Thursday, May 14  
Time: 2:00 PM (EST)  
Number: 1-800-555-1200  
8533123 (passcode)

Thanks,  
Ginger Holmes  
Administrative Coordinator  
Recruiting and Staffing  
Baton Rouge University  
www.bru.edu

Who was the e-mail message sent to?

- Edward Downs
- Pat Jones
- Ginger Holmes
- Sadie Stinfeld
- Don't know

What department is holding the meeting prior to the conference call?

- Temporary Employment
- Recruiting and Staffing
- Equal Opportunity Employment
- Learning and Professional Development
- Don't know

### **Obama manipulations**

*Participants are randomly assigned one of the following four video clips. Each is 10-11 seconds long and contains a close-up shot of Obama talking. The misperception negation and corrective affirmation clips that follow are taken from the same interview and thus have identical camera shots and backdrops.*

Prompt: "You will now watch another video. Please pay close attention, as you did with the last video."

1. Control video ("60 Minutes," Feb. 10, 2008)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I had to think about this long and hard at the beginning of this process and say are you deluding yourself or do you really think that you can do all those things."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I had to think about this long and hard at the beginning of this process."

2. Misperception negation correction video (Christian Broadcasting Network, Jan. 22, 2007)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I'm unequivocal about this – I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith. I think that those who are of the Muslim faith are deserving of respect and dignity."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I'm unequivocal about this – I am not and never have been of the Muslim faith."

3. Corrective affirmation correction video (Christian Broadcasting Network, Jan. 22, 2007)

Transcript (not visible during experiment)

OBAMA: "I want to make sure that your viewers understand that I am a Christian who has belonged to the same church for almost twenty years now."

Excerpt displayed on screen at end of video: "I am a Christian who has belonged to the same church for almost twenty years now."

### **Manipulation checks**

Before this survey is complete, we'd like to ask you some questions about the study.

We would first like to ask you some questions about [Rasheed Jackson/Brad Kelly], the author of this study.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Please check one or more categories below to indicate what race(s) you consider [Rasheed Jackson/Brad Kelly], the researcher conducting this study, to be. (A picture is included above.)

- Asian/Pacific Islander
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native

- Multi-racial
- Other

### **Debriefing**

Thank you for taking part in this research on political information processing. This study examined the effects of different linguistic structures on the effectiveness of corrections of misperceptions – for instance, “John is not a criminal” vs. “John is a law-abiding citizen.” We also examined the effects of researcher race to determine whether social desirability concerns change how people react to corrections of misperceptions about sensitive topics. To do so, it was necessary for the experimenters to deceive you about the identity of the researcher conducting the study. Rasheed Jackson is not a real person. The study was conducted by Brendan Nyhan, a political scientist at Dartmouth College, and Jason Reifler, a political scientist at Georgia State University. Your participation was necessary to help learn whether survey respondents are sensitive to a researcher’s racial or ethnic background in responding to questions about their factual beliefs on sensitive topics. Thank you for your participation in this research.

**IMPORTANT:** Please note that it is vital for the integrity of this research that the details of this study, include the identity of the investigators, NOT be shared with other experimental participants. If the integrity of the study is violated, we will have to withdraw the task from Mechanical Turk, which will both undermine our research and prevent other Turkers from having the opportunity to participate in this study. We appreciate your cooperation and understanding.

Please answer this question honestly. Did you learn about the identity of the experimenters in this study in advance (for example, on Turker forums)? It is vital to the integrity of the study that you disclose that information here. You will still be paid if you answer honestly.

- Yes, I knew the identity of the experimenters in this study in advance
- No, I had no advance knowledge of the experimenters' identity

**Table 1: Interaction models of Obama Muslim misperceptions (Study 1)**

	<i>ReligionChoice</i>		<i>Muslim</i>		<i>Ex-Muslim</i>	
Misperception negation	0.28	0.44**	0.98	0.99	0.26	1.19
	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.64)	(0.75)	(0.70)	(0.79)
Corrective affirmation	0.08	-0.01	1.62**	1.47*	2.06***	2.67***
	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.66)	(0.80)	(0.71)	(0.84)
Political knowledge	-0.48**	-0.47**	-1.60**	-1.62**	-1.70**	-1.62**
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.68)	(0.72)	(0.74)	(0.76)
GOP	-0.00	0.08	0.67	0.52	0.40	2.12**
	(0.17)	(0.25)	(0.61)	(0.95)	(0.66)	(1.00)
Non-white researcher	0.39*	0.25	0.49	0.41	0.45	0.79
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.72)	(0.81)	(0.78)	(0.85)
Non-white x negation	-0.75***	-0.66**	-1.96**	-2.01*	-1.53	-2.37*
	(0.28)	(0.31)	(0.98)	(1.17)	(1.07)	(1.23)
Non-white x affirmation	-0.79**	-0.41	-3.12***	-2.72**	-3.34***	-3.70***
	(0.31)	(0.35)	(1.09)	(1.31)	(1.19)	(1.37)
Non-white x GOP	0.61**	1.14***	0.49	0.78	1.53	0.14
	(0.27)	(0.42)	(0.93)	(1.58)	(1.02)	(1.65)
Negation x GOP		-0.70*		-0.03		-3.83**
		(0.41)		(1.55)		(1.62)
Affirmation x GOP		0.29		0.51		-2.29
		(0.39)		(1.47)		(1.54)
Non-white x negation x GOP		-0.17		0.17		3.53
		(0.61)		(2.29)		(2.40)
Non-white x affirmation x GOP		-1.38**		-1.38		1.36
		(0.65)		(2.46)		(2.57)
Constant	1.46***	1.43***	2.71***	2.76***	3.24***	2.76***
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.60)	(0.66)	(0.65)	(0.69)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.28	0.38	0.29	0.29	0.31	0.37
N	78	78	78	78	78	78

\*p < .10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < .01 (two-sided). Higher values on *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim*, and *Ex-Muslim* represent greater levels of belief that Obama is or was a Muslim.

**Table 2: Treatment effects of correction manipulations (Study 1)**

	<i>ReligionChoice</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Ex-Muslim</i>
<i>White researcher</i>			
Non-GOP: Negation	0.44 (0.20)**	0.98 (0.75)	1.18 (0.79)
Non-GOP: Affirmation	-0.01 (0.21)	1.47 (0.80)*	2.67 (0.84)***
GOP: Negation	-0.25 (0.36)	0.95 (1.35)	-2.65 (1.41)*
GOP: Affirmation	0.28 (0.33)	1.98 (1.24)	0.38 (1.30)
<i>Non-white researcher</i>			
Non-GOP: Negation	-0.22 (0.24)	-1.03 (0.90)	-1.18 (0.95)
Non-GOP: Affirmation	-0.41 (0.28)	-1.25 (1.05)	-1.03 (1.10)
GOP: Negation	-1.09 (0.37)***	-0.90 (1.41)	-1.48 (1.48)
GOP: Affirmation	-1.50 (0.45)***	-2.12 (1.70)	-1.96 (1.78)

\*p < .10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < .01 (two-sided)

Higher values on *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim*, and *Ex-Muslim* represent greater levels of belief that Obama is or was a Muslim. Asterisks represent statistically significant treatment effects relative to the corresponding control condition (e.g., GOP, nonwhite researcher).

**Table 3: Interaction models of Obama Muslim misperceptions (Study 2)**

	<i>ReligionChoice</i>		<i>Muslim</i>		<i>Ex-Muslim</i>	
Misperception negation	-0.13	-0.18	-0.73**	-0.63*	-0.80**	-0.64*
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.29)	(0.35)	(0.32)	(0.37)
Corrective affirmation	-0.21**	-0.33***	-0.07	-0.49	-0.06	0.06
	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.29)	(0.35)	(0.31)	(0.37)
Political knowledge	-0.34***	-0.36***	-1.36***	-1.43***	-1.36***	-1.38***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.38)	(0.38)
GOP	0.12	-0.09	1.20***	0.82*	1.45***	1.80***
	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.26)	(0.47)	(0.27)	(0.51)
Non-white researcher	-0.02	-0.17	0.08	-0.13	0.03	-0.09
	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.32)	(0.35)	(0.34)	(0.38)
Non-white x negation	0.06	0.21	0.27	0.32	-0.06	0.10
	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.42)	(0.50)	(0.45)	(0.54)
Non-white x affirmation	-0.11	0.16	-0.49	0.11	0.14	0.30
	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.42)	(0.49)	(0.45)	(0.53)
Non-white x GOP	0.11	0.61***	-0.42	0.31	-0.59	-0.29
	(0.12)	(0.22)	(0.37)	(0.66)	(0.40)	(0.71)
Negation x GOP		0.20		-0.22		-0.56
		(0.21)		(0.64)		(0.69)
Affirmation x GOP		0.38*		1.25**		-0.43
		(0.20)		(0.63)		(0.68)
Non-white x negation x GOP		-0.50*		-0.23		-0.48
		(0.30)		(0.91)		(0.98)
Non-white x affirmation x GOP		-0.95***		-1.85**		-0.50
		(0.29)		(0.91)		(0.98)
Constant	1.51***	1.58***	2.65***	2.79***	3.08***	3.00***
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.31)	(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.35)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.11	0.15	0.16	0.18	0.18	0.19
N	303	303	306	306	308	308

\*p < .10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < .01 (two-sided). Higher values on *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim*, and *Ex-Muslim* represent greater levels of belief that Obama is or was a Muslim.

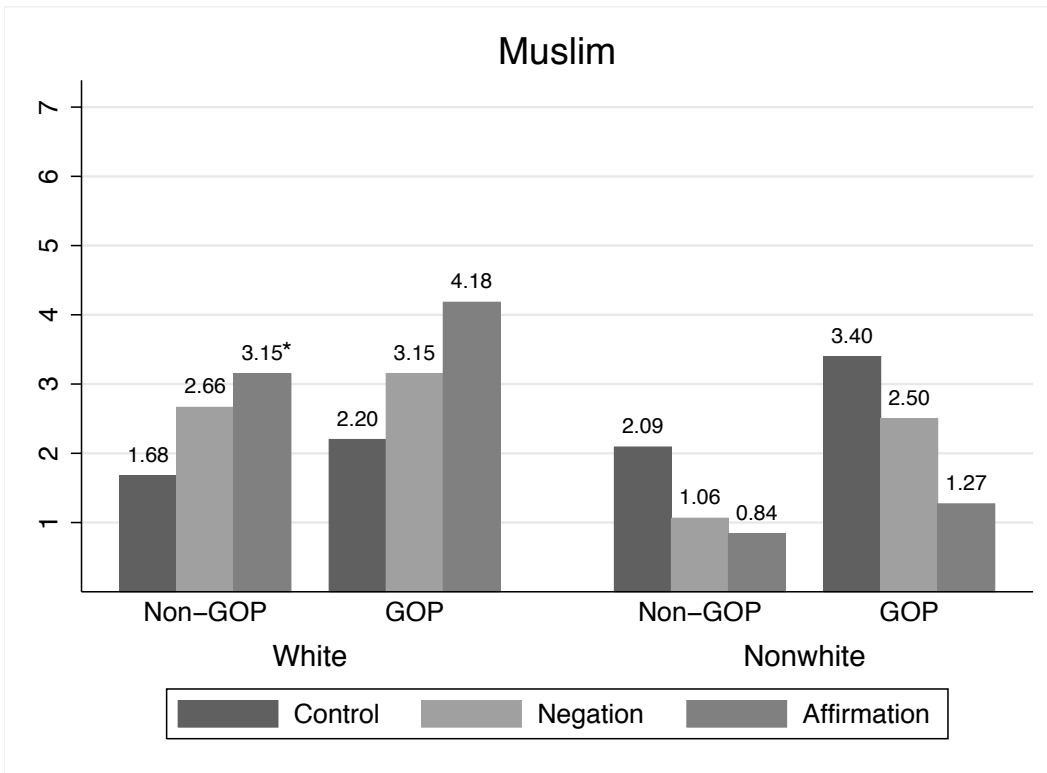
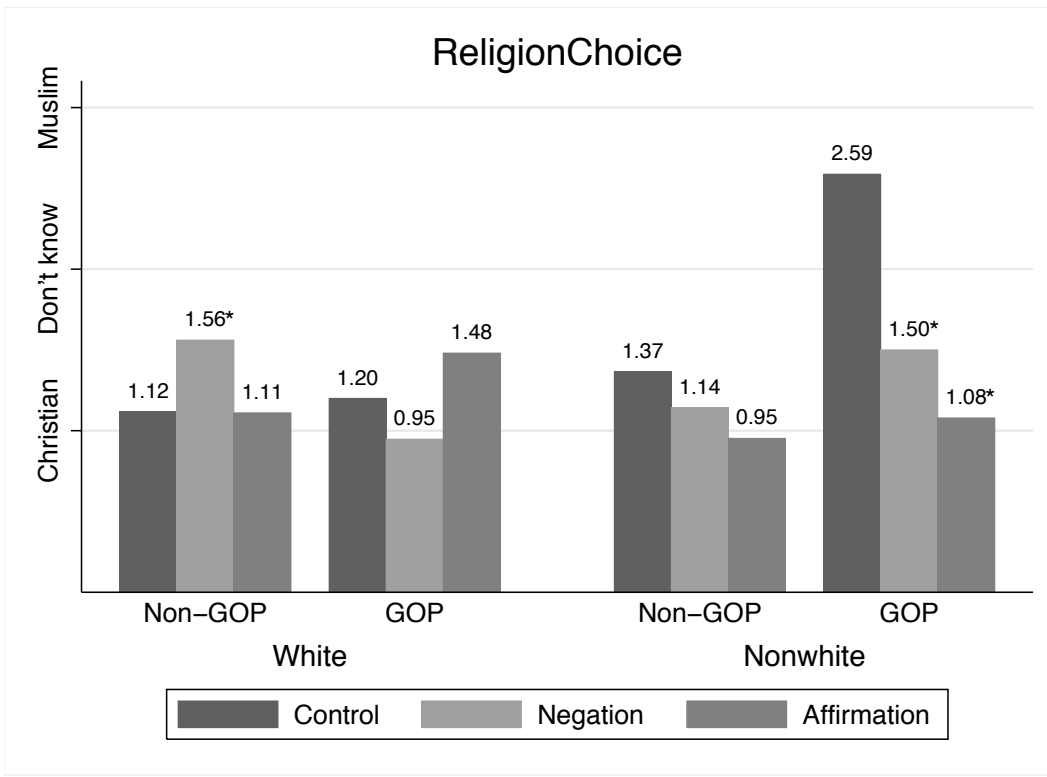
**Table 4: Treatment effects of correction manipulations (Study 1)**

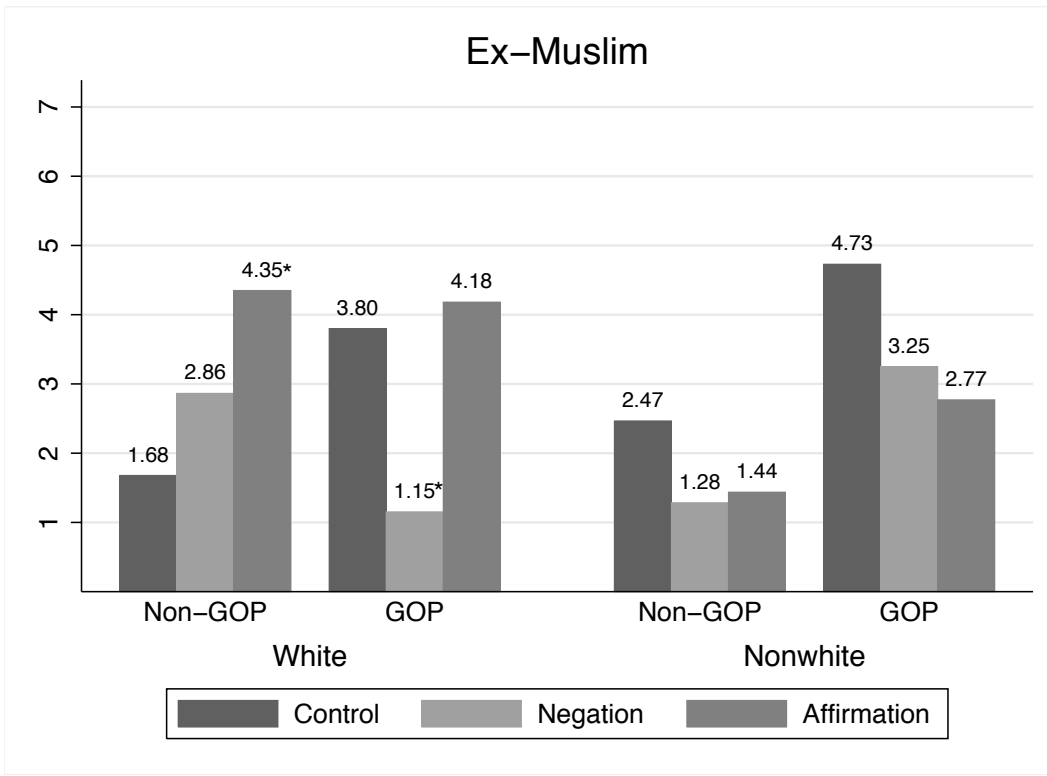
	<i>ReligionChoice</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Ex-Muslim</i>
<i>White researcher</i>			
Non-GOP: Negation	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.63 (0.35)*	-0.64 (0.37)*
Non-GOP: Affirmation	-0.32 (0.11)***	-0.49 (0.35)	0.06 (0.37)
GOP: Negation	0.02 (0.18)	-0.86 (0.54)	-1.20 (0.58)**
GOP: Affirmation	0.05 (0.17)	0.75 (0.52)	-0.38 (0.56)
<i>Non-white researcher</i>			
Non-GOP: Negation	0.03 (0.12)	-0.32 (0.35)	-0.55 (0.38)
Non-GOP: Affirmation	-0.16 (0.11)	-0.38 (0.35)	0.36 (0.38)
GOP: Negation	-0.27 (0.18)	-0.77 (0.54)	-1.58 (0.59)***
GOP: Affirmation	-0.73 (0.18)***	-0.99 (0.55)*	-0.58 (0.60)

\*p < .10, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < .01 (two-sided)

Higher values on *ReligionChoice*, *Muslim*, and *Ex-Muslim* represent greater levels of belief that Obama is or was a Muslim. Asterisks represent statistically significant treatment effects relative to the corresponding control condition (e.g., GOP, nonwhite researcher).

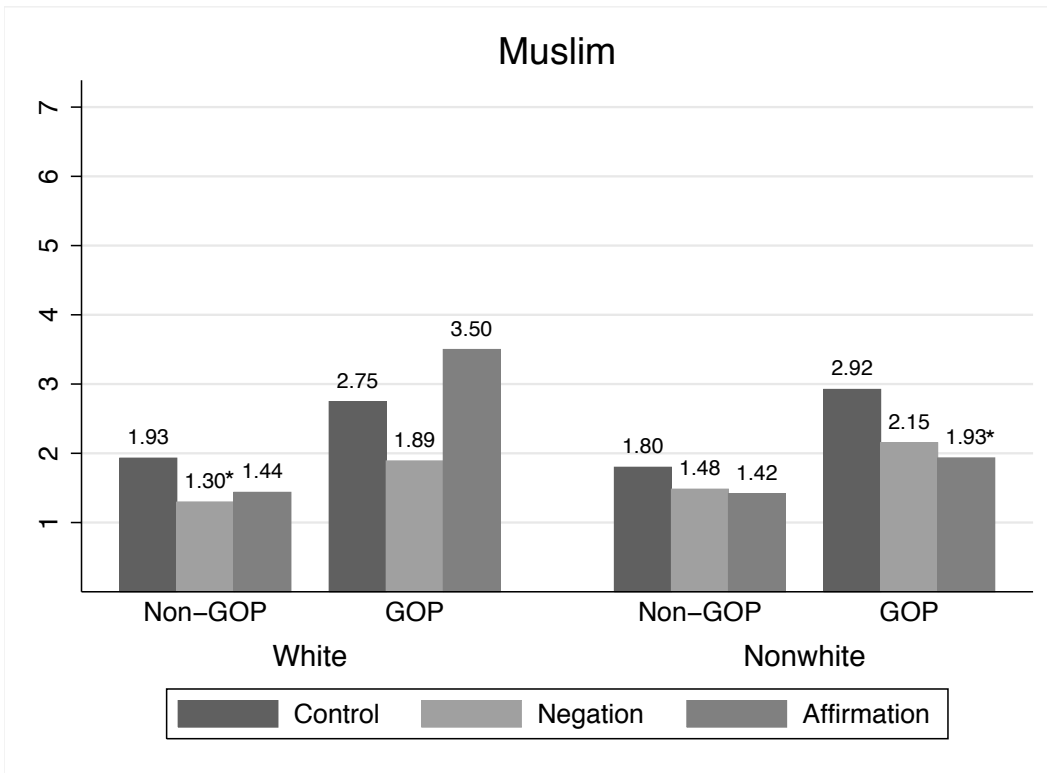
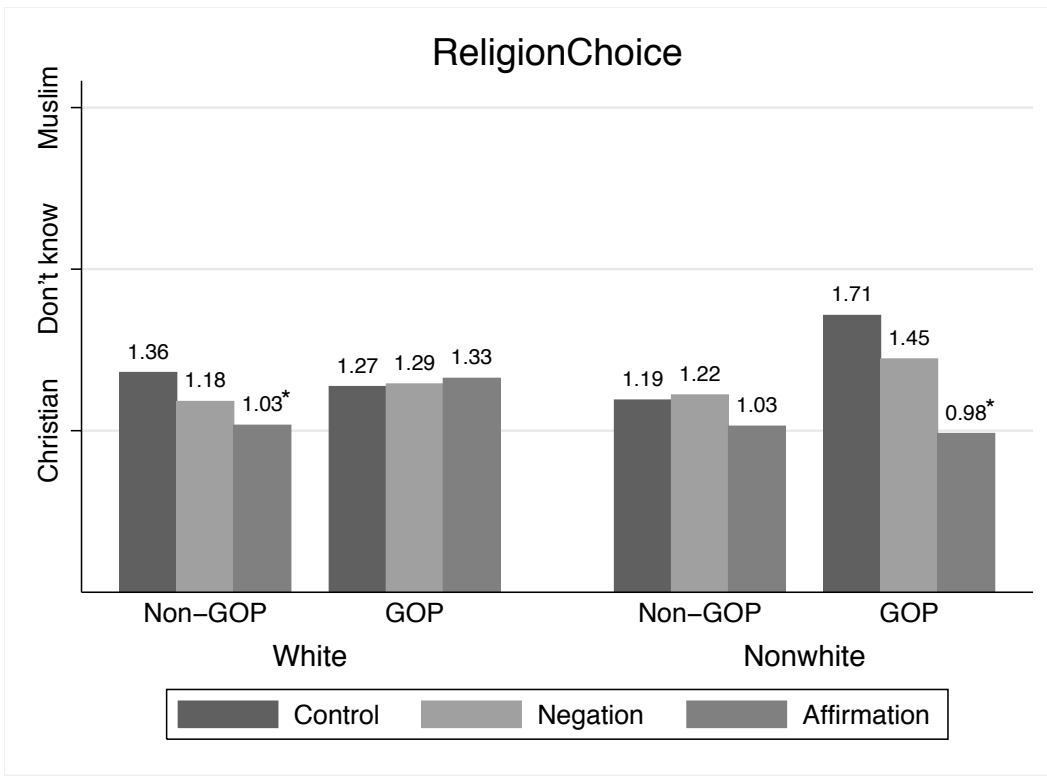
**Figure 1: Predicted effects of correction treatments (Study 1)**

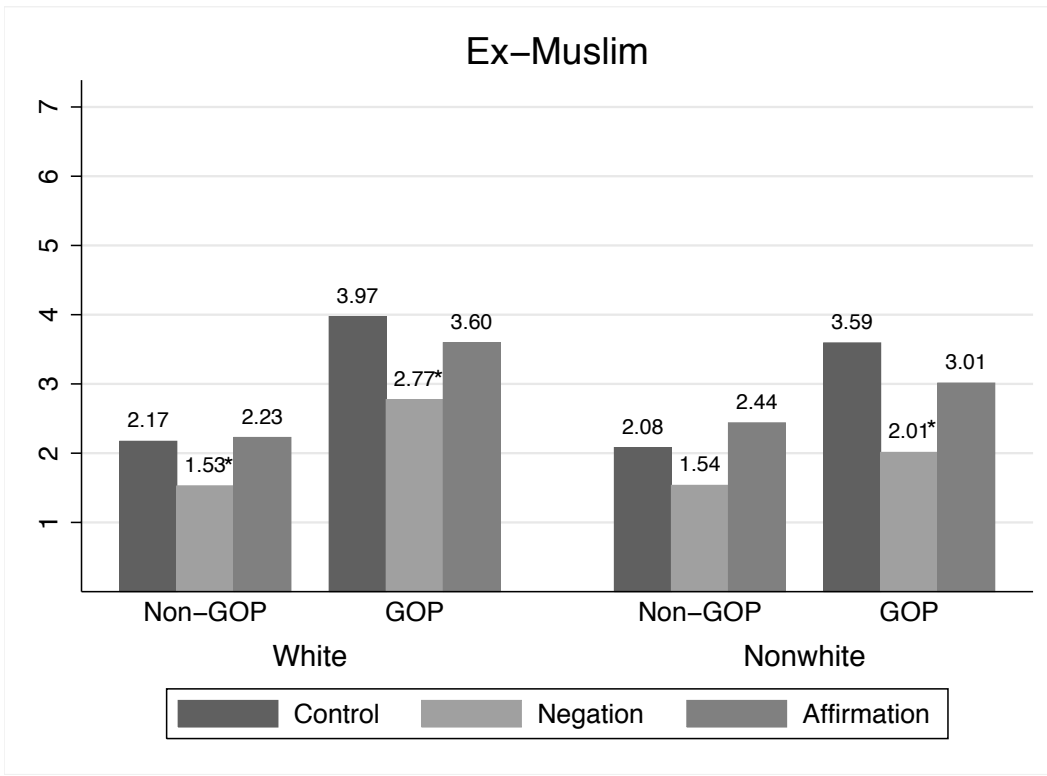




Predicted effects calculated from regressions in Table 1 for a non-GOP respondent with median levels of political knowledge. Asterisks represent statistically significant treatment effects ( $p < .10$ ) relative to the relevant control condition (e.g., GOP, nonwhite researcher).

**Figure 2: Predicted effects of correction treatments (Study 2)**





Predicted effects calculated from regressions in Table 2 for a non-GOP respondent with median levels of political knowledge. Asterisks represent statistically significant treatment effects ( $p < .10$ ) relative to the relevant control condition (e.g., GOP, nonwhite researcher).