

4-2022

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### **Recommended Citation**

Chirco, P., & Buchanan, T. M. (2022). Dark faces in white spaces: The effects of skin tone, race, ethnicity, and intergroup preferences on interpersonal judgments and voting behavior. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 22(1), 427-447. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12304>

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# Dark faces in white spaces: The effects of skin tone, race, ethnicity, and intergroup preferences on interpersonal judgments and voting behavior

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[Correction added on 11th April 2022, after first online publication: CSAL funding statement has been added.]

## Abstract

Across three experimental studies, we explored how a political candidate's intersections of skin tone, race, and ethnicity affect voting preferences and interpersonal judgments (e.g., warmth, trustworthiness, expertise). Study 1 assessed whether White participants would favor a light-skinned (vs. dark-skinned) African American candidate. Study 2 investigated participant (White vs. non-White) voting preferences based on the interaction between candidate race/ethnicity and relative skin tone (lighter vs. darker). In Study 3, we examined the influence of candidate race/ethnicity on voters' preferences as well as the accuracy and impact of memory for candidate skin tone. Supporting our hypotheses, White participants generally held more negative attitudes (e.g., expressed less warmth, perceived candidates as less trustworthy) and were less likely to vote for underrepresented candidates with darker skin tones than non-White participants were. Additionally, voters remembered politicians as having a lighter skin tone, and the extent of such bias predicted warmth, perceived trustworthiness, and expertise of the candidate. While candidate race/ethnicity on its own did not affect voting preferences and attitudes, it significantly influenced voters when race/ethnicity was associated with certain skin tones

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(i.e., brown skin tone). Theoretical, practical, and political implications for judgments influenced by skin tone and race/ethnicity of candidates are discussed.

**KEYWORDS**

diversity, political candidates, skin tone bias

## INTRODUCTION

During his 2020 reelection campaign to the US Senate against the current chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Jamie Harrison, Sen. Lindsey Graham's campaign included a digitally altered photograph of Harrison that portrayed him with a skin tone notably darker than that of his actual complexion (LeBlanc, 2020). The same skin-tone-darkening tactic was also used by then appointed Republican Georgia Senator Kelly Loeffler during her campaign to the Senate against Rev. Raphael Warnock in 2020 (Sollenberger, 2021). These tactics are often effective and work especially well on White voters. For example, Caruso et al. (2009) found that White voters who believed that former President Barak Obama had a darker complexion than he actually did were less likely to vote for him. In addition to the potential impact on voting behavior, research suggests that an individual's skin color and tone also influence the perception of their citizenship status (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021; Zou & Cheryan, 2017). When then Senator Obama ran for office in 2008, birtherism conspiracy theories were circulated in order to call into question his eligibility for the presidency of the USA. (Server, 2020). Similar conspiracies were spread in 2020 by the Trump Administration regarding Vice President Kamala Harris when she was running for office (Wright, 2020).

Nevertheless, Obama became the first African American President in the history of the USA and Harris was elected Vice President. At the same time, conservatives have been focused on appealing more and more to the White constituency (Gramlich, 2020). Therefore, while White voters still make up the largest proportion of the American electorate, the rapid growth of the non-White population and the expected racial shift in the USA (Krogstad, 2019) make it essential for scholars to understand the factors that impact the appeal of underrepresented political candidates to an increasingly diverse electorate, for which the intersections between skin tone, and race/ethnicity may be differently relevant.

Our social identities (e.g., race, gender, roles) not only determine how we see ourselves, but also influence how we make judgments and view those who are categorized as in-/out-group members (Hogg & Terry, 2000). According to social identity theory (SIT), leaders are thought of as representing a group's properties (Hogg, 2001) because they are part of a social system that shares group membership and characteristics (Barreto & Hogg, 2017; Hogg et al., 2012). Further, the sociofunctional approach to prejudice (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) suggests that affective and behavioral responses elicited by groups reflect the types of threat they elicit, resulting in different forms of discrimination, including but not limited to impacts on voting behavior (Franks & Sherr, 2014). Because skin tone is an important phenotypic group characteristic (e.g., Chirco & Buchanan, 2021; Maddox, 2004; Stepanova & Strube, 2009), people may often use this information when making interpersonal judgments. In fact, research suggests that voters use this visible characteristic as a heuristic to evaluate political candidates (Anderson et al., 2020) and choose the leaders that most likely represent them (Hogg, 2001).

## Colorism and racial reorganization

Whereas racism relies on the belief that some races are superior to others, colorism, which is the idea that there are hierarchies within the races, takes the discourse even further and uniquely shapes people's social environments (Golash-Boza, 2016b). In the context of colorism, such hierarchies (i.e., skin color stratification) depend on skin tone: the darker a person's skin, the lower their position in society and the more difficult their access to resources (Golash-Boza, 2016a; Hall, 2018). The association between social status and skin tone has been prevalent for centuries (Hunter, 2005). During slavery in the USA, for example, enslaved people with lighter skin tones worked in the house and were often taught to read, whereas individuals with darker skin worked in the fields.

The effects of colorism are ubiquitous. For example, lighter skin tones are more often associated with higher levels of perceived competence. In a series of studies, participants who were primed to associate the word *educated* with the photograph of a Black man (Ben-Zeev et al., 2014) exhibited a skin tone memory bias, remembering him as having a much lighter skin tone. These findings suggest the existence of a need to achieve cognitive consistency after a counter-stereotypical portrayal (Sherman et al., 2012) of a Black man – dark skin = educated. Not coincidentally, people of color with lighter skin tones have higher salaries (Diette et al., 2015) and were viewed as more attractive than black Americans with darker complexions (Reece, 2016). Research on leadership categorization (Lord & Maher, 1991; Lord et al., 1982) further demonstrates the impact of colorism. In the USA, one of the perceived central characteristics of leadership is being White (Rosette et al., 2008), which leads White leaders to be evaluated more favorably than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ensary & Murphy, 2003). Given vast research linking positive perceptions to Whiteness, it is not surprising that, within the same racial groups, individuals with lighter skin tones are punished less harshly in academic settings (Hannon et al., 2013), have fewer negative confrontations with the criminal justice system (e.g., Finkeldey & Demuth, 2019; Monk, 2019), and feel better physically and psychologically (e.g., Laidley et al., 2019; Louie, 2020).

## Skin tone, racial, and ethnic bias in politics

Skin tone bias does not spare prominent political figures. Kimmelmeier and Chavez (2014) found that participants expressed greater likelihood to vote for former President Obama when he was seen in a lighter skin tone, but favored his opponent when Obama was presented in a darker skin tone. Recent research has shown that media outlets such as newspapers portray politicians of color (i.e., former President Obama, and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Dr. Ben Carson) differently depending on their readership. For example, it seems that, no matter the candidates' political party (Republican or Democrat), newspapers on the left of the political spectrum tend to favor images in which candidates of color appear lighter, while conservative newspapers find photographs in which the candidates' skin tone is portrayed as darker more appealing for publication (Kimmelmeier et al., 2021).

Skin tone, however, is not the only characteristic that affects an individual's placement in society's hierarchy. Because racial and ethnic minorities are disadvantaged along more than one dimension (Zou & Cheryan, 2017), a person of color may be privileged and disadvantaged at the same time. For example, whereas Latino individuals with lighter skin tones may face less prejudice than African American individuals with dark skin do as a function of skin tone bias, Latino people

are generally seen as more *foreign* and, therefore, are more likely to experience specific types of discrimination due to perceived lack of citizenship (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021). As a consequence, ethnicity, in addition to skin tone, may affect voters' preferences for a political candidate (Anderson et al., 2020). This may help to explain why, whereas the Latino population is the largest ethnic group in the USA (United States Census Bureau, 2021), its members are still underrepresented in public office.

## Current research: Aims and hypotheses

While research on perceptions of political candidates based on *independent effects* of skin tone, race, or ethnicity continues to grow, scholarly work on preferences for candidates of color based on the *combined or interactive effects* of voter demographics, candidate skin tone, and race/ethnicity remains limited. Therefore, the present set of studies extends prior work on the effects of constituents' demographic variables on voting preferences for candidates of color by taking an intersectional approach. We experimentally investigated the impact of candidates' skin tone and race/ethnicity on the voting preferences and interpersonal judgments (e.g., trustworthiness, expertise, ideologies) of White and non-White constituents. We also explored the relationship between these attitudes and judgments with voters' skin tone memory biases – that is, how light or dark the candidate is remembered to be. By understanding how a political candidate's skin tone and race/ethnicity affect White and non-White voters' perceptions of what, for example, a trustworthy candidate looks like, we can advance psychological research, inform political strategists about the impact of such factors on evaluations of diverse voter populations, and add to our knowledge about the increasingly diverse pool of political candidates and constituents that shape our democracy.

Broadly, we expected that skin tone memory bias would predict participants' attitudes, and that participant identity factors would affect the endorsement of a racially underrepresented candidate. Specifically, we expected that White participants would generally show more support for candidates with a lighter complexion. In line with research on the effects of comparison groups and reference groups on interpersonal judgments (e.g., Boyce et al., 2010; Richins, 1991), we also anticipated that candidates who identify as African American would be received more positively than Mexican American candidates of the same skin tone, who may be seen as darker in relative skin tone for their group and higher in cultural foreignness. Conversely, we expected non-White participants, whose racial and ethnic identity may have been made salient by the most recent social justice movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter), to express more positive attitudes toward the more dark-skinned candidates and favor in-group members (Jiang et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup>

## STUDY 1

### Method

Considering that light-skinned candidates are perceived as better leaders (Rosette et al., 2008) and dark-skinned leaders are judged less favorably (Lyness & Heilman, 2006), the goal of the first study was to understand whether participants would generally feel warmer toward, show more

<sup>1</sup> The dataset and full materials will be made available upon request. This work was not a part of a preregistered project.

positive judgments, and be more inclined to vote for the African American candidate with lighter skin tone than the same candidate shown with a darker skin tone.

## Participants

Assumptions underlying the a priori power analyses were based on the results of previous research (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021), medium to large effects ( $d = .65$ ),  $\alpha = .05$ , and power ( $1 - \beta$ ) set at .80. The projected sample size needed with this effect size (G\*Power 3.1) was  $N = 60$  for a between groups comparison (Faul et al., 2007). For each of our studies, we report all measures, conditions, data exclusions, and sample size determinations.

We sampled 90 MTurk workers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.37$ ,  $SD = 11.15$ ) who mostly identified as male (58%), White/Caucasian (83%), and conservative (45%).<sup>2</sup> The study included participants over the age of 18 who received \$.75 for their participation.

## Materials

Participants saw images originally created using Poster 6 to manipulate skin tone and facial physiognomy (Stepanova & Strube, 2012).<sup>3</sup> Those images were used in previous research on the impact of skin tone on immigration status (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021) and the role of skin color and facial features on racial categorization (Stepanova & Strube, 2009, 2012). The images selected for use in the present study differed only in skin tone: one image (lighter skin tone condition) was chosen from the middle point of the skin tone continuum and the other (darker skin tone condition) from the far end of the continuum.

Participants were asked a series of questions designed to assess voting intentions and interpersonal judgments. Specifically, participants were asked how warm they felt toward the candidate using a feeling thermometer that ranged from 0 (*very negative*) to 100 (*very positive*) in 10-point increments, and how likely they were to vote for the candidate. Additionally, participants rated their agreement with a series of statements designed to assess their views of the candidates' attributes and values (i.e., "This candidate seems trustworthy," "This candidate is an expert in his field," "This candidate will represent my group well," "This candidate has similar ideologies to mine," "I am confident that this candidate will fight for my rights") which they could rate using a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).<sup>4</sup> Finally and in addition to demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, race), the participants' political orientation was collected using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Extremely Conservative*) to 7 (*Extremely Liberal*).

## Procedure

Participants completed the study electronically on a personal device, and after providing informed consent, were randomly assigned to see one of two facial stimuli (between-subjects design). The

<sup>2</sup> Participants also identified as African American (7%), Asian (6%), Latino/Hispanic (2%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1%), and multiracial (1%).

<sup>3</sup> Approval for all three studies was granted by the local Human Subjects Review Committee.

<sup>4</sup> The complete set of measures can be found in the supplemental materials.

facial stimuli were presented with a political statement not aligned with any particular political party; in it, the candidate informed voters that, "I am running to be your next District County Commissioner. As an African American of this district, the wellbeing of the entire community is very important to me and, if elected, I will listen to you and I will defend your rights." Participants rated how positive or negative they felt about the candidate using a feeling thermometer that ranged from 0 (*Very negative*) to 100 (*Very positive*) with 10-point increments. Additionally, participants expressed the likelihood they would vote for the candidate using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Extremely unlikely*) to 5 (*Extremely likely*). Before the attention<sup>5</sup> and manipulation check, demographic questions, and debriefing, we measured the participants' interpersonal judgments via statements such as, "The candidate seems trustworthy" and "The candidate is an expert in his field" using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

## Results

Prior to statistical analysis, the data were screened for missing entries, skewness, kurtosis, and violation of assumptions. Out of the 90 entries, no missing values were found and only two participants failed to correctly answer the attention check question. Their inclusions, however, did not influence our findings; they were therefore included in the reported analyses. The values for skew and kurtosis showed that all measures were within the cutoff ranges recommended (Bryne, 2010; Hair et al., 2010); therefore, normal distribution was assumed. The participants' political ideologies were coded into categories representing *Conservative*, *Moderate*, and *Liberal* according to their responses. More precisely, participants who identified as extremely conservative, conservative, and slightly conservative were grouped into a newly created Conservative category and participants who self-identified as extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal were placed into a new Liberal group. Finally, all participants who identified as moderate were left in that category.

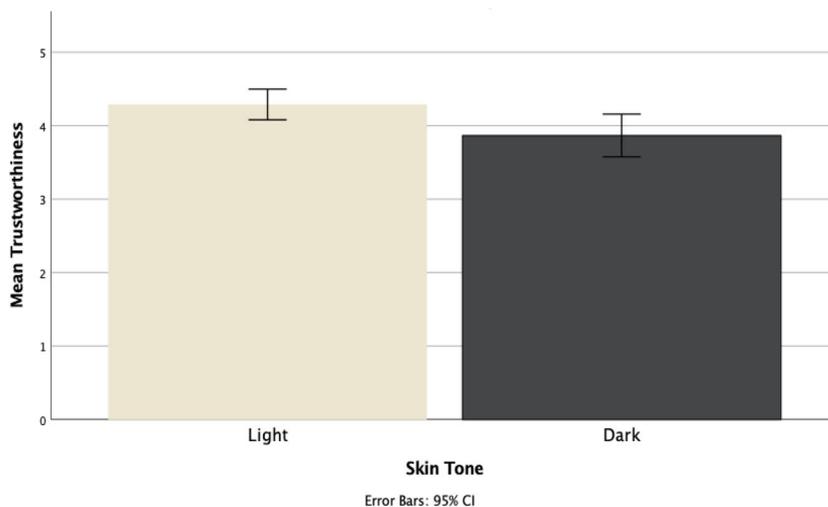
We examined the effect of skin tone across our entire sample of participant judgments before moving on to test our more specific hypotheses about White respondents. Although the candidate's skin tone (light vs. dark) did not appear to have a significant impact on the likelihood to vote for or warmth expressed toward the candidate (all  $ps > .098$ ), an independent samples  $t$ -test showed that participants placed significantly more trust in the candidate with light skin ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) than the candidate with dark skin ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .97$ ),  $t(88) = 2.38$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $d = .50$ . We found that for our White participants, the candidate's skin tone also had a significant effect on judgments of expertise,  $t(73) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $d = .47$ . That is, White participants perceived the candidate with lighter skin as having more expertise in his field ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) than the candidate in the darker skin tone condition ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .83$ ).

A multiple regression analysis predicting voting intentions from warmth toward the candidate, perceived trust, expertise, perception of group representativeness, shared ideology, and perception that the candidate would fight for their interests was significant (see Table 1),  $F(6, 83) = 43.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .76$ . Specifically, we found that more positive feelings toward a candidate ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p = .001$ ) uniquely predicted greater likelihood to vote for that candidate, as did trust ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p = .013$ ), and the perception that the candidate would represent the participant's group ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

<sup>5</sup> For all three studies, participants were told to select a particular response to reflect that they were indeed reading and responding thoughtfully.

**TABLE 1** Summary of significant independent predictors of voting intentions from regression analysis

Interpersonal Judgments	$\beta$	$p$	$sr$
Trust	.219	.013	.138
Represents my group	.335	<.001	.222
Feeling Thermometer	.276	.001	.184

**FIGURE 1** Perceptions of trustworthiness toward the lighter versus darker-skinned candidate (White Participants) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

< .001). Contrary to findings from previous research (Anderson et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2009; Kimmelmeier & Chavez, 2014), there were no significant differences between conservatives and liberals on our outcomes of interest (all  $ps > .220$ ).

## Discussion

Study 1 provided initial evidence that African American political candidates with lighter skin tones are perceived as more suitable for office than those with darker skin. Participants seemed to perceive the candidate with darker skin as less trustworthy (see Figure 1), and White participants additionally perceived him as having less expertise than the lighter-skinned candidate. However, because most of our participants identified as White, we were not able to adequately explore possible group differences between White and non-White participants. Therefore, we collected data from a more diverse and representative pool of participants for Studies 2 and 3.

## STUDY 2

### Method

Although we found evidence of skin tone bias, both candidates of color in Study 1 were African American. Therefore, to examine the extent to which these effects generalize to other types of candidates and the possible unique influences of the addition of candidate race/ethnicity, we conducted Study 2. As is the case for judgments of wealth, (e.g., Boyce et al., 2010), and attractiveness (e.g., Richins, 1991), reference/comparison groups and relative judgments likely play a role in colorism as well. An African American person may be categorized as having light skin, while a Mexican American individual with the same skin tone may be viewed as having medium/dark skin. These relative (vs. absolute) skin tone differences may create a more nuanced skin tone bias for evaluations of candidates of color. Further demonstrating the importance of exploring the impact of race/ethnicity in tandem with skin tone on the daily lives of people of color, recent research has shown that perceptions of people belonging to racial and ethnic minorities happen along two dimensions: perceived inferiority and perceived cultural foreignness (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Specifically, whereas African American people are regarded as more *American* than Latino and Asian individuals, they are perceived as inferior when compared to people who are White or Asian. Latino individuals, on the other hand, are generally seen as inferior and more foreign when compared to members of other groups. Therefore, the objective of Study 2 was to explore how skin tone (lighter vs. darker), race/ethnicity (Mexican American vs. African American), and their interaction influence participants' voting preferences and attitudes amongst White versus non-White participants.

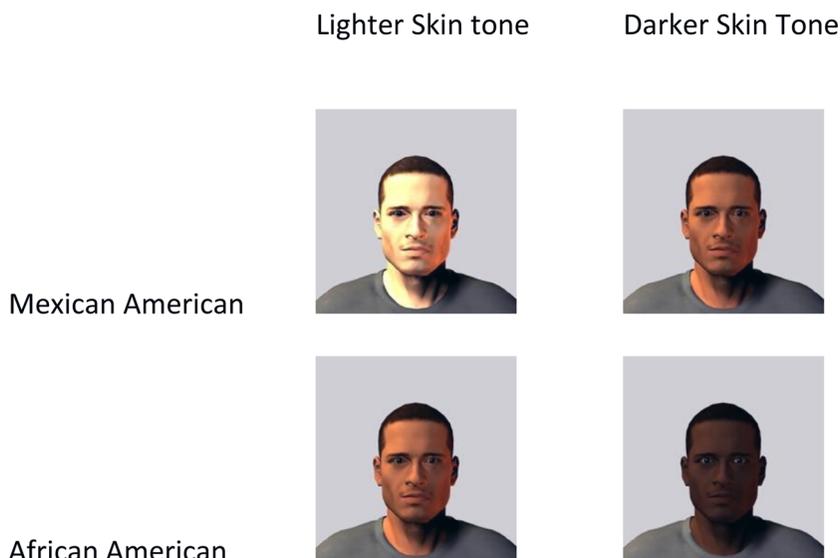
### Participants

As in Study 1 we calculated a projected sample size (G\*Power 3.1) of  $N = 128$  for a between groups comparison based on medium to large effects ( $d = .65$ ),  $\alpha = .05$ , and power ( $1 - \beta$ ) set at .80 (Faul et al., 2007). After removing the entry of one participant who did not agree to the informed consent, the present study included 156 MTurk workers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.26$ ,  $SD = 9.80$ ) over the age of 18 who received \$.75 for their participation. Unlike in Study 1, non-White participants in Study 2 represented about a third of the entire sample. Specifically, 67% of the participants identified as White, 28% identified as African American, 3% as Asian, 1% as Hispanic/Latino, and the remaining 1% as multiracial. Most of the participants (51%) self-identified as conservative, 41% reported being liberal, and the remaining 8% identified as moderate.

### Materials

This study used a 2 (Skin tone: Lighter vs. Darker)  $\times$  2 (Ethnicity: Mexican American vs. African American) experimental between-subjects design. In addition to the conditions included in Study 1, we added conditions to Study 2 in which participants were shown images of the same candidate who self-identified as a Mexican American and whose skin tone was either light (far left of the continuum) or medium (middle of the continuum). To examine the impact of relative skin tone and in order to avoid effects of counter-stereotypical images (Power et al., 1996), participants were

## Stimuli used in Study 2



**FIGURE 2** Stimuli used in Study 2. The rows represent the Race/Ethnicity conditions, and the columns represent the relative skin tone conditions. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

randomly assigned to see images with skin tones representing relatively lighter or darker skin tones for the described ethnic group (see Figure 2).

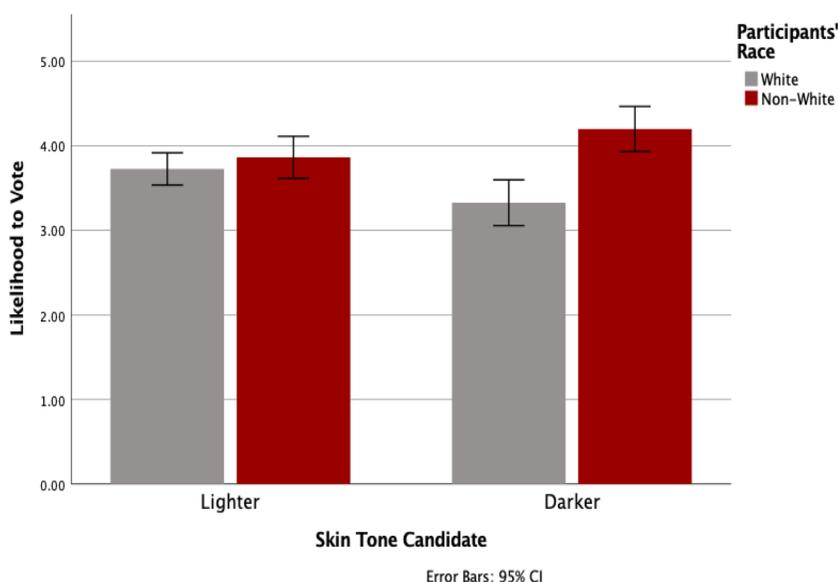
In addition to warmth felt toward the candidate measured using a feeling thermometer that ranged from 0 (*Very negative*) to 100 (*Very positive*), participants also expressed their voting intention by rating the question, “What is the likelihood that you would vote for him?” using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Extremely unlikely*) to 5 (*Extremely likely*).

## Procedure

In all of the four conditions, participants were informed that the candidate in the image was running as the next District County Commissioner and were provided with a neutral candidate statement (same as in Study 1, but with the words “Mexican American” replacing “African American” in the relevant conditions). Next, participants were asked to rate how they felt about the candidate and how likely they were to vote for him. All participants answered attention and manipulation check questions before moving on to demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, and race).

## Results

Prior to conducting a MANOVA to examine differences in voting likelihood and warmth felt, the assumption that the dependent variables were moderately correlated (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2013) was tested. A Pearson product-moment correlation showed that the relationship between the two



**FIGURE 3** Interaction effect between participants' race and candidates' skin tones on likelihood to vote. Participant racial group (White vs. non-White)  $\times$  political candidates skin tone (lighter vs. darker skin tone) interaction on likelihood to vote [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

dependent variables (i.e., Likelihood Vote and Feeling Thermometer) was indeed moderate;  $r = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ . Additionally, the computation of a non-significant Box's M test ( $p = .299$ ) indicated homogeneity of covariance matrices of the dependent variables.

Results of the MANOVA to examine the overall effect of participants' racial group on the dependent variables suggested that the effect of participant racial group was significant,  $F(2, 153) = 7.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ , such that White participants generally exhibited less positive views of the candidates of color than non-White participants did. Follow-up 2 (Candidate relative skin tone: light vs. dark)  $\times$  2 (Participant racial group: White vs. non-White) ANOVAs with warmth and voting intentions as dependent variables revealed a significant interaction between the participants' racial group (White vs. non-White) and the candidates' skin tone (lighter vs. darker) on the likelihood to vote for,  $F(1, 156) = 7.73$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ , and warmth felt toward the candidates,  $F(1, 156) = 5.53$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . Specifically, White participants felt warmer toward and were more likely to vote for the candidates in the *lighter* (vs. darker) skin tone conditions, and non-White participants felt warmer toward and were more likely to vote for the candidates in the *darker* (vs. lighter) skin tone conditions (see Figure 3). This effect was driven primarily by the darker skin tone conditions. Specifically, White participants were less likely to vote,  $t(77) = -4.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , and expressed less warmth,  $t(77) = -3.38$ ,  $p = .001$ , for the dark-skinned candidate than non-White participants were. We did not find the same differences when looking at the lighter-skinned candidate (all  $ps > .420$ ).

We controlled for candidates' skin tone (i.e., medium skin tone images only) and ran a two-way ANOVA to examine differences in voting intentions as a function of participants' racial group and the candidate's race/ethnicity. The data showed that interaction between participant racial group and candidate race/ethnicity was significant,  $F(1, 78) = 4.63$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ . Specifically, when presented with the identical image of a candidate, White participants expressed higher likelihoods to vote for the candidate identified as African American, while non-White participants favored the

Mexican American candidate. We did not find the same interaction effects on warmth toward the candidates.

As in Study 1, participants' political orientations were coded into categories representing *Conservatives*, *Moderates*, and *Liberals* according to their responses. Once again, there were no significant differences between conservatives and liberals on our outcomes of interest (all  $ps > .256$ ).

## Discussion

Study 2 included a more diverse sample which allowed us to compare voting preferences between White and non-White participants and investigate the interaction effects of participants' racial groups, candidates' race/ethnicity, and skin tone. In line with findings in Study 1, the participants' political orientation did not influence their voting behavior, nor did it affect how warm they felt toward either of the candidates. Overall, however, and in line with results from Study 1, we found that White voters generally preferred and were more likely to vote for candidates with lighter skin tones. Conversely, non-White participants were more likely to vote for and felt warmer toward the politicians presented in the darker skin tones. Importantly, our data suggested that while the candidates' race/ethnicity on its own did not affect warmth toward and likelihood to vote for them overall, it significantly influenced voters when race/ethnicity was associated with specific skin tones (i.e., medium/Brown) most prominently associated with Mexican Americans (Chavez, 2013; Chirco & Buchanan, 2021). In addition to liking candidates in lighter skin tones, when presented with the same image of a candidate with the same skin tone, White participants were more likely to vote for the candidate identified as African American (vs. Mexican American). This preference highlights the idea that, similarly to previously documented interpersonal judgments (e.g., Boyce et al., 2010, Richins, 1991), skin tone bias is relative and often dependent on reference categories. An African American person may be categorized as having light skin while a Mexican American individual with the same skin tone may be viewed as having medium/dark skin. These relative (vs. absolute) skin tone differences may contribute to a more nuanced skin tone bias for evaluations of candidates of color such that when the same skin tone is perceived as relatively lighter per the reference group, more favorable judgments may result.

## STUDY 3

### Method

One of the main findings of Study 2 suggested that, when evaluating candidates who belong to racially underrepresented groups and presented with the same candidate image, White voters prefer an African American candidate for whom the skin tone may be perceived as relatively lighter, whereas participants who identified as non-White prefer the Mexican American candidate portrayed in a relatively darker skin tone (Chavez, 2013). The results of Study 2 indicated that judging political candidates with darker skin tones is not only a matter of "lighter = better." Instead, they suggested that relative judgments matter. Therefore, one of the aims of Study 3 was to replicate these interesting findings in another participant pool, focusing on the combined impact of participants' racial group (White vs. non-White) and candidate race/ethnicity (African vs. Mexican American) on voting behavior and interpersonal judgments when the candidate is presented in the *Brown* skin tone (midpoint of continuum of skin tone from the image set). We

expanded upon our previous studies by investigating whether interpersonal judgments and likelihood to vote would be predicted by the participants' skin tone memory bias (i.e., errors in how light or dark they remembered the candidate's skin tone to be). Finally and partially replicating Kimmelmeier and Chavez's (2014) research, we explored a possible alternative explanation of our results, examining whether the participants' ratings on the Symbolic Racism Scale (Henry & Sears, 2002), which measures a subtler kind of racism with statements such as, "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve," could account for our findings.

## Participants

Given the impact of Gen Z voters on the 2020 presidential election (Johnson Hess, 2020) and the importance of exploring the impact of skin tone on different demographics of voters, the data for Study 3 were collected from a pool of younger potential voters. According to a priori power analyses based on the results of previous research (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021), for medium to large effects ( $d = .65$ ),  $\alpha = .05$ , and power ( $1 - \beta$ ) set at .80, the projected sample size needed (G\*Power 3.1) was  $N = 128$  for a between groups comparison (Faul et al., 2007). We sampled 190 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.43$ ,  $SD = 6.15$ ) undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at a university in the Pacific Northwest who received extra credit for their participation. We did not find any missing values in the collected data and only one participant failed to correctly answer the attention check question. Because the inclusion of their data did not influence the findings, we included them in the reported analyses.

The participants identified as female (68%), male (28%), non-binary/third gender (3%), and 1% identified as other or preferred not to say. Fifty-one percent of participants were White, 20% identified as Latino/Hispanic, 12% as Asian, 9% as multiracial, 4% as African American, 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Most of the participants were liberal 45%; the rest identified as moderate (33%) and conservative (22%).

## Materials

In Study 3, we used a between-subjects design incorporating the same facial stimuli and materials used in the previous two studies. Specifically, participants were shown a candidate with *Brown* skin (midpoint in continuum) and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which the candidate's statement identified them as either a Mexican American or African American candidate (as in Study 2).

All participants expressed interpersonal judgments using the same measures used in Study 1 and Study 2 (presented in randomized order). To measure the participants' skin tone memory bias, we partially replicated Kimmelmeier and Chavez's study (2014) and drew from a pool of seven images displaying the same individual whose skin tone was manipulated in increments or decrements of 10% from the original. Before demographic questions and debriefing, all participants were also presented with the 8-item Symbolic Racism Scale (Henry & Sears, 2002) which measures a more subtle type of racism (Kimmelmeier & Chavez, 2014).

## Procedure

After electronically agreeing to the content of the informed consent, participants were asked to imagine that they were about to vote in an upcoming election and then randomly assigned to see the same candidate with *Brown* skin tone who either identified as a Mexican American or an African American candidate. After that, participants were asked how positive or negative they felt (i.e., feeling thermometer), how likely they were to vote for the candidate they saw, and rated statements such as, "The candidate represents my group well" using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Then, we randomly assigned participants to either see an array of the slightly lighter six images (with image number four being the original/correct image) or an array of the slightly darker six images (with image number three being the original/correct image) and asked them to choose the image they believed they had seen at the beginning of the study. Before answering demographic questions and being debriefed, participants were asked to complete the 8-item Symbolic Racism Scale (Henry & Sears, 2002).

## Results

An initial MANOVA<sup>6</sup> examined the effects of participant racial group (White vs. non-White) on the dependent variables of warmth, voting intention, perceived expertise, and perceptions of representing the participants' group and fighting for their rights. In line with findings from Study 2, the data suggested that the effect of participant racial group was significant,  $F(2, 184) = 4.02$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ , in that White participants generally expressed less positive judgments of the candidate of color than did non-White participants. Although the results of our two-way ANOVA examining differences in intentions to vote as a function of both participants' racial group and the candidate's race/ethnicity suggested that there was not a significant independent effect of ethnicity ( $p = .481$ ), the interaction between participant racial groups and candidate race/ethnicity was, once more, significant,  $F(1, 190) = 3.75$ ,  $p = .054$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . In line with results of Study 2, White participants were more likely to vote for the African American candidate ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) than for the Mexican American candidate ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), and non-White voters expressed more support for the Mexican American candidate ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) than for the African American candidate ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).<sup>7</sup>

Next, we ran a one-sample *t*-test which showed that, overall, skin tone memory bias was statistically significant, in that the candidate was remembered having a lighter skin tone than the one the participants had seen at the beginning of the experiment,  $t(189) = -2.17$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $d = -.16$ . Further, the data showed that the extent of the participants' skin tone memory bias predicted judgments of the candidate. Specifically, a Pearson product-moment correlation showed that lighter skin tone memory judgments were related to perceptions of more trustworthiness,  $r(188) = -.15$ ,  $p = .027$ , and expertise,  $r(188) = -.15$ ,  $p = .034$ .

As in Studies 1 and 2, the participants' political orientation was collected and coded into categories representing *Conservatives*, *Moderates*, and *Liberals*. The data showed a significant

<sup>6</sup> All assumptions for this analysis were met with the exception of the Box's M test of equality of variance. However, because this test is overly sensitive, it can produce a significant result even when the sample sizes are equal (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The interaction is not attributable simply to racism, as the effect remains significant when controlling for the effect of symbolic racism,  $F(1, 190) = 3.71$ ,  $p = .056$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$

**TABLE 2** *T*-test results comparing Liberal and Conservative participants on candidate judgments and outcomes

	Mean Con- servative	Mean Liberal	Statistic	df	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Warmth felt toward candidate	57.38	72.82	-4.59	125	<.001*	-.87
Likely to vote for candidate	3.00	3.80	-4.37	125	<.001*	-.83
Candidate is likeable	3.55	3.91	-2.38	125	.019	-.45
Candidate is expert	2.60	2.96	-2.43	125	.016	-.46
Candidate shares my ideology	3.10	3.78	-3.65	125	<.001*	-.69
Candidate is trustworthy	3.21	3.75	-3.35	125	.001*	-.63
Candidate is believable	3.38	3.75	-2.61	125	.010*	-.49
Candidate represents my group	2.88	3.48	-3.26	125	.001*	-.62
Candidate fights for my interests	3.17	3.81	-3.81	125	<.001*	-.72
Skin tone memory bias	3.83	3.87	-.15	125	.880	-.03

\*Outcomes that remain significant using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels.

difference between conservatives and liberals for most of our outcomes of interest (see Table 2 for results). Specifically, independent samples *t*-tests showed that, generally, conservative participants viewed the candidates more negatively and were less likely than liberal participants to vote for the candidates of color. Further, we found that conservatives felt warmer toward the African American than the Mexican American candidate,  $t(40) = 2.12$ ,  $p = .040$ ,  $d = .66$ , and also rated the African American candidate to be more likely to fight for their interests,  $t(40) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 1.05$ . Although differences emerged from evaluations based on the candidate's ethnicity for conservative participants, this was not the case for our liberal participants ( $ps > .207$ ).

## Discussion

In line with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, results of Study 3 suggested that when White voters are given the option to vote for political candidates of color, they generally prefer politicians portrayed as having lighter skin tones. However, we also found that the processes that lead White constituents to differentially evaluate candidates of color are not simply a matter of lighter skin being viewed as better. Instead, our findings suggest that relative judgments play a major role. An African American candidate may be more appealing to White voters than a Mexican American of the same skin tone, because the African American individual is perceived as having a relatively lighter skin tone for their racial/ethnic group and may be seen as *more American*. Given that we did not measure perceived cultural foreignness, we can only speculate based on previous research that the African American political candidate may have benefitted from being seen as lower in cultural foreignness and therefore higher in both the racial and skin tone hierarchy – the former being a product of race/ethnicity, and the latter being a product of the relative lightness of skin tone (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). In agreement with Kimmelmeier and Chavez's (2014) findings, participants tended to remember the political candidate as having lighter skin tone than the candidate they saw at the beginning of the study. Additionally, we found that the warmer participants felt toward the candidate, the more they trusted him, and the more they perceived him as expert, the lighter they remembered his skin tone to be. While in Study 1 and 2 we did not

find any evidence of partisanship influencing voter behavior and interpersonal judgments, the findings of Study 3 were in line with previous research in which partisanship influenced voting behavior (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2009; Kimmelmeier & Chavez, 2014). More precisely, our data suggested that the candidate's ethnicity significantly influenced conservative (but not liberal) constituents. Specifically, we found that conservatives felt warmer toward the African American than the Mexican American candidate, and also rated the African American candidate to be more likely to fight for their interests. Although differences emerged for evaluations based on the candidate's ethnicity for conservative participants, this was not the case for our liberal participants. However, partisanship did not influence skin tone memory bias.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the present series of studies provide evidence that White voters tend to prefer political candidates of color with relatively lighter skin tones whereas non-White voters are more inclined to support candidates with a relatively darker skin tone. In line with previous scholarly work (Martin & Blinder, 2020), our research demonstrates that while political candidates' race/ethnicity on its own does not affect their success at the ballot box, the interaction between the candidates' skin tone and their ethnicity may. When it comes to voting for politicians of color, White voters prefer light-skinned African American candidates whereas non-White constituents show more positive attitudes and voting behaviors toward darker-skinned candidates of color. We found mixed support for previous research in which participants' political orientation predicted skin tone bias (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Kimmelmeier & Chavez, 2014). Specifically, only data from Study 3 showed that political orientation significantly affected voting behavior; this finding should therefore be interpreted with caution. In contrast to the liberal participants, whose judgments did not differ based on candidate race/ethnicity, conservative voters expressed more positive attitudes toward the African American (vs. Mexican American) candidate.

Overall, these findings can be explained by potential colorism effects that lead voters, White and non-White, to make judgments based not only on the lightness or darkness of a political candidate's skin tone, but possibly on the intersection between their skin tone and their ethnicity or race as well. It seems that, in line with research on interpersonal judgments such as attractiveness (e.g., Richins, 1991), and wealth (e.g., Boyce et al., 2010), reference groups and relative judgments impact colorism and voting behavior as well. In line with previous research on skin tone memory bias (e.g., Ben-Zeev et al., 2014), findings from Study 3 show that, generally, the political candidates were remembered as having a lighter skin tone, and that more positive judgments (e.g., warmth felt, perceived expertise, trustworthiness) predicted such a recollection.

Important to note is that, contrary to the existing literature on ingroup colorism (e.g., Golash-Boza, 2016a, 2016b; Hall, 2018; Uzogara, 2019), our data suggest that non-White participants favored candidates with darker skin tones. Although an empirical question that is not yet answered, it is possible that when racial identity is made salient through, for example, contemporary social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter), people of color may further embrace and celebrate their race and ethnicity and support prototypical candidates of color to a greater extent, including those with darker skin tones. In fact, studies suggest that when racial and ethnic identities are made salient, certain cognitive processes are activated (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2010; Vecchi & Zelinsky, 2019) which then may lead people to show more in-group preferences (Jiang et al., 2021). Additionally, SIT suggests that in the eye of the evaluators, the perception of a prototypical leader changes depending on the group the evaluators belong to (Hogg, 2001; Hogg et al., 2006).

In the instance of candidate preferences, this could mean that White voters may prefer more prototypical White candidates and non-White voters show more support for prototypical non-White exemplars.

## Limitations and future directions

Our findings further highlight the intersections between electorate identity factors and political candidates' skin tone and race/ethnicity on interpersonal judgments and voting behavior. However, our sample only allowed us to investigate differences between broad categories (i.e., White and non-White participants). In fact, the size of key demographic groups in the sample from Study 1 prevented us from analyzing important participant characteristics (e.g., race, political orientation). Replicating these studies using a larger, more representative sample would allow us to explore voting preferences *among* racial minorities who may be more likely to endorse political candidates that they see as more likely to represent their group (Boudreau et al., 2019). In addition, presenting participants with computerized images of a potential, unknown District County Commissioner may have created an emotional distance (Gaither et al., 2019) which may have enabled participants to distance themselves from the political candidate portrayed. However, these same images have been successfully used in published research demonstrating that skin tone does, in fact, importantly influence social judgments (e.g., Stepanova & Strube, 2009). Furthermore, considering that digitized human images are used in many areas of psychology to control for potential confounding factors (e.g., Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003; Strom et al., 2012) and that we were able to reproduce the pattern results of across three studies, we are more confident about the generalizability of our findings. However, it may be worthwhile to replicate the current set of studies by looking at real local elections using images of candidates of color whose names are on the ballot. We also purposefully chose not to explicitly mention the candidate's political party because 1) we wanted to solely focus on the effects of the candidate's skin tone on the variables that we measured and 2) at the local election level, not every candidate includes their political affiliation in the voting information materials. Because of this omission, it is possible that participants may have answered in a socially desirable manner in order to avoid appearing biased. However, the fact that we found significant results even in the absence of a specific political party affiliation makes the findings of this study even more striking given the possibility that they may underreport the effect that skin tone has on voting intentions especially given the political polarization surrounding voters' attitudes on racial disparities ("Voters' attitudes," 2020). In addition to exploring skin tone effects on interpersonal judgments and voting behavior while highlighting additional intersecting identities (e.g., a woman of color, a LGBTQ+ candidate of color), future research should investigate whether the political affiliation of a candidate of color may influence or moderate voters' support along party lines.

Supported by previous research (Chirco & Buchanan, 2021; Zou & Cheryan, 2017), these findings may potentially suggest, that for some, a Mexican American political candidate might not be perceived as *American enough* and, therefore, might not be viewed as fit to represent the constituents' interests in public office. Future research that directly measures both prototypicality and cultural foreignness is essential for elucidating the role of these factors in the current work. We also would like to highlight the variability in skin tone that exist among those individuals who share a common racial/ethnic background, and the fact that the full range of variability in skin tone was not represented in the current research. For example, while our skin tone manipulations for the Mexican American candidate focused primarily on the skin tone *Brown* because

it is perceived as most closely associated with people from Mexico (e.g., Chavez, 2013; Chirco & Buchanan, 2021), we acknowledge the importance of the experiences of Afro-Latinos and those with darker skin tones whose identities highlight the complexities and multiple dimensions of the intersections of skin tone, colorism, and racial/ethnic identities. Because of these multiple dimensions, future studies should explore whether associations of darker skin tones with Latino or Hispanic ethnicities may yield different and interesting results.

Finally, given that the candidates in our studies were identified as either African American or Mexican American individuals, future studies could investigate whether emphasizing the candidates' racial/ethnic identities compared to highlighting their American identity may yield different results. Would candidates of color be perceived differently by White voters if they highlighted their ethnic identity by, for example, identifying as Asian American or Cuban American? Would White voters think that by identifying as, for example, Cuban American, a candidate does not show interest in being simply *American*?

## CONCLUSION

The present studies underscore the complexity of factors that come into play when voters choose the politicians they think best represent them. Overall, our studies reaffirm the impact that skin tone, political ideology, and voter identity have on interpersonal judgments (e.g., Jardina, 2019; Kimmelmeier & Chavez, 2014; Stephens-Dougan, 2021) and expand previous work on the importance of race/ethnicity as a heuristic used to judge political candidates (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Martin & Blinder, 2020). The results from our set of studies have important theoretical and practical implications, calling attention to the relevance of understanding the multitude of factors that influence voting behavior in an increasingly diverse nation, and informing scholars and political strategists who seek to work toward a more diverse and representative political landscape.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open Access Funding provided by Universitat Bern.

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**How to cite this article:** Chirco P. & Buchanan T.M. Dark faces in white spaces: The effects of skin tone, race, ethnicity, and intergroup preferences on interpersonal judgments and voting behavior. *Anal Soc Issues Public Policy*. 2022;22:427–447.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12304>