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Coded Language: The History, the Message, and 2016

Adam Bruno

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I have neither given or received, nor tolerated others use of unauthorized aid.

Since the 1960s the use of race has played a crucial role in American Presidential elections; however, the way that it has been used has greatly evolved from 1960 to 2016. Central to the discussion of racial politics is how coded language is used to talk about race, particularly by conservatives.¹ Nonetheless, coded language has not always been the norm. Starting with the civil rights movement of the 1960s most race baiting rhetoric has moved into the realm of implicit coded language. Much of this changed in 2015 when businessman Donald Trump made the announcement that he was running for President. Suddenly it was as if the code meant less, it did not go away, but Trump and his supporters found it less necessary to use it.² What makes the conversation about race so delicate and chaotic is that Trump did not completely break with coded language; instead utilizing a combination of coded and un-coded language. What is undeniable is that Trump's powerful blend of coded and un-coded language drew an enormous national following.³ How did this happen? What caused coded language to change so much that Trump was able to employ rhetoric that had seemingly died in the 1950s and 1960s? This paper will explore two intermediate theses that lead to a third, and ultimate thesis. First, this paper will demonstrate the necessity of an evolution of the language used for successful race baiting. As times have changed coded language has had to evolve alongside it in order to incite the greatest following from backlash voters. This accompanies the paper's second thesis; that there must be social turmoil and anxiety amongst populations most susceptible to being racially baited. When people are afraid for their social position they are much more susceptible to being racially baited. Both of these theses help generate the ultimate thesis; that Trump took years of old coded

¹ This is not to say there is no race baiting used by liberal politicians; race baiting is generally used more frequently by conservatives than liberals.

² This paper will focus on the use of code by Presidential candidates, not the use of such language by their supporters. While the language of supporters is a fascinating subject, especially in the context of the 2016 election, this paper lacks the time and space for such an exploration.

³ Trump's announcement and campaign as a whole drew significant backlash resulting from his overt racial appeals while simultaneously drawing an equally sizeable following.

practices, broke many of them, and played to white backlash voter's racial feelings and fears of outsiders, particularly Muslims and Latinos. The question of Trump's ascent to political prominence, ultimately culminating in his election, has been, and will likely continue to be, the topic of much scholarly debate. Accordingly, this paper by no means claims to give a definitive answer for Trump's success, but instead attempts to provide an explanation for part of what made Trump's rhetoric so powerful, as well as how it fits into a larger history of coded language in American political rhetoric.⁴

This research will be carried out through an examination of a variety of campaign messaging platforms, including: campaign ads, speeches, social media, and other major forms of political communication.⁵ To understand the power of coded language it is necessary to find the language that reaches the largest group of people; consequently the platform for the exploration of coded language will change depending on the election in question. As a result there is a greater focus on social media in 2016 as opposed to 1968, 1988 and 2008 since social media was the dominant campaign messaging tool of 2016. In order to understand the power of Trump's rhetoric one must understand the use of rhetoric in the past; since only an understanding of the past allows an understanding of the present. Therefore this paper will examine three historic elections in order to trace the history of racially coded rhetoric and its influence on the 2016 election.

⁴ The author would like to emphasize that he is by no means making the claim that he believes all Trump supporters are backlash, and racially motivated voters. He is seeking to illustrate how race baiting and more specifically racial code was successfully implemented in the Presidential campaign of Donald Trump.

⁵ While this work will attempt to examine as much campaign rhetoric as possible it is nearly impossible to look at and discuss all campaign messaging. As a result this paper does not claim to be 100% comprehensive, but will look to cover as much ground as possible in order to provide as clear a picture of coded language as possible.

The first election used will be 1968; where Republican Richard Nixon defeated Democrat Hubert Humphrey and Independent George Wallace. This election featured the beginning of “law and order” rhetoric and the birth of the “southern strategy”; two major aspects of coded language that became a central part of American politics. This election also provides a prime example of different methods and shades of race baiting. Both Nixon and Wallace racially baited voters, but because of their previous stances on racial issues did so in different ways. The next election studied is the 1988 election where George H.W. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis. Notably for the history of coded language 1988 provided one of modern history’s most powerful examples of coded language, featuring the Willie Horton ad which has had a lasting impact on American political rhetoric around race. 2008 supposedly marked a turning point for elections, and for American race relations as a whole. Theoretically ushering America into a new “post-racial era” when Barack Obama defeated John McCain for the Presidency. During this election the presence of Barack Obama, a black man, at the top of a Presidential ticket opened the door for a new and slightly altered form of code; one that used a presidential candidate as a target for coded language and race baiting as a whole. The final election is the one that drives the research; the 2016 election, where Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton. This election featured a mixture of coded and un-coded language, but with un-coded language making a monumental comeback into the mainstream vernacular. The coded language of 2016 was about more than just blacks and whites, greatly expanding to an intense focus on Muslims, Latinos and other immigrant groups.⁶

⁶ Unfortunately due to time and page restraints this paper cannot explore the use of code around gender in the 2016 election; something that many have pointed to as being a key factor in Hillary Clinton’s defeat.

The discussion of race and consequently coded language about race is a very delicate and controversial subject in American political rhetoric. As a result the discussion of such a topic is likely to disconcert people, therefore in order to help reduce such anxiety it is necessary to provide a thorough background of the historiography of coded language.⁷ Therefore prior to entering an examination of coded language in 1968, 1988, 2008, and the evolution of coded language that resulted in the 2016 election this paper begins by providing a historiography of the history and necessity of coded language.

Historiography

The 2016 election featured the explosion of Donald Trump onto the political stage, and with it the return of an unfiltered, un-coded, discussion of race in the American political vernacular. The day Trump said that Mexicans coming into the United States were “bringing drugs... bringing crime... they’re rapists,” the code around race changed, as certain aspects of code became less prevalent in the racial politics vernacular.⁸ Trump successfully appealed to backlash whites’ fears of non-white groups.⁹ In doing so he treaded on the implicit nature of these appeals, something that had been previously understood to be necessary.¹⁰ However,

⁷ A note from the author. The nature of this topic is likely to upset some groups of people, or raise the argument that what is described in this paper is untrue. If, as a reader, this topic causes you discomfort or anger and prompts you to disagree with the work presented here I welcome this sort of disagreement as the creation of dialogue is part of the nature of democracy and progress. I provide this note as a caution of what is to come and what to expect, and as a message about the goal of this work.

⁸ Donald Trump, “Presidential Campaign Announcement” (speech, New York City, NY, June 16, 2015), CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-donald-trump-announces-his-presidential-candidacy/>.

⁹ Ted Brader, Elizabeth Suhay and Nicholas A. Valentino, “What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Groups Cues, and Immigration Threat,” *Midwest Political Science Association* (52), No. 4 (2008): 959-60. In this paper Brader, Suhay and Valentino provide a study of how politicians are able to spur animosity towards immigrant groups, particularly and with much greater success, towards non-white groups.

¹⁰ Vincent L. Hutchings, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Ismail K. White. “Cues that Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Attitudes During Campaigns,” *American Political Science Review* (96), No. 1 (2002): 76, 88. Also see John Hurwitz and Marc Peffley, “Playing the Race Card in the Post-Willie Horton Era: The Impact of Racialized Code Words on Support for Punitive Crime Policy,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (69), No. 1 (2005): 101. For an indepth look at the necessity of implicit language see: Tali Mendelberg. “Executing Hortons: Racial Crime in the 1988 Presidential Campaigns,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (61), No. 1 (1997): 137-38, 152.

historical events do not occur in a vacuum, and neither did Trump's movement, as racial politics have been an evolving issue since 1960.¹¹ Therefore to understand Trump's code altering ability one must first examine the historiography of coded language's history, circumstances that make this sort of language effective, and Trump's language itself.

The 1960s brought the Civil Rights movement, and with it a change in the way that race was discussed. The use of coded racial language essentially began with the "southern strategy," a way for conservatives like Richard Nixon to talk about race; but in a way that disguised race as a neutral point about busing, affirmative action, or a similar race neutral topic.¹² In the "The Fog of War", Gerard Alexander illustrates the "southern strategy's" appeal to white voters through "items with explicit racial connotations...but was otherwise ostensibly race-neutral."¹³ Alexander's work provides an overview of the origins of coded language and how the "southern strategy" was essential in creating the conservative "base". Alexander points to race as only one part of the conservative story; in contrast, Jeremy Mayer's *Running on Race* puts race at the very center of the American electoral story. Mayer argues that "perhaps no other issue shows the limitations of economic analysis better than racial politics does."¹⁴ A thesis he illuminates by providing in-depth analysis of race's role in 20th century presidential elections. Mayer's book is exceptional in its ability to tell the stories of race in individual elections. In the chapter about the 1968 election Mayer uses the Nixon campaign's speeches and correspondence, found in newspaper articles and archives, to tell the story of Nixon's coded rhetoric and the "southern

¹¹ Jeremy Mayer, *Running on Race* (New York: Random House, 2002), 3. In this work Mayer provides an overview and in-depth analysis of race's role in every U.S. Presidential election from 1960-2000.

¹² Gerard Alexander, "The Fog of Political War: Predicting the Future Course of Conservatism," *The Journal of Political History* (26), No. 1 (2014): 122-123.

¹³ *Ibid*, 122.

¹⁴ Jeremy Mayer, *Running on Race* (New York: Random House, 2002), 8.

strategy” as a whole.¹⁵ The 1968 election also provides an excellent case study about the effectiveness of different layers of coded language.¹⁶ Elsewhere Mayer argues that what made Nixon’s message so salient was that it said close to the same thing as George Wallace’s, but did so using a more nuanced code, consequently it did not turn away as voters who feared being seen as racist.¹⁷ 1968 made coded language a key political tactic, but it was 1988 that made it central for the American people.

The 1988 election featured the “Willie Horton” ad; which used fear to become one of the most effective coded appeals in history. Using an experiment where some people saw videos of the Horton ad, and some saw neutral ads, Tali Mendelberg showed the power of coded language that associated Horton with racial fears.¹⁸ Mendelberg argues that the Horton ad was a textbook “southern strategy” style race baiting maneuver; the ad talked about a theoretically non-racial issue (crime) while playing on backlash white fears of blacks.¹⁹ Additionally the Horton ad offered ample opportunity for plausible deniability to claim it was not racial, something essential to racial appeals.²⁰ Several campaign ads linked negative feelings of blacks and crime, and sought to demonstrate that Bush, not Dukakis was the candidate to stop crime.²¹ What both Mendelberg and Mayer show is that the Horton ad’s effectiveness lay in its ability to connect blacks, through Horton, to crime without ever mentioning race. The importance of the Horton ad

¹⁵ “The Bullets, the Ballots, and the Backlash: The Charged Racial Politics of 1968,” chapter in *Running on Race*.

¹⁶ Jeremy Mayer, “Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Campaign,” *Historian* (64), No. 1 (1997): 359, 363.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tali Mendelberg, “Executing Hortons: Racial Crime in the 1988 Presidential Campaign,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (61), No. 1 (1997):150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 151.

²⁰ Jessica Autumn Brown, “Running on Fear: Immigration, Race and Crime Framings in Contemporary Debate Discourse,” *Critical Criminology* (24), (2016): 317. Brown offers an excellent definition of coded language. Saying “techniques which denigrate minority populations but do so obliquely enough to allow the speaker room for deniability if challenged”.

²¹ Mayer, *Running on Race*, 220-221.

in 1988 cannot be overstated, as its legacy has played a role in any politician's decision to "play the race card". The Horton ad forever linked race and crime; which made it very easy for modern politicians to slip coded words about crime into political discourse, since the Horton ad had already created an association between the two.²²

The Horton ad created strong political links between blacks and crime which have existed since; by 2008 the code had expanded, despite some calling it the beginning of a "post-racial era."²³ Obama's presence in the election led some on both sides of the aisle to say racism was waning; this had a side-effect of making racial issues, and especially the use of code, powerful conservative ammunition.²⁴ John McCain's 2008 campaign ads often portrayed Obama as being "uppity, a term suggesting Blacks are out of their place of subordination," or as "not ready to lead... (which) tied Obama to stereotypes of African American inaptitude."²⁵ The goal of these ads, as Camille Charles and Maryann Erigha argued was to associate Obama with older codes and stereotypes of blacks being incompetent. A similar argument is made when Anthony Sparks demonstrates how discussion about Obama had parallels with minstrel shows of the Jim Crow era. Sparks demonstrates this when describing the McCain campaign's and media's descriptions of Obama as a "Black man *who speak(s) too well*... the McCain campaign drew on a historic and national ambivalence toward the educated and public Black (male) body."²⁶ The 2008 election

²² Jon Hurwitz and Marc Peffley, "Playing the Race Card in the Post-Willie Horton Era: The Impact of Racialized Code Words on Support for Punitive Crime Policy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (27), No. 5 (2006): 100. Hurwitz and Peffley illustrate the power of racial appeals in an experiment using the buzzword "inner-city" and its effect on priming conservative feelings and the results showed a strong linkage.

²³Thomas Edge, "Southern Strategy 2.0: Conservatives, White Voters and the Election of Barack Obama," *Journal of Black Studies* (40), No. 3 (2010): 427. Camille Z. Charles and Maryann Erigha, "Other Uppity Obama: A Content Analysis of Race Appeals in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election," *Du Bois Review* (9), No. 2 (2012): 438. Anthony Sparks, "Minstrel Politics or "He Speaks too Well:" Rhetoric, Race, and Resistance in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* (46), 2009: 23. Autumn Brown, "Running on Fear: Immigration, Race, and Crime Framings in Contemporary GOP Presidential Debate Discourse," 329.

²⁴ Edge, 435, 438.

²⁵ Charles and Erigha 448-49.

²⁶ Sparks, 31.

demonstrates how conservatives used similar coding practices from 1968 and 1988 about blacks and crime and applied them to Obama, making him a coded surrogate for all blacks.²⁷ Since 2008 there has been an expansion of coded language from being mainly about blacks to including other groups, especially Latinos and Muslims.²⁸ Jessica Autumn Brown makes this argument by showing how race baiting about these groups is increasingly frequent in present GOP discourse; this is a product of a shift in backlash whites' fears, and is the next aspect of this historiography.²⁹

The history of the code is vital to understanding the next part of the coded language historiography, which explores the circumstances and types of links necessary to make coded language most effective. Coded appeals are most effective during times of social upheaval, or when backlash whites are in a position they fear they are losing the status they once had.³⁰

Matthew Hughey demonstrates this argument through a discussion of 3 crucial times in American history: the 1960s, the 1980s and post 2000.³¹ Simple circumstance is not enough for coded language to resonate with voters; these appeals must also possess some form of either one or both of the following characteristics. The first is they must resonate with either a fear or

²⁷ Vincent L. Hutchings and Nicholas A. Valentino, "The Centrality of Race in American Politics," *American Political Science Review* (96), (2002): 394. While this article precedes Obama's election by 6 years Hutchings and Valentino describe how "some racial cues evoke historic racial stereotypes... trigger more psychologically oriented racial reactions." Similar instances occurred in the attempts to use coded language to associate Obama with racial stereotypes

²⁸ Brown, "Running on Fear: Immigration, Race, and Crime Framings in Contemporary GOP Presidential Debate Discourse," 329. Jessica Autumn Brown, "The New "Southern Strategy:" Immigration, Race, and "Welfare Dependency" in Contemporary U.S. Republican Debate Discourse," *Critical Ciminology* (24), (2016): 34, 37. Space constraints limit the ability to specifically discuss links between Obama and terrorism as code. The expansion of this form of code is well explained by Anthony Sparks (34) when he argues the code linking Obama to terrorism attacks him as both inadequate and unprepared for office, as well as linking Obama, Islam and terrorism together.

²⁹ Brown, "Running on Fear: Immigration, Race, and Crime Framings in Contemporary GOP Presidential Debate Discourse," 329. Brown, "The New "Southern Strategy:" Immigration, Race, and "Welfare Dependency" in Contemporary U.S. Republican Debate Discourse," 37-38.

³⁰ Matthew W. Hughey, "White Backlash in the 'Post-Racial' United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (37), No.5 (2014): 722.

³¹ *Ibid.* 722-723.

anxiety towards a minority group.³² The other major factor is that the appeal must create a connection between a minority group and conservative views, usually about small government or limited spending.³³

When it comes to code towards a minority group it is typically much more effective for that appeal to be made when there is anger towards that group; something illustrated in the argument made by Antoine Banks and Nicholas Valentino.³⁴ This is demonstrated in a sociological experiment designed to see what sort of emotions individuals have towards policies designed to help blacks. Through this experiment they found that the most common feelings elicited were those of fear or anger. Banks and Valentino found that the higher a person's racial resentment was, the angrier they felt towards policies geared to help blacks. From this they argue that someone with high levels of racial resentment is likely to be quick to anger at the association of policies aimed to help these groups, a concept very evident with groups such as the Tea Party. This idea is strengthened by Ted Brader et. al, who, in a 2008 experiment designed to look at opinions regarding immigration, found that there is higher anti-immigrant sentiment when the immigrants in question are Latino rather than when they are European. This idea becomes especially powerful when the less favored immigrant group is discussed alongside negative stereotypes about that group, and pre-existing anxiety towards that group can be emphasized

³² Antoine J. Banks and Nicholas A. Valentino, "Emotional Substrates of White Racial Attitudes," *Midwest Political Science Association* (56), No. 2 (2012): 288-289. Ted Brader, Elizabeth Suhay and Nicholas A. Valentino. 959, 975-76. Paul A. Passavant, "Political Subjectivity and Presidential Campaign Ads," *Political Science and Politics* (49), No. 1 (2016): 38. Melania A. Buckner and Michael W. Giles, "David Duke and Black Threat: An Old Hypothesis Revisited," *Journal of Politics* (55), No. 3 (1993): 708, 710-71.

³³ Martin Gilens, "Race Coding" and White Opposition to Welfare," *The American Political Science Review* (90), No. 3 (1996): 593-94, 598. P.J. Henry and David Sears, "The Origins of Symbolic Racism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (85), No. 37 (2015): 263-64, 272. David O. Sears and Nicholas A. Valentino, "Old Times there are not Forgotten: Race and Partisan Realignment in the Contemporary South," *American Journal of Political Science* (49), No.3 (2005): 280-81. Hutchings, Valentino and White, 82, 84. L.J. Zigerell, "Distinguishing Racism from Ideology: A Methodological Inquiry," *Political Research Quarterly* (68), No. 3. (2015): 522.

³⁴ Banks and Valentino. 294.

through implicit messaging.³⁵ In addition to feelings of fear or anxiety towards immigrants, the presence of large minority groups in an area can also spark backlash fears. This is shown by Melanie Buckner and Michael Giles, whose study illuminated the increase in white voter registration in counties with a substantial black population when a candidate brought out fears of minority groups.³⁶ This sort of anxiety stirring can best be seen at the national level in 1968, when Nixon deftly used the “southern strategy” and emphasized the turmoil caused by rioting in the wake of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.³⁷ What makes the use of fear and anxiety appeals especially useful is that they tie in pre-existing white fears towards minorities and use them to create animus towards policies designed in the favor of these minority groups.

The other crucial link to be built for these coded appeals to work is through association of anti-minority feelings and traditional conservative policies.³⁸ Martin Gilens illuminates how there is a higher feeling of antipathy towards social welfare policies when the policies are viewed as “favoring minorities”; for example “means tested public-assistance” such as welfare receives much higher hostility than policies such as Medicaid because the former is predominantly associated with blacks.³⁹ This negative association is shown to be much stronger in the form of symbolic racism, which results from a combination of racial prejudice and conservative values; this becomes especially effective at creating a feeling that blacks already get more than they deserve so the government does not need to help them anymore.⁴⁰ This mixing of conservative

³⁵ Brader, Suhay, and Valentino. 963, 975.

³⁶ Buckner and Giles. 708. Buckner and Giles use David Duke’s Louisiana Senate run as a case study for their article.

³⁷ Passavant. 38. Mayer “Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory”. 354.

³⁸ L.J. Zigerell warns of accidentally mixing up anti-black sentiment with general conservative policies of small government and individualism. See his work “Distinguishing Racism from Ideology” for an explanation of the dangers of confusing symbolic racism (anti-black or anti-minority feelings) with general conservatism.

³⁹ Gilens. 593-94.

⁴⁰ Henry and Sears. 264. This study dealt specifically with anti-black feeling and conservative leaning.

feelings and racial animus can become especially influential in areas that are high in both feelings; for example these feelings tend to both be more prevalent in the “Old Confederacy.”⁴¹ In general, it is crucial that coded language remains implicit in order to provide plausible deniability; several works illustrate that when racial appeals become explicit they become less effective.⁴² This occurs because it is seen as a norm violation, or because overt appeals convey explicit racism which turns people away from these policies.⁴³

The final historiographical step is to examine what makes Trump’s language so appealing to so many people. As many of the aforementioned authors have argued racial appeals work best in times of uncertainty, or when people fear the “other”; and this is an appeal that Trump provides. As Patrick Fisher demonstrates Trump did best in the primaries in states where there were a lot of “left behind whites,” or in states where people who had less positive views of government; what Fisher effectively shows is that Trump perfectly played upon racial fears and uncertain times.⁴⁴ Thomas Edsall of the *New York Times* adds to this argument quoting David Berg of the Yale School of Medicine saying “for many voters, perceived threats to their security are now coming.”⁴⁵ When people are afraid of an outside threat, especially from foreigners taking their power and status, they are more drawn to racial appeals, similar to Trump’s. One of Trump’s most common talking points during, and even since the election, is that “the election is rigged against him,” an appeal Yoni Appelbaum of *The Atlantic* labels as very dangerous, and

⁴¹ Sears and Valentino. 285. The “Old Confederacy” consists of the 11 states that seceded during the civil war.

⁴² Gregory A. Huber and John S. Lapinski, “The “Race Card” Revisited: Assessing Racial Priming in Policy Contests,” *American Journal of Political Science* (50), No. 2 (2006):428. Hutchings, Valentino, and White. 75-76.

⁴³ Huber and Lapinski. 438.

⁴⁴ Patrick I. Fisher, “Definitely not Moralistic: State Political Culture and Support for Donald Trump in the Race for the 2016 Republican Presidential Nomination,” *The American Political Science Association*, (2016): 743, 745. A similar situation to the one described by Fisher would be in 1968, when Nixon played upon the uncertainty of those times.

⁴⁵ Thomas B. Edsall, “Donald Trump’s Appeal,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 2, 2015).

suggests may be a racist and sexist code. Appelbaum discusses how the claim alludes to minority groups and women, demographics where Trump's appeals were weaker. Thus, Appelbaum argues, that when Trump says the election is illegitimate, he may be suggesting that these people's vote are illegitimate.⁴⁶ This idea relates to much of the previous literature about how racial backlash is at its most powerful when whites fear loss of power and influence; something that is an increasing concern for many whites today. Part of what makes Trump's racial rhetoric so appealing can be effectively summed up in the quote of one Trump supporter "I feel he's the last chance we have to establish law and order and preserve the culture I grew up in."⁴⁷ As Michelle Cottle argues, Trump has been able to ignore the code and explicitly appeal to people's racial fears because people are so angry and fearful about change and being left behind. Trump's explicit appeals become acceptable to his base because he effectively speaks to their anxiety in uncertain times.

The historiography around coded language has led to a point where Trump has seen a situation where circumstances are ripe for racially resentful appeals; and the anger of the people has enabled him to be more explicit with some appeals than most politicians have been in recent memory. This literature now prepares us to examine coded appeals in the past, and how they have evolved to the point where Trump has successfully used many of them in an explicit manner. The task now is to explain what has been so difficult for many to comprehend; what made Trump so politically successful?

⁴⁶ Yoni Appelbaum. "Trump's Rigged Game," *The Atlantic*, October 16, 2016.

http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/10/trumps-rigged-game/504299/?utm_source=atfb.

⁴⁷ Michelle Cottle, "Trump Fans have more to lose than Trump Himself," *the Atlantic*, October 14, 2016.

http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/10/what-will-happen-to-the-trump-die-hards/504032/?utm_source=atfb

Coded Language: The History and Message

The first major undertaking in understanding our ultimate thesis is to examine the history of coded language in American Presidential rhetoric. In order to understand the code one must look at what exactly is being said; what words and imagery are being used to appeal to the “backlash electorate.” Crucial to this is understanding the links between what is being said or illustrated and the sort of reaction that it can conjure up from backlash voters.⁴⁸ In the case of each specific election it becomes necessary to examine what makes these “loaded” words loaded; this is best done by going right into the sources and looking at what has been said, as well looking at the social and political circumstances of the time, something that is necessary in order to understand the concerns of people in specific time periods. Thus in order to achieve the most thorough understanding of the coded language used in each election theses one and two are examined in tandem; understanding the code cannot be done without understanding the time period and vice versa. For example, in order to get the best understanding of coded language in 1968 it is necessary to identify a phrase such as “law and order” while simultaneously seeing how this phrase became charged during the turbulent 1960s that preceded its use. Our study begins in 1968 looking at the new “southern strategy”; however this is not treated as a single election on its own, but as a watershed moment in the history of racially coded language.

The 1968 election came during a turbulent time for the United States; the country was bogged down in the Vietnam War, while closer to home there was violence, which seemingly consumed urban America every summer between 1965 and 1967.⁴⁹ The social upheaval of the time made Nixon’s emphasis on “law and order” especially salient for a population where 81%

⁴⁸ Banks and Valentino, 287-88. Gilens, 598.

⁴⁹ Mayer, *Running on Race*, 71.

of people “agreed that law and order had broken down.”⁵⁰ This anxiety about a lack of order featured strongly in Nixon’s rhetoric; both in his campaign ads and in his acceptance speech. Nixon began the campaign emphasizing law and order, and by appealing to people’s fears of blacks and social unrest.⁵¹ This was demonstrated in his acceptance speech of the Republican Presidential nomination where he said “As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night.”⁵² Crucially for the code he never says anything about blacks or race. To people sitting in the audience, or watching at home, who were very concerned about racial tensions, especially the 54% of people who “said fear of racial violence made them uneasy on the streets”⁵³ Nixon’s statement would have sent them a clear message- a message stressing that Nixon knew who and what they were afraid of, and one that emphasized that he was going to make sure that white people felt safe. Nixon’s acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention demonstrates that he knew that racial coding needed to remain implicit.⁵⁴ This was most evident when, in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention he said “And to those who say that law and order is the code word for racism, there and here is a reply: Our goal is justice for every American. If we are to have respect for law in American, we must have laws that deserve respect.”⁵⁵ It is clear that Nixon understood the implicit meanings of his statements; he understood the racial tensions and unease white Americans had in the wake of

⁵⁰ Ben Schott, “The Way we Were, 1968” *New York Times*, August 1, 2008. Schott is citing a Gallup poll from 1968 conducted by Louis Harris.

⁵¹ Mayer, *Running on Race*, 83. While having previously been a moderate on Civil Rights and a member of the NAACP Nixon became part of the Republican move towards the right on race.

⁵² Richard Nixon. “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida.” (Speech, Miami Beach, FL, August 8, 1968) The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25968>.

⁵³ Schott, citing Gallup in 1968

⁵⁴ The importance of the implicit nature of coded language is well documented by Huber and Lapinski (421-422) who said “If a message’s racial content is too apparent, the norm of equality becomes active. If it is absent, then the message will not activate anti-black predispositions at all.”

⁵⁵ Richard Nixon, 1968.

the Civil Rights movement and the rioting and violence that had followed and so he said to them, with a bit of a wink, that he would ensure “law and order”.⁵⁶ What Nixon said was that he would be keeping safety; while what was understood was that would help protect whites in their traditional places of power. This message would set the tone not only for his campaign but also for future coded campaigns, since staying coded is absolutely crucial for sending a racially baited message, but making sure one never gets accused of being racist.

Nixon expends a lot of effort in his campaign ads to use coded language, as well as powerful imagery and music to appeal to backlash voters. The ad “The First Civil Right” starts out very dark and frightening; with shrill, horror movie sounding music played over the top of images of screaming protesters and burning buildings.⁵⁷ During the first 30 seconds of the ad there is no talking, just this imagery; during this time the viewer is left to fill in the gaps of who or what caused this violence and destruction. This is crucial in building implicit links between blacks, violence and crime; nothing is ever said about race, but the ad leaves it open to the viewer’s interpretation about who caused this violence and destruction.⁵⁸ The narrator finally enters halfway through the ad making one of his few comments “let us recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence”; this comment is crucial for both the code and Nixon’s intended message.⁵⁹ Not only has code about blacks and violence been built, but there is now another code that is pushing the Civil Rights movement down as less

⁵⁶ There was obviously no actual wink from Nixon to racial conservatives, the statement is merely to note Nixon’s knowledge and intentionality of what he was doing.

⁵⁷ Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee, *The First Civil Right*, Television, 1968. Retrieved from *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

⁵⁸ Hutchings, Valentino and White, 75-76, here they cite Tali Mendelberg and her discussion of what makes coded messaging the most effective. One of the key criteria being that some cues are more effective at priming preconceived notions and prejudices against certain minority groups. Another key criteria for these cues is that they must remain implicit.

⁵⁹ Nixon-Agnew TV Committee.

important by making the obvious statement that safety is everyone's civil right. This is comparable to the contemporary "All Lives Matter" concept that emerged to push back against "Black Lives Matter". Both "the first civil right" and "All Lives Matter" seek to downplay the importance of civil rights or stopping violence against blacks by making the universally accepted statement that all people have a right to life and safety, consequently minimizing the more immediate problems facing these minority communities. Additionally closing the monologue with the call to order goes back to Nixon's main theme of "law and order", which is central to the code around blacks as criminals, while also maintaining whites in a position of power. This ad would have been lacking in its ability to draw people in if it was not created at a time when 17% of people said civil rights were the most important problem facing the country, and another 12% said "racial strife" was the biggest concern facing the country.⁶⁰ The timing was key, since this ad campaign came out when the minority group facing the most racial animosity was blacks; thus the Nixon campaign's consistent use of advertising that connected blacks and crime was very effective at priming racial animosities and getting out the backlash vote.⁶¹

Similarly to the "First Civil Rights", the ad "Crime" plays directly to the code of blacks and crime, subtly using backlash against the civil rights movement and accompanying anxiety as a deep and powerful code.⁶² On the surface there is the code linking blacks and crime; recognizing this code is much easier because "law and order" became a pretty much catch-all phrase for Nixon's racial coding.⁶³ However, there is also a different level of more nuanced code; this occurs when the narrator says there will be protection for the decent people of the

⁶⁰ Schott, citing Gallup in 1968.

⁶¹ Banks and Valentino, 295. Banks and Valentino do an excellent experiment that demonstrates that those with prior racial animus are most susceptible to racial priming; thus it becomes evident why these ads are so powerful.

⁶² Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee, Crime. Television, 1968. Retrieved from The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016.

⁶³ Passavant, 39.

country and “the wave of crime is not going to be the wave of the future in America.”⁶⁴ This is a coded way of saying that despite the civil rights movement and the new found power and equality that black have, the Nixon administration is going to make sure that minority groups do not come in to too much power. There is again no mention of race in this discussion of crime which is central in keeping the code going while maintaining plausible deniability.⁶⁵ The ad had to make clear that the new found upward mobility for blacks was negative for whites, while simultaneously not breaking any code, which would have severely damaged the ads effectiveness.

Unique to this election was that it featured another candidate known for racing baiting, George Wallace; who was much less nuanced about race baiting than Nixon was. Part of understanding Wallace’s ability to race bait is understanding his history of not being coded. Wallace was traditionally known as an ardent supporter of “states’ rights” and segregation. Consequently when he “tried to hide behind states’ rights saying that he only advocated segregation as best for Alabama”⁶⁶ the code was easier to recognize as race baiting. The voters Wallace searched for were most likely voters possessing higher levels of racial resentment, accordingly it would take less race baiting for them to draw parallels between the message and what it symbolized.⁶⁷ This is very evident in Wallace’s ad “busing/law and order”; using two racially loaded phrases insinuate that the ad will be loaded with racially coded language and appeals.⁶⁸ The ad is representative of the campaign Wallace ran; there were hints of code, but it

⁶⁴ Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee ad.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Running on Fear: Immigration, Race and Crime Framings in Contemporary GOP Presidential Debate Discourse*, 315.

⁶⁶ Mayer, “Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Campaign,” 358-59.

⁶⁷ Gilens, 598. Gilens discusses how level of racial resentment amongst whites affects their opposition to welfare policies, a similar theory can be applied here towards opposition to the civil rights movement.

⁶⁸ Luckie and Forney, *Busing/ Law and Order, 1968*. Retrieved from *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

was consistently very shallow code. At one point in this ad there is an image of a pair of what appear to be white women's legs in high heels walking down a dark street, the image is succeeded by a nearby light being shot out, while a voice says "why are more and more millions of Americans turning to Governor Wallace? Take a walk in your street tonight."⁶⁹ There is a clear attempt here to tie fears of crime with the age old fears of black men preying on white women.⁷⁰ The Wallace campaign understood these fears and racist stereotypes; accordingly they used a shallow code to arouse backlash whites into voting for Wallace. "Law and order/ busing" is an excellent representation of Wallace's attempts to race bait as much as he could while hiding behind the shallowest of codes.

The 1968 presidential campaign provides a tremendous springboard from which to begin a study of the power of coded language. Not only was it the first election where coded language was a necessity when it came to race baiting, but it also provides a prime example of how code can be nuanced to achieve different goals. Nixon's much more nuanced code showed that he was trying to hid the fact that he was race baiting, whereas Wallace's campaign likely aimed at those with high levels of racial resentment and therefore needed to use a less subtle form of code.

The 1988 election featured one of the most blatant and powerful examples of coded language; featuring the "Willie Horton" ad, a thinly veiled attempt to make race baiting look like a discussion of crime. While 1988 was unique from 1968, it contained many elements that showed how it built upon the 1968 campaign. The 1980s were the Reagan years, a time of strong individualism and conservative backlash against the social liberal policies of the 1960s; this was

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mendelberg, 138. Mendelberg talks about this phenomenon in the 1988 election, but the same affects and appeals are clearly at work in this ad.

also the era where welfare became a powerful code word to talk about blacks.⁷¹ Bush's goal in this election was to paint himself as a continuation of all of the good that come out of small government and individualism of the Raegan era. As the times changed, so did the coded phrases used for race baiting; consequently there was a shift in the vernacular from loading phrases such as bussing and the "threat" posed by the civil rights movement to loading phrases such as welfare and drugs.⁷² A crucial theme continued from 1968 to 1988 was the necessity of crime framings as a key racial code. In 1968 Nixon used "law and order" as the center piece of his campaign, while in 1988 Willie Horton would become the centerpiece of the crime code and the election itself.⁷³

The enduring memory of the 1988 election would be the Willie Horton ad, a deftly calculated political move that impeccably brought crime and race together, and into the forefront of the American voters' mind. The campaign picked up on the Horton story in early May, 1988, and used Horton as a powerful race bait once the general election began.⁷⁴ As Roger Ailes, a media adviser in the Bush campaign, said "The only question is whether we depict Willie Horton with a knife in his hand or without it."⁷⁵ This helps make clear that this ad was planned to be a center piece of a campaign that would use racial code.⁷⁶ Bush's move to use code in the campaign was evident from his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in August. Interestingly his speech embraces a much more nuanced race bait than the more obvious

⁷¹ Hughey, 722.

⁷² Raegan was well known for his coded story of the "welfare queen" who had multitudes of children simply to syphon more welfare money from the government; this story was a very thin racial code used to talk about blacks.

⁷³ As Lee Atwater famously said "By the time we're finished, they're going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis's running mate. (Roger Simon, "How a Murderer and Rapist became the Bush Campaign's Most Valuable Player," *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Nov. 11, 1990.)

⁷⁴ Mayer, *Running on Race*, 212-13. It is important to note is that Bush himself never actually approved the ad, however it is hard to believe that he and his top advisors did not know or approve of the ad.

⁷⁵ Mayer, *Running on Race*, 219. Quoting an August Time magazine article.

⁷⁶ While the campaign may have argued that this was only about crime and the death penalty it was and is evident that this was a clear attempt at race baiting.

use of race baiting in the campaign itself. In his acceptance speech Bush said “I’m the one who believes it is a scandal to give a weekend furlough to a hardened, first-degree killer.”⁷⁷ Central to this appeal is that it linked traditional conservative beliefs, a support for stronger jail sentences, with negative racial feelings about blacks; this maneuver is a central part of priming the racial resentment used in coded language.⁷⁸ Bush would again draw on the links between conservatism and racial prejudice following up that appeal by saying “I’m the one who says a drug dealer who is responsible for the death of a policemen should be subject to capital punishment.”⁷⁹ This demonstrates another attempt to link conservative feelings about capital punishment with race since the Reagan era had done a great deal to racially code drugs and drug dealers. The acceptance speech began linking race with traditional conservative principles, which helped pave the way for the Horton ad.

The Willie Horton ad was groundbreaking when it came to racial coding in modern American politics. The ad begins innocently enough, comparing the two men’s positions on crime and the death penalty; once Horton’s name and accompanying mugshot appear the ad becomes code for race and does so in a very thinly veiled way.⁸⁰ The first instance of race baiting through code is by referring to Horton as “Willie” instead of William; in calling him “Willie” the ad creators attempt to make Horton seem like a racial character, in an attempt to dehumanize him.⁸¹ The dehumanization of Horton was a clear attempt to try and strengthen the link between

⁷⁷ Bush, George. “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans.” Speech, New Orleans, LA. August, 18, 1988. The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25955>. This may have also been an early allusion to Horton.

⁷⁸ Henry and Sears, 264. Henry and Sears demonstrate how symbolic racism is the “glue” that hold conservatism and racial prejudice together. This is evident here in the link between the death penalty and racial prejudice.

⁷⁹ Bush, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention.

⁸⁰ National Security PAC, Willie Horton, 1988. Retrieved from *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

⁸¹ Sparks, 24. Sparks discusses how one effective coding technique is when the appeal takes the form of black stereotypes; similarly to those seen in the minstrel shows of the Jim Crow era.

Horton's race and white's historic fears of black men. The power behind this ad is best described by Roger Simon of the *Baltimore Sun*, who said "He was big. He was black. He was every guy you ever crossed street to avoid... He was every person you moved out of the city to escape, every sound in the night that made you... check the locks on the windows."⁸² The mugshot, coupled with the words "kidnapping", "stabbing", and "raping" appear beneath a picture of Horton staring down at a Police Officer which is used to emphasize the message of fear. Race could be completely left out, because the ad, which featured Horton's mugshot and the picture of Horton scowling at the Police Officer, was effective in conveying the message of fear which was crucial in linking blacks and crime in a thinly coded way. This same message was stressed in the "revolving door" ad that showed prisoners walking through a revolving prison door.⁸³ Prisoners of all different races are seen walking through a revolving door, but what is designed to stand out is a black prisoner with an afro staring menacingly at the camera. This stare is designed to provoke fear from the audience in a similar way that Horton's menacing mugshot is designed to in the "Willie Horton" ad. The ad makes the statement that there are criminals from all races, but the real criminals, the ones voters should be afraid of are large black men, like Willie Horton.

These ads were clear examples of race baiting, but importantly for their effectiveness as code was that they offered plausible deniability as a discussion about crime since Horton was a multi-time felon. Despite the plausibility of it being about crime it was clear what the campaign's intended goals were; they had a powerful story of a black man attacking a white couple, and raping a white women, and they were going to make the most of it to appeal to backlash voters and discredit Dukakis. The fear and raw emotion that crimes elicits from people

⁸² Simon, "How a Murderer and Rapist became the Bush Campaign's most Valuable Player"

⁸³ Roger Ailes and Dennis Frankenberry. *Revolving Door*. 1988. Retrieved from *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

is powerful, which helped make the Horton ad so effective.⁸⁴ The ad contained the major components necessary for race baiting: crime, threat to whites and fear. The Horton ad forever changed how racial coding could be used; in the ensuing years, whenever politicians tried to race bait they had to make sure their ads would not become the next “Willie Horton” ad. More powerfully though is that the Horton ad demonstrated how disastrous of an effect these fear mongering ads could have on opponents of those who use them. These tactics would not disappear after 1988, and they would find a new place to latch onto, the 2008 Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama.

While 2008 was a unique election in many ways it also contained elements that carried over from previous elections. The 2008 election came at a troubling time for the United States; with the two major issues being the struggling economy and ongoing War in Iraq. The major concern about these factors is indicated in a February 2008 Gallup poll where 89% of people surveyed said the candidates position on the economy was “extremely/very important” and 87% said the situation in Iraq was “extremely/very important”.⁸⁵ On the surface it may have appeared that these major issues would overshadow the use of racially based appeals; however a closer look yields an indication about the power racial issues could, and would have. The same Gallup poll showed that “Terrorism” was “extremely important” for 50% of Republicans while “Moral values” were “extremely important” for 39% of Republican voters.⁸⁶ While these issues are not necessarily overtly racial they provide an opportunity to use code since the nature of these issues show potential fears amongst the backlash electorate. In this election the McCain campaign, and accompanying PACs, would use very nuanced code to try and tie Obama to older negative

⁸⁴ Hurwitz and Peffley, 100

⁸⁵ Lydia Saad, “Iraq and the Economy are Top Issues to Voters,” *Gallup*, February 13, 2008, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/104320/iraq-economy-top-issues-voters.aspx>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

stereotypes about blacks. Similarly, although much less overtly, than the way that Horton was used as a surrogate for blacks and crime, Obama became a code for talking about blacks as a group, often using many coded terms that had become widely used in preceding elections. Obama's presence at the top of the ticket allowed McCain and the GOP to attack Obama, often using old "dog-whistle" words and black stereotypes, doing so in a way that connected Obama with negative perceptions of blacks. These appeals became some of the most subtle forms of code seen to date.

The 2008 election began what some may have perceived to be the beginning of a post-racial era in America; however as most people would quickly realize the candidacy and eventually presidency of Barack Obama would lead to anything but a post-racial era.⁸⁷ At this point in the discussion of coded language it is necessary to momentarily pause and make note of a potential critique of this research. Many phrases that could be considered coded appeals, especially ones seen in the 2008 election, are phrases that may simply be meant as traditional conservative language, with no "dog-whistles" attached to them. L.J. Zigerell provides an important warning about the dangers of confusing coded language with traditional conservative rhetoric, when in reality the language is merely a good faith non-racial appeal.⁸⁸ This is an area of inquiry where one must tread lightly; it is important to bring to light and discuss genuine instances of race baiting, it is of equal importance to ensure that one is not painting all conservative language with a broad brush, for doing so would undermine the fairness of any potential discussion about race and politics. Consequently this paper has, and will continue to only illuminate what appear to be genuine racially coded appeals. However as the author has

⁸⁷ While the discussion of all of these elections is controversial the nuance of the coded used here, and the interpretation of these codes, may cause greater discomfort and disagreement amongst many readers.

⁸⁸ Zigerell, 522, 532.

previously acknowledged this is a contentious subject and there will undoubtedly be disagreements about what is and what is not a racially coded appeal.

Noticeably the beginning of McCain's campaign sent a message that this would be a civil campaign; in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention McCain utilized minimal coded racial appeals. One example that McCain may have been using coded language, and intended to use it in the general campaign, was when he used a pair of traditional "dog-whistle" phrases in describing the campaign's platform, saying "we believe in... personal responsibility, rule of law..."⁸⁹ This appeal is much closer to the traditional racially coded appeals seen in 1968 and 1988. Accordingly by 2008 these "dog-whistle" words had become so ingrained in the racial coding vernacular that a candidate could easily slip them into rhetoric with little questioning.⁹⁰ While these traditional coded appeals would feature in much of McCain's campaign, the bulk of his coded rhetoric would be in the form of attack ads on Barack Obama, where Obama became a surrogate for coded appeals about blacks as a group. When examining 2008 it is necessary to consider the power of the internet and social media; despite the McCain campaign's limited use of social media, the internet allowed for the message to be spread to a much wider audience than in previous elections.⁹¹

⁸⁹ John McCain, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention." These are "dog-whistle" terms that were first used by Ronald Reagan. In the context that these words are used here it is again important to note that while they appear as potential dog-whistle terms, there is the possibility that their intentions as non-racial talking points is real. This is the difficult nature of investigating coded language; for it to be effective it must offer plausible deniability, but this fact also makes it difficult to separate coded language from true non-racial language.

⁹⁰ Hurwitz and Peffley, 109. This idea appears in Hurwitz and Peffley's article during their discussion of how perceptions of groups associated with certain policies affect how people perceive such policies. The power behind this is that utilizing prior existing links between groups and policies making race baiting much easier.

⁹¹ Aaron Smith, "The internet as a Source of Political News and Information," *Pew Research Center*, April 15, 2009, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/04/15/the-internet-as-a-source-of-political-news-and-information/>. 44% of adults received news about the election via the internet, up from 29% in 2004 and up from 4% in 1996. It is also important to note that the Obama campaign vastly outperformed the McCain campaign when it came to social media, and in general the McCain campaign's use of social media was fairly weak. Upon examining McCain's Facebook page

Many of McCain's attack ads on Obama centered around the message of "he's just not ready" or "who is Obama?"; the power of these ads was that they could easily be described as being about Obama being a relatively young outsider, instead of being coded appeals about how a black man was out of place in such a position of power. This is seen in the ad "dangerous" which opens with the question "who is Barack Obama", before illuminating reasons such as the War in Iraq and reckless spending for why Obama should not be President.⁹² While this is a fairly straight forward attack ad about an opponent's ability to handle major issues, opening with the question of "who is Obama", comes with a code for blacks. Beyond just asking who Obama is, the ad also begs the question, in a coded way, of who is this black man to try and come into this power? This questioning of a black person's place in this sort of power is again seen in the ad "special", which closes by saying "the fact is Barack Obama's just not ready... yet".⁹³ This ad again points to Obama's youth; but similar to "dangerous" provides a code for saying black people are out of place in positions of major political power. What makes "special" such a deep and powerful code is that it has definite plausible deniability of being about Obama's youth and lack of experience at the national level. While it sends this message, it simultaneously makes the coded claim that the country is not ready for a black president. The creators of the ad also seem to recognize that this may be perceived as a coded appeal. Consequently there is the addition of the word "yet" to cover any accusations of racism and maintain that there may come a day when Obama and other black people will be capable of running for the highest office. What makes these ads so effective is that they came at a time when a black person was running for President

from 2008 it was apparent that he mainly used social media to share interview transcripts and newspaper articles written by other people.

⁹² Foxhole Productions, *Dangerous*, 2008. Retrieved from the *Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

⁹³ Foxhole Productions, *Special*, 2008. Retrieved from the *Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

and there was an air that this might spark the beginning of a post-racial era in the United States. This was an issue grappled with by those on both sides of the political spectrum. Racial progressives could argue that Obama's success demonstrated how far the country had come. While for those on the opposite end of the spectrum there was potential to argue that Obama's success meant discussions about the need for racial progress could disappear.⁹⁴

While some of the messaging about Obama not being ready yet employed new forms of code others relied on traditional codes and stereotypes to send the same message.⁹⁵ One of the reoccurring messages of the campaign was an attempt to portray Obama as a celebrity in an effort to make him look less credible and out of place in such a position of power. The coded implication of this lies in the history of blacks being portrayed as out of place in positions of high power, in this case the presidency. Portraying Obama as a celebrity is seen in the ad "celeb" where the narrator describes Obama as a major public figure, similarly to Paris Hilton and Brittany Spears, but again raises the question of his preparedness to handle major obstacles facing the country.⁹⁶ The coded appeal lies in the comparison of a celebrity being in the White House with a black person being in the White House. The ad never once mentions race, but it carries the underlying claim that there is a similar level of unsuitability about a black person and a celebrity being in such a powerful position. An ad with a similar message to "celeb" is "the one", which incorporates religious sounds and imagery as a way to portray Obama as a sort of

⁹⁴ Paul L Wachtel, "Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-racial America," *Political Psychology* (35), No. 1: 126. Wachtel also makes the case that there was no getting around Obama's race; therefore even when there were attempts to take race out of the conversation, it was unavoidable to notice race.

⁹⁵ Charles and Erigha, 446-447 discuss this idea, which is also emphasized by Anthony Sparks on pg. 27 of "Minstrel Politics or "He speaks Too Well:" Rhetoric, Race, and Resistance in the 2008 Presidential Campaign."

⁹⁶ Foxhole Productions, *Celeb*, 2008. Retrieved from the *Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*. This idea is also discussed by Charles and Erigha, who point to many ads that question whether Obama, as a black man, is really ready to be the President of the country.

self-anointed religious leader.⁹⁷ The ad portrays Obama as a reverend or pseudo-prophet, someone who may provide a major emotional appeal to people, but not someone who is ready to lead the country. This echoes the sentiment of Sarah Palin calling Obama a “community organizer”; both “the one” and Palin’s statement are designed to associate Obama with a local religious or community leader, someone who can be very emotionally exciting and moving, but not someone who should be trusted with the Nation’s highest office.⁹⁸ In both “celeb” and “the one” there is an implicit message that Obama, as a black man, is out of place chasing such political power. These appeals demonstrate a very nuanced code; explicitly they are only claiming that his age and lack of experience inhibit his ability to be President. All the while employing traditional codes to insinuate that his race would make him unqualified for such a position.

Beyond making coded appeals that Obama was not ready to lead, several of McCain’s commercials employed very nuanced coded links between Obama and deep-rooted negative stereotypes about blacks.⁹⁹ One theme that reappeared was a connection between Obama and an increase in spending; the power is that the appeal is about limiting spending, a traditional conservative principle, while the coded power lies in the old negative association of blacks and welfare spending.¹⁰⁰ The ad “sweat equity” exemplifies this by showing Obama talking about “spreading the wealth around” and then featuring individuals saying “I’m Joe the plumber” and questioning why they should have to pay for Obama’s tax hikes.¹⁰¹ Important to notice is that the

⁹⁷ Foxhole Productions, *The One*, 2008. Retrieved from *the Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

⁹⁸ Sparks 32-33, elaborates on Palin’s statement, making Obama out to a dreamer and not a true national leader.

⁹⁹ This section is one of those places where there is potential for a great debate about if McCain’s language is code of truly non-racial; this is what makes coded language so powerful and controversial.

¹⁰⁰ Henry and Sears, 264.

¹⁰¹ Foxhole Productions, *Sweat Equity*, 2008. Retrieved from *the Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*. The name “Joe the Plumber” is a traditional euphemism for a working class individual.

ad never mentions race, or any traditional “dog-whistle” words such as welfare. Part of the ad’s effectiveness may lay in the ad’s ability to connect traditionally loaded phrases about blacks and traditional conservative antipathy towards spending believed only to be helping blacks.¹⁰² This message becomes even stronger when taken in collaboration with the ad “compare”, an ad loaded with “dog-whistle” words.¹⁰³ “Compare” contrasts pictures of Obama and McCain, accompanied by short phrases comparing and contrasting the two candidates. One comparison shows a picture of Obama with the message “spread your income”, while the image of McCain says “keep what’s yours.”¹⁰⁴ This is overtly a comparison of liberal versus conservative spending policy; nevertheless, the wording “keep what’s yours” sends a very deep code of protecting one’s income from being used to support the welfare policies generally associated with blacks. These ads use an exceptional degree of subtlety, with traditional coded appeals being used beneath the surface. The stigma of using race baiting, coming from negative reaction to ads such as “Willie Horton,” which, coupled with an era of “political correctness,” have forced racial appeals to move deeper underground to a point where they must rely extensively on preexisting perceptions of blacks and welfare policies.¹⁰⁵

The 2008 election came at a fascinating moment in U.S. history; the election saw a rise in the use of the internet as a campaign tool, something that would set the stage for ensuing elections by providing a platform that reached a much wider audience. 2008 was a seminal election for racial politics and race as a whole; as a country historically marred by racial tensions elected its first black president. Obama’s campaign showed just how far the country had come,

¹⁰² Gilens, 593-94 & 598 discusses how racially resentful white voters are easily swayed away from social welfare policies that they associate with blacks.

¹⁰³ Foxhole Productions, *Compare*, 2008. Retrieved from *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2016*.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Gilens, 602.

but it also showed that as much as things had changed they also stayed the same. Obama was repeatedly used as a code for talking about blacks as a group.¹⁰⁶ Consequently 2008 saw a decrease in traditional “law and order” rhetoric, which by 2008 was recognized by most as a coded appeal, but was supplemented by the use of Obama as a newer and more nuanced code. If 2008 demonstrated how nuanced racial code could be, 2016 showed how overt a code could become and remain appealing.

The elections of 1968, 1988 and 2008 have told a story, one of an ever shifting and evolving racial coded landscape. 1968 was the birth of coded language, when “law and order” became a way of talking about race without ever saying anything explicitly racial. The 1988 “Willie Horton” ad demonstrated the immense power of coded racial appeals, but also demonstrated the danger that taking these ads too far could have. The 2008 election caused some to believe America had become “post-racial”, and the code used by the McCain campaign had to be tremendously nuanced. Upon electing Obama the country had seemingly reached its race baiting bottom, an era where racially divisive appeals would either disappear, or at least go so far underground that they would be difficult to identify and become ineffective. On June 16, 2015, in the span of less than an hour, this coded trajectory would completely change course when Donald Trump issued his now famous statement about Mexicans saying immigrants from Mexico were “bringing drugs... bringing crime... they’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”¹⁰⁷ With that statement racial code became much less prevalent, and as one may expect the following 15 months contained even more explicit racial language. However, the code did not completely break; undoubtedly June 6, 2015 marked a major change in the history of coded

¹⁰⁶ Barack Obama and his family were also the targets of a great deal of explicit racial language. Most of this came from outside the political arena, but it is still an important aspect to note and understand when looking at race and politics in American history.

¹⁰⁷ Donald Trump, “Presidential Campaign Announcement.”

language, but did not instigate a complete change in the rhetoric. This brings us back to our opening question, the question that has driven this plunge into the history and the circumstances surrounding racial code. The question of why, after so many years of racial progress and pushing race baiting further underground, was Trump able to so spectacularly change the code and have it be accepted and embraced by vast swaths of the American people?

In 2016 Trump used both coded and un-coded language about race; this tactic, coupled with social media's broad reach, is potentially what made Trump's race baiting so effective.¹⁰⁸ There were instances when he utilized overt racial rhetoric, especially when talking about Muslims or Latinos. For example on December 2 2015 he tweeted “@thumpmomma: I likewise saw militant Muslims burning our flag and burning George Bush photos and figures, right after 9/11 Not#here!”¹⁰⁹, this tweet was emblematic of Trump's overt race baits against Muslims.¹⁰⁹ This tweet was also a major break from traditional coded language; there is little plausible deniability in such a tweet that this claim is about anything besides an attempt to associate all Muslims with terrorism. Similar to his overt attacks on Muslims, Trump was very blatant in his race baiting about Hispanics, particularly Mexicans. On July 13th 2015 Trump tweeted “likewise, billions of dollars get brought into Mexico through the border. We get the killers, drugs & crime, they get the money!”¹¹⁰ Again little plausible deniability is offered here, as Trump explicitly compares Mexican immigrants, and Mexicans in general, to criminals. Both of these tweets, one aimed against Muslims and the other against Mexicans show Trump's willingness to use un-filtered language against the two groups who are presently the most prevalent subjects of racial

¹⁰⁸ As a result of Trump using Twitter as his most far reaching form of political communication the discussion of Trump's election will examine Tweets as a method for Trump's discussion of racial politics.

¹⁰⁹ Donald Trump, Twitter post, December 2, 2015, 4:36 p.m.
https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/672182509111767041?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

¹¹⁰ Donald Trump, Twitter post, July 13, 2015, 3:53 a.m.
https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/620546522556534784?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

animosity.¹¹¹ While these tweets were representative of the way that Trump frequently spoke about minorities he still resorted to coded appeals, particularly when discussing blacks. An excellent example of this came in a November 22, 2015 tweet where Trump tweeted a picture of a black man holding a gun with a chart showing the percentages of total homicides between races.¹¹² Among the statistics there are a few that stand out “Blacks Killed by Police~~1%, Whites Killed by Whites~~ 16%, Whites Killed by Blacks~~81%, Blacks Killed by Blacks~~ 97%”; the statistics seem to be designed to play upon old racial stereotypes about the violent nature of black people.¹¹³ What is most noticeable about this post is that the “Crime Statistics Bureau-San Francisco” is not an actual research group, nor are these statistics true, as a variety of fact checking groups deemed these claims false.¹¹⁴ The coding here is similar to the type of race baiting seen in 1968, 1988 and 2008, the tweet employed racial stereotypes to appeal to the backlash vote. Additionally the statistics are geared to discredit “Black Lives Matter”, similarly to Nixon’s “The First Civil Right” ad, which sought to downplay the Civil Rights movement by making the generally accepted statement about all people having the right to live. However, the tweet also offers plausible deniability that it is only about crime, something that is crucial for a racially coded appeal. What was so unique about Trump’s discussion of race was that it broke code when discussing Muslims and Latinos, while continuing the use historic codes and “dog-whistle” appeals when discussing blacks. Considering that the 2016 election happened so recently it is difficult to determine why this blend of coded and un-coded rhetoric was so

¹¹¹ This shift towards a more anti-immigrant sentiment is greatly discussed by Jessica Autumn Brown.

¹¹² Donald Trump, Twitter post, November 22, 2015, 12:05.

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/668520614697820160?lang=en>.

¹¹³ Charles and Erigha, 440-441. Discuss the use of overwhelmingly negative stereotypes about blacks in campaign ads to try and denigrate the character and overall trustworthiness of blacks as a group.

¹¹⁴ The Pulitzer Prize winning group “Politifact” and the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s “FactCheck.org” issued reports deeming these claims false in the wake of this tweet. There is currently a great deal of debate about “fake news,” its levels of truth, and its effect on the American public; while this is an important topic for scholarly inquiry it is not one that can be explored here.

effective. It is plausible that the combination of coded and un-coded racial language allowed Trump to appeal to both the base he founded in the primaries, and the more traditional base that would be accepting of coded appeals, but wary of un-coded ones.

The brief examination of Trump's racial language shows that viewing 2016 as an outlier in an era of general "political correctness" and declining overt racial politics, may be incorrect. Instead it is feasible that 2016 ushered in a brand new era of racial backlash voting. What the 1968, 1988 and 2008 elections demonstrated is that there must be strong backlash sentiment for race baiting to be effective. The backlash white vote must have a feeling of insecurity, a feeling that they are being left behind and a minority group is being given an unfair leg up. In 1968 it was an uncertainty of what lay ahead in a post-Civil Rights America. 1988 came after the Reagan years of personal responsibility and anti-welfare spending, while economically there was a growing unease of jobs being shipped out of the country. 2008 came at a time of financial crises, a lingering war, and a major uncertainty among many racial conservatives about what a black presidential candidate meant for their future. 2016 saw elements of these three elections coming together in one election, one where Donald Trump saw these factors and brilliantly employed them to his advantage. One way to look at 2016 is as a backlash against social liberalism that has become increasingly prevalent in America since 2008. Prior to 2016 the country had eight years of a black president, a rise in "political correctness", a racial movement in "Black Lives Matter" unseen in scale and influence since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. All of this coupled with stifled economic growth for many working class whites delivered an electorate primed for backlash. When Trump opened his campaign with his comments about Mexicans, he sent a loud and clear message to "left-behind whites" that he was their candidate, a candidate who would not be restrained by the growing forces of political correctness, racial

liberalism and liberal identity politics. Trump's campaign may have ushered in a new era of sorts; one that at times followed the trends of previous elections, while also following the tone set by his first political speech to the country. Trump followed racial coding trended in regard to certain minority groups, using code where it was politically profitable, while simultaneously breaking code where he recognized that his language would be politically acceptable to at least a portion of his base. Do the elections of 1968, 1988 and 2008 explain why Trump was able to run his campaign in the way he did? No, but some of the major factors of 1968, 1988 and 2008 resurfaced in 2016, therefore understanding the background of these forces aid an understanding of what made Trump's racial rhetoric so powerful.

Conclusion: 2016 and Towards a New Normal?

The 2016 campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton proved to be one of the most divisive and hard fought campaigns in American history. The campaign also saw a return of racial rhetoric that, based upon the trajectory of recent elections including the three explored in this paper, appeared to heading underground. What made Trump's racially divisive rhetoric so powerful and appealing will undoubtedly be the topic of extensive debate for years to come. The goal of this paper has been, through the study of three earlier elections crucial to racial code, to add to the literature surrounding what made Trump so appealing. This work has shown the necessity of an ever shifting racial code in order to stay relevant to the fears and anxiety of the current backlash electorate. It has also demonstrated how racial code is at its most effective during times of great social and racial anxiety, when there is substantial fear of loss by the backlash electorate. Both of these factors proved crucial for Donald Trump's victory; Trump understood the fears of backlash voters throughout the country and spoke directly to the voter's fears of impending white loss and encroaching outsiders. What remains to be seen is which

direction racial politics, and political discussions in general turn. Will they follow the trajectory of 1968, 1988 and 2008 and move further underground? Or will racial politics follow the path set by 2016, with the backlash vote becoming increasingly powerful and vocal, where a combination of overt and coded appeals become central to winning elections? This work does not claim to provide answers to these questions, but instead to provide a platform for discussion of where American politics about race are heading, based upon where they have been. Racial politics will undoubtedly be a part of future American rhetoric, it now remains to be seen if it will be in the form of racial code, or the combination of implicit and explicit rhetoric that featured in 2016.

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