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## SDSU Prof's Race Study Grabs Spotlight

A San Diego State University professor is attracting national attention for his new research suggesting that college students unconsciously view Barack Obama as less "American" than white people like his rival John McCain.

"What we've shown is when we think of an American, we're more likely to think of a white person than members of an ethnic minority," said professor Thierry Devos. "It shows a discrepancy between our conscious thoughts and our unconscious thoughts."

Devos's research was highlighted earlier this month by [the Washington Post](#) and today in a New York Times [op-ed column](#) by Nicholas Kristof.

The articles looked at studies by Devos and a colleague that aim to understand how Americans look at traits like race, age and gender.

Devos's studies rely on a technique called the "implicit association test," designed to test how quickly participants put things and people into categories.

In the most recent study, which took place in September and early October, about 150 students were asked to quickly press keys on a keyboard when they figured out how to categorize pictures they saw on a computer monitor.

The study was designed to determine "if it's mentally easier for you to link an American symbol with a white person," Devos said.

The images showed American icons (like the Capitol building) and foreign icons (like the Eiffel tower), along with photos of McCain and Obama. In one part of the test, the participants were asked to press one key if they saw American icons or Obama and another key if they saw foreign icons or McCain.

In a different part of the test, the roles were reversed: participants were asked to press one key if they saw foreign icons or Obama and another key if they saw American icons or McCain.

It took the participants about 60 milliseconds longer to associate American icons with Obama than with McCain.

The study, which hasn't yet been published, suggests that, at an unconscious level, Obama might be seen as less American than McCain, Devos said.

The study results held up even among students who planned to vote for Obama.

The study suggests that some participants can't as easily link American symbols to Obama because they don't have that association "built in," Devos said.

The Washington Post reported about Devos's research:

It is important to emphasize that the bias uncovered by the studies was subtle, and only one of many factors that go into people's voting choices. The research in no way suggests that all of Obama's opponents are racially biased -- people who do not find Obama appealing may well reach their conclusions based on policy positions, partisan identification and personal circumstances.

But Devos said the difficulty in seeing African Americans as fully American is clearly a drag on Obama's prospects, without which he would probably be further ahead in the polls.

The Post also reported:

During the primary season, Devos ... along with colleague Debbie Ma at the University of Chicago found that on a subconscious level, people more easily associated Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton with being American than Sen. Barack Obama. Clinton is white; Obama is biracial.

Even more remarkably, the psychologists found that the volunteers were quicker to associate former British prime minister Tony Blair with being American than Obama. Blair is white.

-- *RANDY DOTINGA*

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