



# Can he say that? Who's going to stop him?: Liberal and conservative racial norm enforcements against Trump's racial derogations

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## Abstract

Throughout his campaigns and presidency, Trump repeatedly flouted the norm prohibiting racially derogatory appeals, leading many to wonder if modern racial norms against explicit racism had eroded. Despite the centrality of the normative prohibitions against explicit racism in the scholarship of modern racisms, few examined how these racial norms operate as norms. This paper foregrounds two interventions. First, I emphasize that studies of racial norms must interrogate not only parameters of acceptable behaviors, but also mechanisms for sanction. Second, I highlight that, as all norms are simultaneously cooperative and coercive, how social actors construct the meanings of the norm itself shapes its enforcement. This paper draws from interviews with a multiracial group of 65 liberal and conservative activists to answer how they understand the acceptability of Trump's remarks and how they reasoned the actions they did or did not take as a result. I find that even enthusiastic Trump supporters recognize Trump's remarks as unacceptable. Yet, both liberals and conservatives express unwillingness to sanction Trump's behavior. This is especially the case among the understudied conservatives of color. I highlight that both liberals and conservatives refrain from sanctioning Trump and his supporters by constructing racial norms as coercive.

**Keywords** Social norms · Color blind racism · Political behavior · Dog whistle politics

Examples of explicit racial derogations abound throughout Trump's presidency and his 2016 and 2020 campaigns. For instance, during his speech when he first announced his presidential run in 2015, Trump proclaimed to a cheering crowd that

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“Mexico sends its people.... They are bringing crimes. They are rapists” (C-SPAN 2015). Throughout the 2020 election, Trump also repeatedly referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as “Kung Flu” and “China virus” (Nakamura 2020).

Scholars contrast these unequivocal verbalizations of non-whites as inferior, foreign, and dangerous (Braunstein 2017; Gorski 2017; Hell and Steinmetz 2017) against the recent historical “color blind” (Bonilla-Silva 2018) racial regime, under which politicians have often been constrained to mobilize racial resentment and racial threat only through implicit “dog whistles” (Haney-López 2014; Mendelberg 2001). Commentators further point to the rise in hate violence and white supremacist mobilization as evidence that Trump’s rhetoric may be indicative of a shift in the bounds of acceptable behaviors (Miller and Graves 2020). All of which invite the question of whether Trump’s presidency reflects the erosion of post-Civil Rights Era normative prohibition against explicit racism (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Kinder and Sears 1981; Mendelberg 2001; Quillian 2008; Schuman et al. 1997).

This paper proposes two interventions to make sense of what Trumpism means for post-Civil Rights Era racial norms. First, I suggest that, taking seriously the assertion that the prohibition against explicit racism is an informal social norm, it is necessary to consider not only the boundaries of acceptable behaviors, but also the mechanisms of enforcement. In other words, Trump’s ability to make racially explicit appeals could be less a reflection of a shift in acceptable political discourse, but rather a failure to sanction his violations. Second, I argue that all norms, including racial norms, exist in two registers: cooperative and coercive. As such, to understand how certain norms are enforced while others are not, it is necessary to attend to the social meanings assigned to the norm itself.

This paper considers Trump’s rhetoric throughout his campaigns and presidency as natural “breaching experiments” (Garfinkel 1984) and examines how a multiracial group of liberal and conservative activists make sense of Trump’s violations of the norm against explicit racially derogatory remarks. In particular, this paper investigates the operation of this racial norm in two parts: first, how do liberals and conservatives understand the acceptability of Trump’s remarks? Second, if they do find Trump’s remark unacceptable, how do liberals and conservatives describe and reason the actions that they did or did not take as a response?

Contrary to the concern that racial denigration has become increasingly acceptable, I find that even Trump’s enthusiastic supporters recognize Trump’s remarks as socially unacceptable. Yet, despite recognizing Trump’s violations, many conservatives and liberals are unwilling to sanction these violations. This is the case even for the group that has the most incentive to punish Trump’s transgressions: the often-underexamined Latinx and Asian American conservatives. In turn, I find that, although liberals, white conservatives, and conservatives of color may be distinct in their values and social positions, many justify their unwillingness to sanction violations of racial norms through similarly constructing these norms as coercive. These findings illuminate the need to examine everyday actions and their meanings to understand the operations of racial regimes.



## Norms against explicit racism in post-Civil Rights United States

Contemporary scholarship on race takes as its central puzzle how racial inequities are able to persist, even though most Americans say they denounce racism (Schuman et al. 1997). This question contrasts modern racial processes with the preceding Jim Crow racism, when white Americans justified racial subordination and exclusion with verbalized insistences that Black Americans and other non-whites are biologically inferior and dangerous. Scholars agree that, as a result of the social transformations brought about by the Great Migration and World War II, as well as the direct challenges by the Civil Rights Movements, the explicit and *de jure* Jim Crow racial regime did collapse (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Mendelberg 2001). Many link the end of Jim Crow racism to a rising “norm of racial equality”: the informal social injunction for everyday Americans to embrace the principle that all Americans should be treated equally regardless of race (Mendelberg 2001, pp. 17–9). In particular, Mendelberg (2001) makes the case that the norm of racial equality has been so internalized for everyday Americans that perceiving oneself as “not racist” has become indispensable for people to think of themselves as good people. Nonetheless, as racial hierarchy is structurally embedded within the American economic, political, social, and ideological systems (Bonilla-Silva 1997), racial inequity persists and will continue to persist unless actively redressed. In place of the explicit Jim Crow racism, scholars illustrate that “color blind ideology” (Bonilla-Silva 2018) provides the alibi for white Americans to perpetuate their institutional racial advantages (Bobo et al. 1997), without tainting their self-perceptions as racially innocent (Mills 2022; Mueller 2017, 2020). In other words, the post-Civil Rights era norm of racial equality has necessitated a new racial regime where practices that reproduce and maintain the racial hierarchy must appear non-racist.

The need to appear non-racist shapes how racial processes unfold in all spheres of social life; in electoral politics, it takes the form of “dog whistle” politics (Haney-López 2014; Mendelberg 2001). In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movements—just as during the Civil War and Reconstruction—race has reemerged as a central cleavage in American electoral politics (Mendelberg 2001), where candidates and parties must signal to the voters the racial interests they represent. Yet, unlike during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the post-Civil Rights era norm of racial equality requires politicians who represent white interests to signal their positions covertly. Mendelberg (2001) points to George H. W. Bush’s infamous “Willie Horton” campaign advertisement as an illustration. During the 1988 presidential election, Bush attacked his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis in a television ad that featured the story and mugshot of William Horton, an incarcerated Massachusetts Black man who had killed a white couple while under a prison furlough program during Dukakis’s term as governor. While the ad itself makes no mention of race, the implicit connection the ad makes between Horton and the longstanding stereotype of Black criminality primed racially-resentful white voters to evaluate Bush more favorably on *race policies*, even when controlling for the voter’s view on Bush in general and view



on law-and-order issues (Mendelberg 2001). Yet, the effect of the ad diminished after the third-party candidate Reverend Jesse Jackson had called out the ad's implicit racial appeal. Mendelberg (2001) argues that, once voters had been made aware that the ad violates the norm of racial equality in invoking negative racial stereotypes, voters withdrew their support for Bush.

To be clear, dog whistle politics did not occur by happenstance, but was a strategy crafted by conservatives. Lee Atwater, George H. W. Bush's campaign manager in 1988 and later the chairman of the Republican National Committee, was recorded explaining to an interviewer that, even though a candidate may be able to appeal to voters by using anti-Black racial slurs in 1954, by 1968, a candidate can no longer use the slur because it "hurts you. Backfires. So [a candidate would] say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff.... If it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other" (Perlstein 2012). Atwater's remark reflects that not only have conservative strategists been well-aware of the norm of racial equality, but they also have been actively devising strategies to circumvent it. This makes Trump's electoral success after repeated explicit racially derogatory remarks an especially notable break from the past. As Trump's ascendancy coincided with growing white supremacist mobilization and increased race-based hate violence (Miller and Graves 2020), one possible explanation is that Trump's success reflects the overall deterioration of the norm of racial equality and foretells a more explicit and contentious era in American racial politics.

Yet, despite the centrality of the norm of racial equality in the scholarship on contemporary racism, few attend to it *as a norm*. Social norms regulate individual's behavior not just through proscribing the bounds of acceptable behaviors, but, more importantly, through imposing informal sanctions when people behave in unacceptable ways. In other words, the norm of racial equality is not merely the collective understanding that it is unacceptable to express that racialized minorities are inherently inferior and dangerous on the basis of their race, but it further entails that those who do express such sentiment will face consequences. As such, while it is possible that Trump's ascendancy epitomizes a shift in racial norms, it is also possible that it reflects constraints in enforcing the norm's sanction. Indeed, qualitative scholars (Anderson 1999; Young 2004) have long cautioned that researchers risk faulty extrapolation when inferring people's internal beliefs through people's actions, as thoughts and actions have different sets of constraints. Through attending to both the content of racial norms and the mechanism for their enforcement, this paper clarifies how sanctions against Trump's comments failed to emerge, as well as illustrates how attending to norms and sanctioning may advance theories of contemporary racism.

## Norms, enforcements, and social meanings

Enforcement of sanction is a critical facet of norms (Doering and Ody-Brasier 2021; Reilly 2018). The reason for any norm to exist is that, at least some people would otherwise act in ways that are unacceptable to the collective, were they not discouraged by the sanction. More importantly, as norms are informal and unwritten, often



the only way to communicate and reaffirm the existence of a norm is through the act of sanctioning violations. As such, while social sanctions can vary in their degrees of material consequences—ranging from calling out the behavior as unacceptable, scolding, avoidance, damage to reputation, ostracization, withholding of resources, all the way to expulsion from the collective—all sanctions must first and foremost communicate disapproval to both the violator and the collective at large (Durkheim 2014 [1933]).

In the context of electoral politics, withholding one's vote against a norm-violating politician may be the most direct and widely-available sanction for the general electorate; yet, as there could be many reasons for one to not vote for a candidate, withholding one's vote does not always unequivocally communicate disapproval. Other political sanctions available to the general electorate may include open letters, petitions, protests, and campaigns to recall and remove; in addition, the average voter can also enforce the norm by applying one of the above-mentioned social sanctions to the politician's supporters, in order to both communicate disapproval to society at large and indirectly punish the politician by deterring people from supporting them. For those more involved in electoral politics—such as fellow officeholders, staffers, and party activists—not only are their public condemnation and withholding of support consequential, but they also have direct means to expel the violator out of the party or the office.

Why might the above-mentioned social and political sanctions fail to emerge against Trump's remarks? Unlike laws and organizational rules that specify the agent of enforcement, it is often unclear who ought to enforce informal norms. Existing research points to two main explanations for who would enforce norms and why (Horne and Mollborn 2020). The consequentialist approach argues that, since norms exist to promote social good and mitigate social harm, those who are the most harmed by the norm's violation would be the most motivated to sanction. For instance, a quasi-experiment on a quiet train demonstrates that those who are sitting closest to the person playing loud music are the most likely to intervene (Przepiorka and Berger 2016). Taking a consequentialist approach, one will expect that those who are the most affected by Trump's remarks, such as those belonging to the racial groups disparaged by Trump, will be the most motivated to sanction. Alternatively, the relational approach emphasizes that, as norms are always embedded within social relations, the types of relationship between the enforcer, the violator, and the community at large may determine who enforces norms and when (Horne 2009). For instance, Reilly (2018) finds through participant ethnography that stand-up comedians are less likely to sanction another comedian for joke theft if the violator is otherwise reputed as a prosocial member of the comedian community, regardless of the actual similarity of the jokes. Under this approach, one may expect that, not those who are most affected by Trump's comments *per se*, but those who are most disrupted by Trump's ascendancy—such as establishment Republicans—may be the most motivated to sanction him.

Yet, many people of color and establishment conservatives I interviewed were unwilling to either directly sanction Trump or enforce the norm indirectly through sanctioning his supporters. Here, I propose that the cultural meanings people attribute to the norm itself may be another dimension that explain why some choose to



enforce norms and others refrain from doing so. Granted, attention to cultural meanings is not a novel proposition within norms scholarship. For instance, many studies of which behaviors are considered violations often point to the central role of interpretation when acts themselves can often be ambiguous (Fine 2001; Reilly 2018). In this paper, however, I underscore that it is important to attend to not only the role of interpretation during the process of norm enforcement, but also to the cultural meanings of the norm itself. In particular, I argue that as all norms are simultaneously cooperative and coercive, which register people choose to understand and emphasize for a given norm helps explain how certain norms are not enforced.

Within norms scholarship, there is often a divide between understanding norms as promoting prosocial behaviors and other larger collective goods, such as the growing norm against smoking, as opposed to understanding norms as repressive and often maintaining unequal social relationships, such as gender norms (Horne and Mollborn 2020). The fact of the matter is all norms are always both. Since the early days of sociology, Durkheim (1997; 2014) illustrates the duality of norms: on the one hand, in its excess, social control contributes to fatalistic suicides; on the other, the punishment of norm violations reaffirms group solidarity and contribute to collective effervescence. This is similarly reflected in Foucault's (1990) insistence that power is always simultaneously enabling and constraining. Yet, whereas norms always simultaneously promote cooperation and coercion, most norms are only understood as one or the other. In this paper, I illustrate that emphasizing the coercive register of a norm tends to inhibit its enforcement.

## Research design and methodology

This paper takes Trump's many derogatory remarks against racially subordinated groups as natural "breaching experiments" (Garfinkel 1984) to establish the bounds of acceptable political speech. As norms are often unstated and taken-for-granted, the existence and content of a norm often crystalize only in people's reactions when the norm is breached. At the same time, as Young (2004) illustrates, analysts often risk misattributing values and other interior motivations to social actors when inferring from observations of behaviors. This is particularly the case in studies of social norms, where it is tempting for analysts to infer acceptability from actions without inquiring how individuals understood and reasoned their actions (Anderson 1999). Semi-structured interviews are most suited to capture the ways in which people narrate their understandings of the social world and the motivations of their actions.

This paper draws upon original semi-structured interviews from a larger project about electoral activism and law-and-order politics. Between 2020 and 2021, I interviewed a multiracial group of 65 liberal and conservative electoral activists from two Southern California suburban counties—Orange County and San Bernardino County. Given the limited ability for an interview study to produce estimates of relative prevalence at the population level, I prioritized constructing a purposive sample. The first choice was to focus exclusively upon electoral activists. This included members of local chapters of Democratic and Republican clubs, members of other electoral organizations with partisan bents (including the Tea Party on the right and



Indivisible on the left), and elected leadership of county Democratic and Republican parties. While it was not part of my sampling criteria, many of my respondents also happened to be former or current local elected officials or candidates. Electoral activists are thus far understudied compared to issue activists and the general electorate; yet, they constitute a particular consequential population in this context, as they have far more means to assert their candidate preferences and sanction unacceptable candidates given their control over endorsement, party platforms, donation, and volunteer labor (Carmines and Woods 2002). Furthermore, as electoral activists are more politically engaged than the average voter, they are likely to be more attuned to the unspoken norms in politics. Studying those who are likely the most aware and equipped to enforce the norm allows me to zoom in upon other constraints that contributed to the failure for sanctions to emerge.

The second choice was to sample exclusively in Southern California. As US racial attitudes are highly influenced by region, an interview study with a small but national sample risks obfuscating the underlying dynamics. As illustrated in the Introduction, Trump had directed his racial derogations at many targets in addition to the frequently-targeted Black Americans, including Latinx, Asian Americans, and Muslim and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans. This corresponds with the growing population and political significance of these racial groups, as the American color line continues to be contested following the increasing migration from Asia and Latin America since 1965 (Lee and Bean 2004). Southern California leads the nation in this sociodemographic shift, with 34% Latinx and 23% Asian American in Orange County and 56% Latinx and 9% Asian American in San Bernardino County in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021a, b). At the same time, Southern California had been the incubator for the New Right throughout the 20th century (McGirr 2015), especially giving rise to Nixon and Reagan—both pioneers of dog whistle racial appeals. With growing Latinx and Asian American populations and the long political dominance of dog whistle conservatism, Southern California is an ideal location to study racial norm enforcement, as it is a context where sanctions against Trump's remarks are the most likely to emerge according to the consequentialist and relational approaches to norm enforcement. To further induce theoretically-generative insights, I followed the growing scholarship in attending to conservatives belonging to marginalized social groups (Lockhart 2022) and oversampled the understudied Latinx and Asian American conservatives. This allows for a nuanced examination on how people navigate the competing influences of harm caused by the violation, social relation with the violator, and cultural understanding of the norm when deciding how to enforce a norm. Table 1 details the relevant sociodemographic breakdown of my sample.

The interviews range from 45 minutes to just short of three hours, with the median interview being 110 minutes. I conducted all interviews over video conference platform; the interviews were recorded and human-transcribed. While the interviews cover the interviewees' experiences with electoral activism more generally, as well as their views on law-and-order issues, this paper focuses exclusively upon the parts where my respondents discussed the 2016 election, Trump and his presidency, and the 2020 election. I took an iterative and abductive analytic approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I first read through all responses relating to Trump's behavior



**Table 1** Interviewees demographic

	Conservative		Liberal	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Asian American	3	1	1	2
Black	1	0	2	2
Latinx	3	4	3	3
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	1	1	0	0
White	4	3	5	22
Two or more races	1	1	0	2

across all respondents and inductively coded for emergent themes. Then, noting the prominent discussions of norms—particularly racial norms—across both liberal and conservative respondents, I drew from the literature to construct deductive codes around acceptability, norm enforcement, and types of norms. I again inductively coded for patterns within the deductive codes, especially comparing across race and party identification. Lastly, to confirm my findings, I checked across the larger sample for validity and counterexamples.

Given the paper's focus on the acceptability of racially derogatory remarks, I acknowledge that social desirability may be an especially pertinent influence on my interviewees' responses. Self-reported data, such as surveys and interviews, are especially susceptible to research subjects inflating the extent to which they engage in socially desirable behaviors, such as denouncing racism (assuming that the norm of racial equality is still in operation). As such, if one wishes to infer the extent to which electoral activists actually took action to denounce and sanction Trump's violations, the self-reports by the interviewees will likely be an overestimation. Yet, as explained above, an interview study is not suited to make such estimation. This paper is centrally concerned with how people understood Trump's racial derogations and how they reasoned their responses, or lack thereof. Whether or not people indeed took actions and how many of them did are questions more appropriately answered by future studies using observational data.

I also note that interviews are themselves a form of social interaction and, like all social interactions, are structured by the race of all participants. In other words, it is possible that interviewees would give me, the interviewer, a different answer had I belonged to a different racial group. Yet, this does not entail that the responses are invalid, but only that they should be analyzed and interpreted with the particular context in mind. I present as a young East Asian American man. Given the ambivalent position Asian Americans occupy in both politics (Wong and Shah 2021) and the racial hierarchy (Kim 1999), many Asian American qualitative researchers find themselves to be a blank slate onto which subjects project their own political and racial allegiances (Lin 2000; Venkatesh 2002). This does present a unique difficulty in specifying how my race may have influenced the interviews, especially for a multiracial group of interviewees. In other words, it is difficult to predict if interviewees would be more likely to overstate their





opposition to Trump's offensive comments and the sanctions they have taken, because they perceived the Asian American interviewer as a person of color who would be offended by racism, or would they be more likely to understate it because they perceived the Asian American interviewer as a model minority opposed to playing the so-called "race card." Similarly, in a context like Orange County where, for instance, in 2022 both the Republican and Democratic nominees for the congressional seat were East Asian Americans, it is unclear if interviewees perceived me as liberal or conservative and overstated or understated their opposition to Trump as a result. In my analysis, I note the instances in which I can discern that my race has influenced my interviewees' responses, but I further invite readers to critically evaluate my findings with this in mind.

## Findings

### Trump's derogations are unacceptable: liberal perspectives

Were Trump's remarks during his presidency and the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns overall socially unacceptable? For liberals, the answer is an unambiguous yes. Liberal interviewees were unequivocal that Trump had done something wrong during his campaigns and presidency and should have suffered some consequences. For instance, Karen, a white homemaker in her early 50s, said "I thought there was no way [Trump] would win. I mean, who could vote for someone who makes fun of the disabled, who—you know, the *Access Hollywood* tape...and then, lo and behold. And I literally was crying election night. I could not believe it." Here, Karen referenced two other incidents that were regarded as norm-violating during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign: when Trump mocked the congenital arm paralysis of journalist Serge Kovalski at a campaign rally and when Trump proclaimed on an audio recording that he could sexually assault a woman with no consequences. Karen's response reflects the belief that these behaviors are sufficiently unacceptable that, as a punishment, people should refrain from voting for Trump. In turn, the failure for these sanctions to materialize had been so upsetting to Karen's understandings of right and wrong that it provoked strong emotional reactions when Trump was elected in 2016. Some liberals even explicitly utilized the term "norm" to make sense of Trump's behaviors. Martha, a white retired attorney in her early 70s, expressed that Trump "violates every norm that I think we've ever had. So when you say, 'what don't you like about him?' I say, 'I'd be damned if I can come up with anything I do like about him.'" Not only did Martha explicitly describe Trump's behavior in the terms of "norm" and violation, but she further used the concept to justify to me her distaste for Trump, reflecting the assumption that we should both understand that norm violation is evaluated negatively in society.

Zooming in to the norm of racial equality specifically, one example of liberal interviewees taking issue with Trump's violation is the response by Georgia, a retired police dispatcher and a Black woman in her mid-60s. With some hesitation, Georgia recalled:



I didn't feel President Trump was president material...but people voted for him, and I think—and I hate to say, I could be wrong—I don't feel that I'm a racist person, but I feel that he's racist to a certain extent...some of the remarks he made about handicapped people and about saying little things about Blacks or whatever, it kinda brought out his racism here.... I didn't vote for him.

While Georgia cautiously hedged her sentiment—which is understandable, given that allegations of racism coming from Black Americans are often discounted as “playing the race card” (Bonilla-Silva 2018)—she was clear that Trump's racial remarks were socially unacceptable. Furthermore, Georgia articulated that the violations were sufficient reason not only for her to withhold her vote, but also that others should have as well. Similarly, Angela, a retired teacher and a white woman in her mid-70s, expressed that,

I have a very close girlfriend...her son was born with that same disability. And when I saw him making fun of [journalist Serge Kovaleski] on a stage, it just made me furious.... Oh like the judge in Chicago and [Trump] told him to go back to Mexico.... It's just absolutely unbelievable to me that somebody could vote for someone who has gotten up and spoken at rallies in such a way.

Likely referencing Trump's attack against US-born federal judge Gonzalo Curiel's Mexican ancestry, Angela likewise asserted that voters should sanction politicians who have made racially derogatory remarks. Important to note, neither Georgia nor Angela felt the need to explain in what way were Trump's statement racist, which reflects how Trump's violation were self-evident to them. Furthermore, both Georgia and Angela chose to foreground their personal stakes in why Trump's action were unacceptable, which highlights their consequentialist understanding that norm violations are worth sanctioning because of the harm they cause.

Relational approach to norms—that is, people recognize and enforce norm to be viewed positively in social relations—also explains how some liberals engage with Trump's violations of the norm of racial equality. For instance, Sarah, a white retired librarian in her mid-60s, asserted that “I've heard the argument that it was a dog whistle. That what ‘Make America Great Again’ really means is make America white again, or let's go back in time and make it the way it was when women and Black people knew their place.” Noting how she had distanced herself from the interpretation, I asked Sarah if she personally found the argument to be valid. Sarah responded, “it probably is because I can't come up with any other interpretation.” Cameron, a white nonprofit worker in his early 20s, explained that Trump's Make America Great Again slogan is “aimed at white people” and “telling people [to] ignore the past.” Cameron continued, “and it's hard for me. I'm still trying to become more aware of these things because this is never shit that we were taught in school.” Both Sarah and Cameron noted that “Make America Great Again” constituted a violation of racial norms as it encapsulated an aspiration to return to a racially unequal past. At the same time, both of their recognitions of Trump's violation are more removed: Sarah “heard the argument” that Trump's slogan is “probably” a racial dog whistle; it was “hard” for Cameron to be “aware” because it was never taught in school. This highlights the relational aspect of racial norms: even if



people may not be personally affected by a norm violation—like Georgia did when faced with Trump’s anti-Black attack and Angela did over Trump’s mocking of a disabled person—liberals may still be motivated to recognize and sanction the violation in order to present a positive image of themselves. Cameron’s mention of school learning and Sarah’s portrayal of her assessing competing “interpretations” further suggest that being able to recognize racial norms may serve to signal high levels of formal education.

It is possible that it is merely motivated reasoning that liberals find Trump’s explicitly racist remarks unacceptable—that is, liberals have already decided that they dislike Trump and are driven to find fault in everything he does. While this can certainly be the case, it does not negate that liberals do recognize the norm of racial equality. This is especially clear when it applies to the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Samantha, a white teacher in her mid-60s, recalled, “I didn’t like [Clinton’s] ad about that 3 a.m.—remember that 3 a.m. ad she had? I felt like that was racist. Some of Bill’s—her husband’s comments, I think it was North Carolina—kinda racist too. And I didn’t like how, I felt like she was using African Americans.” Here, Samantha was referencing the Clintons’ past attacks against Barack Obama during the 2008 Democratic primary. This includes the “3 a.m.” advertisement that portrays Hillary Clinton as the protector of white mothers and children against unspecified threats—which allows for the interpretation of Obama as the threatening Black criminal (Patterson 2008)—as well as Bill Clinton’s suggestion that Obama had won the South Carolina primary only due to his race. Samantha concluded, “the race issue was bothersome, but she was certainly a much better alternative to Trump.” While the Clintons’ violations may be more ambiguous and subtle, which make for imperfect comparison to Trump’s more explicit derogations, they are still sufficient to give liberals like Samantha pause about whether to support. Nonetheless, Samantha’s conclusion also suggests that violations of racial norms are often conceptualized as graduated, with explicit derogation imagined as more severe and in need of harsher sanctions.

In sum, for liberals, it is unambiguous that Trump’s behaviors are socially unacceptable and deserving of sanction. Many directly and explicitly identify racially derogatory remarks as violations that should have disqualified Trump from serving as president. Next, I turn to my conservative respondents to illustrate that, contrary to the alarm among commentators and scholars, the recognition of Trump’s remarks as unacceptable spans the political spectrum, even including Trump’s more fervent supporters.

### **Trump’s derogations are unacceptable, but...: conservative perspectives**

While it is tempting to interpret a vote for Trump as an endorsement of his remarks, I find that supporting Trump and recognizing that Trump had violated the norm of racial equality are not mutually exclusive for conservatives. For example, Diane, a white woman in her early 60s who was a former elected official, proclaimed that she “came out very, very early” in support of Trump during the 2016 Republican primary. Yet, Diane also emphasized that “people are



like, ‘well, what about the things he says?’...I wasn’t voting on him to be my boyfriend; I was voting on him to be my chief executive officer.” This statement illustrates that Diane was keenly attuned to the fact that she not only ought to find Trump’s remarks unacceptable, but was further expected to refrain from voting for him as a sanction. Diane reconciled her enthusiastic support of Trump with her recognition that it was socially unacceptable to do so by minimizing Trump’s violations and construing them as matters of personality preferences: while it may be unpleasant to socialize with someone who would say the things that Trump did, it is not an appropriate criterium to evaluate a presidential candidate. Through emphasizing that such violations may not have been tolerated in her private life, Diane further insulated herself from possible association with Trump’s unacceptable remarks.

The recognition of Trump’s behavior as unacceptable is especially pronounced among conservatives of color, many of whom draw from their personal experiences with racism. For instance, when discussing Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, John, a business owner and an Asian American man in his mid-40s, conceded that “it was a bad thing for him to say that, honestly. I mean, if he had just said Wuhan, I would be fine, but Kung Flu is kind of like, ok, you’re borderline saying somethings that is inappropriate.” Nonetheless, John continued, “if he didn’t say it, we would still face the same level of racism, I think. I don’t think it had an important bearing on Asian hate because as an Asian American who grew up with a huge amount of racism toward myself—I mean I was beaten, spit on, my family spit on.” John was unequivocal that Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric violated the norms of acceptable speech and further grounded its harm in his lived experience. Yet, he proceeded to minimize the violation, first by circumscribing the harm as only “borderline...inappropriate” and then by insisting that these words are ultimately inconsequential to racial violence at large.

Similarly, Miguel, who was a Latino elected official in his early 60s, recounted that, because he “didn’t look Latino,” he remembered that growing up many of his white friends would be “cussing and using words and putting down Latinos” around him. I followed up and asked if it had been difficult to hear similar rhetoric coming from Trump. Without any hesitation, Miguel answered,

Yes...I withdrew from being a delegate to the first [Republican National] Convention in 2016.... I didn’t think he was going to win or should win.... I took a lot of flak for not doing that. I was asked by the campaign and by the president’s office to be a delegate the second time. And I did accept. I thought that President Trump, even with his tweeting and lack of decorum, I still think he would’ve done a better job.

Much like John, Miguel expressed personal experiences with racism and identified that in Trump’s behavior. Furthermore, Miguel found Trump’s behavior during the 2016 campaign so unacceptable that not only did Miguel personally believe that Trump shouldn’t have won, but further expected that most would not have supported Trump. During 2016, Miguel even jeopardized his political career by withdrawing himself as a delegate, in order to sanction Trump’s statements. Yet, Miguel agreed to serve as a delegate for Trump when Trump ran again in 2020. To resolve this



tension, Miguel similarly minimized Trump's violations as just "tweeting and lack of decorum," which are ultimately outweighed by doing a "better job."

While many conservatives I spoke to did hedge their support for Trump in some fashion—like Diane, John, and Miguel—there were some that did not find Trump's remarks objectionable. An example is Audrey, a clerical worker at a police department in her early 50s who identified as "white and Hispanic." Audrey asserted that "I felt like Trump gave Americans hope again. I don't understand the hatred that people have for Trump." When I followed up by soliciting her thoughts on Trump's call to "Build the Wall," Audrey immediately and unequivocally responded, "I didn't have any objections to that." Audrey not only did not personally find Trump's 2016 campaign unacceptable even when asked point-blank about Trump's more controversial statements, but she further struggled to understand why others did.

While Trump's racially derogatory remarks during his elections and presidency and the strong support he garnered may appear as if racially derogatory remarks have become socially and politically acceptable, responses from his supporters illustrate that they have been keenly aware that Trump's behavior is unacceptable. Yet, many are unwilling to sanction Trump's unacceptable behavior by, at the very least, withholding their votes, even when many verbalize that they know they are expected to. This is especially surprising in the case of conservatives of color, who recognize Trump's violation through their personal experiences with racially derogatory remarks. Under a consequentialist understanding of norms, one may expect that, as people who experience harm from the behavior, conservatives of color will be the most motivated to enforce the norm. In the following section, I demonstrate that one way to understand how conservatives, especially those who are not white, are able to reconcile their unwillingness to sanction behaviors that they recognized as unacceptable is through attending to the social meaning they attribute to the norm of racial equality.

### **Sanctions as suppressions of truth: conservative perspectives**

Just as people assign social meanings, such as acceptable or unacceptable, to Trump's racially derogatory remarks, people also imbue meanings to the act of recognizing and sanctioning Trump's violations—that is, to the operation of the norm itself. As such, even when people acknowledge that certain behavior is socially unacceptable, even when they may personally suffer harm from it, they may be unwilling to sanction it through constructing the norm as coercive. Among conservatives, this is reflected in their emphasis that, while Trump's racial derogations may be socially unacceptable, they believe the remarks to be ultimately true. As a result, the prohibition against explicitly racist remarks appears to conservatives as inauthentic and driven by ulterior motives. In turn, any effort to sanction these remarks is construed as a suppression of not just free speech, but also a suppression of what they believe to be the truth. This not only absolves conservatives' obligation to sanction Trump's violation, but further allow conservatives to construe themselves as righteous for not sanctioning what they themselves recognize as a norm violation.



For instance, I asked Gerry what he thought about Trump's comments about "Mexico sending people who are criminal." Gerry, a retired police officer in his early 70s who described himself as "American of Mexican descent," responded:

Mexico did send us criminals. There's no question about that. That did happen. But again, I'm not Trump. Would I use the same verbiage and state things the same way he did? No, not at all.... He's not a racist. He doesn't not like Mexicans. He doesn't not like me.... I think that gets played up. I do wish he was smoother in his talk, but I'll tell you what, I'll take substance over style.... Obama, very smooth, I hated his policies.... Again, you're not voting for your valentine.... You're voting for what's good for the country.

Like other conservatives, Gerry did not deny that Trump's remark was unacceptable, as Gerry distanced himself from Trump's statement and stressed that he himself would not have said it. Yet, Gerry also began his response by emphasizing that he found Trump's statement to be true. To reconcile recognizing the statement as unacceptable, but believing in his heart the statement to be true, Gerry chalked up the violation as violating "smooth" talking "style," which was "played up" by opponents for political gains. Gerry further pointed to Obama as the counterexample, someone who's able to speak in the acceptable style but whose policies are not "good for the country" in Gerry's mind. Lastly, to manage the implications of what it would mean for his identification as someone of Mexican descent if Trump's statement were true, Gerry made the distinction between "Mexico" and "Mexicans," insisting that Trump's negative statement about the country is not an indicator of racial hatred towards Mexicans and people of Mexican descent, like Gerry himself.

As exemplified by Gerry's assertion that Trump's racially derogatory remarks were "played up" by opponents, the construction of the sanctions as inauthentic and driven by ulterior motives is central for conservatives to evade their obligation to sanction violations of racial norms. For instance, when asked about Trump's remarks against Mexican immigrants during the 2016 election, Carmen, a Latina former elected official in her late 40s, responded:

it was just more the Democrats on the left making it a bigger deal because, of course, it's all politics. They want to win. So I believe they exaggerated and they lied a lot in order to get the Latino vote. And that's what they do: they put fear into our voters, into our community. Rather than the Republicans, it's more about, okay, we're going to do the right thing and you're more self-sufficient.

Carmen further pointed to her own experience: "Democrats and their leaders... they're always on the negative campaign trail. So they always—they can't really say, okay, call me racist because I'm a Latina. They really can't call me like white privilege because I am an immigrant." Carmen's assertions reflect her belief that efforts to sanction racially derogatory remarks are merely liberal ploys to win elections. This belief that sanctions are baseless or overblown is especially apparent in Carmen's incredulity that her liberal opponents would attempt to allege her



as a racist if they had the opportunity. Here, Carmen also drew upon the distinction between style and substance to further invert the allegation of racism: liberals are the true racists for manipulating racialized communities by sanctioning racially derogatory remarks, whereas the Republicans are trying to do right by communities of color through their policies.

In construing sanctions against racially derogatory remarks as politically-motivated suppressions of what they believe to be true, not only are conservatives absolved of their obligation to sanction what they also concede as unacceptable, surviving the sanction further becomes a badge of honor. Returning to Diane--the white former elected official in her early 60s, who acknowledged "the things that [Trump] said" were unacceptable, but that she wasn't "voting for a boyfriend"--I followed up and asked Diane what were things she liked about Trump that inspired her early support. Diane extolled:

when there are drugs coming through our porous border and he calls it out, it's the truth.... People were thinking it, they were afraid to say it, because when you speak it, you will be—the wrath of the left will come down on you. And hard. I've experienced it. It's devastating.... All it has done is it has—it's hardened my resolve.... They came after me specifically because I looked like the easiest petal. I'm this middle-aged little blonde woman.... People witness what happens to people like me...and people go 'oh, I don't want that to happen to me,' and so they shut up.... That's called ruling by fear...And yeah, Trump is not ruled by fear. As a matter of fact, he flies in the face of that fear. I was so thankful for him.

As Diane elaborated her responses from her previous answer, her perspective shifted some: whereas she had acknowledged before the possible objection "people" may have over Trump's racially derogatory remarks against immigrants, she here indicated that "people" were also thinking it because it's the "truth." Nonetheless, Diane still understood that verbalizing such thought is socially unacceptable and believed that people are "afraid" to verbalize it due to the sanction. Much like Carmen, Diane drew from her own experience as an elected official to label such sanctions as mere liberal politicking. This allowed her to construe her textbook description of norm enforcement—people are deterred from violating the norm after they see violators being punished—as "ruling by fear." It further enabled her to construct "middle-aged little blonde woman" as politically vulnerable. Through portraying herself as speaker of what she believed to be suppressed truth, Diane recasted herself as a victim of unjust sanctions and was further resolved to continue violating the norm despite knowing that it is socially unacceptable. As such, through flouting racial norms, Trump becomes the champion of those who recognize the existence of racial norms but do not believe they should be bound by it.

Diane's comment about her being targeted due to being "a middle-aged little blonde woman" doubtlessly reflects how conservatives' recasting of sanctioning violations as suppressing the truth is central to the preservation of white racial advantages without contaminating white Americans' idealized image of themselves as racially innocent (Mueller 2017, 2020). Yet, this move is not exclusive to white conservatives. I asked Gabriela, a formerly-undocumented Latina insurance broker



in her late 40s, about what she liked about Trump. Gabriela responded, “I liked that [Trump] was a real person and he wasn’t just reading off a script.... He could have been anybody. It could have been anybody else. I just liked how it wasn’t so fake and all so proper and everything had to be a certain way.” On the flip side of conservatives’ emphasis of liberals’ inauthenticity in sanctioning Trump’s remarks, Gabriela praised Trump for not being “fake...and proper” in how he speaks. In particular, Gabriela’s repeated insistences that Trump “could have been anybody” speak to Gabriela’s belief that Trump’s unfiltered speech reflects widely shared beliefs among everyday people. I followed up with Gabriela and asked her what she thought about Trump’s remark about “Mexicans being criminals and rapists.” Gabriela responded:

I mean some of them are rapists. And I was born in Mexico and it’s okay to say that... I have family members that had the same opportunity that I did and made poor choices. They ended up in jail, doing nothing but drugs, living a life of crime, and now they got deported and that’s what they deserve.... I think what [Trump] said was correct. It’s true.... I didn’t take offense to it. And I think if people see it as offensive—I know a lot of Mexican people.... I get called—just because they know I’m a Republican or something, they call me a whitewash or a coconut or whatever it is. They get offended because I don’t think like them.

*Interviewer: Do you have any sense as to why is it that they took such an offense when you didn’t?*

Gabriela: Maybe they are criminals.... I think they’re lenient towards one way because maybe they’ve lived in a life with a lot of gangs, a lot of crime, and a lot of criminals. So they just lean that way, but you don’t have to follow suit.... Just because you have people in jail or because you have a lot of gang-related family members doesn’t mean that that’s the only way.

Like Diane, Gabriela emphasized that Trump should be able to make racially derogatory statements because Gabriela believed them to be true. Yet, unlike Gerry and Diane, who simply asserted that they believed Trump’s statements to be factual, Gabriela pointed to people in her life as evidence. In turn, Gabriela constructed the sanctions directed toward Trump, as well as toward herself for failing to sanction Trump, as motivated not by the unacceptability of Trump’s remarks, but by conformity and criminality. As such, Gabriela’s refusal to sanction Trump’s statements served as a way for Gabriela to symbolically distance herself from the derogated category of Mexican.

To be clear, I do not intend to imply that no conservatives took action to sanction Trump’s violation. Beyond Miguel resigning from his role as the Republican National Convention delegate in 2016, two other conservative interviewees reported taking actions. Edison, a white accountant in his early 50s, voted instead for the Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, despite Edison asserting that third-party presidential campaigns “can’t work.” “I don’t trust [Trump],” Edison explained, “He never really got to the point where he was particularly presidential, to where he was polished and a good representative of our country.” Terrance, a municipal employee in his mid-twenties who identifies as “mixed race” (one white and one South Asian parent), who had volunteered and interned for Republican candidates





and conservative organizations since grade school, further unregistered from the Republican party shortly before our interview. Terrance recounted having encountered comments from other volunteers that he didn't "look like a Republican" since a young age. Although Terrance believed that "it wasn't an intentional racist comment," he noticed that "those things began to accelerate when Trump ran for president...and a lot of the passive racism became more overt." Terrance concluded that "those are not the types of people I would want to associate myself with in a public setting, which is why I unregistered." Both Edison's and Terrance's actions reflect the typical operation of social norms: they found Trump's (and other conservatives') actions to be unacceptable and therefore they sanctioned the behaviors through withholding support and severing social and organizational ties. In particular, Terrance's articulation is illustrative of a relational understanding of norms, as he sanctioned the violation so that he wouldn't be seen as associated with "those...types of people" by the public. Nonetheless, it is also important to note that both withholding one's vote and changing one's party registration are relatively non-public acts that do not unambiguously communicate condemnation, both to the violators and to society at large.

Even when conservatives recognize Trump's racially derogatory remarks as socially unacceptable, many refrain from sanctioning Trump through constructing the norm to be a coercive suppression of what they believe to be the truth. While this may be less surprising among white conservatives, conservatives of color also justify their unwillingness to sanction Trump by insisting that Trump's derogatory remarks against their own groups are true. For white conservatives, this allows them to recast their unwillingness to sanction Trump's violation as a courageous defense of truth. For conservatives of color, believing that Trump's derogatory statements are true is more complicated, as they themselves belong to the derogated group. Here, the refusal to sanction becomes a way for conservatives of color to distance themselves from the derogated group and manage the harm of Trump's remark.

### **Sanctions as incivility: liberal perspectives**

While liberal respondents in this study sanctioned Trump's violations by refusing to vote for Trump, these sanctions may have little effect since most liberals would not have otherwise voted for any Republican candidate, even if they did not violate norms around racially derogatory comments. In other words, withholding one's vote does not unambiguously communicate disapproval specific to the violation. At the same time, despite many liberals articulating the unacceptability for others to continue to vote for Trump, these same liberals are also unwilling to sanction the Trump supporter in their lives, which would have communicated the unacceptability of racial derogation to the society at large and also indirectly imposed costs on Trump. Here, attending to the social meanings of the violation of racial norms and its sanction also provides leverage to understand why these sanctions failed to materialize. Perhaps more surprisingly, liberals also understand the norms against racially derogatory remarks as coercive, rather than positively promoting cooperation and coexistence in a multiracial society. In turn, they justify their unwillingness to enforce the



norm because they believe that the norm's enforcement will jeopardize their larger values of civility and compassion.

For many liberals, what concerns them the most are not Trump's racially derogatory remarks themselves, but how Trump's remarks signal to others the acceptability of explicit racism. Karina, a Latina community organizer in her early 20s, was still in college when Trump was elected in 2016. She recounted that "when [Trump] won...I was scared.... There was a lot of white people in my campus, so it was a lot of concern to me and my safety.... I was biking through my campus...I hear people chanting 'Build the Wall' or 'Trump 2020'...I immediately just started crying, because the people did vote for him for a reason.... It was terrifying." Karina's experiences highlight that, while she recognized Trump's remarks as themselves violations of racial norms, what concerned her the most was the Trump supporters in her community. She reasoned that, since the Trump supporters in her community failed to find Trump's remarks to be sufficient ground to not support Trump, these supporters were endorsing Trump's remarks and, as such, violating the norm by proxy. In turn, what concerned her are not the racially derogatory remarks in and of themselves, but rather the physical violence that they can often imply, which poses more direct danger to her everyday life.

Yet, while liberals identify Trump supporters as violating the norm by proxy, many of the same liberals are unwilling to sanction them. For instance, Gayle, a Black woman and an educator in her late 60s, was unequivocal that, while she was "speechless" over Trump's "lack of respect for so many people," she was "mainly shocked" at her Republican friends who were "willing to release their integrity and their values and their morals to support a party and a man that has shown so much disrespect...it tells me that we live in a nation of people that feel what he did was okay." Gayle continued and shared an anecdote of her encounter with a neighbor who flew a Trump flag at his house. Gayle struck up a conversation with the neighbor on her daily walk during the beginning of the COVID -19 pandemic and asked him why he supported Trump. After the neighbor shared his reasons, Gayle asked the neighbor, "what about the way he treats people and the language that he uses and the disrespect that he shows?" Gayle recalled that the neighbor responded, "well, that's not what's going to bring revenue to our country. Sometimes you have to say what you have to say to people. And if their feelings get hurt, their feelings get hurt." The neighbor proceeded to tell Gayle that he thought "all you guys that walk around here wearing a mask, I truly believe you guys are a part of a cult." Gayle thanked him for sharing and left. Gayle concluded that, "people like that, I think we just have to listen and, if they give us an opportunity, to share our point of view. He didn't give me an opportunity so I just left it at that.... I believe that I cannot change their mind by going into a debate with them. If I continue to walk and pass them and be cordial and polite, they'll give me the opportunity one day to share my point of view."

Much like Karina, Gayle found others who continued to support Trump even more concerning than Trump's remarks themselves. In particular, Gayle believed that it was a reflection of the lack of respect Trump and his supporters had for others, especially racialized minorities and others who are socially marginalized. Gayle modelled this respect in her interaction with her neighbor: she listened to what the neighbor had to say and refrained from saying anything negative about him both to



his face and in her retelling, even when this respect for differences was not reciprocated by the neighbor in his comments about her facemask. Gayle contrasted her “cordial and polite” approach against the implied alternative—confronting and sanctioning the neighbor. Gayle decided against sanctioning her neighbor because she believed that this is not how one can “change their minds.” Gayle’s articulation reflects the liberal belief that civility and respect for differences also includes respecting other’s right to believe in racist comments and that it is impolite and uncivil to even informally communicate disapproval through social sanctions as a private citizen. In other words, while liberals recognize that it is unacceptable for one to violate the norm of racial equality, even by proxy through supporting someone who did, it is also inappropriate to compel someone to not violate the norm.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that those like Gayle were individually to blame for not sanctioning Trump supporters. Indeed, there can be many personal costs and other external constraints for one to enforce a norm. Particularly for Gayle, an older Black woman living in an affluent and predominantly-white neighborhood, there are many ways in which confronting the neighbor could put Gayle in physical danger. Instead, Gayle’s anecdote is intended to illustrate how liberals also underscore the coercive register of the norm of racial equality over its cooperative register when refraining from enforcing sanctions, just like their conservative counterparts.

Liberals similarly find Trump’s racially derogatory remarks and other’s support for these remarks as reflecting a lack of compassion. Denise, a white chiropractor and a seasoned environmentalist in her late 60s, described an interaction with her adult nephew, who failed to see the problem with his support for Trump even after she mentioned the suffering Trump’s stance on immigration had caused. Denise’s nephew responded to her, “well, I think people are suffering in our own community.” Unclear if it was Denise’s response to him in the moment or a post-hoc comment in her retelling to me, Denise exclaimed, “Well, then don’t say negative things about that and then go help the people that you think you should help. But don’t spread hate.” Denise concluded:

I just tell [my family] I can’t go there with them if they start going nuts.... It’s not a good place for us to go. Otherwise, we’re going to end up not speaking to each other. And I don’t want to do that.... It’s really hard. The reason why I take that really offensively is because when you’re contributing to the destruction of our environment by voting for somebody like Trump...you’re affecting me now personally. I care about everybody though.

As Denise repeatedly identified, compassion for other’s suffering and caring about others are her core political values. The “negative things” that Trump and his supporters said are unacceptable to Denise because their remarks contributed to the suffering of others in the form of “hate” and increased hostility. While Denise at first confronted her family about their support for Trump and their lack of compassion for migrants, she explicitly identified that it was “hard” and that she was unwilling to escalate her enforcement of the norm by severing ties with her family. Denise ultimately compromised by requesting her family to not “go there”—that is, discuss politics—despite noting how she was personally affected by her family’s support for Trump. Denise’s avoidance, however, left her family’s violation unchallenged and



conveyed the sense that it was merely an acceptable disagreement in candidate preference, rather than a sanction against unacceptable behavior. Like Gayle, Denise here constructed the enforcement of racial norms as antithetical to her core value of harmony and compassion. This again reflects an understanding that the norm of racial equality is coercive and its enforcement undermines, rather than enhances, societal harmony.

Much like among their conservative counterparts, the act of sanctioning violations of racial norms is also an act imbued with political meanings for liberals. In particular, although liberals may find other's support for Trump to also constitute a violation of racial norms, they report an unwillingness to sanction the Trump supporters in their life. They justify their lack of action by constructing the enforcement of racial norms as a coercive endeavor. While the enforcement of racial norms, like the enforcement of all norms, is indeed coercive, what I wish to highlight is that even liberals who recognize the unacceptability of Trump's behaviors do not draw upon the prosocial reasons why the norm of racial equality needed to be enforced. Instead, many decide that, due to its coercive nature, sanctioning the violation similarly constitutes a violation of liberal values of civility and compassion.

## Discussion and conclusion

Central to theories of modern racism is the assertion that it has become socially unacceptable to express explicit racism; in turn, political appeals upholding the racial hierarchy must be covert "dog whistles" (Mendelberg 2001). As such, it is reasonable to wonder if Trump's repeated explicit racial derogation signaled a shift in the norm. Through this paper, I suggest that, beyond attending to the acceptability of behaviors, it is important to subsequently ask how unacceptable behaviors would be sanctioned and why. In other words, it may be less so a question of "can he say this?" but rather "who's going to stop him?" Through interviews with liberal and conservative activists, both white and non-white, I find that even Trump's enthusiastic supporters recognize that Trump's remarks are outside the bounds of acceptability. Yet, the recognition of Trump's remarks as violations of the norms of racial equality does not automatically result in sanctions. Many conservatives of color are unwilling to sanction Trump's remarks, even though the harm that they experienced from the violations should make them more likely to enforce the norm under consequentialist understandings of norm enforcement. I argue that, in addition to social relations and harm and benefit, the meanings that liberals and conservatives attribute to the norm itself help illuminate why they are unwilling to sanction behaviors they find unacceptable. Although all norms are simultaneously cooperative and coercive, both conservatives and liberals understand the norm against racial derogation as primarily coercive. Conservatives believe that Trump's statements, while unacceptable, are true. Therefore, any attempt to sanction the remarks are understood as a tactic of repression driven by ulterior motives. On the other hand, while liberals find Trump supporters in their communities to have also violated the norm by proxy, they believe that people are ultimately entitled to support harmful statements; as such, any attempt to coerce Trump supporters into not supporting racially



derogatory statements will inevitably lead the liberals to violate their own values of civility and compassion.

The fact that both liberals and conservatives find the norm of racial equality to be coercive is consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2018) observation that "abstract liberalism," or counterposing vague commitments to individual liberty against addressing racism and racial inequity, is a core frame through which color-blind racial regime is perpetuated. Even some of Trump's strongest critics are unwilling to sanction Trump's and his supporters because they believe that it would infringe upon Trump and his supporters' abstract right to say and endorse racist statements. This not only conflates governmental prohibition with informal social sanction by private citizens, but also ignores the fact that the norm of racial equality is indispensable for the functioning of a multiracial democracy.

What does this entail about the post-Civil Rights norm of racial equality? On the one hand, even Trump's enthusiastic supporters are able to recognize Trump's remarks as violations of the norm, which reflects that the norm is still recognized across the political spectrum. On the other hand, however, unspoken social norms only crystalize through sanctions against their violations. Given the many other reasons that people may not support Trump, the dearth of unambiguous sanctions specifically against Trump's racist remarks may signal to society at large that one can engage in overt racism with impunity, leading to the gradual withering away of the norm. As this is a cross-sectional study rooted in a particular point in time, I cannot extrapolate about over-time change. Nonetheless, my findings suggest that color-blind racial regime, with the normative prohibition against explicit racism, is still in effect, but perhaps only for now. As the abstract liberalism frame of color-blind racism can also be deployed to legitimate the perpetuation of explicit racism, the norm may begin to wither unless people begin actively reasserting the norm.

This leads to a more general point about scholarship on contemporary racism. As a corrective against the assertion that the significance of race has declined because most Americans now denounce racism, scholars tend to emphasize that racial hierarchy is structural—that is, nonvoluntary—and that individual attitudinal changes are merely changes in the ideological superstructure, which do not reflect changes to the racial hierarchy itself (Bonilla-Silva 1997). In other words, racism is able to persist even without people doing anything that they believe to be explicitly racist, as the title of Bonilla-Silva's (2018) seminal work highlights. Yet, as most social structures exist only as taken-for-granted schema in people's minds, structures must be substantiated through individual actions; in turn, as there are near-infinite scenarios that people must respond to as they live their day-to-day life, people must improvise, transpose, and adapt the schemas, leading to changes to social structures in the long run (Sewell 1992). This paper joins the growing race scholarship that emphasizes the dynamism of situated social actors reproducing, modifying, and challenging the racial hierarchy through their everyday actions (Jung 2015; Ray 2019). In particular, I draw attention to how the non-voluntarist constraint against explicit racism in the post-Civil Rights era is contingent upon people's willingness to take action to sanction its violation, which are in turn determined by the meanings of the sanction, as well as other external constraints to sanctions. This attention to how everyday acts of



transgressions and sanctions constitute and alter the racial structure can be usefully extended to better understand other racial processes.

An important caveat is the sparse discussion on how these activists navigated anti-Black remarks. During the interviews I explicitly solicited my respondents' views on Black Lives Matter activism and the role "Defund the Police" played in the 2020 election; yet, there were few discussions that also involved Trump. Given Trump's history with the exonerated Central Park Five and birtherism, it is indeed a curiosity that not only did few of my respondents discuss Trump's anti-Blackness, but further that the media and his opponents have also largely failed to raise the issue during Trump's campaigns and presidency. This is particularly noteworthy, as a common way that conservative Latinx and Asian American interviewees manage the harm of Trump's comments is through insisting the difference between "Mexico" and "China" the countries and Mexican Americans and Chinese Americans. This distinction highlights how non-Black people of color engage with racial politics in ways that are distinct from Black Americans and it can be productive for future research to systematically compare across different racial groups to expand scholarly frameworks on racial politics.

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