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What's in a Name? Symbolic Racism, Public Opinion, and the Controversy over the NFL's Washington Football Team Name

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Abstract

According to Daniel Snyder, owner of the National Football League Team formerly known as the Washington “Redskins,” “the name really means honor and respect.” For decades, Snyder pointed to polls that suggest majoritarian support among the American public to justify the continued use of the racially contested team moniker. However, Indigenous activists and their allies have long argued that the term “Redskins” is a racial slur. Using data from the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), this paper investigates the role of racial attitudes—specifically symbolic racism directed at Native Americans—in shaping public opinion about the name change during a period of heightened public attention to the debate over the team’s name. Our findings indicate that support for the continued use of the team’s name, though admittedly widespread among the American public, is in part influenced by negative racial attitudes directed at Native Americans. By engaging the literature on the politics of symbolic racism we demonstrate that, rather than “honoring” American Indians, those supportive of Native American mascots and symbols in professional football are significantly likely to begrudge them.

Keywords Native American mascots · Symbolic racism · Race · American Indians · Public opinion

In the controversy over the name of the National Football League’s (NFL) Washington, DC franchise, Daniel Snyder, the team’s longtime owner, remained strikingly steadfast in his continued support for the use of the team’s name. For instance, in a 2013 open letter to the team’s fans Snyder brazenly declared that “Redskins” is, “more than a name we have called our football team for over eight decades. It is a symbol of everything we stand for: strength, courage, pride, and respect—the same values we know guide Native Americans and which are embedded throughout their rich history as the original Americans” (Snyder 2013).¹ Despite significant pressure to change the name from politicians (Hulse and Schneider 2014; Nakamura 2013), media officials (Kogod

2013), and Native American² activists (Oneida Nation 2017), Snyder consistently expressed his commitment to maintaining the team’s name.³

The extensive critiques of appropriated Indigenous symbols have steered many sports teams at the high school, college, and professional levels to end their use (King 2016; Kogod 2013; Waldstein 2018). Critics of Snyder,

¹ Throughout the text, we limit reference to the team’s former name, “Washington Redskins.” Because the name enacts spiritual, emotional, social and cultural harm on Indigenous people, we use the term “R-word” wherever possible to refer to the team’s former name. We only use the term itself when it is employed in direct quotes and when relevant to specify our research design. Our decision regarding terminology draws from leading scholars in the field (King 2016, see also Mihesuah 2005). That the term refers directly to the nineteenth century bounty placed on slaughtered Native Americans informs our decision to limit its use.

² In line with King (2016) and the publications of the National Congress of American Indians, we interchangeably use American Indian(s) and Native American(s) when referring to Indigenous people.

³ During the summer of 2020 in the midst of nation-wide protests against the police murder of George Floyd and larger discussions of issues of racial inequality, the team’s top sponsor, FedEx, threatened to cancel their naming rights contract unless the team changed the name. FedEx’s decision led to a cascade of the team’s sponsors similarly calling for a name change. On July 13, 2020 the team officially changed its name to the “Washington Football Team.”

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most notably the Indigenous activists in National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), charge that the team name amounts to a “racial slur” (NCAI 2014). What then explains Snyder’s decades long refusal to change the team’s name? Snyder’s rejoinder consistently reframed critiques as both narrow and wrong-headed by citing evidence that he claimed illustrates public backing for the name (Snyder 2013). Indeed, many polls suggest relatively high levels of support for continued use of the team’s name (e.g., Annenberg Center 2004; Cox et al. 2016; Moore 2015).

Given the purported importance of public opinion to Snyder’s position, it is imperative to better understand its content and determinants. The scholarly literature points to partisanship (Bresnahan and Flowers 2008) and respondent’s own racial identity (Fenelon 1999; Laveay et al. 2009; Sigelman 1998; Williams 2007) as important factors that predict public opinion on the use of the team’s name. However, missing from this literature is an exploration of the extent to which *negative racial attitudes* about Native Americans may shape opinion toward the ongoing use of Native American mascots and nicknames in the high-profile professional sporting arena.⁴ In this article we seek to fill this lacuna and to extend the ongoing conversation among scholars about how sports are a location for stereotype activation (e.g., Kim-Prieto et al. 2010; Wallsten et al. 2017).

This article investigates the specific role of racial attitudes—namely symbolic racism directed at Native Americans—in shaping public opinion toward this issue. We explore *symbolic* racism because the use of mascots and names invokes Native Americans as “an abstract collectivity” (Sears and Henry 2003, p. 260). We argue that the disputes over the continued use of the R-word is akin to the controversies over other contested racial symbols and groups in the United States. As with other racialized symbols (e.g., Confederate flags and statues), the R-word invokes a history and ideology of racist practices and racism, and as a result, we expect that negative racial attitudes are central to explaining public opinion in this domain (Strother et al. 2017).

We ask two questions: (1) What is the nature of public opinion on the naming controversy regarding the NFL’s Washington Team? and (2) To what extent does symbolic racism directed at Native Americans help to explain (a) opposition to changing the name, and (b) the belief that the name is itself offensive. Controlling for a number of important individual and contextual factors, we expect that symbolic racism will emerge as a key factor in accounting

for both. In testing these hypotheses, we use original, nationally representative survey data from the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Our conclusions illustrate that symbolic racism toward Native Americans is central to interpreting the public’s resistance toward changing the name, in sharp contrast to Snyder’s claim that the name is about “respect.”

Debate over the Use of Native American Names and Mascots in Sports

Indigenous activist groups have sought the termination of Native American mascots in sports for decades (King 2010); this long debate has only recently come to be intensely focused on the NFL. From student-lead activism on many college campuses (Guiliano 2015; see also King and Springwood 2001), to statements by multiple groups including the American Psychological Association and the United States Commission on Civil Rights (APA 2005; USCCR 2001),⁵ calls to eliminate Native American mascots famously culminated at the college athletic level in 2005. That year, the NCAA banned the use of Native American symbols and names by teams participating in post-season competition (NCAA 2005).⁶

A growing number of media outlets, journalists, and on-air sports commentators publicly pledged not to use the term to refer to the Washington team over the subsequent decade (Pew Research Center 2013). At the forefront of the most recent iteration of this lengthy protest movement has been the Oneida Indian Nation and the NCAI, with their “Change the Mascot” campaign specifically targeting the NFL Washington franchise (Oneida Nation 2017). Their critique found political traction among elites in 2013 when President Barack Obama, members of the U.S. Congress, and NBC sportscaster Bob Costas publicly spoke out against the NFL franchise name (Hulse and Schneider 2014; Kogod 2013; Nakamura 2013). In June that same year, the U.S. Patent Office canceled the team’s trademark registration,

⁴ As of fall 2020, four American professional men’s sports teams continue to feature American Indian symbols, names, and mascots. These mascots are printed on apparel and sports paraphernalia and, as such, they permeate sports broadcasting, leisure clothing, and American society more generally.

⁵ Many other organizations have also endorsed this stance (see King 2010, pp. 255–257).

⁶ Although the NCAA policy includes some special exceptions for teams which receive tribal blessing for the use of their names (i.e., the Utah Utes and the Florida Seminoles), several universities which changed their mascots to comply with policy continue to be embroiled in conflict as students and alumni persist in celebrating the retired symbols (i.e., University of North Dakota and the University of Illinois). Permissive historical practices around unauthorized Indigenous mascots have either ended or become contested, but conflict remains at both the collegiate and high school levels.

ruling that the term was disparaging of Native Americans (Kang 2014).⁷

Under fire, the NFL maintained its public stance that the use of the team name “honors” Indigenous people (Maske 2014).⁸ Such claims run counter to findings in the literature on Native American mascots which illustrate how mascots and images reflect harmful prejudice toward and stereotypes about Indigenous people (Farnell 2004; King 2010; Leavitt et al. 2015; Roppolo 2003). Both scholars (e.g., Bruyneel 2016; Deloria 2004; Farnell 2004) and public intellectuals (e.g., Oneida Nation 2017; Rodriguez 1998) scrutinize the centrality of damaging racializing discourses in appropriated Native symbols. They note that these mascots activate negative stereotypes against Indigenous people (Burkley et al. 2017; Freng and Willis-Esqueda 2011; Fryberg et al. 2008; Kim-Prieto et al. 2010; Leavitt et al. 2015). Notably, research suggests that support for Native American mascots is highly correlated with implicit bias against American Indian people both in laboratory studies (Chaney et al. 2011) and in studies of online discussion forums related to the controversy at the college-level (Steinfeldt et al. 2010).

More generally, the mascot controversy emerges from a long history of derisive representations of Native Americans in American culture and media (Black 2002; Deloria 1998, 2004; Leavitt et al. 2015). Such images are deeply historically rooted (Mihesuah 1996); the R-word itself openly refers to the bounty placed on Native Americans in the nineteenth century. Thus Indigenous mascots and the use of the R-word directly connects contemporary attitudes toward Native people to the practices of territoriality, dis/possession, and cultural extermination that define the American Indian experience (Billings and Black 2018). Additionally, because these symbols misrepresent American Indian life, they are apt to activate and naturalize negative opinions toward Native Americans *vis-à-vis* other minority groups (Erhart and Hall 2019).

The lessons from this literature have yet to be seriously considered by social scientists interested in (a) how the politics of the R-word controversy continue to evolve, or (b) how

racism against Native Americans manifests in public opinion toward mascots. Neither the study of American Indians, nor the ways in which our politics both shape and reflect bias against Native Americans, have received significant attention from political scientists (but see Bobo and Tuan 2006).⁹ Of the limited studies of public opinion on the use of Native American mascots or nicknames, scholars have concluded that large swaths of the public *support* the continued use of these team names and do not view the use of these names as offensive (Laveay et al. 2009; Sigelman 1998). In explaining these views, these studies have found that racial minorities, more so than whites, exhibit more opposition to the use of these mascots (Laveay et al. 2009) and that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to oppose the use of Native American imagery in sporting venues (Bresnahan and Flowers 2008). More recently, Nteta et al. (2018) found that exposure to statements in support of a team name change from sports media elites, more so than exposure to similar statements from political elites, influence the public to more strongly support changing the Washington team name. Although literature on the use of Indigenous mascots has suggested that sporting institutions shape public perceptions of Native Americans (e.g., Burkley et al. 2017; Freng and Willis-Esqueda 2011), limited scholarship directly explores the converse—how negative racial attitudes toward Native Americans may structure public opinion toward the continued use of Indigenous mascots and names.¹⁰ In order to address this void, we turn to the scholarship on symbolic racism to help better understand the potential connection between racist attitudes and the controversy over the future of the Washington team’s name.

Theory

Theories about the symbolic functions of politics date back to Murray Edelman’s scholarship (1964, 1971) and suggest that underlying dynamics of public opinion toward political controversies are often related to their affective dimension and symbolic function. This approach to analyzing politics notes that people acquire predispositions toward particular political entities (most notably political parties, ideologies, and race) early in life and subsequent opinions are largely an affective response to the symbols evoked or connected

⁷ The trademark was later reauthorized when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Matal v. Tam*, to protect American’s rights to trademark names that are racially offensive, events which transpired after our survey was in the field.

⁸ Snyder has claimed that Indigenous people support the use of the term “Redskins,” citing a controversial Annenberg Public Policy Center Poll (2004) and a 2016 Washington Post study (Cox et al. 2016). Scholars argue that such claims misstate the findings from the data, citing evidence that respondents strategically claim an identity “as Indian,” regardless of a bonafide tribal affiliation (King et al. 2002; Springwood 2004). Research which investigates the opinion of Indigenous people reveals that Native Americans are *more* offended by the use of Indigenous symbols than are others in the American public (Jacobs 2014; Laveay et al. 2009).

⁹ See also Ferguson (2016).

¹⁰ This article theorizes and explores the latter, although we acknowledge that, in practice, the processes may not be entirely unidirectional. Recursive feedback effects in the co-construction of negative racial attitudes and Indigenous mascots could be at play, over time. Because our data are cross-sectional, we limit our analyses to that which we can reasonably assess: the discrete relationship between racial attitudes and the Washington team name.

to the issue in question. Studies of symbolic racism built from this theory and proposed to “explain new forms of racial conservatism appearing after the civil rights era” (Sears and Henry 2005, p. 95). In their review of more than 30 years of research on symbolic racism, Sears and Henry describe how this new strain of conservatism directed at topics where material resources are not directly at stake was labeled “symbolic” “to highlight its roots in abstract moral values, rather than in concrete self-interest or personal experience, and because it targets Blacks as an abstract collectivity rather than specific Black individuals” (2005, p. 98). It was labeled “racism” to underscore the central disposition of racial antipathy underlying this concept. Sears and Henry further note that although the original specification of symbolic racism theory has undergone some minor conceptual modifications and has more recently been presented under the tags of “racial resentment” or “modern racism” the actual operationalization of symbolic racism and its variants have been remarkably stable over time, as have the empirical effects of this concept on public opinion and political behavior.

Since its inception, symbolic racism has emerged as a strong and consistent determinant of public opinion on issues that directly or indirectly touch on racial concerns in the United States. According to studies of symbolic racism, when whites are faced with an issue that concerns African Americans, they will react in an affective and oppositional manner to the issue in question in line with the expectations that the position of African Americans in society no longer emanates from racial discrimination (Sears 1993). These expectations have been confirmed in studies of candidate evaluations and vote choice in elections that feature African American candidates. Scholars find that not only do whites largely oppose black candidates, but that symbolic racism emerges as a strong predictor of opposition to these candidates (Erigha and Charles 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010). Additionally, the literature on racial policy preferences has similarly found that symbolic racism plays an important explanatory role in accounting for opposition to policies that are popularly associated with remediating discriminatory treatment of African Americans such as health care (Tesler 2016), criminal justice reform (Green et al. 2006), and even support for paying college athletes (Wallsten et al. 2017).

In this article, we argue that attitudes toward the use of Native American mascots and nicknames are similarly explained by affective reactions to Indigenous people, akin to the affective reactions associated with African Americans in other racialized contexts. Like African Americans, Native American people and traditions remain at the center of the history of racialized tensions and conflicts in the U.S. (Brown 2007). The events of 2013 made clear that the mascot issue is an important flash point for the representational politics of acknowledging the oppressive history of violence

against Indigenous people. Many Americans may think that the mascot issue is “merely” about entertainment, underscoring the trend that often (falsely) cast sports as an apolitical realm (Green and Hartmann 2012). But race and the politics of sports are, in fact, significantly intertwined (Kusz 2007; see also Wallsten et al. 2017). From the history of racial segregation in major league baseball, Americans have long-debated major racial conflicts in the realm of sports *particularly* because the valence attached to racialized and gendered change within sports are so loaded (Druckman and Sharrow 2019; Schultz 2014; Sharrow 2017; Tygiel 1997).¹¹ Yet because there are no material resources to be directly won or lost by retaining versus replacing the franchise names and mascots that feature Native Americans, the symbolic racial politics of the issue are most salient.

Thus, we contend that the Washington team naming debate is a case well poised to extend both the literatures on symbolic racism and the politics of sport. In line with scholars of symbolic racism, we hypothesize that symbolic racism will emerge as a strong determinant of support for the Washington team name (H1) and opposition to the belief that the team’s name is offensive (H2).

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we employ original cross-sectional survey data from a module embedded in the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The 2014 CCES is an online survey of over 56,000 Americans conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix on the behalf of 48 colleges and universities (Schaffner and Ansolabehere 2015). The CCES uses data culled from the U.S. Census Bureau, voter registration databases, the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey and the Current Population Survey to gather a representative sample of respondents from the YouGov database of thousands of “opt-in” volunteers. This collaborative study is verified to produce estimates similar to mail and telephone surveys (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014). Our module of the CCES was in the field during September and October of 2014 (pre-election), and the total number of respondents in our module was 1500.

Our two dependent variables measure a respondent’s opinion toward the controversy surrounding Washington’s professional football team. The first item asks respondents their views on changing the team’s name with the question, “Recently, there has been a lot of debate about the NFL team the Washington Redskins changing their team’s name. Do

¹¹ The #takeaknee protests in the NFL, and the backlash against peaceful protest in sports by President Trump, illustrate this point (Nteta et al. 2017).

you support or oppose the Washington Redskins changing their team's name?" Our second dependent variable explores whether a respondent finds the term "Redskins" offensive by asking respondents, "Some people say that the name the Washington Redskins is offensive to Native Americans. Others say that the name is not offensive and is a positive symbol of Native Americans. How about you... Do you agree or disagree that the Washington Redskins' team name is offensive to Native Americans?"¹² Given the high levels of correlation between these two items ($\alpha = .86$), we also present results from an index of these two questions.

Alongside a standard set of demographic and political variables (i.e., partisan identification, ideology, race, education, age, and gender), we also include a number of theoretically relevant variables that may be of import in predicting opinion toward the team's name change and assessments of whether the team's name is offensive. In our model, we first include items that tap a respondent's knowledge of and interest in the NFL, first with an index of two questions that measure a respondent's factual knowledge of NFL's record holders ($\alpha = .59$) and second with an item that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they "follow what's going on in the National Football League." Given the widespread attention the issue of the team's name was garnering during this period (as delineated below), we measure exposure to this debate using a question that asks respondents, "Generally, how often do you read, watch, or listen to SPORTS news?" In line with the scholarship on social identity theory (Tajfel 2010), we control for the possibility that identification with the Washington team may influence opinion on these issues. To do so, we add to our model a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a respondent identifies the Washington team as their favorite NFL team (i.e., a measure of their status as a fan) as well as a dichotomous variable that measures whether a respondent is a resident of Washington, DC, Maryland, or Virginia (the states that have historically been most supportive of the Washington franchise). We also measure a respondent's proximity to Native American populations by using the percentage of Native Americans living in a respondent's congressional district during the 113th session of the U.S. Congress.¹³

Our independent variable of interest is a respondent's support for Native American symbolic racism (see also Bobo and Tuan 2006). Symbolic racism is measured by an

index ($\alpha = .65$) of two items that ask a respondent their level of agreement with the following statements: "Most Native Americans work hard to make a living just like everyone else," and "Most Native Americans take unfair advantage of privileges given to them by the government." The index is also scaled from 0 to 1 with higher scores representing stronger support for Native American symbolic racism. All question wordings used in our analyses are delineated in "Appendix."

Timing of Our Study

As noted above, our questions concerning the controversy over Washington's professional football team were included in the October 2014 pre-election wave of the CCES. Why use data from 2014 to make inferences concerning the key factors that explain public opinion toward changing the name of Washington's professional football team? We maintain that the year 2014 was a key year in the debate over the team's name with the controversy garnering widespread attention from social movement activists, political elites, the mass media, and the mass public. Beginning in the spring of 2013, when team owner Daniel Snyder defended the sanctity of his team's name, a number of civil rights and religious organizations called for a change in the team's name and an end to the use of Native American imagery. In the aftermath of Snyder's comments, President Obama entered the fray stating in an interview that "If I were the owner of the team and I knew that the name of my team, even if they've had a storied history, that was offending a sizable group of people, I'd think about changing it."¹⁴ By 2014, close to 80 media organizations had publicly vowed to no longer use the R-word, members of Congress had started to publicly pressure the NFL and Snyder to change the team's name, and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office canceled the Washington team's federal trademarks (Kang 2014; Nteta et al. 2018).

Not only did the controversy over the Washington team garner considerable elite attention, it was also prominently featured in the mass media between the years of 2013 and 2014. As seen in Fig. 1, a search of the terms "Washington Redskins name change" on the Lexis Nexis database of news reports yields a total of 1782 stories concerning this controversy from 1990 to 2018, only 146 of which were published before 2013. However, in the wake of Snyder's comments in 2013, the number of stories on this issue swell to 718 in 2013 and 659 in 2014 and levels out in 2015–2018

¹² Our questions foreground reactions to the team's *name*. Billings and Black (2018) note that, in contrast to evaluations of images (as in the case of the MLB Cleveland Indian's "Chief Wahoo" and other symbols, see Staurowsky 2004, 2007) or rituals (as in the case of Florida State University's pre-game practices, see King 2016), the name, "Redskins," is central to negative public reaction and is, therefore, a difficult test of our theory.

¹³ This measure is calculated using U.S. Census data.

¹⁴ President Obama announced his ambivalence over the continued use of the name on October 5, 2013 (Nakamura 2013). In May 22, 2014, 50 members of the U.S. Senate addressed a letter of concern about the name to the NFL (Hulse and Schneider 2014).

Fig. 1 Number of news stories of “Washington Redskins” name change, 1990–2018 ($N=1782$ Stories)

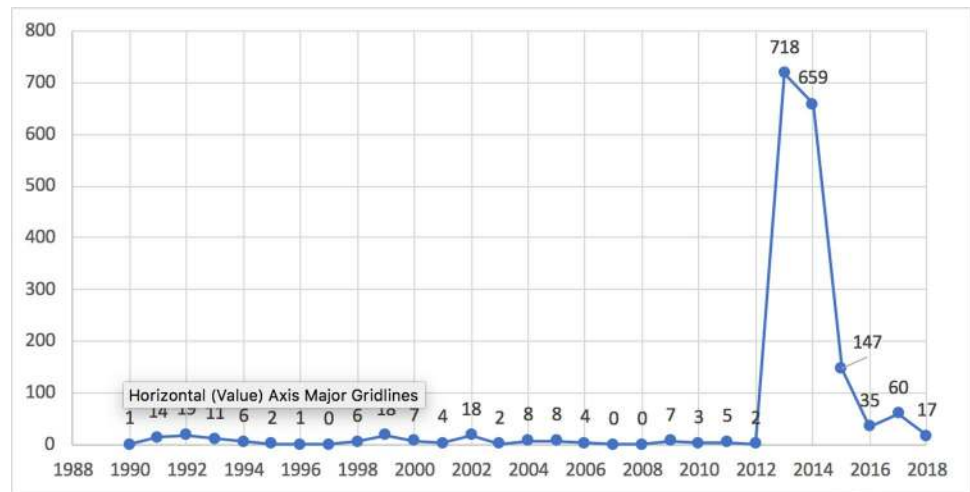
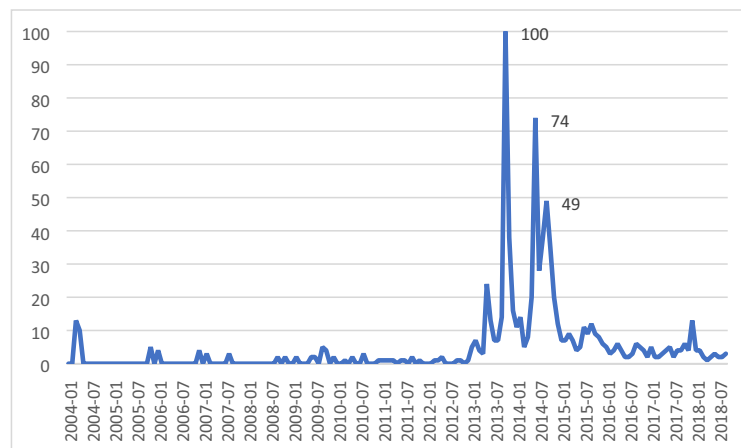


Fig. 2 Volume of Google searches for terms related to “Washington Redskins” name change, 2004–2018



Note: Values of 100 for a term represent the high point of searches for the term/individual relative to any other point during the period featured in the figure.

wherein only 259 total stories were published on this controversy.

Finally, we find clear evidence that the mass public was also uniquely interested in the controversy over Washington’s professional football team in 2014. In Fig. 2, we chart the volume of searches on Google for the term “Washington Redskins Name Change” in order to garner a sense of mass interest in this issue (see also Schaffner and Roche 2017). Here we find that the highest volume of searches for these terms occurs in the fall of 2013 and 2014 which corresponds with elite and media attention on this issue as well as when our module of the CCES was in the field.

Thus, the timing of our study in the midst of public discussions and debate over the future of the team’s continued use of the R-word term provides an ideal and unique moment to explore the nature of public opinion on this issue and to uncover the impact of symbolic racism in predicting support for the team’s name and opposition to the belief that the team’s name is offensive.

Results

For decades, supporters of the Washington team have pointed to myriad public opinion polls which show that strong majorities of the public (1) express support for the continuing use of the team’s name, and (2) view the team’s name in a positive light (AP-GfK 2013; Cox et al. 2016; IPoll 1992; Spindel 2000; Trujillo 2014). Do these results hold in 2014? In addressing this question, we examine the distribution of support for the team’s name and the belief that the team’s name is offensive in Fig. 3. Here we find that a close to half of all Americans oppose efforts to change the team’s name (46%) and only one fourth of our respondents express support for the team changing its name.¹⁵ We see a similar trend when examining public

¹⁵ This result, compared to the 2013 AP-GfK poll which found 79% of respondents responded “don’t change the name,” while 11% supported a change to the team name (AP-GfK 2013).

Fig. 3 Distribution of support for team name change and team name is offensive, 2014 CCES

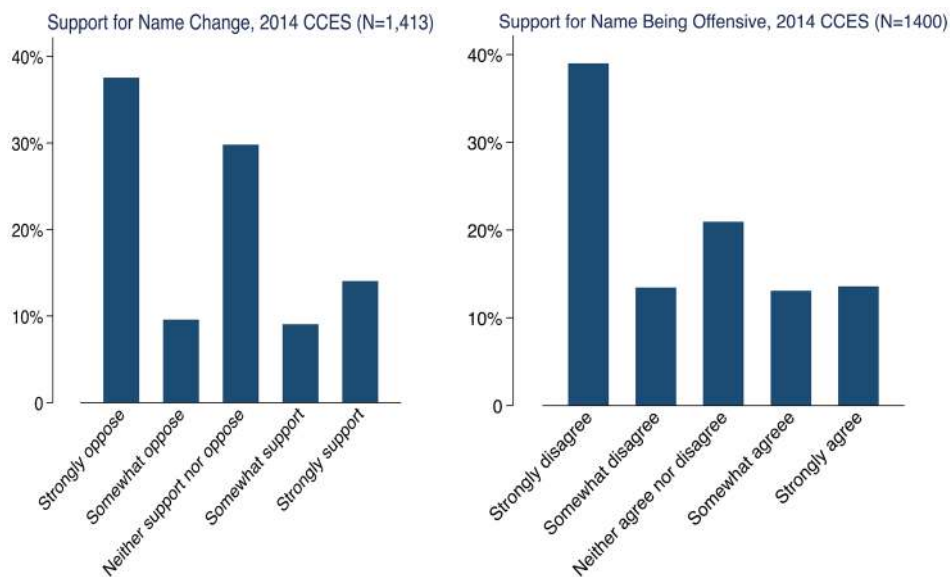


Table 1 OLS regression for opinion toward Washington team name controversy, 2014 CCES

	Model 1 Support for name change	Model 2 Support for name not offensive	Model 3 Team name index
African American	-0.148*** (0.0389)	-0.161*** (0.0463)	-0.165*** (0.0388)
Latino	-0.113* (0.0438)	-0.0315 (0.0481)	-0.0723+ (0.0409)
Asian	-0.0175 (0.0596)	0.0113 (0.0612)	-0.000178 (0.0582)
Native American	0.147+ (0.0776)	0.202** (0.0658)	0.173* (0.0699)
Other race	-0.0661 (0.0625)	-0.0554 (0.0470)	-0.0594 (0.0502)
Female	0.0272 (0.0267)	0.0296 (0.0285)	0.0328 (0.0256)
Age	0.225*** (0.0625)	0.203** (0.0721)	0.224*** (0.0609)
Education	-0.0535 (0.0440)	-0.0803+ (0.0479)	-0.0732+ (0.0426)
Party ID (1 = Strg Republican)	0.273*** (0.0430)	0.205*** (0.0552)	0.239*** (0.0435)
Ideology (1 = Strg Conservative)	0.271*** (0.0568)	0.325*** (0.0687)	0.300*** (0.0571)
DC, MD, VA resident	0.0130 (0.0578)	0.0346 (0.0693)	0.0212 (0.0627)
NFL sophistication index	0.0807* (0.0400)	0.0489 (0.0404)	0.0639+ (0.0380)
NFL interest	0.0525 (0.0492)	0.0514 (0.0555)	0.0463 (0.0489)
Sports media attention	-0.0715 (0.0466)	-0.0576 (0.0541)	-0.0557 (0.0464)
Native American symb. racism	0.128* (0.0654)	0.221*** (0.0560)	0.177** (0.0546)
Washington team fan	-0.00856 (0.0911)	0.00471 (0.0860)	0.00922 (0.0991)
% Native American in district	-0.221 (0.358)	0.122 (0.304)	-0.0721 (0.288)
Constant	0.207** (0.0655)	0.202** (0.0708)	0.197** (0.0662)
Observations	1051	1047	1024
R ²	0.311	0.306	0.344

These are weighted unstandardized coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

Significant results are bolded.

+*p* < .10, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001

opinion on whether the R-word term is offensive to Native Americans. Here we uncover that a slim majority of Americans (52%) do not find the term offensive and that again

25% of our respondents find the term offensive to Native Americans.

To better explore the determinants of opinion on this issue, we present the results from three ordinary least square (OLS) regression models in Table 1. In line with

previous research (Laveay et al. 2009), we similarly uncover that respondent's race matters in predicting support for the team's name and assessments of the offensive quality of the R-word term. African Americans and Latinos, relative to whites (the excluded group in our analysis), express stronger support for a name change and the belief that the term is offensive. Interestingly, we also discover that those who self-identify as Native American, relative to whites, are more likely to oppose changing the team's name or to perceive the team's name as offensive. However, it is important to note that our sample of Native Americans is quite small ($N=11$) and, as such, we urge caution in generalizing these results.¹⁶ Additionally, our models suggest that older Americans, conservatives, and Republicans were all less likely to support a name change and view the team's name in a positive light. Ideological identification emerges as the strongest determinant of attitudes toward this controversy in our model. As seen in model 3 of Table 1, the movement from identification as a strong liberal to a strong conservative yields a 30-point increase in support for the team's name change and the belief that term is inoffensive.

What, if any, impact does symbolic racism directed at Native Americans have on opinion toward the Washington team name controversy? As noted by scholars of symbolic politics, symbolic racism is more likely to emerge as a key factor in explaining the contours of public opinion during periods when the issue in question is salient (Marcus et al. 2000). Thus, given the widespread attention that this controversy generated in 2014 and the explicit link between this issue and the status of Native Americans, we hypothesize that negative symbolic predispositions concerning Native Americans will be activated and brought to bear on public opinion concerning this controversy. As seen in Table 1, we find clear evidence in support of our hypotheses as respondents who score high on our measure of symbolic racism are significantly more likely to oppose the team name change and view the team's name as inoffensive in 2014. More specifically, moving from the lowest level of symbolic racism to the highest score on this index increases support for the contested Washington team name by 18 points, controlling for all other variables in our model.

¹⁶ See also critiques of polls which purport to measure the opinions of Native Americans (Springwood 2004) including who is allowed to "claim" indigenous identity (Staurowsky 2007) and particularly in case of the 2016 *Washington Post* poll (Keeler 2016). Scholars also analyze how colonialist logics can be internalized by oppressed groups in the case of mascot issues (i.e., Endres 2005).

Discussion

Our study positions us to uniquely investigate the impacts of increased public attention to the issue of Native American mascots and symbols in sports during a salient juncture. While other research suggests that exposure to more critical perspectives toward changing the name by high-profile public figures can shift attitudes (Nteta et al. 2018), the study we present here offers insight into the *reasons* for intransigence in the attitudes of Americans. In it, we demonstrate that the common narrative of public support for Indigenous mascots omits a key variable: such support, though admittedly widespread among the American public, is conditioned on racist attitudes that malign Indigenous people. By engaging the long literature on the politics of symbolic racism we demonstrate that, rather than "honoring" American Indians, those supportive of Native American mascots and symbols in professional sports are significantly likely to begrudge them. As predicted by the literature on other "symbolic" racial issues and because the mascot concerns are not predicated on disputes over material resources, opinion toward mascots are significantly based on extant attitudes toward the implicated racial group.

Our work is therefore well poised to reveal the fallacious nature of claims toward "honoring" and "respecting" Indigenous people advanced by the NFL and franchise owner, Daniel Snyder. Recently, several other professional teams—including Major League Baseball's (MLB) Cleveland Indians franchise—announced their decision to cease using other mascots like "Chief Wahoo," who, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred stated "is no longer appropriate for on-field use" (Waldstein 2018). Since 2013, racial politics became a major flashpoint within the NFL with the organized protests during and around games, designed to highlight histories of American racial violence, led by Colin Kaepernick. America's most watched sport (Norman 2018) is, perhaps unsurprisingly, also where Americans play out some of our deepest, affective political battles. This article extends previous research on sports as a location for stereotype activation (Kim-Prieto et al. 2010) to explore symbolic racism, thereby drawing connections between the "recreational" context of professional athletics and racist attitudes that play a role in producing quotidian vulnerabilities, cultural appropriation, and entrenched poverty experienced by Native American populations.¹⁷ Ultimately, shortly before this article was published, these critiques finally found traction in the NFL;

¹⁷ Reports consistently show that poverty rates and economic inequality remain chronically high for Native Americans compared to the general population (Sarche and Spicer 2008; Wilson and Mokhiber 2017).

at the time of publication, the Washington team has retired the R-word mascot as is currently considering a new name.

Mascots and sports, rather than inhabiting merely the realm of leisure and entertainment, are increasingly central to the politics of racial appropriation and the question of who has the right to utilize (and profit from) racist iconography (Barnes 2017). Across many scholarly contexts there is increased attention to the many impacts of settler colonial legacies of violence that shape the experience of Indigenous people in the U.S. (Hixon 2013; Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006), including as it manifests in the mascot issue (Bruyneel 2016). Here, we connect such studies to a significant lacuna in research on race and politics in the U.S. Political science has directed only limited attention to the lives and politics of American Indians even as Native Americans comprise roughly two percent of the U.S. population and are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than the national average (U.S. Census 2018). They are more likely to be targeted by hate crimes, experience unemployment, and qualify for government assistance, yet social scientists—and political scientists in particular—have been slow to devote sustained attention to the racist discourses and politics impacting Indigenous populations (Ferguson 2016). Additional research within social science literature is required to deepen the connections among the ongoing legacies and consequences of racial subordination, material and corporeal control, and domination of American Indians.

The stakes of addressing racism and bias against Indigenous people in the United States are high. During the first year of Donald Trump's presidency, hate crimes against Native Americans rose by 63% (FBI 2018). Such humiliation and violence aimed at Native American people is ongoing but under-acknowledged (Perry 2008). Our work illustrates empirically that these issues fundamentally connect to and permeate even the purportedly “leisure” arenas of American life. Perhaps because professional sports are framed as “mere leisure,” many Americans do not take seriously the ways in which sports are imbricated in core racial battles. That our nation's capital was home to a sporting franchise that employed a mascot relying on racial stereotypes only served to underscore the double-barreled exclusions endured by Indigenous people, both through legacies of forced assimilation into white culture and simultaneous cultural appropriation and tokenism.

Consequently, this article should serve as a jumping-off point for scholars invested in isolating the dynamics that might alter the status quo within teams that continue to employ Indigenous mascots. In particular, our finding that age is a factor in predicting support for the name change suggests that public opinion may be evolving with shifting cultural attitudes about racism. These dynamics may be conditioned on racial identity, but our results portend a likely

evolution in public understanding. Ultimately, pressure from investors such as FedEx, Nike, and Pepsi caused Daniel Snyder to retract his assertion that the team will “never” change the name. Public pressure around increasingly salient critiques of structures and practices of white supremacy forced the franchise to acknowledge, in their decision, that symbolic racism and animus toward Indigenous people are, despite decades of claims to the contrary, what is “in” the name.

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Data Availability Elizabeth Sharrow will share all data and coding for replication purposes on request.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose. The authors have full control of all primary data and that they agree to allow the journal to review their data if requested.

Appendix: Question Wording from the 2014 CCES, Pre-election

Washington Redskins Name Change: Recently, there has been a lot of debate about the NFL team the Washington Redskins changing their team's name. Do you support or oppose the Washington Redskins changing their team's name? (1) Strongly Support; (2) Somewhat Support; (3) Neither Support or Oppose; (4) Somewhat Oppose; (5) Strongly Oppose; (6) Don't Know.

Washington Redskins Name Offensive: Some people say that the name the Washington Redskins is offensive to Native Americans. Others say that the name is not offensive and is a positive symbol of Native Americans. How about you...Do you agree or disagree that the Washington Redskins' team name is offensive to Native Americans? (1) Strongly Support; (2) Somewhat Support; (3) Neither Support or Oppose; (4) Somewhat Oppose; (5) Strongly Oppose; (6) Don't Know.

NFL Favorite Team: What is your favorite National Football League (NFL) team? [Text box response].

NFL Interest: Some people seem to follow what's going on in sports most of the time. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in the National

Football League (NFL)? (1) Most of the time; (2) Some of the time; (3) Only now and then; (4) Hardly at all; (5) Never.

NFL Sophistication Index:

NFL Sophistication Question 1: We'd now like to ask you some questions about the National Football League. Who holds the all-time NFL rushing record? (*response options randomized*) (1) Emmitt Smith; (2) Jim Brown; (3) Walter Payton; (4) Barry Sanders; (5) Don't Know.

NFL Sophistication Question 2: What NFL team is the last team to go undefeated in the regular season AND win the Super Bowl? (*response options randomized*) (1) New England Patriots; (2) San Francisco 49ers; (3) Denver Broncos; (4) Miami Dolphins; (5) Don't Know.

Native American Symbolic racism: Please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

(A) Most Native Americans work hard to make a living just like everyone else.

(B) Most Native Americans take unfair advantage of privileges given to them by the government.

(1) Strongly Agree; (2) Agree; (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree; (4) Disagree; (5) Strongly Disagree; (6) Don't Know.

Sports Media Attention: Generally, how often do you read, watch, or listen to SPORTS news? (1) Every day; (2) Sometimes; (3) Rarely; (4) Never.

Race: What racial or ethnic group best describes you? (1) White; (2) Black; (3) Hispanic; (4) Asian; (5) Native American; (6) Mixed; (7) Other; (8) Middle Eastern.

Gender: Are you male or female? (1) Male; (2) Female.

Age: In what year were you born?

Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

(1) No HS; (2) High school graduate; (3) Some college; (4) 2-year; (5) 4-year; (6) Post-grad.

Party ID: Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat? Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican? Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party? (1) Strong Democrat; (2) Not very strong Democrat; (3) Lean Democrat; (4) Independent; (5) Lean Republican; (6) Not very strong Republican; (7) Strong Republican; (8) Not sure.

Ideology: Thinking about politics these days, how would you describe your own political viewpoint? (1) Very liberal; (2) Liberal; (3) Moderate; (4) Conservative; (5) Very Conservative; (6) Not sure.

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