Speaker:  Simon Jackman  

Departments of Political Science & (by courtesy) Statistics,  
Stanford University

Title:  How Does Obama Match Up?

Abstract:  
Barack Obama won a convincing victory in the 2008 US presidential election. But would the outcome of the election had been different had Obama not been the nominee? In this paper we analyze a unique data set in which over 14,000 survey respondents were presented with head-to-head match-ups between Democratic and Republican candidates (both real and hypothetical), over the 2008 election campaign. We use these data to estimate Obama's exceptionalism as a candidate, via hierarchical logistic regression models, with each hypothetical matchup generating a distinct set of parameters for predictors of vote choice. We find that “old-fashioned” racial stereotyping is uniquely important in shaping decisions about Obama in 2008, relative to its role in past elections or in 2008 choices substituting Hillary Clinton or John Edwards for Obama. A similar pattern emerges for other measures of racial prejudice. The Democrats would have won the 2008 election regardless of who they nominated, but the average Democratic party nominee from the last 16 years, and either of Edwards or Hillary Clinton, would have done better against McCain than Obama, although in Clinton’s case, not by much. We conclude with what these results portend for the 2012 election, given that the electoral context is less favorable for Democrats — and for Obama in particular — than in 2008.