

What is happening to our norms against racist speech?

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Once upon a time, not too long ago, it was accepted wisdom that overt racism would doom a candidate for national political office in the United States. Of course, there was still a good deal of racism among white Americans—but a politician who openly espoused obviously racist views was thought to be unelectable. Elaborate signaling strategies were developed as ways of playing on these racist sentiments for political gain without being too obvious about it. Political psychologists studied these strategies, though philosophers tended to focus on vastly more obviously racist speech: slurring or derogatory terms.

Just as philosophers were starting to explore these signaling strategies, however, something happened. The world changed dramatically in a way fundamentally at odds with the previously accepted wisdom: Donald Trump was elected President, despite very overt expressions of racism. New, and deeply pressing questions emerged. Chief among them, of course are (1) the descriptive question of how what seemed like fixed norms have come to be, apparently, smashed; and (2) the normative question of how we should respond to our new reality. This paper focuses on (1), exploring in depth how what political psychologists said could not happen happened. I will argue that a norm against racist speech is still (as I write this, anyway) widely though not universally in force; but that it is not nearly as effective as we might have thought that it was.