

# The electoral consequences of racial fluidity

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Elections  
Representation  
Racial fluidity  
Campaigns  
Brazil

## ABSTRACT

Brazilian politicians have seemingly adopted new racial identities en masse in recent years. What are the electoral consequences of asserting membership in a new racial group? In the Brazilian case, politicians who change how they racially identify themselves and secure greater access to campaign resources may become more electorally competitive. If voters learn a politician has changed their self-declared race, however, the politician's reputation is likely to be tarnished and their chances of victory are likely to decline. Building on evidence that voters acquire greater information about election front-runners in high-profile contests than other types of politicians, I expect incumbents running for executive offices who change how they publicly identify themselves to suffer an electoral penalty. Drawing on data from local elections in Brazil, I find limited evidence that voters penalize city council candidates who adopt new racial identities. I show that incumbent mayors seeking reelection, however, receive significantly fewer votes after they assert membership in new racial groups.

## 1. Introduction

One of the major news stories of Brazil's 2020 elections was a "race switching" scandal. In late September of 2020, national news outlets reported that thousands of the politicians running for public office had changed their racial classification on electoral documents (Faria and Pitombo, 2020; Mariz and Portinari, 2020). The disclosures, which came on the heels of the Supreme Electoral Court's declaration that political parties must distribute campaign resources proportionately to Afro-Brazilian candidates, sparked public outrage. Pundits and members of the public speculated on social media that Brazilian politicians were claiming new racial identities to gain an electoral advantage. On election day, however, there was little media coverage of the politicians who had adopted new racial identities. Were the Brazilian politicians who adopted new racial identities rewarded at the ballot box or penalized by voters?

Scholars recognize that individuals can change how they racially identify themselves over time. The fluidity of racial and ethnic identities has been documented in national surveys and censuses (Egan, 2019; Nobles, 2000). Although the reasons for identity shifts vary across countries and contexts, studies routinely suggest that they reflect instrumental calculations (Barth, 1998; Laitin, 1998; Posner, 2017). Individuals are presumed to weigh the costs and benefits of various identity choices and assert membership in the group that offers the greatest expected benefits (Chandra and Boulet, 2012). Political elites are also believed to strategically claim membership in the racial group that provides the greatest rewards and at times change how they

racially identify themselves (Adida et al., 2016; Janusz, 2021; Lemi, 2017).

In the Brazilian case, politicians who change how they racially identify themselves and secure greater access to campaign resources may become more electorally competitive. If voters learn a politician has changed their self-declared race, however, the politician's reputation is likely to be tarnished and their chances of victory are likely to decline. Building on evidence that voters are more knowledgeable about competitive candidates in high-profile elections than those in down-ballot races, I contend that voters are most likely to sanction incumbents in high-profile contests who racially identify themselves inconsistently.

In this paper, I investigate the electoral impact of elite racial identity shifts in Brazil using individual-level data on politicians who ran for elected office in 2016 and 2020. My analysis suggests that political challengers who change how they racially classify themselves across elections are not electorally penalized. I find that race shifting incumbents, however, are penalized depending on the electoral arrangements. Incumbent mayors who racially reclassify themselves, in contrast to incumbent city councilors, are penalized at the ballot box. I show that race-shifting mayors seeking reelection receive significantly fewer votes than their non-switching counterparts.

This article stands at the intersection of two broad literatures: one focusing on the construction and flexibility of elite identities and another focusing on how candidate race matters in elections. By bridging

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102597>

Received 29 April 2022; Received in revised form 2 February 2023; Accepted 6 February 2023

Available online 14 February 2023

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the two, it contributes theoretically and substantively to our understanding of the role of race in politics. Extant research, which largely focuses on members of the general public, shows that racial shifts have implications for understanding political attitudes and behavior as well as measuring and remedying inequality (Davenport, 2018; De Micheli, 2021; Egan, 2019; Saperstein and Penner, 2012). The fluidity of elite racial identities is just as politically important, and perhaps even more significant. This article provides evidence that elite racial identity shifts are electorally consequential.

## 2. Racial identity shifts and elections

Racial group membership is typically understood to be a stable, individual attribute. As a result, when a high-profile individual is recognized as having changed how they racially identify themselves, their claims receive considerable media coverage and scrutiny (Brubaker, 2016; Franke-Ruta, 2012; Morning, 2018; Uehara, 2021). The behavior, however, is by no means rare. National surveys and census data show that members of the general public routinely adopt and discard racial identities over the course of their lives (Liebler et al., 2017; Loveman and Muniz, 2007; Nobles, 2000).<sup>1</sup> In the U.S. alone, millions of individuals racially classified themselves inconsistently when they completed the 2000 and 2010 censuses (Liebler et al., 2017).

Evidence that individuals change how they racially identify themselves has led scholars to explore the determinants of reclassification. Some point to measurement decisions as an important driver of racial shifts. Research shows that the format of racial identification questions can lead the same individual to identify themselves differently (Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman, 1992; Roth, 2016; Telles, 2014a). Nonetheless, even when the question format is consistent over time, some individuals change how they racially identify themselves. As a result, others attribute identity shifts to sincere changes in how individuals think of themselves. For example, work in developmental psychology indicates that adolescents, and to a lesser extent, young adults, change their sense of which race best describes them (Hitlin et al., 2006; Kiang et al., 2010). Finally, some scholars contend that racial identity shifts reflect instrumental calculations (Barth, 1998; Chandra and Boulet, 2012; Laitin, 1998; Posner, 2017). Studies suggest that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of claiming membership in different racial groups and claim membership in the category that maximizes their expected rewards.

Politics is considered to be one of the factors that affects the utility of different identities and is believed to drive instrumental identity shifts. In many countries, group membership affects access to resources and services (Bates, 1974). When governments favor certain identity groups over others, those denied access stand to benefit if they alter how they identify. Nonetheless, not all individuals will, or even could, switch into privileged groups. Individual characteristics and attributes constrain their identity options (Chandra, 2005; Laitin, 1998; Posner, 2017). Even in societies where racial boundaries are policed, though, some individuals “pass” into privileged racial groups to secure resources (Antman and Duncan, 2015; Bowker and Star, 2000; Dahis et al., 2019).

Like members of the public, political elites may benefit from changing how they publicly identify themselves. Janusz (2021) shows that thousands of the politicians who competed in Brazil’s 2014 and 2016 elections changed their self-declared race and presents evidence that these racial identity shifts were driven by electoral considerations. Specifically, he demonstrates that politicians relinquish membership in numerically small groups that do not constitute viable electoral coalitions and assert membership in large groups as well as shows that candidates claim membership in the racial categories they are

<sup>1</sup> For a review of social science research on racial fluidity see Davenport (2020).

ascribed membership. This work, nevertheless, leaves many questions unanswered. Among the most important is whether politicians who adopt new racial labels are electorally rewarded or penalized.

Although Janusz (2021) contends that Brazilian politicians instrumentally change how they identify themselves to improve their chances of winning office, he does not ultimately test if politicians benefit from this behavior at the ballot box. It is possible that they do not. Janusz (2021) notes that some Brazilian politicians who adopted new racial identities were publicly criticized for their behavior. I extend the literature on racial fluidity by exploring whether voters punish or reward politicians who adopt new racial identities.

## 3. Electoral consequences of racial changes

Central to instrumental conceptions of group membership is a general model of identity choice: an individual claims membership in the identity category that maximizes their expected utility. For politicians, the racial category that maximizes their expected utility can be assumed to be the category that offers the greatest chances of winning elected office. There are two principal pathways through which a politician’s publicly professed race may affect electoral outcomes: indirectly through access to campaign resources and directly via the ballot box.

Due to formal electoral rules and norms, group membership is known to affect which individuals are given the opportunity run for public office and what campaign resources they are provided (Baldez and Cortez, 2005; Gonzalez Perez, 2010; Wylie, 2020). By altering how they identify, political aspirants may potentially gain a place on the ballot. Moreover, they may enhance their ability to secure campaign funds, assemble a knowledgeable staff and attract campaign volunteers, and attain critical endorsements. In the absence of an opportunity to run for public office and without campaign resources, they will have no need and little ability to cultivate voter support.

Politicians need to attain sufficient voter support to win public office. Voters are known to demonstrate in-group favoritism at the ballot box (Adida, 2015; Aguilar et al., 2015; Horowitz, 1985; Hutchings and Valentino, 2004; Posner, 2005). Politicians oft encourage this favoritism and mobilize coethnics through targeted group appeals (Leighley, 2001; McIlwain and Caliendo, 2011). Rather than trying to convince voters not to engage in in-group favoritism, politicians that are members of out-groups may instead attempt to convince voters they are actually in-group members (Posner, 2017). If a politician is able to convince voters that they are members of the same racial group, they stand to benefit on election day.

Both resource-centric and vote-based explanations for elite racial identity shifts point to the same conclusion — politicians who change how they identify will improve their chances at the ballot box.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Politicians who change how they racially identify themselves will increase their vote share.

Politicians who change how they publicly identify themselves may expect to improve their electoral prospects, yet this behavior is not without risks. Voters who learn that a politician previously claimed membership in a different racial group are likely to question their motives. If the politicians’ behavior is deemed opportunistic, members of the politician’s newly claimed racial group are likely to view them as dishonest and withhold their support on election day. Moreover, members of the racial group a politician no longer claims membership in can be expected to regard them as untrustworthy and reject them at the ballot box.

The chances that voters learn a politician has changed how they racially identify is likely to depend on the politician’s public profile. In contrast to challengers, voters are often familiar with incumbents even before electoral campaigns officially get underway (Jacobson, 1981). While this familiarity provides incumbents an electoral advantage, it can also be a liability. As voter knowledge of an incumbent increases, so

too does the likelihood that they will notice if that incumbent changes how they racially present themselves. While some incumbents may perceive the potential benefits of adopting a new racial identity to exceed the risks, the electoral benefits they realize are likely to be lower than those realized by non-incumbents.

- **Hypothesis 2:** Political incumbents who change how they racially identify themselves will increase their vote share by a smaller margin than non-incumbents who reclassify themselves.

Voters can sanction any incumbent politician who they perceive as having acted inappropriately via the ballot. The media plays an important role in informing voters about the behavior of politicians (Romano, 2014). Because the media focuses on high-level officeholders, voters are most likely to be exposed to information about those who hold executive posts. Journalists often consider negative information about politicians to be newsworthy and have found that it captures public attention (Soroka, 2006; Soroka and McAdams, 2015). When the media has learned incumbent politicians have racially identified themselves inconsistently, it has investigated and reported that information to the public (Jacobs, 2019; Santana, 2021).

Voters also learn about candidates via political campaigns. In elections held in multi-member at-large districts, political candidates use their campaign resources to educate voters about themselves and cultivate voter support (Carey and Shugart, 1995). In single-member district plurality elections, though, candidates also routinely try to educate voters about their competitors. By “going negative” and attacking the front-runner, trailing candidates can potentially close the gap between them (Desposato, 2008; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995). While the substance of such attacks varies across elections, candidates have at times questioned the identity claims of their opponents (Alexander, 2008; McIlwain and Caliendo, 2009).

- **Hypothesis 3:** Incumbent politicians who change how they racially identify themselves and compete in elections governed by plurality rules will experience an electoral penalty.

Brazil presents the ideal case to test these hypotheses for three reasons. First, thousands of Brazilian politicians have changed how they racially identify themselves across elections (Janusz, 2021). Second, although Brazilian politicians are known to display progressive ambition, it is not uncommon for incumbents to seek reelection and defeated candidates to run for the same position again (Pereira and Rennó, 2013; Samuels, 2003). And lastly, electoral rules in Brazil vary by position. At the local level, city council candidates compete in multi-member districts under open-list proportional representation and mayors are elected in single-member districts according to majoritarian rules. After describing racial identification in Brazil, I present evidence that electoral rules and electoral experience are associated with patterns of elite racial reclassification as well as electoral outcomes.

#### 4. Race in Brazil

Brazil was the largest importer of enslaved Africans and the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery (Telles, 2014b). In contrast to the United States, Brazil did not adopt institutionalized segregation following the abolition of slavery. This decision though, like the introduction of Jim Crow laws, was driven by racist beliefs about white superiority (Moritz-Schwarz, 1993). Brazil’s predominantly white political elite believed that the African descendants would hinder its development. Therefore, it encouraged immigration from Europe and racial mixing with the goal of “whitening” the Brazilian population (Silva and Paixão, 2015). The decision to promote racial mixing removed the need to codify racial group membership into law (Loveman, 2014). The absence of official rules for racial classification, however, has not stopped Brazilians from categorizing themselves and others.

The *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE), the governmental agency that administers the census, collects information on racial group membership using a five category classify scheme.<sup>2</sup> Citizens are permitted to self-classify as white (*branca*), brown (*parda*), black (*preta*), Asian (*amarela*), or Indigenous (*indígena*).<sup>3</sup> The white, brown, and black categories are considered to exist on a color continuum, with the brown category occupying an intermediate position.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Asian and Indigenous categories are regarded as analytically distinct.

Racial categorization in Brazil is primarily a function of phenotype. A combination of physical characteristics, such as skin tone, hair type, nose shape, and lip shape are important determinants of categorization (Telles, 2014b). Nonetheless, research shows that individual attributes like age, education, gender, region, and wealth also affect labeling decisions (Silva and Paixão, 2015; Telles, 2002, 2014b). Racial group membership in Brazil thus can be subjective and individual racial identities can be fluid.

Studies indicate that educational attainment is an important driver of racial identity shifts. De Micheli (2021) argues that the expansion of education led many Brazilians to develop racialized identities and identify as brown and black. In other work, however, Francis and Tannuri-Pianto (2012) and Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto (2015) find that access to education, not education itself, precipitates some racial identity shifts. They report that the introduction of affirmative action programs in Brazilian universities inspired some applicants to begin identifying as brown and black, but demonstrate that not all who professed these identities maintained them afterward. In other words, some Brazilians instrumentally adopt identities to secure advantages and benefits.

As previously mentioned, Brazilian politicians have been accused of opportunistically adopting racial identities. When “race switching” became a major news story in the run up to the 2020 elections, news sites published the names and photographs of politicians who racially classified themselves inconsistently. News reports suggested that politicians were instrumentally adopting new identities and implied that politicians claiming membership in the brown and black racial categories were doing so to gain campaign resources. Although city council and mayoral candidates adopted new identities, media coverage focused primarily on those running for mayoral office.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the politicians identified by the press were criticized on social media and may have been penalized by voters. Before turning to the impact of racial reclassification on electoral outcomes, I explore temporal changes in racial reclassification and show that the incidence of racial shifts varies according to electoral experience and electoral rules.

#### 5. Fluidity of elite racial identities

In 2014, Brazilian electoral authorities began requiring political aspirants to racially identify themselves when they register to run for public office. On the *Requerimento de Registro de Candidatura* (RRC), all prospective candidates, regardless of whether they have run for public office before, are required to classify themselves as members of one of

<sup>2</sup> The terms race and color are used interchangeably in the Brazilian census. Some Brazilians prefer the notion of color, which captures fluidity (Telles, 2014b). Telles (2014b) notes that “color captures the Brazilian equivalent of the English language term race” (Telles, 2014b:79).

<sup>3</sup> Brown and black individuals are commonly referred to collectively as Afro-Brazilians. This umbrella-term, however, obfuscates economic, social, and political differences between them (Mitchell-Walthour and Darity, 2014; Mitchell-Walthour, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The brown category subsumes the myriad of mixed-race terms used in popular discourse (Silva, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Carvalho (2020).

the five mutually exclusive ethno-racial categories used by the IBGE.<sup>6</sup> Although neither the registration process nor the racial categories that prospective politicians can claim membership in have changed over time, official registration documents reveal that thousands of politicians have racially classified themselves inconsistently.<sup>7</sup> The number of politicians that changed their race from 2016 to 2020 is particularly noteworthy.

A total of 160,242 politicians ran for elected office in both 2016 and 2020. Most of those politicians ran for the same elected office and competed in the same electoral district each time. They did not, however, always claim membership in the same racial group. Of the politicians that competed in 2016 and again in 2020, 26 percent claimed membership in different racial groups across elections.

It is not possible to know with certainty why Brazilian politicians racially classified themselves inconsistently across elections. When journalists ask race shifting politicians about it, they usually do not respond (Faria and Pitombo, 2020; Martins, 2020). A minority of politicians, though, have offered explanations. Some declare their self-reported race changed because of error on the part of electoral officials, the complexity of racial categorization in Brazil, or growing racial consciousness (Mariz and Portinari, 2020; McCoy and Traiano, 2020; Velasco et al., 2020). Voters and non-race shifting politicians, however, are skeptical of these claims and acknowledge an alternative explanation — electoral incentives.

Racial divisions are salient in Brazilian elections. There is evidence that voters prefer candidates from their racial group and candidates employ racial appeals to cultivate voter support (Aguilar et al., 2015; Janusz and Campos, 2021; Mitchell-Walthour, 2009, 2017).<sup>8</sup> A politician's racial group membership may be an electoral asset or liability depending on the racial composition of the electorate. When politicians require the support of voters from a particular racial group to win office, they may attempt to manipulate how they are racially perceived.

There is some evidence that Brazilian politicians seek to shift into electorally powerful racial groups. For example, while campaigning in Brazil's Northeast, a region known for its substantial black population, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), who is socially regarded as white, remarked that he has a "foot in the kitchen", a phrase which implies African ancestry (Caldwell, 2007).<sup>9</sup> More recently, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who classified himself as white when he registered to run for president in 2016, appeared to embrace a nonwhite racial identity. When asked during an interview about his race, he responded, "I'm Lula the way that I am Lula. I'm black. I'm white." and subsequently indicated that the president of Senegal identified him as the first Black president of Brazil (Uehara, 2021).<sup>10</sup> While FHC and Lula appear to have embraced blackness because of the electoral strength of black constituencies, others have been accused of reclassifying themselves for financial reasons.

In August of 2020, the Brazilian Supreme Electoral Court ruled that political parties must distribute campaign resources proportionately

<sup>6</sup> Party administrators enter the information of affiliated candidates into a TSE database. Each candidate is provided a physical print-out of the entered information and instructed to review it for errors, and declare themselves "responsible for the accuracy of the presented information" by physically signing the document. A candidate's personal attorney may sign on their behalf, but Janusz (2021) reports that candidates typically certify the information themselves.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for detail on the incidence of racial switching across elections.

<sup>8</sup> But see also Bueno and Dunning (2017).

<sup>9</sup> The phrase *pé na cozinha* indicates African ancestry via slavery by referencing the kitchen, which was historically the domain of black female slaves. This phrase is considered derogatory by some because it implies that blacks are limited to certain social positions.

<sup>10</sup> The interview, which took place on the *Mano a Mano* podcast, was the most popular program on Spotify in Brazil in 2021.

to the white and Afro-Brazilian candidates they nominate beginning in 2022. One month later, Ricardo Lewandowski, the minister of the court declared that the policy would apply to the 2020 elections. Lewandowski asserted that the policy would encourage Afro-Brazilians to run for elected office (Brigido and Portinari, 2020). Some Brazilians, however, claim that the policy instead led opportunistic politicians to become "Afro-Brazilian."

There are three reasons to be skeptical that financial motives explain racial identity shifts in 2020. First, Brazilian politicians have been changing how they racially classify themselves since 2016, long before race-informed campaign finance reforms were ever discussed. Second, thousands of the politicians who registered to run for elected office in 2020 did so before Lewandowski announced that political parties would be required to distribute campaign resources proportionately to white and Afro-Brazilian candidates. And finally, many of the politicians who reclassified themselves did not claim membership in racial categories that would provide greater access to campaign resources. Although politicians may not have changed how they racially identified themselves to secure greater campaign resources, some may have nonetheless benefited financially depending on which racial identity they adopted.

In Table 1, I provide detailed information on election-to-election changes in candidate racial self-classification. Each row indicates the race of candidates in 2016 by whether they self-classified as white, brown, black, Asian, or Indigenous. The bolded cells along the center diagonal show the percentage of candidates who racially classified themselves consistently in 2016 and 2020. Observations in the off-diagonal cells show the percentage of candidates who changed their self-reported race from one election to the next and what racial identities they adopted.

Table 1 suggests that many politicians who racially reclassify themselves do not do so to gain access to campaign resources. Politicians who classified themselves as brown or black in 2016 stood to benefit financially from the new campaign finance rules if they classified themselves consistently across elections. Nonetheless, they did not always do this. Many politicians shifted between the brown and black categories and a portion reclassified as white. This latter pattern is particularly insightful because membership in white racial category would presumably reduce their access to campaign funds.

The reason that some candidates change how they racially classify themselves may be as varied as the individuals themselves.<sup>11</sup> Systematic factors, though, are likely to influence the incidence of racial shifts. If the electoral rewards race-shifting politicians receive are conditional on their electoral experience and electoral rules, we can expect those factors to also affect the incidence of reclassification.

In 2016 and 2020, politicians competed for city council and mayoral positions in Brazil's more than 5,500 municipalities.<sup>12</sup> Although city council and mayoral elections are held concurrently, they are governed by different electoral rules. City council members are elected according to open-list proportional representation (OLPR) rules in at-large municipal districts while a single mayor is elected in each municipality according to majoritarian rules.<sup>13</sup> Assuming that Brazilian politicians change how they racially classify themselves in order to improve their electoral prospects, we should observe two patterns if the electoral benefits they receive are conditional on their individual electoral experience and electoral rules. First, politicians who previously lost their bid for elected office will be more likely to change how they racially classify themselves than incumbents seeking reelection. And second,

<sup>11</sup> Appendix B provides more detail on racial identity shifts.

<sup>12</sup> Brazilian municipalities are akin to counties in the United States.

<sup>13</sup> The number of members on city councils range from 7 to 55 in accordance with the municipality's population. Mayors are elected according to plurality rules in municipalities with less than 200,000 voters and a two-round run-off system in municipalities with more than 200,000 voters.

**Table 1**  
Patterns of racial self-classification in 2016 and 2020.

		Self-classified race in 2020					
		White	Brown	Black	Asian	Indigenous	N
Self-classified race in 2016	White	80%	19%	1%	0%	0%	83,001
	Brown	21%	70%	9%	0%	0%	62,658
	Black	4%	32%	64%	0%	0%	13,325
	Asian	38%	44%	3%	15%	0%	730
	Indigenous	3%	28%	5%	0%	64%	528

Note: Table 1 shows the percentage of political candidates who gave a particular combination of responses on the 2016 and 2020 RRC documents. Percentages sum across rows.

**Table 2**  
Racial fluidity from 2016 to 2020.

	Position sought in 2020	
	City council OLPR rules	Mayor FPTP rules
All politicians	26.6% (143,052)	20.5% (9985)
Political novices	27.6% (92,436)	21.9% (2491)
Prior office experience	25.0% (9432)	21.5% (4412)
Past 8 years — non-incumbent		
Incumbents seeking reelection	24.6% (41,184)	17.7% (3082)

Note: Table 2 reports the frequency with which politicians of different types changed their self-reported race. The number of politicians in each category is listed in parentheses. Table 2 only includes politicians that competed in both the 2016 and 2020 elections.

incumbents seeking reelection in multimember districts will be more likely to change how they racially classify themselves than incumbents seeking reelection in single-member districts.

Table 2 shows how the incidence of racial reclassification varies based on electoral experience and electoral rules. It provides striking evidence that electoral experience is associated with the incidence of racial reclassification. Inexperienced politicians, regardless of which office they are seeking, are significantly more likely to racially reclassify themselves than incumbents seeking reelection. City council candidates in 2020 without political experience are 3 percent more likely to racially reclassify themselves than city council members seeking reelection (27.6% vs. 24.6%,  $p = .0000$ ). Similarly, inexperienced politicians running for mayoral office are significantly more likely to reclassify themselves than incumbent mayors seeking reelection (21.9% vs. 17.7%,  $p = .0001$ ). These findings suggest that inexperienced politicians expect to receive greater electoral rewards from adopting new racial identities than incumbents seeking reelection. Moreover, they point to the possibility that incumbent city councilors expect to receive greater electoral rewards from reclassification than incumbent mayors.

Table 2 also suggests that there is an interaction between electoral experience and electoral rules. Specifically, it shows that incumbent city councilors seeking reelection are significantly more likely to change how they racially classify themselves than incumbent mayors seeking reelection (24.6% vs. 17.7%,  $p = .0001$ ). This finding suggests that incumbent city councilors and mayors expect to receive differential rewards from reclassifying themselves. The latter may view racially reclassifying themselves to be an especially costly electoral strategy because voters have a high likelihood of learning that they changed their self-declared race and may penalize them for it.

The presented evidence suggests that incumbency and electoral rules are associated with individual racial identity shifts. It is unclear if this is because they affect the expected electoral benefits or the potential costs. To determine if the politicians who adopt new racial identities benefit electorally or are penalized by voters, I now turn to multivariate methods.

## 6. Electoral consequences of racial reclassification

To determine how candidates who racially reclassify themselves fare, I again rely on data from Brazil’s 2016 and 2020 elections. In

contrast to the prior analysis, though, I only include politicians who ran for the same elected office in the same electoral district. Although this decision leads to a slight reduction in sample size, it eliminates a variety of alternative explanations for how racial identity shifts affect electoral outcomes.

To test the proposed hypotheses, I use ordinary least squares regression to estimate six different models of electoral performance. In Table 3, I assess the electoral performance of city council candidates in the first three models and do the same for mayoral candidates in the latter three models. In each model, candidate vote share is the dependent variable.<sup>14</sup> I use municipal fixed effects to account for omitted variables that do not vary across politicians in a given municipality as well as cluster the standard errors on the municipality.

My principal independent variable in each model is a dichotomous measure of whether a candidate changed their self-reported race across elections. The *Racial Shift* variable takes the value “1” if a candidate racially classified themselves differently in 2020 than 2016 and “0” otherwise. As such, all politicians who change their self-classified race, regardless of which racial category they assert membership in, are treated similarly. This approach presumes that politicians who racially classify themselves inconsistently professed membership in the racial category that they believed would maximize their electoral chances in 2020 and therefore biased toward finding that racial reclassification assists candidates in winning public office. In addition to the *Racial Shift* variable, I include a dichotomous measure of incumbency and interact that *Incumbent* variable with the *Racial Shift* variable. This interaction provides an opportunity to determine whether incumbents who reclassify themselves receive more votes than those who identify themselves consistently. I expect incumbents who reclassify themselves will receive fewer votes than non-incumbents.

In my analysis, I progressively incorporate control variables that election scholars have identified as electorally consequential.<sup>15</sup> I first include a measure of vote share (lagged) because prior electoral performance is recognized as a strong predictor of future success. Next,

<sup>14</sup> In the Appendix, I present the results of regression models in which the dependent variable is electoral victory.

<sup>15</sup> Additional information on controls can be found in the Appendix.

**Table 3**  
Racial shifts and candidate vote share.

	City council candidates			Mayoral candidates		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Racial shift	-0.060*** (0.010)	-0.018*** (0.007)	-0.009 (0.010)	0.051 (1.681)	-0.057 (1.443)	0.315 (1.346)
Incumbent	1.882*** (0.017)	-0.130*** (0.015)	-0.225*** (0.021)	14.191*** (0.926)	-0.022 (0.972)	-1.478 (1.035)
Racial shift × incumbent	0.010 (0.024)	0.005 (0.020)	0.017 (0.022)	-3.372 (2.412)	-4.079* (2.112)	-4.176** (1.939)
Vote share 2016 (%)		0.763*** (0.005)	0.693*** (0.006)		0.796*** (0.033)	0.581*** (0.034)
Constant	1.447*** (0.005)	0.371*** (0.009)	1.314*** (0.081)	37.061*** (0.565)	9.078*** (1.247)	10.489*** (2.731)
Controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Municipal fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	137,546	136,899	93,256	5386	5381	5254
R squared	.311	.696	.691	.176	.300	.534

Note:

\*p < 0.1.

\*\*p < 0.05.

\*\*\*p < 0.01.

I add a series of candidate and constituency controls. These variables include prior office experience, candidate gender, candidate education, and candidate age as well as campaign expenditures in 2020, which I operationalize as the percentage of all campaign resources spent by a candidate in the municipal race they were competing. I control for whether candidates were affiliated with right or centrist parties, leaving leftist parties as the referent. I also control for whether candidates switched parties across elections. Finally, because one of the ways adopting a new racial identity may improve a candidate's chances of winning office is by aligning them with the racial constituency they are courting, I include a measure of racial group size based on data from the 2010 census. The *Racial Group Size* variable reflects the percent of the population in a municipality that identify as members of the racial group a candidate claimed membership in when they registered to compete in 2020.

Having specified the models, I now turn to the results presented in Table 3. I focus first on city council candidates. With respect to my first hypothesis, that politicians who change how they racially identify themselves will receive an electoral reward, I find limited support. The coefficient on the *Racial Shift* variable in Models 1–3 is negative, but ceases to be statistically significant when controls are incorporated. This suggests that inexperienced politicians running for city council who racially identify themselves inconsistently across elections do not receive significantly fewer votes than inexperienced candidates who racially identify themselves consistently.

Before turning to my second hypothesis, the *Incumbent* variable warrants discussion. In Models 1–3, the coefficient on the *Incumbent* variable is statistically significant, but the sign flips across models. In the first model, the coefficient is positive, but in Models 2 and 3 it is negative. This indicates that incumbents seeking reelection who racially identify themselves consistently receive significantly fewer votes than non-incumbents who racially identify themselves consistently.

Turning to my second hypothesis, I focus on the *Racial Shift\*Incumbent* variables. According to my second hypothesis, incumbent city council members who racially reclassify themselves are likely to receive a smaller benefit than political novices. In Models 1–3, the *Racial Shift\*Incumbent* variable has a positive, but not statistically significant coefficient. This suggests that incumbent city council members who change how they racially identify themselves across elections do not do significantly better nor worse electorally than incumbents who racially identify themselves consistently.

Theory suggests that the extent to which politicians are electorally rewarded for adopting a new racial identity is conditional on more

than just their incumbency status. It is also likely to depend on what office a politician is running for. Voters have greater access to information about incumbents competing in high-profile electoral races than other types of candidates. As a result, they are better positioned to hold politicians accountable for behavior they deem unacceptable, such as identifying themselves inconsistently. In Models 3–6, I investigate whether incumbent mayoral candidates who racially reclassify themselves will experience an electoral penalty.

In Models 3–6, the sign of the coefficient on the *Racial Shift* variable varies, but never reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. Like city council candidates, it does not appear that inexperienced mayoral candidates receive a significant electoral bump or penalty if they racially reclassify themselves. I also find that the sign and significance of the coefficient on the *Incumbent* variable changes from Model 4 to Model 5. In Model 4, the coefficient of the *Incumbent* variable is positive and statistically significant, but once I control for vote share in 2016 it becomes negative and insignificant. This suggests that incumbent mayors seeking reelection who racially identify themselves consistently across elections do not fare better or worse than challengers who racially identify themselves consistently.

Turning now to my third hypothesis, I focus on the *Racial Shift\*Incumbent* variable. In Models 4–6, the *Racial Shift\*Incumbent* variable has a negative coefficient. Once control variables are included, the coefficient on the interaction becomes statistically significant. This suggests that incumbent mayors who racially identify themselves inconsistently are electorally penalized. Fig. 1 demonstrates that, all else equal, incumbent mayors who racially identify themselves inconsistently across elections receive 3.9 percent fewer votes than incumbent mayors who do not.

Broadly, these results indicate that the electoral impact of racial reclassification is conditional on incumbency and electoral rules.<sup>16</sup> City council candidates who racially reclassify themselves do not experience an electoral penalty or benefit. The impact of racial reclassification on the electoral performance of mayoral candidates, however, is tied to their incumbency status. Non-incumbents running for mayor who racially reclassify themselves do not receive an electoral reward nor are they penalized. On the other hand, incumbent mayors seeking reelection who racially reclassify themselves do significantly worse electorally than incumbents who identify themselves consistently. These

<sup>16</sup> In Appendix C, I formally test whether the impact of racial shifts varies by incumbency status and electoral office using a three-way interaction.

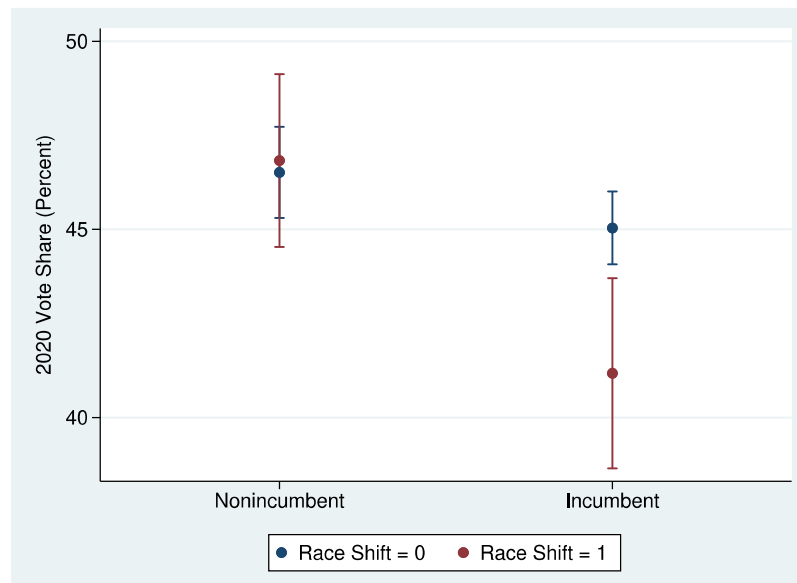


Fig. 1. Impact of racial reclassification on mayoral candidate vote share. Note: Fig. 1 shows the impact of racial reclassification on mayoral candidate vote share in 2020.

disparate findings may be attributable to information asymmetries. While voters may desire to sanction politicians who racially identify themselves inconsistently, they are only likely to have the requisite information to hold accountable incumbents seeking reelection to high-profile positions.

Although politicians adopted and discarded various identities, public outrage was often directed at individuals who asserted membership in the brown and black racial categories. Members of these groups were presumed by some to have instrumentally changed how they racially identify to gain access to campaign resources. To explore whether candidates who embraced these identities benefited from it at the ballot box, I conduct further tests.

Like the preceding analysis, I estimate separate models for city council and mayoral candidates. In contrast to the prior analysis, though, I employ a subset of all observations and different variables. With respect to observations, my analysis only includes candidates who self-classified as white, Asian, or Indigenous in 2016 and therefore could reclassify as brown or black. Moreover, instead of using the *Racial Shift* variable, I now use the *Afro-Brazilian Shift* variable. This takes the value “1” if a candidate racially classified themselves as brown or black in 2020 and “0” otherwise.

The results presented in Table 4 also indicate that electoral experience and electoral rules shape whether politicians who reclassify themselves as Afro-Brazilian benefit electorally. The findings, however, are not consistent with those of the prior analysis. Focusing first on city council candidates, I find that inexperienced politicians who reclassify themselves as Afro-Brazilian do not increase their vote share. In Models 1–3, the coefficient on the *Afro-Brazilian Shift* variable is actually negative and highly significant in each model. This indicates that those who reclassify as brown or black receive fewer votes than those who do not. While inexperienced candidates are penalized when they adopt Afro-Brazilian identities, incumbent city council candidates who reclassify as Afro-Brazilian appear to be rewarded. The coefficient on the *Afro-Brazilian Shift\*Incumbent* variable is positive in each model. It only reaches conventional levels of statistical significance though in the third model.

In Models 3–6, I assess how mayoral candidates who reclassify as Afro-Brazilian fare at the ballot box. In each model, the *Afro-Brazilian Shift* variables have negative coefficients but fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This suggests that inexperienced mayoral candidates that reclassify themselves as brown or

black do not receive a significant electoral bump or penalty. The *Afro-Brazilian Shift\*Incumbent* coefficients are also negative and statistically insignificant. Nonetheless, there is still reason to believe that incumbent mayors who adopt Afro-Brazilian identities are electorally penalized. For one, the coefficients reported in Models 3–6 in Table 4 have the same negative sign and are similar in size to those reported in Models 3–6 in Table 3. Moreover, when using a three-way interaction, I find incumbent mayoral candidates who adopt Afro-Brazilian identities receive significantly fewer votes than incumbent mayoral candidates who do not reclassify as Afro-Brazilian.<sup>17</sup> These additional results suggest that incumbent mayors who adopt Afro-Brazilian identities do suffer an electoral penalty.

The results from my empirical analysis indicate that voters do not reward politicians who profess membership in different racial groups across elections. Inexperienced candidates and incumbents seeking reelection who identify themselves inconsistently do not receive more votes than those who identify themselves consistently. Although voters do not reward politicians who change how they racially identify themselves, they sanction some for identifying themselves inconsistently. Incumbent mayors who racially identify themselves inconsistently receive significantly fewer votes than those who identify themselves consistently. Notably, the electoral penalty appears not to vary much based on which racial labels incumbent mayors discard and adopt.

One plausible reason voters sanction incumbent mayors who claim new racial identities but not other types of politicians is that they have incomplete information. Voters can only hold accountable politicians that they are knowledgeable about and are likely to be most informed about incumbent mayors. While expanding access to information would presumably allow voters to make more informed voting decisions, it may not always improve accountability (Dunning et al., 2019). When voters can choose from many candidates, like in Brazil’s city council elections, they are likely to limit the information they gather about them (Cunow et al., 2021). So long as politicians believe that voters are unlikely to learn they changed their self-professed race, we can expect they will continue to strategically adopt and discard racial identities.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix D for more detail.

**Table 4**  
Afro-Brazilian shifts and candidate vote share.

	City council candidates			Mayoral candidates		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Afro-Brazilian shift	-0.083*** (0.016)	-0.028** (0.012)	-0.055*** (0.017)	-1.402 (2.878)	-1.532 (2.486)	-0.851 (2.693)
Incumbent	1.805*** (0.021)	-0.116*** (0.021)	-0.277*** (0.028)	14.773*** (1.206)	1.155 (1.295)	0.093 (1.393)
Afro-Brazilian shift × incumbent	0.052 (0.037)	0.037 (0.032)	0.066* (0.035)	-3.473 (4.270)	-4.734 (3.560)	-3.662 (3.235)
Vote share 2016 (%)		0.737*** (0.007)	0.670*** (0.009)		0.761*** (0.046)	0.509*** (0.050)
Constant	1.554*** (0.007)	0.449*** (0.013)	1.620*** (0.048)	37.320*** (0.816)	10.308*** (1.778)	17.043*** (4.828)
Controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Municipal fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	69,975	69,649	48,646	3677	3673	3590
R squared	.300	.685	.681	.174	.287	.542

Note:

\*p < 0.1.

\*\*p < 0.05.

\*\*\*p < 0.01.

## 7. Discussion

In 2020, national news outlets in Brazil reported that thousands of Brazilian politicians had changed how they racially classified themselves across elections. Considering that news reports presented this phenomenon as strategic, it stands to reason that political elites who adopted new racial labels were rewarded at the ballot box. The publicity that candidates who claim new racial identities receive, though, may eliminate any electoral advantages that they gain. Instead of believing that a politician who claims membership in their racial group is “like them,” voters may perceive politicians who shift into their racial group as untrustworthy.

This article provides empirical evidence that Brazilian politicians who racially reclassify themselves do not benefit at the ballot box. In fact, it demonstrates that many race-shifting politicians are electorally penalized. My analysis shows that the extent to which politicians who change their self-reported race are sanctioned is conditional on their public profile and electoral rules. I find that unknown political aspirants and incumbent city council members do not pay an electoral cost. In contrast, incumbent mayors who reclassify themselves receive significantly fewer votes than other incumbent mayors and are less likely to win reelection. These findings suggest that as access to information about politicians grows, so too does the likelihood that voters will sanction politicians who identify themselves inconsistently.

Evidence that mayoral incumbents who change their race are penalized raises new questions. Among the most important is why did they behave in a manner which damaged their chances of winning reelection? One potential explanation is that mayors seeking reelection did not know they would pay an electoral cost if they reclassified themselves. After all, prior to the 2020 election, the media did not publicize the fact that some candidates had changed their self-reported race across elections. On the other hand, politicians may have expected they could face backlash for claiming membership in a new racial group but decided the potential benefits exceeded the costs. The available data do not provide the means to answer these critical questions.

In addition to exploring why politicians adopted new racial labels, future work should investigate the conditions in which voters punish politicians who change how they publicly identify themselves. Survey experiments may be an especially useful tool for isolating how different information affects voter preferences. Although I posit that voter awareness of reclassification shapes voter responses, candidate characteristics may also impact voter attitudes. For example, the racial identity that a politician adopts and the identity they discard may influence whether

voters perceive their behavior as instrumental or sincere, and their willingness to vote for them. It is also possible that voters from different racial groups respond to the same information differently (Adida et al., 2016; Clayton et al., 2021; Lemi, 2021). Racially conscious voters may punish candidates that leave their racial group or punish those that seek to join it. Others, though, may not care about such behavior.

Future research should also connect work on identity fluidity with literature on political representation. In 2020, 8,943 city council candidates and 761 mayoral candidates who changed their self-reported race across elections ultimately won office. Moreover, many of those who reclassified themselves and did not win local office in 2020 returned to other public posts, including elected offices at the national and state levels. It is important to understand whether politicians who change their self-professed race govern differently than others. Politicians that adopt new racial identities may substantively represent members of their newly claimed racial group or continue to act for their prior racial group.

Finally, these findings point to a new way in which race matters in Brazilian elections. Electoral success appears to be shaped, at least in some instances, by whether or not politicians change their race. Nonetheless, it is unclear if race-shifting politicians pay a one-time electoral cost, or if it affects their electoral prospects in the long run.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

### Acknowledgment

I thank Hannah Alarian, Marcus Johnson, Giacomo Lemoli, David de Micheli, Juliana Restrepo Sanín, Andrew Rosenberg and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102597>.

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