

# Minority Candidates, Media Framing, and Racial Cues in the 2004 Election

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Rooted in political communication models of framing and priming and a rather unique theory of appeals to racial authenticity, the authors examine minority candidates in both majority-minority and majority-white districts during the 2004 election cycle. They explore and analyze potential framing and priming effects based on variations of candidates' media coverage in a number of campaign scenarios. Results suggest that racial references are commonplace in biracial election contests (and are more likely to occur there than in all-white contests). Furthermore, newspaper coverage of biracial and all-black elections is more likely to contain a racial frame than stories about all-white races. The authors conclude with a discussion of the normative implications of these findings, as well as suggestions for further examination and testing.

**Keywords:** *African-American/Latino candidates; racial cues; media framing and priming; biracial elections*

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The 2004 election cycle featured a number of interesting contests for students of race and U.S. elections in terms of the number of racial minorities who ran, the number of biracial contests in majority-white districts or states, and the relative success of minority candidates. The racial diversity of candidates and contexts in 2004, as well as the results of several prominent contests in other recent elections (such as the 1996 races analyzed by Voss and Lublin 2001), would seem, on its face, to cast doubt on the fundamental premise of those who espouse race-based districting. This is what Swain (1995) refers to as the "conventional wisdom": that white voters, due to conscious or unconscious racial prejudice and resentment, are largely unwilling to vote for black or other minority candidates. On the other hand, the characteristics of the 2004 elections, if not anomalous, certainly indicate a rather recent trend. Historically, relatively few minority candidates have even attempted to run for office in districts that did not

have a majority-minority population. Even fewer of those who have tried have actually been elected in districts where the majority of the voting population is white (Bositis 1998; Canon 1999; Grofman and Handley 1989; Lublin 1997a, 1997b). On a different front, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that whites' racial predispositions and resentments become salient factors in their political decisions when primed by various forms of racialized communication (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings 2002). The fundamental barrier to reconciling the two sides of this debate is a lack of empirical data necessary to confirm or refute a plausible causal connection between how white racial attitudes affect their perceptions of, and willingness to vote for, racial minority candidates. This causal link, if it indeed exists in the way that it has been suggested by the extant literature, begins with some form of racialized communication, which would activate subconsciously held negative racial predispositions, and would in turn translate into a vote against a minority candidate in a given election scenario.

One of the difficulties with empirically testing such a scenario is that existing studies have approached it somewhat indirectly. Those linking white racial attitudes to unfavorable perceptions of black candidates have done so without considering the crucial intervening element of various forms of racialized communication by a candidate (Terkildsen 1993; Williams 1990). Those who have demonstrated that, when primed, whites' negative racial attitudes affect their political decision making have not included a minority candidate (or minority voters) as the principal subject of that political decision (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings 2002). Others have made the observation that news media may be a primary form of racialized communication that could prime whites' negative racial attitudes and therefore may be a significant barrier to the electoral success of minority candidates. However, these studies are too few in number and inconclusive about the effects of such media cuing (see Reeves 1997; Terkildsen and Damore 1999).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the latter group of studies concerned with how the news media cover and frame elections involving minority candidates. We seek to ascertain the veracity of previously drawn conclusions that show that the media disproportionately makes race a central reference point in biracial elections. We are particularly interested in the media's framing of race, given several factors that we hypothesize significantly contribute to such forms of racial reference (cuing), some of which have not been a part of similar studies, including the racial composition of the candidates (biracial including white, black, and Hispanic/Latino candidates, as well as contests with two black candidates); the racial composition of voters; and the competitiveness of the race. We are also interested in whether the form of coverage differs between biracial election contests involving African-American candidates and those involving Latino

candidates, as well as coverage of contests where both candidates are African-American.

This article presents the results of a content analytic study of national and local newspaper coverage of nine election contests from the 2004 cycle, including five U.S. Senate contests and four U.S. House contests. These contests reflect various forms of racial diversity in terms of the candidates involved and the racial composition of voters. Of the Senate races, two featured Latino candidates against white candidates, one featured an African-American candidate against a white candidate, one included two African-American candidates, and one included two white candidates. The U.S. House races included one contest between an African-American and a white candidate, one contest between two black candidates in a majority-black district, and two contests between two white candidates.

Sonenshein (1990: 220) has observed that "there is no real literature" on African-American statewide candidates, a claim that remains accurate some fifteen years later. This characterization is true of studies about African-American candidates as a whole (particularly on the federal level) and extends to work on candidates of any racial minority group. This article adds to the dearth of existing literature in several ways. First, we provide direct empirical evidence to support or refute conclusions of the few studies that focus specifically on media coverage of biracial (white/black) elections. This contribution increases our ability to judge the veracity of previous conclusions as they are extended to the debate surrounding structural barriers to the election of black candidates. Second, this study is unique in that it allows us to comparatively focus on similarities and differences in media coverage of black and Latino candidates. Third, it is one of the first to study (albeit in a limited way) election contests where both candidates are African-American. Each of these last two points is important given recent trends suggesting that biracial contests including Latino candidates and competitive contests between black candidates are likely to increase (Bositis 2002; Hero and Tolbert 1995).

### **Previous Literature**

There is a vast amount of literature germane to the multiple and overlapping issues we focus on herein. For the sake of clarity, past research studies outlined below are those that relate most directly to this article and, more specifically, those most relevant in terms of the specific research questions and hypotheses with which we are concerned. The primary areas of interest include the use and effects of racial cuing on white voters, perceptions and evaluations of minority candidates within the voting population, and news media framing of biracial election contests.

### **Priming Effects of Racialized Political Communication**

Conclusions from the most recent studies regarding the priming effects of racial messages and their resultant bearing on candidate evaluation and vote choice (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings 2002) test (and ultimately support) Mendelberg's (2001) theory of implicit racial appeals. Mendelberg argues that implicit appeals, as compared to explicit racial appeals, prime white voters' negative racial prejudices, which, in turn, influence views on public policy matters and voting decisions. These conclusions are consistent with a number of related studies (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Reeves 1997).

Valentino and his colleagues (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002) have been able to add to these conclusions by isolating specific types of cues that are most powerful in priming racial attitudes. Using television advertisements, they confirm that some messages prime racial attitudes without any racial imagery; imagery connecting blacks to comments about undeserving groups yields a stronger priming effect; racial priming is mediated by the accessibility of race in memory, rather than self-reported levels of the importance of group representation; and expectancy-violating, negative racial cues regarding blacks suppressed racial priming, while the violation of positive stereotypes of whites had a positive racial priming effect. In a related study, Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings (2002) found that ads containing racial cues significantly strengthened the impact of ideology self-placement in evaluating candidates, especially in cases when the advertising message communicated some form of advantage of whites over blacks. Conclusions from this study suggest that group cues (and group racial cues even more) are powerful in priming political ideology. It also suggests that other factors that highlight the salience of race in voters' memory—such as media reporting—may have the same effect.

As previously mentioned, while the conclusions of such studies are becoming increasingly substantiated, they cannot speak directly to the question of whether such appeals contribute to one's decision whether to vote for a minority candidate *per se*. Though it would be quite reasonable to surmise from these results that such appeals would negatively affect minority candidates, the precise hypothesis has yet to be sufficiently explored.

### **Perceptions and Evaluations of Minority Candidates**

While not drawing a direct link between media images and their effects on perceptions of minority candidates, a second body of literature has demonstrated that whites' perceptions of black candidates mirror many of those stereotypes allegedly played out in various mediated forms. For example, in a national survey studying white and black perceptions of black politicians' electability, Williams (1990) found that whites associated white candidates with more positive attributes of a qualified candidate than they did with blacks.

These include attributes such as being “intelligent,” “hard-working,” and “trustworthy,” among others. Similarly, Terkildsen (1993) also found a similar predilection for whites to negatively evaluate black candidates more than white and suggests that black candidates’ skin color (tone) was a factor in the negative evaluation. That is, while black candidates were evaluated more negatively than their white counterparts, darker-skinned black candidates were evaluated even more harshly.

Other research, however, has suggested that despite the correlation between espoused stereotypes and perception or evaluation of candidates, white voters’ negative evaluations of black candidates may have less to do with their race and more to do with the ideological predispositions of whites. That is, a minority candidate’s race, though a factor, may not necessarily be the most salient predictor of his or her negative evaluations (Sigelman et al. 1995). Based on an “assumed characteristics” perspective, Sigelman et al.’s (1995) findings suggest that

evaluations ultimately depend on what traits specific racial or ethnic stereotypes suggest minority group members should have, what traits they do have, and what evaluative significance is attached to these assumed and individual traits, as influenced by their desirability and correspondence with expectancy. (P. 243)

In this regard, an individual’s previously held ideologies and beliefs about what a minority candidate should “look like” politically is a more plausible predictor of overall evaluations of minority candidates, as opposed to negative racial attitudes.

### **Racialized Media Coverage and Biracial Elections Contests**

Again, the primary shortcoming of research investigating the link between racial cues, white racial attitudes, and willingness to vote for a minority candidate is that scholars have focused on the first two aspects and rarely on the third. Two sets of studies stand out as significant exceptions, both of which focus on the ability of the news media to be the source of racial cues. The first is a set of studies by Reeves (1997), the first of which focused on media coverage of two 1989 mayoral elections that included black candidates—one in New York City featuring David Dinkins and the other in Seattle featuring Norm Rice.

Reeves’s (1997) descriptive analysis focused primarily on the frequency with which news references to the respective contests made racial references to the candidates, other racial groups (including voters), and the tone of the racial references. It showed that both the *New York Times* and the *Seattle Times* frequently referred to the candidates’ race (20 and 60 percent, respectively) and that the *New York Times* in particular made reference to the race of the voters three-quarters of the time. Moreover, he found that the tone of these racial references were frequently negative. The purely descriptive nature of this study obviously has limited explanatory capability on its own. While it provides evidence that the news media do frequently

make racial references in biracial campaign contests, there is no comparative data that allow us to determine whether such references might be considered “overwhelming,” as Reeves describes it, or whether it differs significantly from other racial contexts—when both candidates are white within a district with a sizeable minority population, for example. Second, the study is not set up to be able to test what influence the racial references may have had on voters.

In a separate study using different methods and data, Reeves (1997) does seek to determine whether racialized media coverage had some measurable effect on a voter’s willingness to vote for an African-American candidate. He does so by way of a controlled experiment where subjects read various versions of a news story, some of which contained the kind of racial cuing that he found in his content analysis. The results of this study were mixed, however, with some measures overwhelmingly demonstrating white candidates’ willingness to vote for the black candidate and others showing tacit signs that the racial cues in news stories aroused some form of racial animus that resulted in whites’ choice against voting for the black candidate.

Terkildsen and Damore (1999) looked at news coverage of biracial elections in the 1990 and 1992 cycles, including in their analysis contests involving two white candidates. They ultimately found support for what they refer to as their “racial dualism hypothesis,” concluding from the results of their study that the media act as racial arbitrators by limiting racial emphases; the media bring race to the forefront of campaigns by highlighting candidate race; and media coverage of elections involving African-American candidates suppresses the use of race among the candidates themselves, but accents the race of black candidates and their constituents.

Explaining the significance of their findings, Terkildsen and Damore (1999) draw a conclusion they did not specifically test, but one with which Reeves (1997) would agree following his limited test of the same hypothesis. The former state that

emphasizing race in these (bi-racial) contests, either visually or in print, provides a powerful vote cue for both prejudiced and nonprejudiced citizens. For the prejudiced, race will prime their racial values, while for nonprejudiced voters race will likely cue stereotypical processing unless an alternative belief system is activated. (p. 684)

In light of more recent studies, however, the authors’ distinction between “prejudiced” and “nonprejudiced” voters has little explanatory value. Terkildsen and Damore’s conclusion essentially implies that all white voters are prejudiced, the only difference being that the so-called “nonprejudiced” voter is willing to change his or her mind in light of alternative information. Studies from authors cited above, principally Mendelberg (1999, 2001), suggest that

only the attitudes of those possessing some form of negative racial resentment will be primed given certain implicit racial cues. The only mitigating factor of the primed attitudes being salient to a voter's political decisions is the rendering of the original implicit message as explicit.

We are concerned that by drawing a connection between their conclusions and those of another body of literature (racial priming effects), Terkildsen and Damore (1999) are perhaps overreaching, especially in light of limited data. We acknowledge the possibility that repeated racial references in news media could be shown to prime negative white racial attitudes to the detriment of a minority candidate. However, as noted above, those studies that most directly focus on such priming effects are only applied to decisions made about one's relative support of certain policy decisions, rather than the direct effect on his or her perception or choice to vote for a minority candidate.

Additionally, studies on racial priming effects suggest the possibility that forms of political communication, such as televised political ads, are more likely to evoke racial priming effects than cues taken from news media.<sup>1</sup> Evidence from other studies suggest that this difference may be due to the strength of the medium of television to more effectively convey candidate messages in general (Brians and Wattenberg 1996), not to mention its effectiveness in communicating implicit racial messages (Mendelberg 2001), as well as the probability that voters are affected more significantly by messages emanating directly from a candidate himself or herself in a given election (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994).

In light of this, and in the absence of direct evidence to substantiate Terkildsen and Damore's (1999) conclusions, we are cautious to build our study on the premise that media references to race alone, in elections where minority candidates are involved, are enough to activate the degree of racial animus that would cause one to not support a particular minority candidate. We therefore opt to restrain our claims compared to Reeves (1997)<sup>2</sup> to say that our hypotheses are noteworthy insofar as the media do not necessarily prime negative racial attitudes of white voters. We are only comfortable asserting that media might serve a racial agenda-setting function, making race the most salient factor for consideration, or enact a racial frame of reference by which any reader/voter may choose to read and interpret election news stories including racial minority candidates. We include in our analysis the degree to which we would consider media "references" to race to be elevated to a status that might result in a framing effect. Again, in either case, we would be cautious in describing either as having a significant priming effect on white voters.

## **The Study**

We set out to test these theoretically driven hypotheses and explore some research questions by focusing on nine general election congressional contests

during the 2004 election cycle. While no study of one year's contests can provide a generalizable set of findings on these questions, we chose to focus on several general election contests that allow for a comparison of mediated discourse in a variety of settings while controlling for historical period.

Since our primary goal is to examine news coverage of elections in multiple contexts where at least one candidate is a racial minority, we chose nine races from the 2004 general elections for their variance in scenario. There were two U.S. Senate general election contests with Hispanic candidates, and we examine both of these biracial elections: Florida, which featured a Republican Hispanic candidate (Mel Martinez), and Colorado, which featured a Democratic Hispanic candidate (Ken Salazar). Both ran against white opponents (Betty Castor and Pete Coors, respectively).

Three biracial contests in our study feature a black candidate running against white candidate. Georgia's U.S. Senate race featured an African-American Democrat (Denise Majette) and a white Republican (Johnny Isakson). We chose to examine the election for Missouri's 5th U.S. Congressional District for four reasons: It is an open seat in a majority-white, largely urban district that was being vacated by a white member of Congress; the black candidate (Democrat Emanuel Cleaver) was a heavy favorite; the Republican candidate (Jeanne Patterson) was willing to spend large amounts of her own personal fortune (it ended up being some \$3 million); and this district is one of the few majority-white districts to send a black member to Congress in recent history (Democrat Alan Wheat represented the district from 1983 to 1995).<sup>3</sup> The other white-black contest was Illinois U.S. Senate race, which featured Barack Obama, a black man, running as a Democrat against the white Republican Jack Ryan. Ryan was forced to withdraw from the race due to a personal scandal and was replaced by Alan Keyes, a black Republican candidate.

The other all-black race in the study is the only one that took place in a majority-minority district. Georgia's 4th District featured recently ousted Representative Cynthia McKinney's return (the incumbent Denise Majette vacated the seat to run for the U.S. Senate) to beat Catherine Davis, a black Republican. For purposes of comparison, we also examined contests in majority-white districts where no person of color was running: the Maryland U.S. Senate race and the U.S. House contests for Connecticut's 4th and Texas's 2nd district. These races were randomly chosen in terms of the relative similarities to the biracial and all-black contests included in the study (competitiveness of the contests judged from both an examination of media reports prior to the election and the actual vote totals of the election contest). Table 1 contains descriptive information for these election contests.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics of election contests under examination

Contest	Candidates	Racial Composition of District	Total Stories	Winner <sup>a</sup>
U.S. House, Connecticut 4th	Farrell (D) (white) Shays (R) (white)	76.8% white 11.8% black 9.7% Latino	36	Shays (52-48)
U.S. House, Texas 2nd	Lampson (D) (white) Poe (R) (white)	71% white 19.1% black 12.7% Latino	18	Poe (55-43)
U.S. House, Georgia 4th	McKinney (D) (black) Davis (R) (black)	35.7% white 54% black 9.7% Latino	19	McKinney (64-36)
U.S. House, Missouri 5th	Cleaver (D) (black) Patterson (R) (white)	69.7% white 25.2% black 6.0% Latino	32	Cleaver (55-42)
U.S. Senate, Illinois	Obama (D) (black) Keyes (R) (black) Ryan (R) (white) <sup>b</sup>	74.5% white 14.7% black 13.7% Latino	130	Obama (70-27)
U.S. Senate, Maryland	Mikulski (D) (white) Pipkin (R) (white)	64.2% white 27.6 black 6.3% Latino	12	Mikulski (65-34)
U.S. Senate, Georgia	Majette (D) (black) Isakson (R) (white)	66.2% white 27.6% black 6.3% Latino	81	Isakson (58-40)
U.S. Senate, Florida	Castor (D) (white) Martinez (R) (Latino)	77.1% white 15.2% black 18.7% Latino	425	Martinez (50-48)
U.S. Senate, Colorado	Salazar (D) (Latino) Coors (R) (white)	83.8% white 4.1% black 18.7% Latino	160	Salazar (51-47)

*Note:* Racial composition of districts data come from the U.S. Census Bureau's Fast Facts for Congress; and the 2003 American Community Survey Data Profile Highlights, except Texas 2nd, which comes from 109th Congress Congressional District Demographics of the 2000 census (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>). Final results data come from CNN's "America Votes 2004" page (<http://www.cnn.com/election/2004/>).

a. Only percentages of major party candidates are presented.

b. Republican Jack Ryan was Barack Obama's opponent until he was forced to drop out of the race on June 25, 2004, due to personal issues. At that point, Republican Alan Keyes moved to Illinois from Maryland to run.

**Table 2**

Racial scenario of contests under examination

	Contests	Total Items
White vs. white	3	66
Black vs. black	2	40
White vs. Latino	2	585
White vs. black	3	187
Total	10	878

*Note:* Contests total ten even though only nine races were observed because we counted the Illinois Senate race as two separate contests: one with Obama versus Ryan (black vs. white) and one with Obama versus Keyes (black vs. black).

### Data Collection and Variables

For each contest, we collected newspaper stories relating to the campaigns, beginning with the day following the primary election until Election Day in November.<sup>4</sup> Table 2 indicates the number of articles examined in each election scenario. One striking aspect is the disproportionate number of stories in the “white versus Latino” category. While this is explained partly by having two U.S. Senate races (Florida and Colorado) in this category, Florida’s size and the competitiveness of both of these contests also contributed to this situation. In addition, Florida has a greater number of newspapers that are part of the Lexis-Nexis database than any of the other states or districts under consideration.

Besides descriptives of the contest—election contest being covered, race and party of each candidate, date of the story, level of story (national or local source)—we coded for the following variables: number of substantive policy issues mentioned, race of either candidate mentioned, race of the voters mentioned, and whether a photo of either candidate was included with the story.<sup>5</sup> After the coding was complete, we assigned a level of competitiveness to each contest,<sup>6</sup> created dummy variables for the racial scenario, and computed a “racial frame” variable (explained below).

### Hypotheses and Research Questions

The three dependent variables of primary concern are those that are present in the Reeves (1997) and Terkildsen and Damore (1999) studies discussed above: (1) the mention of candidates’ race in a news story, (2) the mention of the race of voters, and (3) the appearance of candidate photographs. To this, we add a fourth variable, the number of substantive policy issues mentioned, which, though not directly analyzed by the others, is suggested by them: Biracial contests are more likely to focus on race than on substantive public policy issues. Included in our list of possible factors influencing these variables, or those upon which significant differences are likely, include the racial composition of the candidates, the racial

composition of voters, and the competitiveness of the race. Given these factors and the results of prior research, we have constructed the following hypotheses, which center on each of the dependent variables listed above and are drawn directly from previous research. We also have several research questions upon which no existing work suggests a hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1:* The race of candidates and voters, and pictorial representation of candidates (separately and together), are more likely to appear in biracial or all-black election contests than all-white contests.

*Hypothesis 1a:* These factors are more likely to appear in biracial contests than all-black contests.

*Hypothesis 2:* The larger the white population of voters, the more likely that minority candidates' race will be mentioned, the race of voters will be mentioned, and the candidates' photos will appear.

*Hypothesis 2a:* These factors will appear more often in majority-white districts than majority-minority districts.

*Hypothesis 3:* The race of candidates and voters and the pictorial representation of candidates are more likely to appear in competitive, as opposed to noncompetitive, contests.

*Research Question 1:* Do news stories of biracial contests involving African-American candidates more or less frequently mention the candidate's race, the race of voters, and/or include a photo of the candidates than those involving Latino candidates?

*Research Question 2:* Do more or less substantive public policy issues tend to be mentioned in news stories involving minority candidates than those that do not?

*Research Question 2a:* Is this the case in stories that mention the candidates' or voters' race as opposed to those that do not?

*Research Question 3:* How frequently do news stories of contests involving a minority candidate contain all three forms of racial references: mentioning the race of the candidate, mentioning the race of the voters, and featuring a photograph of the candidates?

*Research Question 3a:* Of those stories that do, are there significant differences in regard to level of competitiveness, the racial makeup of the candidates, and the racial makeup of voters?

Table 3 displays an overview of the racial framing elements under consideration.<sup>7</sup> The totals of the positive values of each dichotomous variable are presented, as well as the frequencies within each of the four election contest's racial scenarios that are included in the study.

On the whole, these are not the data that we would construct if we could manipulate the real world, but these cases allow us to discover the way elections involving racial minority candidates are covered in a variety of contexts, and they allow us to compare these findings against some all-white contests during the same election cycle.

**Table 3**  
Frequencies of the elements of racial framing within each election scenario

Election Scenario	Race of Either Candidate Mentioned	Race of Voters Mentioned	Photograph of Either Candidate Included	Total
White vs. white	2 (3.0%) (0.9%)	2 (3.0%) (0.2%)	11 (16.7%) (3.2%)	66 (100.0%) (7.5%)
Black vs. black	23 (57.5%) (10.5%)	16 (40.0%) (11.9%)	16 (40.0%) (4.6%)	40 (100.0%) (4.6%)
White vs. Latino	152 (26.0%) (69.1%)	95 (16.2%) (70.4%)	249 (42.6%) (71.6%)	585 (100.0%) (66.6%)
White vs. black	43 (23.0%) (19.5%)	22 (11.8%) (16.3%)	72 (38.5%) (20.7%)	187 (100.0%) (21.3%)
Total	220 (25.1%) (100.0%)	135 (15.4%) (100.0%)	348 (39.6%) (100.0%)	878 (100.0%) (100.0%)
Chi-square	40.163***	28.580***	16.753***	

Note: Figures were generated by three separate cross-tabulations. Displayed are the raw number of stories within each election scenario that meet each criteria.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Findings

Our first hypothesis, asserting that racial references will occur more frequently in biracial or all-black contests than in contests where both candidates are white, is supported by the data. Table 4 shows the results of cross-tabulations of a number of elements that may be present in print news stories about elections in each of the scenarios under observation. The first three columns show how many stories contain mentions of the race of one or both of the candidates. While the race of candidates is mentioned most often in races where both are African-American, it is also important to note that the race of at least one candidate is noted in a full quarter of the stories of biracial contests (white vs. black or white vs. Latino). Furthermore, it is the nonwhite candidate's race that is most often mentioned in those contests, not the race of the white candidate.

The fourth column of Table 4 indicates the number of stories that included a mention of the race of the voters. Again, there is infrequent mention of the race of voters when both candidates in the contest are white, but when both are black, the race of the voters is mentioned 40 percent of the time. It should be remembered that one of these races with two African-American candidates is in a majority-black district (Georgia's 4th Congressional District), but the others are majority-white states (Illinois and Georgia U.S. Senate races). The biracial contests have double-digit percentages in this area but are not nearly

**Table 4**  
Elements of news stories within each election scenario

Election Scenario	Race of Either Candidate Mentioned		Race of White Candidate Mentioned		Race of Nonwhite Candidate Mentioned		Race of Voters Mentioned		Photo of Either Candidate Included		Photo of White Candidate Included		Photo of Nonwhite Candidate Included		"Racial Frame" Imposed
	Mentioned		Mentioned		Mentioned		Mentioned		Included		Included		Included		
White vs. white	3.0% (2)	3.0% (2)	—	—	—	—	3.0% (2)	3.0% (2)	16.7% (11)	16.7% (11)	—	—	—	—	1.5% (1)
Black vs. black	57.5% (23)	—	57.5% (23)	—	57.5% (23)	—	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	10.0% (4)
White vs. Latino	26.0% (152)	2.6% (15)	25.5% (149)	2.6% (15)	25.5% (149)	2.6% (15)	16.2% (95)	16.2% (95)	42.6% (249)	42.6% (249)	36.2% (212)	36.2% (212)	35.0% (205)	35.0% (205)	9.4% (55)
White vs. Black	23.0% (43)	4.3% (8)	23.0% (43)	4.3% (8)	23.0% (43)	4.3% (8)	11.8% (22)	11.8% (22)	38.5% (72)	38.5% (72)	24.6% (46)	24.6% (46)	29.4% (55)	29.4% (55)	3.7% (7)
N	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878
Chi-square	40.163***	2.734	45.509***	2.734	45.509***	2.734	28.580***	28.580***	16.753**	16.753**	35.577***	35.577***	35.508***	35.508***	10.433*

Note: Figures were generated by seven separate cross-tabulations. Displayed are the percentages of stories within each election scenario that meet each criteria. The raw number of stories in each category follow in parentheses. "Racial frame" indicates that all of the following appear in the story: the race of either candidate is mentioned, the race of the voters is mentioned, and a photograph of either candidate is mentioned.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

as large as the proportion of stories in the all-black races that mention the voters' race. Turning to our first research question, we examine the differences between biracial contests with a black candidate and those with a Latino candidate. The data show little difference, but a slightly higher number of photographs and racial mentions in those contests with Latino candidates featured. A cross-tabulation of only the biracial contests (not shown), however, reveals that there is not a statistically significant difference among the different biracial contests with respect to any of the variables except whether a photograph of the white candidate in the race is included (it is mentioned 36.2 percent of the time in white vs. Latino races and only 24.6 percent of the time in white vs. black races).<sup>8</sup>

The next three columns in Table 4 show the number of stories that reveal a candidate's race by displaying his or her photographs. While showing a picture of a candidate cannot be considered a form of racial cuing in and of itself, we consider it here and in combination with the other elements of the racial frame (below) because it does lead to a reader being aware of the candidate's race. The results are notable: In races where there is a minority candidate, there is a much greater tendency for a photograph of one of the candidates to be shown. However, unlike verbal mentions of the candidates' race, there is not a gap in the tendency to show the nonwhite as opposed to the white candidate in biracial contests.

To look at these articles another way, we organize them by the type of electoral district in which the contests took place (Table 5), hypothesizing (Hypothesis 2) that the different forms of racial references mentioned in news stories will occur more often in contests where the majority of the voting population is white, as opposed to being majority-minority. It is important to note that only one of our observed contests took place in a majority-minority district (Georgia's 4th Congressional District). In addition, that contest was not competitive, and therefore only yielded nineteen stories, which makes it difficult to put too much emphasis on the findings here.

Nevertheless, the data show a greater tendency for journalists to mention a candidate's race—particularly the race of a nonwhite candidate—in the majority-minority district, as opposed to the majority-white districts. When a candidate's race is mentioned in a majority-white district, it is more often that of a nonwhite candidate. The race of the voters and photographs of the candidates are also more likely to appear in the majority-minority district contest. Similar to what is revealed in Table 4, there is a tendency to pictorially depict white and nonwhite candidates at the same rate in majority-white districts.

Our third hypothesis asserted that repeated racial references would more often be found in competitive rather than noncompetitive election contests. Table 6 shows the findings in the campaign coverage under consideration here. These data show no support for this hypothesis with regard to mentions of the

**Table 5**  
Elements of news stories in majority-white and majority-minority electoral districts

District Composition	Race of Either Candidate Mentioned		Race of White Candidate Mentioned		Race of Nonwhite Candidate Mentioned		Race of Voters Mentioned		Photo of Either Candidate Included		Photo of White Candidate Included		Photo of Nonwhite Candidate Included		"Racial Frame" Imposed	
Majority-white	24.7%	(212)	2.9%	(25)	24.1%	(207)	14.9%	(128)	38.9%	(334)	31.3%	(269)	30.5%	(262)	7.6%	(65)
Majority-minority	42.1%	(8)	—	—	42.1%	(8)	36.8%	(7)	73.7%	(14)	—	—	73.7%	(14)	10.5%	(2)
N	878		878		878		878		878		878		878		878	
Chi-square	3.006		0.569		3.260		6.878**		9.410**		8.578**		16.083***		0.231	

Note: Figures were generated by seven separate cross-tabulations. Displayed are the percentages of stories within each election scenario that meet each criteria. The raw number of stories in each category follow in parentheses. "Racial frame" indicates that all of the following appear in the story: the race of either candidate is mentioned, the race of the voters is mentioned, and a photograph of either candidate is mentioned.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 6**  
Elements of news stories in competitive and noncompetitive election contests

Competitiveness	Race of Either Candidate Mentioned		Race of White Candidate Mentioned		Race of Nonwhite Candidate Mentioned		Race of Voters Mentioned		Photo of Either Candidate Included		Photo of White Candidate Included		Photo of Nonwhite Candidate Included		"Racial Frame" Imposed	
Competitive	24.5%	(152)	2.4%	(15)	24.0%	(149)	15.5%	(96)	40.1%	(249)	34.1%	(212)	33.0%	(205)	8.9%	(55)
Not competitive	26.5%	(68)	3.9%	(10)	25.7%	(66)	15.2%	(39)	38.5%	(99)	22.2%	(57)	27.6%	(71)	4.7%	(12)
N	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878	878
Chi-square	0.380		1.431		0.280		0.011		0.189		12.234***		2.445		4.522*	

Note: Figures were generated by seven separate cross-tabulations. Displayed are the percentages of stories within each election scenario that meet each criteria. The raw number of stories in each category follow in parentheses. Competitiveness is retrospectively identified as those contests where the final popular vote result was within 5 percent. "Racial frame" indicates that all of the following appear in the story: the race of either candidate is mentioned, the race of the voters is mentioned, and a photograph of either candidate is mentioned.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

race of the candidates or the race of the voters, as none of the cross-tabulations yield significant differences. There is, however, limited support with respect to inclusion of candidates' photographs, but the results are not overwhelming.

We wondered if this might be a result of too much variation in the types of contests that were included in the "competitive" and "not competitive" categories. Specifically, we questioned whether there was a difference among competitive and noncompetitive races under different electoral scenarios. Table 7 reveals that there is some validity to this contention. Whether the election is competitive or not, a candidate's race (particularly the nonwhite candidate's race) is more likely to be mentioned in news stories about all-black or biracial elections. The race of the voters is more likely to be mentioned in those contests, as well, and the tendency to print photographs of the candidates follows the same pattern revealed in Tables 4 and 5 (somewhat more likely in the biracial or all-black races—in this case, especially those that are competitive—and not much difference in the tendency to show the white or the nonwhite candidate in the biracial scenarios).

Answers to our second research question (and its corollary) are revealed by an examination of the tendency for a story to include discussion of substantive policy issues. Table 8 presents four regression models to explore media coverage of these election contests. The first model presents each of the election scenarios regressed on a count of policy issues mentioned in each story. The only statistically significant coefficient besides the constant is for the white versus black scenario, and it is in the expected direction. That is, while white versus white contests average 1.6 policy issues per news story, those involving a black and a white candidate feature 0.5 fewer policy issues. The remaining models include the "scenario" dummy variables but feature the various elements of racial framing discussed above. Model 2 reveals that each of these elements is statistically significant, though their predictive power is modest. While this model (or any of these models, for that matter) does not explain much of the variance in the number of policy issues included in the stories under examination, it is interesting to note that discussion of a candidate's or the voters' race and inclusion of photographs (which reveal race) actually lead to more substantive policy discussion (as measured by number of issues included, not depth of discussion) in the story.

The third model takes apart two of the three racial frame elements. The results are not intuitive: While mention of the nonwhite candidate's race tends to increase the amount of substantive policy issues mentioned, so does inclusion of a white candidate's photograph.

### **The Racial Frame**

Tables 4 through 8 all contain an additive element titled "racial frame," which is a dichotomous measure of whether a racial frame is present in the

**Table 7**  
Elements of news stories within each election scenario at different levels of competitiveness

Election Scenario	Race of Either Candidate Mentioned		Race of White Candidate Mentioned		Race of Nonwhite Candidate Mentioned		Race of Voters Mentioned		Photo of Either Candidate Included		Photo of White Candidate Included		Photo of Nonwhite Candidate Included		"Racial Frame" Imposed	
Competitive	0	0	0	—	—	—	2.8% (1)	0	0	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
White vs. white	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Black vs. black	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
White vs. Latino	26.0% (152)	2.6% (15)	25.5% (149)	—	—	—	16.2% (95)	42.6% (249)	36.2% (212)	35.0% (205)	—	—	—	—	—	9.4% (55)
White vs. black	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
N	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621	621
Chi-square	12.385***	.946	12.064**	—	—	—	4.702*	25.580***	19.808***	18.832***	—	—	—	—	—	3.714
Not competitive	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
White vs. white	6.7% (2)	6.7% (2)	—	—	—	—	3.3% (1)	36.7% (11)	36.7% (11)	—	—	—	—	—	—	3.3% (1)
Black vs. black	57.7% (23)	—	57.5% (23)	—	—	—	40.0% (16)	40.0% (16)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	10.0% (4)
White vs. Latino	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
White vs. black	23.0% (43)	4.3% (8)	23.0% (443)	—	—	—	11.8% (22)	38.5% (72)	24.6% (46)	29.4% (55)	—	—	—	—	—	3.7% (7)
N	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257	257
Chi-square	27.000***	2.312	32.292***	—	—	—	24.108***	.081	15.683***	14.813**	—	—	—	—	—	3.034

Note: Figures were generated by fourteen separate cross-tabulations. Displayed are the percentages of stories within each election scenario that meet each criteria. The raw number of stories in each category follow in parentheses. Competitiveness is retrospectively identified as those contests where the final popular vote result was within 5 percent. "Racial frame" indicates that all of the following appear in the story: the race of either candidate is mentioned, the race of the voters is mentioned, and a photograph of either candidate is mentioned.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 8**

Effect of election scenario and racial elements on number of public policy issues mentioned per story

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	1.652***	1.580***	1.557***	1.629***
Black vs. black	.298 (.043)	-.155 (-.022)	.0038 (.005)	.0073 (.010)
White vs. Latino	.102 (.033)	-.124 (-.040)	-.107 (-.035)	-.0004 (-.001)
White vs. black	-.593 (-.167)**	-.778 (-.220)***	-.725 (-.205)***	-.647 (-.183)**
Race of voters mentioned		.379 (.094)*	.454 (.113)**	.489 (.122)**
Race of either candidate mentioned		.455 (.136)**		
Photo of either candidate included		.279 (.094)**		
Race of white candidate mentioned			.0068 (.008)	
Race of nonwhite candidate mentioned			.379 (.112)**	
Photo of white candidate included			.470 (.149)***	
Photo of nonwhite candidate included			-.112 (-.036)	
"Racial frame"				.531 (.097)*
F	12.109***	15.270***	11.912***	15.007***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.037	.089	.091	.074

Note: Cell figures are unstandardized ordinary least squares (OLS) coefficients. Standardized coefficients follow in parentheses. The "white vs. white" election scenario dummy variable is omitted from the models. "Racial frame" indicates that all of the following appear in the story: the race of either candidate is mentioned, the race of the voters is mentioned, and a photograph of either candidate is mentioned.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

story. Previous literature has identified discussion of candidates' race and the race of the voters as common ways that potential voters are primed to think about race when making voting decisions. Similarly, scholars have argued that nonverbal cues (such as photographs or, in the case of campaign television advertisements, image manipulation) often substitute for rhetorical racial framing (and often with greater effect) (see Kaid and Johnston 2002; Mendelberg 2001). We set the bar high by requiring that all three of these criteria be in place before we consider the story to be "racially framed." That is, a racially framed story, in our operationalization, is that which mentions the race of either or both candidates, mentions the race of the voters *and* includes a

photograph of one or both candidates along with the story. While we agree that it is arguable at best to conclude that inclusion of any of these three elements is racial in isolation, we feel as if we are on firmer theoretical footing to contend that a story that contains all three of these elements is, indeed, framed in racial terms.

The last column in Tables 4 through 7 reveal the stories that used this frame and under what circumstances. Table 4 shows that the frame is used more often in all-black and white versus Latino contests than all-white or white versus black contests. Turning again to our first research question, we see that the tendency to impose a racial frame is more than twice as likely in biracial contests featuring Latino candidates than those featuring black candidates. While there is no statistically significant difference in use of the frame in majority-white districts as compared to the majority-minority district, even when looking at specific scenarios within those categories (Tables 5 and 7, respectively), it is nearly twice as likely to be used when the race is competitive (Table 6). Finally, the fourth model in Table 8 shows that, even controlling for the election scenario, the race frame is a predictor of the number of policy issues in a story. Contrary to what might have been expected, though, the coefficient's sign is positive, meaning that inclusion of the frame leads to greater substantive (number of) policy issue discussion.

## Discussion

The explanation for these curiosities might be at least partly related to the scarcity of a wide variety of data. That is, as we stated at the outset, we must tread carefully with what is a significantly limited study. Our hypotheses in this study were driven, in large part, by the findings of Reeves (1997) and Terkildsen and Damore (1999) with regard to news media coverage of biracial elections. When read alongside these authors, our findings seem to both support and contradict some of theirs. Like these authors, we find that racial references are commonplace in biracial election contests. This includes all forms of the racial references we examined, each of which was present more often in biracial (and all-black) contests than in those where both candidates were white. Unlike these authors, however, we are unwilling to interpret the prominence of such racial references in biracial contests as significant enough to claim that such references alone (that is, individually) would likely have a priming effect on white voters and necessarily contribute to negative perceptions of the minority candidate. This is especially so when taking into account that only 8 percent of the stories in biracial elections rise to the level of what we would refer to as a "racial frame," in which stories collectively mention the race of candidates, the race of voters, and include photographs of the candidates.

While this small percentage may not allow us to reasonably speculate about how these may influence white voters, it does demonstrate that the presence

of a racial minority in an election contest does significantly increase the chances that the news media will compel voters to view all facets of the election itself, primarily through the lens of race. That is, in biracial contests in particular, where minority candidates are more likely to downplay race in their own communication with voters, awareness of their race, it seems, will largely dictate the nature of mediated discourse about the contest, and thus could negatively affect minority candidates who wish for voters not to evaluate him or her primarily on issues related to race. Given this potential impact on minority candidates in particular, we believe there is sufficient need to monitor this trend in the future, as minority candidates increasingly enter election contests against white opponents.

Neither Reeves (1997) nor Terkildsen and Damore (1999) explicitly test the degree to which the level of competition in biracial contests influences the news media's tendency to make racial references, though both of their studies are premised on this contention. Their assumption is reasonable given their own findings, in addition to more general conclusions by Jamieson (1993), for example, that competition not only breeds increased media attention but also the increased need to frame the contest in a way that dramatizes and emphasizes their most competitive elements. With the relative anomaly of biracial elections, the pitting of two candidates from different racial backgrounds would seem to fit this description. Our findings suggest that the degree of competition has little to do with the mention of various forms of racial references.<sup>9</sup> Whether the race is competitive or not, racial references are more likely to occur in biracial elections more than those including two white candidates.

This finding could be explained in several ways. We could assume the conventional assertion that the competitiveness of some contests increases the probability that the issue of race would be included as part of the competitive framing by the news media. With regard to the noncompetitive contests, it may be that the media, for lack of interest in any other aspect of a campaign, may simply default to race as being the only real "newsworthy" aspect of a biracial contest and therefore make frequent references in the relatively minimal amount of coverage they give to the contest. Finally, it is possible that when a biracial contest is initially considered to be uncompetitive, the news media may try to highlight race as a way of increasing the public's perception of the competitiveness of the race, which would consequently provide the outlet with more "newsworthy" material to print.

To some degree, this finding could be seen as positive for minority candidates exploring the possibility of entering into an election contest against a white opponent. That is, such a candidate would at least know that facing a tough, white challenger alone would not necessarily increase the chances that his or her contest would focus on the race issue. We are cautious to not give much weight to this finding, however, acknowledging that we measure "competitiveness" in a

singular manner and retrospectively. Despite this though, many other measures of competitiveness such as fund-raising, amount of advertising, or news media attention, for instance, are also likely to be flawed.

Our findings with regard to the more general research questions are significant as we move forward in trying to understand the ways that news media coverage influences various facets of elections where minority candidates are involved. First, our finding that news stories of biracial contests involving Latino as opposed to black candidates contain a slightly greater frequency of racial references deserves further attention. This is especially true given the finding that the degree to which what we refer to as a "racial frame" is found significantly more often among Latino than black candidates in biracial contests. Latino candidates' status as comparative newcomers to U.S. elections may be one explanation—that is, Latino-white contests are even more of an anomaly than black-white contests to date. Whatever the case may be, this tendency may have ramifications for Latino candidates. The difference could also signal a new "competitive" dimension, should both blacks and Latinos continue to enter the biracial election fray, essentially running into a "limit" to which the white American public can accept being represented by minorities.

On a second front, these data suggest that when a racial frame is imposed, the media, perhaps to appear to not be focusing on solely on race, focus on a greater number of substantive public policy issues.<sup>10</sup> An inferred conclusion of the Reeves (1997) and Terkildsen and Damore (1999) studies would suggest that in biracial elections the media would be more likely to emphasize race alone (or at least more than substantive public policy issues). Our findings to the contrary, however, should encourage further studies to consider this relationship. Specifically, experimental work that would allow for careful manipulations and controls is needed to tease out potential spurious relationships and intervening variables that are not able to be controlled here.

Interweaving race and other public policy issues could have positive consequences on de-racializing what many consider to be "racial" issues and increasing the degree to which minority candidates are seen by all voters as being able to focus on issues other than those largely considered to be primarily racial in nature. In practical terms, this means that if the media highlight a candidate's race while paying more attention to issues such as Medicare, Social Security, or national security, for instance, the effect may be that voters come to perceive black or Latino candidates as able to represent their interests on those issues despite any racial differences.

Without taking away from the rigor of our study, we must limit the degree to which we interpret or generalize from our results. This study, like similar studies that preceded it, is plagued by the unfortunate characteristics of relying on a very limited amount of data. Our study, though it encompasses many dimensions, focuses on a single election cycle. What is clear is that more work

needs to be done to solidify our understanding of the myriad ways race matters in election contests involving racial minority candidates.

## Notes

1. The Mendelberg (2001) study differs from those conducted by Valentino and his colleagues (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings 2002) with respect to stimuli used; Valentino used television ads in his studies, while Mendelberg used news stories.
2. This refers to his content analysis study. Following his experimental studies, he makes conclusions similar to those of Terkildsen and Damore (1999).
3. Other notable exceptions are Barack Obama's 2004 election to the U.S. Senate seat in Illinois, as well as Carol Mosely Braun's election to the same seat in 1992; Republican J.C. Watts's representation of Oklahoma's 4th District from 1995 to 1999; and Republican Gary Franks's representation of Connecticut's 5th District from 1991 to 1997.
4. Stories for analysis were retrieved from the Lexis-Nexis electronic database. Both candidates' names in a given contest were used as search terms in both the "General News" (Major Papers) database category and in the "U.S. News" category, within which the appropriate state newspapers were selected. The terms were searched in the full text of the story. Stories that focused primarily on nonelection issues were excluded from the sample. Stories that merely reported election results or one-paragraph summaries of the week's news stories were excluded, as were duplicate stories appearing in multiple editions of a paper or wire service.
5. Since all of the variables under consideration are objective (a photo either appeared or it did not, a substantive issue was either mentioned or it was not, etc.), there is no reason to suspect any variance in coding. The written instructions that were provided to coders during training is available from the first author.
6. Competitiveness is a measure developed post hoc, determined by the percentage margin of votes received in the election by each candidate. We assigned the label of "competitive" to those races where the margin of victory in the final result was five percent or smaller.
7. While it was not convenient to include in the table, it is worthy of note that the mean number of public policy issues per story is 1.61 for the total sample. The breakdown within each election scenario is as follows: white versus white, 1.65; black versus black, 1.95; white versus Latino, 1.75; and white versus black, 1.06.
8. It is not possible to compare these racial elements while controlling for level of competitiveness since the contests involving black candidates (Georgia U.S. Senate, Georgia's 4th U.S. Congressional District, Illinois U.S. Senate, and Missouri's 5th Congressional District) were not competitive, while those involving Hispanic candidates (Florida and Colorado U.S. Senate) were.
9. A bivariate Pearson correlation of competitiveness with the existence of the racial frame yields a statistically significant but very small (.072) positive relationship. The strongest relationship that competitiveness has with any of the racial component variables is .118 (photograph of white candidate included).
10. It is important to note that this finding has to do with inclusion of the three elements of the racial frame variable. That is not to be confused with the first model in Table 8, which showed that fewer policy issues were mentioned in white versus black contests than any other election scenario. Interestingly, this holds even when the elements of racial frame are controlled for (in models 2 through 4 of Table 8).

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