

Perceptions of Leadership and the Challenge of Obama's Blackness

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This article analyzes the relationship between race and perceptions of leadership as a way of assessing the presidential prospects of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. Analysis of the 1988 Super Tuesday National Election Studies data demonstrates that for White voters, perceptions of leadership serve as a proxy for racial evaluations of an African American candidate. A content analysis of newspaper coverage during the first 3 months of Obama's candidacy was conducted and demonstrates that questions of leadership and race are prominently featured in media reporting about Obama.

Keywords: *Barack Obama; race; leadership; presidency; African American; White voters*

Though several African Americans have embarked on the path toward the American presidency, Barack Obama is widely seen as the nation's most equipped Black candidate to date to offer a serious run for the office. Obama has been distinguished from previous Black candidates such as Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisolm, and others because of his firm support among African Americans, his broad appeal to White Americans, and his message and approach, which, different from the others, is not premised on the pursuit of racial group interests. Despite such characterizations, recent research on the use and effectiveness of White racist appeals demonstrate that racial prejudices, resentments, and fears still persist in the minds and feelings of White voters. When primed by various forms of persuasive appeals, they are effective in influencing White voters' perceptions and political decisions, to the detriment of Black candidates and/or Black interests (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002; Valentino, Traugott, & Hutchings, 2002).

Given these circumstances and others, Obama's candidacy has been framed largely around the question, "Is America ready for a Black president?" That is, are White voters willing to vote for a Black candidate?

This is the question being asked of millions of Americans by pollsters, press, and pundits prognosticating about Obama's presidential aspirations. Although this is perhaps the most salient underlying question as to Obama's presidential prospects, I argue that this is the wrong question to ask. Much study on race of interviewer effects and other social desirability factors (Finkel, Guterbock, & Borg, 1991; Krysan & Couper, 2003) demonstrate that posing this question to White voters is unreliable.

The most realistic barometer of Obama's success lies not in questions about voters willingness to vote for a Black candidate; it is whether voters, particularly Whites, can view Blacks generally and Obama specifically as a leader. In the following pages, I argue that the question of leadership is, for White voters, a proxy for race. That is, it is the most salient manner in which White evaluations of a Black presidential candidate get expressed. I demonstrate this by first looking at the idea of leadership and its role in shaping public opinion about presidential candidates generally and more specifically during the 1988 presidential primary campaign of Jesse Jackson. Assuming this relationship between race and leadership, I then look at the manner in which the question of leadership was a salient issue of the media agenda during the beginning months of the Obama's candidacy. I also look at the way in which media framing of Obama through the lens of presidential leadership is likely to influence Obama's prospects for emerging successfully atop the field of Democratic party candidates during the primary election, and the whole of the electorate in a general election contest, should he make it that far.

Before continuing, a brief discussion of the role of leadership in presidential politics is in order. Presidential leadership has become an important aspect of shaping the role of presidential politics, as well as shaping public opinion about presidents' effectiveness. According to Tullis (1988), perceptions of presidential leadership and the consequent efforts of presidents to demonstrate certain leadership qualities through their governance are a primary aspect of the rhetorical presidency. The rhetorical presidency is characterized, in part, as an approach to governance in which presidents appeal directly to the people, educating and convincing them about the import and soundness of their public policy initiatives. This direct relationship between the president and the public, Tullis argues, has elevated the importance of being perceived as a strong leader, above all of the criteria by which the public should judge presidential effectiveness. Because public perceptions and evaluations of presidents have the power to define a president's tenure in office (former presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan are two opposing examples), it has become paramount that presidential candidates

portray an image of being a strong and effective leader (Gelderman, 1997; Hart, 1989). It is within this dynamic relationship between image and perception that the issue of leadership justifies its prominence among the list of likely criteria on which to evaluate presidential candidates.

Jesse Jackson: Perceptions of Leadership in the 1988 Campaign

As with any campaign, one can only speculate about the outcome. What separates some speculations from others is the degree to which assumptions about future decisions and outcomes are based on similar previous cases. Only one such case exists on which to base speculations about how America, particularly White America, is likely to perceive and evaluate an African American presidential candidate. The case is that of Jesse Jackson in the presidential primaries of 1988. From the beginning, Jesse Jackson's presidential prospects were viewed as minimal. This minimization largely accounted for what was later largely seen as Jackson's surprising success. At the end of the primary season, Jackson had received a total of 1,218 delegates, finishing second behind Michael Dukakis. His success was almost singularly because of the new structural circumstances in 1988 that created what was then referred to as "Super Tuesday." In an effort to gain greater influence on the presidential nomination process, a number of states, primarily Southern, moved up their primary election day to early March. At the end of the day, Jackson had carried five states, propelling his candidacy well beyond what many had thought possible (with the addition of later winning the South Carolina and Michigan primaries).

Data and Variables

When we look at election and public opinion data prior to and during the primary election cycle of 1988, what emerges is an outcome decided largely around perceptions of leadership and its effect on evaluations of Jesse Jackson and the differential manner in which Whites and Blacks perceived Jackson's leadership qualities. The data for this inquiry are based on the official election results of the 1988 Super Tuesday primary and the 1988 Super Tuesday National Election Study. Two sets of variables were of primary interest in assessing the factors most influencing voters' opinion of Jesse Jackson. First were a number of variables that indicated voters' perception of Jackson and other leaders in the primary

Table 1
Correlation Between Jackson Candidate Characteristics,
Feeling Thermometer Rating, and Vote Percentage in
All Primary States

	Feeling Thermometer Ratings	Total Jackson Vote %
Intelligent	.526*	.057
Compassion	.674**	-.048
Moral	.668**	-.251
Inspire	.514*	.069
Leader	-.046	.822**
Decent	.632*	-.026
Cares	.526*	-.083

Note: Results are bivariate Pearson coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

field on a number of presidential candidate characteristics. These included their evaluations of the candidates on matters of intelligence, compassion, morality, inspiration, decency, caring, and leadership. The second variable of import was voters' overall feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates. Later, the percentage of votes for Jackson in each Super Tuesday primary state was added to the data.

Results

To determine the relationship of each of the above candidate characteristics to respondents' overall feeling thermometer ratings and the percentage of votes Jackson received in all states included in the Super Tuesday primary, a simple bivariate correlation was run. These results, presented in Table 1, provide the first indicator of the basis on which voters evaluated Jackson. Although all candidate characteristics, except for leadership, were significantly correlated with respondents' overall evaluation of Jackson, leadership exclusively was significantly correlated with the percentage of votes garnered by Jackson. These results suggest that although respondents' view of Jackson was strongly related to their evaluations of him on each of these characteristics, the only factor bearing any relationship to the actual voting percentage received by Jackson overall was the degree to which they viewed him as a strong leader.

Bearing out these results is the outcome of a regression analysis, shown in Table 2, in which each candidate characteristic was figured in as a pos-

Table 2
Selected Regression Models Predicting Jackson's Vote Choice

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Intelligent	.105 (.511)	.241 (.655)	.420 (.668)	.302 (.690)	.259 (.721)	.239 (.752)	.313 (.426)
Compassion		-.255 (.724)	.138 (.800)	.056 (.816)	-.222 (.999)	-.538 (1.19)	.221 (.695)
Moral			-.701 (.632)	-.970 (.712)	-1.2 (.855)	-1.18 (.890)	-1.05 (.564)
Inspire				.648 (.754)	.512 (.824)	.620 (.880)	.380 (.501)
Decent					.693 (1.32)	1.50 (2.01)	-.777 (1.26)
Cares						-.822 (1.48)	-.301 (.848)
Leader							**1.813 (.428)
<i>F</i>	.042	.082	.465	.525	.445	.393	3.62
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	-.073	-.151	-.129	-.157	-.247	-.351	.567
<i>R</i> ² change		.010	.099	.061	.024	.030	.556

***p* < .01.

sible predictor of the total percentage of votes received by Jackson. Here again, the predictive models do not significantly predict vote percentage until the last step, when leadership is figured into the model, showing a strong predictive value and accounting for 57% of the total variance, all of which is determined by leadership exclusively.

It is possible that the relationship between leadership and vote choice is indicative of voters' evaluation of candidates irrespective of race. To test this possibility, the same tests were run for the leading White candidates in both the Democratic and Republican party primaries—the eventual nominees Michael Dukakis and George H.W. Bush, respectively. However, this is not the case for either Dukakis or Bush. The correlation between leadership and vote percentage for each candidate is statistically insignificant (.153 and .048, respectively). As expected, leadership is not a significant predictor in the regression models predicting the vote percentage for either candidate. Thus, only when evaluating Jackson, not either of the White candidates, is leadership a significant factor in terms of voting outcomes.

The picture thus far indicates a relationship between candidate race and leadership as the most salient factor influencing vote choice in that

this relationship holds only for Jackson, the Black candidate. The racial element here increases focus when we consider the state breakdown of average leadership ratings of Jackson and percentage of votes garnered by Jackson in each state. Those states voting for Jackson in large percentages were the states that evaluated him highest as a stronger leader; the opposite is true for the states where he received fewer votes. Of the three states where Jackson received the most votes (Virginia, Mississippi, and Alabama), the average leadership rating given to Jackson was 29%, although the three states where he received the fewest (Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Massachusetts) gave him an average leadership rating of 18%.

Furthermore, when we look at the demographics of these states in relationship to how many people in them voted for Jackson and how they rated him in terms of leadership qualities, the results are clear: Southern states and/or those with large African American populations accounted for the highest leadership ratings and largest vote totals for Jackson. This point is compounded by the data that show a stark racial divide in the degree to which voters evaluated Jackson as being a strong leader: In a cross-tabulation comparing Black and White respondents leadership evaluations among all states, 70% of Blacks and only 20% of Whites agreed that Jackson would provide strong leadership ($p < .01$).

Together, these results show that of all other candidate characteristics, leadership is the most salient in terms of the Jackson vote. Thus, the Super Tuesday primary results can be explained in large part by results showing that the states where Jackson was most successful were those with large percentages of African American voters, whose overwhelming leadership evaluations exceeded the overwhelmingly low evaluations of Whites, and were the driving force behind the percentage of votes garnered by Jackson. It reasonably suggests that evaluations of leadership for a Black candidate are a function of race. These results are consistent with previous studies by Terkildsen (1993) and Williams (1990) showing that when compared to White candidates, Black candidates are significantly much less likely to be perceived by White voters as a strong leader.

The findings in this analysis suggest that Obama stands at a disadvantage by virtue of his being African American, given the predilection of White voters to perceive Black candidates less as strong leaders, though the election primary circumstances of the 2008 presidential election suggests he will benefit from the same advantage that Jackson did (in addition to the 1988 Super Tuesday states, a number of states with large Black voting populations have moved up the date of their primary elections, including California and New York).

This notwithstanding, the degree to which this question of leadership will be a significant detriment for Obama depends greatly on the degree to which leadership is a significant item on the public agenda. That is, the salience of leadership for voters in 2008 will largely determine the impact of White voters' evaluations of Obama. As agenda-setting theory has long suggested, salience of political issues and criteria of candidate (especially presidential) evaluation are largely determined by their prominence in the media agenda. The role leadership plays in news reporting during the 2008 presidential campaign cycle will likely be compounded by the likely framing of Obama's candidacy in racial terms (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2006), such that both leadership and race may both be salient factors of the media agenda and thus the public agenda. The following section analyzes the media reporting of Obama since the announcement of his candidacy as a way to determine the degree to which the media will play a role in placing the characteristic of candidate leadership on its agenda and its salience among the public agenda.

Leadership and Race in Newspaper Coverage of Obama

A content analysis of newspaper coverage (both news stories and editorials) of Obama's candidacy was conducted to assess the degree to which various aspects of leadership and race appeared in stories focused on Obama since his February 10th official announcement. A 30% random sample of newspaper stories about Obama between February 10, 2007, and April 27, 2007, were coded on a number of variables.¹ The primary variables for analysis included whether *leadership* was mentioned in the headline and the story as a whole, whether Obama's experience or qualifications were mentioned, whether his experience or qualifications were questioned, and whether race was mentioned in the story. This analysis is meant to be primarily descriptive, though differences between the newspapers and the month in which the story appeared were used to assess any possible differences in terms of the presence of the above variables related to leadership and race.

Table 3 presents the descriptive results of the analysis, showing the degree to which the aforementioned aspects of leadership and race were present in stories. First, though *leadership* is, on average, seldom mentioned in story headlines (the most prominent visible aspect of stories for readers), it figures prominently in the overall reporting on Obama's candidacy. Leadership appears 44% of the time on average, and Obama's experience

Table 3
Frequency of "Leadership Variables" in News Stories

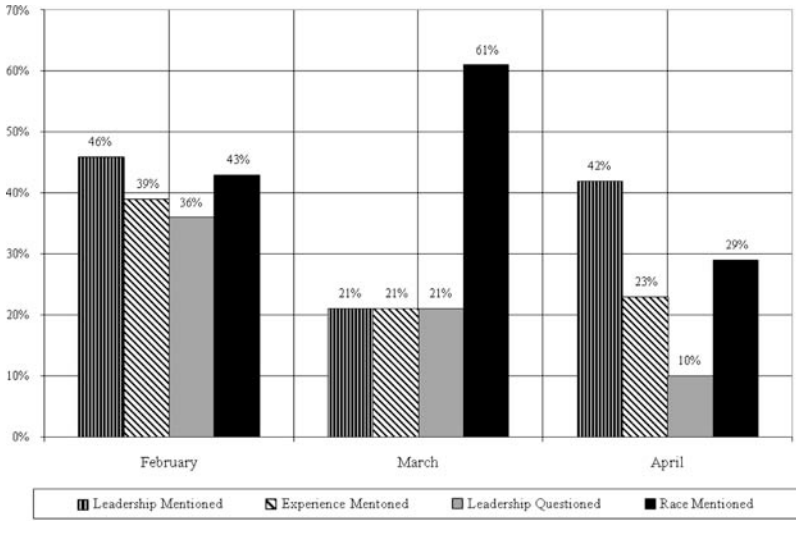
Newspaper	Leadership in Headline	Leadership in Story	Experience in Story	Leadership Questioned	Race Mentioned	<i>N</i>
<i>Washington Post</i>	0	59%	47%	35%	41%	17
<i>Atlanta Journal Constitution</i>	10%	40%	30%	20%	70%	10
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	5%	24%	17%	17%	46%	41
<i>London Daily Telegraph</i>	25%	25%	0	0	25%	4
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	38%	63%	50%	38%	25%	8
<i>New York Times</i>	4%	31%	19%	12%	39%	26
<i>USA Today</i>	0	67%	67%	33%	0	3
Average	12%	44%	33%	22%	35%	Total - 109

is mentioned in one third of all stories. Additionally, almost one quarter of stories explicitly question Obama's leadership, experience, or qualifications. Also, race (of the candidate or voters) is mentioned in more than one third of stories on average. It should be noted that when these leadership characteristics are mentioned, they are overwhelmingly mentioned by the reporter rather than the candidate (Obama), other candidates in the presidential race, or other sources quoted in the stories.

Though differences between the newspaper outlets reporting on these issues is ancillary, such differences were, nevertheless, included in the analysis. The only variable on which the news sources differed was in the degree to which Obama's experience or qualifications appeared in the story ($p < .05$). As can be seen again in Table 3, *USA Today* and *Los Angeles Times* accounted for the highest percentage of stories mentioning this aspect of Obama's candidacy, whereas the *Chicago Sun-Times* accounted for the fewest (the percentage for the *London Telegraph* was not included because of the few number of total stories included in the analysis). On all other variables, however, the newspapers were virtually similar in their reporting on such matters.

Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the presence of these variables across the almost 3 months since Obama has been an official candidate. Statistically significant differences between the months of coverage were present for whether leadership was mentioned in stories ($p < .10$), whether race was mentioned ($p < .05$) and whether Obama's leadership was explicitly questioned ($p < .05$). Leadership was mentioned in stories most frequently in February, waned in March, and rose again in April to levels close to that in February. Leadership overall was a centerpiece of stories

Figure 1
Mentions of Leadership and Race by Month



at the beginning, yet the media’s apparent interest in that topic steadily declined over the 3-month period. Race figured prominently in stories at the beginning of Obama’s candidacy, swelled in March, and fell by almost half in April’s coverage.

These data show that these variations on the theme of leadership and race appear rather episodically in news coverage to date. Leadership emerged as perhaps the sole, tangible critique the media could offer at the beginning of Obama’s road to the White House, after having spent considerable time in the months prior hyping the candidate’s celebrity status. Similarly, race was the most visible theme and characteristic distinguishing Obama from the rest of the candidate field. Along with that novelty about his candidacy, it is perhaps to be expected that it would be a prominent feature of the initial coverage. Continued reporting on race, especially throughout March, seemed mostly because of the supposed competition between Barack Obama and front-runner Hillary Clinton over African American votes, including much coverage of the showdown in Selma, Alabama, where both candidates simultaneously delivered speeches to a broad African American audience a short distance apart from each other.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this article, of course, is that there has yet to be one. Data analysis of public opinion during the 1988 presidential primary campaign of Jesse Jackson demonstrates quite convincingly the relationship between race and leadership in voters' evaluation of Jackson and presumably of other African American presidential candidates. Although this seems to disadvantage Obama's election hopes from the beginning, its influence on today's voters' future choice of candidates is unclear, largely because the degree to which voters will use leadership (and race as a proxy) as a salient criteria for making their evaluations will likely be determined by how much the media makes leadership, experience, and race a salient issue in their coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. The results of the content analysis presented here suggests that though media attention to leadership and race has ebbed over time, even at its lowest point, both leadership (specifically Obama's lack of experience) and race figure prominently into the media's coverage.

However, a close reading of these stories to date also suggests that opinions about Obama's lack of experience largely depend on the person to whom he is being compared. His lack of experience seems less significant when the experience of President George W. Bush is the measure and more significant when he is compared to Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side or to figures such as Rudolph Giuliani or John McCain on the Republican side. Given the media's penchant to talk about issues of race and leadership in the absence of explicit prodding from outside sources, it seems that should any of Obama's competitors in the primary election or the general election (if he becomes the nominee) continue to make an issue of either race or leadership, the media's attention to these issues will also likely increase. In such a scenario, to Obama's detriment, voters are also likely to evaluate the candidates primarily on the basis of leadership.

Notes

1. Six national newspapers were used, including *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *L.A. Times*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and *USA Today*. One international newspaper was also included, the *London Daily Telegraph*.

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