

Racial Discourse in Political Advertisements: An Historical View

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Abstract

We explore the extent to which and the ways in which race-based messages have been used in election campaigns that feature racial minorities. We examine televised political advertisements from federal election contests where at least one of the candidates was a member of a racial minority group. In this paper, we present a descriptive account of the types of messages that have been used, differentiating between racist and racial appeals and implicit and explicit messages. We also take into consideration candidates' parties, the region of the country in which the contests took place, the year of the election, and the specific type of appeal that was made to identify trends in racialized campaign discourse over the past three decades. Results reveal that both White candidates and minorities appeal to race, but in vastly different ways. Analysis includes discussion about the implications for research on the effects of such messages on potential voters.

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Racial Discourse in Political Advertisements: An Historical View

Willie Horton, who became the central symbolic figure in the Republican's 1988 Southern Strategy, initiated what has now developed into two decades of interest in and research about the intersection of race and political campaign communication. The focus has been on how and under what circumstances political candidates (primarily Whites) appeal to particular racial stereotypes, prejudices and resentment to persuade voters (who are also primarily White) to support or oppose particular public policy positions and, in some cases, certain political candidates. While there is no absolute consensus about the effects of racial appeals, a preponderance of the evidence demonstrates that they have been effective in priming certain racial attitudes, which, in turn, influence individuals' political behavior.

There is another question about racial appeals for which there is neither scholarly consensus nor very much empirical evidence: What constitutes a "racial appeal" or "racialized discourse." Is it any language that invokes race? Must there be intent to invoke race? Are all appeals that involve race by definition "racist?" The purpose of this paper is to address these questions by offering a theoretically grounded descriptive exploration of the medium that most prominently includes racial appeals – televised political advertising. What follows is a brief review of the extant literature on racial appeals, including what we know about how they are constructed, what forms they take, and the effects they purportedly have on voters. Following this, we present data from a content analysis of political advertisements used in contests involving at least one racial minority candidate for federal office between 1970 and 2006. Along the way, we elaborate on our earlier work (McIlwain and Caliendo 2009), which demonstrated that race-based appeals are used in more widespread and complicated ways than we have previously believed.

Previous Research

Racial Priming Effects

Some researchers have provided convincing evidence that questions the veracity of Mendelberg's (2001) thesis that race-based appeals (specifically implicit appeals) substantially prime racial resentment and affect voter attitudes. Most notably, Huber and Lapinski (2008) assert that while Mendelberg is correct that voters' eschew explicit race-based appeals, implicit appeals' effectiveness is moderated by education. Specifically, they found that implicit race-based appeals were no more effective than explicit appeals except among the subset of the population with the least education.¹ While Huber and Lapinski's study is notable because it improves upon some methodological limitations of Mendelberg's work, other studies essentially substantiate Mendelberg's claims (Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott and Hutchings 2002).

We can say with relative certainty that implicit race-based appeals do have the potential to prime negative racial attitudes, though the strength of such priming effects may depend on who is targeted with the message. In addition to failing to settle the question about who is most vulnerable to the effects of racial cues on opinion formation about public policy issues, the extant research does not approach the topic of what effects such appeals may have on public opinion and evaluation of political candidates – minority candidates in particular. We also do not know how non-White audiences may be affected by the kinds of racial cues that have been tested in the research.

Forms of Race-Based Appeals

Like U.S. Supreme Justice Potter Stewart's famous phrase relating to identifying obscenity, most scholars take an "I know it when I see it," approach when trying to determine

¹ White (2007) similarly suggests that racial cues work differently depending on the specific subset of the population being exposed.

whether a political candidate, public official, or other popular figure makes a race-based appeal, which is referred to in contemporary nomenclature as “playing the race card.” This is to say, despite our ability to draw some conclusions about the potential effects of race-based appeals, there is little empirical evidence that directs us toward making specific, reasonable determinations about whether a given message does or does not constitute racialized discourse. Mendelberg (2001) offers the broad distinction that implicit racial appeals are constructed through oblique, racially-coded language, images, or – more powerfully – some combination of the two. But deciphering code is tricky; it relies on a great deal of interpretation for which we have little empirical guidance.

The insight that the current literature affords us on this matter comes from understanding how scholars operationalize race-based appeals when testing their effects on potential voters in laboratory experiments. Valentino, Hutchings, and White (2002) make the important point, for instance, that the mere presence of a Black image in an ad is not the solitary source of an effective racial cue. Rather, they argue, the specific pairing of racial images with an attendant narrative(s) can create a racial appeal powerful enough to prime negative racial predispositions, prejudices and fears. Drawing on the work of Martin Gilens (1996, 1998, 1999) and others, Valentino and his colleagues constructed a set of race-based appeals by pairing various Black images with varied narratives about “undeserving” Blacks.

They are not alone in conceiving race-based appeals in this way. Mendelberg (2001) also used the race and welfare connection as the subject of the appeals she tested. Similarly, White (2007) conceptualized a set of race-based appeals (using the language of news stories) in relationship to a nonracial issue (the Iraq war). The language used to make up the various forms of race-based appeals (both explicit and implicit) focused on the inability to provide government services to the underprivileged. Thus, when we look to how race-based appeals have been operationalized in laboratory experiments, we see that they almost always include the narrative

of racial minorities – whether they rely on and deserve to receive government benefits principally because of their race. In one of the few studies that operationalizes and tests racial appeals communicated through language only, Hurwitz & Peffley (2005) test specific code words associated with either welfare or crime to assess the degree to which respondents associated Blacks with these terms. A common thread and motivation in these studies is that historically, White Americans' resentment (towards African Americans especially) has been due to the belief that they unduly receive a lion's share of undeserved financial benefits from the government (Berinsky 2004; Dudas 2005; Feldman and Huddy 2005; Jacobs 2007; Kinder and Winter 2001). This level of resentment is thought to be the most likely to elicit the kind of priming of negative racial attitudes that researchers expect will result from targeting Whites with race-based appeals. While messages associating Blacks with crime have been a focus of some studies, the crime narrative in political advertising, as it relates to its influence on public opinion, has generally only been examined in reference to the infamous Horton ad from 1988 (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Jamieson 1992; Mendelberg 1997).

What We Don't Know

While we could certainly go more in depth about the literature cited above (including the political psychology that undergirds the cognitive processes involved), the reality is that this is essentially what we know about race-based appeals: They are conceptualized as political messages that draw on some form of anti-minority sentiment – generally related to White resentment of minorities' receipt of government services – that, in their implicit form, are likely to prime negative racial beliefs held by some Whites. There is much we do not know and even more that we have not even considered when we discuss race-based messages that are used by political candidates in contemporary political campaigns.

The Horton ad touched off interest in the topic, but no existing evidence exists with respect to the prevalence of race-based appeals in the more recent history of American politics.

We do not have very much data demonstrating where and under what circumstances race-based political appeals are most often used.²

Additionally, we do not know very much about the forms of race-based appeals that do not fit the Willie Horton mold. This is to say, most research on racial appeals has conceptualized them generally as messages by White candidates that draw on anti-Black (or, more generally, anti-minority) sentiment for their efficacy, targeting White voters. Most work in this area has also primarily focused on how race-based appeals affect public opinion, rather than how they may affect other political candidates, minority candidates in particular. Similarly, almost all research on race-based appeals has tested for effects on Whites, with White (2007) being the only notable exception with which we are familiar. Thus, there has been little effort to conceptualize or understand the manner in which White candidates might use race-based appeals in a way that does not draw on voters' racial prejudices, or, more importantly, the way that minority candidates might use race-based appeals in their election contests against either Whites or other minority candidates.

Racial and Racist Appeals

Essentially, the assumption has been that any appeal involving race (implicitly or explicitly) is inherently racist. This follows naturally because, as mentioned above, scholarly interest was largely sparked by the implicit racist appeal in the Horton ad and the fact that racist appeals widely perceived to be the most harmful, as they violate values of equality by activating deeply held resentments that give an advantage to Whites, who already disproportionately have access to power in America. All race-based appeals, however, need not be racist. We found, for instance, in a smaller study of television advertisements, that race-based appeals are also used by

² Some research points us to the South, where White conservatives are prevalent – some of whom have been shown to have become adept at masking racial resentment and prejudice under the guise of ideology and conservative values (Glaser 1994, 1995).

racial minority candidates, but for different reasons (McIlwain and Caliendo 2009). For instance, Black candidates used explicit appeals to race to mitigate a racist appeal made implicitly or explicitly by their White opponent. In other cases, Black candidates running against a White opponent (and, therefore, likely in a majority-White district) apparently seek to inoculate themselves against racist predispositions by stressing characteristics that cut against racists' beliefs (laziness, entitlement, etc.) that would otherwise put them at a disadvantage with White voters. Finally, we found that Black candidates used race-based messages in contests against Black opponents (in majority-minority congressional districts).

We argued in the conclusion to that study that researchers need to be more thoughtful as we explore the myriad ways race is used in political communication. Accordingly, we distinguish between “racist” and “racial” appeals, such that the former label refers to that which is built on an edifice of anti-minority prejudice, stereotypes and racial resentment (irrespective of the intent of the producers and/or candidates, as that cannot be known). Racist appeals do not have to target only Whites, as internalized racism and resentments that exist between racial minority groups are also prominent characteristics of a racist culture. The term “racial appeals,” on the other hand, refers to all race-based appeals that are not racist.

One of the principal purposes of this paper is to flesh out the findings from our earlier study with a larger sample and with more variables in an attempt to gain a more sophisticated understanding about the contexts in which both racist and racial appeals exist. We seek to explore, given the limitations of the data available to us, a number of characteristics found in advertisements that contain race-based appeals, as well as the electoral scenarios in which they occur.

Research Questions

Given the limitations of existing research to guide our study, we offer a set of research questions rather than formal testable hypotheses.

RQ#1: How prevalent & in what electoral circumstances are race-based appeals used?

We seek to ascertain the frequency of race-based appeals over the past three decades and determine the race of candidates who most used race-based appeals (and the race of their opponents). We are also interested in both the geographical area where such appeals occur and political party to which candidates belong.

Our remaining three research questions have to deal with the various forms that race-based appeals may take.

RQ#2: What are some of the dominant political features of racist and racial appeals?

We seek to understand the prevalence of common political variables associated with political advertisements among those ads that feature some form of race-based appeal. This includes variables such as the presence or absence of public policy issues, the valence of the ad (attack, contrast, advocacy), the types of persuasive appeals (such as fear appeals) used, and others.

RQ#3: What character traits do sponsors/opponents most often use when making racist/racial appeals?

With this question, we hope to better understand the most common character traits, linguistic code words and stereotypes used in race-based appeals.

RQ#4: What kinds of images are most associated with racist and racial appeals?

Finally, since we know that visual images communicate race-based appeals effectively, we want to understand what kinds of images have been most often used in race-based appeals.

Data and Method

Previous research demonstrates not only the potential for televised political advertisements to have stronger effects than messages communicated in other media (Brians and Wattenberg 1996), but also the likelihood that they communicate negative messages more potently (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997; Pinkleton 1997). More importantly, however, scholars

have suggested that racial messages – because of their reliance on concealing and coding their racial bases – are most effectively communicated through images in general and televised political ads in particular (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002; Valentino, Traugott and Hutchings 2002). This study is unique in that we incorporate these findings in our attempt to understand the breadth and depth with which race-based appeals have been used by American congressional candidates.

Sample Characteristics

We content analyzed televised political advertisements themselves, something that scholars interested in race-based appeals – to our knowledge – have not done on such a scale. While several scholars have conducted case studies of, or experiments using, actual political advertisements, none has systematically examined large numbers of political advertisements for the purpose of examining race-based appeals. For this study we content analyzed 767 televised political advertisements. To be included in the sample, advertisements had to be produced for a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate, and one of the candidates in the contest in which an ad was produced had to be a racial minority. The final requirement was that the ads had to be available in the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma, the largest repository of political ads existing at every level from 1952 to the present. While this poses some limitations, it makes the most sense for a study of this magnitude to be conducted in the most systematic way possible.³

The scope of our study includes content analyzing each advertisement available at the archive and produced for a U.S. House or Senate candidate, in which one of the candidates in the electoral contest was a member of a racial minority group. Table 1 includes some general

³ While we may never know what constitutes the entire population of advertisements used in contests including a racial minority, limiting our sample to those ads contained in the archive results in a boundary that is difficult to overcome. Jamieson, Waldman and Sherr (2000), note the inadequacy of relying on the Kanter archive for presidential ads (50), and further point out that relying on archives in general does not allow researchers to know for certain the potential effect of the ads, as we do not know which of the ads were run (if at all), how frequently, etc.

characteristics of this sample of advertisements. The majority of ads were sponsored by White and Black candidates, the two groups of candidates that most frequently ran against each other in contests included in this sample. Relative newcomers (compared to African Americans) to running for federal office, Latino candidates makeup a smaller, though sizeable portion of the sample running mostly in contests against White opponents. The overwhelming majority of ads in the sample were produced for male candidates, evenly split (as one would imagine) between Democrats and Republican sponsors and opponents.⁴

[Table 1 about here]

While ads for contests that included racial minorities are sparse in the 1970s and increase marginally in the 1980s, the majority of ads in this sample were produced for an almost equal number of House and Senate candidates between 1990 and 2006. There are spikes in the number of ads from contests including racial minority candidates in 1990, 1996 and 1998. Most contests took place in the South and Midwest, and the vast majority of them produced advocacy ads that were image focused (either they contained no mention of a policy issue or made mention of several at a time with no focus on any single one).

Variables and Coding

We coded each of the ads on fifty-five separate variables, which are grouped together in five general categories.

Demographic Variables

Demographic variables include the length of the ad, characteristics about the ad sponsor and his or her opponent, including race, gender, party affiliation, office sought, and the racial

⁴ Another question we had to consider is whether the ad was produced for a primary contest or a general election. When the opponent is mentioned, it is easy to determine, but in a traditional advocacy spot, for instance, it is not. Therefore, we do not distinguish between these two elements of political campaigns, assuming that each spot is designed for or run in an election against a candidate of the opposing major political party.

makeup of the contest. This category also includes the year in which the ad was produced and the state where the ad ostensibly ran.

Racial Message Type

The second category of variables involves determining whether the ad contained either a racist or racial appeal. As noted above, while the extant literature features the term “racial appeal” as applied to appeals by Whites that draw on anti-Black or anti-minority sentiment and are primarily targeted to White voters, race-based appeals can and are used by members of all racial groups. We use the term “racist” to refer to appeals that will be effective because of negative racial beliefs and stereotypes and the term “racial” to refer to all other race-based appeals.

Beyond coding whether an ad included a racist or racial appeal, we also coded whether that appeal was communicated explicitly or implicitly. We rely on Mendelberg’s (2001) definition of the two concepts. Mendelberg states:

Implicit racial appeals convey the same message as explicit racial appeals, but they replace the racial nouns and adjectives with more oblique references to race. They present an ostensibly race-free conservative position on an issue while incidentally alluding to racial stereotypes or to a perceived threat from African Americans. Implicit racial appeals discuss a nonracial matter and avoid a direct reference to black inferiority or to white group interest. They forego professions of racial antipathy and do not endorse segregation or white prerogatives. They convey a message that may violate the norm of racial equality by submerging it in nonracial content. In an implicit racial appeal, the racial message appears to be so coincidental and peripheral that many of its recipients are not aware that it is there. (9)

In this category of variables we also determine and code whether any “racial descriptors” were used, noting whether the ad sponsor or opponent invoke a racial label such as “Latino” or “Asian-American” to describe either candidates or others.

Language, Code & Character

The third variable category includes language-based references to specific character traits that an ad sponsor uses to characterize himself or herself, as well as his or her opponent. These variables are designed to reveal what personal attributes are more or less associated with racist or racial appeals. More importantly, we code them with the aim of describing what terms might function as racial “codes,” as well as the language candidates use to identify common stereotypes held about individuals belonging to certain minority groups. We coded whether the following character attributes (generally paired as positive/negative) were used to describe either a sponsor or opponent in any given ad: lazy/hard-working, leader-experienced/ inexperienced, caring/ uncaring, trustworthy/untrustworthy, self-reliant/taking advantage, responsible/irresponsible, plays by the rules/criminal, qualified/unqualified, and authentic/not authentic. We also included three other categories of terms: whether candidates used first-person, in-group identifying phrases such as “us,” “we,” “our” or third-person, out-group identifying phrases such as “they” or “them”; whether ad sponsors or opponents used the term “liberal” to refer to their opponent; and whether a candidate invoked the phrase “the American dream.”

Image Content

The fourth category of variables assesses the kind of images prevalent in the ads (see Kaid and Johnston 2001). Again, our interest is to determine whether certain types or categories of images are associated with ads that contain some form of race-based appeal. We coded whether the specific ad included a still image of the sponsor and/or opponent, as well as a moving image of one or the other. We also coded the racial characteristics of persons featured in the ad, who the dominant racial group represented in the ad was, and whether an ad featured

“only” Whites or minorities. Finally, we included whether the ad included a backdrop image of a rural or urban setting.

Ad Valence

The final category of variables involves those that describe the nature of the spot itself in ways that have commonly been used to typify political advertisements. This includes coding for the presence of fear appeals, determining the valence of the ad in terms of attack, advocacy, or contrast,⁵ and whether the ad was primarily issue-oriented or image-oriented. We also determined whether the ad referred to any substantive issue and, if so, which issue was most dominant and which, if there was more than one, was secondary. We also noted whether the ad featured a character attack and who the dominant speaker in the ad was.

Results

While our interpretation of these findings are far from conclusive at this point, an overview of the results of the content analysis provides a useful beginning in our effort to unpack and deal with the complexities surrounding the construction and deployment of race-based appeals in political ads.

General Characteristics of Race-based Appeals

We begin our analysis by briefly considering both forms of race-based appeals together, determining their general usage by candidates and some of the characteristics race-based ads as a whole possess. As illustrated in Table 2, race-based ads are divided between racist (43.1%) and racial (56.9%) at a rate that might surprise those who suspect that all appeals to race are racist in nature. Race-based appeals occur most frequently (67%) in contests when White candidates are

⁵ Political ads have long been categorized by the focus of the ad – whether it focuses primarily on the sponsor of the ad, the sponsor’s opponent and where the ad lies on the sponsor-opponent continuum. In this study we use Jamieson, Waldman and Sherr’s (2000) typology, which identifies ads as being primarily advocacy ads, attack ads or contrast ads.

running against Black candidates.

[Table 2 about here]

Much research has focused on the explicitness of race-based appeals, specifically the ineffective nature of explicit appeals and the greater potential of implicit appeals to affect voters' political decisions. The breakdown between implicit and explicit appeals appears in Table 3, where it becomes clear that the overwhelming majority of race-based ads (92.6%) convey that message implicitly. We also see that 50% of all ads in this sample contain an implicit appeal to race of one type or another.

[Table 3 about here]

As with our previous study, we find that when it comes invoking race in any form, White candidates in biracial contests and Black candidates do so about equally in the political ads they sponsor (see Table 4a). Latino, Asian American and other minority candidates do so relatively infrequently. Most race-based appeals appear in contests in the South and are produced primarily by male candidates (though the number is proportionate to the total number of ads in the sample sponsored by men). The percentage of race-based appeals appearing in the sample of ads peaks in 1990, decreases the following election cycle, and continues to fluctuate in the low- to mid-teens through 2006.

[Tables 4a, 4b and 4c about here]

While considering any and all race-based appeals together gives us a sense of the degree to which race was part of the campaign discourse in particular contexts, dwelling on the aggregation of race-based appeals is ultimately unproductive, as it conflates racial and racist messages. Thus, we devote the remainder of the paper to discussing the results from this study in relation to these two distinct categories of race-based appeals.

Racist v. Racial Appeals and Political Ad Valence

It is no surprise that in our definition of and distinction between racist and racial appeals, Whites, by and large, are the sponsors of racist appeals (which appeal to anti-minority sentiment) while minority candidates generally use racial appeals. As we move beyond this to consider the remaining variables in our study, we see quite clearly a stark contrast not just between those candidates who sponsor one or the other types of ads, but the characteristics of racist versus racial ads in particular.

Our first research question seeks to determine whether, how and to what degree various race-based appeals are associated with the variables related to ad valence. In addition to valence (advocacy, attack or contrast), political ads are often distinguished by the degree of substantive issue content featured, with those focusing on issues categorized as “issue ads” and those not focusing on issues at all (but rather on the candidate’s person or character attributes) being labeled “image,” ads (Kaid and Johnston 2001). Finally, we are interested in a particular form of advertising appeal – the fear appeal. Many, if not most, of these distinctions have come about in the course of research about the nature of so-called “negative” political advertisements (Christ, Thorson and Caywood 1994; Kahn and Geer 2005; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Roddy and Garramone 1988; Thorson, Christ and Caywood 1991).

As can be seen in Table 5a, the political ad valence of racist appeals are generally associated with those ad attributes related to negativity. The majority of racist appeals feature sponsors (94% of whom are White) who attack their opponents (almost 70% of whom are Black and 24% of whom Latino). Additionally, we see that racist appeals overwhelmingly feature character attacks on candidates’ opponents and significantly focus on candidate image rather than issues (by a 20% margin). Almost 60% of ads that feature racist appeals contain either no issue content at all or present a smattering of policy issues with no focus on any single issue.

[Tables 5a and 5b here]

In Table 5b we see that ads containing racial appeals similarly focus on candidate image, to a greater degree than ads with racist appeals do. Like racist appeals, the vast majority of racial appeals also feature no issue content at all or contain many issues scattered throughout the ad. The primary difference between ads with racist appeals and those with racial appeals, however is that the lack of issue focus in ads with racist appeals comes at the expense of the opposing (minority) candidate, while the dominant image focus of ads containing racial appeals buttresses the sponsoring candidate's advocacy of himself or herself. Unlike ads with racist appeals, those with racial appeals are rarely characterized as "attack" and infrequently feature an claim against the opponent's character.

Language, Code and Character

As we delve further into the specific features of race-based appeals, we address the question of how racist and racial appeals use language to reference candidates' character attributes and utilize coded racial language when referring to oneself or to one's opponent. A glance at the terms listed in Tables 6a and 6b reveals few similarities among racist and racial appeals, while the two forms of messages ultimately vary greatly in ways consistent with the political valence of these appeals. What stands out most among racist appeals – which primarily focus on their (minority) opponents – are the labels candidates use to describe their opponents: "untrustworthy," "criminal," "taking advantage," and "liberal," in diminishing order of prevalence. When we look at the language sponsors of racist ads use to refer to themselves, we see first-person, in-group language ("us," "we," "our") used most frequently. When considered alongside images in ads with racist appeals, this in-group language takes on the character of a racial code. In almost 70% of ads featuring a racist appeal, the dominant racial group featured in the ads is White; 46% of the same ads feature all Whites. That number is, in actuality, significantly greater if we consider the fact that many of the ads where Whites are the dominant, but not exclusive, racial group are coded that way because an image of the White candidate's

minority opponent is present. Taken as a whole then, a White candidate who features all or mostly White folks in his or her ads signals whom the “us,” “we” and “our” includes.

[Tables 6a and 6b about here]

It makes sense when we look at racial appeals (Table 6b) that focus primarily on the sponsoring (minority) candidate that positive character traits about the ad’s sponsor are emphasized. Minority sponsors’ references to “hard work” appear most frequently, followed by them characterizing themselves as “caring.” “Caring” in this context often takes on a racial quality in that minority candidates frequently intimate that they care about White people specifically, inoculating against the stereotype that minority candidates are out to represent the interests of their own racial group. The next level of prevalence of attributes sponsors of ads with racial appeals use includes “leader”/“experienced,” “self-reliant,” and “trustworthy.” Like “caring,” in-group language used in these contexts has racial significance; when minority candidates use such language, they generally use it inclusive of and predominantly about Whites.

Conceal and Carry: The Images of Racist and Racial Appeals

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is consistent with how race-based appeals are communicated. That is, scholars generally agree that in an age where racial talk – particularly negative racial talk – must be concealed, an image is effective in both concealing and carrying race-based political messages. We previously referenced the work of Valentino, Hutchings & White (2002), who made the point that racial images serve as racial cues inasmuch as they are paired with racial narratives. This is a reasonable claim because their experimental scenario pairs together two White opposing candidates. While we certainly believe a racial cue will be stronger when connected to a racial narrative, we leave open the possibility that racial images themselves may still cue racial thinking among potential voters.

We explore the reasonableness of this possibility by looking at the results in Table 7, beginning with racial appeals. The (minority) sponsors of ads containing racial appeals appear

moving in more than 80% of those ads. The presence of the minority candidate's image to this degree suggests the possibility that whether he or she appears in moving or still images (sponsors appear in still images 22% of the time), a minority candidate's racial features are likely to elicit the attention of viewers. Terkildsen (1993) corroborates this possibility. The potential of racial cuing arising from the presence of a minority candidate's image is compounded when we consider the dominant racial group of people featured in the ad. Fifty-three percent of the time, in ads with racial messages where the sponsoring minority candidate appears, the dominant racial group present is White. Forty-two percent of the remaining ads contain an equal mix of individuals from various racial groups.

[Table 7 about here]

The point is that the racial contrast present by opposing visual images of a minority candidate surrounded by images of White people is likely to cue racial schemata. It not only draws attention to the sponsoring candidate's race, but it potentially transforms certain benign racial language into racial code. Take an ad for U.S. Senate candidate Alan Wheat (Missouri) for example (Figure 1). Wheat, who is Black, appears amidst only White images and repeatedly uses the first-person, in-group terms discussed earlier – “our,” “we,” “us.” In this context, where the contrasting racial imagery provides a racial cue, the signal from the image defines who is being referred to by the use of first person, which cuts against the racist stereotype that people of color disproportionately look out for each other and are hostile toward Whites. In this example, the combination leads to interpreting Wheat's statements as signaling that he – though Black – can and will represent all Missourians, including White Missourians, on whom he must rely for support since the “district” (in this case, the state) is majority-White.

[Figure 1 about here]

The question remains, however, whether the images would provide a racial cue if the narrative was race-neutral (if the first person and other racially-suggestive language such as

“hard work,” reference to “the American dream,” or “opportunity” were left out). The answer, of course, cannot be inferred from these data, which do not test racial cuing effects. What we can say, however, that it is reasonable to surmise given the extant experimental literature, that the nature of the contrast of racial imagery present in many racial appeals could provide a racial cue. That is, in the absence of any racial narrative, a viewer is likely to recognize (consciously or subconsciously) that Wheat is Black and the majority of his potential constituents are White. This kind of racial contrast is typical of ads containing racial appeals, more than of half of which include a vast majority of White folks, as well as some image of the racial minority candidate.⁶

Does racial imagery function differently in the context of racist appeals? The minority opponents of candidates featured in ads with racist appeals are present (moving or in a still image) 57% of the time. Additionally, 60% of the instances where a still image of an opponent is featured in ads containing a racist appeal, the dominant racial group present in the ad is White. These data reveal that, at least in these electoral contexts, it is common for political candidates to feature their opponents in their political ads. The unfortunate reality for White candidates running against an opponent of color is that doing so might present an additional obstacle as compared to running against another White candidate. That is, especially with the contrast of racial backgrounds when minority candidates are featured alongside their White opponents in ads, there is a likelihood that the racial characteristics of the candidates will be more apparent to viewers. However, this does not lead to a conclusion that the presence of a minority image in a White candidate’s ad constitutes a racist appeal on its own, even given that we do not use the term “racist appeal” to refer at all to the intent of the candidate or the ad’s producers but rather

⁶ The kind of racial contrast that likely occurs when one pictures a minority candidate with a mostly White cast of other characters in ads is likely to be highly dependent on skin color (see Terkildsen, 1993), and thus may be more likely to take place when Blacks with darker skin are the candidates in such ads. Such contrasts may not exist or may be present to a lesser extent when there is, for example, a light-skinned Latino candidate (e.g., Ken Salazar) who often may be able to “pass” as White (whether he or she intends to do so). In such cases, cuing might also occur if, for instance, the candidate’s last name is pictured or if the candidate is filmed speaking with an identifiable accent (see Ottaway, Hayden & Oakes, 2001; White et. al., 2008).

the potential effect of the message. Rather, a racial narrative, however brief, is necessary to justify defining an appeal as having the potential to be more effective as a result of racism (that is, to label the appeal as “racist”).

We might consider the example of an ad by Jesse Helms (who is White) against his Black opponent, Harvey Gantt. Both Helms and Gantt appear in the ad, and the only verbal reference to Gantt is that he opposes education reform. A viewer will be alerted to the fact that Gantt is Black and Helms is White, especially because all of the people featured in the ad besides Gantt are White folks testifying to their belief that Gantt rejects education reform. We do not know, however, whether it is likely that attention to the racial contrast alone is enough to prime the kinds of deep-seated racial prejudices and resentments that would contribute to a less favorable opinion of Gantt. With the addition of first-person, in-group language (effectively referring to all the other White individuals in the ad), as well as additional language specifying Gantt is against “neighborhood schools” (a racial reference since neighborhoods are largely segregated by race), we can more confidently label the ad as containing a “racist” appeal.

Conclusions

The sum of these findings, then, confirms our findings in the earlier (smaller) study. While there is still a great deal that we do not know about race-based appeals in television advertisements, we have additional evidence that such appeals are more common than has been typically assumed and that their use is broader and more complicated than conventional wisdom has allowed. We encourage researchers to conceptualize “racist” appeals as distinct from appeals that involve race but do not rely on negative predispositions about racial minorities for effect so that we can move forward with experimental research that tests the effects of such messages on participants of all races and ethnicities and in multiple electoral contexts.

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Table 1. Summary: Televised Political Advertisements in Contests Involving a Racial Minority

Ad Sponsors		Year	
White	348 (45.4%)	1970	5 (0.7%)
African American	283 (36.9%)	1978	15 (2.0%)
Latino	92 (12.0%)	1984	13 (1.7%)
Asian	20 (2.6%)	1986	16 (2.1%)
Native American	4 (0.5%)	1988	24 (3.1%)
Middle Eastern	9 (1.2%)	1990	138 (18.0%)
Sponsor race unknown	11 (1.4%)	1992	86 (11.2%)
		1994	60 (7.8%)
Female	117 (15.3%)	1996	102 (13.3%)
		1998	108 (14.1%)
Republican	353 (46.0%)	2000	20 (2.6%)
Democrat	414 (54.0%)	2002	60 (7.8%)
Other	0	2004	70 (9.1%)
		2006	50 (6.5%)
Opponents		Office	
White	320 (41.7%)	U.S. House	377 (49.2%)
African American	230 (30.0%)	U.S. Senate	390 (50.8%)
Latino	136 (17.7%)		
Asian	32 (4.2%)	Region	
Native American	4 (0.5%)	Northeast	90 (11.7%)
Middle Eastern	4 (0.5%)	South	371 (48.4%)
No opponent	4 (0.5%)	West	180 (23.5%)
Opponent race unknown	41 (5.3%)	Midwest	125 (16.3%)
Female	100 (13%)		
Republican	377 (49.2%)	Ad Type	
Democrat	367 (47.8%)	Advocacy	461 (60.1%)
other/no opponent	6 (0.8%)	Attack	200 (26.1%)
Opponent party unknown	17 (2.2%)	Contrast	106 (13.8%)
Racial Makeup of Contest		Issue/ Image	
Black v. White	458 (59.7%)	Issue focused	337 (43.9%)
Latino v. White	145 (18.9%)	Image focused	430 (56.1%)
Asian v. White	36 (4.7%)		
Black v. Black	21 (2.7%)	Policy Issues (most frequent)	
Latino v. Latino	34 (4.4%)	No issue mentioned	267 (34.8%)
Asian v. Middle Eastern	13 (1.7%)	More than one/ none dominant	195 (25.4%)
Native American v. White	4 (0.5%)	Education	53 (6.9%)
Unknown	56 (7.3%)	Taxes/spending	49 (6.4%)
		Jobs/economy	38 (5.0%)

N=767

Note: Geographic regions are defined by the U.S. Census (www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf). There are no ads in the dataset from Hawaii; the only ad from Alaska was omitted from the statistics that include geographic region.

Table 2. Race-Based Messages in Televised Advertisements by Contest

All Race-based Messages			Racist Messages	
			Black v. White	120 (70.2%)
			Latino v. White	35 (20.5%)
			Asian v. White	5 (2.9%)
			Black v. Black	0
			Latino v. Latino	7 (4.1%)
			Asian v. Middle Eastern	1 (0.6%)
			Native American v. White	0
			TOTAL	168 (43.1% of race-based ads)
			Racial Messages	
		Black v. White	156 (64.7%)	
		Latino v. White	33 (13.7%)	
		Asian v. White	4 (1.7%)	
		Black v. Black	6 (2.5%)	
		Latino v. Latino	18 (7.5%)	
		Asian v. Middle Eastern	2 (0.8%)	
		Native American v. White	3 (1.2%)	
		TOTAL	222 (56.9% of race-based ads)	
	TOTAL	390 (54.9% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)		

Table 3. Implicit and Explicit Race-based Messages in Television Advertisements

<u>All Ads with Race-based Messages</u>	
<i>Implicit Race-based Messages</i>	
Black v. White	255 (66.8%)
Latino v. White	64 (16.8%)
Asian v. White	9 (2.4%)
Black v. Black	3 (0.8%)
Latino v. Latino	25 (6.5%)
Asian v. Middle Eastern	2 (0.5%)
Native American v. White	3 (0.8%)
TOTAL	361 (92.6% of race-based messages; 50.8% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)
<i>Explicit Race-based Messages</i>	
Black v. White	21 (70.0%)
Latino v. White	4 (13.3%)
Asian v. White	0
Black v. Black	3 (10.0%)
Latino v. Latino	0
Asian v. Middle Eastern	1 (3.3%)
Native American v. White	0
TOTAL	29 (7.4% of race-based messages; 4.1% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)
<u>Ads with Racist Messages</u>	
<i>Implicit Racist Messages</i>	
Black v. White	111 (68.9%)
Latino v. White	34 (21.1%)
Asian v. White	5 (3.1%)
Black v. Black	0
Latino v. Latino	7 (4.3%)
Asian v. Middle Eastern	1 (0.6%)
Native American v. White	0
TOTAL	158 (94.0% of racist messages; 40.5% of race-based messages; 22.2% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)
<i>Explicit Racist Messages</i>	
Black v. White	9 (90%)
Latino v. White	1 (10%)
Asian v. White	0
Black v. Black	0
Latino v. Latino	0
Asian v. Middle Eastern	0
Native American v. White	0
TOTAL	10 (5.9% of racist messages; 2.6% of race-based messages; 1.4% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)

Table 3 (continued). Implicit and Explicit Race-based Messages in Television Advertisements

<u>Ads with Racial Messages</u>	
<i>Implicit Racial Messages</i>	
Black v. White	144 (65.2%)
Latino v. White	30 (13.6%)
Asian v. White	4 (1.8%)
Black v. Black	3 (1.4%)
Latino v. Latino	18 (8.1%)
Asian v. Middle Eastern	1 (0.5%)
Native American v. White	3 (1.4%)
TOTAL	203 (91.4% of racial messages; 52.1% of race-based messages; 28.6% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)
<i>Explicit Racial Messages</i>	
Black v. White	12 (60.0%)
Latino v. White	3 (15.0%)
Asian v. White	0
Black v. Black	3 (15.0%)
Latino v. Latino	0
Asian v. Middle Eastern	1 (5.0%)
Native American v. White	0
TOTAL	19 (8.6% of racial messages; 4.9% of race-based messages; 2.7% of all ads for which the race of both candidates is known)

Table 4a. Race-based Messages in Televised Advertisements by Race, Gender, Year, Party and Region

<i>Race</i>		<i>Gender</i>	
White Sponsor	189 (45.9%)	Male Sponsor	356 (86.4%)
Black Sponsor	162 (39.3%)	Female Sponsor	56 (13.6%)
Latino Sponsor	49 (11.9%)		
Asian Sponsor	6 (1.5%)	Male Opponent	349 (84.7%)
Native American Sponsor	3 (0.7%)	Female Opponent	52 (12.6%)
Middle Eastern Sponsor	3 (0.7%)	Sponsor Unopposed	2 (0.5%)
		Sponsor Gender Unknown	9 (2.2%)
White Opponent	170 (41.3%)		
Black Opponent	137 (33.3%)	<i>Year</i>	
Latino Opponent	75 (18.2%)	1970	4 (1.0%)
Asian Opponent	8 (1.9%)	1978	6 (1.5%)
Native American Opponent	0	1984	5 (1.2%)
Middle Eastern Opponent	0	1986	9 (2.2%)
Sponsor Unopposed	2 (0.5%)	1988	9 (2.2%)
Opponent Race Unknown	20 (4.9%)	1990	88 (21.4%)
		1992	43 (10.4%)
<i>Party</i>		1994	39 (9.5%)
Democratic Sponsor	214 (51.9%)	1996	62 (15.0%)
Republican Sponsor	198 (48.1%)	1998	53 (12.9%)
		2000	11 (2.7%)
Democratic Opponent	214 (51.9%)	2002	33 (8.0%)
Republican Opponent	187 (45.4%)	2004	32 (7.8%)
Other Opponent	1 (0.2%)	2006	18 (4.4%)
Sponsor Unopposed	3 (0.7%)		
Opponent Party Unknown	7 (1.7%)		
<i>Region of Contest</i>			
Northeast	42 (10.2%)		
South	214 (51.9%)		
West	73 (17.7%)		
Midwest	82 (19.9%)		

N = 412

Note: Geographic regions are defined by the U.S. Census (www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf). There are no ads in the dataset from Hawaii; the only ad from Alaska was omitted from the statistics that include geographic region.

Table 4b. Racist Messages in Televised Advertisements by Race, Gender, Year, Party and Region

<i>Race</i>		<i>Gender</i>	
White Sponsor	160 (93.6%)	Male Sponsor	159 (93.0%)
Black Sponsor	2 (1.2%)	Female Sponsor	12 (7.0%)
Latino Sponsor	8 (4.7%)		
Asian Sponsor	0	Male Opponent	141 (82.5%)
Native American Sponsor	0	Female Opponent	30 (17.5%)
Middle Eastern Sponsor	1 (0.6%)		
		<i>Year</i>	
White Opponent	3 (1.8%)	1970	0
Black Opponent	118 (69.0%)	1978	1 (0.6%)
Latino Opponent	41 (24.0%)	1984	0
Asian Opponent	6 (3.5%)	1986	0
Native American Opponent	0	1988	0
Middle Eastern Opponent	0	1990	55 (32.2%)
Opponent Race Unknown	3 (1.8%)	1992	18 (10.5%)
		1994	14 (8.2%)
		1996	23 (13.5%)
		1998	17 (9.9%)
		2000	0
		2002	15 (8.8%)
		2004	14 (8.2%)
		2006	14 (8.2%)
<i>Party</i>			
Democratic Sponsor	49 (28.7%)		
Republican Sponsor	122 (71.3%)		
Democratic Opponent	123 (71.9%)		
Republican Opponent	48 (28.1%)		
<i>Region of Contest</i>			
Northeast	24 (14.1%)		
South	86 (50.6%)		
West	32 (18.8%)		
Midwest	28 (16.5%)		

N = 171

Note: Geographic regions are defined by the U.S. Census (www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf). There are no ads in the dataset from Hawaii; the only ad from Alaska was omitted from the statistics that include geographic region.

Table 4c. Racial Messages in Televised Advertisements by Gender, Year, Party and Region

<i>Race</i>		<i>Gender</i>	
White Sponsor	29 (12.0%)	Male Sponsor	197 (81.7%)
Black Sponsor	160 (66.4%)	Female Sponsor	44 (18.3%)
Latino Sponsor	41 (17.0%)		
Asian Sponsor	6 (2.5%)	Male Opponent	208 (86.3%)
Native American Sponsor	3 (1.2%)	Female Opponent	22 (9.1%)
Middle Eastern Sponsor	2 (2.0%)	Sponsor Unopposed	2 (0.8%)
		Opponent Gender Unknown	9 (3.7%)
White Opponent	167 (69.3%)		
Black Opponent	19 (7.9%)	<i>Year</i>	
Latino Opponent	34 (14.1%)	1970	4 (1.7%)
Asian Opponent	2 (0.8%)	1978	5 (2.1%)
Native American Opponent	0	1984	5 (2.1%)
Middle Eastern Opponent	0	1986	9 (3.7%)
Sponsor Unopposed	2 (0.8%)	1988	9 (3.7%)
Opponent Race Unknown	17 (7.1%)	1990	33 (13.7%)
		1992	25 (10.4%)
<i>Party</i>		1994	25 (10.4%)
Democratic Sponsor	165 (68.5%)	1996	39 (16.2%)
Republican Sponsor	76 (31.5%)	1998	36 (14.9%)
		2000	11 (4.6%)
Democratic Opponent	91 (37.8%)	2002	18 (7.5%)
Republican Opponent	139 (57.7%)	2004	18 (7.5%)
Other Opponent	1 (0.4%)	2006	4 (1.7%)
Sponsor Unopposed	3 (1.2%)		
Opponent Party Unknown	7 (2.9%)		
<i>Region of Contest</i>			
Northeast	18 (7.5%)		
South	128 (53.1%)		
West	41 (17.0%)		
Midwest	54 (22.4%)		

N = 241

Note: Geographic regions are defined by the U.S. Census (www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf). There are no ads in the dataset from Hawaii; the only ad from Alaska was omitted from the statistics that include geographic region.

Table 5a. Racist Messages in Televised Advertisements by Other Content

<i>Dominant Policy Issue</i>		<i>Ad Type</i>	
No issues	75 (43.9%)	Advocacy	41 (24.0%)
Multiple		Attack	99 (57.9%)
(none dominant)	25 (14.6%)	Contrast	31 (18.1%)
Taxes/spending	16 (9.4%)		
Jobs/economy	8 (4.7%)	<i>Fear Appeal</i>	20 (11.7%)
Others combined	47 (27.5%)	<i>Character Attack</i>	112 (65.5%)
<i>Secondary Policy Issue</i>		<i>Issue Ad</i>	69 (40.4%)
No issues	75 (43.9%)	<i>Image Ad</i>	102 (59.6%)
Only one issue	74 (43.3%)		
Multiple		<i>"American Dream" Mentioned</i>	4 (2.3%)
(none dominant)	16 (9.4%)		
Others combined	6 (3.5%)		

N = 171

Table 5b. Racial Messages in Televised Advertisements by Other Content

<i>Dominant Policy Issue</i>		<i>Ad Type</i>	
No issues	85 (35.3%)	Advocacy	206 (85.5%)
Multiple		Attack	14 (5.8%)
(none dominant)	77 (32.0%)	Contrast	21 (8.7%)
Education	15 (6.2%)		
Jobs/economy	14 (5.8%)	<i>Fear Appeal</i>	3 (1.2%)
Health care	10 (4.1%)	<i>Character Attack</i>	31 (12.9%)
Crime	9 (3.7%)	<i>Issue Ad</i>	79 (32.8%)
Taxes/spending	7 (2.9%)	<i>Image Ad</i>	162 (67.2%)
Environment	7 (2.9%)		
Others combined	17 (7.1%)	<i>"American Dream" Mentioned</i>	32 (13.3%)
<i>Secondary Policy Issue</i>			
No issues	85 (35.3%)		
Only one issue	105 (43.6%)		
Multiple			
(none dominant)	26 (10.8%)		
Education	5 (2.1%)		
Others combined	20 (8.3%)		

N = 241

Table 6a. Racist Messages in Televised Advertisements by Character Trait Descriptors

<i>Sponsor Describing Self</i>		<i>Sponsor Describing Opponent</i>	
Hardworking/ strong voice	18 (10.5%)	Lazy	11 (6.4%)
Leader/experienced	20 (11.5%)	Inexperienced	2 (1.2%)
Caring	17 (9.9%)	Uncaring	5 (2.9%)
Trustworthy	20 (11.7%)	Untrustworthy	74 (43.3%)
Self-reliant	2 (1.2%)	Takes advantage	26 (15.2%)
Responsible	0	Irresponsible	6 (3.5%)
Plays by the rules	0	Criminal	47 (27.5%)
Qualified	0	Unqualified	0
Authentic	0	Inauthentic	0
"Us"/"We"/"Our"	68 (39.8%)	"They"/"Them"	4 (2.3%)
		Liberal	44 (25.7%)
		<i>Explicit Racial Descriptor Used</i>	3 (1.8%)

N = 171

Table 6b. Racial Messages in Televised Advertisements by Character Trait Descriptors

<i>Sponsor Describing Self</i>		<i>Sponsor Describing Opponent</i>	
Hardworking/ strong voice	122 (50.6%)	Lazy	2 (0.8%)
Leader/experienced	61 (25.3%)	Inexperienced	12 (5.0%)
Caring	75 (31.1%)	Uncaring	13 (5.4%)
Trustworthy	36 (14.9%)	Untrustworthy	23 (9.5%)
Self-reliant	37 (15.4%)	Takes advantage	0
Responsible	17 (7.1%)	Irresponsible	0
Plays by the rules	17 (7.1%)	Criminal	0
Qualified	13 (5.4%)	Unqualified	0
Authentic	0	Inauthentic	4 (1.7%)
"Us"/"We"/"Our"	81 (33.6%)	"They"/"Them"	0
		Liberal	1 (0.4%)
		<i>Explicit Racial Descriptor Used</i>	5 (2.1%)

N = 241

Table 7. Race-based Messages in Televised Advertisements by Visual Images

Ads with Racist Messages		Ads with Racial Messages	
<i>Dominant Racial Group Present</i>		<i>Dominant Racial Group Present</i>	
No one but candidate	62 (36.3%)	No one but candidate	37 (15.4%)
White	70 (40.9%)	White	97 (40.2%)
Black	12 (7.0%)	Black	13 (5.4%)
Latino	10 (5.8%)	Latino	15 (6.2%)
Asian	0	Asian	0
Native American	0	Native American	0
Middle Eastern	0	Middle Eastern	0
Other	4 (2.3%)	Other	0
Relatively equal mix	13 (7.6%)	Relatively equal mix	79 (32.8%)
<i>Only Minorities Present</i>	43 (25.1%)	<i>Only Minorities Present</i>	26 (10.8%)
<i>Only Whites Present</i>	51 (29.8%)	<i>Only Whites Present</i>	34 (14.1%)
<i>Urban Setting</i>	9 (5.3%)	<i>Urban Setting</i>	38 (15.8%)
<i>Rural/Suburban Setting</i>	28 (16.4%)	<i>Rural/Suburban Setting</i>	91 (37.8%)
<i>Still Image</i>		<i>Still Image</i>	
None	60 (35.1%)	None	165 (68.5%)
Of Sponsor	13 (7.6%)	Of Sponsor	54 (22.4%)
Of Opponent	78 (45.6%)	Of Opponent	15 (6.2%)
Of Both	20 (11.7%)	Of Both	7 (2.9%)
<i>Moving Image</i>		<i>Moving Image</i>	
None	81 (47.4%)	None	46 (19.1%)
Of Sponsor	66 (38.6%)	Of Sponsor	193 (80.1%)
Of Opponent	19 (11.1%)	Of Opponent	1 (0.4%)
Of Both	5 (2.9%)	Of Both	1 (0.4%)
<i>Dominant Speaker</i>		<i>Dominant Speaker</i>	
Sponsor	32 (18.7%)	Sponsor	66 (27.4%)
Narrator	121 (70.8%)	Narrator	134 (55.6%)
Opponent	0	Opponent	0
Other	18 (10.5%)	Other	38 (15.8%)
None	0	None	3 (1.2%)
N = 171		N = 241	

Figure 1. "American Dream" Ad, Alan Wheat



The American Dream, to me it's always meant that if you **work hard enough** you could find opportunity, and become anything you wanted to be. That's the dream we should pass along to **our** children.



Our kids need to know that if **you work hard** and **play by the rules**, in Missouri, you'll have every opportunity to succeed. I know. Missouri gave me a chance to reach for my dreams.



Now I'm running for the United States Senate, to make sure that every child in Missouri has the same chance I had, to make their dreams come true.