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Black Messages, White Messages

The Differential Use of Racial Appeals by Black and White Candidates

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This article seeks to ascertain how implicit and explicit racial messages are constructed in televised political campaign advertisements. Utilizing a content analysis of 328 spots run in election contests between 1990 and 2000 where at least one candidate was African American, the authors provide results and analyses that demonstrate that both White and Black candidates are prone to utilizing racial messages. However, the authors show that a stark distinction exists between racial messages constructed by Whites and those by Black candidates.

Keywords: *campaigns; political communication; race and politics*

Introduction

Following more than 30 years of research regarding various aspects of televised political campaign advertising, several conclusions are generally agreed on. First, political advertising has measurable effects on its audience (Buzzi, 1968; Cavanaugh, 1995; Clark & Brock, 1994). Second, candidate image rather than substantive political content has become a candidate's major concern in advertising (Postman, 1985; Sherrow, 1992). Third, there has been a steady increase in the use of negative advertising, and such ads have a significant effect on weakening the image of the target opponent (Kaid & Johnston, 1991). Finally, it has been surmised that such negative advertising may have detrimental effects on the electorate (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Authors' Note: Both authors contributed equally to this study.

Although much attention has been given to how political advertisements are produced in this regard, little attention has been given to the potential role a candidate or his or her opponent's race might play in political advertising spots. However, more recent work provides solid evidence that implicit racial appeals can be (and are) used by White candidates in a variety of media to gain a competitive advantage over minority (particularly African American) candidates (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002; Valentino, Traugott, & Hutchings, 2002).

This study provides descriptive evidence for what constitutes an implicit racial appeal through a content analysis of political advertising spots used by candidates in election contests in which one of the candidates was African American. We are thus able to clarify the tendency for racial appeals to be couched in particular uses and/or arrangement of language use and visual imagery, which helps to close the interpretive gap between scholars' designation of messages as being explicitly or implicitly racial.

Theory

Because the most effective forms of advertising, whether commercial or political, use implicit messages embedded in linguistic and imagistic content (Schwartz, 1974), we hold to Mendelberg's (2001) thesis that racial messages will most often take the form of implicit rather than explicit verbal appeals. As such, we rely on her theory of how implicit racial appeals are defined and why they are effective in priming the racial dispositions of White voters. The theory rests on the consideration of the two sets of actors in the political decision-making process: the candidates and the messages they construct and the predispositions and processing frameworks of such messages by White voters. Mendelberg claimed that politicians rely on racial messages when they seek to violate egalitarian norms and need to mobilize White voters who harbor racial resentment. White voters also respond to such messages out of the desire to appear not racially biased while actually holding to certain resentments, fears, and prejudices regarding Blacks in areas such as work, violence and sexuality, and their claim to public resources. Finally, we use Mendelberg's theoretical definition of implicit racial appeals as a guide for codifying such appeals in the present research. She stated,

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. (p. 9)

This is consistent with Glaser's (1996) findings that at least in the South, Republican messages on race claimed to be "conservative not racist" (p. 170). He discovered that "racial issues [were] expressed in conservative terms" and that "racial appeals [were made] in the name of fairness" (pp. 170-171). Accordingly, we employ this general characterization of racial appeals to determine the frequency and manner in which they appear in political advertising spots.

Whereas most work on racial messages in political campaign communication focuses on *racist* messages—those that in intent and/or effect serve to elevate one candidate over another by priming negative racial predispositions toward persons of color—we wish to encourage a broader consideration of the way race is used in campaign discourse. Nearly all of the aforementioned work focuses on the effects of racist messages on White voters in the context of an election where both candidates were White. But increasing trends in Black candidates seeking federal office highlights the tardiness of scholarly attention to the ways racist messages may be used to advantage a White candidate over a Black opponent. Furthermore, we know virtually nothing of the potential for Black candidates to use *racial* messages—those that involve race but clearly do not have the intent or effect of invoking negative predispositions about persons of color—in campaign communication. To fill this gap, we examine television advertisements for both candidates in federal election contests (U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate) from 1990 through 2000 where at least one of the candidates is African American.

Review of Literature

Symbolic Racism and the Evaluation of Black Candidates

At issue is the way White candidates present themselves and/or attack their opponents when running against an African American candidate. Such

presentation is informed by an understanding of the way White voters will respond to Black candidates.¹ Whereas Whites throughout much of the 20th century would have had no qualms about expressing their preference for a White candidate over a Black candidate, such expressions of individual-level bigotry began to fall out of favor in the political culture of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, David Sears and his colleagues began to lay out a theory of “symbolic racism” that was designed to explain latent racist predispositions that were available to influence political attitudes and behaviors (see Henry & Sears, 2002). Accordingly, researchers turned their attention to the ways racist attitudes could be measured as well as the myriad effects they had on public policy preferences and candidate evaluation and (ultimately) selection.

As overt bigotry became unpopular (a situation that Mendelberg, 2001, referred to as the norm of racial equality), social and political pundits began to argue that socioeconomic class, not race, was the most important cultural issue with respect to inequality. But Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989) put forth compelling research to argue that race is so powerful a force in American culture that it both interferes with and trumps class with respect to the potential to form political coalitions (and ultimately achieve public policy outcomes that champion equality). They presciently pointed out that as the Democratic coalition becomes “Blacker,” Whites will be more reluctant to join it, and the consequence will be a reluctance of even progressive Whites to encourage such coalitions, further marginalizing the Black community from a meaningful locus of power and discouraging them from promoting and maintaining multiethnic coalitions of any kind. This potential has been realized, at least in part, as confirmed by Kaufmann (2003), who found that Blacks and Latinos did not mobilize for each other’s candidates in ways that would be mutually beneficial.

What we are left with, then, are electoral scenarios where a White candidate running against a racial minority candidate in a majority White district is not only satisfied with securing the White vote but is also rewarded for invoking racist messages to disadvantage his or her opponent and to mobilize his or her racial base. Because the norm of racial equality makes it unwise to do so explicitly, White candidates in these situations rely on symbolically racist images and messages to achieve electoral success.

Almost all of the work on perceptions of Black candidates centers on White perceptions, and most of it reveals that White voters are resistant to supporting Black candidates. Williams (1990) found that White respondents were more likely to attribute positive characteristics to White candidates

over Black candidates. Terkildsen's (1993) work further revealed that whereas Black candidates were evaluated more negatively than White candidates overall, a Black candidate's skin tone further affected perceptions such that darker skinned Blacks received the most negative evaluations. Concerned with the utilization of available stereotypes, McDermott (1998) found that both trait and belief stereotyping influence voting in biracial low stimulus elections. She found that race has no effect on vote independent of such stereotyping and that in low-stimulus elections, voters use demographics as cues to stereotypes that affect voting behavior.

Carsey (1995), interested in testing contextual effects of the evaluation of Black candidates by Whites in the context of mayoral elections, found that at the precinct level, Black geographical density is associated with White voters choosing a Black candidate in a biracial election. Extrapolating from this notion of proximity to Blacks mitigating racist predispositions is Hajnal's (2001) work, which reveals that Whites who live in cities with Black mayors are less racist. Furthermore, and more important to the study at hand, he found that Whites tend to support Black incumbents but oppose Black challengers (which results in a cycle that allows Black incumbents, most of whom are in majority-minority districts, to hold onto their seats, while affording little opportunity for Black officials to take office in other areas or increase their percentage in Congress).

To lend further complication to the prevalent notion that Whites will not support Black candidates, Colleau et al. (1990) reported results from an experimental study that revealed that race was a significant predictor of candidate support but not in the expected direction. Respondents who received information about a hypothetical Black candidate were more likely to support him or her than those who received information about a White candidate or a candidate with no racial identification. Even though they urge us not to abandon the notion of symbolic racism, they conclude that it is an insufficient construct to explain White voting against Black candidates. Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, and Nitz (1995) similarly found that negative evaluations of a racial minority candidate are not necessarily explained by race. They argued that ideology and expectations are more significant factors. And Howell and McLean (2001) reported that performance of minority public officials, not race, is a stronger predictor of Whites' evaluations of them.

Taken as a whole, though, most research shows that race is at least one factor in determining candidate preference. It is therefore important to examine the communicative strategies of candidates in biracial elections to see how this reality is manifested in election discourse.

Method

The data for this study are advertising spots from U.S. House and Senate races from 1990 to 2000 in which at least one candidate was African American. The advertising spots themselves are the primary unit of analysis. The Julian Kanter Political Archives at the University of Oklahoma² possessed 328 spots for 10 contests that fit this description, including both general and primary elections (see Table 1).

Each spot was first viewed and coded by the authors according to a number of demographic (ad sponsor, race of candidate/opponent, candidate party, etc.) and descriptive variables. Given previous research in political advertising, we were interested in categorizing the ads by type. Accordingly, we adopted the categories of advocacy, attack, and contrast as opposed to being simply positive and negative (see Jamieson, Waldman, & Sherr, 2000). We were also interested in the degree to which candidates address aspects of one's own or one's opponent's character and substantive political issues. In addition, we coded for whether the candidate or his or her opponent appeared in the ads and whether the candidate or opponent was either moving or speaking.

In conjunction with these typical coding categories used in content studies of political advertising, we added another variable of primary interest that is directly related to race—the presence or absence of an explicit or implicit racial appeal by the sponsoring candidate. Because this variable was the only one that relied on some measure of interpretation, we utilized a third coder who viewed and coded a random 15% sample of the ads as a measure of intercoder reliability. We used Cohen's Kappa as a test of reliability, which produced a coefficient of .75 for the determination of the presence of an implicit appeal and .90 on explicit appeals.

Because of the novelty of coding racial content in political advertising spots, we proceeded with several research questions rather than direct hypotheses. These research questions include the following:

Research Question 1: How often do candidates utilize explicit or implicit racial appeals; are White candidates more likely to do so than Black candidates?

Research Question 2: What differences exist between the characteristics of implicit and explicit appeals and are used by Black and White candidates (in terms of type of ad, the depiction of opponents, and focus on either character or substantive issues)?

Research Question 3: Does the presence of an implicit or explicit racial appeal mitigate the number of substantive issues discussed in the ad?

Table 1
Characteristics of Ads in Sample

Candidate	State	Years	Number of Spots Sponsored by Candidate	Number of Spots Sponsored by by Opponents
Sanford Bishop	GA	1992	3	0
Carol Mosley-Braun	IL	1992, 1998	18	12
Corrine Brown	FL	1994	2	6
Cleo Fields	LA	1990	5	0
Gary Franks	CT	1990, 1998	23	38
Harvey Gantt	NC	1990, 1996	60	80
Cynthia McKinney	GA	1996, 1998, 2000	12	1
Charles Vincent	MI	1990	2	0
J. C. Watts	OK	1994, 1996, 2000	17	8
Alan Wheat	MO	1992, 1994	19	10

Results

Overall, we found that almost one third (29%) of all ads contained some form of racial appeal, though as expected, the vast majority of these appeals (23%) were implicit rather than explicit (6%). When it comes to what types of candidates use racial appeals most, we found, surprisingly, that Black candidates used explicit appeals more than their White opponents (8% and 4%, respectively), though there was not a statistically significant difference between the two. The results for implicit appeals also showed no significant difference as Black and White candidates used such appeals at an equal frequency (23%). Northern candidates used explicit appeals more frequently than their Southern counterparts (though not significantly different), and implicit appeals were used equally among candidates from both geographic regions.

Given the results showing greater usage of racial appeals by Black candidates (which is counterintuitive), the remaining results regarding the specific characteristics of implicit and explicit appeals are separated by candidate race. Separating the data and results in this way helps us better understand the circumstances in which and differences between the way in which Black and White candidates make use of racial appeals.

When White candidates run against Black opponents, their Black opponents overwhelmingly appear in the ads with explicit appeals (67% of the time) but are far less likely to appear in ads with implicit appeals (only 30%

of the time). When the Black opponent does appear, he or she appears moving slightly more often when there is an explicit appeal (33%) than when there is an implicit appeal (23%), never appears speaking in ads with explicit appeals, and appears so only 6% of the time when an implicit appeal is present. In such contests, implicit appeals are most likely to be featured in attack ads (49%) or contrast ads (34%) as compared to advocacy ads (17%). A fair amount of explicit appeals appear in contrast ads as well (33%), though they, even more so than implicit appeals, are found in attack ads (67%). The difference between advocacy, attack, and contrast ads among ads with implicit appeals is the only statistically significant variable of difference ($p < .05$).

White candidates' implicit ads are almost equally likely to discuss their Black opponents' issue position(s) (37%) as their explicitly racial ads (33%). However, the vast majority of ads with explicit appeals (67%) never mention substantive issues as compared to implicit ads where only 37% are lacking any discussion of issues. This difference is also statistically significant ($p < .05$ for explicit, $p < .05$ for implicit). The vast majority of implicit appeals are found when an ad mentions the Black opponents' character (63%), the difference between mentioning and not mentioning in this case being significant at $p < .00$. Ads with explicit appeals are also far more likely to mention the opponents' character (67%), though the difference between those that do and those that do not is not statistically significant. Finally, the use of both implicit and explicit appeals shows significant difference depending on whether the White candidate is from the North or South. That is, both forms of appeals appear significantly more often ($p < .01$) in the South than North.

For Black candidates, their White opponents rarely appear in ads featuring either an implicit or explicit racial appeal (3% and 17%, respectively). Differences between the presence or absence of implicit and explicit appeals are significantly different on the factor of appearance, moving, and speaking. However, this is likely to be a function of few of their opposing candidates' ever appearing at all. When it comes to discussing their opponents' issue positions, Black candidates rarely do so when their racial appeals are implied (6%) as compared with the 42% of the time that they are mentioned when the ad features an explicit message. Black candidates also rarely couple racial appeals with talk of their opponents' character, though they do so more often when the appeal is explicit (33%) than implicit (8%). Black candidates' ads with explicit appeals are always either advocacy or contrast ads, whereas those with implicit appeals are almost always advocacy ads (92%). Finally, explicit appeals appear significantly

more often ($p < .01$) in ads by Northern candidates (58%) than their Southern counterparts (42%), whereas implicit appeals are utilized more often (but not significantly) by Southern candidates.

Discussion

When it comes to implicit racial appeals as traditionally viewed (that is, used by White candidates against Black voters or Black interests), our results show a general pattern of characteristics. First, more often than not they include static images of their Black opponent. This allows for some measure of racial cueing by visually drawing attention to their opponents' race. But if this were all that it takes to constitute a racial appeal, the White candidates could never, as is commonplace in political advertising, depict their opponent as their opponents will always wear their skin color. However, ads with implicit appeals add to their racial cueing by attacking their opponent (which they do more often than not) and by attacking their character overwhelmingly.

Featuring such character attacks (as opposed to substantive issues, which are rarely the focus of such messages) along with placing race in the awareness of the viewer by featuring an image of the Black opponent allows the Black image to be connected with attacks against his or her character. Such character attacks generally make use of one or more of several stock character stereotypes about Blacks. In this analysis, these include those related to laziness, criminal behavior, and freeloading (welfare). The relative absence of substantive issues in such ads heightens the degree of connection of race (in the image that appears) with the racial stereotype and makes that racial connection the most salient aspect of the message.

These results also signal a need to broaden our scope of consideration when it comes to the contexts in which racial appeals occur. That is, minority candidates (Blacks in this instance) use racial appeals too. But Blacks use racial appeals for different reasons than their White counterparts, and they construct racial appeals in different ways. Whereas White candidates attack, Blacks advocate. The dominant image in Black candidates' ads with racial appeals is their own, not the White opponents'. And when appealing to race, Black candidates more often than not focus on substantive issues rather than talking about their own or their opponent's character. When one looks back at the actual ads of Black candidates that feature a racial appeal, one can clearly get a picture of why such appeals are used. First, they are likely to be responding to and defending themselves against a race-based attack made by

their White opponent, thereby invoking racial language as well because it was the substance of the initial attack. Second (and in most cases), Black candidates are inoculating themselves—if not from possible race-based attacks from their opponent, then from likely stereotypical attitudes held by Whites.³ Third, Black candidates are using racial appeals targeted toward other Blacks in contests against Black opponents.⁴

Conclusions

It is clear that although these data begin to move us toward a fuller understanding of how race comes into play in televised political advertisements, more work needs to be done. Perhaps what is most important here is not conclusive findings regarding either of the advanced hypotheses but rather the manner in which the findings broaden our scope in terms of what should be considered when analyzing the use of racial appeals in political advertising. Perhaps most important, the data here show that researchers should not only investigate how White candidates use racial appeals to gain a competitive advantage over Blacks but the myriad ways and motives behind Blacks' use of such appeals as well. Blacks' use of racial appeals also broadens the scope of investigation not only to the use of race in interracial election contests but in contests that feature only African Americans. A recent example of such a case can be found in the 2002 primary election cycle in which three Democratic primary opponents in the race for Alabama's Seventh Congressional District seat—incumbent Earl Hilliard, Arthur Davis, and Sam Wiggins—vied for their party's nomination. In this case, the racial appeal came in the form of Hilliard's and Davis's claims to "racial authenticity" in an effort to appeal to the majority of Black voters in the district (Halfbinger, 2002).

Although the findings here are inconclusive, largely due to the small sample size (which becomes even farther as we test certain variables), it does suggest that the research is going in the right direction in that the findings are consistent with what might be expected given our conceptualizations of the form of racial appeals and how they are used.

Notes

1. As we are concerned here only with federal election contests, we focus disproportionately on biracial contests that take place within a majority White congressional district (or state). Whites running in majority-minority districts would necessarily have different

campaign strategies, but because the contests under consideration are overwhelmingly composed of majority White constituencies, we limit our review of the literature to work relevant to such scenarios.

2. Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr (2000) pointed out the limitations of this archive's collection—principally that they do not include ads from every minority candidate who ran for federal office during the years covered in our analysis.

3. Generally, such forms of inoculation take place in election contests where the Black candidate is running in a majority White district.

4. Although not represented in this sample, there are additional motivations for using racial appeals by both White and Black candidates. See Caliendo and McIlwain (2005).

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