Racial Frames and Potential Effects of Minority Candidates in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract

We explore the degree to which media coverage of the 2008 Democratic presidential nominating contests contribute to perceptions of minority candidates in the mass public. We examine the attribute framing of candidates in news media coverage from January 1, 2007 through January 15, 2008. Specifically, we quantitatively content analyze newspaper coverage to identify the presence of racial attributes (such as the mention of race, the race of candidates, race of voters, and other racial language) and character attributes (such leadership, trust, and intelligence). These data are compared with public opinion data regarding the candidates over the same time period. Results suggest that stories about minority candidates contain racial references more frequently than stories that involve only white candidates, and, contrary to expectations, emphasis on character traits often seen as detrimental to black candidates does not seem to harm support for Barack Obama.

Since Barack Obama has been a frontrunner in the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination process, race has been a focal point for voters and the media, even as the candidate himself attempted to downplay it. In March, race took center stage as portions of sermons from Obama's long-time pastor Dr. Jeremiah Wright became public. While African American candidates have run for president in the past (Jesse Jackson, Alan Keyes, Lenora Fulani), never has a racial minority candidate come as close as Obama has to securing a major party nomination. Further, Latino candidate Bill Richardson had notable support until he dropped out of the race in January. In this campaign season, race is, has been, and will continue to be a focal point.

Recent research has shown that, in general, the news media frequently make racial references when covering minority candidates (Reeves 1997), yet the degree to which they impose a significant racial frame is questionable (Caliendo and McIlwain 2006). Research has also shown that white voters by and large perceive more negatively (and tend not to vote for) minority candidates in a bi-racial contest against a white candidate (Terkildsen 1993; but see Highton 2004). We explore the racial tone of campaign communication and mass media coverage of the Democratic nominating contests to discern the extent to which having two (and then one) racial minority in the race affected the racial tone of the campaign season.

Previous Work

We ground our study in two sets of literature: that which is concerned with the potential effects of framing and priming in political communication and that which centers on minority candidates' media coverage and electoral success. In short, there is relative consensus on two points of relevance to our topic. First, individuals are affected by the contextualization (framing) of information such that cognitive schemas can be primed and subsequently affect evaluations

outside the consciousness of the individual. This phenomenon has been demonstrated by studies involving racial discourse as well as in broader contexts. Second, coverage of minority candidates' campaigns often involve racialized portraits, though the existence of a "racial frame" is not firmly established as common. Irrespective of coverage, however, racial minority candidates tend to fare poorly in electoral districts that are majority white. This trend is mitigated by incumbency (i.e., black members of Congress who have their district lines redrawn to include a majority of whites have a better chance of keeping their seats than a black candidate seeking an open seat) and is dotted with exceptional cases (e.g., Alan Wheat and then Emanuel Cleaver in Missouri's 5th Congressional District, Carol Mosely Braun and Barack Obama for U.S. Senate in Illinois), but is relatively stable. The intersection of these two research threads has implications for the success of a racial minority presidential nominee, who must win in majority-white "districts" (states) to garner electoral votes.

Framing and Priming of Historically Disadvantaged Populations

The cognitive psychology, communication and political science literature on framing and priming is extensive. Beginning with early revelations by psychologists about the power of framing (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Quattrone and Tversky 1988), research has demonstrated that changes in context can lead participants in experimental settings to prefer one option of a decision-making situation. This occurs by the "priming" or activation of particular cognitive schemas prior to the decision, which makes certain memories accessible and, therefore, affects preferences. While this occurs in a variety of settings and about a variety of topics (both political and otherwise), the relevance for our purposes involves the ability of latent stereotypes to be primed in such a way as to cause individuals to rely on them when assessing choices that involve issues involving members of historically oppressed groups.

Over the past forty years, Americans have become increasingly sensitive to the perception that prejudice is a largely unaccepted practice. While negative stereotypes and systemic racism, sexism and heterosexism continue to prove problematic, most Americans are aware of what Mendelberg (2001) refers to as a "norm of . . .equality,"[1] which causes them to self-police with respect to words and actions. For instance, most white Americans will not laugh at a racist joke in public, even if they find it to be funny, because of the belief that they would be judged harshly as a result. Therefore, overt references to negative stereotypes have a backlash effect. Instead, choosing a frame that activates schemas that contain those stereotypes can have the desired effect of causing individuals to rely on them without alerting them that they are doing so.[2]

Because we are socialized to understand the status quo as "normal" and everything else as "other," portrayals of "outgroups" are particularly susceptible to the effects of framing. We process information without cues as relating to the status quo, only considering the "other" when prompted to do so. For example, white people generally describe other white people without making reference to race, but invariably include the race of a person of color in a description, lest the person to whom they are speaking assumes that the person being described is white (which, as the power norm, would be the "default" race). Research on framing about welfare rights (Reese and Newcombe 2003; Ross 2000) and rights of the LGBT community (Price, Nir and Capella 2005) explore and reveal differences in available frames and their potential effect on the target audience. Powell, Branscombe and Schmitt (2005) report the results of a set of experiments that revealed that frames about ingroup privilege led to less resentment (and more

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[1] Mendelberg's work centers on race, but a norm of equality exists with respect to sexism and, to a lesser extent, homophobia.

[2] Scholars differ in terms of the extent to which they ascribe intent to such frames; for our purposes, we are interested in potential effects and find largely irrelevant (even if interesting) determinations of intent.

guilt) among white respondents as compared to frames about outgroup disadvantage. These results dovetail nicely with studies that demonstrate that once a message is attended to more closely by a white participant (and, thus, identified "racial") he or she tends to resist negative evaluations that might otherwise result from latent prejudices (Banaji and Hardin 1996; Mendelberg 2001).[3] Valentino, Hutchings and White (2002) used television advertisements to show that some messages prime racial attitudes, even without the use of racial imagery. They found, however, that imagery linking African Americans with comments about undeserving groups results in a stronger priming effect, but that the effect is a result of the meaning assigned to racial images, not simply the accessibility of racial stereotypes in one's memory.

Minority Candidates' Media Coverage and Electoral Success

Irrespective of racialized campaign communication, the relatively small number of studies that attempt to measure how racial resentment affects minority candidates confirm what history has revealed: white voters tend to prefer a white candidate in a bi-racial contest. For instance, Williams (1990) reports that whites associate positive candidate attributes more to white candidates than to black candidates. Terkildsen (1993) showed that whites tend to evaluate black candidates more negatively than white candidates and, further, darker skinned black candidates were more harshly evaluated than lighter skinned black candidates. Sigelman et al. (1995) suggest that that negative evaluations are a consequence of the interrelationship between whites' existing beliefs about character traits associated with candidates of color, such that variations in whites' predispositions result in greater or lesser support for minority

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[3] The research on implicit associations and Mendelberg's (2001) so-called "implicit-explicit" model of racial priming is extensive and growing. Most recently, Mendelberg's model has come under attack by Huber and Lapinski (2006), who argue that in some populations, implicit racial messages are no more effective than explicit racial messages. The scholars exchanged arguments in the March 2008 issue of *Perspectives on Politics* (Mendelberg 2008a, 2008b; Huber and Lapinski 2008).

candidates. Further, Highton (2004) further calls into question the results of the experimental

studies. The potential problems with this study are the methodological flipside of the problems

with the experimental studies. While the conditions under which any experimental study is

conducted compromises generalizability, the inability to control potentially mitigating or

aggravating elements of vote choice compromises the study of aggregate exit poll data. The fact

that most black candidates in the biracial contests studied were incumbent Democrats in two

general elections illustrates but a few characteristics that, while externally valid, call into

question our ability to draw larger conclusions about the results.

We can expect, however, that any bias that whites do bring to the voting booth will be

more likely to surface and become salient the more central race is to the contest. While skin

color is usually obvious, the coverage of minority candidates by mainstream media outlets is

qualitatively different than that of white candidates. This is especially relevant in biracial

elections. In a study of media coverage of two biracial mayoral elections, Reeves (1997) found

that newspapers mentioned the race of the candidates, as well as the voters, quite frequently.

While the result would not be to inform voters that one candidate was black while the other was

white, it calls into question the extent to which the contest itself was framed in racial terms. As

noted above, racial frames can activate schemas that, in turn, affect the way an individual

evaluates the candidates. Terkildsen and Damore (1999) examine biracial election coverage in

1990 and 1992 with comparisons to all-white contests in those same years. They conclude that

the media act to control the amount of racial imagery introduced into the contest.

Mere mentions of a candidate's race or the voters' is not tantamount to framing the

contest in racial terms. Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) set the bar intentionally high in their

analysis of racial framing by newspapers in the 2004 federal elections. Their findings show that

references to race occur more frequently in biracial or all-black contests than they do in all-white contests, and more often in contests that took place in majority-minority districts. When "racial frame" is operationalized as a news story that 1) mentions the race of one or both candidates, 2) mentions the race of the voters, *and* 3) includes a photograph of one or both candidates, results reveal that election contests are racially framed most often in all-black and white versus Latino contests than in all-white or white versus black contests. Finally, they found that, contrary to expectations, racial frames do not replace discussion of substantive policy issues; stories that contained a racial frame featured discussion of more policy issues than stories with no racial frame.

The uniqueness of a presidential primary renders previous research interesting, but not particularly instructive with respect to generating hypotheses. First, almost all previous work has been conducted in general election contests, where candidates were competing with members of another party. Second, the racial minority candidates who have run for president in the past were not perceived as being as viable as either Bill Richardson or Barack Obama were in 2008. Alan Keyes was never more than an afterthought, and Lenora Fulani did not run as a candidate of a major party. Only Rev. Jesse Jackson's runs for the Democratic nomination in the 1980s received widespread media coverage. Finally, while analysis of the political culture in 1984, 1988 and 2008 are beyond the scope of this paper, it is difficult to predict coverage of the latter based on analysis of the former. Accordingly, we proceed by describing our data and methods, addressing research question, as well as a smaller number of formal hypotheses. What results is a mostly descriptive portrait of newspaper coverage in this heretofore unprecedented primary season.

The Study

The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the degree to which racial attributes were prominent in news coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. To accomplish this, we content analyzed 1,099 stories about the presidential election contest, beginning January 1, 2007 and extending to January 15, 2007.

Data

News stories are our primary unit of analysis. We chose six "national" newspapers from which to draw our sample, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *USA Today*, and *Los Angeles Times*.[4] Stories from these papers were taken from the Lexis-Nexis Database. We conducted a search using the name of each of the four "frontrunner" candidates for the Democratic nomination: Obama, Clinton, Edwards, and Richardson. At least one of the candidate's names had to appear in the headline or first paragraph of the story in order for it to be included in our sample. Additionally, we conducted the search using a seven-day time period. Each of the seven-day segments were categorized into separate coverage weeks. When the initial search results were retrieved according to this protocol, we selected a thirty percent random sample of the weekly set of articles to include in the set of articles for each coverage week that would then be coded. Stories within each coverage week set were scanned by coders; those stories that did not focus specifically on the presidential campaign were excluded. This yielded a total sample of 1,099 stories. Other characteristics of the sample are included in Table 1.

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[4] Newspapers were chosen based on their circulation, reputation as "national" newspapers and their geographical representation. The Chicago *Sun-Times* was chosen as Obama's "hometown" paper. The Chicago *Tribune* was not selected (despite it having larger circulation) because there were gaps in the Lexis-Nexis database for stories during the coverage period.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Media Outlet	Percent of Total Stories
New York Times	27%
Washington Post	27%
Chicago Sun-Times	24%
L.A. Times	10%
U.S.A. Today	7%
Atlanta Journal Constitution	5%
News Stories	63%
Editorials	22%
Mean # of Stories Per Week	35
Total # of Stories	1,099

Content Analysis

Stories were coded by a group of twenty-four separate coders, each of whom coded a unique set of articles (all articles were coded by a single coder). Each coder was trained as to the coding scheme and rationale. [5]

The stories in our sample were coded along eighty-five separate variables, grouped within the following categories: a) Story Characteristics, including the date of he story, source, headline text, section, and page number; b) Presence of presidential candidates and character-related topics, such experience/leadership, trust, qualifications; c) Presence of the racial (and gender) attributes of presidential candidates and the source of such attributes; d) Presence of race-related discussions within various segments of the newspaper, including whether race was mentioned in the headline and/or story text, who was it mentioned by, etc.; and e) Presence of

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[5] We calculated inter-coder reliability with a three percent random subsample of articles. The coders completed the same set of articles, followed by an additional training session. Another three percent random sample of articles was generated and coded a second time by each individual coder. Reliability measures were calculated using an Excel-based software program, PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment with Multiple Coders). We use the percent agreement calculation as our measure of reliability. Percent agreement ranged from .78 to .96 across all variables tested. For each variable that required a subjective response by the coder, the minimum percent agreement was .82.

campaign-related questions such as policy issues, character trait references, horse race content, and whether candidate photos are included in the story.

In line with previous studies about how the news media report stories about political campaigns involving minority candidates (Terkildsen and Damore 1999; Caliendo and McIlwain 2006), one of our primary questions relates to the general issue of racial framing and the degree to which reporters make racial references when reporting on the campaigns of minority candidates. We test three hypotheses related to this question:

H_1:   Stories about the 2008 presidential election will contain racial references more frequently than stories reporting on the congressional campaigns of minority candidates noted in previous studies.

H_2:   Stories that include Barack Obama will contain racial references more frequently than those that do not.[6]

H_3:   Stories that include some form of racial reference will be more likely to include discussion of public policy issues than stories that do not make a racial reference.

Our second set of interests focus on other ways that the media frames minority candidates not by relying on racial language or other forms of racial references, but by connecting them with certain perceived, desirable or undesirable character traits (Sigelman et al. 1995). This leads us to several research questions:

RQ_1:   To what degree do character traits negatively associated with African American candidates appear in stories about Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton?

RQ_2:   Do stories mentioning these character traits more often appear when Barack Obama is part of the story than when Hillary Clinton is?

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[6] The number of stories that only included Richardson were too few to be tested.

Finally, we are interested in the influence that media framing may have on measurable public opinion outcomes.

RQ$_3$:   Is there a relationship between the degree to which racial references are made in stories about Barack Obama and voters' favorably perception of his candidacy?

RQ$_4$:   Does the presence of racial references in stories about Barack Obama relate to how favorable he is rated in public opinion polls?

Results

Racial Cues in News Reporting

Our first set of hypotheses relate to the frequency with which racial references are commonplace in news/editorial reporting about the presidential contest. We hypothesized that given the more visible nature of presidential campaigns and the historic possibility of electing an African American president, racial references would be featured in news stories more often than they are in congressional or Senate races that are, for the most part, of local interest. This hypothesis is confirmed by the findings in Figure 1, below. The number of stories that include at least one racial reference is significantly higher in stories about Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election (28%, N=149) than stories reporting on congressional elections (24%, N=1638; χ^2=4.896, p<.05).[7]

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[7] The comparison group is derived from previous studies (Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; McIlwain and Caliendo 2007) assessing the degree of racial framing in congressional and Senate election contests.
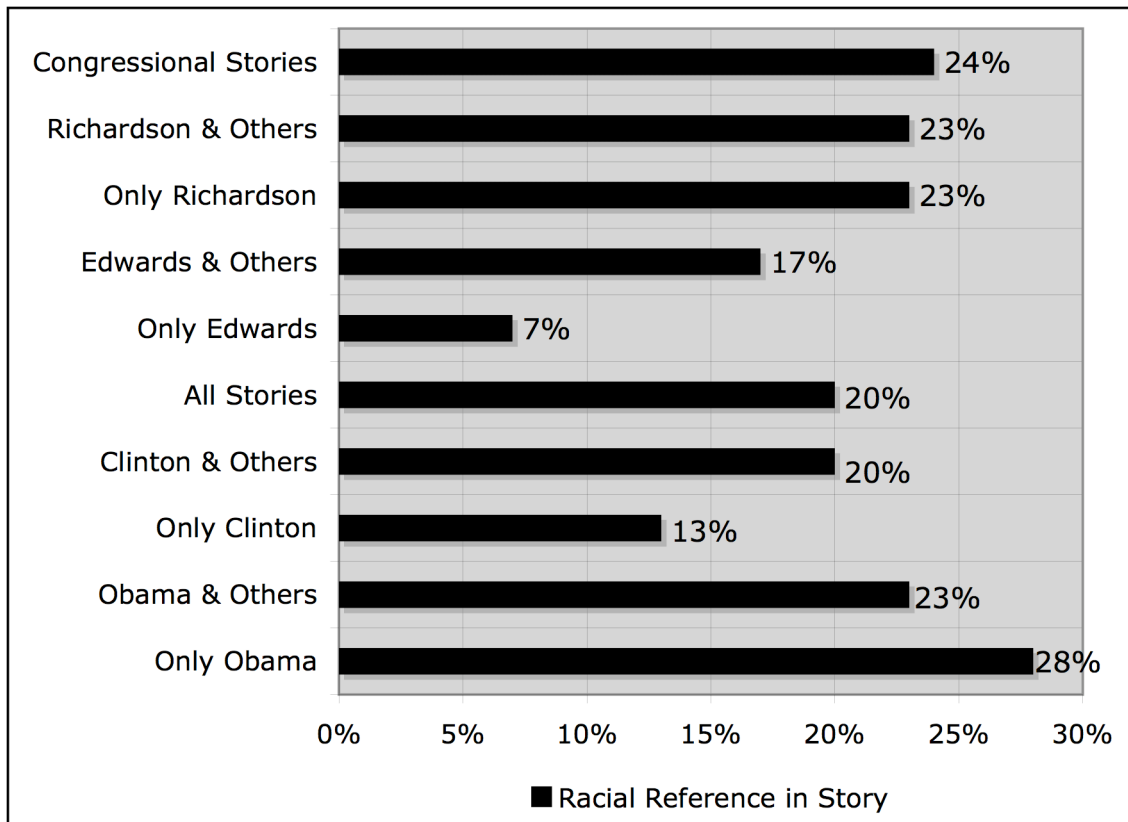
Figure 1. Percent of Stories With at Least One Racial Reference

When we compare data from the 2008 presidential election only, our second hypotheses is confirmed. That is, when either Obama or Richardson is the only candidate mentioned in stories about the election, racial references appear more often than in stories where either Clinton or Edwards is the sole focus of the story. There is an additional finding reflected in Figure 1 that we did not initially hypothesize, but is nevertheless significant. That is, more often than not, stories reporting on the presidential election tend to include two or more candidates as a primary focus. In this case, we see that the frequency of racial references in stories about the election increase for Clinton and Edwards when more than one candidate is part of the story, primarily when that candidate is Barack Obama.

Each of these results presents evidence that some modicum of racial framing is evident in news reporting about the 2008 presidential election. While we cannot conclude that the frequency of racial references that appear in these stories are pervasive enough to constitute a racial frame, these results certainly present strong evidence about the presence of racial cuing and that such cues spill over from stories about Obama, the black candidate, to those about the white candidates. That is, the evidence suggests that race is cued and therefore may influence readers' interpretation of the minority and non-minority candidates in the contest.[8]

Leadership, Experience & Trust

Our first set of research questions focus on the degree to which news stories reference character traits that traditionally have been negatively associated with African American candidates. The traits we test for here include leadership, experience (see McIlwain 2007), and trust (Williams 1990). As seen in Figure 2 these positive traits (that traditionally are not associated with black candidates) are mentioned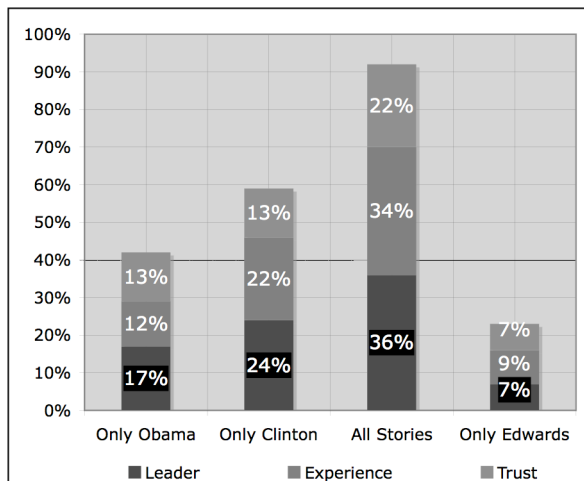 more often when Clinton is the subject of the story. The traits "strong leader" and "experience" appear in almost one quarter of all stories focused on her, whereas "experience" is associated with Obama only half the times as that of Clinton, and "strong leader" only slightly more. The difference between stories about the two candidates is significant at p<.05. "Trust," a character trait negatively associated with black candidates, is mentioned equally in stories about the two candidates. Comparing the frequency of these traits with their appearance in stories overall

Figure 2. Character Traits Present in News Stories

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[8]Both news stories and editorials are included in these findings, given that there was no statistically significant difference between them in terms of their propensity to use racial references of some kind.

expresses a telling result: both "experience" and "leadership" appear to be a significant part of the news agenda in these stories, but are referenced most often in connection with Clinton. The possible influence on readers is to cue the issue of leadership and experience as an important criterion by which to assess the merits of the two candidates and subsequently influence them to think more pointedly about the positive traits of experience and leadership as they apply to Hillary Clinton.

Racial Cues, Character Traits & Favorability Ratings

The assumption of agenda setting and framing theories is that the content of political news and the manner in which it is presented exercise influence on what readers think about and how they interpret the information to which they are exposed. In keeping with this, most scholars investigating racial framing in news about minority candidates conclude that this influence is negative (Gibbons 1993; Terkildsen and Damore 1999). Previous studies that we have conducted, however challenge this assumption (Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; McIlwain and Caliendo 2007). Thus, the final set of data presented in this paper speaks to possible outcomes of racial cues and inclusion of specific character traits found in the stories analyzed here, insofar as they may be said to influence readers in one way or another and effect the political outcomes of the candidates involved in the contest.

The first outcome we test is whether the presence of racial cues and content about the character traits of leadership and experience had any relationship to public opinion about Barack Obama. As previously mentioned, stories were categorized into fifty-five separate seven-day time frames, which were then aggregated into twelve monthly periods. Polling numbers reporting the overall favorability for Obama were taken from the Gallup Political Poll (monthly) and inserted into the dataset along with the corresponding month in which each given story appeared.

Table 2, below, reports the results of a means test of Obama's favorability ratings, compared to

the frequency with which stories contained racial references and discussions of leadership and

experience.

Table 2. Means Tests of Obama Favorability Ratings

	Mean Favorability	SD	F	p<	N
Leadership/Experience Mentioned in Story					
Yes	54.57	3.201			201
No	53.69	2.933	6.711	.001	642
Obama's Race Mentioned in the Story					
Yes	54.20	2.869			147
No	53.84	3.043	1.641	.194	701

With these results, it is important to point out that the favorability ratings, over a period of

twelve months, varied relatively little, fluctuating between 49% and 59%. The overall mean

favorability rating is 53.20. Thus, when we assess the influence that reporting on character traits

related to leadership and experience had on the Obama ratings, we find a statistically significant

difference in mean scores, though the actual numerical difference is slightly less than one point.

Rather than being a damper on Obama's favorability ratings, bringing up issues of leadership

and/or experience seem to bolster those ratings. Further, there is no significant difference in

favorability ratings depending on whether nor not a story referenced Obama's race.

Discussion

Perhaps the most striking finding from our descriptive analysis is no surprise whatsoever:

the content of media coverage of a presidential primary cannot be predicted by previous studies

of local or statewide general elections. Barack Obama, and to a lesser extent, Bill Richardson,

made history in this nomination season. Further, analysis of public opinion and media coverage

is further complicated by Hillary Clinton's historic run as the first woman to be in contention for

a major party nomination for president. Just as scholars of the American presidency suffer from a "small N" problem, drawing any generalizations from the news coverage of the 2008 Democratic presidential primary is impossible. Still, the reasons for exploring the level of racialized media coverage increases in importance for the very reason that it is complicated. Predicting the impact of racialized media on potential presidential voters was relatively useless when there was no sign of a minority candidate making a legitimate run at a nomination. Previous studies of racialized discourse in all-white electoral contexts showed that white voters' negative predispositions about racial minorities could have an effect on vote choice. But the dynamic when a minority candidate is involved in the race is quite different.

If Barack Obama secures the Democratic nomination, there will be opportunity to compare press coverage of the campaign with other general election campaigns to see if findings from previous studies are applicable to a presidential election. Trends in racial minorities' presence in other elections over the past fifteen years suggest that there will be more racial minority candidates for the presidency, as well, which will offer yet more opportunities for exploration. At stake is the potential for bias in coverage (intentional or otherwise) that might affect election outcomes and, thus, the nature of representation in American democracy.

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