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# ***The Dynamics of Racialized Media Coverage in Congressional Elections***

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Research examining press coverage of African-American candidates has put forth conflicting explanations to account for the use of race by the media in campaigns involving black politicians: the media act as racial arbitrators by limiting racial emphases; the media bring race to the forefront of campaigns by highlighting candidate race. In contrast, both phenomenon may occur simultaneously—i.e., media coverage of elections involving African-American candidates suppresses the use of race among the candidates themselves, but accents the race of black candidates and their constituents. Based on a content analysis of newspaper articles occurring during the 1990 and 1992 congressional election cycles, we find support for our racial dualism hypotheses, with the effect particularly strong in competitive biracial elections and in those contests occurring during the 1992 election cycle.

**I**n 1928 Oscar De Priest, a Republican from Chicago, became the first African-American elected to Congress during the twentieth century. In comparison, 39 members of the 104th Congress were African-American. Many factors have contributed to this increase in national-level black representation: greater numbers of African-Americans seeking office, the creation of majority-black districts, less-biased party recruitment, passage of the Voting Rights Act, and a reduction in white voter prejudice (cf. Fowler 1993; Grofman and Handley 1989; Herrnson 1995; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Swain 1995). Nonetheless, significant national barriers remain. Black candidates are substantially underrepresented in the pool of candidates seeking national offices, much less likely to win in majority-white districts, and more likely to be stereotyped by white voters (Herrnson 1995; McDermott 1997; Terkildsen 1993).

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Against this backdrop, we attempt to move our understanding of the obstacles facing black candidates forward by exploring media coverage of black and white candidates in congressional elections. Despite the well-documented influence that media coverage has on campaigns and elections at all levels, we know very little about coverage differences between black and white candidates and the effect that these differences have on voter perceptions and election outcomes. While prior research has demonstrated that race is often central to the coverage of elections when African-American candidates compete, there are conflicting results regarding which actors inject race into election reporting (Jones 1987; Jones and Clemons 1993; Reeves 1994; Traugott, Price, and Czilli 1993). Some researchers conclude that the candidates themselves play the race card (Jones 1987; Jones and Clemons 1993); others suggest that the media are responsible for highlighting race (Reeves 1994; Traugott, Price, and Czilli 1993).

In contrast, we contend that the racialized campaign reporting is more complex than the either/or dichotomy currently found in the literature. In particular, we posit that the media shape the racial tone of election coverage by limiting the racial references put forth by candidates while promoting candidate race themselves. We speculate that the media's racial dualism is motivated by a number of institutional and individual-level considerations (e.g., media roles, news definitions, and journalists' socialization). In addition, we contend that the media always accent the race of black candidates, particularly when they are competing in biracial elections (i.e., elections involving an African-American and a white candidate), but rarely, if ever, mention the race of white candidates, regardless of the race of their competitors.<sup>1</sup> The underscoring of race for African-American candidates is further accentuated in more competitive contests, and when race is salient in the larger political environment.

We test our hypotheses against data gathered from a content analysis of newspaper articles of same-race and biracial elections during the 1990 and 1992 congressional elections. Via analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA), we find strong support for our model. We conclude by discussing the implications that racialized media coverage present for the success of African-American candidates.

### Race and Media Coverage of Black Politicians

While black politicians may emphasize their race when seeking office in majority-black districts or competing against other blacks, African-American candidates who face white opponents or compete in majority-white districts frequently attempt to remove race as an issue or downplay its significance given the potential for some portion of the white electorate to be biased against their candidacies (Cavanagh 1983; Jones and Clemons 1993; McCormack and Jones

<sup>1</sup> This suggests that white candidates are still seen as the norm, and as a consequence, mentioning their race is superfluous.

1993; Pettigrew and Alston 1988; Sears, Citrin, and Kosterman 1987; Sniderman, Swain, and Elms 1995; Terkildsen 1993).<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, their white opponents may seek a political edge by injecting race, either subtly or overtly, into their campaign messages (Callaghan 1991; Kleppner 1985; Sniderman, Swain, and Elms 1995).

However, due to the dynamic nature of the campaigns, candidates can only control at most their own message or at the least their opening salvos. Statements generated by their opponents or the media are typically beyond the scope of their control (i.e., campaigns can react to opponent or media rhetoric after it unfolds, but can do little to stop such information from being communicated). Further, given the greater credibility attached to media-generated information, voters may perceive election reporting as exponentially more important than the candidates' own messages (Herrnson 1995; Ranney 1984; Sabato 1981; Westlye 1991). Thus, with the potential effect that race may have on candidate perceptions, the extent to which the media supply or suppress racialized messages in their coverage takes on increased importance.

Research examining the role of media coverage involving African-American candidates has put forth conflicting findings. One perspective contends that the media act as racial arbitrators in such elections. That is, campaigns that emphasize race or use blatant racial tactics are condemned (Jones 1987; Jones and Clemons 1993). Under this scenario, the media set an election's racial tone and generally monitor the fairness of political contests—players' messages, as well as their own print and televised outputs. The notion that the media are not only objective, but perhaps even slightly protective toward African-American candidates, portrays the press as a political institution well above the racial fray.

The alternative view holds that far from neutralizing racial considerations, the media promote contests involving black politicians in terms of their potential for racial conflict (Reeves 1994; Traugott, Price, and Czilli 1993). Here the media methodically promote race by reporting the unedited and unvarnished racial messages of others (e.g., the candidates and their opponents), and by independently constructing racially charged campaign coverage of their own. Many black politicians have long contended that the racial code words used against them are both opposition- and media-driven (Kleppner 1985; Pettigrew and Alston 1988).

Unfortunately, little systematic evidence exists to support either polar assertion. And, given what we know about the media and journalistic norms (Gans 1979; Weaver and Wilhoit 1994), it seems highly unlikely that the media act as deliberately as either hypothesis contends. Instead, we suggest that a third explanation

<sup>2</sup> The assumption that African-American candidates emphasize their race in majority-black districts may belie the complexity of race in elections. On the surface, such a strategy posits that black voters will vote for a candidate simply because he or she is black. In reality, the mobilization of African-American constituents likely depends on candidate ideology, partisan affiliation, and resources, as well as the symbolic nature of the electoral contest.

is more plausible: Due to an interaction between the media's roles and norms, changes in the societal discourse on race, and individual reporters' perceptions and values, the media act both as "racial ombudsmen," to use Jones and Clemons's (1993) term, *and* as independent promoters of race. That is, the media act to suppress the racial emphases of other political players while at the same time highlighting the race of African-American candidates.

### The Racialization of Media Coverage

Our racial dualism hypotheses rest on several key assumptions. First, in keeping with institutional and legal changes, the nation's racial dialogue has evolved to reflect societal changes in race and the expression of racist sentiment. Dialectical changes have been both concrete in nature and superficial in tone (i.e., modified notions about the social desirability of overt racial discussions, the use of racially biased language, and the communication of blatant racial messages). Thus, given that the media act as an agent of change and also reflect change in society, the tolerance of both the press and the public for politicized racism should have declined as well.

Second, industry norms regarding the importance of journalistic neutrality should cause the media to perceive themselves as racial arbitrators in elections involving African-American candidates and, at least on the surface, attempt to act accordingly. The media's race-neutral role is further reinforced by the other historically evolving function of the press: to be watchdogs of political fairness and champions of social reform. In this respect, journalists should act as the guardians of others' racial messages with this impartial, regulatory mind-set muting the extent to which political players are able to use race overtly in their mass appeals and/or be assured that their race-driven appeals will receive favorable coverage. Thus, overt racial appeals by candidates should have dwindled substantially, or, at least, attempts to convey such messages through the mass media should now be irregular at best. In sum, by capping the racial discourse of other actors, the press arbitrate the presence of race in election coverage.

However, at the same time that the press monitor the racial references of others, they are in a position to underscore race themselves. This may be done for a variety of economic, professional, and personal reasons. In terms of generating revenue, race sells. As a still prominent issue in the United States, race provides a sufficient dividing line that titillates and holds viewers' attention. Given the link between advertising revenues and media ratings, such racial emphases should come as no surprise. The disproportionate emphasis on racial considerations in the reporting of crime news in the local media is but one such example (Gilliam and Iyengar n.d).

Professionally, it is unclear to what degree media norms are consensual and how consistently they are applied. Research addressing this concern suggests

that there are relatively low levels of agreement among journalists about what constitutes news (Gans 1979; Weaver and Wilhoit 1994). This, in turn, suggests that any broad criteria of news definitions may or may not include specifics about how race should be handled by reporters. Further, given that news definitions are often intuitive rather than systematic (Gans 1979), it is unlikely either that most newspapers or broadcast organizations have explicit guidelines on race or that such standards have been established industry-wide (Rodriguez 1997).

To the extent that clear or well-formulated definitions of news do not exist and the inclusion or exclusion of race is not a consensual news criterion, the potential for a reporting gap that may foster "street-level" journalism exists. In the absence of clear professional guidelines, some mix of reporters' personal values and professional socialization may determine if and in what context race is a newsworthy component of electoral coverage. Thus, some reporters may unconsciously inject their personal racial beliefs into their reporting without realizing that race was actively primed (Callaghan 1991; Devine 1989; Fiske and Taylor 1991), since journalists, like everyone else, are a product of a color-biased society and as such may unconsciously emphasize racial aspects of campaigns. Others may actively promote race in elections because they may perceive that race provides an evaluative service for their readers (McDermott 1997; Terkildsen 1993). That is, since reporters know that race remains salient and that many voters, both white and black, continue to employ race as a voting heuristic, reporters may highlight race as a relevant vote cue (in much the same way that partisan identification and other traditional vote cues might be emphasized).

Reporters' use of candidate race may be further exacerbated or inhibited by their own racial identity. As compared to their white counterparts, African-American and other minority reporters may be more sensitive to the impact that racial differences and labels have in society and, as a consequence, less likely to emphasize race in their reporting. Conversely, due to their racial identity, white reporters may be less sensitive to the adverse consequences that can result from racial labeling. In sum, regardless of individual reporters' motivations, media coverage of candidate race should be characterized by a fair degree of interreporter and internewspaper differences that may be further augmented by the race of the reporter.

While the above discussion is pertinent to all contests involving black candidates, racialized media coverage takes on increased importance in biracial campaigns. Emphasizing race in these contests, either visually or in print, provides a powerful vote cue for both prejudiced and nonprejudiced citizens. For the prejudiced, race will prime their racial values, while for nonprejudiced voters race will likely cue stereotypical processing unless an alternative belief system is activated (Devine 1989; Terkildsen 1993; Terkildsen and Swain 1998).

However, biracial contests are first and foremost elections. As such, any coverage these contests receive is subject to the same constraints that govern all elections. More specifically, based on the congressional elections literature (cf. Jacobson 1978, 1987, 1990, 1997; Jacobson and Kernell 1983), we know that all elections are not equal. Some elections, particularly those for open seats or where a vulnerable incumbent is facing a viable challenger, are much more competitive. As a consequence of this increased competitiveness, these elections generally elevate voter interest, lead to greater fund-raising and candidate expenditures (regardless of their status), and are, from the perspective of the media, more newsworthy than noncompetitive elections.

Thus, in competitive elections, media coverage takes on additional importance, particularly in terms of content. Specifically, given that the outcome of competitive elections is less certain, coverage of these elections is more frequent and may seek to provide greater pertinent candidate information. Thus, in competitive biracial elections, media coverage should be more likely to emphasize the race of African-American candidates than would comparable coverage of noncompetitive contests, regardless of candidates' electoral status (i.e., challenger, incumbent, or candidate for an open seat).

Finally, exogenous shocks to the political environment may accent the link between race and elections. When this link is made more prominent, media coverage of relevant political events should follow suit. The net result will be coverage that increases its emphasis on race and racial distinctions. For example, the ongoing controversy over race-based redistricting (cf. Brace, Grofman, and Handley 1987; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Swain 1995), the creation of a number of majority-black districts after the 1990 reapportionment, and the likelihood of judicial action would have increased the salience of race in the 1992 congressional elections. Thus, race-relevant political events will serve to underscore intercandidate racial distinctions.

### Racial Dualism Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, we contend that the media suppress racial messages generated by candidates and their opponents, while simultaneously stressing candidate and voter race themselves. That is, in the coverage of elections involving African-American candidates, the majority of racial emphases emanate from the media, not from the candidates or from other sources. We put forth the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: For African-American candidates, regardless of the race of their opponents, media will be more likely to highlight candidate race, partisanship, and the racial composition of their constituency.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: In mixed-race elections, the media accent the race of African-American candidates but not the race of white candidates.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: In biracial elections, the media place a greater emphasis on the race of voters, both black and white, when covering African-American politicians than when covering their white opponents.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: In biracial elections, the media inhibit racial references emanating from candidates, their opponents, and other political players.*

*H<sub>5</sub>: Media coverage of competitive biracial elections further accents the race of African-American candidates as compared to coverage of noncompetitive biracial elections.*

*H<sub>6</sub>: Exogenous, racially driven changes to the political environment increase the use of racial labels vis-à-vis African-American candidates and their constituents.*

Finally, if media-derived racial emphases stem from a low consensus within the news profession about the newsworthiness of race, then the racial highlighting of African-American candidates should vary from reporter to reporter and even within the same newspaper. To the extent that individual reporters' judgments influence their perceptions regarding the significance of race in elections, we hypothesize:

*H<sub>7</sub>: Black reporters who cover biracial elections are less likely to use racial cues in their reporting as compared to white reporters.*

*H<sub>8</sub>: Media coverage of elections involving African-American candidates is characterized by a lack of consistency in either emphasizing or ignoring candidate race both between and within newspapers, reporters, and the candidates who are covered.*

## Methods

To test these hypotheses, a content analysis of newspaper coverage of biracial and same-race congressional elections was performed. The decision to use newspaper coverage was based on three considerations. First, congressional candidates are often locked out of television news coverage. This, in turn, increases the importance of print reporting for establishing name recognition and conveying campaign and candidate-related information to voters (Clarke and Fredin 1978; Cook 1987; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Joslyn 1984; Robinson 1975). Second, the print media are more likely than television to give free campaign coverage to congressional contenders (Cook 1987; Herrnson 1995). Third, during campaigns, newspapers are more likely to assist readers in identifying candidate assets and liabilities (Clarke and Fredin 1978; Mondak 1995). Further, the use of content analytic techniques allows a test for systematic patterns of coverage—something that has been absent from previous, case study-based research examining media coverage of race in elections.



### Sample and Data Sources

In 1990 and 1992, 21 states held one or more biracial congressional elections. Of those 21, 9 states were randomly selected for study: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Data were then collected for all biracial elections that occurred in these states. The 1990 and 1992 election cycles were chosen to test the impact of exogenous shocks on coverage of biracial elections (1990 being prerredistricting and 1992 being postredistricting, resulting in the controversial creation of a number of majority-black districts). For 1990, 13 biracial contests were analyzed; and for 1992, 18 such races.<sup>3</sup> In addition, to provide a baseline for comparison, the 28 all-white and 7 all-black congressional elections held in these same states during 1990 and 1992 were also sampled.<sup>4</sup>

Using the two newspapers with the largest circulation in each state with on-line databases, all articles published between September 1 and election day 1990 and 1992 that mentioned one or more of the candidates were included in the dataset ( $n = 410$ ).<sup>5</sup> Only articles that focused on the election were analyzed.<sup>6</sup> Additional data used in the analysis were obtained from *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*, *The Joint Center For Political and Economic Studies*, and *Federal Election Reports on Financial Activity (1989–1990 and 1991–1992 Final Reports) for U.S. Senate and House Campaigns*. Data regarding the race of

<sup>3</sup> The decision to sample was based on two criteria. First, this procedure provides a representative sample of the total universe, which, by definition, eliminates the need to analyze the entire population. Second, costs for obtaining the data from on-line sources initially prohibited the collection of all cases. For 1990, the data capture 45% of all biracial contests occurring that year, and for 1992, 55% of such races.

<sup>4</sup> The races used for 1990 are: biracial—California 8, 28, 29, 31, and 33; Illinois 2 and 7; Missouri 1 and 5; Ohio 2 and 21; Pennsylvania 1 and 2; same-race—California 4, 9, 13, 14, 37, and 44; Georgia 3, 5, and 7; Illinois 1, 9, 15, and 20; Michigan 1 and 13; Ohio 7, 11, and 13; and Pennsylvania 19, 21, and 22. The races used for 1992 are: biracial—California 9, 32, and 35; Florida 13, 17, and 23; Georgia 2, 5, and 11; Illinois 2 and 7; Michigan 4 and 7; Missouri 1 and 5; North Carolina 1; Ohio 11; and Pennsylvania 2; same-race—California 3, 4, 20, 21, 37, and 44; Georgia 3 and 7; Illinois 1, 9, 15, and 20; Ohio 13; and Pennsylvania 8.

<sup>5</sup> The following papers were searched: *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Akron Beacon Journal*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Kansas City Star*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. For four states (Georgia, Michigan, Illinois, and North Carolina) only one major newspaper was available on-line for the time frame studied. The *Akron Beacon Journal* was searched as a supplement to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* due to the latter paper's limited availability in 1990. Search terms used were the candidates' legal names and any nicknames or other variants.

<sup>6</sup> Articles that involved coverage of incumbents acting in an official capacity (i.e., reports of member's roll call votes, members of Congress performing some aspect of their elected duties, or members campaigning on behalf of others) were eliminated from the analysis (see Robinson and Sheehan 1983 for an explanation as to why this type of coverage should be analyzed separately). Thus, the analyzed coverage is local and electorally specific in nature due to its focus on district-level election considerations.

the reporters was obtained via phone calls with editors and the personnel departments of the relevant newspapers.

### *Coding*

All articles were coded for the name of the reporter who covered the story, his or her race, and the newspaper in which the article appeared.<sup>7</sup> The quantity of coverage was measured as the number of paragraphs that discussed a specific candidate. If a paragraph contained references to more than one candidate, the paragraph was divided by the appropriate denominator.

Attributions of candidate race and racial references to the voting population were coded along a number of dimensions. The attribution of candidate race was measured as either direct (e.g., the number of times the candidate was referred to as black, African-American, the first black "something," white, etc.) or inferred (i.e., a photograph of the candidate was included with the article). Racial references about the voting district were defined as the number of times the race of voters, the racial composition of the district, or the phrase "black majority district" were mentioned. All of these messages were further linked to a specific source. Sources were coded as either the candidate (or his/her campaign staff), his or her opponent (or staff), a third party, or the media. This was done using a textual analysis of the article in which all statements not directly attributed to an individual, either through a quote or paraphrase were assumed to be part of the reporter's own observation, analysis, or assessment(s).

In an effort to minimize any systematic racial bias, or the perception thereof, articles were coded by both an African-American and a white coder; in addition, 30% of the articles were randomly selected and coded separately by each individual. A correlation of .94 across coders was obtained indicating a strong level of agreement regardless of the coders' race.

### *Results*

#### *Main Effects: Patterns of Coverage in Same-Race and Biracial Elections*

Table 1 presents the results from a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA's) for media coverage of pooled congressional elections, biracial congressional elections, and same-race congressional elections. Column one presents the results for all congressional elections, pooled across type of contest and year of contest. Here, both amount of coverage and content of coverage differ sharply by candidate race. In general, white congressional candidates received approximately one and a half times more coverage than their black counterparts.

<sup>7</sup>It was not possible to gather consistent data on reporters' race for articles written by freelance reporters (as the newspapers kept no personal information on these individuals) or for those articles where authorship was unattributed (e.g., *Los Angeles Times* staff).

TABLE 1  
One-Way ANOVA's of Media Coverage of Pooled, Same Race, and  
BiRacial Congressional Elections

Campaign Type	Pooled		Same-Race		Biracial	
Race of the Candidate	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Dependent Variable						
Amount of Coverage						
Number of Paragraphs	5.31	7.54	3.56	8.05	5.60	5.70
	(F = 7.21)**		(F = 4.33)*		(F = .01)	
Number of Mentions to Partisanship	1.77	.95	1.21	.98	1.86	.84
	(F = 45.37)***		(F = 1.18)		(F = 18.86)***	
References to Candidate's Race						
By the Candidate	.07	.00	.25	.00	.04	.00
	(F = 9.06)**		(F = 20.75)***		(F = 1.54)	
By Opponent	.01	.00	n/a		.01	.00
	(F = 1.62)				(F = .40)	
By a Surrogate	.02	.00	n/a		.02	.00
	(F = 1.61)				(F = .40)	
By the Media	1.06	.02	.50	.00	1.15	.08
	(F = 108.29)***		(F = 76.06)***		(F = 18.12)***	
References to Voters' Race						
By the Candidate	.12	.03	.17	.00	.11	.14
	(F = 5.71)*		(F = 28.54)***		(F = .19)	
By the Media	1.23	.08	.17	.00	1.39	.33
	(F = 35.23)***		(F = 17.16)***		(F = 5.76)**	
Number of Cases	181	293	24	230	157	63

*Note:* Column 1 represents a means comparison for black and white candidates pooled across all elections. Column 2 conveys the same analysis but for same-race elections only, and column 3 compares patterns of coverage for black and white candidates in biracial elections only.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

Further, media references to partisanship, candidate race, and the racial composition of the district are statistically different for African-American candidates compared to white candidates. In comparison to white candidates, reporters were more likely to highlight the partisanship of black candidates ( $M = 1.77$  versus  $M = .95$ ,  $F = 45.31$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), the race of black candidates ( $M = 1.06$  versus  $M = .02$ ,  $F = 108.29$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), and the racial composition of these candidates' districts ( $M = 1.23$  versus  $M = .08$ ,  $F = 35.23$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). In addition, black candidates themselves, although to a much smaller magnitude, were more likely to refer to their own race and the racial composition of their districts as compared to white candidates ( $M = .12$  versus  $M = .03$ ,  $F = 5.71$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ).

In sum, these results first suggest that, without controlling for the race of opponent, both black candidates (though marginally so) and the media are responsible

for bringing race to the forefront of congressional campaign coverage. However, a disaggregation of the data reveals that such is not the case. Specifically, the results in columns 2 and 3 of Table 1 (for same-race and biracial elections, respectively) suggest that the moderate use of race by African-American candidates depends upon the race of their opponents (i.e., black versus white), while the media's substantial mentions of African-American candidates' race are a constant regardless of their opponents' race.

Looking at same-race elections first, column 2 reveals that white candidates who ran against another white candidate received twice as much campaign coverage as African-American politicians who faced a black opponent ( $M = 8.05$  versus  $M = 3.56$ ;  $F = 4.33, p \leq .05$ ). Moreover, this coverage differed in its references to race, both in terms of candidate race and the racial composition of the district. The race of white candidates and their districts were never mentioned (either by the candidates or by the media). In contrast, candidate race and voter race were cited by both the media ( $M = .50$  and  $M = .17$ , respectively) and by black candidates ( $M = .25$  and  $M = .17$ , respectively) when two African-Americans opposed one another for congressional seats.

While the results discussed up to this point offer broad insight regarding the racial tone of media coverage in congressional elections, this evidence does not address differences in coverage of black and white candidates competing in biracial elections. Column 3 of Table 1 provides evidence in support of hypotheses 2-4.

Consistent with our expectations, these results reveal clear distinctions in the coverage of black and white candidates in mixed-race elections. Specifically, while the amount of coverage given to white and black candidates was virtually identical, the substance of the coverage varies along a number of important dimensions. Coverage of black candidates was more likely to emphasize partisan orientation, race of the candidate, and the racial composition of the district. However, different from same-race media patterns, racialized and partisan coverage of biracial elections was due exclusively to media coverage, not the candidates' or their opponents' use of racial and partisan labels. That is, the media was more likely to report the partisan affiliation of black candidates than their white opponents ( $M = 1.86$  versus  $M = .84$ ;  $F = 18.86, p \leq .001$ ). Further, media coverage was much more likely to mention the race of black candidates ( $M = 1.15$  versus  $M = .08$ ;  $F = 18.12, p \leq .001$ ) and mention the racial orientation of black voters as compared to their white opponents ( $M = 1.39$  versus  $M = .33$ ;  $F = 5.76, p \leq .01$ ). Finally, the means for racial mentions by other political players (e.g., the candidates themselves, their opponents, or surrogates) all fail to reach conventional levels of statistical or substantive significance. No actor other than the media consistently utilized a racial frame for the coverage of African-American candidates in biracial elections.

Based on these results several points are clear: (1) coverage of African-American candidates who ran for Congress differed in both the amount and tone of the media coverage they received compared to their white counterparts; (2) for

same-race elections this effect was due both to candidate statements about race and to independent media coverage; (3) in biracial political contests, racial emphases were exclusively media derived.

### *Moderating Factors: Biracial Elections in Context*

The results presented in Table 1 go a long way to support our racial dualism hypotheses. However, as discussed above, given the additional importance that race may have in biracial elections, there are a number of additional factors that might mitigate or augment coverage of these campaigns. Specifically, the competitiveness of the election, changes to the political environment (conceptualized here as differences in coverage of biracial elections before and after the 1990 re-districting), and the race of the reporter might all affect patterns of coverage in biracial campaigns.

As suggested by the congressional elections literature, the competitive nature of elections (operationalized here as an election that is either an open-seat election or one where a challenger spent more than \$100,000 in 1992 dollars) has a significant influence on election outcomes.<sup>8</sup> If competition matters rather than race, our results should wash out once controls for competition are introduced. However, if competition heightens the effects of racialized coverage then our results should be accentuated in highly competitive biracial congressional contests.

Dependent variables controlling for competition are presented in Table 2 for those main effects that were either statistically or substantively significant in earlier analyses: amount of coverage, and media mentions of partisanship, candidate race, and voter race. Via MANOVA, our results suggest that more competitive races generated greater coverage than less competitive contests ( $M = 7.3$  versus  $M = 4.3$ ;  $F = 8.64$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). More importantly and in support of hypothesis 5, media references to the race of black candidates increased ( $M = .91$  versus  $M = .29$ ;  $F = 7.99$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ) significantly between competitive and noncompetitive contests. References to candidate partisanship and voter race were also greater in competitive than noncompetitive races, though these effects failed to reach statistical significance.

<sup>8</sup>The advantage of coding for competitiveness in this manner is twofold. First, it eases interpretation and second, and more importantly, it is theoretically sound. Specifically, as can be gleaned from the congressional elections literature, competitive elections are those that are either open seats or where a vulnerable challenger is facing a viable and quality challenger (cf. Jacobson and Kernell 1983). In the former case, both candidates are generally well financed, which allows them to increase their name recognition, get their message out, and develop a solid campaign organization. In the latter case, the most important factor determining the outcome of the election is the spending of the challenger for these same reasons. In sum, while competitiveness in congressional elections can be tapped by a variety of measures such as challenger quality or incumbent's past margin of victory, the endpoint of this causal chain is challenger spending (Jacobson 1978, 1990), or to amend and paraphrase Jacobson: "You can't beat somebody with a nobody who isn't well financed."

TABLE 2

**MANOVA of Media Coverage of BiRacial Congressional Elections  
Controlling for Competitiveness of Election**

Campaign Type	Competitive		Noncompetitive	
Race of the Candidate	Black	White	Black	White
<b>Dependent Variable</b>				
Number of Paragraphs of Coverage				
F = 8.64**		7.3		4.3
F = .28	6.7 <sub>a</sub>	8.0 <sub>a</sub>	4.2 <sub>b</sub>	4.4 <sub>b</sub>
Number of Mentions to Partisanship				
F = 9.41**		1.7		1.0
F = .25	2.2 <sub>a</sub>	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	.62 <sub>b</sub>
References to Candidate's Race by Media				
F = 7.99**		.91		.29
F = 3.41*	1.6 <sub>a</sub>	.22 <sub>b</sub>	.57 <sub>c</sub>	.00 <sub>b</sub>
References to Voters' Race by Media				
F = .53		1.0		.68
F = .42	1.7 <sub>a</sub>	.35 <sub>b</sub>	1.0 <sub>a</sub>	.31 <sub>b</sub>
Number of cases		110		110
	87	23	70	40

*NOTE:* Means with different letters are statistically significant from one another at or above the .05 level. Boldfaced letters are not statistically different from nonboldfaced letters. Line 1 presents main effects for competition; line 2 presents interaction effects for competition by candidate's race.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

While three of the four interactions between level of competition and candidate race failed to reach significance, substantively, these results suggest that blacks seeking office in competitive races received on average 1.3 paragraphs less coverage than did their white rivals, had their race emphasized seven times more often than white candidates when running in competitive contests ( $p \leq .05$ ), their partisan affiliations discussed twice as often as whites, and the racial composition of the districts was stressed 4.8 times more often than was the racial population of the district for their white contenders.<sup>9</sup> This is certainly not to imply that in noncompetitive biracial elections, African-American candidates did not have their racial identities or partisan affiliations stressed. The patterns of coverage in noncompetitive campaigns are comparable to the results for competitive elections, although to a lesser magnitude (see column 2 of Table 2 for exact values).

Table 3 presents the results for differences in coverage of biracial elections across the 1990 and 1992 election cycles. These results provide evidence in support of

<sup>9</sup> Additional analyses (not reported here) of other campaign specific variables such as candidate status (e.g., incumbent versus challenger), racial composition of district (e.g., majority black versus majority white) did not produce statistically significant relationships.

TABLE 3  
MANOVA of Media Coverage of BiRacial Congressional Elections  
Controlling for Election Cycle

Election Cycle	1990		1992	
Race of the Candidate	Black	White	Black	White
<b>Dependent Variable</b>				
Number of Paragraphs of Coverage				
F = 16.69***		1.12		6.53
F = .78	1.98 <sub>a</sub>	.33 <sub>b</sub>	6.19 <sub>c</sub>	6.87 <sub>c</sub>
Number of Mentions to Partisanship				
F = 9.20**		.58		1.49
F = .10	1.00 <sub>b</sub>	.17 <sub>c</sub>	2.01 <sub>a</sub>	.98 <sub>b</sub>
References to Candidate's Race by Media				
F = 2.79		.20		.69
F = 1.82	.39 <sub>c</sub>	.00 <sub>b</sub>	1.28 <sub>a</sub>	.09 <sub>b</sub>
References to Voters' Race by Media				
F = 2.20		.13		.99
F = .64	.26 <sub>b</sub>	.00 <sub>c</sub>	1.58 <sub>a</sub>	.39 <sub>b</sub>
Number of cases		35		185
	23	12	134	51

*Note:* Means with different subscripts are statistically significant at or above the .05 level. Boldfaced letters are not statistically different from nonboldfaced letters. Line 1 presents main effects for election cycle; line 2 presents interaction effects for election cycle by candidate's race.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

hypothesis 6: the impact of external political events, such as race-based redistricting, on subsequent media coverage of biracial elections. While clearly additional factors may have contributed to this variance (e.g., presidential election versus midterm election), these results suggest that as a consequence of the 1990 redistricting and the creation of new majority-black districts, the salience of race in the 1992 congressional elections was elevated, resulting in patterns of coverage for biracial elections that further highlighted the race of African-American candidates.

Specifically, overall coverage of biracial elections was much greater in 1992 as than in 1990 (though the increase was comparable across candidate race), and reporting in 1992 was substantively more partisan for all candidates. However, the party affiliation of African-Americans was highlighted twice as often as the partisanship of their white counterparts. More importantly, and in direct support of hypothesis 6, media references to candidate race and voter race increased from 1990 to 1992. Both African-American candidates ( $M = .39$  versus  $M = 1.28$ ) and district voters were more likely ( $M = .26$  versus  $M = 1.58$ ) to be described in terms of their race in 1992 as compared to 1990. No statistically significant interelection differences exist for the coverage of white candidates.

Other substantive differences in coverage between African-American and white congressional candidates are as follows. During the 1992 election cycle, media references to both candidate race and voter race were much greater for blacks than for whites. Likewise, partisanship was stressed more often for black candidates than for white candidates. Similar patterns, though with lesser magnitudes, hold for the 1990 elections as well.

Table 4 presents the results for hypothesis 7: the impact of reporters' race on coverage of biracial elections. Surprisingly, and inconsistent with our theoretical expectations, these results suggest that overall race of reporter does not influence the previously reported racial patterns. That is, black and white reporters did not vary to a statistically significant level in their usage of references to either the racial composition of the voting districts or the race of political contenders. If anything, substantively, African-American reporters were marginally more likely to make such references about black candidates, as well as their constituencies.

Where the coverage did differ by race of reporter was its emphases on partisanship and the amount of coverage. Black reporters were generally more likely to cue the partisan identification of the candidates they covered, as compared to white reporters ( $M = 2.79$  versus  $M = 1.37$ ;  $F = 13.50$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), and black

TABLE 4  
MANOVA of Media Coverage of BiRacial Congressional Elections  
Controlling for Race of Reporter

Race of the Reporter	Black		White	
Race of the Candidate	Black	White	Black	White
Dependent Variable				
Number of Paragraphs of Coverage				
$F = 3.60^*$		9.1		8.5
$F = 1.48$	12.0 <sub>a</sub>	9.1 <sub>b</sub>	6.2 <sub>b</sub>	7.9 <sub>b</sub>
Number of Mentions to Partisanship				
$F = 13.50^{***}$		2.79		1.37
$F = 4.81^*$	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	1.58 <sub>b</sub>	1.74 <sub>b</sub>	1.00 <sub>b</sub>
References to Candidate's Race by Media				
$F = .24$		.72		.53
$F = .33$	1.44 <sub>a</sub>	.00 <sub>b</sub>	1.03 <sub>a</sub>	.03 <sub>b</sub>
References to Voters' Race by Media				
$F = .06$		1.20		.97
$F = .19$	2.11 <sub>a</sub>	.29 <sub>b</sub>	1.50 <sub>a</sub>	.45 <sub>b</sub>
Number of cases		108		25
	80	28	18	7

Note: Means with different subscripts are statistically significant at or above the .05 level. Boldfaced letters are not statistically different from nonboldfaced letters. Line 1 presents main effects for reporter race; line 2 presents the interaction effects for reporter race by candidate's race.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$



reporters were more likely to emphasize partisanship for black candidates ( $M = 4.00$ ) over white candidates ( $M = 1.58$ ;  $F = 4.81$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Also, African-American reporters wrote more copy about biracial elections, although this difference is likely a function of editorial control as well reporter perceptions. Compared to white reporters, the bulk of this copy focused on black contenders ( $M = 12.0$  versus  $M = 6.2$ ), though white reporters wrote more about candidates of their race as well. See Table 4 for all exact means.

Finally, the data speak to the degree to which racialized reporting is consistent or inconsistent across newspapers, reporters, and candidates (hypothesis 8.) Compatible with our "street-level" reporting assumptions, there are strong differences within and between newspapers, candidates, and reporters (though these findings are not presented here). Specifically, only 33% of the newspapers sampled were consistent in their use of race (i.e., 16.5% always highlighted the race of black candidates and 16.5% never did). The majority of newspapers were erratic in how they dealt with the race of African-American House contenders. There were no discernible regional or state differences in these coverage patterns.

Second, individual candidates were covered in an inconsistent manner: 8 out of 10 African-American politicians were sometimes covered as black politicians and sometimes simply as politicians. Thus, only 20% of all African-American candidates included in this sample consistently avoided verbal racial references. Third, slightly more than half of all reporters did not stress the race of black politicians, though 46% of reporters did. Of the journalists who mentioned the race of black congressional candidates in their coverage, one-third were inconsistent in their decision whether or not to allude to the candidate's race; the remaining two-thirds (32% of the total number of reporters included in the sample;  $n = 23$ ) always highlighted the race of African-American House candidates.

How do these results compare with the reporting trends for white candidates? When seeking office against other white candidates, white politicians running for Congress were never directly defined by their race in the text of an article, though 10% of these articles did include a candidate photo. Likewise, in biracial contests, the highlighting of white politicians' race by reporters was virtually nonexistent. Only one white candidate who ran against an African-American politician was referred to by his race. Photos of white candidates were included in 23% of articles about biracial contests, as compared to the inclusion of photos in 44% of articles about black candidates (difference of means test is significant beyond the .01 level).<sup>10</sup>

### Discussion and Conclusions

In sum, the above evidence provides strong support for our racial dualism hypotheses—that is, that media coverage of African-American candidates

<sup>10</sup> This difference in the inclusion of photographs suggests editorial, as opposed to reporter, decision making regarding the importance of race.

suppresses the use of race among candidates and their surrogates while, simultaneously, highlighting intercandidate racial differences. Further, our results suggest that while black politicians are willing to refer to themselves racially when competing against other blacks, they refrain from doing so when competing against white opponents. Moreover, media coverage consistently highlights the race of black candidates and their constituents in both same-race and biracial contests. This effect is further accented in biracial contests that are competitive and that can be linked to exogenous racial shocks within the greater political environment. With respect to the influence of reporter race, our results suggest that while African-American reporters are more likely to emphasize the partisan identification of black candidates, they are statistically neither more nor less likely than their white counterparts to include racial references to black candidates or voters in their coverage.

In addition, our results suggest an inconsistent use of race in coverage of biracial elections. This gap is accentuated by editorial decisions regarding the erratic use of photos. We speculate that this inconsistency in editorial policy allows journalists independently to determine the newsworthiness of candidate race in these elections.

Such "street-level" reporting may occur for a variety of reasons. For instance, journalists could highlight race based on the belief that it provides voters with a relevant vote cue (i.e., the inclusion of race in same-race elections is comparable to the highlighting of partisanship in a primary election). However, if this is the motivation for racialized media coverage, then similar patterns should be absent when blacks run for office against other blacks. It was not. If race is an institutionalized part of news definitions, then the race of all candidates should either always be underscored or never mentioned. Our results clearly indicate this was not the case.

Alternatively and more in line with our results, the underscoring of race likely reflects society's interest in racial differences, particularly when those differences counter the norm (see note 1). If this is the case, the media should use race whenever African-Americans seek office but not when whites do so. There is evidence to support just that. Additionally, the use of race could stem from individual reporters' and editors' personal value structures, beliefs, or experiences. Such a notion would imply inconsistencies in the use of race. Our data uphold such an assumption.

Although our data only suggest what motivates these differences, our results indicate that the patterns of media coverage were due to a combination of individual reporters' and editors' perceptions regarding the electoral importance of race that were fostered by nonconsensual media norms and society's preoccupation with race.

How might the highlighting of candidate race affect voters' judgments about African-American candidates? If, as McDermott (1997) suggests, race is a viable cue in low-information elections (particularly when it is coupled with partisan

identification), then less informed citizens' vote choices should be partially or fully based on racial stereotypes. At the very least, the underscoring of candidate race, either visually or in print, provides a powerful vote cue for racially prejudiced voters and those prone to stereotypical judgments (Devine 1989; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997; Terkildsen 1993). Further, given our results suggesting that black candidates are only willing to identify themselves racially when competing against other blacks, it appears that African-American politicians attempt to avoid the transmission of any racial cues that may adversely affect their candidacies when running in biracial contests. While a comprehensive test of this point is beyond our data, it appears that media coverage of black candidates in biracial elections is at cross-purposes with the candidates likely strategies!<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, one could argue that this type of reporting may even force race-neutral readers to process information along racial lines by persistently cuing the group stereotype. That is, the cumulative reinforcement of race in campaign coverage may likely insure that even in high-information contests race remains a salient vote factor. Therefore, even if candidates chose to run a dual campaign (i.e., make separate appeals to voters of different racial groups as a means to maximize votes), mainstream press coverage that consistently primes race would negate the value of more moderate deracialized appeals. Thus, to paraphrase Tom Bradley, "Politicians who are black once again become black politicians" thanks to media outlets, who, for whatever reason, determine that candidate race is part of "all the news that's fit to print."

While our effort is notable in that it provides the first systematic evidence regarding the differences in coverage given to black and white candidates, clearly more research, particularly assessing the impact that racialized coverage has on candidate evaluations, is needed. Only then will we be able to comprehensively understand the obstacles hindering the ability of blacks to win elective office.

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the strategies and tactics used by black candidates, see Metz and Tate 1995.

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