

Racial Framing in Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election

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In the spring of 2008 it became clear that Barack Obama would be the first African-American to receive the nomination of a major political party. For the first time ever, an African-American holding the nation's highest office became a real possibility. How did the media deal with this historic candidacy? What role, if any, did racial themes play in media coverage of the 2008 presidential election? In order to answer this question, this paper presents the results of a systematic content analysis of *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today* campaign coverage during the fall campaign. We examined substantive campaign coverage, coding for a number of potential racial references or frames. We find, not surprisingly, that racial references were present in the general election coverage. Most often, we found references to Obama's own race or the race of groups within the electorate. References to racism or the potential for racial animosity to continue to play a role in the campaign were also present, though less common. Although we cannot test the effects of this coverage, we suggest that references to race which occur throughout the fall campaign have the potential to prime racial considerations. This paper represents the first part of a larger project in which we also examine print coverage in four battleground states as well as broadcast coverage on nightly network news.

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The 2008 presidential election marked an important milestone in the history of American race relations. Ultimately, as we all know, Obama won the campaign and race did not matter in the ways many speculated it would (Gelman and Sides, 2009). Obama generally shifted the electoral map across the board toward the Democrats, helped by low approval of and fatigue with the Bush administration and a poor economy. Obama did better than John Kerry among white voters (43% compared with 41% of the white vote).¹ While his improvement among white voters may have underperformed the general democratic swing in 2008 there is little evidence of a backlash against Obama (Ansolabehere and Stewart, 2009). This is not to say race did not matter. Rather, as Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart (2009) show, Obama won in part because he turned out significant numbers of new black and Hispanic voters in addition to increasing support among these groups. Obama increased the percentage of black voters voting democratic from 88% in 2004 to 95% in 2008 and the percentage of Hispanic voters voting democratic from 56% to 67%.² In the end, race may have helped Obama as much or more than it might have hurt him. This may be, in part, because the Obama campaign worked hard to run a deracialized campaign (Ambinder, 2009) and the financial crises of the fall aided that by keeping the economy as the central issue.

Yet much of this is what we know in retrospect. During both the primary and general elections there was considerable debate and speculation about the role that race might play. This paper draws on prior work demonstrating that media attention can prime racial considerations as well as prior research on black candidates to argue that media coverage may matter. If media coverage has the potential to prime racial considerations and play a role in vote choice, it is important to understand the culture of that coverage during the fall campaign season. We undertake a systematic analysis of national mainstream newspaper coverage during the 2008 general election campaign period. This analysis is designed to answer the following questions: Are racial references that might prime race present in mainstream newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential election? What is the nature of those references?

¹ <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/exit-polls.html>

² <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/exit-polls.html>. See also, Dawson, 2009.

White Racial Attitudes

A background assumption of the literature we discuss in this paper is that many white Americans continue to harbor negative racial predispositions (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 2001; Hajnal, 2007). Despite a sea change in views on the principle of racial equality (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo and Krysan, 1997) and the decline of old fashioned biological racism, Americans continue to harbor negative stereotypes about and prejudice toward blacks³. On average, whites continue to see whites as a group as possessing more positive characteristics than blacks as a group on trait based assessments. There is also an automatic preference for white over black among most whites in the Implicit Attitude Test. These continuing negative stereotypes may play a role when white voters are evaluating black political candidates. Stereotypes and negative predispositions may lessen white support for black candidates, particularly in the absence of alternative information (Hajnal, 2007). This is why racial appeals have the potential to be successful in undermining support among whites and why black candidates have an incentive to run deracialized campaigns in order to gain white votes

Racial Appeals and White Vote Choice

One line of research on race and elections focuses on the role that racial appeals play in election campaigns. Early in the 20th century, racial appeals were quite explicit and quite effective (Mendelberg, 2001). However, with increasing acceptance of the norm of racial equality, the nature of these appeals changed (Mendelberg, 2001). It was not that racial appeals disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s, rather they took a different form. Kinder and Sanders (1996) argue that alignment of the parties around race (the racial coalitions supporting the parties since 1964) along with this evolving norm of racial equality provide different incentives to Democrats and Republicans. The temptation for Democrats, they argue, was “benign neglect” in order to maintain black support while not alienating racially conservative whites. Republicans on the other hand had an incentive to use “racial code words”, to play on white racial conservatives attitudes without appearing racist (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Mendelberg (2001) builds on this to show that only *implicit* racial

³ These views take a new, more subtle form variously called racial resentment or symbolic racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996, Sears and Henry, 2005).

appeals work, and that the effectiveness of an implicit appeal can be undermined by making it explicit. More specifically, she argues that many whites continue to harbor negative racial predispositions while simultaneously adopting the norm of racial equality. She draws on this observation, together with the theory of priming⁴, to suggest when racial considerations will come to the fore in vote decisions (when negative racial predispositions alone are primed) and when the effect of racial considerations can be diminished (when the norm of racial equality is primed).⁵

The 1988 campaign forms a key case study in this research. In 1988, the Bush campaign's use of the Willie Horton story functioned as an implicit racial appeal – it primed racial consideration while seeming to be about crime not race. Thus, the appeal failed to engage the norm of racial equality (Mendelberg, 2001, pp.). More importantly for our purposes is the key role of the media. As a number of authors suggest the news media assisted the Bush campaign in their play of the race card against Dukakis (Jamieson 1992, Mendelberg, 2001, Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Using survey data from the 1988 National Election Study, Mendelberg (2001) demonstrates messages about Horton primed racial predispositions making them a more important component of opinion. This is particularly true in the period when Horton received greater media attention. However, once Jesse Jackson called it a racial appeal, it no longer was effective. It is important to remember, that in Mendelberg's analysis the media did not agree that Horton functioned as a racial appeal after Jackson's accusation, they merely repeated the accusation and raised the possibility. This was enough to prime the norm of racial equality and diminish the effect of negative racial predispositions. In short, media coverage was a key variable in understanding the role that racial predisposition can play in a campaign.

Electing Blacks to Public Office

Prior research on the election of blacks to public office also stresses the role that race plays in voting decisions. The implicit or explicit assumption is that white racial attitudes can prove to be a barrier to election for those black officials who are not running in majority minority districts and must depend on some

⁴ A communication can prime a particular consideration such as negative racial predispositions, making that consideration accessible in the mind and thus more likely to be used in subsequent evaluations and decisions. See Iyengar and Kinder, 1987.

⁵ A long line of research has demonstrated that racial framing, which primes racial considerations, can diminish support among whites for both policies and candidates. (See e.g., Gilens, 1996; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1998; Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, 1999)

white votes. Thus, this research often focuses on the role that race plays or the conditions under which race will matter less (e.g. Hajnal, 2007, Howell, 2007, Reeves, 1997).⁶

One early argument has been that black candidates need to use a “deracialized” voting strategy in order to gain expanded support outside the black community (McCormick and Jones, 1993; Perry, 1996). Similarly, Pettigrew (1976) makes this argument in the context of black mayoral campaigns in the 1970s. He argued that blacks and whites tend to agree on the problems facing cities and that black candidates should “appeal for both black and white voters with a common platform” (24). McCormick and Jones (1993) define a deracialized approach more specifically, arguing that black candidates can diffuse the polarizing effects of race and increase support among whites by avoiding race specific issues and focusing on issues that are perceived as racially transcendent, avoiding direct appeals to the black community, and projecting a non-threatening image. In Mendelberg’s terms, the point is to prime considerations other than race and diminish attention to race.. Of course, a candidate can run a campaign featuring inclusive messages only to see that undermined by their opponent or the media (2001).

Reeves’ (1997) experimental work would seem to provide some support for the claim that a deracialized campaign might be an important factor in white voter evaluations. Reeves provided whites in the Detroit metropolitan area with a news article describing a non-partisan mayoral race and featuring two hypothetical candidates. Reeves experimentally varied both the race of the more liberal candidate and whether the major issue in the campaign was deracialized (the environment) or racialized (affirmative action). When the campaign issue is the environment the more liberal candidate is preferred irrespective of whether he is describe as black or white. When the issue is affirmative action, the liberal candidate is not hurt when he is described as white, whereas when he is described as black, respondents are more likely to say they don’t know who they would support.

⁶ Of course it is not a given that white citizens will vote on race rather than something else. In particular, it is important to remember that racial polarized voting in and of itself is not evidence that race was the determining factor. For example, ideology and partisan identification are strong factors in voting choice and may reinforce racially polarized voting because black candidates tend to be democrats. However, Kaufmann (2004) notes party identification may be less of a factor in big cities where the Democratic Party dominates and republican candidates are extremely moderate.

Hajnal's (2007) work on black political leadership also provides support for the claim that deracialized campaigns help black candidates. Hajnal (2007) examines how experience with black elected officials influences the attitudes and political choices of whites. He argues that, most whites have little experience with black leadership and thus rely on racial stereotypes in assessing black candidates in their first election campaign or black challenger candidates. Once elected, however, black candidates produce changed perceptions of black leadership in the white community and black challengers tend to receive more of the white vote in subsequent elections. Consistent with this learning effect, media coverage may vary between first and second elections for black public officials. Hajnal (2007) provides anecdotal evidences of this. He observes a "dramatic shift in tone between the typical black challenger election and the typical black incumbent election" (2007, 67). Challenger elections were characterized in the media as much more racially polarized than incumbent elections⁷.

Media Portrayals of Black Candidates

There is some previous work on the characterization and portrayal of minority candidates in the mass media which provide a model for our research. McIlwain (2007) explains that the media tend to use preparedness and ability to lead as a proxy for race, questioning whether or not the minority candidate has the experience and knowledge to take office, particularly for white voters. When speaking about Obama's early candidacy during the 2008 primaries, McIlwain (2007) explains that "the most realistic barometer of Obama's success lies not in questions about voters willingness to vote for a Black candidate; it is whether voters, particularly Whites, can view Blacks generally and Obama specifically as a leader" (65). He argues that leadership is the most salient way in which whites will evaluate a black or any other minority candidate. Using content analysis, McIlwain (2007) did indeed show that the media has a penchant for discussing the leadership capabilities of minority candidates, when comparing them to their white opponents. This can then

⁷ This discrepancy also reminds us that racialized elections and election coverage is not a given.

reinforce the electorate's use of leadership as a proxy for race when discussing and deciding upon a candidate, whether presidential or otherwise.

Ditono (2009) also discusses racial coverage in terms of the 2008 primary election by discussing both Clinton and Obama as "outsiders." Obama affiliated himself as "Washington Outsider," but as Ditono (2009) explains he was also an outsider in terms of his ability to represent American citizens as a whole. Similar to McIlwain's (2007) assertion that experience and leadership are a proxy for race, Ditono also notes that outsiders, such as Obama and other minority candidates, were often framed in the media with questions of whether they had the ability to "represent his/her own social group (i.e. African Americans and women), and the (in)ability of each to represent the nation as a whole" (4). Such coverage reinforces the difficulty of running a deracialized campaign – media coverage of this sort may highlight racial associations in raising questions of who a minority candidate really represents.

While both Ditono (2009) and McIlwain (2007) discuss racial framing in terms of using other frames as a proxy for a discussion of the candidate's race in their analysis of Obama, earlier studies by both Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) as well as Reeves (1997) specifically focus on racial frames in media coverage of black candidates. Both studies use content analysis of newspapers to examine media framing and racial cues. Their work highlights the potential difficulty for minority candidates using a deracialized election strategy. Even though minority candidates themselves may downplay their race in bi-racial contests, the media may provide these racial cues or ?? on racial cues from the opponents campaign.⁸

Reeves (1997) examines the *New York Times* and *Seattle Times* coverage of biracial mayoral elections in 1989. Most articles do not focus on race primarily, but do call attention to the race of the candidates, even if only in passing, and to the racial or ethnic groups in the electorate. He finds that the tone of most racial references are neutral, however 17% of the campaign news stories in the *New York Times* and 26% *Seattle Times* were potentially or clearly negative (57-59).

Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) discovered that race is mentioned more often in biracial elections (i.e. elections in which one candidate is black and one candidate is white) as well as elections in which both

⁸ See also Hajnal (2007, 67).

candidates are minorities. A full quarter of news stories involving biracial contests mentioned the race of the candidates. They found little evidence that race is mentioned more often in competitive elections rather than non-competitive contests.⁹ Finally McIlwain and Caliendo (2006) also take note that when a racial frame is imposed, the media also focus on a greater number of substantive public policy issues, “perhaps to appear not to be focusing solely on race” (66).

In this paper, we follow this prior work in examining the nature of racial references during the 2008 general election.

Method

Much of the research on race and elections sees communication as a key element in highlighting or diminishing the degree to which race will prove to be a factor in the election. Before one can assess the potential effects of media in priming race during the 2008 general election, it is necessary to understand the degree to which racial themes or ideas that might prime race were present in media coverage of the campaign or of Barack Obama himself. We begin our investigation of racial themes in the 2008 general election coverage of Obama by looking at three national newspapers. We conducted a systematic content analysis of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today* looking for a variety of ways in which race might be highlighted or discussed – both subtle and explicit. These racial themes or frames as we will call them are described in detail below.

Our focus is on how mainstream news media might invoke race within their campaign coverage. Thus, we examined articles that dealt *substantively with the presidential election campaign or Barack Obama* to characterize the extent to which these papers brought “race” into the coverage. This is only one part of a larger project seeking to characterize media coverage of this campaign with respect to racial issues. Here we begin by looking at arguably the most important agenda-setting newspapers with respect to political coverage (*The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) as well as the only truly “national” newspaper (*USA Today*).

⁹ They find articles are somewhat more likely to impose a “racial frame” (where all the elements: race of candidate, race of voters and a photo are present), but not any more likely to mention candidate race or race of voters in competitive versus non-competitive races (Caliendo and McIlwain, 2006, 59)

Sample

Our study focused on media coverage during the general election, taking the conclusion of the Republican National Convention as the start of the general election campaign. Thus, our analysis focused on newspaper coverage between September 5 and November 4 2008. Our interest is in looking at racial themes and frames in *substantive campaign coverage and Obama coverage*.

In order to obtain our sample of presidential election coverage of the Obama campaign, we used a LEXIS-NEXIS keyword search for all articles that contained “Obama” and “race or election or campaign” at least three times¹⁰ within this date range. We randomly sampled half of these articles¹¹ and then determined if the article was substantively devoted to the presidential campaign or to Obama and thus eligible for inclusion in the study. Ultimately, many articles from the key word search were not eligible for inclusion in the study either because the article did not substantively deal with the campaign or Obama. For example, an article might include the key words but focus on local races or public policy issues discussed outside the campaign context (with at most passing reference to campaign) and thus not fit our criteria.¹² In addition, we excluded letters to the editor, ad summaries and ad watches (even if they were devoted to the presidential race) because we were interested in coverage by the paper rather than messages generated by readers or the

¹⁰ In the case of *USA Today* we also included the term “final edition” in the key word search to eliminate duplicate versions of articles. We tried a number of search terms to determine what might most clearly provide us with a preliminary set of articles that substantively dealt with the *presidential* election campaign and/or Barack Obama. In the end, this search provide the most useful as it did not exclude too many relevant articles but also ensured that these were campaign articles and that the references to Obama were not in passing.

¹¹ These initial selection criteria produced 642 *Washington Post* articles, 577 *New York Times* articles and 230 *USA Today* articles.

¹² In September, there were a number of articles on the economic bailout and policies surrounding that which included the key words but really were not discussing this in the context of the campaign. Such articles were excluded from our sample as we were interested in the degree to which *campaign coverage* dealt with race. For our purposes such news stories were not considered campaign coverage. We also excluded one set of stories that might be considered campaign stories: stories which focused solely on the vice presidential candidates including profile stories and vice presidential debate stories. A story about Biden or Palin on the campaign trail which dealt with the campaign would however be included in the sample. Also profile stories dealing with Obama and McCain are included in the sample.

campaigns. Our final sample contained 156 *Washington Post* articles¹³, 189 *New York Times* articles and 71 *USA Today* articles.¹⁴

As one might expect, there were more substantive campaign stories as the campaign progressed particularly in the more politically focused papers. This can be seen in Figure 1, which presents the number of campaign stories in the sample by week of the campaign. The final campaign weekend has the highest number of stories (although it is only five days as opposed to a full week) in both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. In *USA Today* there is a slight drop in coverage as the campaign draws to a close.

Figure 1 Here

Coding

Every article that was eligible for inclusion was coded for source, date of publication, page and section number; as well as whether the article was a news story or an editorial or commentary. We then coded for the presence or absence of a number of ways in which race may have been primed or mentioned in campaign coverage. We refer to these as racial referents or frames. The racial referents or frames we coded for were chosen on the basis of our reading of the 2008 campaign coverage and commentary suggesting ways in which race entered, or might have entered, into the debate this campaign season as well the as prior literature (e.g. Reeves) on media coverage of black candidates and race and elections more generally.

More specifically, we coded for the presence of nine potential ways in which race may have been primed or mentioned in the context of campaign coverage (see also Appendix 1 for additional detail on the coding) as well as the source of the referent.¹⁵ These racial references included:

¹³ Note in the case of the *Washington Post*, the total N of 156 includes articles from “The Trail” which presented a series of small reports on various campaigns. We have treated the separate campaign stories within this series as separate articles in our coding so the effective N for the *Washington Post* is 167.

¹⁴ Effectively, this represents a random half sample of the total *substantive campaign coverage*. We took a half sample of the initial articles produced by the key word search and determined if they were eligible for inclusion. We found that 62% of the *USA Today* articles, 65% of the *New York Times* articles and 49% of the *Washington Post* articles were substantively about the campaign or Obama.

¹⁵ A tenth potential reference, discussion of whether Obama was “black enough” which received some attention in the black press was not present in the mainstream press we analyzed. We included an open ended category to account for

1. *Mentions or references to Obama's own racial background.* This included explicit mentions of his race, his ancestry, mentions of his family member's race, or references to being the "first black" presidential nominee. As Reeves's has noted, race is often injected into coverage when black candidates run simply through the identification of the candidate as black or African-American.
2. *Mentions or references to race of supporters and opponents.* Reeve's also notes that race is injected into coverage through the identification of racial groups supporting or opposing a candidate, including both voters and elite level supporters. Again, this can be a relatively innocuous way to prime race in the campaign context, though it often implies some level of racial identification at play in voting decisions. We did not include in this category claims that supporters or opponents were driven by racism, those less innocuous mentions were coded separately.
3. *References to race within polling results.* This category was used only for when results of polls presented broken down by race. This was seen as distinct from the former category, though again it can be considered a more implicit referencing of race within campaign coverage.
4. *References to racism.* This was used to code any discussion that racism might or might not explain opposition to Obama, more general mentions of individual racism of voters, and speculation about the role that racism may or may not play in the election. When we coded an article as containing a reference to racism, we also accounted for whether the article argued that racism did not play a role or undercut or disavowed that claim. In other words, we treat an article that might suggest some say racism is playing a role but it is not as a reference to racism, but then code it as undercutting that claim.
5. *References to racial policies.* Race can also be injected through references to explicit (affirmative action, aid to blacks) and implicit racial policies (TANF, welfare, food stamps).
6. *References to the "Bradley effect".* We coded for all references to the Bradley effect.
7. *Reference to prominent "radical" black leaders.* Another way that race may be injected would be through mentioning of certain prominent black leaders often considered to be "radical" by whites.

any other racial references uncovered by coders to ensure that we were not missing a prominent or systematic theme with our coding scheme. We did not find many examples of racial referents outside our coding categories.

Specifically, we accounted for whether a story mentioned Reverend Jesse Jackson, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Reverend Al Sharpton or other “radical black leaders”.¹⁶

8. *References to Reverend Wright.* The most prominent way in which race was injected onto the primary campaign was certainly the controversy around Reverend Jeremiah Wright. To determine how often this arose in the general election campaign, we coded for references to Wright separately.
9. *Implicit Racial References.* We also coded for any additional reference that might be seen by the reader as appealing to race without specifically mentioning one of the racial categories above. We only coded here for *negative* implicit racial references, those that might be seen as hurting Obama with white voters through an appeal to race. Coders recorded the nature of the implicit reference.

We coded a racial referent or frame as present if it was present anywhere in the article. We did not account for the number of times a given type of referent could be present in a given article. In other words, we treat five references to Obama’s race within an article as equivalent to a single reference to Obama’s race. Thus, our coding may underestimate the presence of racial references and frames within news coverage.

As noted above, when a racial referent was present in an article we coded for the source of the referent. This allowed us to examine just who might be injecting race – was it the campaigns, people on the street quoted in the news, experts or elite sources outside the campaigns or the journalists themselves who brought forward the racial themes found in coverage? (See Appendix A for detail on source coding).

In addition, we coded for whether an article contained a racial referent in the context of horserace or strategy coverage, whether Obama was explicitly portrayed as liberal on racial policies, and whether the article mentioned Obama in connection with Muslims. Finally, we also coded for whether racism or the role of race in the campaign was the main focus or topic of the article.

¹⁶ Arguably, the reputation of Reverend Jackson is not as extreme as that of Minister Farrakhan or Reverend Sharpton. This category could be considered a subcategory of the “race of supporters/opponents” category. A mention of Reverend Sharpton might come in a story noting his support for Obama. Yet, we felt it was important to distinguish these individuals from say a comment that Congressman John Lewis is supporting Obama. The former would be coded into this category, the latter into category 2. Associating the campaign with black leaders considered more “radical” might frame Obama as more extreme and undermine the deracialized approach taken by the campaign so we wanted to be able to distinguish these references from more general racialized references to supporters.

Results

Our goal in this paper is to characterize the extent and nature of the racial references that appeared in these papers during the fall general presidential election campaign. We begin by providing an overview of racial references in the three national mainstream newspapers.

Of the 427 articles included in our combined national newspaper sample, 67% had no racial references.¹⁷ This means that one-third of the substantive campaign coverage in these three papers had at least one type of racial reference.¹⁸ Figure 2 shows the proportion of substantive campaign articles that contained any racial referent by week in the campaign. Between a fifth and a third of the articles contained some type of racial referent across the campaign, with more of the final weekend coverage containing some type of racial reference.¹⁹ So while race did not dominate campaign coverage, a substantial portion of the coverage did contain racial referents or frames. Moreover, front-page (A section, page 1) stories were somewhat more likely to contain at least one racial reference than non front-page stories in each of the three papers.²⁰ In short, race was primed relatively frequently in the mainstream national newspapers.

Figure 2 Here

Nature of Racial References

The more interesting question of course is how was race primed? What was the nature of these racial references? Table 1 provides a sense of the specific ways in which race was primed. As Reeves (1997) suggests the media injects race into these campaign through the use of racial language that references the race of the candidate or racial groups in the electorate. Just under one fifth of the articles include references to Obama's racial background (18% of *New York Times* articles, 19% of *Washington Post* Articles and 17% of *USA Today* articles). Such references often came in the context of referring to the historical nature of the race or in

¹⁷ *USA Today* had more articles with no racial references (79% compared with 65% for the other papers). It also had a greater percentage of articles with three or more types of racial references.

¹⁸ Just over half of these had a single type of racial referent. Some articles had more than one of the nine racial references coded for present, with the five being the largest number of types of references within a single article.

¹⁹ Nearly half of all articles in the final weekend had at least one reference.

²⁰ In the *New York Times*, 47% of front page and 33% of inside stories contain at least one racial reference. In the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* the proportions are 48% front page, 33% inside and 29% front page, 19% inside stories respectively.

biographical references. For example, articles would talk about voters' excitement at the prospect of "the nation's first black president", include biographical information about his black father and white mother, or describe him as a member of "Chicago's African-American community". Because we coded unambiguous mentions as references to his race (e.g. use of racial signifier words), this coding likely undercounts some more implicit mentions. For example, if a paper refers to Obama's "historic candidacy" without saying Obama is black, most readers know that what makes it historic is that he is the first black candidate for a major party.

Table 1 Here

Articles also make reference to specific racial or ethnic groups within the electorate (16% of *New York Times* articles, 24% of *Washington Post* articles and 13% of *USA Today* articles). Campaign stories contain references to "black crowds" at rallies, personal stories of individual supporters who are identified as black and horse race coverage that talks about expanded voter registration and levels of support in the black community. References suggesting white voters are more prone to supporting McCain are also coded here on the idea that again such coverage is a reminder that race is a key aspect of the voting decisions.

One might argue that these results suggest that race is primed most often by these mainstream newspapers in what seems like relatively innocuous ways. This was, after all, a historic election in which we did have the first viable black candidate for president. Campaign coverage always discusses the make-up of the candidates' electoral coalitions frequently using group based identifiers in making those characterizations. Reeves (1997) claims that in covering campaigns in this way, the media have the potential to act as "handmaidens" to strategies which would inject race in order to mobilized whites to discriminate against the black office holder (45). Whether this works mainly to the detriment of the black candidate or whether this can also mobilize individuals to vote for the black candidate on the basis of race is a question we cannot answer here. However we would argue that use of this mere "racial language" can contribute to making race an issue in the campaign.

When we turn to look at more explicit racial references – we find more limited evidence of racial priming. Overall these types of references emerge less often than those just discussed (See Table 1). We

found very few references to racial policy, or to black leaders like Sharpton or Jackson.²¹ Perhaps this reflects the nature of the Obama campaign which arguably worked to implement a de-racialized strategy. We also see very few references to the “Bradley Effect” (and all but one of these came during the last weekend of the campaign).

References to racism included the question of whether racism explains opposition to Obama, the racism of individual voters, or the role that racism plays in the election. While such references are less common than references to the candidates’ race or the race of their supports, they are not absent from coverage. Seven percent of *New York Times* campaign coverage, eight percent of *Washington Post* campaign coverage and 13 percent of the *USA Today* campaign coverage referenced racism or a potential role for racism and racial hostility in the election (Table 1).²² When looking at references to racism or the role that racial fears might have played, it is important to note two things: first, references are mainly *not* explicit racists saying straight out that they refuse to support a black man, rather racism references are more subtle. Secondly, in many cases these references were presented to undercut or disavow the claim that racism was playing a role (See Table 2).

These references to racism took varied forms. For example, historical references to instances where black candidates were not elected because of their race in the context of speculating about whether it would happen with Obama. Some articles explicitly suggest Obama lost support he would have if he were white. Others quoted or described individuals who arguably were not supporting Obama because he was black. The following is an example of an individual story suggesting race and racial attitudes explain the votes of some whites.

“On a weekend when racial issues flared once more in the presidential campaign, race was also on the minds of many white voters here, who said they were wary of a black president even if he might be better for them economically. ‘What you hear around here is, would you rather have a black

²¹ While they are at times mentioned as supporters, there were also a number of articles that mention comparisons to Jackson’s presidential campaigns.

²² While it appears that the prestige papers are less likely to include this type of reference than USA Today, once you include references to Reverend Wright, Bradley Effect and other black leaders, the proportions of articles containing more explicit racial references are more even across the three papers – 13% in USA Today; 12% in Washington Post; 15% in New York Times.

friend in the White House or a white enemy?... ‘Most guys I know are for McCain, and a lot if it’s because of race,’ Mr. Schuster continued. “Obama doesn’t have the right friends – That Reverend Wright and Bill Ayers the terrorist. The thing is, Obama may be better for jobs. But a lot of us don’t trust him.” (*New York Times*, 10/12/2008, A34)

Another article gave the example of a campaign worker who encountered a voter uncomfortable with Obama because of his race.

“I don’t want to sound like I’m prejudiced,” Ms. Mendive said. “I’ve never been around a lot of black people before, I just worry that they’re nice to your face but when you they get around their own people you just have to worry about what they’re going to do to you”. The campaign worker was reported as responding that Obama is half white and was raised by his white mother “so his views are more white than black really.” (*New York Times*, 10/15/2008, A21)

A final interesting example suggested that racism still mattered but is expressed differently because it is taboo to come out and say one does not support Obama because of his race:

“... [R]eligious prejudice is becoming a proxy for racial prejudice. In public at least, it’s not acceptable to express reservations about a candidate’s skin color, so discomfort about race is sublimated into concerns about whether Mr. Obama is sufficiently Christian.” (*New York Times*, 9/21/09).

Related to this coding category was coverage of Reverend Wright. Though Wright did not become a major issue in the general election campaign, we do see a steady trickle of mentions of Wright particularly in the *New York Times*. (Nine percent of all *New York Times* coverage, four percent of all *Washington Post* coverage and three percent of all *USA Today* coverage mentioned Wright). To the degree that news coverage brings Reverend Wright and the controversy surrounding him before voters, it might prime white racial fears or lead whites to associate Obama with a more explicit black advocacy or see Obama as too radical.

Racial References Over Time

Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the presence of four racial themes over the course of the fall campaign. We see the general pattern noted above of more attention to more subtle racial references

(e.g., Obama's race, race of those in coalitions) than to more explicit racial references. The sole exception to this is during the fifth week of the campaign when references to Reverend Wright exceeded other racial references.

Editorials versus News

We were interested in whether specific types of racial references would be more likely to appear in editorial content than news content. Overall, 19% of the articles we coded are editorials or columns while 81% are news. The relative proportion of editorial and commentary to news varies slightly across the three newspapers (87% of the *New York Times* articles, 73% of the *Washington Post* articles and 82% of the *USA Today* articles are news stories).

References to the race of supporters and opponents are found mainly in news content (Table 3).²³ References to Obama's own racial background are more common in news coverage in the overall sample, however this masks variation across the papers. The vast majority of references in the *Times* occur in news content, while both the *Post* and *USA Today* show references to his background more evenly divided between news and commentary. We found that all references to the Bradley effect were from opinion content, and the few times that race policy emerged it too emerged in opinion content. The former likely reflects the fact that in our time frame, there could only be speculation about what the polling numbers were revealing relative to the actual vote. In the latter case, we suspect this reflects both an attempt by the Obama campaign to avoid discussion of racial policy and a context (economic crisis) that would have made it difficult to turn racial policy into a major campaign issue.

Table 3 Here

More interesting to us was the question of whether references to racism would appear in news or commentary. A baseline expectation might be that more explicit references, questions about the role of racism in the campaign, would be more likely in columns and editorial content than in news content. Contrary to our expectation, such references are nearly as likely in news content as in opinion content. When we break this down further, looking within the different papers, we find that *Times* coverage is more likely to

²³ This would seem to be consistent with the strategic or game coverage that dominates election reporting. However, most of these references are not found in the context of specific horse-race or strategic coverage.

include such references in news articles (62%) while the *Post* and *USA Today* are more likely to include such references in opinion pieces (64% and 55% respectively). References to Jeremiah Wright are more likely to be found in news coverage (particularly in the case of the *New York Times*).

Sources for Racial References

In addition to coding for the presence of racial references, we also coded the source of each racial reference.²⁴ In general, the journalists (or commentators) themselves are the main source of the racial references we uncover. This is true for 80% of all references to Obama's racial background, 85% of references to the race of supporters and opponents in the electorate; 81% of references to Reverend Wright.²⁵ Citizens (voters) are the next most common source for references to both Obama's race and the Reverend Wright (14% and 12%). When looking at references to racism or the role that race and racism are playing in the campaign, we found journalists to still be the most frequent source of the reference (67%). Here however we also see a few references from citizens (11%), campaign officials and outside groups (11%), academic experts (6%) and polling results (6%). What the results suggest is that most references are from the writers. Only rarely are the campaigns and their surrogates and other elected officials the source of the racial references we uncover.

Association with Muslims

Despite considerable media attention to both his protestant pastor and the question of his faith during the primary campaign, in the midst of the general election 12 percent of respondents in a national poll believed that Barack Obama was a Muslim and 33 percent of respondents said they did not know or had "heard different things" about Obama's religious beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2009).²⁶ As with racial

²⁴ Because we only code for presence or absence of racial references at the article level, as noted earlier we may underestimate the total number of such references. This complicates the source coding a bit, because there could be multiple instances of the same type of racial reference which might have different sources. We coded only the first source.

²⁵ It is also true for those categories where we had relatively few references (mentions of the Bradley Effect, radical black leaders and racial policy).

²⁶Based on polling results from mid October 2008. (see: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1176/obama-muslim-opinion-not-changed>). This is consequential because prior work by the Pew Research Center in the summer of 2008 showed that particularly among democrats, those who said they had heard different things about Obama's religious beliefs or who believed him to be a Muslim were less likely to support Obama. (Pew Research Center, 2008, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/898/belief-that-obama-is-muslim-is-bipartisan-but-most-likely-to-sway-democrats>)

references, references connecting Obama to the Muslim faith had the potential prime negative associations. Thus, we coded for the nature of any references within an article that mentioned Obama in connection with Muslims. Specifically, we coded whether the article presented the idea that Obama was a Muslim as a legitimate or valid claim, whether the article explicitly discounted this claim, whether the article contained both the claim and a discounting, and whether the article mentioned Muslim voters. Within the national mainstream newspaper sample, only three percent of articles (13 articles) included references along these lines. And most importantly, in every case, the reference also included a discounting of the claim that Obama might be Muslim. In short, as with references to racial policy or other black leaders, the mainstream national papers did spend much time on this.

Is Racism or the Role of Race in the Campaign the Main Topic of Article?

Our sample of mainstream national newspaper coverage contained 27 articles (6 percent of the total) in which race or the role of race in the campaign was determined to be the main topic. There are a few articles a week, beginning with the third week, in which race is the primary topic which a slightly increase on election weekend.²⁷ Of these, 59 percent were news stories and 41 percent were opinion pieces. The *New York Times* was somewhat more likely to contain articles in which race was the main topic (8.5% in the times compared with 4.2% in the *Post* and 5.6% in *USA Today*. Of these, 59 percent were news stories and 41 percent were opinion pieces. We undertook a closer qualitative examination of these 27 articles which we discuss in this section.

A few common themes characterized most of these articles: the role that race and prejudice might play in determining white voters decisions; campaign tactics being used to appeal to those who might hesitate to support Obama on the basis of race; the excitement of black voters and their role in the election; and historical racial references.

It should be mentioned that in all three papers there were articles suggesting that the effects of race are more subtle and less visible than in the past: “Obama’s Subtle Hurdle” (*Washington Post*, 9/28/08), “Race

²⁷ Interestingly, this is the point at which their polling numbers have already started to diverge a bit.

Remains Campaign Issue but Not a Clear One” (New York Times, 10/13/08), “Racism without Racists” (New York Times, 10/5/08), “Despite Candidate’s Efforts, Race Lurks Beneath Surface (USA Today, 10/21, 08). These articles seemed to want to remind readers that race did still matter even if it did not appear on the surface as the main theme.

Racism is also discussed in the context of the electorate in both editorials and news. We found both editorials and articles implying that Obama faces white racism and that continuing racial animosity could influence the vote choices of whites as well as the election. The *New York Times* contained both articles and editorials critiquing campaign tactics that sought to appeal on the basis of race. For example, one *New York Times* editorial (October, 6 2008, Editorial Desk, page 28) discusses hate-mongering among independent political action groups that place fliers “deriding black people,” accusing Obama of being a Muslim, and linking him with disfavored black leaders in mostly white neighborhoods in states such as New Jersey and Michigan.

All three papers contained articles that more or less explicitly suggested white animosity could hurt Obama’s chances in certain communities where the communities were identified both in terms of class (working class) and region (rust belt and rural communities). These articles took the form of both opinion pieces in which the authors could speculate and insert their own views more explicitly and news pieces which tended to feature examples designed to convey this point. For example, the *Washington Post* ran a long article exploring the reactions of voters in overwhelmingly white Montana (October 30, 2008) and the day before the election the *Times* ran a piece on McCain efforts to woo Clinton supporters in Philadelphia (November 3, 2008).²⁸ Other articles were not centered on specific communities but nonetheless presented examples of a lack of enthusiasm or fear on the part of white voters when discussing the possibility of a black president. For example, some argued that racism operates at a more subconscious level but still has power to influence

²⁸ Hesitancy on the part of whites in Pennsylvania to support Obama was used as a speculative example in a number of articles. It seemed to have become “common campaign wisdom” which reporters would draw on in constructing their stories.

vote decisions, others suggest that some of the reasons given for not supporting Obama simply mask racial concerns.²⁹

One *New York Times* article from the day before the election does note that Obama's level of support among whites is higher than Bill Clinton's attributed in part to changing racial attitudes but also to the economic crisis and running a de-racialized campaign ("Level of White Support for Obama a Surprise", November 3, 2008). The article suggests that his success has much more to do with the type of campaign Obama ran and the economic downturn keeping the economy as the central issue than to the fact that racism is no longer a problem in America. Other articles also suggested that voters were deciding to set aside uncertainty about a black president (implying their uncertainty stems at least in part from racial attitudes) due to the failing economy.

A few articles mention the Bradley Effect, with a couple arguing that it is not an issue in this campaign and that it never really was. Others took a different historical approach. For example, one *New York Times* article discussed the 1988 campaign between Bush and Dukakis in which the Bush campaign aired advertisements linking Dukakis to convicted criminal Willie Horton.

The other theme of articles where race was the main topic was a focus on the black community and the black electorate. This came mainly in news articles talking about the engagement, excitement and unease of black voters and the potential effects of higher black turnout.

Discussion

Our analysis of national mainstream newspaper coverage of the 2008 general election suggests that while race did not dominate it certainly was a theme. We find some type of racial reference in approximately one-third of the substantive campaign articles. Just as Reeves (1997) found in his analysis, the news media injected race into campaign coverage. In the 2008 general election, most of these references were relatively subtle and innocuous – references to Obama's race and to the race of groups within the electorate. Despite

²⁹ Many of these articles treat campaign appeals to race or racism as a source of concern about Obama as illegitimate.

the Obama campaign's attempt to run a deracialized campaign, the historic nature of the election meant that references to Obama's racial heritage may have been inevitable.

There were less subtle references to race in the campaign coverage as well. And these references appear throughout the fall. During the primary, attention to the controversial Reverend Wright seemed to be the issue most likely to undermine the Obama campaign's deracialized approach. We found references to Reverend Wright in our general election analysis, though this story did not assume the same prominence it took in the spring. We did not find many references to racial policy or to black leaders, things that might lead to the conclusion that Obama would mainly serve the black community. A small number of articles did feature a reference to racism or the role of racism in the campaign. Moreover, race and the role of race in the campaign was the *main topic* in six percent of national mainstream papers. While we suspect this is a higher proportion than would be found in past presidential campaigns, it is perhaps a low number for the first ever major party black presidential nominee.³⁰

Was this level of racial coverage a good thing? Is the nature of this racial coverage a good thing or a bad thing for Obama? Our study does not speak to the effects of this coverage, though we will offer some preliminary thoughts. Our findings are consistent with those of Reeves (1997) and Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) who suggest that even when the black candidate downplays race in campaign communication the media will attend to it. To degree these papers, particularly *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, perform an agenda setting role in political coverage it is likely this attention to race appears beyond the three newspapers analyzed here.³¹ On the other hand, it is tempting to conclude that the fact that race was not a dominant theme in coverage is a good thing if a deracialized approach is key for black candidates seeking white votes. There was certainly speculation about racial polarization, and attention to both the potential for white voters' racial fears to hurt Obama and black voters racial identity to help Obama but such questions did not dominate the coverage.

³⁰ It would be interesting to compare this with black mayoral campaign coverage to determine if the Obama coverage looks more like the coverage received by black mayors in their reelection campaigns than their first runs for office (Hajnal, 2007, 67).

³¹ We are collecting data to explore the nature of racial references in coverage in four key battleground states.

It is hard to know the potential effect of these references and more current work need to be done on this. Racial references were certainly frequent enough that they may have primed racial considerations. But even if we assume that racial considerations were available to voters those considerations may have negative or positive influences – they may have helped or hurt Obama. The fact that many of the references were subtle may be a good thing when you combine it with the fact that racial issues did not become a main theme of the campaign. Reeves (1997) found little effect from the mere mention of a candidates' race. In Reeves experiment, mentioning that a candidate would be the first black mayor when racial issues were not the focus of the campaign had little effect on support.³² (But see Davis and Wilson, 2009, for evidence that subtle racial framing can alter support.) Moreover, the less subtle references often dealt with the question of whether racism was in fact a force in the campaign. In Mendelberg's terms, these stories made explicit the claim that certain appeals were in fact racial appeals. They also made explicit the claim that a lack of support may be driven by negative racial attitudes (attitudes that as a society we generally do not accept.) Such stories may not work as implicit appeals – they may not facilitate priming racial considerations without priming the norm of equality. Mendelberg (2001) suggests racial appeals are least effective when they are explicit.

Subsequent research should more directly test the *effect* of the different types of messages that emerged in our analysis. We might also compare our general election results on racial references to coverage of the 2008 democratic primary campaign. Was the number of racial references and the nature of racial references different in the primary campaign? Our intuition is that the answer here is yes. It will also be interesting to compare this to coverage of the 2012 reelection campaign. Perhaps by his reelection campaign, coverage will have come to the point that Obama will simply be “President Barak Obama”, not “Barak Obama the first black president.”

³² However, the total extent of the information subjects in Reeves' experiment had was a very brief news article about a non-partisan mayoral race in another state. This is also a low involvement context. The real world campaign of the first black president may work quite differently.

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Appendix A – Coding Appendix

All articles were assigned a unique identification number. Articles were then coded for source, date, page and section, type of story (new or editorial/commentary). We then coded for the presence or absence of the racial referents or frames detailed below. We coded as present if the racial referent was present anywhere in the article. We did *not* account for the number of times a given referent could be present. Thus, we treat five references to Obama's race within an article as equivalent to a single referent.

RACIAL REFERENTS

Obama's race.

This includes explicit mentions of his race, discussions of ancestry, mentions of his family members race (e.g. Michele growing up black on the South Side of Chicago, his white mother and African father). It also includes references that talk about him as "first black presidential nominee of major party".

Race Supporters/Opponents.

This includes mentions of race in connection with identification of supporters/opponents. This would include both races of individual voters who are supportive or not supportive as well as race of more elite level supporters. This would include references to Hispanics as supporters or opponents, not just black and white. Also include a discussion of race of supporters of McCain if being done as a comparison to reference Obama supporter's race. WHAT DOES NOT FIT HERE: 1) reports of polling results that separate by race that should be treated as separate category. 2) mentions that opponents or supporters driven by "racism" separate category.

Polling references race.

Race within polling results. This category was used ONLY for polling stories or when results of polls reported in a story. If the article was reporting the results of tracking polls or media polls and give the results by race was coded here. This could be considered a more implicit referencing of race within the campaign.

Racism.

Discussions that racism underlies or may underlie hesitancy to support Obama. More general speculation about the role racism may or may not play in the election. **For cases where coded reference to racism**, we also accounted for whether it was a case where the article argued that racism was not playing a role, undercut or disavow claim that racism play role.

References to racial policy.

This included references to explicit racial policies (policy seen as helping black like affirmative action, aid to blacks) and references to implicitly racialized policies (welfare, TANF, food stamps)

References to Reverend Wright.

Mentions of Jackson, Farrakhan, Sharpton or other "radical black" leaders.

Mentions or discussions of the "Bradley Effect"

References or discussion of question of whether Obama "black enough".

Implicit Racial Reference. (fill in the reference in V18b)

Reference that would be seen by the reader as appealing to race without specifically mentioning one of the racial categories above. These were only coded if they were NEGATIVE implicit racial references (and the nature of the reference was recorded).

Other Racial Reference.

If a coder felt there was a racial reference that does not fit one of the above categories it was recorded.

SOURCE OF REFERENT

In each case where a specific racial mention is present we also accounted for the source of that reference. If the racial reference can be attributed to more than one source, the FIRST source mentioned was coded. In assigning a source, we coded the source as journalist/reporter unless it was direct or indirect quote.

SOURCE CODES:

- [1] Obama campaign or surrogates for campaign (including campaign officials and staff, the candidate, prominent officials who identified explicitly as supporters of the campaign)
- [2] McCain campaign or surrogates for the campaign (including campaign officials and staff, the candidate, prominent officials who identified explicitly as supporters of the campaign)
- [3] Citizens or voter
- [4] democratic elected officials who not identified as supporters of a specific campaign
- [5] republican elected officials who not identified as supporters of a specific campaign
- [6] outside groups, not part of the candidate organization
- [7] academic, expert
- [8] journalist or reporter themselves
- [9] poll as source

In addition, we coded for the following:

Racial Mention in horserace/strategy coverage? In addition, we recorded whether a racial mention came in horserace/strategy coverage. Horserace or strategy coverage involved discussion of how race might influence the outcome of the campaign or discussions of campaign strategy.

Is Obama portrayed explicitly as liberal on racial policy?

Obama/Muslim

Because of the “rumors” that associated Obama with Muslims, we also coded for the nature of any references within an article that mention Obama in connection with Muslims. Here we coded whether the article presented as a legitimate or valid claim the idea that Obama is a Muslim, whether the article explicitly discounted this claim, whether the article contained both the claim and a discounting, and whether the article mentioned muslim voters.

Racism or role of race in campaign as main focus or topic of article?

Finally, we coded for whether racism or the role of race was the main topic of the article.

Figure 1. Number of Stories in Sample by Campaign Week

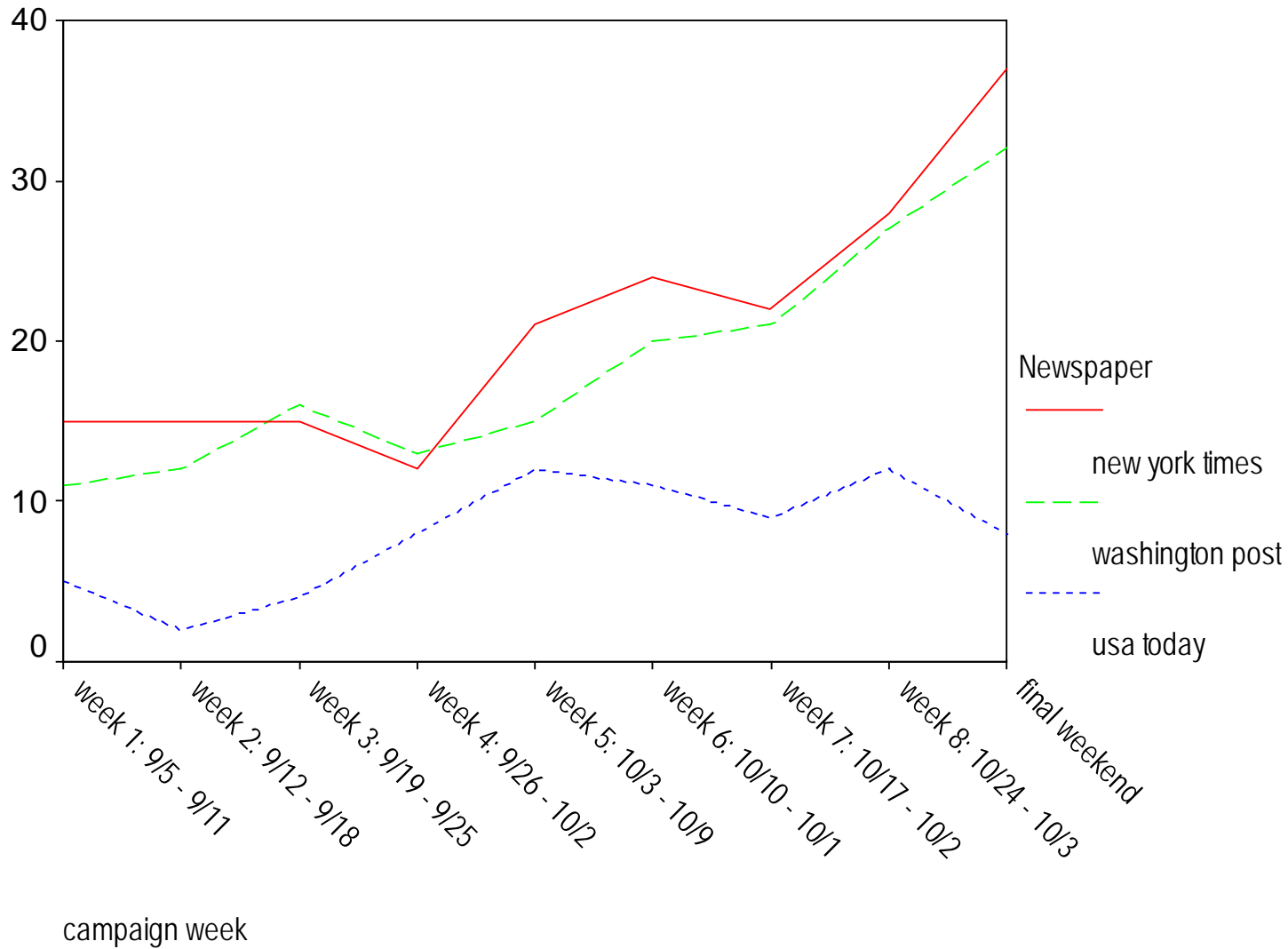


Figure 2. Presence of Racial References in Campaign Coverage Over Time

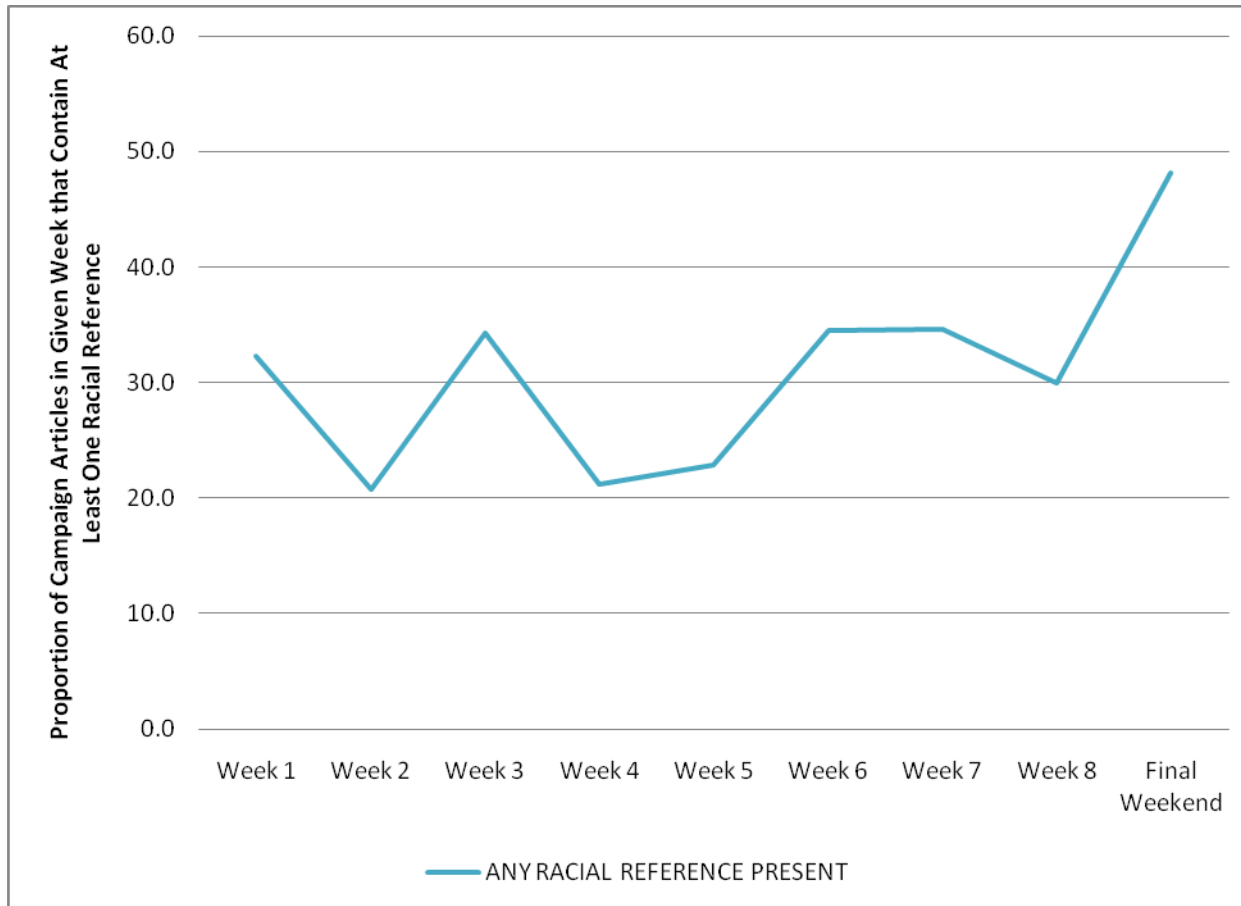


Figure 3. Presence of Specific Racial Themes by Week Over Campaign

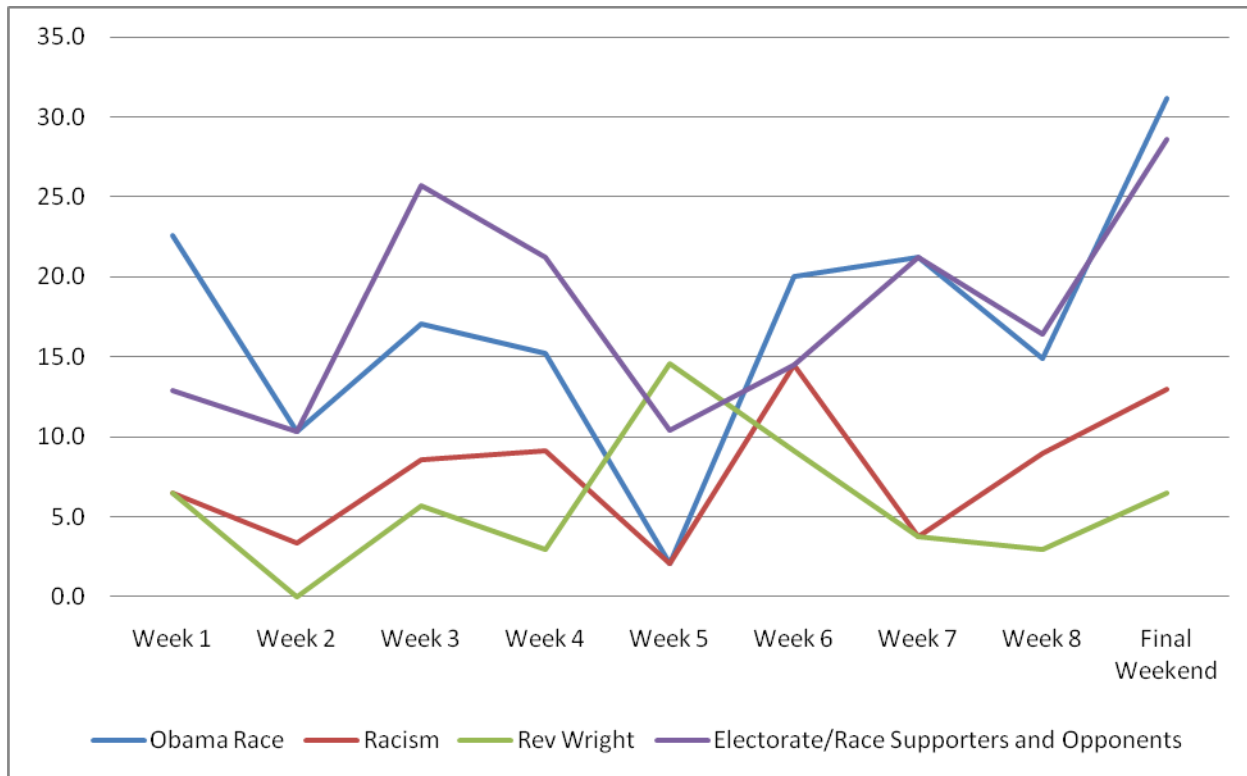


Table 1. Racial References in Mainstream National Newspaper Coverage of 2008 Presidential Election

	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>	<i>Combined National Newspaper Sample</i>
Reference to Obama's race	18.0%	19.2%	16.9%	18.3%
Reference to race supporters/opponents*	16.4	24.0	12.7	18.7
Reference to race within polling results**	1.1	1.8	7.0	2.3
Reference to racism	6.9	8.4	12.7	8.4
Reference to racial policy***	-	0.6	4.2	0.9
Reference to "Bradley Effect"	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.2
Reference to "radical" black leaders	0.5	2.4	1.4	1.4
Reference to Reverend Jeremiah Wright*	9.0	4.2	2.8	6.1
Implicit racial reference	0.5	1.8	-	0.9
Other racial reference	1.1	0.6	-	0.7
N	189	167	71	427

Note. Table entries represent the proportion of all articles in a given newspaper that contain a particular type of racial reference.

* Chi square <.10, ** Chi square <.05, Chi square <.01.

Source. The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today substantive general election campaign coverage, September 5th – November 4th 2008.

Table 2. References to Racism in Campaign Coverage of 2008 Presidential Election

	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>	<i>Combined National Newspaper Sample</i>
Article Undercuts or Disavows Claim that Racism Matters in this Campaign	30.8%	14.3%	11.1%	19.4%
Article Contains Example or Claim of Racism that is Not Undercut	69.2	85.7	88.9	80.6
N	13	14	9	36

Note. Table entries represent the proportion of all articles with a reference to racism that undercut or do not undercut that claim or example.

Source. The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today substantive general election campaign coverage content analysis, September 5th – November 4th 2008.

Table 3. Racial References by Content Type, National Mainstream Newspapers

	<i>News Articles</i>	<i>Editorials or Commentary</i>	<i>N</i>
Reference to Obama's race	67%	33%	78
Reference to race supporters/opponents	82%	17%	80
Reference to race within polling results	90%	10%	10
Reference to racism	47%	53%	36
Reference to racial policy	25%	75%	4
Reference to "Bradley Effect"	-	100%	5
Reference to "radical" black leaders	50%	50%	6
Reference to Reverend Jeremiah Wright	62%	38%	26

Source. The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today substantive general election campaign coverage, September 5th – November 4th 2008.