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Racial framing in the 2008 presidential election: a content analysis of geographically diverse newspapers and the framing of Barack Obama

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The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Racial Framing in the 2008 Presidential Election: A Content
Analysis of Geographically Diverse Newspapers and the Framing of
Barack Obama

by

Jeffrey D. Mason

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in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree
in Communication & Media Technologies

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RACIAL FRAMING IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A CONTENT
ANALYSIS OF GEOGRAPHICALLY DIVERSE NEWSPAPERS AND THE FRAMING OF
BARACK OBAMA

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Abstract

This study content analyzed three geographically diverse newspapers: *The Boston Globe*, *The Star Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to determine if there were geographic differences in the frequency that Barack Obama was referred to by his race and the frequency that the race of the voters was mentioned regarding then-candidate Obama. No differences were found in how Obama or the voters were referenced across the three newspapers.

Keywords: Obama, racial frames, content analysis, geographic diversity, election

Racial Framing in the 2008 Presidential Election: A Content
Analysis of Geographically Diverse Newspapers and the Framing of
Barack Obama

The 2008 Presidential election in the United States offered a unique setting in which to study the role of the media's framing of a minority candidate running for office. The 2008 presidential race was the first opportunity to study the media's reaction of having a minority candidate leading a major party's ticket. This rare opportunity for study is academically important since it provides an opportunity to assess the media's ability to frame a racially diverse election on a nationwide scale.

In the 2004 Congressional elections, Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) reported that the media's use of racial references was commonplace in biracial election contests and was more likely to occur than during a contest between White candidates only. While previous studies were focused on statewide campaigns, the present study examined the first bi-racial presidential election in the United States. This places the study in a broader context than previous studies as the media framing is no longer limited to a single district, city, or even state but instead the a diverse geographic makeup of the United States.

If previous studies were accurate Obama's race should be mentioned more often than McCain's. With that assumption in place, this study focused on the differences between geographically diverse newspapers to see if there were any disparities in how different parts of the country framed the Obama candidacy.

Taking a cross section of newspapers across geographically diverse sections of the United States this study explored what, if any, differences were present in the framing of Barack Obama in different parts of the country. Much like the research of Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) the ultimate goal of this study was to continue that of previous researchers who have overwhelmingly found that race plays a disproportionate role in media coverage of a biracial election. This study expanded on previous research by addressing the presidential election as waged across the country as a whole. It resulted in a unique study as to how a single bi-racial presidential election was covered through multiple sections of the country and reported the differences depending on the geographic circulation of the different newspapers.

The effects of such framing will not be studied since without a self-reported survey of voters, any suggestion as to

why voters did or did not vote for a candidate would be speculative. However the implications of such framing, if any exist, can be investigated in another study. As noted by Mendelberg (2001) and Hutchings (2002), there is evidence that White voter's racial resentments become factors in biracial contests. These effects will not be examined directly by this study, but the link between racially charged words and racial framing of the candidates can arguably inflame racial resentments and hence affect voting patterns.

The main focus of this study was in regard to whether or not there were differences in the framing of Barack Obama depending on what part of the country in which the newspaper article was written and published. This will be determined by how often Barack Obama was referred to by his race and how often voters, in conjunction with the candidate, were defined by their race according to the regional newspaper in which they were published.

Determination of whether geography was a factor in racial framing will add heuristic value to similar studies and encourage further studies to build upon the results of this study. By providing further empirical evidence to the body of previous research, this study will direct and guide future

research. Furthermore, by studying any differences in the framing across different parts of the country this study should reveal any overt racial sensitivity in different parts of The United States.

Research Questions

Variables culled from previous studies (Reeves, 1997; Terkildsen & Damore 1999; Caliendo & McIlwain, 2004) have been employed to produce the following research questions: (1) Mention of the candidate's race and (2) mention of the voter's race. The following variables are added to account for the geographic diversity aspects of the study: (3) geographic location of newspapers and (4) initiator of the racial discussion.

RQ1: With what frequency is the race of Barack Obama mentioned in a geographically diverse set of newspapers?

RQ1a: Are there any differences, dependent on the geographic location of the newspaper, with the frequency with which Barack Obama's race is mentioned?

RQ1b: If race is discussed with regard to Obama who is the initiator of the discussion?

RQ2: With what frequency does the race of voters get mentioned in newspaper articles discussing Barack Obama in a

geographically diverse set of newspapers?

RQ2a: Are there any differences, dependent on the geographic location of the newspaper, in the frequency with which the voter's race gets mentioned when discussing Barack Obama?

RQ2b: If race is discussed with regard to the voters, what is the race of the voter?

RQ2c: If race is discussed with regard to the voter, who is the initiator of the discussion?

Project Rationale

Social

Political elections are arguably one of the most important events in a democracy, and how the media cover those elections can be crucial to an election since they are the means by which information is delivered. This study examined how newspapers covered the 2008 Presidential election and to determine whether the biracial nature of the race skewed the coverage. Noting whether skewing occurred in several geographically diverse newspapers will lead to a better understanding of how the media operated in a racially diverse election. Armed with that understanding, audiences will be able to better guard against any skewed media coverage. By taking note of biased reporting, should it exist, readers and researchers could also effect

change in the coverage of elections involving minority candidates.

Scholarly

By expanding on the somewhat limited research done previously involving minority candidates and framing by the media, this study adds new and interesting results that will be available to produce a new standard in future, similar studies. By performing a content analysis of a cross-section of newspapers, this study is more complex than previous studies that more often than not investigated single-state elections. This, of course, was due to the lack of minority presidential contenders, but the scholarly implications are still important as it is with any new study that adds previously un-testable variables.

Personal

The impeachment of President Clinton was the political event of my teenage years as was the exciting 2000 Presidential election. I consumed a very large amount of news during that time as did the rest of the country and in doing so I began to wonder how the media operated. During the 2008 Democratic primary much was made of the nature of the race between an African American and a female candidate, and the media focused

on those superficial traits (with, perhaps, the help of the candidates themselves). I believed that the first biracial Presidential election was unique and too interesting a topic of media framing to pass up.

Review of Literature

There is a wide range of research concerning the media's ability to frame both politically and racially. For the sake of clarity the following review of literature will be broken down into the following categories: (1) News Media and framing, (2) Racial frames in the media, and (3) Framing and geographic diversity.

News Media and Framing

Studies of framing effects in the news media are wide and varied in their makeup and can be focused on both visual and verbal communication. Coleman and Banning (2006) addressed the visual framing of the 2000 presidential election. Fahmy, Kelly, and Kim (2007) conducted a visual analysis of hurricane Katrina coverage. Both studies found that the media acts as gatekeepers to information and by doing so they portray a reality that affects the audience's perception.

A similarly themed study of framing (Mastin, Choim, Barboza, & Post (2007) examined newspaper coverage of elder

abuse and how newspapers frame coverage of the abuse on the individual instead of the societal level which ignores some of the realities of the problem. The study finds that the media's role as gatekeepers of important information shaping perception of the facts to fit a common idea--even if it is falsely perceived.

These are important contributions to the body of research that affects this study directly by showing that the media can influence perceptions of an audience. If that perception is overly racialized could it affect the outcome of an election?

There are divergent opinions on the role of media and their gatekeeper role with some studies suggesting that newspapers act as a mirror that reflects the beliefs of the population. For instance, Bullock's (2007) study of domestic violence coverage in Utah newspapers explores a single year's worth of domestic violence coverage in a state whose Mormon culture is largely patriarchal. While the author does not directly study framing effects, she does find a relationship between the way news coverage of domestic violence in Utah newspapers heavily favors a patriarchal view of the issue and the majority population's beliefs. In other words, the newspapers in the study acted as a feedback loop with the population and in the process simply

reiterated the majority view back into the audience. Whether that framing comes from the media or the audience however is tougher to answer without a larger study with a direct survey.

Though these studies diverge in some areas they share a common thread that reveals the powerful influence that the media may have over their audiences through agenda setting and the framing of issues that comes with setting the agenda for debate. Reviewing these studies documents the influence that the media and audience have on each other when it comes to issues and events. Investigating the political frames of the 2008 presidential election contributes to that literature.

Racial Frames in the Media

Studies of racial framing in the media have been widely studied, and they more often than not have political implications. Conclusions to some recent studies found that in political races where at least one candidate is Black the news coverage surrounding the race will contain racial frames more so than if both politicians are White (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2006).

These racial frames have been shown to have an effect on the voter by linking minority candidates with so called racialized issues such as welfare, affirmative action, crime, and universal healthcare (Valentino, Traugott, & Hutchings,

2002). This has been further investigated by Valentino (1999) who found that local coverage of crime affects voters during an election. Valentino concludes that crime is not the only race-coded issue and that voters are also affected by issues such as welfare, affirmative action, and illegal immigration.

Other researchers have found a racial dualism in the media where the media limits the racial tone created by the candidates in favor of one that they create. Terkildsen and Damore (1999) hypothesized that the media acts as racial arbitrators and while they limit racial emphases by the candidates they simultaneously bring race to the forefront of campaigns by highlighting the candidate's race and the race of their constituents.

Though studies have shown that the race is a factor in newspaper's reporting of bi-racial political contests, it was also discovered that the role of race was tilted to one side with only minority candidates regularly being described by their race. One of the primary questions posed in this study is to perceive whether this racialized discussion of political candidates expands to the race for President and more specifically whether geographic diversity matters in their coverage.

Framing and Geographic Diversity

Comparative newspaper coverage across a spectrum of cultures has been an issue studied in relation to many different topics. Though the study proposed here examines the framing of the first African-American presidential candidate of a major party across different geographic cultures, the overall study of framing and geographic diversity is not limited to this scope. Like the study by Ghanem (2006), which examines comparative newspaper coverage of the war in Iraq by examining different newspaper in both western and middle-eastern countries, this kind of study can have wider international implications if one were to take that angle.

Ghanem (2006) found that ideology provides the framework for the different coverage and concludes that the findings lend credence to the belief that media reflect the culture in which they are produced.

Another study (Scott and McDonald, 2005), though taking a narrower approach and in a more domestic fashion, examined how different newspapers in Utah covered first amendment controversies and drew similar conclusions to that of Ghanem--arguing that newspapers reflect the cultures in which they are found. Both of these studies show the role of ideology or

culture in the coverage of an event. Ideology can be found worlds apart or even in a single state, but the same principles apply as they do in the study presented here.

This cultural reflection can be seen in the study *News, Race, and the Status Quo: The Case of Emmet Louis Till* (Spratt, Bullock, & Baldatsy, 2007), which examines, by looking at different newspapers, the coverage of a historic event. By doing so the study was able to find the different frames and narratives were used by different newspapers based, not only of geographic location, but also by race of those who ran the paper.

By examining the different frames of a singular event that are developed by culturally and geographically diverse newspapers, one is able to better understand the ideology of the places where those frames are developed. Further examination of the racial skew of the frames, if any exist, can lead to further investigations as to the relationship between the coverage of the news media and the community that they serve.

Method

Introduction

To answer the research questions posed, a content analysis

was performed of three geographically diverse newspapers representing North, South and Mid-western states. The newspapers were chosen based on geographic location, circulation numbers, and the presence of an online database in which to search.

By partially using the coding methods developed by Terkildsen and Damore (1999) a content analysis was performed on newspapers with the largest circulations in their respective geographic locations. A random sample of articles published between the nominating conventions and Election Day that mention then-candidate Obama were examined.

The decision to use newspapers instead of another medium such as local television was two-fold. First, use of databases to perform a content analysis on three months of articles is more realistically done through the printed media than through local television which would be overly difficult to obtain. Second, newspapers, according to Mondak (1995), are important sources to voters as a source for local information. Herrnson (1995), meanwhile, points to the fact that the print media are more likely to provide free coverage to campaigns. These assertions were instrumental in choosing to study newspaper coverage.

Sample Sources

Using the 2007 report by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (2007) the following newspapers were chosen based on three factors (1) circulation, (2) geographic diversity, and (3) ability for online database access. The newspapers selected that use this criteria were *The Boston Globe*¹, *The Star Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* which represent the North, Mid-West, and South respectively.

Articles with an Associated Press byline were not coded as they did not represent the regional interests this study proposed to gauge.

The articles themselves were collected from the LexisNexis database and coded separately by newspaper. The sample size was determined using a stratified random sampling to cover any disparities in the amount of coverage that each paper had of Obama.

Sample Size

Between the dates of August 29th and November 4th a LexisNexis search was completed using the keyword "Obama." The search produced 1889 articles that were broken down by newspaper:

¹The Boston Globe is actually has the fourth largest circulation behind USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and The New York Times. USA Today was disqualified because it is marketed as a national paper and so would skew the regional aspect of this study. The Wall Street Journal was similarly discounted because it primarily covers financial and business news and this study is more concerned with more general news coverage. The New York Times has a local edition which covers strictly the New York area but it is not searchable through LexisNexis.

- *The Boston Globe*: 758 = 40% of all combined articles
- *The Star Tribune*: 316=17% of all combined articles
- *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*: 815 =43% of all combined articles

Using a sample size with a 5% margin of error and a confidence Interval of 95%, 319 articles were examined. Owing to the differences in the number of articles available from each paper, the sample was further divided using a stratified random sampling. The number of articles from each paper that were analyzed was broken down as such:

- *The Boston Globe*: 128 articles
- *The Star Tribune*: 54 articles
- *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*: 137 articles

Coding

Before coding began, a graduate student was trained to code the articles selected in the sample size using the Content Code Book (See Appendix 1). The author and the second coder then coded 21 of the same articles spread across the three newspapers. A reliability analysis was performed for intra and inter-coder reliability. Inter-coder reliability for the three newspapers combined was .960. Intra-coder reliability for the two coders was .966 and .895 respectively.

All articles were coded for geographic location, if the race of candidate Obama was mentioned, if the race of the voters was mentioned, and who was the initiator of the racial conversation was. The articles were also coded by what newspaper they were published in and the length of the article measured by number of words. If the article discussed multiple races then the article was coded once for each race.

By using coding methods developed by Terkidsen and Damore (1999), the attributions of the candidate's race were measured by the number of times that candidate Obama was referred to by his race which could be Black, African-American, the first Black *something, or anything directly mentioning race.*

The race of the voters was measured by how many times the race of the voter was referred to.

These variables were further coded via a textual analysis of the article to reveal the source of the racial categorization. This was either the author of the media, the voter, the candidate, the opposing candidate, elected member of the Democratic Party, or an elected member of the Republican Party.

Results

The results of the investigation were fairly conclusive. While no statistically significant results were found between

any of the newspapers in any of the questions, there are still important decisions to be made about how this effects future studies of similar topics, how past studies fit into this research, and the reasons behind the significance of these results.

Racial Framing of Barack Obama

Within the three newspapers analyzed there were no clear differences in reference to Obama's race. While Obama's race was indeed mentioned with a modicum of frequency across the newspapers, an analysis of variance showed that there was no significant difference between the newspapers ($F = .71$, $df = 2$, $p = .49$).

Racial Framing of Voters

Much like that of Barack Obama, there were no significant differences as posed by both research questions regarding voters. Differences in the race of the voters mentioned within the articles were nonsignificant ($F = 1.95$, $df = 2$, $p = .14$). Differences between the races mentioned were also nonsignificant ($F = 1.95$, $df = 2$, $p = .48$).

Initiator of Racial Framing

There was no significant differences between who the

initiator of any racial framing of Obama or the voters between the three newspapers ($F = 1.80$, $df = 2$, $p = .17$).

Discussion

While statistically nonsignificant, the findings open up some interesting discussion points. The question of whether Barack Obama was framed as the Black candidate during the election was not overtly posed by this study, but through content analysis of the three geographically diverse newspapers it was found that there were more than a few instances of Obama's race being referenced. Was there a difference across the nation's papers in how Obama was referred to by race? The answer is a resounding no. By no means does this mean that Obama was not framed racially--only that he was referred to by his race similarly across the three newspapers. The same can be said about voters. Interestingly enough, in *Minnesota's Star Tribune* White voters were mentioned with more frequency than any other race, but the difference was not statistically significant. Of the 319 articles examined, Obama was referred to by race 34 times while all voters were referred to by their race 178 times.

The conventions that influence journalists and how they discuss race should also be noted. While the stylebooks for the

three newspapers examined could not be found, The Associated Press Stylebook 2006 (Goldstein, 2006) provided useful information on how newspapers cover race. When discussing African Americans, "the preferred term is *black*. Use *African-American* only in quotations or the names of organizations or if individuals describe themselves so" (p. 8). Goldstein also says that the term Black is the "preferred usage for those of the Negroid or black race... do not use colored as a synonym" (p. 30). There is no definition given for either *White* or *Caucasian*. This could be significant to the reason why minority candidates are referred to by their race more often than their White counterparts.

In discussing the results of this study one must also look at the actual results of the election. Barack Obama was elected President of the United States by one of the largest margins in recent history with electoral gains across all parts of the country. He was not linked successfully with the so called racialized issues such as welfare, affirmative action, crime, and universal healthcare which were studied by Valentino, Traugott, and Hutchings (2002).

Of the states where our three newspapers were published, Obama won Massachusetts and Minnesota handily while losing

Georgia by only five percentage points. In the 2004 Election, John Kerry lost Georgia by seventeen percentage points.

There were also unprecedented events in the months before the election that seemed to galvanize support behind Obama. Economic issues which are often seen as Democratic strengths seemingly superseded any racial concerns that may have existed.

Overall this study shows that there were no significant differences in how candidate Obama and voters were referred to by race across geographic lines. Though we presupposed, when following the results of previous studies, that candidate Obama would be referred to by race more often than McCain, the audiences of those newspapers studied did not respond negatively if one were to look at the voter outcome.

There could be many reasons for this, but ultimately the question that must be asked is what do these findings mean? Are we living in the media pronounced post-racial country where those of African-American ancestry are no longer treated unequally in the political arena? Did the economic events of late 2008 replace the usual issues that shape elections? Again, while these were not questions technically asked by this study it is but a few of the many questions raised by its results that can hopefully be answered by a continuation of the study.

Were there differences, in geographic location and in the way that Presidential candidate Barack Obama and the voter's were framed in the 2008 Presidential election? These were the overarching questions of this study, and they were answered by analyzing newspaper articles mentioning Barack Obama and comparing them by their geographic location. Between newspapers representing the East, Mid-West, and South the answer was no. There were no differences in how Obama or the voter's were framed.

Previous studies have shown how newspapers frame issues and candidates. It is in this framing that reality is shaped and viewed. Whether the media in their role of information gatekeepers have any effect on their audience or if they are the ones affected by the audience was beyond the scope of this study, but the effects of such framing can be inferred if only as anecdotal evidence.

Obama and the voters were referred to by their race, but in the end Obama was elected by an arguably large margin so did the media framing matter? Does it ever or were these just extraordinary times both economic and political that transcended racial frames? The study gathered information from geographically and ideologically different parts of the country

and in doing so searched for any overt differences in the cultural differences in how race was discussed. While it might be premature to interpret these results as evidence that the United States has made robust strides in racial harmony, the results do show that when it comes to newspapers there does not seem to be geographic disparities in the politics of race and conversely race in politics.

Limitations and Future Studies

The chief limitation to this study is that it is limited, as with any content analysis, to only the content examined and nothing more. Nothing of the audience reaction or how they used and interpreted the information within the newspapers was studied, and that perhaps is the greatest limitation to this study. Without knowing the full effects of the racial framing of Barack Obama it is difficult to ascertain anything beyond how he was framed in the media. With that in mind, this could be a great start to an even larger study that would address the voting population's views and whether their vote extends beyond that of the ideological and enters racial territory.

For further study a larger number of newspapers from a wider area of the country would improve the validity of the findings. Multiple papers from the same area would also help

with a wider variable finding. Inclusion of a survey to a random selection of registered voters would also help elaborate on the actual meaning of the results.

Consideration must also be given to the current state of the newspaper industry. It might be worthwhile to expand this study to other industries such as television or even the Internet to examine how those media compare to newspapers.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Content Code Book

1. On the designated lines on the top of the page, put your name and the name of the newspaper you are coding.
2. In the far left column mark the number of article you are coding. This is for your benefit to make it easier to restart coding after multiple sessions.
3. In the **Article Title** column, note the name of the article you are coding.
4. In the **Date column**, note the date that the article was published
5. In the **Article Length** column, note the length of the article by number of words.
6. In the **Obama's Race Mentioned** column, note how many times Obama's race is mentioned in the article. This can be mentioning Obama as being black, African-American, the first black *something* or anything similar.
7. In the **Voter's Race Mentioned** column, note how many times a voter or group of voters are mentioned by their race. Each mention of a racial term should be coded as a single instance. For example. If more than one race is mentioned then code the article twice but do not recode the Obama's Race Mentioned column.

A voter is defined as anyone in the article that is not elected or running for elected office.
8. In the **Voter's Race column**, note the race of the voter that was mentioned in the Voter's Race Mentioned column. If more than one voter race is mentioned then code the article twice but do not recode the Obama's Race Mentioned column.
 - 1 = No race mentioned
 - 2 = White
 - 3 = Black

- 4 = Hispanic
- 5 = Asian
- 6 = Other

9. In the **Initiator of Racial Discussion** column, note who initiated the racial conversation. If more than one entity discussed race then code the first entity that discussed it and list the other(s) in the Notes column.

- 1=No race mentioned
- 2= Author of article
- 3 =Voter
- 4 = Obama himself
- 5 = Elected member of the Democratic party
- 6 =McCain himself
- 7 = elected member of the Republican party
- 8 = Other

Categories for this section are described as follows:

- **No race mentioned** - No race is mentioned in the article.
- **Author of article** - The author of the article is the initiator of the racial discussion.
- **Voter** - The voter is the initiator of the racial discussion. A voter can be defined as any citizen not in political office.
- **Obama himself** - Obama is the one who mentioned race.
- **Obama's campaign** - Someone in Obama's campaign mentioned race.
- **McCain himself** - McCain is the one who mentioned race.
- **McCain's campaign** - Someone in McCain's campaign mentioned race.
- **Other** - Someone not listed above initiated the racial discussion. List specifics in the **Notes** column.

10. In the **Notes** column, list any notes that you think are important for the article that you have coded.

Appendix 1.1: Content Code Sheet

[illegible]