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Race in the News
Stereotypes, Political Campaigns, and Market-Based Journalism

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This essay considers the role of the media in news coverage of racial issues. I begin by discussing American society's failure to require news programming in the public interest before describing changing patterns of news consumption and the gradual emergence of local television news as a major news source. Next, I show that local news programs are doing race by systematically overemphasizing the issue of violent crime and by associating crime with the actions of racial minorities. This pattern of news coverage has predictable consequences; there is evidence of a racial double standard in the public's views about both crime and poverty. Whites react more harshly to black than white criminal suspects and also respond more generously to white than black victims of natural disasters. Finally, I turn to the use of racially coded "wedge" appeals in American political campaigns. The effect of news coverage and campaign advertising featuring media messages that broadly caricature African and Hispanic American is to exacerbate long-standing racial divisions and discord. The lack of a strong public broadcaster, coupled with the absence of programming requirements applicable to commercial media outlets, means that most media consumers will inevitably encounter stereotypic treatment of racial minorities. Under these circumstances, the prospects for racial and cultural inclusiveness are less than promising.

ON AUGUST 29, 2005, HURRICANE KATRINA HIT NEW ORLEANS WITH devastating force. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, news coverage focused exclusively on the unprecedented scope of destruction and the thousands of residents left stranded in the city. Within forty-eight hours, however, the media began to feature reports (mainly unsubstantiated) of violence, looting, and crime. In fact, between August 31 and September 2, 15 percent of all broadcast and print news reports on Katrina made some reference to crime.[1]

Why was crime a news story in the context of this overwhelming disaster? Did the fact that it was poor African Americans who experienced the worst of Katrina's devastation play a role in making crime a focus of the news? In an idealized sense, news is supposed to serve as a mirror of "reality"; in the case of Hurricane Katrina, the unmistakable reality was the suffering of local residents and the inability of government organizations to deliver relief. The fact that news reports of the event paid significant attention to crime suggests that "mediality" (media accounts of events) is often a distorted mirror of events. As the case of Hurricane Katrina illustrates, violent crime is often treated as especially newsworthy when minorities are involved. Understanding the media's preoccupation with crime and other divisive issues, and how this preoccupation affects our understanding of race, is complicated and requires careful unpacking. It can be broadly attributed to (1) the failure of American society to require news programming in the public interest, and (2) the essentially self-interested behavior of news organizations and public officials.

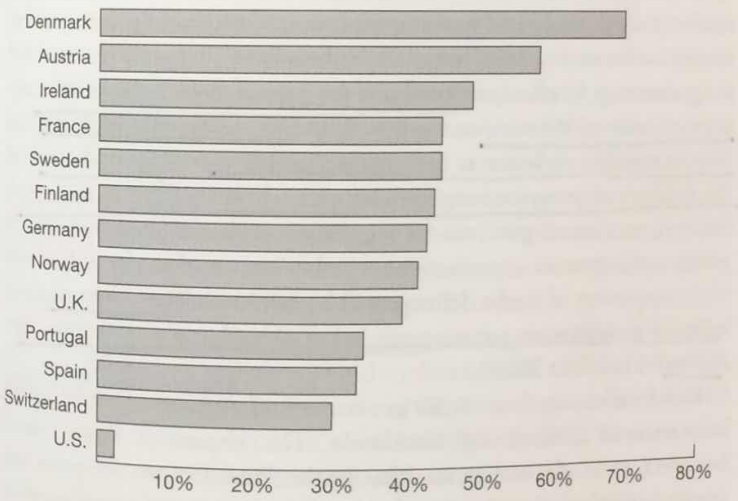
NEWS AS "PUBLIC SERVICE"

In the United States, the majority of news outlets are corporately owned rather than publicly funded. The concept of public service broadcasting, introduced in Britain and adopted by most other democracies before World War II, treats the broadcast media as a major pillar of the democratic process. Broadcasters are mandated to provide a vibrant public forum in which citizens encounter significant diversity of perspectives on political issues and voice for all groups, no matter their size or influence (Benton Foundation 1999). In return for the provision of costless access to the publicly owned airwaves, radio and television stations must provide "payback" in the form of regular public affairs programming that informs and educates citizens on the issues of the day.

[1]This figure is derived from a content analysis of forty-one major national newspapers and three television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC).

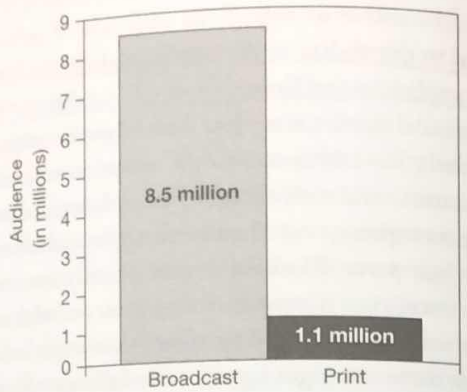
In the United States, the Carnegie Commission recommended the creation of public broadcasting, emphasizing the value of providing citizens with media programming that would allow them "to see America whole, in all its diversity." A major impetus to congressional adoption of the Carnegie Commission recommendations was the perception that commercial broadcasters could not be relied on to deliver informative content representing the myriad of groups and perspectives making up contemporary America. This pessimism was well founded. Research demonstrates that two sets of factors significantly influence news media civic performance—regulatory policy and market forces (Bishop and Hakanen 2002; Iyengar and McGrady 2006). Regulatory policy consists of two key elements; first, the establishment and continued support of a government-funded broadcasting network, and second, the enforcement of regulations that require privately owned media to deliver minimum levels of public affairs programming. The United States lags behind the rest of the world on both these regulatory factors. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) receives trivial government funding and has never been able to reach a significant share of the national audience (see Figure 9.1). In Europe, on the other hand, public broadcasters receive significant government subsidies and attract 30 to 40 percent of

FIGURE 9.1 | **AUDIENCE SHARE BY PUBLIC BROADCASTER.**



SOURCE | Data from Hallin, D. C., and Mancini, P. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

FIGURE 9.2 | BROADCAST VERSUS PRINT NEWS AUDIENCE.



SOURCE | Data from Nielsen Media Research, *Editor and Publisher Yearbook*, 2003.

audience demand, station owners began to air multiple local newscasts and hybrid entertainment–news programs each day. In the 1960s most television stations broadcast a single local newscast; today, local news runs continuously. In the Los Angeles area, for instance, the three network-affiliated television stations air a total of 7.5 hours of local news each day between 4:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. The explosion in local news availability created a serious problem for network news; people began to watch local rather than national news. Between 1993 and 2003, the combined audience for the three evening newscasts dropped by nearly 30 percent—from forty-one million to twenty-nine million.

Recent breakthroughs in digital technology have transformed still further how Americans get their news. As the personal computer begins to rival television as the gateway to the outside world, competition for news audiences has intensified. The traffic to Internet news sites is already heavy; as of early 2005, nearly one in three Internet users reads a newspaper online. Today, virtually every major news organization reproduces its news offerings online, giving consumers instant, on-demand access to the news. The major Internet portals all provide access to news, but their content derives exclusively from conventional sources (newspaper, wire services, or television news). In some cases, such as MSNBC, media and technology companies have joined forces hoping to create synergy between established providers of news content (NBC) and technological giants (Microsoft).

THE ECONOMICS OF NEWS

Every day, major events and issues occur in the world at large with significant consequences for Americans. One expects these same events and issues to appear in the news. This "mirror image" definition stipulates close correspondence between the state of the real world and the content of news coverage. During times of rising joblessness, the news focuses on unemployment; when thousands of Sudanese civilians are massacred, the spotlight shifts to Sudan and to U.S. policy on Africa.

There are several challenges to the mirror image definition of news, but the most compelling is that news is simply what sells (Hamilton 2003). American consumers are free to choose from a wide array of news providers. Facing competition, rational owners inevitably choose to further their own interests rather than provide public service to the community. Thus, the content and form of news coverage are subject to the same logic that drives all other economic activity: minimize costs and maximize revenues.

Since all American news outlets (with the exception of National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service) are privately owned, their survival depends on the size of their audience. Advertising is the principal source of revenue for publishers and broadcasters. The price of advertising depends on the size of the audience; the more popular the program, the greater the profit margin. Thus, "ratings" are the lifeblood of the broadcasting industry.

The A. C. Nielsen Company conducts quarterly ratings "sweeps" during the months of February, May, July, and November. The result of each sweeps period locks in advertising rates for individual programs and stations until the next period. Programs that suffer a decline in their ratings stand to lose significant revenue, so owners do their utmost to maintain or improve their ratings. In the case of news programs, the implications are obvious: entertainment value trumps substantive content. Thus, one-half of all network news reports broadcast in 2000 had no policy content; in 1980 the figure was approximately one-third (Patterson 2000). "Sensationalized" reports accounted for 25 percent of network news in the 1980s, but 40 percent in 2003. Clearly, news organizations have learned that fluff is more profitable than substance.

The expansion of local news programming in the 1980s and 1990s provides a compelling case study of the responsiveness of television station owners to economic constraints. First, local news is inexpensive

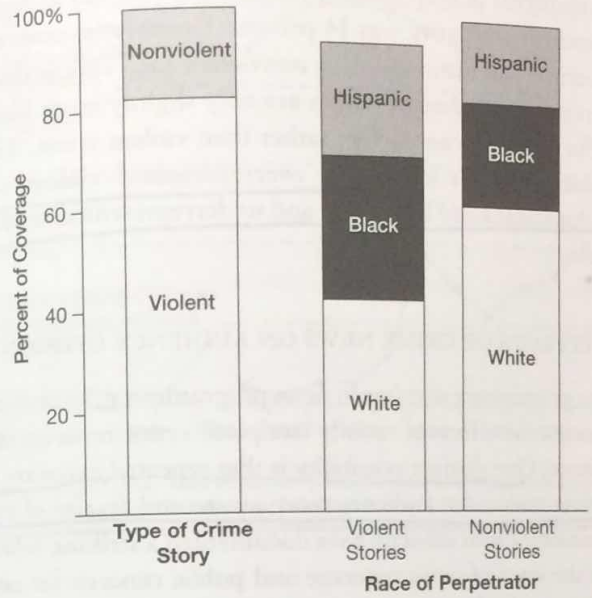
to produce. The typical local newscast can be staffed by four or five all-purpose correspondents, an anchor or two, a weather forecaster, and a sports correspondent. Local news correspondents, in contrast with their network news counterparts, do not command extravagant salaries. Infrastructure costs for local news programming are similarly limited; for the typical news station, the single most expensive budget item is the monthly lease of a helicopter to provide immediate access to breaking news. All told, therefore, the cost of putting together a local newscast is modest.

Cost is only half of the programming equation. Local news is especially enticing to owners because it attracts large audiences. In many markets, more people tune in to local than network news. Not only is local news close to home and the source of both useful (the weather forecast and traffic reports) and personally engaging (the latest sports scores) information, but public affairs content can also be presented in ways that appeal to viewers. It is no accident that the signature "issue" of local news coverage is violent crime. From armed bank robberies to homicides, "home invasions," carjackings, police chases, and gang wars, violence occurs continually in local newscasts. Conversely, little time is devoted to nonviolent crimes such as embezzlement, insider trading, or tax evasion because they lack the "action" to command the attention of the viewing audience. Thus, "if it bleeds, it leads" is the motto of local news directors.

Stories about crime convey drama and emotion and provide attention-getting visuals. The allure of this combination for news directors is apparent across the country. In Los Angeles, for example, English-language commercial television stations aired a total of 3,014 news stories on crime during 1996 and 1997. As shown in Figure 9.3, the overwhelming majority of these reports focused on violent crime. The crime of murder, which accounted for less than 1 percent of all crime in Los Angeles County during this period, was the focus of 17 percent of crime stories. In fact, the number of murder stories equaled the number of stories focusing on all forms of nonviolent crime (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). The results were identical across all six television stations whose offerings were examined.

Los Angeles television stations are not especially distinctive. A study of fifty-six different cities by Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman (1997) found that crime was the most prominently featured subject in the local news, accounting for more than 75 percent of all news coverage in some cities.

FIGURE 9.3 **CONTENT OF TELEVISION CRIME COVERAGE, LOS ANGELES, 1996–1997.**



SOURCE Gilliam, F. D., Jr, and S. Iyengar. 2000. Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public. *American Journal of Political Science* 44:560–573.

Not only does broadcast news highlight violence, it links the issues of race and crime (Entman 1992; Entman and Rojecki 2000). Over 50 percent of the crime stories in the Los Angeles study provided information about a specific suspect. As shown in Figure 9.3, more often than not, the suspect was nonwhite. These findings parallel a detailed study of the three major weekly news magazines on the basis of which the author concluded that "criminals are conceptualized as black people, and crime as the violence they do to whites" (Elias 1994, 5).

Of course, the representation of different ethnic groups in crime news may reflect real-world trends. Research by Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright (1996) compared television representation of minority suspects with actual arrest rates for different races in Los Angeles. The authors computed population-adjusted crime rates for whites, Hispanics, and African Americans, showing the degree to which these groups were either over- or underrepresented in both violent and nonviolent crime. Their data showed that although African Americans committed violent and nonviolent crime at about the same rate, television coverage of black

crime focused more (by a factor of 22 percent) on violent crime. In the case of Hispanics, their actual participation in violent crime exceeded their participation in nonviolent crime by 7 percent, but as represented in the news, the disparity was 14 percent. Conversely, news coverage of white crime was distinctly more nonviolent than violent (by a factor of 31 percent), even though whites are only slightly more likely (by 7 percent) to engage in nonviolent rather than violent crime. Thus, this study concluded that local news overrepresented violent crime by African Americans and Hispanics, and underrepresented violent crime by whites.

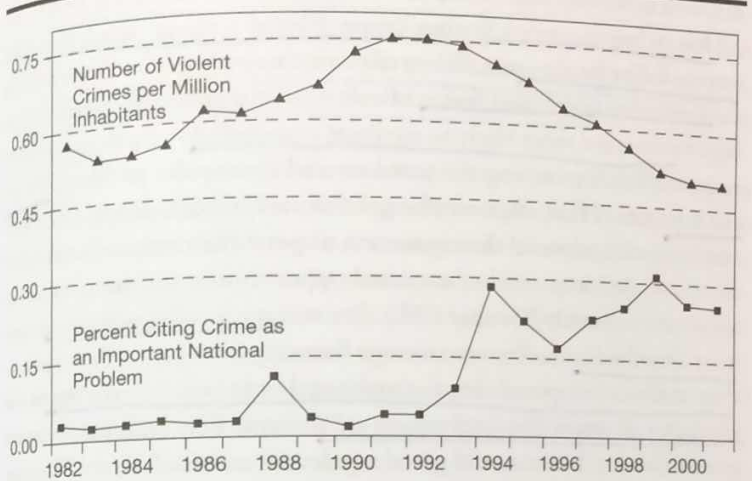
EFFECTS OF CRIME NEWS ON AUDIENCE OPINION

Given the prominence of crime in news programming, an obvious question concerns the effects of racially "scripted" crime news on the viewing audience. One distinct possibility is that repeated exposure to news about crime makes the audience more aware and fearful of crime. In fact, communications scholars have documented a striking relationship between the level of news coverage and public concern for any given policy issue. An early statement of this "agenda-setting" hypothesis was formulated by Cohen (1963): the media, Cohen said, "may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (Cohen 1963, 13). In other words, the media sets the public agenda.

There is ample evidence of media agenda-setting with respect to crime; over the past two decades Americans have regularly identified crime as among the three most important problems facing the country. This correspondence between the public and media agenda, in and of itself, does not establish the influence of the media. The media and the public may simultaneously respond to the same real-world events (Behr and Iyengar 1985). This is possible because unlike most issues, crime can be directly experienced. During periods of rising crime, for example, more people are victimized (or come in contact with crime victims), thus making them more concerned about the issue.

Examination of trends in actual crime rates, news coverage of crime, and public concern for crime does not lend support to the notion that real-world experiences shape both public concern and news coverage. In fact, over the past two decades the over-time trends in Americans' concern for crime and actual crime rates have moved in opposite directions! As shown in Figure 9.4, the FBI nationwide violent crime index

FIGURE 9.4 | REAL-WORLD CUES AND PUBLIC CONCERN FOR CRIME, 1982–2001.



SOURCE | Data from the Gallup "Most Important Problem" series; University of Washington Policy Agendas Project. FBI Violent Crime Index data from the U.S. Department of Justice.

has declined significantly since the early 1990s. Despite the overall reduction in crime, the percentage of the public that cited crime as an important national problem increased substantially during this same period. Not coincidentally, the decade of the 1990s also witnessed a dramatic increase in the availability of local television news. Figure 9.4 suggests, at least in the case of crime, that public concern is more responsive to what appears on the television screen than to the state of the real world.

Repeated exposure to violent crime has made the American public fixate on crime as a political problem. (As we will note shortly, this fact has not gone unnoticed among those who seek elective office.) But is it sheer frequency of exposure or more subtle, qualitative aspects of crime news that drive public opinion on crime? Scholarly research suggests that the way in which the media frame the issue does matter. In an extensive content analysis of network news, Iyengar (1991) identified two distinct genres of news coverage for policy issues. "Thematic" framing encompasses news reports that place policy issues in some collective or societal context (e.g., rising crime rates in major urban areas or changes in the criminal justice system). "Episodic" framing, on the other hand, focuses on particular instances or exemplars of policy issues (e.g., the arrest of a suspect in the JonBenét Ramsey case). Not surprisingly, broadcast news tilts heavily in the direction of episodic reports; during the decade of

the 1980s, for example, thematic stories accounted for only 10 percent of network news coverage of both crime and terrorism (Iyengar 1991).

How television news frames crime affects viewers' attributions of responsibility for the issue. When television news provides viewers with a collective or contextual frame of reference for crime (thematic framing), viewers are more likely to attribute responsibility (both in terms of responsibility for causing the problem and curing the problem) to societal factors. Thus, after watching a thematic report, people cited unemployment and racial discrimination as potential causes of crime and recommended improved educational opportunities for the poor as an appropriate remedy (Iyengar 1996). But when provided with the dominant episodic frame—news coverage focusing on a particular crime—they attributed responsibility not to societal or political forces but to the attributes of particular individuals or groups. For example, viewers cited amorality, laziness, and greed as relevant causes of crime. The predominance of episodic framing means that most Americans are drawn to dispositional rather than societal accounts of crime.

Recent work has extended the analysis of media frames to local news. Typically, local crime reports provide a physical description of the suspect in the form of a police sketch, security camera footage, or a mug shot. Race is a personal attribute that is evident in an episodic news report whereas poverty and other social factors are not. Episodic framing thus necessarily introduces racial stereotypes into the public's understanding of crime.[2] Viewers are compelled to evaluate their racial beliefs in light of what seem to be empirical realities. Lacking the focus on an individual suspect, thematic framing directs the viewers' attention to alternative and more contextual accounts of crime.

The regular coverage of crime by television news coupled with the dominance of episodic framing constitutes a strong implicit signal that members of minority groups are prone to engage in violent crime. Public opinion polls show that the news audience has accepted this message; that minorities are violence-prone is "deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of Americans" (Quillian and Pager 1999, 722; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz 1998).

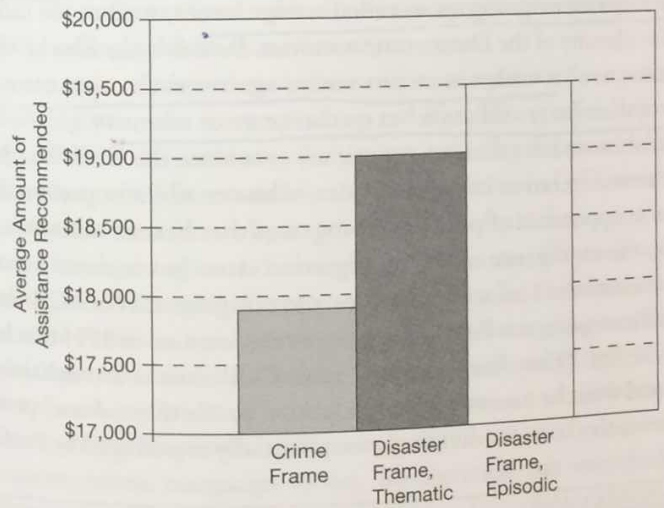
Experimental research by Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) has confirmed the particular importance of racial cues in episodic crime reports. Using computer-based editing techniques, the researchers presented the *same* individual as either a white or an African American male suspect. Their

[2] For a similar argument, but applied to the issue of poverty, see Gilens 1996.

results showed that when the suspect was depicted as African American, the number of viewers who endorsed punitive criminal justice policies increased significantly. More tellingly, the researchers found that when the news story on crime made no reference to a criminal suspect, a significant number of viewers mistakenly recalled that the suspect was nonwhite.

The most recent example of crime news exacerbating racial bias comes from the previously cited study of news coverage of Hurricane Katrina. This study manipulated media framing of the disaster. The investigators presented one set of study participants with a news report that focused on looting and disorder in the aftermath of the disaster (the "crime frame"). Other participants read a news report that focused exclusively on the death and damage caused by the hurricane, with no reference to crime (the "disaster frame"). This report framed Katrina in either thematic (e.g., discussion of the scope of the disaster with no reference to individual victims) or episodic (e.g., the efforts of one family to relocate) terms. After reading the news report, participants were asked a series of questions concerning the appropriate level of government assistance for hurricane victims. As shown in Figure 9.5, participants exposed to the

FIGURE 9.5 **FRAMING EFFECTS ON RECOMMENDED LEVEL OF DISASTER ASSISTANCE.**



SOURCE Online experiment conducted by Stanford University's Political Communications Lab in conjunction with the *Washington Post*, May 6–24, 2006.

report on crime and looting recommended significantly lower amounts of financial assistance for hurricane victims.[3] Thus, this study documents that when the news links natural disasters with crime, people see the victims of the disaster as less deserving.

In short, nonstop coverage of crime by television news encourages racial stereotyping. By associating crime with the actions of minorities, mere exposure to crime news is sufficient to prompt the expression of beliefs and opinions hostile to minorities.

WEDGE APPEALS IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Candidates for national and statewide office spend vast sums on television advertising hoping to attract votes by "selling" their candidacies. Since the 1960s, campaign ads have frequently cast racial minorities and policies that promote minority interests as threats to white voters. Typically, these ads are aired by Republican candidates who hope to persuade white Democrats to cross party lines. Consider the following scenario: as the 2008 election approaches, the economy is uncertain, Osama bin Laden remains at large, and American troops die every day in Iraq. A clear majority of the public thinks the country is on the wrong track. Under these conditions, voters direct their wrath at the party controlling the White House. Boxed in by an unpopular war and concerns over the economy, Republican candidates have a strong incentive to change the subject by campaigning on so-called wedge issues, such as the racial or gender identity of the Democratic nominee. Based on the idea of "divide and conquer," a wedge issue pits voters against each other not on the basis of their party affiliation but on their race or ethnicity.

Racial issues have divided Americans ever since the Civil War. In the most recent iteration of racial politics, white candidates present themselves as opponents of policies or programs that benefit minorities. Recently, the emergence of the immigration issue has injected a parallel division between Latinos and Anglos into campaigns. When California's Republican governor Pete Wilson ran a television ad in 1994 that began with the line "They keep coming," most Californians immediately understood what he meant. Cultural identity, or "family values," provides an alternative basis for dividing voters. Initially introduced by President

[3] The average amount of assistance awarded by participants in the crime frame condition was significantly lower than the averages in both other conditions.

Nixon in 1968 as an appeal to conservative southern Democrats, "family values" has since broadened into a code word for religious fervor and opposition to non mainstream lifestyles. A call for family values is generally interpreted as opposition to abortion, feminism, gay rights, and sex education in the public schools.

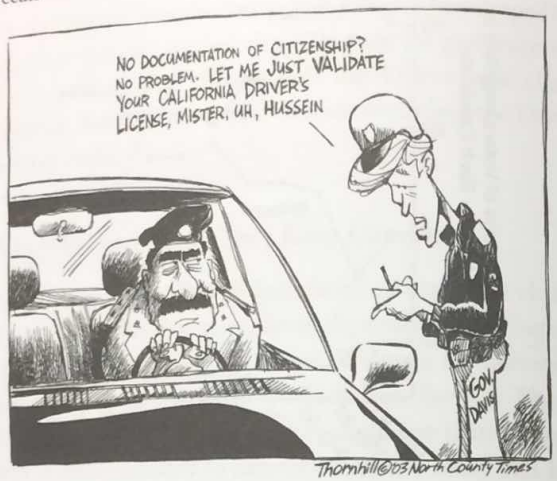
Wedge appeals based on race occurred in both the 1988 and 1996 presidential campaigns, with crime and illegal immigration, respectively, as the featured issues. Senator Robert Dole's attempts to run as a strong opponent of illegal immigration in 1996 made little difference in his overwhelming loss to President Bill Clinton. But in 1988, the election may well have turned on the notorious "Willie Horton" ad in which a Republican group attacked presidential candidate Michael Dukakis for his support of prison furlough programs. This ad featured an African American convict who had committed a violent crime while on a weekend furlough. The ad's controversial content generated extensive media attention across the country; the "Dukakis is soft on crime" message was recycled across the country, and Vice President George H. W. Bush overcame what was then a double-digit deficit in the polls.

Wedge issues are used more frequently in state and local races. In 1990, the conservative North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms was locked in a close Senate race with Harvey Gantt (the Democratic African American mayor of Charlotte). During the closing days of the race, Helms released an ad that condemned the use of affirmative action in employment decisions. This ad is credited with eliciting a significant increase in white turnout, leading to Helms's reelection.

In some races, wedge issues influence the eventual outcome indirectly by deterring one side from speaking out (for fear of offending white voters). In 1998, for instance, the groups opposing Proposition 209 (a measure that called for an end to affirmative action in California) tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to persuade President Clinton to visit the state and speak out against the measure. At the time, Clinton's national popularity stood at nearly 60 percent, and Clinton led Dole by more than 20 points in California polls. Despite this thick security blanket, Clinton refused to get involved until the very last days of the campaign, when he made a speech in Oakland. His involvement proved too little, too late; on Election Day, Proposition 209 passed easily.

In more recent campaign cycles, immigration has overshadowed affirmative action as the wedge issue of choice. The country's preoccupation with terrorism following the attacks on the World Trade Center in

eligible for licenses if they provided a taxpayer identification number and one other form of personal documentation. Davis had initially vetoed the bill but reversed himself and signed it into law in September 2003, hoping to boost his standing with Hispanic voters and thus stave off the recall.



As far as public opinion was concerned, SB 60 was anathema (see Table 9.1). By overwhelming margins, Californians felt that the bill threatened national security. Among whites, opponents outnumbered proponents by a factor of 3:1. For voters concerned with immigration, then, Schwarzenegger—who had pledged to repeal the bill— was clearly the more desirable candidate.[4]

How did voter sentiment on the drivers' license issue play out in the recall election? A pre-election survey asked a representative sample of likely voters to evaluate Governor Davis's record in office (most thought he had performed very poorly), to indicate their feelings about Arnold Schwarzenegger, and, of course, to indicate their vote choice on the recall question and the replacement candidate ballot. Although evaluations of Davis and Schwarzenegger were influenced primarily by party identification (Democrats were less critical of Davis, Republicans more enthusiastic about Schwarzenegger), voters' positions on the drivers' license bill had almost as much impact on their candidate evaluations. Overall, immigration was a more powerful predictor of vote choice than the energy crisis, social issues such as abortion or gay rights, or generalized

[4] Governor Schwarzenegger's first legislative action, carried out on December 1, 2003, was to sign the repeal measure into law.

TABLE 9.1 | IMMIGRATION IN THE 2003 RECALL CAMPAIGN

Some people say that allowing illegal immigrants to get a driver's license will result in more insured drivers and safer roads. Others say that giving driving licenses to illegal immigrants will hurt national security. What do you think?

	All respondents	Whites	Nonwhites
More insured, safer roads	26	21	35
Hurt national security	56	64	44
Haven't thought about it	15	12	16
Hurt national security	32	25	44
Haven't thought about it	69	75	56

SOURCE | Knowledge Networks statewide survey of 1,124 CA residents.

cynicism over state government. The recall election was less about economic mismanagement or disaffection from state government and more about controlling immigration.[5]

The successful use of immigration as a wedge issue in the 1994 and 2003 campaigns suggests that the political environment in California has changed little over the past decade. This may seem paradoxical, given the substantial changes in the ethnic composition of the state population. Whites accounted for 60 percent of the adult population of the state in 1992, but only 47 percent in 2008 (Citrin and Highton 2002; Public Policy Institute of California 2008). The Latino share of the population, on the other hand, increased from 24 to 33 percent. However, the size of the two groups among the voting population has remained relatively stable. Whites accounted for 79 percent of California voters in 1992 and 70 percent in 2008, while the Hispanic share of the voting population increased from 10 to 15 percent over this same period. Thus, the increase in the Latino population has not translated into a corresponding increase in the Latino electorate (see Citrin and Highton 2002; Public Policy Institute of California 2008). Even allowing for considerable Latino skepticism over SB 60, one suspects that the outcome of the 2003 special election may have been different had the Latino share of voters matched their share of the adult population. Latinos remain significantly underrepresented in the electorate, while whites still account for the vast majority of voters. Interestingly, the 2008 California electorate is a virtual replica

[5] For a more detailed analysis, see Iyengar 2004.

of the 1980 population—70 percent white and only 14 percent Latino. In short, whites have retained their dominant political status, primarily because of low turnout among Latinos.

Given the distribution of ethnicity within the electorate, it should come as no surprise that candidates resort to appeals that capitalize on white racial identity. Were the situation reversed, and Latinos the majority electoral group, it is unlikely that issues of illegal immigration or eligibility for driver's licenses would gain significant political traction. An axiom of political campaigns is that candidates respond to the preferences of voters, not nonvoters; until the Latino vote begins to match the Latino population, the incentive to use wedge appeals remains strong. For those who seek less divisive campaigns, the answer lies in civic outreach and get-out-the-vote campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Candidates for elective office and owners of news outlets both behave as rational actors—the former seek to maximize their vote share, the latter their audience share. Neither has any compelling interest in the effects of their media presentations on race relations. As long as crime news attracts and holds a substantial audience, television stations will continue to highlight violence and mayhem; as long as wedge appeals entice voters to cross party lines, Willie Horton–type ads and grainy images of immigrants sprinting across freeways will continue to play a significant role in advertising campaigns.

The impact of racial cues in news programs and campaign advertising is especially influential in shaping white Americans' views about race for the simple reason that most whites have little personal contact with minorities. Despite the ever-increasing diversity of the American population and the passage of significant civil rights laws, most white people still live in racially homogeneous enclaves (Massey and Denton 1993; Charles 2003). The people they see and interact with on a daily basis are overwhelmingly white (Charles 2003). Unable to think of specific instances that might contradict the association between ethnicity and antisocial or dysfunctional behavior, they uncritically accept the implications of racially biased media messages. The vicious circle expands.[6]

[6] Whites' frequency of interpersonal contact with members of minority groups does not, in and of itself, contribute to weakening of racial prejudice and stereotyping. In fact, there is considerable evidence that whites living in areas characterized by a significant minority population are more threatened and hence more apt to buy into traditional stereotypes (Taylor 1998; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004).

What might be done to break out of this circle? On the media side, we cannot expect any shift away from "infotainment" unless society imposes minimum "public service" obligations on broadcasters (Bishop and Hakanen 2002). In almost every other democratic society, broadcasters are treated as public trustees; in exchange for their free access to the publicly owned airwaves (worth billions of dollars), they are required to deliver some minimal degree of public service. In addition to providing more extensive and frequent coverage of public affairs, American broadcasters should also be required to air programs representing a wide array of cultural and political perspectives from the Black Muslims to the Christian Coalition.

An alternative means of increasing the public's potential exposure to substantive news programming is to strengthen the standing of the public broadcaster. As we noted at the outset, PBS has a tiny audience share when compared with most European public broadcasters. But PBS's ability to attract viewers has been compromised by the cutbacks in government financing. At present, PBS receives only a trivial portion of its operating budget from the federal government and is forced to devote significant amounts of broadcast time to fund-raising. In stark contrast, the BBC's annual revenues derive almost exclusively from government funds. Obviously, the BBC has much more freedom to develop programming initiatives that not only address important issues of the day but also attract a significant number of viewers.

Finally, it is difficult to imagine what might be done to discourage candidates from using divisive campaign rhetoric. As a form of political speech, campaign advertising is protected by the First Amendment, and as long as whites turn out to vote in greater number than nonwhites, playing the "race card" is rational candidate behavior. In recent years Congress has passed legislation designed to make candidates more accountable for the content of their advertising; the "in person" rule, for instance, requires candidates to appear in their ads and assure the viewer that they "approved" the content. This requirement may serve as a disincentive for candidates to campaign on the basis of race. A further deterrent is the tendency of the news media to "fact check" the content of candidate advertising. Since 1988, most major news outlets have taken to running "ad watches" in which they scrutinize and critique the accuracy of campaign ads. If each time a candidate produced an ad featuring an "us against them" appeal, he or she was cited by the press as a "race baiter," this would surely discourage campaign consultants from pursuing the strategy.

In the final analysis, however, the behavior of candidates and news organizations is dictated less by government strictures or efforts at monitoring and more by the behavior of consumers. The strongest disincentive to the use of racial appeals in campaigns is the possibility of a voter revolt: if the candidate who runs an ad featuring his support for the construction of a wall along the U.S. border suddenly finds that his support has dropped by ten points after the airing of this ad, he will surely advertise on some other issue. If television stations that feature the most gruesome footage of violent crime in their news programming discover that they are losing viewers to other sources, they will switch to some other formula. Ultimately, it is audience demand that is responsible for the supply of media programming. In that sense, consumers and voters get what they deserve. Whether that delivery is consistent with racial harmony in a functioning democratic society is another question.

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