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## EXAMINING MEDIA STORYLINES: RACE AND THE OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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**Abstract:** This study explores the intricate interplay of race, news media, and U.S. elections, with a particular focus on the 2008 election of Barack Obama. Traditionally, scholars have operated under two fundamental assumptions regarding the relationship between race and U.S. elections. Firstly, it has been widely observed that non-White political candidates often receive more negative and race-centered news coverage compared to their White counterparts. Secondly, the level of salience that race assumes during an election tends to bring racial considerations, including both latent and overt racial prejudice, into the voting decisions of White voters.

In essence, this media-driven racial focus on non-White candidates can create substantial hurdles for these candidates by reinforcing racial perceptions among White voters. This study aims to shed light on how these dynamics played out during the historic 2008 election, challenging conventional wisdom and offering a deeper understanding of how race and nation intertwine to shape political discourse. By delving into the intricate relationship between media, race, and elections, this research aims to unravel the complexities that influence the perception and treatment of non-White political candidates in the U.S.

**Keywords:** race, media, U.S. elections, Barack Obama, political discourse.

### Introduction

The 2008 election of Barack Obama offered scholars the opportunity to examine and broaden our understanding of the complex process by which race and nation permeate and shape political and news discourse in U.S. elections. For years, scholars have largely agreed upon two key assumptions about race and U.S. elections. First, news coverage of non-White political candidates tends to be more negative and race-focused than that of White candidates (Chaudhary, 1980; Entman, 1994; Schaffner & Gadson, 2004; Terkildsen & Damore, 1999). Second, the more salient race is during an election, the greater the likelihood that White voters will bring racial considerations, including both latent and manifest racial prejudice, with them to the polls on election day (Hutchings & Valentino, 2004; McDermott, 1998; Mendelberg, 2008; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995). Put simply, race-oriented news coverage of elections tends to be, in the words of Terkildsen and Damore, “at cross-purposes” with a minority candidate’s goal of not being perceived primarily—let alone entirely—in racial terms (1999). Indeed, the U.S. news media’s overwhelming propensity to focus on the race of non-White candidates during elections

only serves to significantly heighten the barriers that minority political candidates already face among White voters (see Huddy & Feldman, 2009; Hutchings & Valentino, 2004) when running for office.

One might assume, then, that these dynamics were largely absent during the 2008 presidential election, given Obama’s obvious success. The evidence, however, strongly speaks to the contrary. Tesler and Sears (2010) have

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suggested, for example, that attitudes toward race played a greater role in the 2008 presidential election than they had in any previous election for which comparable data were available. Specifically, they claim that race was a crucial consideration for those who both opposed *and* supported Obama, with race weighing more heavily for those in the pro-Obama camp. In addition, Schaffner (2011) found that simple race salience among some White voters cost Obama as much as 3% of the vote. Piston (2010) also found that racial animus among White voters substantially undercut support for Obama among Independent and Democratic voters. Thus, race salience and prejudice appear to have had a significant impact on electoral support for Obama. At the same time, scholarship has also demonstrated that, during the 2008 campaign, Obama aggressively sought to transcend difference—racial or otherwise—and unify voters around his candidacy via explicit appeals to the national identity and an overwhelming emphasis on U.S. exceptionalism (Coe & Reitzes, 2010; Ivie & Giner, 2009). Indeed, this can be traced back to Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004—which, one could argue, launched his 2008 presidential bid—in which he stated: Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation. . . . Yet, even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers. . . . Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America—there's the United States of America. There's not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. . . . We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America. (Public Broadcasting Service, 2004)

As Transue (2007) has shown, such appeals can have a potent, unifying effect on diverse audiences, bringing together voters otherwise cued to think about and focus on racial, partisan, or gender differences.

Given these competing dynamics, then, this study seeks to systematically examine the discursive environment that surrounded Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. We conducted a content analysis of 211 of Obama's nationally televised campaign speeches and 2,434 news articles, drawn from five major U.S. news media outlets, to assess the extent to which racial identity cues versus national identity cues were present in political and news discourse. Our findings reveal that, despite Obama privileging nation over race in his speeches, the U.S. news media—in all but one case—did the reverse, consistently privileging race over nation in their coverage. In addition, news coverage also tended toward more divisive and controversial racial terms than Obama employed in his speeches. Finally, the results reveal interesting patterns across the partisan-leaning news outlets, with the ideologically opposed outlet behaving differently than both neutral and ideologically aligned outlets.

Overall, this study builds on existing scholarship in several important ways. First, it extends research on group identity cues to the area of minority political campaigns, introducing the concept of *identity prioritization* within this context. Second, it demonstrates an unexpected form of bias in news coverage: *identity punishment* by an ideologically opposed outlet that refuses to make a unifying identity—national identity—salient in its coverage. Third, it broadens our understanding of news coverage of minority political candidates to the now-relevant presidential context, which will enable scholars to theorize about the opportunities and obstacles that minority presidential candidates are likely to face in the future. Indeed, these findings are likely to provide considerable insight into the dynamics that are likely to surround Hillary Clinton's upcoming 2016 presidential campaign as well as the early field of Republican primary candidates. We reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for scholars, journalists, and future minority candidates in U.S. politics.

### Race, News, and Voting

Scholars have long understood that racial minority political candidates receive less favorable coverage than White candidates. In all-Black and biracial elections, for example, studies have shown that news coverage is much more likely to contain a racial frame than stories about all-White races (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2006). Also, research has indicated that, in biracial elections, the race of Black candidates

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(Versus that of their White opponents) is much more likely to be mentioned in news coverage (Terkildson & Damore, 1999), particularly at the congressional level (see Schaffner & Gadson, 2004). Furthermore, Chaudhary (1980) found that Black elected officials, on average, received longer, but significantly more negative, news stories than their White counterparts when in office. More recently, Squires and Jackson (2010) demonstrated that news coverage of the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries served to reinforce problematic racial assumptions, noting that “the press’s dependence on Black/White framing often oversimplified the identities and interests of various communities” (p. 392). In particular, they found that, although race was indeed made salient in news coverage of the primaries, seldom was it brought up in the context of policy issues relating to racial injustice or inequality. Finally, although McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) did not find a “widespread pattern” of racial framing, they did find that racial references in news coverage were most pronounced when a Black candidate was running for office, particularly in (highly) competitive races. These dynamics are also not isolated to the political realm. Entman’s seminal 1994 study, for example, found that Blacks are, in general, portrayed much less favorably than Whites on television news. Indeed, these patterns are as long-standing as they are troubling. It is to be expected, then, that news coverage of a Black candidate running for the presidency would be more race-focused and likely more negative than that of a White candidate.

This race-salient coverage is not without consequence. Scholars in political science, for example, have found robust effects of race salience on Whites’ support for certain policy issues—such as social security, taxes, and welfare—as well as their propensity to vote for minority candidates (McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011; Tesler & Sears, 2010; Winter, 2008). At its simplest level, race salience in a campaign environment simply makes voters take into account racial considerations when they may otherwise have not (Sigelman et al., 1995). This effect can happen beyond people’s awareness (Mendelberg, 2008) and can range from the simple use of the race of a candidate as a heuristic cue in low-information environments (McDermott, 1998) to the more deliberate consideration of racial attitudes in informationrich environments (Huddy & Carey, 2009). Moreover, there is evidence of a negative effect of race salience vis-à-vis Obama’s presidential campaign; in particular, Andersen and Junn (2010) found that a more racialized portrayal of Obama led to less support among White Democrats during the election. Thus, there is evidence—both in general and in the specific case of Obama—that the more a campaign and candidate are racialized in news coverage, the more potential damage it does to attitudes among White voters.

The issue of race salience, however, does not operate in a vacuum—that is, it is not the only or perhaps even the most important consideration that drives voter preferences. After all, individuals belong simultaneously to multiple overlapping, sometimes competing social groups; thus, racial identity may very well come into conflict with other more powerful forms of identity among voters. It is the varying salience of one group *over* another, we argue, that can lead to attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The goal of this article, then, is to join these bodies of literature and structure an analysis of *competing* identity cues in the context of Obama’s 2008 campaign, focusing in particular on the two identities that were made most salient during this election: racial and national identity. Specifically, drawing upon research in social psychology, we examine how and why group identity cues can serve to unite or divide voters.

### Group Identity and the 2008 Presidential Election

A useful framework for understanding how racial and national identity cues in political and news discourse might impact voting behavior can be derived from self-categorization and social identity theories. Self-categorization theory assumes that people automatically categorize others into groups to which they themselves belong (in-groups) or groups of which they are not a part (out-groups) (see Oakes & Turner, 1980). Such groups can be ethnic, racial, religious, gender, partisan, regional, national, and so on. Social identity theory builds on this work, suggesting a link between an individual’s self-identity and that of the group within which that individual is embedded (Brewer, 2001; Tajfel, 1982). Individuals derive comfort, self-esteem, and security from such

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memberships (Mercer, 1995; Rivenburgh, 2000) and, as a result, often engage in favoritism toward their in-groups (Brewer, 1999; Dasgupta, 2004; Transue, 2007). This includes engaging in more cooperative behavior with in-group members (de Cremer & van Vugt, 1999; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Esses, 2008; Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Lane, Mitchell, & Banaji, 2005), remembering more information about in-group members (Howard & Rothbart, 1980; Park & Rothbart, 1982), and exhibiting positive feelings toward other group members (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). Such ingroup favoritism can also lead to out-group denigration, distrust, and even hostility (Sherif, 1996; Smith & Bond, 1999; Triandis, 1994).

Individuals, of course, simultaneously belong to multiple social groups; the varying salience of any one social group at a time is what tends to elicit group-serving behavior and attitudes for one group in lieu of another. For example, in the United States, members of different racial groups, who may experience intergroup conflict at that level, are nevertheless part of the same national group. Thus, outgroup foes in one context can become in-group compatriots in another. Research has shown, for example, that an emphasis upon a superordinate identity can reduce prejudice, lead to more prosocial in-group behavior and cooperation, and reduce bias against former out-group members (Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Indeed, as McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) documented in their examination of the 2008 presidential campaign, one of the ways that Obama sought to mitigate the salience and impact of racial difference on voters during the election was to employ discourse in his campaign ads that focused on the collective, frequently using such terms as “we,” “us,” and “our” when discussing his candidacy, and emphasizing that he would work to “bring people together” during his presidency. In this sense, Obama was deeply concerned with “traversing the racial divide” (p. 188) during his campaign. Coe and Reitzes (2010) also found that Obama “steered well clear of the factious appeals that often divide American politics” (p. 401) during the 2008 election, largely avoiding any discussion of issues such as race, immigration, gay rights, and abortion, and, instead, emphasizing to large extent unifying messages throughout his campaign. It should be noted, however, that Coe and Reitzes did find that Obama discussed race more often than patriotism in his speeches. We suspect, however, that this finding may have been due to the narrow construction of the patriotism category, which did not account for other ways in which appeals to national identity might have arisen during the campaign.

It is against this backdrop that we seek to explore Obama’s rhetorical strategy—specifically, his use of racial versus national identity cues—during the 2008 presidential election. On the one hand, if Obama were to highlight *racial* identity alone during the campaign, social identity theory would suggest that such discourse might risk alienating anyone who does not share his racial identification (e.g., White voters). Conversely, if Obama were to focus on *national* identity, each voter would, in theory, be included and feel some level of identification with his candidacy. Thus, it would seem to be strategically beneficial—if not imperative—for Obama to emphasize national identity over racial identity in his campaign, especially given that he is a member of a racial minority group.<sup>1</sup> This would serve as a first step for Obama toward creating a unifying discursive environment that could work in his favor when speaking to racial majority voters. We therefore offer our first hypothesis:

*HQ1: Obama will emphasize nation to a greater degree than race across his campaign speeches.*

### **Identity Prioritization in News Coverage of the Obama Campaign**

As with any presidential election, Obama’s strategic communications during the 2008 presidential campaign were only one part of the broader discourse surrounding this election. Campaign speeches and advertisements from political supporters and opponents, the release of public opinion polls, horse-race news coverage, and

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, such an emphasis upon nation is not unvaryingly positive; however seemingly benign one’s motivations or tactics, messages emphasizing national identity exclude and denigrate some others in order to bolster the national group (see Billig, 1995).

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interpersonal discussions among voters all serve to interfere with and potentially undermine a candidate's campaign message (Just et al., 1996). Thus, political candidates, however strategic their use of group identity cues might be, are not the only ones influencing which identities, values, and issues become salient among voters at a given time. The news media, in particular, play a pivotal role in this process. Scholarship suggests, for example, that news norms and routines often lead journalists to focus on the unusualness or social significance of a candidacy—specifically, the more divisive, unique identity components of a particular candidate—because it serves as a compelling point of interest in a news story (Meeks, 2012; Shoemaker, Lee, Han, & Cohen, 2007). This explains, at least in part, why the issue of race might be more salient in news coverage of minority political campaigns versus other considerations. Indeed, in the case of Barack Obama (and in a parallel manner, Hillary Clinton), it seems likely that news accounts would emphasize the historic nature of his candidacy as the first African American major party nominee—even when its relevance could be questioned—because of the novelty of his candidacy. This, in turn, serves to cue the racial identity of voters, bringing race back into the picture even when Obama might have sought to emphasize national or other group identity over race in his communications. In this sense, because of news norms and routines, journalists can be seen as engaging in *identity prioritization* that deviates from the identity cues emphasized by minority candidates. We offer this new theoretical construct as a way to understand the discursive function played by journalists (either intentionally or not) during minority elections. To some extent, this echoes the role that news media can play in reinforcing the issue ownership reputations of certain parties (e.g., Hayes, 2008). As Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) have argued, certain political parties are perceived by voters to “own” certain issues—that is, to be better suited to handle those issues than their competitors. News agendas, especially during campaigns, can prioritize particular issues over others, which can, in turn, benefit the owning party (see Belanger & Meguid, 2008). Here we suggest that news media can also prioritize particular *identities* over others. In this case, we argue, such prioritization—of a more controversial, vulnerable identity over the politically safer, more unifying one—works counter to a candidate's interests. Again, we expect such patterns to be driven by the newsworthiness of the identity in question—in this case, Obama's Black racial background. Put another way, the excitement, novelty, and historical nature of Obama's campaign were prime targets for journalists, and those elements of his candidacy, all related to his race, were simply too newsworthy for journalists to ignore. Given these dynamics, we offer our second and third hypotheses:

*H2: Journalists will emphasize race to a greater degree than Obama did in their coverage of his campaign.*

*H3: Nonetheless, we expect journalists to still place a greater emphasis on nation than race overall in their news coverage, for two reasons.*

First, the novelty of Obama's race per se likely wore off during the campaign; that is, the reason Obama's campaign was historic—essentially, his race—remained constant throughout the campaign, and, thus, its newsworthiness may have plateaued as months wore on. Second, journalists may have resisted always emphasizing Obama's race to not appear too preoccupied with it; that is, the cultural baggage of race makes it a difficult topic to address objectively in journalism, prompting journalists to strive to appear neither dismissive of, nor overly focused on, Obama's racial identity.

More nuanced differences between Obama's and journalists' discussions of race were also expected. One pattern, in particular, that we expected was that

*H4: Obama would invoke less contentious racial figures and terms than would journalists.*

Again, given the news value of controversy and conflict, compared to Obama's presumed goal of uniting his audiences, one would expect the news to highlight the more controversial aspects of race relative to Obama.

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Finally, although we expected these patterns to hold across all news outlets examined, it is plausible that important differences were present. Due to a lack of sufficient theoretical grounding for a hypothesis, we offer a research question:

*RQ1: To what extent did the five news outlets show consistent patterns relative to one another in their identity prioritization?*

### Method

Two parallel content analyses were conducted to test our hypotheses. First, we examined Obama's nationally televised speeches during the campaign. Second, we analyzed U.S. news coverage of the campaign. The sample for each of these analyses is explained below. In both cases, computer-aided content analysis was employed, using the well-reviewed (Brown, 2007) program Wordstat 6.1. Computeraided content analysis of political texts has grown in popularity considerably in recent years (see Monroe & Schrodt, 2008), and, although the methods range from simple keyword recognition to sophisticated computer-learning programs (Cardie & Wilkerson, 2008), the current use was squarely at the former end of the range: to electronically identify a list of keywords.

Two lists of keywords (called "dictionaries" in the language of such analysis) were developed for the analysis—one of race-related terms and one of nation-related terms. The dictionaries were based on two sources: previous scholarship on race, campaigns, and news coverage (Entman, 1994; Schaffner & Gadson, 2004) and the texts themselves (samples of Obama speeches and campaign news articles were read in-depth to isolate relevant keywords). The dictionaries comprised terms that manifestly related to race or nation (e.g., the words *race*, *skin color*, and *America*) and, in some cases, implicitly related to the topics (e.g., words such as *inner city* [see Entman, 1994; Mendelberg, 2001] and *patriotism*). Each dictionary was divided into several subcategories for conceptual and analytical parsimony, and for identification of term categories that might be particularly relevant for future research.

The nation dictionary consisted of 45 terms organized into three subcategories: America, mythology, and patriotism. The America category included terms explicitly denoting the national place (e.g., *America/ns*, *nation*, *country*); the mythology category included terms derived from cultural stories, the nation's founding, key figures, and key events; and the patriotism category included terms related to patriotism specifically, troops, or veterans. The race dictionary comprised 50 terms in seven categories—racial labels, race policy, civil rights, racial figures, Obama's story, slavery, and Reverend Wright. The racial labels category included terms describing racial background and racial groups (e.g., *African American*, *minority*, *skin color*). Race policy included policy terms such as *affirmative action* and *voting rights*. Civil rights specifically pertained to the 1960s struggle for civil rights (e.g., *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, *march*, *Selma*); racial figures included leading Black figures such as Jesse Jackson and groups such as the NAACP. Obama's story included terms about his own background (e.g., *Kenya*, *the South Side of Chicago*). And the Reverend Wright and slavery categories included concrete references to either topic. Although not all terms were used in every speech or news article—and indeed some terms appeared quite rarely—the emphasis was on comprehensiveness rather than parsimony; the analysis would be stronger were it to err on the side of including too many, rather than too few, terms. The full dictionaries of categories and terms can be found in an online appendix.

The dictionaries were tested on both speeches and news stories. The Wordstat program produces frequency lists of the dictionary terms and lists each instance of a term in its surrounding context. Dictionary development ran in two phases: First, after developing an initial set of terms based on the literature and reading of the texts, a sample set of texts was run through Wordstat. Every reference was then examined in its context to verify that it indeed referred to race or nation and was being coded appropriately. When that was not the case, coding rules were developed for the program. At the same time, a subsample of news stories and speeches was coded manually for terms that were not already in the dictionary but connoted either race or nation. Those terms were then added to

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the dictionary, and the validation process was run again. Through this iterative process, the dictionaries were built in such a way as to be both comprehensive and discerning. As Neuendorf (2002) notes, this manner of “spot checking” is used in lieu of calculating standard reliability figures when employing computer, rather than human, coding.

### Sample

For speeches, Obama’s televised national campaign speeches were examined, beginning with his announcement speech on February 10, 2007, and concluding with his election night victory speech on November 4, 2008. CQ Transcripts, the congressional transcription service available through LexisNexis Academic, contains the transcripts of 204 speeches and news appearances during this time. To avoid omitting any additional speeches deemed important by Obama and his staff, those speeches listed on Obama’s website, but not transcribed by CQ, were also included. Taken together, after eliminating substantially incomplete transcripts, a sample of 211 speeches was established.

For news content, national news coverage of the campaign in three media forms was analyzed:

television, newspaper, and news magazine. Television news reaches immense audiences—far more than the other two media forms. For example, in 2008, more than 4 million viewers tuned into the cable evening news nightly, and 22 million tuned into the network evening news every night (Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). NBC was analyzed because it is one of the “big three” mainstream outlets and it had the highest morning and evening news rating among network news at the time (Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). Two cable outlets were also included, which are less mainstream and more partisan-leaning: Fox News and MSNBC. Fox is commonly considered to be conservative-leaning, and trumps the other cable news channels in viewership, at more than 2 million viewers per night (Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). MSNBC is generally considered the more liberal counterpart to Fox (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2009) and reaches an average of 785,000 viewers per night.

Newspapers are the traditional form of hard news for citizens. Indeed, reading newspapers is associated with more knowledge gain than other forms of media consumption (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2004). *The New York Times* was examined, because it is among the top five papers in national circulation (BurrellesLuce, 2010), is commonly considered the “paper of record,” and is often cited as a driver of intermedia agenda setting among mainstream news outlets (e.g., Danielian & Reese, 1989). Finally, news magazines allow for more in-depth coverage than traditional newspapers. In particular, journalists in those forums engage in more analysis and possess greater opportunity to reflect on issues of race, nation, and patriotism than a journalist in a newspaper or brief TV news story (see Entman, 1991; Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, & Garland, 2004). *Newsweek* was, therefore, chosen because it was one of the leading newsweeklies at the time, with a 2008 circulation of 2.6 million (Friedman, 2008).

The priority here was on news coverage that was primarily—or even disproportionately—focused on Obama. As a result, story selection was limited to those in which the word *Obama* appeared in the headline. We then eliminated those stories that referred solely to Michelle Obama. Our rationale here was that those news stories in which Obama appeared in the headline would be more likely to explore in-depth Obama’s candidacy and, thus, engage the tension between racial and national identity, which was at the heart of his campaign. Indeed, those stories that made reference to Obama but did not feature him in the headline, we argue, were more likely to have focused on a narrower or even trivial aspect of his campaign. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that, by adopting this approach, it is possible that some news stories that would have been appropriate for the sample—that is, did not contain the word *Obama* in the headline but still featured him in the body of the news story—may have been excluded. Using the same date range as his campaign speeches, the LexisNexis Academic database was used to gather all stories with Obama in the headline for *NBC Nightly News*, the flagship evening newscast on that

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network ( $N = 348$ ); all Obama-headlined stories for all programs on MSNBC ( $N = 827$ ) and Fox ( $N = 467$ ); all Obamaheadlined A-section and Week-In-Review articles from *The New York Times* ( $N = 681$ ); and all Obamaheadlined stories from *Newsweek* ( $N = 111$ ). Letters to the editor were omitted, but editorials were included, because the focus was on journalist-created content.

### Results

As an initial look at the data, the aggregate numbers regarding the use of racial versus national identity cues across all of the texts—within both Obama speeches and news coverage—are presented in Table 1. These results show the total frequency of each of the 10 subcategories of terms that comprise the nation and race dictionaries.

**Table 1. Aggregate Distribution of Terms Across All Speeches and News Stories.**

| Frequency of Terms       |       |        | Percent Within Terms |                    | Percent of Texts    |                      |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Obama                    | News  |        | Obama                | News               | Obama ( $N = 211$ ) | News ( $N = 2,434$ ) |
| <b>Nation</b>            |       |        |                      |                    |                     |                      |
| America                  | 7,680 | 36,973 | 77.30%               | 50.9%              | 100.0%              | 98.2%                |
| Mythology                | 858   | 6,299  | 8.64%                | 8.7%               | 87.7%               | 49.5%                |
| Patriotism               | 174   | 1,354  | 1.75%                | 1.9%               | 24.6%               | 21.6%                |
| <i>Nation aggregates</i> | 8,712 | 44,626 | 87.73%               | 61.5%              | 100.0%              | 98.8%                |
| <b>Race</b>              |       |        |                      |                    |                     |                      |
| Racial figures           | 4     | 846    | 0.00%                | 1.2%               | 0.9%                | 12.7%                |
| Race policy              | 105   | 951    | 1.06%                | 1.3%               | 28.9%               | 17.5%                |
| Racial labels            | 782   | 21,929 | 7.87%                | 30.2%              | 54.5%               | 75.5%                |
| Obama story              | 86    | 333    | 0.86%                | 0.5%               | 27.5%               | 8.1%                 |
| Slavery                  | 69    | 400    | 0.69%                | 0.6%               | 16.6%               | 9.3%                 |
| Wright                   | 18    | 2,515  | 0.18%                | 3.5%               | 2.4%                | 18.5%                |
| Civil rights             | 154   | 1,033  | 1.55%                | 1.4%               | 25.6%               | 13.8%                |
| <i>Race aggregates</i>   | 1,218 | 28,007 | 12.27%               | 38.7% <sup>a</sup> | 67.3%               | 79.0%                |

a. The numbers do not add up to 100% in this column due to a rounding of the percentages by the Wordstat program.

The aggregate nation and race rows indicate that Obama's references to nation far outpaced his references to race: 87.73% to 12.27%. This seven-fold margin was also reflected in a separate calculation of the average number of each type of term per speech: Obama averaged 41.4 nation terms per speech and just 5.8 race terms per speech. Regarding the consistency with which Obama employed these terms, nation terms appeared in each one of his speeches; race terms, however, were present in 67% of his speeches. The fact that in one-third of his speeches, Obama did not invoke *any* of the race terms used in this analysis is notable. Thus, in looking both at the relative percentage of terms that appeared and the overall percentage of speeches in which each major cluster of terms appeared, it is evident that Obama prioritized nation over race throughout his speeches. This finding supports H1. Turning to the news sample, recall that we expected that journalists would emphasize race in their coverage of Obama's campaign more than Obama would (H2), but that, overall, national identity cues would still be more

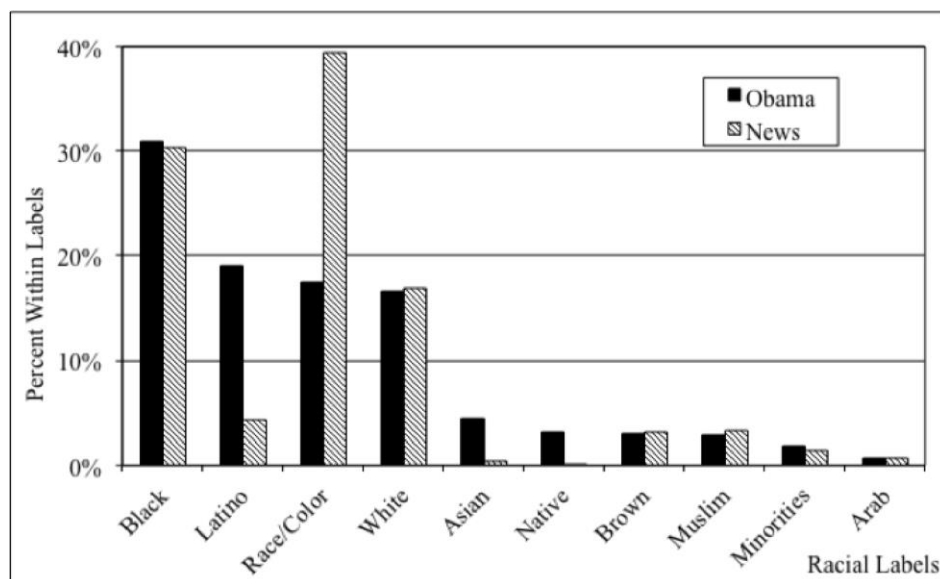
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pronounced than race in news coverage (H3). The results presented in the news columns of Table 1 support these hypotheses. In particular, 98.8% of news stories included national identity cues, and 79% included racial identity cues. That is, four of every five news stories discussed race, compared with two of every three Obama speeches. Thus, journalists were more likely than Obama to emphasize race. That said, journalists still emphasized nation more often than they did race in their news coverage. In terms of the rate of invocation per speech or story, the numbers are also telling: Although Obama averaged 41.4 nation invocations per speech to only 5.8 race invocations, news coverage averaged 18.6 nation invocations per story to 14.6 race invocations. Certainly the lengths of stories and, thus, the number of terms included vary across sources and news outlets, but the relative rates are more interesting: Whereas Obama discussed nation 7.1 times more often than race, the news media discussed nation just 1.3 times as often as race. These data support H2 and H3.

In addition, we expected that Obama would invoke less contentious racial figures and terms than would journalists (H4). A comparison of the right-hand columns in Table 1 allows a preliminary look at this expectation. First, even though the top three most-invoked categories—America, racial labels, and mythology—were the same for both Obama and journalists, the degree of their usage was quite different. For example, Obama employed racial labels in 20% fewer texts than journalists and mythology in nearly 40% more. One might not necessarily expect journalists to frequently emphasize mythology, given that this category contains a set of more nuanced nation-related terms as compared to the America category, but the fact that journalists seemed willing to fill this gap with racial labels in particular is striking—in nearly four of every five news stories, journalists included some descriptions of race, ethnicity, background, or skin color. A second distinction is that Obama rarely invoked the categories of Reverend Wright and racial figures, which were among the most divisive race term categories, mentioning them in only 2.4% and 0.9% of speeches, respectively. Journalists, by contrast, made mention to these racial categories in 18.5% and 12.7% of news stories, respectively. Moreover, within the racial figures (and groups) category, Obama *only* invoked the NAACP ( $n = 4$ ) during a speech given to that organization. None of the more contentious figures, such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, or even Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson, were invoked by Obama, whereas they appeared in news discourse with some level of frequency. Finally, within the civil rights category of terms—arguably the most unifying of the race term categories—Obama invoked these terms in a quarter of his speeches, whereas they appeared in less than 14% of news texts. Thus, in addition to differences in the quantity of race language used, there were also important differences in the types of race language employed by Obama and journalists. These results lend initial support to H4.

As a second look at H4, Figure 1 shows the relative distribution of the racial labels category employed by Obama ( $n = 782$ ) and the five news sources ( $n = 21,929$ ) in the aggregate.

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**Figure 1. Relative distributions of racial labels used by Obama and journalists.**

Here we see that, even though language about Blacks and African Americans dominated Obama's racial label language, he did devote relatively substantial and even portions to discussion of Latinos, Whites, and race/skin color in general. Journalists, on the other hand, devoted little time to Latinos and focused primarily on discussion of race in general, Blacks, and Whites. Furthermore, Obama devoted much more attention to Asians and Native Americans than did journalists, who rarely discussed those groups. This suggests that voters listening to Obama heard a more varied and multicultural description of race in the United States than they received from journalists. For a final look at H4, an exploratory principle components analysis (PCA) was conducted. PCA is valuable here because it can reveal differences in the way different terms clustered within Obama's discourse versus that of journalists. To conduct the PCA, the data were log-transformed to accommodate the zero-inflated distribution. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Principle Components Analysis with Varimax Rotation.**

| Obama                            | Component 1 | Component 2 | Component 3 |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Mythology                        | 0.861       |             |             |
| America                          | 0.831       |             |             |
| Patriotism                       | 0.723       |             |             |
| Wright                           |             | 0.816       |             |
| Slavery                          |             | 0.719       |             |
| Race policy                      |             | 0.568       |             |
| Civil rights                     |             |             | 0.767       |
| Racial figures                   |             |             | 0.699       |
| Racial labels                    |             | 0.454       | 0.581       |
| Obama story                      |             |             | 0.383       |
| Percentage of variance explained | 30.21       | 16.05       | 11.75       |
| Eigenvalue                       | 3.02        | 1.51        | 1.18        |

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|                        |       |       |           |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|
| America                | 0.804 |       |           |
| Mythology              | 0.744 |       |           |
| Patriotism             | 0.665 |       |           |
| Slavery                | 0.322 | 0.319 |           |
| Race policy            |       | 0.654 |           |
| Civil rights           |       | 0.618 |           |
| Racial figures         |       | 0.606 |           |
| Racial labels          | 0.549 | 0.603 |           |
| Obama story            |       | 0.452 |           |
| Wright                 |       | 0.336 |           |
| Percentage of variance | 30.78 | 11.59 | explained |

Eigenvalue 3.08 1.16

*Note.* Figures indicate primary factor loadings. Loadings are presented in descending order, and loadings < 0.30 are omitted for ease of visualization. When alternate loadings exceeded 0.4 or were essentially identical to primary loadings, those are indicated in gray text. In both models, KMO & Bartlett’s tests indicated that statistical assumptions were adequately met (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2005).

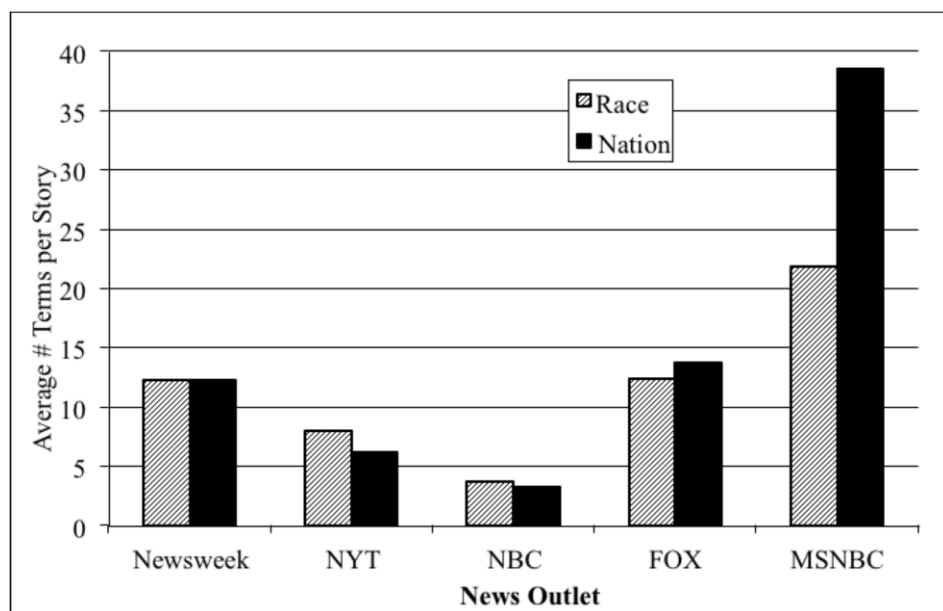
Both the Obama and news models had one factor devoted primarily to nation terms. This suggests that these terms frequently clustered together, and did so not necessarily in the consistent presence of any of the race terms. For Obama, this was a “pure nation” cluster; none of the race categories cross-loaded here. For journalists, by contrast, two race categories cross-loaded: slavery and racial labels. This means that, although journalists used the nation terms in the context of Obama, some race language also tended to appear—again suggesting that journalists prioritized race relative to nation. Second, the Obama model shows two components of race terms—one containing the categories of Reverend Wright, slavery, and race policy and another containing the civil rights, general racial labels, racial figures (containing, as noted earlier, only references to the NAACP), and Obama’s own story. This suggests that when Obama addressed more controversial racial topics such as discrimination (in race policy) and slavery, he did so in isolation, not directly tainting his discussion of other race issues or the nation in general with these controversial terms. Conversely, only one primary component is shown for journalists for

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race discourse. Thus, more unifying racial terms were likely to appear alongside more controversial ones, perhaps making the picture of race more controversial than that which was presented in Obama's discourse. Although these results should not be taken to indicate underlying theoretical or empirical constructs, their utility in revealing the clustering patterns among the terms further illustrates the patterns expected in H4: that Obama's discourse would be less divisive and controversial than that of journalists.

Our final analytical step involved exploring the consistencies across news outlets in their overall usage of racial versus national identity cues, to answer RQ1. The first point of comparison between the news outlets pertained to the raw numbers of stories with Obama in the headline—*The New York Times* had 681 relevant stories, *Newsweek* had 112, NBC had 348, Fox had 455, and MSNBC had 827. As noted earlier, NBC was limited to just its flagship *Nightly News* program, whereas the Fox and MSNBC samples were open to all hours of programming. In light of this, two differences are surprising: first, that Fox had only 100 more stories with Obama in the headline than NBC across a possible 24-hour news cycle; second, that MSNBC had almost double the headline coverage of Fox. Further, MSNBC's average story was roughly four times longer than FOX's. These patterns reveal that there might be some significant news coverage bias (see D'Alessio, 2013)—the conservative Fox was much less likely than the liberal MSNBC to feature stories focused on Obama.

As a second point of comparison, Figure 2 presents the average number of race and nation terms per news story, by outlet.

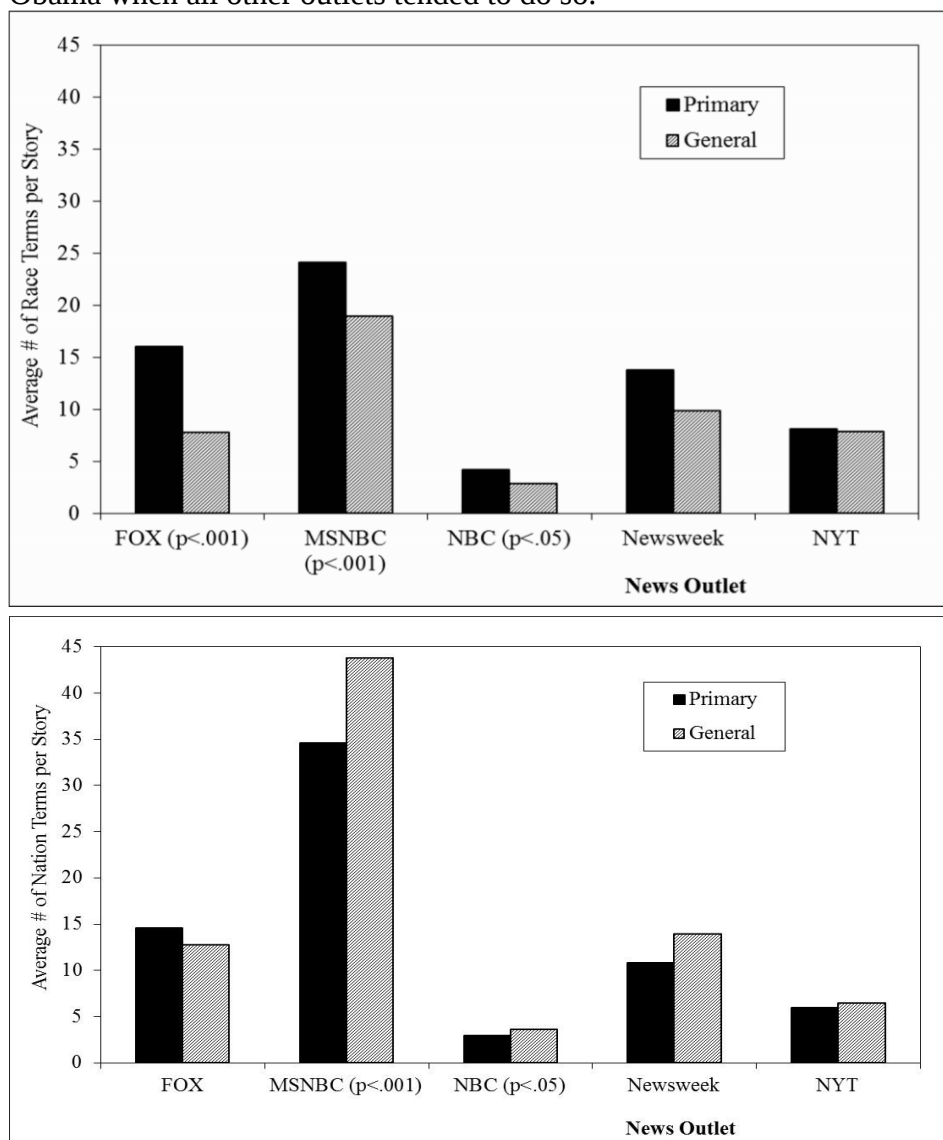


**Figure 2. Average number of race and nation terms per story, by news outlet.**

The data shown in Figure 2 should be examined within outlets; that is, comparisons between outlets are not as useful because of the varying length of their different stories. Moving from left to right, the data reveal several patterns. First, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, NBC, and Fox used nation and race terms with nearly identical frequency. These data indicate that the support demonstrated earlier for H3—that nation language would still dominate coverage of Obama—is driven almost *entirely* by MSNBC, the most politically liberal of the outlets. For a richer look at these potential ideological differences, the relative rates of race and nation invocation, per outlet, over the course of the campaign were examined. Here, we made a distinction between the primary and general phases of the election. The results are presented in Figure 3. The first clear pattern that emerges here is

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that journalists tended to decrease their race language as the campaign moved from the primary to the general election phase, with three outlets doing so significantly and a fourth substantially. Perhaps the newsworthiness of Obama's race had indeed decreased by the time he secured the nomination. By contrast, all outlets except Fox increased their nation language over the same period. Thus, it appears that race salience was replaced, to some extent, by nation salience as the campaign progressed. Fox is the clear outlier, however, not giving any more voice to nation language in its discussions of Obama as he moved closer to the presidency. In this case, the identity prioritization seems not about making race salient but about *refusing* to make nation salient in discussions of Obama when all other outlets tended to do so.



**Figure 3. Rates of race and nation invocation, by news outlet, during primary and general election phases.**

## Discussion

Research has demonstrated that racial considerations typically undermine support among White voters for a Black candidate (Hutchings & Valentino, 2004; McDermott, 1998; Mendelberg, 2008; Sigelman et al., 1995). Conversely, a politician's invocation of national identity can function as a unifying, superordinate identity,

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decreasing intergroup conflict between citizens and eliciting positive feelings from voters (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). The tension between these competing identity cues was on particular display during the 2008 campaign of Barack Obama, making the interplay between campaign discourse and news particularly ripe for analysis. The analysis presented here adds to existing scholarship in several ways. First, it introduces the concept of *identity prioritization* in minority campaigns, suggesting that journalists, likely because of news norms and routines, tend to prioritize a minority candidate's vulnerable and controversial identity in lieu of a unifying national one. Second, the analysis revealed an unexpected form of partisanship in news: a form of *identity punishment* by an ideologically opposed outlet, whereby that outlet refuses to make a unifying identity salient in its coverage of Obama. And, third, it extends research on news coverage of minority political candidates to the now-relevant presidential context; given the 2016 presidential primary candidacies of several women, racial minority and ethnic minority candidates, these analyses are informative for both scholars and practitioners alike. As expected, Obama emphasized nation to a far greater degree than he did race during his campaign. His emphasis on a superordinate identity in lieu of the subgroup identity should have provided the greatest common ground for the greatest number of voters (Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). In contrast to Obama's emphases, however, the press *consistently* prioritized race cues in its coverage of Obama, playing up the potentially more divisive aspects of Obama's candidacy. Not only were the relative proportions of identity cues quite different, but journalists also spent a great deal more time emphasizing some more contentious and less inclusive racial terms than did Obama. This highlights, systematically, the discrepancies—theorized by Terkildson and Damore (1999)—between the strategies of candidates and the priorities of news. It appears that regardless of how much a candidate might work to emphasize a superordinate identity in his or her messages, the news media will prioritize identities as they see fit—privileging the more unusual, and likely more divisive, identities instead of the national one. This presents a conflicting message for voters, who may hear a unifying message from the candidate but be reminded by news coverage of the candidate's differences. Such crosstalk in the campaign is not unusual (Just et al., 1996), but it does add yet another obstacle for candidates coming from already underrepresented groups. Furthermore, within their racial discussion, journalists tended to gravitate toward a narrower range of topics and terms than did Obama. Racial labels serve a purpose, certainly; however, one should think carefully about the fact that, depending on how they are used, such labels have the potential to reemphasize difference rather than unity among racial groups. Discussions of civil rights and race-related policy more readily involve all citizens, and often fuse national and racial identities together; in fact, this was one of Obama's discursive strengths in the campaign: He often invoked race in a way that included it as part of a national discourse. By telling his story as "only possible in America," for example, he linked his race and nation together for voters, possibly in a way that was less alienating than a standard racial label.

Finally, interesting differences emerged between the ideologically oriented outlets of MSNBC and Fox. The more liberal MSNBC echoed Obama's patterns of identity invocation, favoring nation dramatically over race—thus making national identity clearly salient in its coverage of Obama. As the campaign shifted from the primary to the general election, all news outlets tended to decrease their race invocations, indicating a possible waning of the newsworthiness of race over time. However, only Fox did not increase its use of nation language; instead, Fox refused to make national identity salient in its Obama coverage. Notably, this finding is consistent with the work of D'Alessio (2013), in which Fox News was shown to be substantially more conservative in its coverage of presidential elections than the broadcast networks. Indeed, such partisan identity punishment of a candidate—where the ideologically opposed outlet refuses to grant a unifying national identity as a campaign progresses—is interesting and worth future examination in more detail.

This study is not without limitations, of course. The dictionaries of terms, although comprehensive, did not include all possible references to either identity, especially more subtle or latent terms that cue group identity (McIlwain

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& Caliendo, 2011) and that nonetheless can have implicit effects (Mendelberg, 2001). Terms that jointly cue both race and nation—such as those in the civil rights category—also should be conceptualized separately in future work, and their effects studied experimentally. Further, our decision to focus on these particular news outlets, and on coverage in which Obama was in the headline (versus, for example, the lead paragraph or even full text), were necessarily limiting. Future studies should take these limitations into account. Finally, this study should be complemented by scholars working in an interpretive paradigm; quantitative analysis on this scale cannot pick up the nuances and latent meanings of identity discourse. In conjunction with the systematic, largescale analysis offered here, communication scholars should add insight about models of identity invocation and news coverage for a range of presidential candidates in the future—including for those candidates who have other, nontraditional and as-yet-untested identities in U.S. presidential politics—such as nonmainstream Christian religious identities and nonheteronormative gender and sexual identities. Ideally, the presidential office should be open to any qualified U.S. citizen. Knowing that one can expect the candidates to emphasize nation but news media to emphasize those nontraditional identities should help to envision ways in which future elections could enrich democracy by expanding the field of potential candidates.

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