

Elite Messages: The Role of Race as a Source Cue

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I. Overview

In public debate about many social issues, leading societal actors, groups, and institutions interact with a goal of shaping citizens' perceptions and outlook. In this process, a growing body of research suggests that what social and political elites say and do, and the manner in which news media report these actions, often exerts considerable influence upon citizens' opinion formation and policy evaluations (Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Zaller, 1992). A premise of this research is that while some individuals are motivated, interested, and capable of comprehensive processing of political ideas and messages (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), many citizens, when given appropriate opportunities, use shortcuts in forming political judgments, such as relying on trusted sources of information (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; McGuire, 1969; Mondak, 1993). Building upon this scholarship, this paper suggests that a nuanced understanding of elites and their influence in politics must take into account the role of *source cues* in citizens' information processing. Indeed, some aggregate-level research suggests that elites' partisan ties serve as important cues in the public's filtering of discourse about media and politics (Zaller, 1994; Watts et al., 1999). Virtually unexamined, however, is the potential influence of other seemingly important source characteristics of political elites — such as one's race or gender.

With this in mind, this paper offers a theoretical framework that attempts to link elite discourse, source cues, and citizens' racial and political cognitions. I then report some results of an experiment in which the source of a first-person essay about race relations, presented in the context of a leading newsmagazine, was systematically altered — as written by either a *white* elite or *black* elite — within otherwise constant information environments to examine how individuals process, evaluate, and use elites' ideas and perspectives in forming political judgments. The sample consisted of undergraduate students at the University of Washington.

II. A Theoretical Framework

Race relations, particularly between whites and blacks in the United States, intersect with much contemporary political discourse, either manifestly in discussion of racial policies such as affirmative action or implicitly in debate about issues such as crime, welfare, immigration, and poverty. It seems reasonable, therefore, to expect that citizens have schema about race that are mentally available and, in varying degrees, "accessible" — that is, fairly easily activated and retrieved from memory in response to stimuli (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Graber, 1988; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & King, 1981). Further, it seems likely that these constructs consist of values, such as principles of equality and personal responsibility, inter-mingled with perceptions about racial groups, particular

issue policies, and race relations in general. In combination, these factors increase the likelihood that discourse about race will, first, activate certain values and perceptions, and then, secondly, influence whether individuals apply these considerations in race-related political judgments, as some recent research suggests (Domke et al., 1999; Mendelberg, 1997; Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Valentino, 1999).

I posit that these processes are particularly likely to occur when (a) the sources in political conversation are social and political elites, and (b) their perspectives are presented within a news media context. Indeed, as noted, research suggests that what elites say and do, and the manner in which news media report these actions, exerts considerable influence upon public opinion; lacking, however, is individual-level examination of the cognitive processes involved in such influence. My perspective is that elite sources are perceived as highly credible, particularly when presented within a news media context in which "expert" status is magically bestowed upon key political actors by seemingly neutral journalists and editors. I contend that as a result of generally perceiving elites as credible sources, citizens encountering ideas by elites in news discourse will not only have certain mental constructs activated, *but will consider adopting that elite's political perspective*. Indeed, several decades of research suggests that sources perceived as highly credible often are highly influential upon people (e.g., Aronson & Golden, 1962; Chaiken, 1980; McGuire, 1968). To be clear, my argument is not that elites *create* individuals' viewpoints, but rather that elites are particularly successful at *both* activating certain ideas and inspiring individuals to adopt and apply those ideas in political interpretations and evaluations.

At the same time, however, I believe that this theorized influence of elites' messages upon citizen cognitions will be substantially mediated by source characteristics of the elites, in particular one's race. Considerable research suggests that negative perceptions or stereotypes of racial minorities, such as African Americans, are widely held among U.S. adults (e.g., Devine, 1989; Sears et al., 1997). Such negative racial perceptions seem likely to prompt individuals to give less credibility to an argument if the source is an African American, and the relative dearth of black elites in U.S. politics would seem to ensure that their race would be noted by citizens. Further, the fact that whites and blacks are deeply divided on many political concerns (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Page & Shapiro, 1992) — a fact widely discussed by elites, journalists, and pundits in recent years in the context of high-profile racialized incidents involving black men such as Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, and Amadou Diallo and white police officers — may prompt many white individuals, in particular, to become skeptical about an African American elite's perspective. In the context of discourse about issues with clear racial implications, for example, a black source may be perceived as having what Burkhart et al. (1997) call a "vested interest" in the debate, thereby undermining their perceived impartiality. Both of these factors, then, suggest, that an argument by a black elite about the status of race relations will be viewed as less credible, particularly by white citizens, and, as a result, will be less influential upon individuals' information processing, than discourse by a white elite. Accordingly, my first hypothesis is that *individuals presented with an argument about race relations by an elite white source will be more likely to adopt the perspective of the source than individuals presented with the identical argument by an elite black source*.

I also am interested in how an elite's race may influence the cognitive associations formed by individuals as they process information and make political judgments. Some research suggests that a person's mental framework is a network of integrated and intersecting concepts and constructs, with the linkages between constructs strengthened each time they are activated in tandem (Anderson, 1985; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Judd & Krosnick, 1989). As a result, Berkowitz and Rogers (1986, pp. 58-59) argue, "When a thought element is activated or brought into focal awareness, the activation radiates out from this particular node along the associative pathways to other nodes," thereby increasing the probability that related constructs will come to mind, influencing subsequent evaluations and the formation of impressions (Lodge & Stroh, 1993). It may be, then, that elites are in a position to "trigger" priming effects that begin with individuals' thoughts about a topic and then, through spreading activation, carry over to *associated* cognitive elements (Domke et al., 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In this process it seems likely that discourse by elites, by emphasizing certain considerations and relationships and not others, may help to strengthen (or weaken) the linkages between one mental construct and related ones. Such processes may have substantial implications for politics and race.

In particular, due to the historical, social, and political significance of race in U.S. culture, it is my expectation that people's orientations toward relations between blacks and whites are linked, in varying degrees, with a wide grouping of values and political ideas and judgments. With this in mind, I posit that elite discourse may not only *activate* certain race-related values and political perceptions, particularly those that are the focal point of an elite's argument, but also may *strengthen the associations* among these constructs, as well as linkages with other related political evaluations such as specific policy positions. I contend that such a process of spreading activation is likely to occur because the mental linkages among race-related values and political evaluations have been established over time for many citizens, in part due to seemingly periodic "racial moments" — e.g., Rodney King, O.J. Simpson — that occur in U.S. society; as a result, I expect that such linkages are activated with relative ease whenever political elites emphasize race relations in discourse. In essence, then, my view is that elite messages can trigger a set of cognitive linkages that strengthen the associations among individuals' mental frameworks, and that such frameworks are particularly likely to be integrated in the domain of race relations.

At the same time, consistent with earlier theorizing, I believe that such influence of elites' messages upon citizens' mental associations will be substantially mediated by a source's race. Specifically, when the discourse focuses on how to improve race relations in some fashion, an argument by a white elite, who has already achieved some measure of stature, seems likely to be perceived as motivated by factors other than personal gain, thereby increasing the credibility of the source. As a result, individuals, particularly white citizens, may not only adopt the source's perspective (as argued in hypothesis 1), but will — albeit unconsciously in many cases, I suspect — exhibit strengthened linkages among race-related political considerations, particularly those that are emphasized by the elite, within their associative networks. In contrast, an argument by a black elite seems likely to spur concern about source motivations and credibility, thereby focusing individuals' information processing and evaluations upon considerations other than those emphasized by the elite. As a result, when an African American elite is the source in discourse about

race relations, the associations among individuals' race-related political considerations seem likely to be weak. Instead, in such instances I expect that other factors — in particular, views of black Americans in general — will become central to individuals' information processing and subsequent judgments. Accordingly, my second hypothesis is that *the relationship between individuals' race-related values and political perceptions will be much stronger among individuals presented with an argument about race relations by an elite white source than among individuals presented with the same argument by an elite black source*. And my final hypothesis is that *the relationship between individuals' race-related values and political perceptions with their position on racial policy (e.g., the appropriate role of government) will be much stronger among individuals presented with an argument about race relations by an elite white source than among individuals presented with the same argument by an elite black source*.

III.3. An exploratory study

The core of this research strategy is the controlled presentation of political information environments. In this study, two experimental conditions and one control condition were created. In the experimental conditions, subjects received one article and one first-person essay, both presented in a newsmagazine format modeled upon *Time* and *Newsweek*. The article was an actual *Newsweek* story (shortened slightly) on portable communications technology, a subject unrelated to the research focus but consistent with the forward-looking nature of the essay. The first-person essay, created for this study, discusses the current status and future outlook of U.S. race relations. The essay was given the headline "Race in the New Millennium," and was accompanied by three photographs. Across these experimental conditions, all information and photographs were held constant; only the first name of the essay author was altered. The control condition contained no stimulus. To manipulate the race of the elite source, the essay author's name was altered. In one experimental condition, "Patrick Sullivan" was the essay author; I expected that this name would bring to subjects' minds a white, European American individual. In the other experimental condition, "Tyrone Sullivan" was the essay author; I expected that this name would bring to subjects' minds an African American author. These names were selected based on a survey conducted prior to the experiment with other undergraduate students in the same academic discipline. Of 19 commonplace names in the survey, Patrick was most often associated with "white (European)" and Tyrone was most often associated with "African American": 68 of 69 respondents made each of these associations. To confer elite status upon the essay author, he was identified — seemingly by the newsmagazine editors — as "Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, an independent, bipartisan organization," which is a real agency in the federal government's executive branch (the link to the government was not mentioned). Use of male names controlled for gender, and political ideology was controlled by having the essay author affiliated with a bipartisan organization.

The essay was adapted from a speech given by President Bill Clinton during a commencement ceremony on June 14, 1997, at the University of California at San Diego, to unveil his "One America" initiative. The text was modified considerably; in particular, content was added that advocated three concerns. First, the essay argued for the importance of *equality* in race relations. Second, the essay argued that while gains have been made in U.S. race relations, the *extent of racial progress* is inadequate. Third, in a similar fashion, the essay argued that while gains have been made in creating *equal*

opportunities regardless of race, the current extent of opportunities for racial minorities is inadequate. These three arguments, then, were the focal points of the essay.

Subjects were told that they were being asked to participate in a research project examining their views about news coverage and social issues. Each subject in the experimental conditions read the articles and then filled out a questionnaire; subjects in the control group only filled out the questionnaire. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions, and took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete the materials.

The questionnaire examined subjects' (a) ranking of equality in a hierarchy of 15 values; (b) perceptions of the extent of racial progress; (c) perceptions of the extent of equal opportunity regardless of race; (d) impressions of black Americans in general; (e) belief in the importance of equality among groups in society; and (f) view of the appropriate role of government in race relations. All were closed-ended measures, and are not described here for the sake of brevity.

IV. Some results and discussion

The view offered in this paper is that a nuanced understanding of elites and their influence in politics must take into account the type of *source cues* present in the political arena, and the role of such cues — particularly a source's race — in citizens' information processing. The experiment results provide support for this perspective. Three components of the theory and findings merit discussion.

First, I contend that negative perceptions, or stereotypes, of African Americans that are widespread in U.S. culture seem likely to diminish many citizens' assessments of the credibility of black elites and will, as a result, reduce the influence of their messages. Second, I suggest that in political debate about race relations, a perception that African Americans have a "vested interest" in certain policies also will damage the perceived credibility of black elites. The pattern of results is consistent with both of these arguments. Findings show that individuals presented with a newsmagazine essay on race relations "authored" by an elite black source were significantly *less* likely to adopt this elite's perspective than individuals presented with the same essay by an elite white source. I find this in (1) the emphasis that individuals place upon equality in their personal values, (2) individuals' perceptions in the extent of racial progress, and (3) individuals' perceptions in the extent of equal opportunities across racial groups. Further, results also indicate that the *associations* among one's race-related values and political perceptions — specifically, those which were the focal points of the elite's argument — were considerably weaker when the elite source was black rather than white. Similarly, results indicate that when a black elite was the source, individuals' perceptions of African Americans in general *and* individuals' own racial status were the only variables significantly linked to their views of the appropriate role of government in race relations, suggesting that racialized cognitions were salient for these individuals.

Third, in contrast, my view is that an argument by an elite white source will exert the "expected" influence suggested by growing bodies of scholarship on priming effects and the role of elites in public opinion formation — that is, the elite's message is likely to (a) activate and increase the accessibility of certain mental constructs for individuals, and (b) strengthen the linkages among associated cognitions and judgments (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Zaller, 1992). Indeed, the experiment results indicate that individuals presented with a white elite as the source of the newsmagazine

essay on race relations were highly likely to adopt the elite's perspective and to exhibit linkages among race-related values, political perceptions, and policy evaluations, all of which are suggestive of the cognitive processes some scholars have suggested are triggered by news media and elite messages about race (Domke et al., 1999; Valentino, 1999). These findings among individuals presented with the elite white source, therefore, are wholly consistent with both aggregate-level research on the influence of elite discourse and individual-level work on priming effects, *nearly all of which has been conducted in contexts in which the key political actors are white*. While such a *primary* focus is understandable given the prevalence of white elites in U.S. political culture, the limitations of these theoretical frameworks, as currently formulated, are unmistakable. These findings, then, in combination with some other work (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Zaller, 1994), strongly suggest that source characteristics of elites may substantially influence how citizens process, evaluate, and use the ideas and arguments of political elites.

With this mind, it seems important, at a minimum, to explore the potential influence of other racial and ethnic source categories. For example, examination of whether an Asian American or Hispanic source similarly influences citizens' processing and evaluation of elite messages about race relations would shed further insight into these relationships. My speculation is that a similar pattern of findings would emerge — albeit it is likely that other stereotypes and associated constructs would enter into active thought — but that racial status would nonetheless continue to be an important source cue. Further, it seems plausible that the relevance of an elite's racial status may vary across issue domains. For example, a source's race seems likely to be most crucial in discourse about topics with manifest racial dimensions, such as race profiling by law enforcement or disagreements regarding display of the Confederate flag in public places, since in these instances minority sources must face both culturally embedded stereotypes and questions about their personal stake in the issue outcomes. When individuals encounter elite discourse about issues that intersect with race relations more implicitly, such as crime and welfare, some evidence suggests that racial stereotypes may remain an important influence, particularly if discourse takes on a "racially coded" tenor (Gilens, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; Mendelberg, 1997). Finally, the influence of race as a source cue would seem likely to be smallest in issue domains that, at the surface, are seemingly unrelated to race relations, such as tax cuts and gay rights. All of this, of course, remains to be explored in future research.

It also seems likely that other source characteristics — such as gender, sexuality, age, religious affiliation, and so on — may be important cues for the public as it processes elite discourse about political issues. For example, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) found that individuals' stereotypic gender expectations "translated directly" into perceptions of political candidates' competency to address particular social problems, but that the political consequences of such gender stereotypes remains an open question. Further, Burt and Code (1995) suggest that the mental image of a "typical" person possessed by most Americans is "male, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and 'of a certain maturity' (neither too young nor too old)" (p. 15); if this is the case, then citizens may implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, evaluate social and political sources in relation to such qualities. At the same time, it seems plausible that elite source characteristics may interact in significant ways with audience characteristics. In this study, subjects were

primarily white, with a sizable minority Asian American; among these individuals, the credibility and influence of the black elite source suffered in comparison to the white elite source. Intuitively, it seems reasonable to expect that sources, at least initially, would hold higher credibility among populations with similar characteristics (see Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994), but whether such a relationship endures might depend on elites' messages as well as several other factors. In short, considerable avenues exist for future work on how elite messages and messengers interact with citizens' political cognitions. While this research offers insight into the role of source cues as a mediating factor in citizens' processing of elite discourse, I recognize that it has some weaknesses. In particular, I theorize that the cognitive effects spurred by contextual factors such as the newsmagazine essay and elite source's race depend, to some degree, on the associations and inter-connections within an individual's mental system. With this perspective, the results in this study suggest that the white elite's *ideas* substantially strengthened the linkages among individuals' race-related values, political perceptions, and outlook on the appropriate role of government in race relations, while the black elite's *race* prompted individuals to draw upon their perceptions of African Americans and their own racial identities. I am unable, however, to offer concrete evidence of the relations between mental constructs, partly due to the difficulty of getting inside the cognitive "black box." Further, the limitations of any single experimental study are obvious. Until the type, role, and import of source cues in individuals' processing of messages are examined across differing populations and differing issues and with differing methodologies, I recognize that this theoretical perspective, while intriguing, must be argued cautiously.

V. Citations

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