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CRIME NEWS AND THE PRIMING OF RACIAL ATTITUDES DURING EVALUATIONS OF THE PRESIDENT

NICHOLAS A. VALENTINO

Abstract This study explores the news media's ability to activate racial attitudes via stereotypic portrayals of minorities in common local crime coverage. The central hypothesis is that crime news containing minority suspects primes racial attitudes, which are subsequently brought to bear on evaluations of political candidates. In an experiment, subjects were shown no crime story, a story with nonminority suspects, or a story featuring minority suspects. President Clinton's support suffered when any crime story was present, but his support was lowest among those who saw news with minority suspects. Evaluation of Clinton's performance on crime was primed powerfully by exposure to crime news, and this effect was largest when the suspects in the story were nonwhite. Spreading activation to performance on welfare, another "race-coded" issue, was also evident among those exposed to racially stereotypic crime stories. Finally, among whites, exposure to minority suspects boosted the importance of the president's concern for whites as a predictor of his overall support. These results suggest that implicitly racial issues are connected in memory and can be simultaneously activated by common news coverage. The findings prompt further consideration of the political impact of stereotype-reinforcing news.

The influence of the news media is of continuing interest to those who would hope to understand the dynamics of political behavior. Empirical evidence provides ample support for Cohen's (1963) claim that the news might not tell us what to think, but it does help determine what we think about. In particular, we know that coverage of an issue boosts the impact of a candidate's performance on that issue as a criterion for her overall

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support (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). The news can also prime character-related criteria during candidate evaluation (Mendelsohn 1996). Thus, the media alters the weight attached to a given criterion by "priming" a relevant issue.

The dominant model of information processing underlying the priming effect is known as cognitive accessibility theory. Instead of inventorying every memory relevant to a particular decision, people use shortcuts to simplify the process. Heuristics are critical during political decision making, especially when detailed information relevant to the decision is scarce (Lupia 1994; Simon 1955). Furthermore, readily accessible information is weighted more heavily in the process. Recent activation is one fact that determines accessibility. For example, Srull and Wyer (1979, 1980) demonstrate that recently activated personal traits are more likely to be used in subsequent evaluations of ambiguous behaviors.

Related work on information processing attempts to describe the way information is organized in memory. This work invokes the notion of an "associative network" of related opinion nodes, or "schemas," linked in memory (Anderson 1983). The linkages between nodes vary in strength, depending on the frequency of pairing in previous experience. If the model were correct, one would expect that activating one node in a network would "spread" to other closely linked nodes. This phenomenon has been dubbed "spreading activation" (Collins and Loftus 1975).

Although priming studies involving the news media provide support for the first two tenets of the accessibility model—the use of cognitive shortcuts and the increased weight afforded recently activated schemas—media researchers have discovered relatively little evidence for spreading activation between ostensibly related schemas. For example, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that coverage of the Camp David peace accords boosted the impact of the president's performance in dealing with foreign countries but did not affect the predictive power of a seemingly related issue: the decline in American power and prestige. The authors concluded that "priming may require a close fit between the domain of judgment that is the intended target of priming and the news stories that constitute the prime itself" (p. 111).

Why has spreading activation seemed so elusive in research on political cognition when cognitive psychologists have demonstrated it conclusively? One possibility is that we have been looking in the wrong place. Work involving the organization of political information in memory suggests that group attitudes play a central role in associative networks (Conover 1984). Perhaps it is worth shifting our attention to the activation of issues connected via ties to various groups that are vying for rights and resources in the political arena. Attitudes about groups might play a central role in cognitive networks, such that spreading activation is more

likely to occur when connections between the issue and the group are made explicit.

A large body of theory and empirical research suggests that, in order to successfully navigate our complex social environment, we make use of stereotyping, group categorization, and other simplifying techniques (Allport 1954; Tajfel 1969; Turner 1984). One result of this cognitive process is intergroup bias or discrimination (Tajfel 1970). Evidence is also mounting that, under certain conditions, group-based stereotypes are activated quite automatically in the presence of group-relevant stimuli (Devine 1989; Kawakami, Dion, and Dovidio 1998; Perdue et al. 1990). Gilbert and Hixon (1991) also find that many thoughts and feelings are evoked involuntarily and can only be suppressed consciously, after the fact. Specifically, when people are not given enough time to control their reaction to a stereotypic stimulus, they tend to adopt attitudes consistent with the stereotype.

Research on category accessibility, which provides the foundation for group priming theory, typically involves targeting single trait categories (Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977; Srull and Wyer 1979). One word flashed on a screen primes a construct and then the subject performs a task using that construct. Typically, constructs primed in this way influence behavioral tasks more frequently and more rapidly than other constructs. Simple lexical task experiments allow the researcher to target specific constructs. For example, respondents exposed to the words "hostility" or "kindness" were subsequently more likely to interpret the ambiguous behavior of a stranger in accordance with the primed trait (Srull and Wyer 1979).

In the political arena, spreading activation from one issue to another might occur if the issues are related to each other via their underlying group content. For example, if opinions about two substantively unrelated issues, like welfare and crime, are linked in memory to one's racial attitudes, then exposure to crime should also activate race and should subsequently activate other race-relevant issues, such as welfare. This extension of priming effects into the realm of group concerns has been referred to simply as "group priming" (Jamieson 1992).

This study attempts to combine psychological theories of stereotype activation with research on the organization of political information in memory. The goal is to investigate one set of real-world stimuli—news coverage of crime—as a priming stimulus for racial attitudes that are subsequently brought to bear on evaluations of political leaders. Other work has shown that exposure to news coverage of crime reinforces racial stereotypes, especially when it portrays minorities as suspects (Gilliam et al. 1996). This same news coverage might, therefore, prime racial attitudes in evaluations of political leaders.

I explore the impact of exposure to common local crime coverage on

evaluations of President Bill Clinton during the 1996 election cycle. If such coverage causes changes in evaluations of the president, we will investigate whether the criteria of judgment have changed. In other words, the group-priming process should have real implications for evaluations of the president because he and his party maintain some reputation about various groups. Issue ownership theory (Petrocik 1996) explains this linkage.

Issue ownership theory suggests that the party's relationship to various groups underlies long-term issue reputations. For example, news about crime plays into the hands of Republicans. This issue reputation is built, in part, upon the performance of high-profile party representatives. Richard Nixon ran in 1968 on a "law and order" platform, directed at the Vietnam War protesters who received nightly coverage throughout the election campaign (Sears et al. 1980). Ronald Reagan reinforced this linkage as an outspoken proponent of the death penalty. George Bush pushed for mandatory sentencing for car jacking and drug-related crimes. In California, Republican Governor Pete Wilson successfully lobbied for "three-strikes" legislation that sent three-time-felony convicts to jail for life. In short, Republicans have demonstrated their "toughness" on the issue of violent crime.

Issue reputations are also based on the public's impressions about the group coalitions that make up the parties' core support (Petrocik 1996, p. 827). Many issues are infused with symbolic group cues. Crime, for example, has become "racialized" as a result of the patterns of coverage described above (Sears et al. 1980). In addition, voters maintain longstanding beliefs about relationships between parties and groups (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller, Wlezien, and Hildreth 1991). Party attachments grow out of these linkages. Therefore, group concerns are implicated during evaluations of major-party presidential candidates. If news about crime activates racial attachments that are subsequently used as heuristics for judging presidential candidates, Republicans will be advantaged.

Group Attitudes and the Organization of Political Information

Scholars have made few attempts to apply and test the notion that group attitudes can be primed in the political arena. Lau (1989) has convincingly shown that group attitudes may be "chronically" salient to some voters in evaluating political candidates. Nevertheless, the possibility that the news media variably determine the salience of group-based attitudes is intuitively appealing. Sometimes particular groups receive a great deal of attention in the news during particular historical events or trends. Other kinds of media attention to groups might be less episodic but not less

effective at raising the salience of group attitudes, such as the depiction of minorities as violent crime suspects.

Group attitudes may frequently be activated by news because it tends to place groups in a comparative context, pitting the interests of one group against another (Price 1989). Crime news is a particularly good example of this phenomenon. Coverage of violent crime is increasingly popular with news agencies under new budget pressures seeking to boost ratings. The bias toward violent crime leads to an overemphasis on blacks as crime suspects (Entman 1990; Peffley, Shields, and Williams 1996). For whites, such stories are vivid reminders of the supposed threat they face from "aggressive" and "violent" minorities, including blacks. For blacks and other minorities, the stories may serve as reminders of unfair treatment by the criminal justice system.

On the other hand, coverage of white suspects does not directly reinforce negative racial stereotypes nor does it emphasize racial conflict or threat in the ways described above, so one would not expect it to produce strong group-priming effects. Crime news containing no suspects is a more difficult case. Others have shown that people infer minority perpetrators even when they are not explicitly shown in the crime news story (Gilliam and Iyengar 1997). Nevertheless, when the news directly reinforces a negative racial stereotype by visually depicting blacks as suspects, one would expect to find the largest group-priming effect.

The existing research exploring contextual effects on the salience of group attachments during political decision making has largely been survey based. The advantages of survey methodology lie in the generalizability of the findings. The gain in external validity, however, comes with a loss of control over the priming stimuli. Koch (1994), for example, tests the hypothesis that national economic conditions, such as high unemployment, will prime class-based attachments. He finds that the relationship between class identity and candidate choice in 1972 (when unemployment was high) was larger than that same relationship in 1976 (when unemployment was low). These results suggest that media context could prime certain group attachments.

Mendelberg's (1997) experimental work on priming symbolic racism in racial policy opinions via exposure to Bush's now infamous 1988 "revolving-door" presidential advertisement is the most convincing demonstration to date that racial attitudes can be primed by media exposure. In an experiment, subjects who viewed news coverage about the Bush "turnstile" ad were much more likely to employ existing racial prejudices in opinions about racial policies than were those who were not shown the coverage.

This study would greatly expand the set of media stimuli that have a demonstrable group-priming effect. It would do so in two ways. First, Mendelberg (1997) demonstrated that a very controversial and well-

known political campaign message could prime racial prejudice in public opinion about governmental policies related to race. Both the stimulus and the target attitudes in that study were explicitly political. These analyses investigate whether crime news coverage that never mentions government policies or politicians primes racial attitudes in evaluations of the president.

Second, one might argue that the Willie Horton story was not only explicitly political, but also explicitly racial. By the time Mendelberg did her study in 1992, the media had covered the story extensively as an example of politicians "playing the race card" for the purpose of achieving electoral advantage.¹ The current study also explores whether implicitly racial news coverage—crime stories with minority suspects—primes racial attitudes as well. If nonpolitical, racially implicit media content substantially boosts the impact of racial attitudes during political decision making, concern about the process of news story selection and framing might be significantly elevated. Such findings would also necessitate further consideration of the impact of elite manipulation of racial conflicts for political gain.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis involves our expectations about the main effects of exposure to racially stereotypic crime stimuli with regard to evaluations of Democratic President Bill Clinton and his Republican challenger in 1996, Bob Dole. Issue ownership theory suggests that since Republicans "own" crime, stories that raise the salience of the issue should play to Dole's advantage in 1996. Conversely, exposure to crime coverage should depress Clinton's support.²

However, not all crime news is expected to have the same impact. Coverage that directly reinforces negative stereotypes about minorities infuses the issue with racial significance. This combination of race and crime should benefit Republican candidates most since they are seen both as tough on crime and as the party that best represents whites. Conversely, because Democrats are known for their liberal and progressive stance on crime policy and racial issues, Clinton might suffer most when the two

1. Mendelberg uses the fact that her student sample did not have high levels of recall of the Horton incident to argue that the effects are not biased by previous experience with the incident. Yet other studies have indicated that there was widespread recognition of the incident among adults (Jamieson 1992). Thus, it is important to note that an adult sample would probably have been even more likely to understand the racial message in that particular stimulus.

2. This will be an especially strong test of the ownership hypothesis since Clinton has worked hard to distance himself from the "soft-on-crime" Democratic stereotype.

dimensions are combined in the news. This discussion leads to the first hypothesis.

HYPOTHESIS 1.—Exposure to crime news, especially when it features minority suspects, will depress Clinton's overall support and boost Dole's.

The second hypothesis explores the capacity of various types of crime news to prime concern about the issue itself. One would expect that the weight of Clinton's performance on crime, as a predictor of his overall support, should increase when people are exposed to news about the issue. Furthermore, according to the group-priming hypothesis, stereotype-reinforcing crime news should prime racial concerns most powerfully. The presence of minority suspects in a news story reinforces the racial significance of the issue, making it both more vivid and threatening for whites and more likely to provoke defensive reactions among minorities than when coverage includes counterstereotypic depictions. In other words, racial attitudes will be more salient when a respondent is asked to evaluate the president's performance on crime. Overtly reinforcing the linkage between race and crime should, therefore, boost the weight of Clinton's performance on crime.³

HYPOTHESIS 2.—Crime news should prime Clinton's performance on crime as a predictor of his overall support. The effect should be largest among those respondents exposed to minority suspects.

Through the process of spreading activation described above, a stimulus may prime constructs that are linked in memory to the one specifically targeted (Collins and Loftus 1975). This is expected to happen only when a news story primes the underlying attitudes that bind two issues together in an associative network. The issue in the story might share little or no explicit content in common with another issue. Yet spreading activation might still occur if the target issue and the story are indirectly related through a third schema.

Applied to the current analysis, stereotypic crime news might prime attitudes about issues such as welfare because crime and welfare have both been racialized in recent decades. Gilens (1996, 1997) shows that the elite discussion surrounding welfare policy in the United States has become "race-coded" in recent decades. If so, priming racial attitudes through exposure to news about crime should spread to and activate welfare attitudes as well. On the other hand, presidential performance on issues that are less central to racial concerns, like taxation or balancing the

3. Another way to think about this argument would be to suggest that stereotypic crime portrayals are the most "typical" examples of such portrayals. Previous research suggests that blacks are disproportionately featured in coverage of violent crime while whites are underrepresented (Gilliam et al. 1996). As a more typical instance of the phenomenon, news involving minority suspects is more likely to activate the cognitive schema for crime, making concerns about that issue more accessible during judgments about presidential candidates.

budget, should not be strongly primed.⁴ Furthermore, as with the basic priming effect, spreading activation should be greatest when the story explicitly reinforces negative racial stereotypes by depicting minorities as suspects.

HYPOTHESIS 3.—News about crime, especially that featuring minority suspects, should prime concerns about other “race-coded” issues, such as welfare, in evaluations of the president. Conversely, news about crime should not prime concerns about issues with less manifest linkages to race, such as taxation or balancing the budget, in evaluations of the president.

Finally, we can formulate a somewhat more direct test of the group-priming hypothesis. If, as has been argued, issues are linked via their implications for various groups in society, then the stereotypic crime stimulus should prime attitudes about the groups directly. A variety of group attitudes might be primed during exposure to crime news, including in-group attitudes, such as group identification (Lau 1989; Turner 1984), “self-schemas” (Markus 1977), or group consciousness (Miller et al. 1981); and attitudes toward out-groups, such as symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears 1988; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979), aversive racism (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986), realistic group conflict (Bobo 1983), or group self-interest (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Each of these attitudes affects a variety of political opinions, including governmental assistance to minorities and support for minority candidates.

The current analysis lacks measures of specific group attitudes, such that it is impossible here to sort out precisely which ones are primed by the crime stimulus. Instead, a measure of presidential concern for the respondent’s own racial group is used. If the stereotypic crime stimulus actually primes in-group attachments, the president’s concern for one’s group should become a better predictor of his overall evaluation. If, instead, feelings about out-groups are primed, the same effect should be demonstrated with regard to presidential concern. Those who are highly attached to their own group will use presidential concern for their group as a factor in their evaluations. Those who feel threatened by, or negative affect toward, out-groups should also be more concerned about the representation of their own group. If either type of attitude is primed, it is posited that crime news containing minority suspects should boost the importance of Clinton’s perceived concern for one’s own racial group as a predictor of Clinton’s overall support.⁵

HYPOTHESIS 4.—News about crime, especially that featuring minority suspects, should prime Clinton’s perceived concern for one’s own racial group as a predictor of his overall support.

Data and Measures

This study employs experimental methodology. Experiments are especially well suited for studying exposure effects because they allow the researcher to isolate and manipulate content factors they believe to be causally related to some attitudinal or behavioral variable. Random assignment of subjects to control and treatment groups ensures, at some level of probability, that the differences between groups measured after exposure are attributable to the treatment stimuli and not to some other factor. Of course, experiments have shortcomings. Demand characteristics may reduce the generalizability of experimental effects if they induce behaviors that would not occur in a natural setting. In particular, the laboratory setting might lead respondents to pay more attention to the news or political ads on the screen and to react differently to them than they normally would. Several techniques for reducing these demand characteristics were employed in the current study.

Subjects taking part in this study were told that it involved “selective perception of news stories.” Participants were recruited with flyers, with announcements in newsletters, and by personal contact in shopping malls offering payment of \$15 for participation in “media research.” They were not told the real intent of the study until they had completed the entire 40-minute procedure. The experiment took place in three small office complexes outside the university in the Los Angeles area.⁶ These settings were similarly furnished and decorated to look as much as possible like a natural location for watching television, that is, like a typical living room. The variety of locations helped to ensure a large and diverse subject pool. The study employed an adult, nonstudent sample. The sample was roughly comparable to the city’s population in terms of gender, race, education, income, age, and partisanship.⁷ The total available sample contained 289 subjects. Crime coverage was culled directly from local broadcasts immediately before the period of the study, which took place during the summer of 1996. Ultimately, we selected footage from a citywide police operation to arrest suspected gang members who had been under

4. Taxes and the budget in general may or may not be framed in terms that evoke racial attitudes. Sears and Citrin (1982) find that, under certain circumstances, opinions about taxes and the budget can be strongly affected by racial attitudes. In this case, a relational prediction is made: more manifestly racial issue areas should be more likely to exhibit priming effects.

5. As a measure of racial attitudes, perceived presidential concern for one’s own racial group may also have the beneficial quality of reduced social desirability bias compared to other more direct measures of racism or group identification.

6. One site was located in a popular shopping mall in Westwood. Another was located in a smaller shopping area in Moorpark, a conservative suburb. The last site was located in an office complex in Manhattan Beach, a relatively young and wealthy beach community south of the city.

7. Seventeen subjects were removed from the sample either because of language difficulties or because there was some question about their citizenship status.

surveillance. This story was inserted into a 12-minute newscast of non-crime-related stories with one commercial break. All references about the race of the gang suspects were removed from the anchorperson's narrative. The only racial cue in the treatment was a 5-second mug shot of two suspects of like race. Two suspects were displayed in order to reinforce the story's theme of gang-related crime. This story was unremarkable; it did not contain particularly memorable or unique graphics or audio narratives. A transcription of the entire story is presented in table 1.

The race of the suspects was manipulated simply by inserting various mug shots in the position occupied by the actual suspects in the story. Four treatment cells contained crime stories implicating white, black, Asian, and Hispanic males as suspects. A fifth group viewed the crime story with no suspects inserted. A control group of respondents saw no crime story at all. The race of the victims was concealed in order to reduce the potentially confounding interaction with the race of the suspect.

Candidate evaluations were measured with standard 100-point feeling thermometers.⁸ In addition, a trichotomous variable for candidate choice was based on an item that read, "In the upcoming presidential election in November, who are you likely to vote for?" This item was coded -1 for Dole, 0 for not voting or other, and 1 for Clinton. This variable's mean corresponds to Clinton's percentage lead over Dole.

The instrument tapped Clinton's performance on various specific issues with the following item: "Next we would like to know your opinions about how well each of the candidates running for president will handle national issues. For each of the following issues, please rate how well each of the presidential candidates will produce results. Use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you expect the candidate to perform poorly, while 5 means you expect the candidate will do an excellent job handling the issue. If you have no idea how the candidate will perform on a specific issue, leave the space blank." Next to each issue listed (crime, welfare, taxes, balancing the national budget) respondents wrote in a number corresponding to their confidence in the candidate's ability to "handle" the issue. The wording allows the respondent to define what good "handling" of an issue means. Consequently, the real significance of the issue for each respondent was measured without imposing an arbitrary definition of what would constitute good performance. The priming hypothesis requires that a respondent weigh his or her own definition of good perfor-

8. The exact wording was identical to the National Election Study items used to measure warmth felt toward various people and institutions. "Next we would like to find out how you feel about well-known people. Please write a number between 0 and 100 next to each of the following, using a 'feeling thermometer' scale. On this scale, ratings nearer to 100 'degrees' mean that you feel warm or favorable. Ratings nearer to 0 'degrees' mean that you feel cold or unfavorable. A rating of 50 degrees means you don't feel particularly warm or cold. If you don't recognize the name, please write in 'DK' for don't know."

Table 1. Transcript of Treatment Story

Narration/Audio	Video/Graphics
<p>Anchorman: "Tonight, police in Long Beach have launched a city-wide crackdown on gangs, and thus far there have been 15 arrests. The operation is being conducted by a gang violence suppression task force. Police have already questioned a number of gang members. Let's go now to Sharon Tay for the latest on tonight's big operation. Sharon?"</p> <p>Reporter: "At this hour, Hal, a task force from the Long Beach Police Department is indeed combing the city looking for gang members and already they have arrested 15 people for drug possession and sales, outstanding warrants, and parole violations. Now the sweep is all part of a city-wide effort to make the streets safe."</p> <p>Reporter: "About 100 members of the gang violence suppression task force are briefed on their mission before hitting the streets. Tonight, they fan out across four areas of the city where there is high crime. The first stop is the central area, a known gang hangout. Here, several suspected gang members are stopped on probable cause."</p> <p>Reporter: "In this case, both men are admitted gang members arrested for driving with a suspended license."</p> <p>Officer: "Well, you got some officers that saw one or more of the suspects drinking in public, which is a violation of the municipal code here in Long Beach. And they stop them for drinking in public, and that quite often will lead to something more serious."</p> <p>Reporter: "Reporting live from Long Beach, I'm Sharon Tay, now back to you in Hollywood."</p>	<p>Video of policemen searching a dark alley.</p> <p>Video of white police officers meeting at headquarters.</p> <p>Full-screen still mug shot of two suspects, both of the same race. Shown for approximately 5 seconds.</p> <p>Video of white officer giving interview.</p>

mance on a particular issue as more important in the overall voting calculus.

To assess subjects' perceived level of confidence in Clinton's ability to represent the interests of various racial groups the following question was asked:

Next, we would like to know how well you think the candidates running for President this year would represent and promote the interests of various groups in society. Please rate how well each of the candidates will represent the interests and values of the groups listed. For each group, use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means the candidate does not care about the interests of the group at all, and 5 means the candidate cares a great deal about the interests of the group. If you have no idea how a candidate will represent or promote the interests of a specific group, leave the space blank.

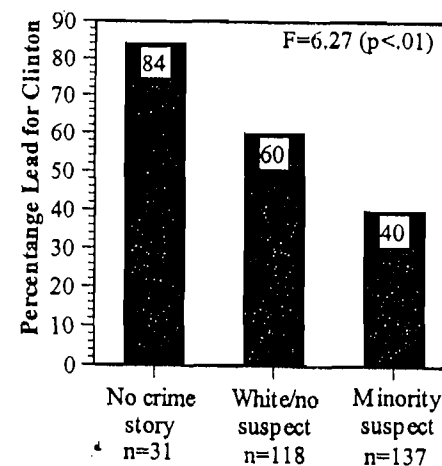
The items used in these analyses were quite comprehensible to the vast majority of respondents. On average, less than 3 percent of respondents were unable to make an evaluation of the president's performance on a particular issue or in regard to a particular group.

Finally, though there were no dramatic differences across cells of the design in terms of demographic characteristics, several variables were included in the regression analyses presented below to control statistically for such variation. These controls include party identification (coded -1 = "Democrat," 0 = "Independent," 1 = "Republican"); liberal/conservative ideology (coded 1 = "very liberal" to 5 = "very conservative"); education (coded 1 = "some high school" through 5 = "post college"); a measure of racial resentment (1 = "civil rights people push too fast" to 7 = "civil rights people haven't pushed fast enough"); gender (0 = "female," 1 = "male"); and race of respondent (0 = "non-white," 1 = "white").⁹

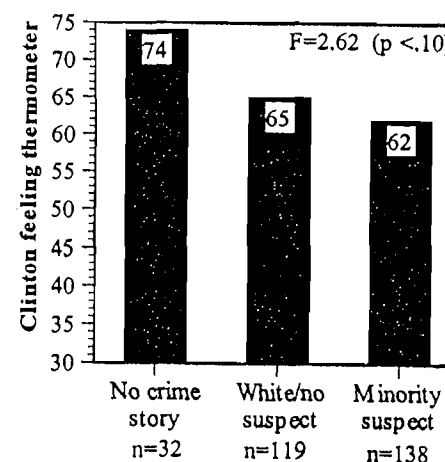
Results

The first hypothesis suggests that exposure to news about crime might affect evaluations of presidential candidates because the parties and candidates have different reputations on the issue of crime. Figure 1 displays the results of a simple test of this hypothesis. In panel A, Clinton's percent-

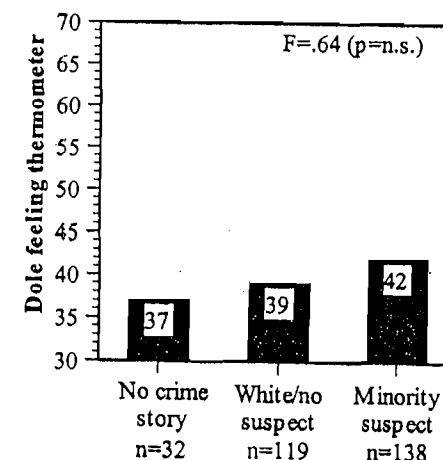
9. Party identification was coded -1 = "Democrat," 0 = "Independent," 1 = "Republican." Self-identified liberal/conservative ideology was coded 1 = "very liberal" to 5 = "very conservative." Education was coded 1 = "some high school" through 5 = "post college." Gender was coded 0 = "female," 1 = "male." Race of respondent was coded 0 = "non-white," 1 = "white." Racial resentment was measured with an item that asked: "Some people say that the civil rights people have been trying to push too fast: others feel they have not pushed fast enough. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?" Responses were coded 1 = "not pushing fast enough," to 7 = "pushing too fast."



A



B



C

Figure 1. The effect of racially stereotypic crime news on ratings of Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. All subjects. A, Clinton's percentage lead over Dole; B, rating of Bill Clinton; C, rating of Bob Dole. Probabilities (*p*) are based on two-tailed significance tests.

age lead over Dole among those who saw no crime story is an astounding 84 percent. Among respondents who saw any crime news, however, this lead drops to an average of 49 percent (this figure is the average of the second and third bars in the panel). This difference is statistically significant ($t = -2.64, p < .01$).¹⁰ Results for feeling thermometer ratings are also as expected. In panel B, the mean Clinton feeling thermometer rating in the control group is 74 degrees. Among those exposed to crime news of any kind, Clinton's mean rating is significantly lower than among those who saw no crime story. The average rating among viewers of crime news (bars 2 and 3) is 64 degrees. Again, this difference is significant ($t = -2.12, p < .05$). The opposite effect emerges for Dole's support, which is 4 degrees higher among respondents who viewed any crime story compared to those who saw no crime coverage. Overall, as expected, news about crime reduces support for Clinton and boosts support for Dole.

Figure 1 also indicates that stereotypic crime news has a more powerful impact than other types of crime coverage. As predicted, coverage of minority suspects benefits Dole most. Conversely, Clinton suffers most when minorities are featured as suspects. In panel A, Clinton's percentage lead over Dole decreases from 60 percent among those who see a white suspect or no suspect at all to 40 percent among those who view the minority suspects. A one-way analysis of variance indicates the overall trend is statistically significant ($F = 6.27, p < .01$). Clinton's feeling thermometer score also drops in the minority suspect conditions, while Dole's ratings are highest among those cells. The trend for Clinton is marginally significant ($F = 2.62, p < .05$).

The second hypothesis suggests that crime news targeting minority suspects evokes a set of crime concerns linked to attitudes about race. These racial stereotypes make the issue more vivid and threatening than counter-stereotypic depictions of crime. Therefore, exposure to stereotypic crime coverage should prime the issue most powerfully. Figure 2 displays the results of this test.¹¹ Lines in the figure represent the independent effect of Clinton's performance on crime on his overall feeling thermometer in

each of the three condition types.¹² The hypothesis suggests that the steepest slope for crime performance will occur among those exposed to racially stereotypic crime stories.

When subjects see no crime story at all, and after controlling for party identification, ideology, education, gender, and race, the impact of Clinton's performance on crime is statistically indistinguishable from zero, as is demonstrated by the nearly horizontal slope of the dotted line in figure 2. Among those who viewed a crime story featuring white suspects or no suspects at all, the impact of a one-unit increase in the crime performance scale grows to 7.13 degrees. This slope shift between the control group and those who saw a nonstereotypic crime story is statistically significant ($p < .05$, two-tailed test). Among those viewing minority suspects, the incremental effect of Clinton's performance on crime grows even more, to 8.45 feeling thermometer degrees, which is also a statistically significant increase ($p < .05$). Thus, both news stories about crime boost the importance of Clinton's performance on that issue as a criterion for evaluating him, but the effect is slightly larger when nonwhites are portrayed as suspects.

The third hypothesis suggests that stereotypic crime coverage should prime concerns about other race-coded issues, such as welfare, because the crime story itself fundamentally primes racial attitudes. If so, then Clinton's performance on welfare should become more closely linked to his overall approval. As predicted, figure 3 demonstrates that the association between Clinton's performance on welfare and his overall evaluation is enhanced when subjects view racially stereotypic crime news. In the

10. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.

11. The results presented in each figure are based on a regression analysis of Clinton's feeling thermometer on the exposure variable and evaluations of his performance on various issues. Control variables included education, liberal/conservative ideology, party identification, gender, race, and racial resentment. Some cases were excluded from these regression models due to missing data on one or more of the control variables. The majority of the cases excluded for this reason consisted of those who did not identify their position on the liberal/conservative ideological continuum. When these cases are assigned an arbitrary value (the sample mean) for ideology instead of excluding them, the overall results are marginally weaker. Further analysis of these individuals suggests that they have slightly lower levels of education than the rest of the sample. This is an important bias, since there is some evidence that political awareness moderates priming effects (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Nevertheless, regardless of the way missing data are treated, the direction and significance tests relevant to the central hypotheses do not change substantially.

12. These partial effects were drawn from an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis which included a dummy variable for two of the three ad effects (the control is the excluded group), plus the crime performance item. Interactions between these dummies and the crime performance item are also entered. The interaction between an ad dummy and the performance item measures the slope shift compared to the excluded cell. By adding the interaction to the baseline effect, one can calculate the partial slope for crime performance in particular cells of the design. This partial effect was multiplied by each level of the performance scale (1-5) and the resulting predicted values were plotted in the figure. The intercept in each cell is determined by taking the constant and adding the main effect of exposure to each ad. So, e.g., the effect of Clinton's performance on crime in the baseline condition was -0.69 feeling thermometer degrees per unit. The Y value for $X = 1$ is therefore the constant (77.36) minus 0.69 degrees [$1 \times (-0.69)$], or 76.67. The Y value for $X = 5$ in the same cell is 76.36 minus 3.45 degrees [$5 \times (-0.69)$], or 72.19. A line between these two points forms the effect for Clinton's crime performance scale in the control group. The effect in the treatment cells are calculated by adding the interaction coefficient to the coefficient for crime performance in the control group. Then this new slope is used to calculate the impact of group performance among those viewing a crime story (this is done separately for those in the white/no suspect condition and the minority suspect condition). It is important to note that the Y -intercept in these figures is arbitrary since it depends on the values of the control variables chosen when the partial effect is calculated. However, differences in the slopes, and not changes in Y -intercepts, are central to the hypotheses being tested here. Point predictions on the dependent variable should not be made based on these figures. For full results of each regression model, see the appendix.

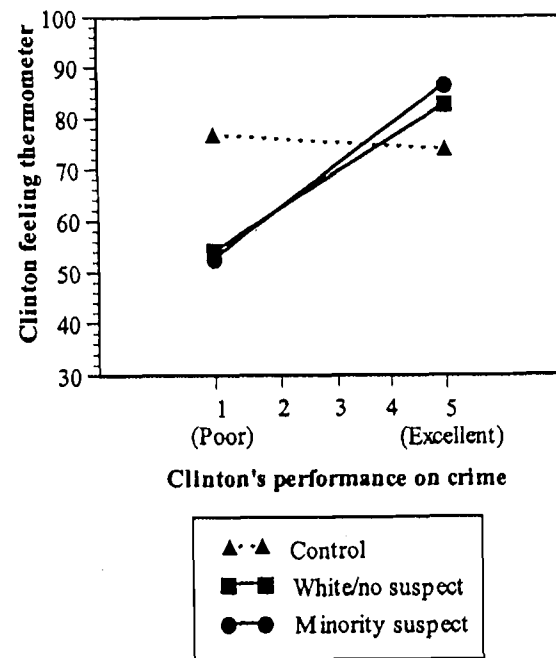


Figure 2. Racially stereotypic crime coverage primes performance on crime. All panels of figures 2–5 display partial slopes of issue performance on Clinton thermometer, calculated by multiplying the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficient for issue performance by each level of the performance variable (1–5), adding the constant, and plotting the partial linear effect. Interaction coefficients were added to the baseline (control group) effect to calculate the slope in the white/no suspect and minority suspect treatment conditions. Controls in each regression analysis included party identification, ideology, education level, racial resentment, gender, and race. In figure 2, slope shift from control to white/no suspect condition = 7.79 ($p < .05$). Slope shift from control to minority condition = 9.19 ($p < .05$). Two-tailed hypothesis tests reported.

control group, a one-unit increase on Clinton's welfare performance scale leads to a 1.79 degree increase in his feeling thermometer score. Among those who saw white suspects or no suspects at all, the relationship grows to 5.91 degrees per unit change on welfare performance, a statistically nonsignificant shift. When minorities are explicitly portrayed as suspects, however, the impact of Clinton's performance on welfare jumps to 8.14 degrees per unit. This effect is substantively large, as demonstrated by the sharply increased slope of the partial effect of welfare performance in the minority suspect condition, and it is statistically significant ($p < .05$).

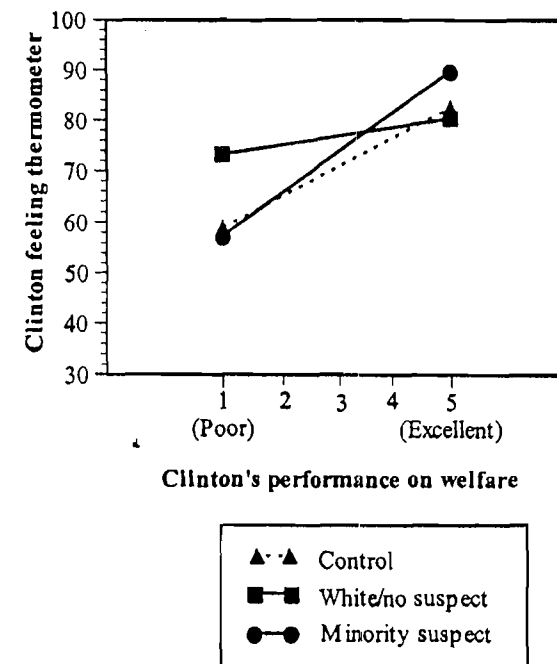


Figure 3. Racially stereotypic crime coverage primes performance on welfare. Slope shift from control to white/no suspect condition = 4.12 ($p = \text{n.s.}$). Slope shift from control to minority condition = 6.35 ($p < .05$).

The third hypothesis also states that Clinton's performance on nonracialized issues, like taxation and balancing the budget, should not be primed by exposure to minority crime suspects. This is because these issue domains are less manifestly linked to race.¹³ Figure 4 shows the impact of Clinton's performance on taxation and balancing the budget in each of the experimental groups. In panel A, one can see that the impact of Clinton's performance on taxes is quite stable across experimental groups. Lines representing the partial effect of tax performance are virtually parallel. In the baseline, the incremental effect is 6.52 degrees. Among those who saw a white suspect or no suspect, the effect is 7.17 degrees per unit. Among those who saw a minority perpetrator, the effect is 8.66 degrees per unit. None of the differences between these slopes approaches statistical significance.

Panel B of figure 4 displays the results for Clinton's performance on

13. Although taxation and balancing the budget do implicate the social redistribution of wealth, one could argue that these connections are less direct, and more difficult to grasp, than the connection between crime, welfare, and race.

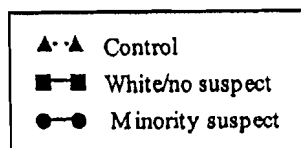
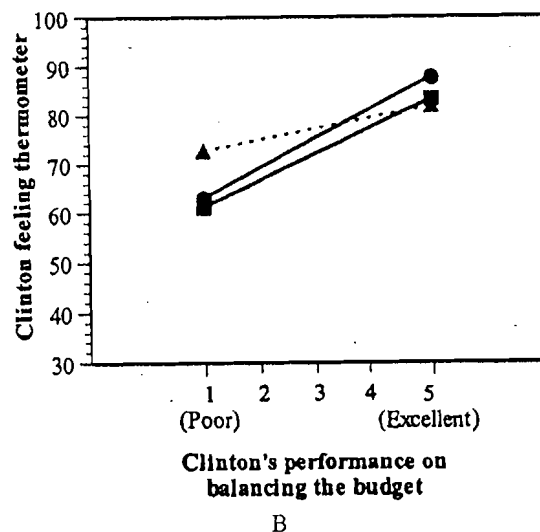
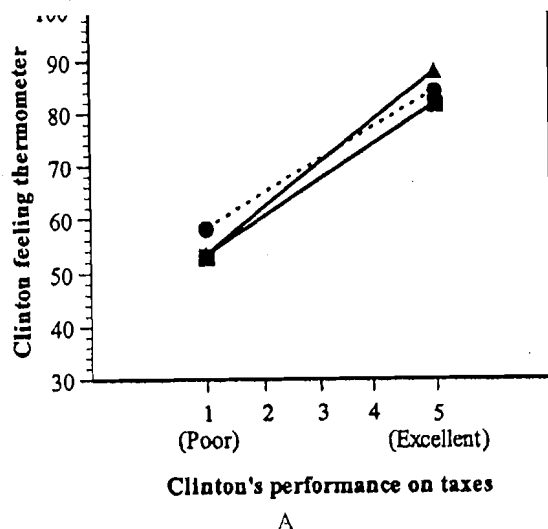


Figure 4. Racially stereotypic crime news does not prime performance on economic issues. In panel A, taxes, slope shift for impact of performance on taxes from control to white/no suspect condition = .65 ($p = \text{n.s.}$). Slope shift from control to minority condition = 2.14 ($p = \text{n.s.}$). In panel B, budget, slope shift for impact of performance on the budget from control to white/no suspect condition = 3.28 ($p = \text{n.s.}$). Slope shift from control to minority condition = 3.93 ($p = \text{n.s.}$).

balancing the national budget. In the baseline condition, Clinton's performance on the budget is positively related to his overall support, though the effect is nonsignificant. A one-unit increase in the budget performance scale is associated with a 2.27 degree increase in Clinton's feeling thermometer score. The slope increases slightly in both the white/no suspect and the minority suspect conditions (by 3.28 and 3.93 degrees, respectively), but these shifts are not statistically distinguishable from zero. Thus, racially stereotypic news coverage does not significantly alter the impact of Clinton's performance on taxes or the budget as a criterion for evaluating him more generally.

The fourth hypothesis predicts a positive interaction between exposure to minority suspects and the impact of Clinton's concern for the respondent's racial group. Figure 5 presents results of this test for white (panel A) and black (panel B) respondents. In panel A, white respondents exposed to a crime story with a white suspect or no suspect at all are compared to whites who viewed a minority suspect.¹⁴ Among those who saw the nonstereotypic stimulus, the effect of Clinton's concern for whites on his overall evaluation is substantively small and statistically nonsignificant. A one-unit increase in responsiveness to whites is associated with a 1.73 degree increase in Clinton's feeling thermometer score. However, among whites exposed to minority suspects, the incremental effect increases significantly to 8.24 degrees per unit on the white-interest scale ($p < .05$). This result indicates that, among whites in this study, exposure to stereotypic crime news occasioned an increase in the impact of group concerns as a criterion for evaluating the president.

Panel B of figure 5 replicates the analysis for black respondents. Given that stereotypic stimuli might serve as reminders of unfair treatment in the criminal justice system, one might expect similar priming effects to occur among blacks. Although the number of African Americans in the sample is too small to make strong inferences, patterns in the data are suggestive. The lines in panel B are steep and parallel, suggesting that Clinton's concern for the interests of blacks is an important factor in evaluating the president regardless of the racial characteristics of suspects in the crime story. Among blacks viewing a white suspect or no suspect at all, a one-unit increase in the black-interest scale is associated with a 5.19 degree increase in Clinton's thermometer score. The effect among those who saw the stereotypic stimulus is virtually identical (4.41 degrees per unit). It appears as though group attitudes are chronically salient among African Americans as a criterion upon which to judge a president. As a result, priming effects associated with the race of the suspect in typical crime news are minimal for this group.

14. The control group, unfortunately, contained too few subjects of any race to produce an adequately reliable estimate of group attentiveness among those viewing no crime story at all.

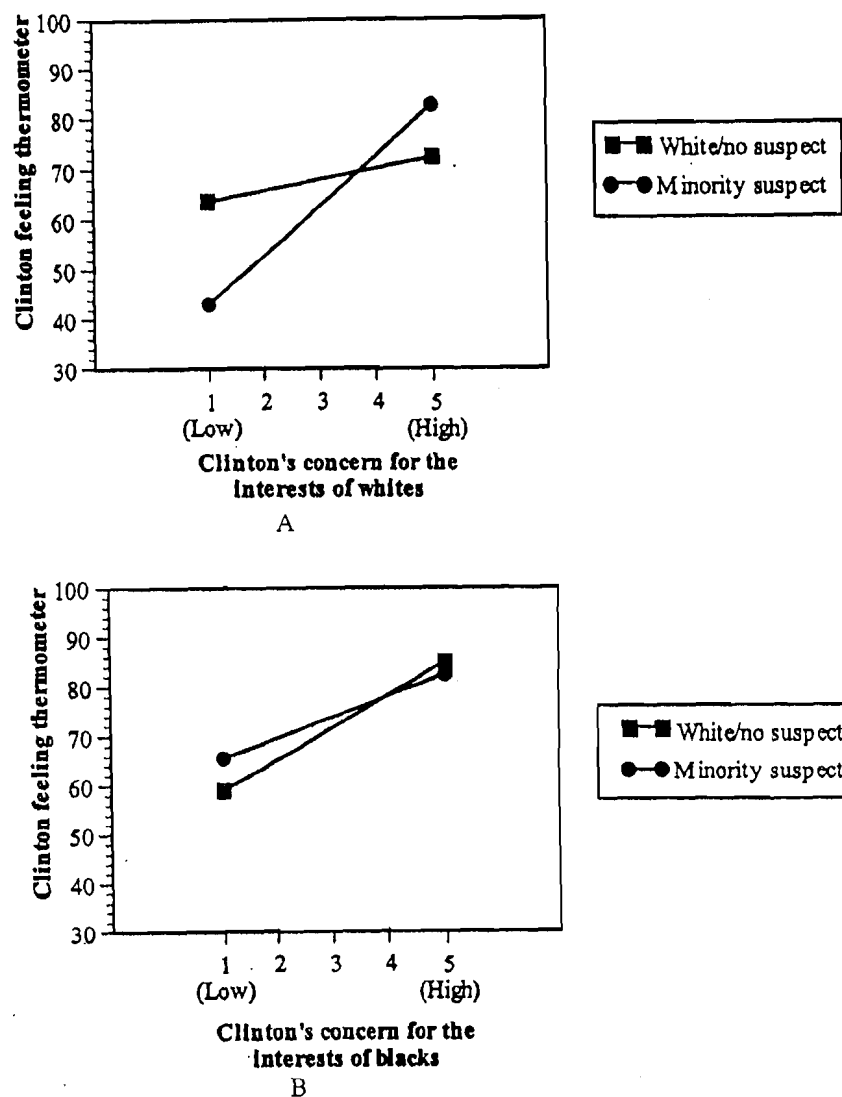


Figure 5. Racially stereotypic crime news primes Clinton's in-group performance among white respondents, but not among blacks. In panel A, white respondents, slope shift for closeness to whites from white/no suspect to minority condition = 6.51 ($p < .05$). In panel B, black respondents, slope shift for closeness to blacks from white/no suspect to minority suspect condition = .78 ($p = \text{n.s.}$).

Discussion

Overall, the group-priming hypothesis finds support in these results. Clinton's support waned when crime was made salient via the news. Dole benefited when crime was discussed in the news, especially when the suspects were members of racial minority groups. Furthermore, crime news that explicitly identified minority suspects also boosted the impact of the president's performance on crime as a criterion for his overall evaluation by respondents in this study. This test successfully replicates previous research demonstrating that media attention raises the impact of issue performance as a predictor of a candidate's overall support (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). But the finding also broadens the applicability of those effects since these news stories do not even tangentially refer to the president, nor do they discuss federal policies meant to reduce crime. In addition, viewing the racially stereotypic crime story also activated concerns about welfare. The linkage between crime news and welfare attitudes is based on the underlying racial content of both issues. In the absence of a specific reminder of the linkage, respondents were only slightly more inclined to use welfare performance as a criterion for judging the president. However, when the linkage was made explicit, by portraying minorities as crime suspects, respondents were more likely to employ welfare performance as a judgment criterion. Also as predicted, neither stereotypic nor nonstereotypic crime news primed Clinton's performance on issues with fewer racial cues, like taxation and balancing the budget. Finally, among whites, exposure to minority suspects powerfully primed the president's concerns about whites.

Several factors make this investigation a critical test of the group-priming hypothesis. First, in the 1996 presidential campaign, both candidates largely avoided race as a central issue of the campaign. Clinton signed the Welfare Reform Act a few months before the election, effectively blocking Dole and other Republicans from criticizing him as liberal on this issue. He then declined to visit California to campaign against Proposition 209, which ended state affirmative action programs in college admissions, employment, and contracting. His campaign speeches focused primarily on the country's strong economy and his record on cutting the deficit. Dole also largely avoided race in the campaign, choosing instead to focus on Clinton's failed attempt to reform health care, his liberal spending policies, and his character flaws. In California, where the racial cleavage may have been most vulnerable to exploitation by Republicans on issues of affirmative action and illegal immigration, Dole largely avoided the issue.¹⁵

15. The candidates did refer to racial issues during the campaign. Dole and Clinton aired appeals focusing on race-coded issues like illegal immigration and drug use. But neither

It is worth attempting to understand why results in figure 1 were weaker for Dole than for Clinton. One explanation consistent with the priming model is that people had less information about Dole's performance on crime or race. Evaluations of the incumbent may always be more susceptible to priming effects in this regard since he or she has at least some public record to be primed. In evaluations of Clinton, the priming stimulus activates real as opposed to imputed performance on the target issue.

On a methodological note, priming effects like the ones depicted in figures 2–5 might arouse concerns about reverse causation as an explanation for the correlation between two posttest measures. That is, the stimulus might activate some global evaluation of a candidate, and then the respondent might bring her responses on specific issue performance items into line with this overall evaluation. Elsewhere this effect has been dubbed "projection" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Projection cannot explain the results displayed here. First, the crime coverage utilized in these experiments was completely unrelated to presidential performance on the issue. In fact, no reference is ever made to any political candidate or public policy in these stories, so people could not be reminded of their overall opinions about Clinton before they answered the issue or group performance items. These effects are more consistent with the interpretation offered above: the stereotypic crime story stimulates racial attitudes that are subsequently brought to bear on evaluations of the president.

At this point it is important to raise the issue of the external validity of these findings. These priming effects are based on a sample that, though highly comparable to the surrounding population, is more educated on average than the U.S. population. There is some evidence that priming effects might be larger among the educated and politically aware because such citizens have richer associative networks in memory that facilitate storing and accessing new information (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). In other words, a linkage between concepts stored in memory can be primed only to the extent that it is established prior to exposure to the stimulus. It is important, therefore, not to overstate the claim based on these data that group attitudes will be primed equally among all citizens. Future research on group priming should attempt to compare effects for low and high awareness citizens.

Concern about the generalizability of these findings is reasonable since they are based on a sample that had recently been exposed to several high-salience racial events. These would include, most notably, the Rodney King riots in 1992 and the O. J. Simpson criminal and civil trials beginning in 1994 and ending in 1997. It is possible that proximity to these

candidate relied heavily on racial "wedge" issues in the 1996 campaign. The excellent posturing by Clinton's re-election team displayed early in the year with regard to these issues might have deterred Dole's campaign from using them.

events boosted the salience of race far above normal levels and therefore led the subjects in this study to be particularly sensitive to racially stereotypic news stories.¹⁶ Without replicating this study on a sample from another location, one could not dismiss this possibility conclusively. However, one could also argue that such sensitivity to the crime stimulus might lead this to be an even more conservative test of the priming hypothesis: if Los Angeles residents are particularly sensitive to crime, additional exposure to run-of-the-mill crime coverage should have little additional impact on the salience of the issue. In other words, the subtle manipulation of a typical local crime story presented in this study would be less likely to register a priming effect because racial attitudes are chronically salient. The fact that a priming effect is demonstrable in such an environment is strong evidence that local news stories indirectly affect evaluations of political leaders.

Conclusions

Previous work has suggested that news coverage can influence the way average citizens view the political world. These results demonstrate that local crime coverage affects the salience of racial concerns during political decision making. It seems unlikely that crime would be the only issue-domain that can prime racial attitudes. Coverage of other "race-coded" issues, like welfare or illegal immigration, or explicitly racial issues, like affirmative action, might have similar effects. More work is needed to determine applicability to other issue domains, candidates, and time periods. However, these initial results are important precisely because crime news is so common.

This study contributes to the growing body of work suggesting that the editorial decisions of news gatekeepers can strongly influence the way Americans think about politics. The rise in crime coverage on local and national news, even in the face of declining crime statistics, is indisputable. The overrepresentation of minorities as suspects, especially in coverage of violent crime, has been demonstrated in various studies. Research has also documented similar biases in coverage of social welfare programs (Gilens 1999). There are, therefore, important normative implications of these results for the standards and practices of the news business.

The evidence presented here does not suggest that the editorial choices of local news outlets are driven by racism. We know that news reporters are, in general, more politically liberal than the rest of America (Lichter, Rothman, and Richter 1986). Why, then, does coverage of crime tend to

16. This argument implies that these events would not have similar effects on people living in other locales, even though they were given a great deal of national news coverage.

reinforce racial stereotypes? One explanation for this bias is structural in nature: news outlets tend to cover stories geographically close to their headquarters, which tend to be located in urban areas with large minority populations. Therefore, crime involving minority suspects is covered at a higher rate than its actual occurrence in the larger community. Some indicators are less sanguine, however, such as the tendency for black crime suspects to appear in mug shots or in handcuffs more often than whites (Entman 1990). Regardless of their intent, these results indicate that editorial decisions can have a profound impact on the way Americans perceive the world.

When combined with Mendelberg's (1997) findings, these results call for a more extensive program of research that seeks to identify characteristics of news coverage that prime group attitudes. This study focuses on racially stereotypic portrayals of minorities, but it is quite possible that counterstereotypic coverage of minorities is just as powerful. Would exposure to coverage of a black Rhodes scholar prime racial attitudes? What difference does the race of the victim in these crime stories make in terms of the priming effect? The answers to these questions are important for our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the group-priming effect itself because they would vary the degree of pride or threat group members perceive.

In addition, future research must further specify the particular group attitudes that are primed by the media. The findings described here are quite general in this regard: Clinton's attention to the concerns of whites is a more important predictor of his overall support when racialized issues are present in the news stream. This group responsiveness variable might be acting as a proxy for either in-group or out-group attitudes. Perhaps news coverage emphasizing racial threat and conflict is more likely to prime out-group attitudes, like symbolic or modern racism, while positive, counterstereotypic news coverage might prime in-group attachments. This distinction is important because different group attitudes are expected to have different effects on behavior.

These results are important because they suggest that characteristics present in coverage of seemingly ubiquitous story topics, even those that do not in any way refer to politics or politicians, can significantly alter the criteria upon which candidates are evaluated. The news does this by making certain group concerns more salient than others, thereby shaping citizens' calculations about how their interests can best be served by government. When public debate highlights group conflict, more than election outcomes are affected. Support for policy solutions to important social problems might also suffer when the public is viewing them through a narrow group lens.

Table A1. Full Regression Models for Results Plotted in Figures 2–4

	Clinton Issue Performance Domains			
	Crime	Welfare	Taxes	Budget
Predictor variables:				
Issue performance	-.69 (3.37)	1.79 (2.99)	6.52 (4.37)	2.27 (2.87)
White/no suspect	-30.30* (12.47)	-18.47 (11.33)	-5.77 (15.75)	-14.91 (10.25)
Minority suspect	-33.06** (12.35)	-22.36* (11.12)	-7.10 (15.37)	-13.61 (10.13)
Issue performance × white/no suspect	7.79* (3.68)	4.12 (3.23)	.65 (4.65)	3.28 (3.21)
Issue performance × minority suspect	9.14* (3.60)	6.35* (3.18)	2.14 (4.51)	3.93 (3.15)
Control variables:				
Party identification	-15.92*** (1.62)	-15.81*** (1.60)	-15.49*** (1.64)	-16.88*** (1.66)
Ideology	-.86 (.75)	-.95 (.74)	-.75 (.75)	-.70 (.78)
Education	-1.22 (1.03)	-1.65 (1.01)	-1.07 (1.05)	-1.90* (1.06)
Civil rights leaders "push too fast"	-1.79* (.71)	-1.84** (.71)	-1.18 (.72)	-1.91* (.75)
Male	-2.27 (2.25)	-2.60 (2.22)	-2.79 (2.27)	-3.35 (2.34)
White	2.19 (2.25)	.89 (2.20)	-.40 (2.23)	.37 (2.31)
Constant	77.34*** (12.59)	71.37*** (11.88)	51.66** (16.62)	70.44*** (10.33)
N	256	256	256	256
Adjusted R ²	.57	.58	.57	.54

NOTE.—Dependent variable is Clinton's feeling thermometer. Standard errors are in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed. Although the total available sample size was 289, missing cases on the control variables reduced data available for regression analyses. When these cases are assigned a substantive value (the sample mean) for the variable on which they were missing, the effects are quite similar.

+ = $p < .10$.

* = $p < .05$.

** = $p < .01$.

*** = $p < .001$.

Table A2. Full Regression Models for Results Plotted in Figure 5

	Clinton Group Concern Domains	
	Whites	Blacks
Predictor variables:		
Group concern	1.73 (2.18)	5.19 (3.81)
Minority suspect	-22.33 ⁺ (12.40)	1.42 (18.02)
Group concern × minority suspect	6.51* (2.91)	-.78 (4.47)
Control variables:		
Party identification	-18.98*** (2.20)	-9.39* (4.15)
Ideology	-1.16 (1.07)	-1.08 (1.70)
College-educated	-2.10 (1.36)	-.83 (2.46)
Civil rights leaders "pust too fast"	-1.86 ⁺ (1.08)	-1.94 (2.02)
Male	2.24 (2.99)	-7.93 (4.99)
Constant	63.64*** (12.32)	58.94** (17.39)
N	144	43
Adjusted R ²	.58	.32

NOTE.—Dependent variable is Clinton's feeling thermometer. Standard errors are in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed.

⁺ = $p < .10$.

* = $p < .05$.

** = $p < .01$.

*** = $p < .001$.

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JEREMY BENTHAM AND THE PUBLIC OPINION TRIBUNAL

FRED CUTLER

Abstract Well-known as the father of utilitarian philosophy, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) is less well-known as a pioneer theorist of public opinion. His work on the subject in the early nineteenth century was the first to tolerate the indeterminacy of public opinion in a liberal democracy. Where previous theorists had tried to specify the content of a "true" or "correct" public opinion, and most did so by imposing conditions on membership in "the public," Bentham argued that the public opinion necessary in a representative democracy must be unfettered and inclusive. For Bentham, the Public Opinion Tribunal, constantly judging government, was the most important social institution in preventing "misrule." As a liberal, Bentham championed public opinion as inherently progressive: he thought it would eventually coincide with his utilitarian ethical standard, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Its operation, however, depends on the freedom of the press to investigate and publicize government actions in order to facilitate a form of public debate mediated through newspapers. Considered broadly, Bentham's public opinion has much in common with the arguments of much recent empirical work on the subject, such as Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public*, Stimson's *Moods, Cycles, and Swings*, Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter*, and Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. The theory is, however, dated by its inability to adequately consider some of the problems that occupy modern theorists of public opinion: deliberation, rational ignorance, media vacuity or manipulation, and the tyranny of the majority.

For British observers in the early nineteenth century, the United States turned out to be a massive natural experiment in politics. Even Jeremy Bentham, whose confidence in his great projects was never in doubt, be-

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