

# Limits to Agenda Setting? The Case of Public Concern with Race\*

Andrew M. Engelhardt<sup>†</sup>

*Draft: January 28, 2025*

## Abstract

Traditional agenda setting accounts show that the more the media cover an issue the more important it seems to the public. But these analyses focus on media coverage featuring a unidirectional frame, a limitation for topics like race where elites can present markedly different perspectives. I demonstrate that these different perspectives affect elites' agenda setting capacity in observational and experimental analyses. I relate how much attention exemplars of different racial dialogues—Rachel Maddow and Bill O'Reilly—give to race with the public's most important problem evaluations between 2008 and 2016. I find that while Maddow's racially liberal coverage produces expected agenda setting effects, O'Reilly's racially conservative perspective has a depressive effect on importance judgments. I find complementary evidence in an experiment with story frames influencing agenda setting effects. Talking about race can motivate public concern, but only when presented in particular perspectives. Agenda setting accounts should consider framing variation as an important conditioning force.

---

\*I thank Allison Anoll, Daniel Gillion, Cindy Kam, Corrine McConaughy, and the UNCG political science research workshop for helpful feedback and discussions during this project. I also thank Kris Hodgins at Gallup for assistance acquiring data.

<sup>†</sup>Assistant Professor of Political Science, Stony Brook University. [andrew.engelhardt@stonybrook.edu](mailto:andrew.engelhardt@stonybrook.edu)

[S]ince the shooting of 18 year-old Michael Brown roughly two weeks ago many self-proclaimed civil rights activists have been stoking the racial fire suggesting that the unarmed teenager was shot because he was black. . . So is the trouble in Ferguson just being exploited by the likes of Al Sharpton or do the protesters have a legitimate beef?

---

Bill O'Reilly

If you want to look at it another way, the most recent data for 2013, black people made up 67 percent of the population in Ferguson, but they made up 86 percent of the traffic stops. . . We have objective evidence as to the prevalence of this problem, and the fact that it's never changing.

---

Rachel Maddow

August 2014 witnessed an outbreak of protests in Ferguson, Missouri, after a White police officer, Darren Wilson, killed a Black teenager, Michael Brown. Media outlets hastened to cover the unfolding events, with potential implications for public opinion. Decades of research would suggest an agenda setting effect, with media coverage increasing public attention to, and concern with, associated issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Beckett 1994; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Soroka 2002, 2006; Miller 2007). Given the nature of the event, media coverage could increase concern with policing, racial inequality, or other issues the media cover in connection to the event.

But as the epigraphs suggest, how media outlets covered unfolding affairs can differ in important ways, and I argue that these differences have implications for the media's agenda setting capacity. For public concern with race to increase, the public may need to hear a specific perspective which, like Rachel Maddow's, acknowledges race's social reality and directly highlights its relevance (Engelhardt 2019; Gillion 2016; King and Smith 2014). But alternative perspectives exist which, like Bill O'Reilly's, deemphasize race's role in social and political affairs and elevate instead other factors as important (see, e.g., Haney López 2014; King and Smith 2014; Engelhardt 2019). These divergent perspectives likely have implications for whether and how elite rhetoric influences mass beliefs about race's importance in the United States, as recent work suggests (Wasow 2020).

More generally, race presents a potential limiting case for traditional agenda setting effects because individual predispositions may intercede. Most scholarship indicates that racial attitudes—individuals’ beliefs about groups understood to be racial—form early in life and persist through adulthood (Sears and Brown 2013, but see Engelhardt 2021). Racial attitudes are therefore easily accessible and can shape individuals’ thinking absent elite influence (Fazio and Dunton 1997). Likewise, issue positions connected with social groups exhibit greater temporal stability than those lacking group implications (Converse 1964; Nelson, Sanbonmatsu and McClerking 2007; Tesler 2015). With race a central component of the current party system (Tesler 2016), elites may face significant constraints engendering concern with it. Talking about race may only lead a subset of the mass public to believe it important while potentially generating a backlash among others (Gillion 2016; Wasow 2020). Despite elite attention, public concern may change little because people react to the same perspective differently.

Through two studies I consider elites’ agenda setting capacity on race. In Study 1 I use observational data to track media attention to race and public concern with race as an important problem between 2008 and 2016. I investigate the association between public concern with race and racially liberal and conservative rhetoric, perspectives respectively elevating or downplaying race’s social and political import. I measure these rhetorical divides using a recently introduced time series of racial discourse on *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *The O’Reilly Factor* (Engelhardt 2019). Using Gallup’s most important problem data series, I find that Maddow’s racially liberal perspective motivates public concern whereas O’Reilly’s racially conservative take does not. In Study 2 I use a survey experiment to demonstrate that issue frames, not just mere content differences, help explain these differences. Taken together my results shed light on past and present opinion dynamics by strengthening evidence for mass opinion shifts tracking how elites discuss race (Wasow 2020; Russonello 2020). Elite attention to race is necessary, but not sufficient, to generate concern with race as a social problem. Agenda setting accounts should consider framing variation as an important conditioning force.

# Elite Rhetoric and Public Perceptions of Race

Classic agenda setting accounts propose that the more the media cover an issue, the more the public sees this issue as a pressing national problem (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Beckett 1994; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Soroka 2002, 2006; Miller 2007). More stories about the environment, unemployment, or crime make these issues seem more important to the mass public. Largely unaddressed, however, is how these dynamics function when what outlets cover within an issue domain varies and, more importantly, how issues themselves are covered.

Variation across media outlets in whether and how they cover an issue matters because this affects what consumers come to believe about the issue. Traditional agenda setting work typically considers a univalent issue (e.g., the economy is bad, inflation is increasing). It does not offer evidence for how attention to an issue matters when coupled with additional information that the issue is important (e.g., characteristic liberal coverage of race) or unimportant (e.g., typical conservative coverage of race).<sup>1</sup> This additional information frames race for viewers by defining what the issue is (Gamson and Modigliani 1987) and what explanation(s) merit consideration (see also Chong and Druckman 2007). To the degree media outlets cover race differently, viewers may reach different conclusions about the sources of, and solutions to, related social and political problems (Iyengar 1991). If coverage patterns persist over time within and across outlets, then viewers' perspectives of current affairs will vary according to the news they consume.

News organizations' decisions about what to cover and how to cover it appear to follow in part from judgments regarding what is and is not newsworthy. Institutional norms, for instance, can guide whether and how an organization covers an issue (Gilens 1999; Boydston 2013). Further, the outlet's belief about who the issue affects, its perceived relevance to consumers,

---

<sup>1</sup>Scholars have incorporated variation in topic frames to explain media (Boydston 2013) or social group (Gillion 2016) attention to issues. Others have considered how coverage characteristics like positive or negative issue content, or personalization, affect importance judgments (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Soroka 2006; Miller 2007). These results imply that issue characteristics affect not only what gets covered but also how this coverage relates to opinions. I extend this work to address evaluations of whether an issue should be seen as a problem.

and attention from other elites all guide coverage decisions. These decisions can lead to outlets paying attention to some issues more than others or, when covering the same issue, applying different frames, patterns than can persist over time (Boydston 2013).

Content variation is particularly important because it aligns with prevailing understandings of agenda setting's psychological underpinnings. Media attention raises an issue's salience and ascribes to it some importance, making accessibility and importance judgments plausible mechanisms (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Building on evidence suggesting accessibility alone has a limited role (Miller 2007), I argue media story content affects individual-level importance judgments and, therefore, the media's agenda setting capacity. These importance judgments can follow from processes including affective responses (Miller 2007), personal experience (Soroka 2002), and external reinforcement (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

I extend these accounts to argue that elite influence occurs both at the information provision stage and at the interpretation stage. Elite attention not only makes salient a certain set of considerations (Zaller 1992; Lodge and Taber 2013), the nature of this attention helps the public decide whether accessible considerations are important or not. Issue framing can therefore forge or sunder connections the public makes between a story and public problems by providing the motivation and opportunity to consider the links between any considerations activated and the judgment at hand. Framing can therefore have an activation effect or a suppression effect. The activation effect is consistent with classic agenda setting accounts where salient considerations are labeled as important, increasing the importance placed on the associated problem. The suppression effect, in contrast, occurs because individuals actively ignore salient considerations, with the importance of other concerns elevated despite their relative inaccessibility. Media coverage produces myriad mass responses with these then connected to problem importance judgments based on acceptance of a story's perspective.

That race divides the American political system makes divergent conversations on race likely. I characterize these differences as racial liberalism and conservatism. Racial liberals

talk about race in a way that the pro-conversation position appears to have in mind (King and Smith 2014; Engelhardt 2019). Race's social reality requires focusing on associated issues with these often systemic in nature and requiring government intervention. Communities of color have unique, often disparate, lived experiences which requires deliberate attention. Racial conservatives, in contrast, describe race as unimportant and irrelevant for understanding prevailing social problems (Haney López 2014; King and Smith 2014; Engelhardt 2019). For them, racial minorities' unique experience come from them receiving special favors and attention. Whenever racial conservatives discuss race they downplay it as a salient concern, perhaps because any remarks they may offer will be construed as racist (Engelhardt 2019).

Consider protests surrounding deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police. As paper's epigraphs suggest, Racial conservatives like Bill O'Reilly emphasize Black criminality and a desire for media attention over racial discrimination as explanations for these events. Individuals' racial backgrounds are irrelevant for understanding what transpires. In contrast, racial liberals like Rachel Maddow link these deaths to historical patterns of discrimination and ongoing struggles against racism and inequity (King and Smith 2014; Engelhardt 2019). From this perspective, to understand these events it is essential to account for the race's of those involved. By varying in the degree to which they assign race importance, these divergent frames may carry potential public opinion consequences (e.g., Wasow 2020).

Three hypotheses related to the media's agenda setting capacity on race follow from this account. The first, the *traditional account*, states that media attention, regardless of frame or content, increases public concern with the issue (cf. McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Beckett 1994; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Soroka 2002, 2006; Miller 2007). The second, the *multi-valent account*, proposes that how the issue is covered matters. In this context, I expect public concern with race to increase as attention to race emphasizing discrimination, racism, and race's social reality increases. In contrast, I expect no relationship between attention devoted to race that denies its ability to explain social phenomena and public concern with race. Finally, the *null account* proposes that race is simply a different type of

issue. Because individuals' racial attitudes are easily accessible (Fazio and Dunton 1997), and personal and group experiences work alongside media influence to shape attitudes (Gamson 1992; Walsh 2004), the media may exert little influence over when people see race as an important problem (cf. Soroka 2002). People use prior beliefs like racial attitudes to understand social and political phenomena and then decide whether race is important. No elite influence needed.

These hypotheses assume that media effects matter similarly for all people. But known individual characteristics can constrain media influence, particularly on a topic like race. First, some public opinion models identify political sophistication as a conditioning force (Zaller 1992). Those likely to be exposed to and understand media content may most likely evince agenda setting effects. But this *sophisticates hypothesis* may not hold. Race in American politics is an easy issue, symbolic in nature and easily understood (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Consequently, the *generalists hypothesis* says that sophisticates and non-sophisticates alike will experience any agenda setting effects.

The second difference I investigate is between White and non-White Americans. Until recently, race for White Americans has been unimportant, an option not a requirement (cf. Waters 1990; Jardina 2019). The experiences of members of racialized groups run opposite, with these categories shaping daily experience (Dawson 1994). Agenda setting effects may then be found among White Americans alone. Media influence varies based on personal relevance. Non-Whites do not need external reminders to translate personal experience to importance judgments. Whites, lacking these experiences, require this coverage. I therefore test this *racial divide hypothesis*.

Finally, I compare partisans' responses to elite rhetoric. With Democrats and Republicans polarized by racial attitudes (Tesler 2016), these party-linked orientations potentially condition the influence of elite communication. Democrats' increasing racial liberalism and Republicans' racial conservatism may make associated elite communications more potent (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013). Consequently, the *party-consistent hypothesis* proposes Democrats

respond more to racially liberal coverage and Republicans respond more to racially conservative attention because these information streams align with existing beliefs (Engelhardt 2021). The *party-inconsistent* hypothesis, however, proposes that partisans will respond most to information inconsistent with their party's position. Republicans may respond more to racially liberal rhetoric because it is unexpected (Nicholson 2011). Finally, the *party parity* hypothesis says that partisanship offers no information on how people respond to elite rhetoric, with no difference in agenda setting effects by party.

## Data and Methods

I test my hypotheses pairing observational and experimental analyses. The observational analyses focus on racially conservative and liberal discussion of race and the public's concern with race as an issue. I operationalize this discussion using a recent time series capturing attention to race on The O'Reilly Factor and Rachel Maddow Show (Engelhardt 2019). Not only are these show exemplars of racially conservative and liberal discourse (cf. Engelhardt 2019), they are ideal because attention to race and related issues varies in accordance with the priorities of the party with which they align (Levendusky 2013). Maddow may avoid covering crime or welfare because these issues disadvantage Democrats. O'Reilly may emphasize these as potential winning issues for the Republican Party. Further, it is unlikely O'Reilly can engage in a discussion of racial inequality which the racial dialogue position desires because it likely angers an increasingly racially conservative White base (Tesler 2016). They provide a most likely place to test the agenda setting effect of different content and perspectives.

The attention measure captures how much O'Reilly and Maddow discuss race on each episode airing between September 2008 and December 2016, the period when both shows aired simultaneously. This measure captures the proportion of a show's transcript from a given day that an automated algorithm classified as including some reference to race.<sup>2</sup> While these

---

<sup>2</sup>Data described in Engelhardt (2019) and made available by the author. Race mentions include references to racialized groups or people, racialized experiences, or racialized issue areas like crime or immigration.



measures directly concern each show's attention to race, I view them as helpful operationalizations of general attention variation in part because the divergent perspectives I contend matter have been validated for these shows (Engelhardt 2019). This approach simplifies patterns in the information environment in much the same way scholars use the New York Times to proxy for media coverage (e.g., Boydston 2013; for a similar argument, see Levendusky 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Public concern comes from Gallup's most important problem series.<sup>4</sup> Every month survey respondents report what issues they feel are pressing national problems in an open-ended format.<sup>5</sup> They can provide up to three issues which Gallup then codes. I use these data to measure concern with race in two ways. First, I create a *race only* indicator for whether or not any response was coded as mentioning "race relations or racism" in any of the three coded responses. Second, I combine these responses with any mention of racialized policies like crime, welfare, or immigration and illegal aliens to create a *race plus* measure. Because racial discourse may take on many guises, this operationalization captures the possibility that this rhetoric increases concern on closely related issues.<sup>6</sup>

I use these observational data two ways. In study 1, I descriptively assess media attention to determine whether attention divides do or do not exist. I then test agenda setting by relating public opinion responses to how much attention O'Reilly and Maddow give race in the weeks preceding a respondent's interview date. Evidence points to how information environment differences do or do not matter.

I also test my hypotheses using an experimental design to directly assess media exposure. In study 2 I randomly assign individuals to read one of three news articles describing civil asset forfeiture. Each respondent read that the policy involves law enforcement's ability to

---

<sup>3</sup>My interest is in capturing variation in divergent information streams rather than immediate exposure. Maddow and O'Reilly function as barometers for the amount of racially liberal and conservative media content people may encounter broadly.

<sup>4</sup>The data and documentation as supplied by Gallup did not include survey response rates.

<sup>5</sup>"What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?"

<sup>6</sup>An average month sees about 2% of Gallup respondents offering a *race only* response (SD: 3.2%; range: .1–18%). Some 9% provide a *race plus* response (SD: 5.9%; range: 3–30%). To compare, a typical month sees 1% of responses mention the environment while the economy and unemployment receive much more attention, averaging 26% and 16% of responses. All descriptives use survey weights.

seize money and property in a person's possession if they suspect that it relates to a crime. But in two conditions respondents read that this policy is connected to race. One of these presents civil asset forfeiture as racially discriminatory while the other contends the policy has nothing to do with race. These frames reflect racially liberal and conservative perspectives which Maddow and O'Reilly respectively offer (Engelhardt 2019). Comparing responses to items assessing problem importance across treatments then offers a way to address directly whether issue framing affects agenda setting by holding content constant.

## **Study 1: Partisan Racial Discourse Correlates with Judgments of Race's Importance**

I first offer descriptive evidence that my measures of racially liberal and conservative attention vary in ways suggesting they have some agenda setting capacity. I plot in Figure 1 the proportion of attention to race each show devotes on every day between September 2008 and December 2016. To contextualize shifts I also plot a selection of potentially salient events. These include the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, President Obama's remarks following George Zimmerman's acquittal of murdering Trayvon Martin, and the shooting death of Michael Brown, among other events. I use the events as a face validity test for the racial discussion series. If variation in attention does not appear associated with such external phenomena, then it is less likely these measures capture racial discourse.

The patterns suggest media coverage varies meaningfully over time. Further, this variation appears in part responsive to these external events, offering additional evidence for these measures' validity beyond content (Engelhardt 2019). Both Maddow and The Factor covered race more after Henry Louis Gates's arrest and the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Attention similarly increases following police officers killing Philando Castile and Terence Crutcher. But attention varies across shows and over time, too. During summer 2013 when George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin and President Obama

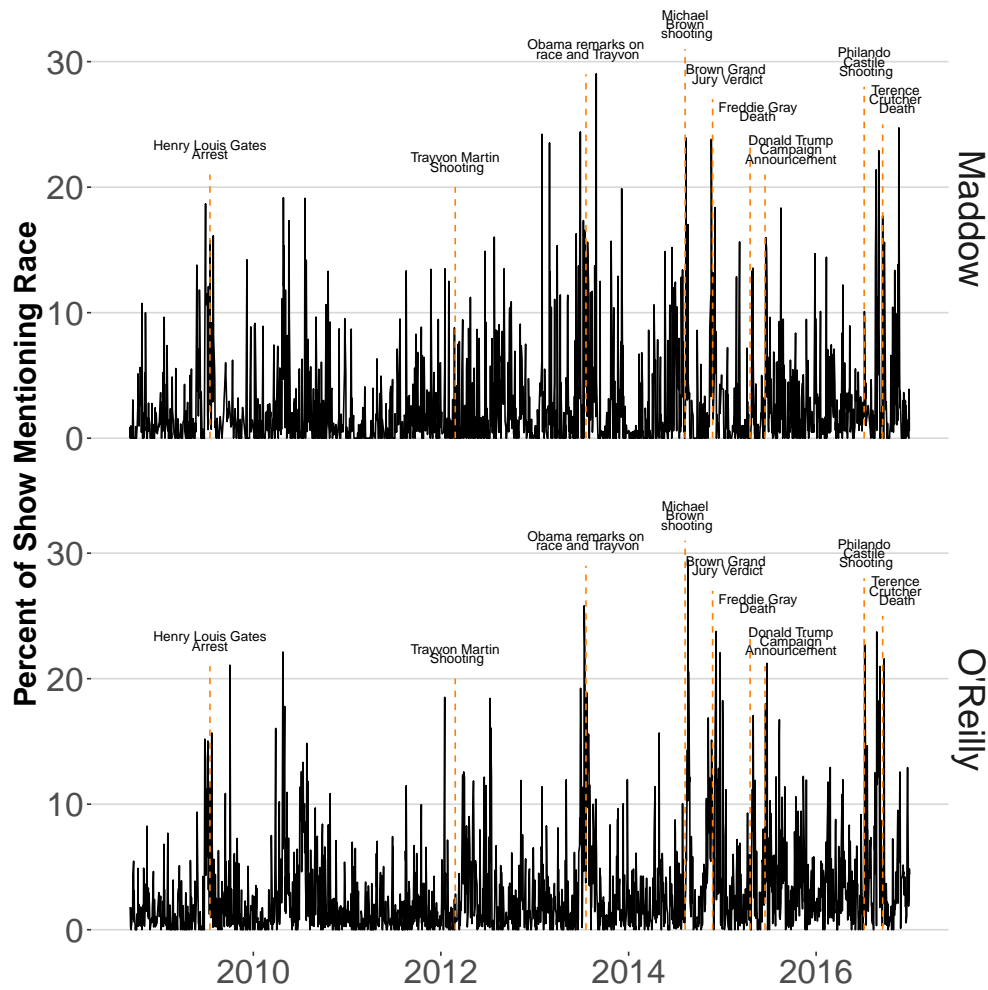


Figure 1: Partisan Media Attention to Race

remarked that if he had a son he would look like Trayvon, Maddow devoted more attention to race than O'Reilly. Similarly, 2011 was a relatively quiet year for both shows when it came to discussing race. Overall, the two series correlate at .31, suggesting that while related, potentially consequential variation exists in how much attention each show devotes to race.

To test my hypotheses I regress the *race only* and *race plus* outcomes on these attention measures and a set of individual and contextual covariates. My key explanatory variable, news coverage, enters as a contextual variable. I assign to each respondent the average amount of attention each show devoted to race in the two weeks preceding her interview date. The

theoretical motivation behind the two-week window comes from the information diffusion necessary for modifying attitudes beyond immediate show viewers to align with viewing them as information environment proxies (Levendusky 2013; Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, including coverage variables for both shows in the same model accounts for potential interdependencies in coverage. Maddow for instance may respond to O'Reilly's coverage of race, or vice versa. While theoretically motivated, this joint inclusion introduces some multicollinearity into the models given the association between the two coverage trends. Consequently, while coefficient estimates remain unbiased, their uncertainty increases. Because measure omission likely introduces bias, I address multicollinearity through joint significance tests to assess whether both coefficients equal 0 (Arceneaux and Huber 2007).

I also include individual-level covariates that may shape most important problem evaluations. These include partisanship, operationalized as indicator variables folding leaning partisans into the relevant partisan category, age set on a 0-1 scale, sex, indicators for whether the respondent graduated from college or is White, and an indicator for whether the respondent lives in the South defined as the states of the former Confederacy (Acharya, Blackwell and Sen 2018). I also include survey fixed effects to account for any systematic differences over time in the survey context that may change respondents' concern with race overall. My inferences therefore relate variation in attention to race by show to problem importance responses within a survey fielding.<sup>8</sup>

I model the binary *race only* or *race plus* categories using a probit link. Consequently, I present the various model results visually. I focus first on testing my three primary hypotheses on the full sample. I then test whether these general patterns differ by respondent characteristics in expected ways.

Each panel in Figure 2 converts the model results into predicted probabilities, holding all

---

<sup>7</sup>The substantive results largely hold for windows as short as 10 days and extend to even a 21 day period, although result precision varies. One potential explanation for the decline in precision as interview date proximity increases comes from reduced variation in show attention to race.

<sup>8</sup>This modeling approach reflects similar designs used to test agenda setting (Gillion 2016).

variables at their sample means or modes.<sup>9</sup> The solid lines presents these probabilities with shading denoting show. The dashed lines denote 84% confidence intervals. I focus first on the left panel and the *race only* outcome. The black line shows that when Maddow discusses race more on her show, respondents become more likely to report that race is an important national problem ( $p = .029$ ). A min-max change in coverage increases this probability by .018, from .012 to .030, over a 140% increase. However, as the hashmarks show, this is a rare event given the distribution of the data. Looking instead at a change from one standard deviation below the mean for Maddow show coverage to one standard deviation above it produces a change of .006, a 50% increase from .013 to .019.

This is not the case for O'Reilly. As the gray line indicates, as O'Reilly discusses race more respondents become less likely to report race is a problem. A min-max change in coverage reduces this probability by .016, from .021 to .005, a 77% decrease ( $p = .050$ ). A more likely change associated with a standard deviation shift in coverage is a reduction of .008, a 38% decrease from .020 to .013.

These results offer initial support for the *multi-valent* account. More racially liberal attention as measured by Maddow's attention to race stimulate public concern. But more racially conservative discourse as indexed by O'Reilly's attention diminishes public attention. Bolstering these results, a joint hypothesis test suggests rejecting the null that both coverage measures are 0 ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.04, p = .049$ ).

These results do not extend to the *race plus* measure. Figure 2's right panel provides the same change in probability for this outcome. A min-max change in Maddow's attention to race yields no change in the probability the public sees race or racialized issues as more important ( $p = .977$ ). As with the *race only* outcome, O'Reilly's attention has a negative effect. A min-max change reduces the probability the public identifies racism and race relations, crime, welfare, or immigration by .023 points. But this is imprecisely estimated ( $p = .256$ ). Nor does a joint hypothesis test suggest that these coverage measures together have associations different from

---

<sup>9</sup>This is a 54 year old White man without a college education who lives outside the south and identifies as a Democrat.

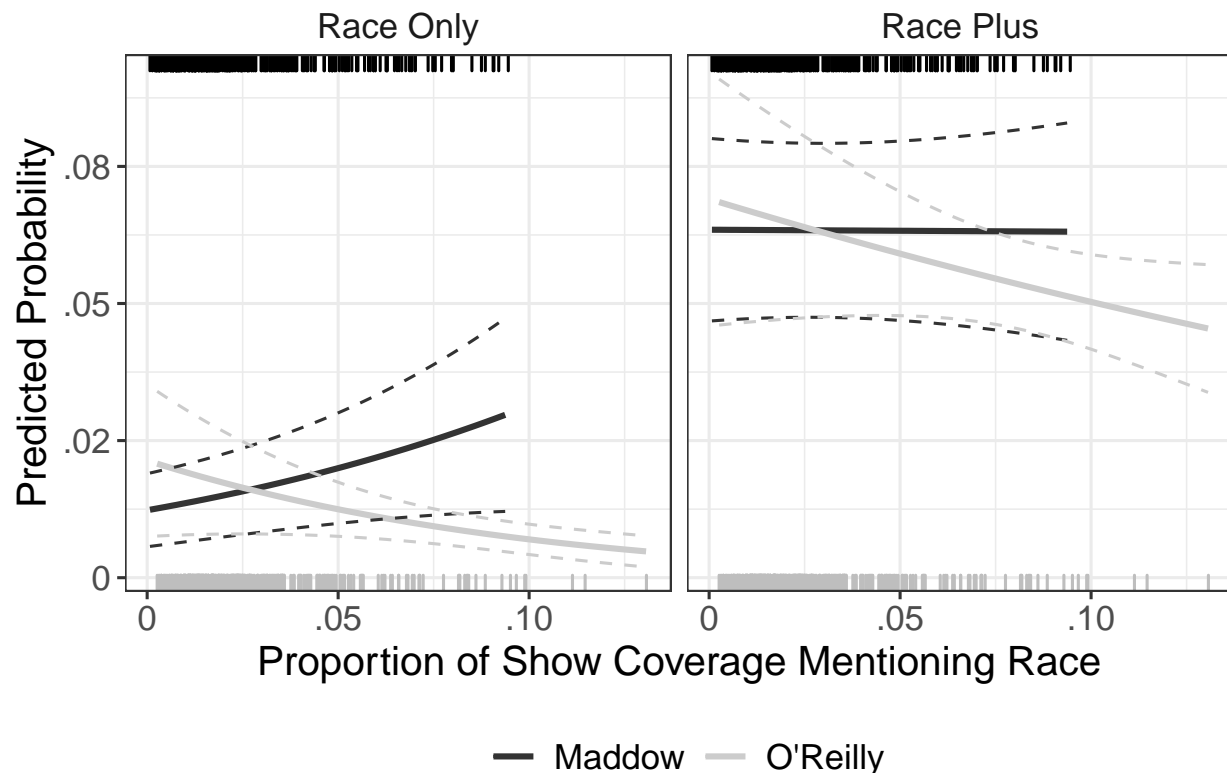


Figure 2: Most important problem response probability and associated 84% confidence intervals by show attention to race. Predictions from probit models. Hashmarks provide the distribution of racial discussion level, shaded by show.

0 ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.52, p = .466$ ). For the public as a whole, the content of racial discourse appears to most clearly set an agenda isolated to race relations and racism.

I turn now to whether the agenda setting effects are general or isolated to certain Americans. I first consider the *sophisticates* and *generalists* hypotheses which offer different predictions about the conditioning effect of political attention. While standard models suggest agenda setting may most likely occur among the most attentive (Zaller 1992), race is an easy issue potentially making changes in importance judgments general in scope (Carmines and Stimson 1980). To index sophistication I use education, defined as whether or not the respondent has a college degree, an imperfect but still useful operationalization (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1993). To test these hypotheses I interact this indicator with the Maddow and O'Reilly attention measures. Significant interaction terms with reliably larger effects among

college educated respondents supports the *sophisticates* hypothesis. The *generalists* receives support if these terms are insignificant and the substantive effects differ little by education.

Figure 3 plots the results. The top row displays changes in response probabilities for college educated respondents. The bottom row offers the same but for respondents without degrees. I first consider agenda setting effects with the *race only* outcome. The results reveal a positive agenda setting effect for Maddow coverage for both groups. Shifting attention from its minimum to its maximum increases the probability a non-college educated respondent identifies racism or race relations as an important problem by .016 points (.013 to .028, an increase of 121% ( $p = .052$ )). College educated respondents become .024 points more likely to offer a *race only* response (.013 to .038), a 180% increase ( $p = .017$ ). But while this change in probability is larger, the increase is imprecise ( $p = .330$ ).

Effect consistency persists when considering O'Reilly's racially conservative rhetoric. It has a negative agenda setting effect irrespective of degree. For non-college educated respondents a min-max change in discussion reduces a *race only* response by .016 points (.021 to .005), a 77% decrease ( $p = .047$ ). For college educated individuals, this is a .017 point change (.023 to .006), a 74% decrease ( $p = .080$ ). And this difference is indistinguishable from 0 ( $p = .727$ ).

The *race plus* outcome offers largely similar, though less precise, results. O'Reilly coverage is again has a negative agenda setting effect for respondents with and without college degrees. But in neither case is this effect distinguishable from 0 ( $ps > .220$ ). Nor does a difference in effects reliably manifest ( $p = .409$ ). A group difference does emerge for Maddow's coverage. This racially liberal attention has little effect on *race plus* response for non-college educated individuals ( $p = .662$ ). However, the effect of Maddow coverage on *race plus* response endorsement is stronger for those with college degrees than without college degrees ( $p = .024$ ). For college educated respondents a min-max change in Maddow's coverage increases the probability of a *race plus* response by .011 points (.043 to .054). But this difference is indistinguishable from 0 ( $p = .326$ ).

These results again support the *multi-valent* account rather than the *traditional* and *null*

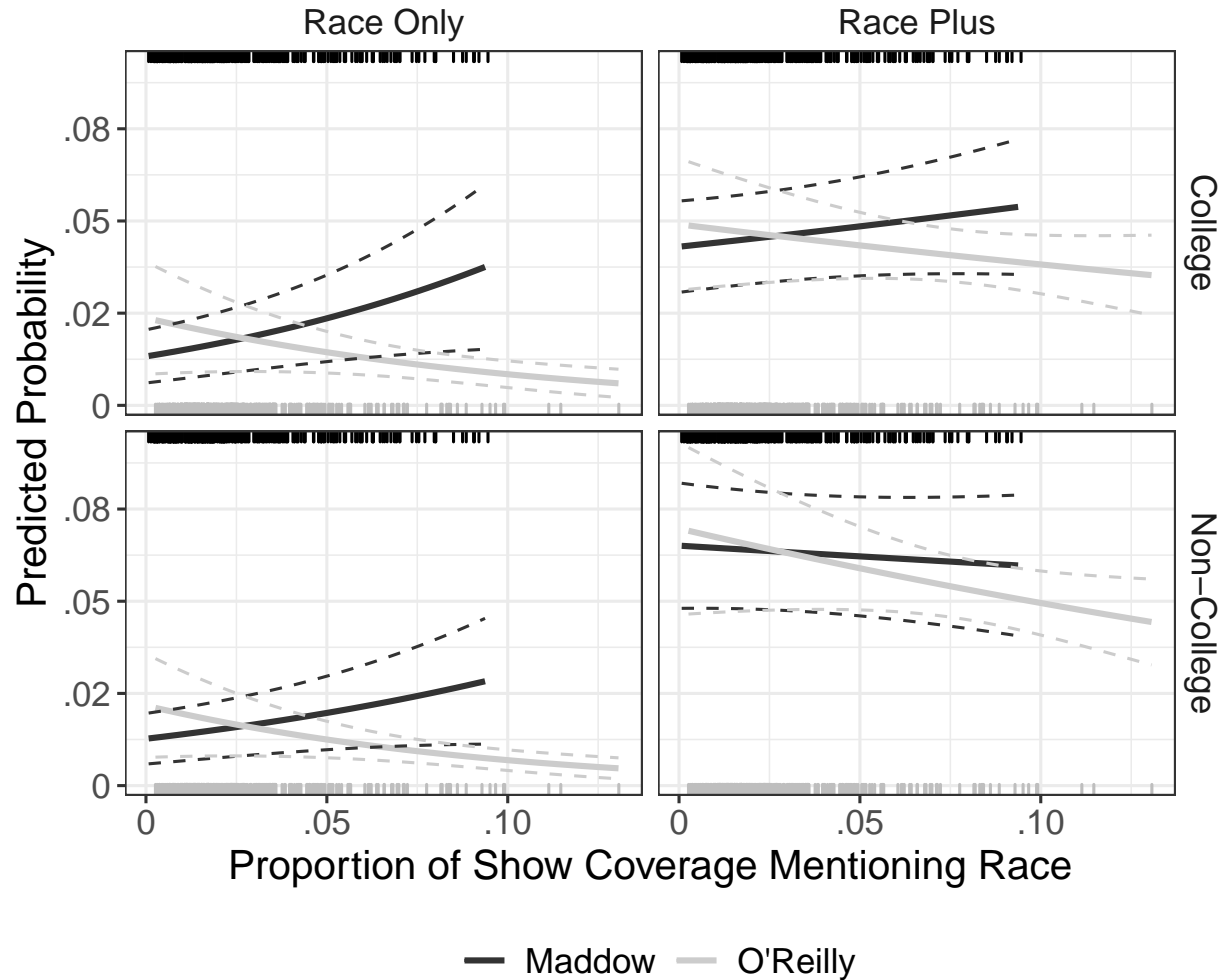


Figure 3: Most important problem response probability and associated 84% confidence intervals by show attention to race. Predictions from probit models. Hashmarks provide the distribution of racial discussion level, shaded by show.

accounts. Racially liberal coverage boosts concern while racially conservative coverage diminishes concern. But these effects appear localized to beliefs about racism and race relations rather than racialized issues. Nor do these effects consistently differ in magnitude by education. The contribution information environment differences make to public concern is general, not isolated to potentially more informed individuals.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>While some may view this consistency as suggesting a lack of media effects and therefore question the measures, I reiterate my view of the measures as proxies for general attention to race that, based on show differences, divides in kind in important ways. I make no claim this attention should have direct or indirect effects. Either can matter for agenda setting, with social diffusion facilitating these processes (Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018; Huckfeldt 2001; Levendusky 2013).



I next consider the *racial divide* hypothesis. Given variation in race's social reality it could be the case that agenda setting effects are isolated to White rather than non-White Americans. To test this I interact each attention measure with an indicator for whether a respondent is White. Support for this hypothesis comes from significant interactions with reliably larger changes in probabilities occurring among White Americans.

Figure 4 reports the results. The top row features changes in response probabilities for White Americans and the bottom row non-White Americans. Considering the *race only* outcome first, a min-max change in Maddow's attention is associated with a .023 point increase in the probability of such a response for White respondents (.012 to .035) and .030 for non-White respondents (.041 to .071), increases of 192% and 72%, respectively. While this difference is suggestive of greater impact among Whites, it is imprecise ( $p = .088$ ). Further, while coverage's marginal effect for non-Whites is imprecisely estimated ( $p = .121$ ), it is more precise for Whites ( $p = .010$ ).

O'Reilly's racially conservative coverage again reduces the probability respondents see race as an important problem. But this change is similar in substantive magnitude for both White and non-White Americans. A min-max shift in O'Reilly attention changes this probability by -.016 for White respondents (.021 to .005) and -.046 for non-White respondents (.062 to .015), reductions of 75% each. Further, this association is more precisely estimated for non-Whites ( $p = .033$ ) than Whites ( $p = .068$ ).

Turning to the *race plus* outcome, no clear agenda setting effects emerge. Nor does this clearly differ by racial group membership. There is some suggestion that racially liberal coverage, as captured by Maddow, has divergent agenda setting effects for White and non-White Americans, but this difference is imprecise ( $p = .108$ ) and neither change in probability is distinguishable from 0 ( $ps > .500$ ).

The results offer little support for the *racial divide* hypothesis and additional support for the *multi-valent* over *traditional* and *null* accounts of agenda setting. While White Americans are somewhat more responsive to racially liberal attention, racially conservative coverage has

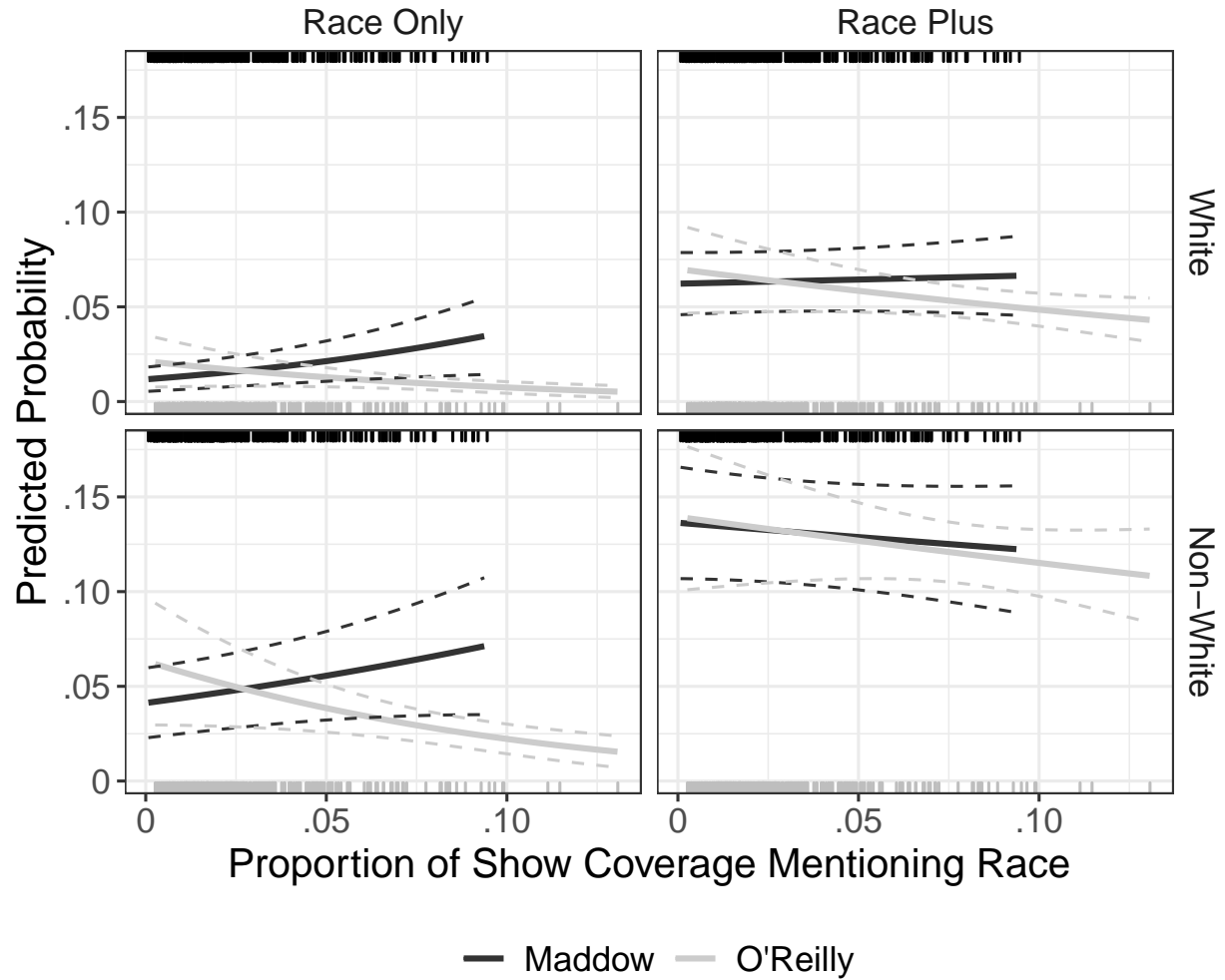


Figure 4: Most important problem response probability and associated 84% confidence intervals by show attention to race. Predictions from probit models. Hashmarks provide the distribution of racial discussion level, shaded by show.

a consistent depressive effect on importance judgments. Further, agenda setting effects remain isolated to the *race only* outcome.

I conclude my observational analyses by exploring whether content differences resonate differently across partisan publics. The *party-consistent hypothesis* proposes media agenda setting effects should be strongest when they are consistent with partisans' expectations grounded in a racially polarized party system (Tesler 2016). In contrast, the *party-inconsistent* hypothesis proposes that partisans respond most to information inconsistent with their party's position. Finally, the *party parity* hypothesis contends partisanship does not condition agenda setting

effects. I test these hypotheses by interacting indicators for whether respondents identify as Republicans or pure Independents with the coverage measures.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 5 contains the results. The rows speak to Democrats', Independents', and Republicans' responses, respectively. I again start with the *race only* outcome. Across parties, changes in Maddow's attention to race produce expected agenda setting effects. These increases in the probability of offering a *race only* response range from 42% for Independents ( $p = .521$ ), to 118% for Democrats ( $p = .052$ ), and 372% for Republicans ( $p = .003$ ). Further, the stronger effect on Republicans' responses is likely reliable relative to Democrats ( $p = .051$ ) and Independents ( $p = .021$ ). Democrats and Independents do not reliably differ ( $p = .256$ ).

Racially conservative coverage has consistent negative agenda setting effects using the *race only* outcome. A min-max change in O'Reilly's attention to race decreases the probability of *race only* responses by 84% among Independents ( $p = .040$ ), 78% for Democrats ( $p = .047$ ), and 78% for Republicans ( $p = .083$ ). This relationship, moreover, does not reliably vary by partisan loyalties ( $ps > .460$ ).

The *race plus* outcome offers more mixed results. For Democrats, discussion of race on neither Maddow ( $p = .947$ ) nor O'Reilly ( $p = .705$ ) has an agenda setting effect. For Republicans, Maddow's attention does not contribute to importance judgments ( $p = .604$ ), but O'Reilly's may decrease importance judgments ( $p = .099$ ), with a min-max change yielding a decrease of about 13%. Independents, in contrast, see negative agenda setting effects from both racially liberal and conservative coverage. Moving from least to most attention reduces the probability of a *race plus* in this group by 44% and 56%, respectively (Maddow:  $p = .029$ ; O'Reilly:  $p = .061$ ). Racially liberal coverage has a reliably stronger effect among Independents than both Democrats ( $p = .004$ ) and Republicans ( $p = .001$ ). The agenda setting effect of racially conservative coverage differs between Democrats and Independents ( $p = .011$ ) and Republicans ( $p = .003$ ).

The results in Figure 5 most consistently support the *party consistency* hypothesis. Whether

---

<sup>11</sup>I code independent leaners as partisans.

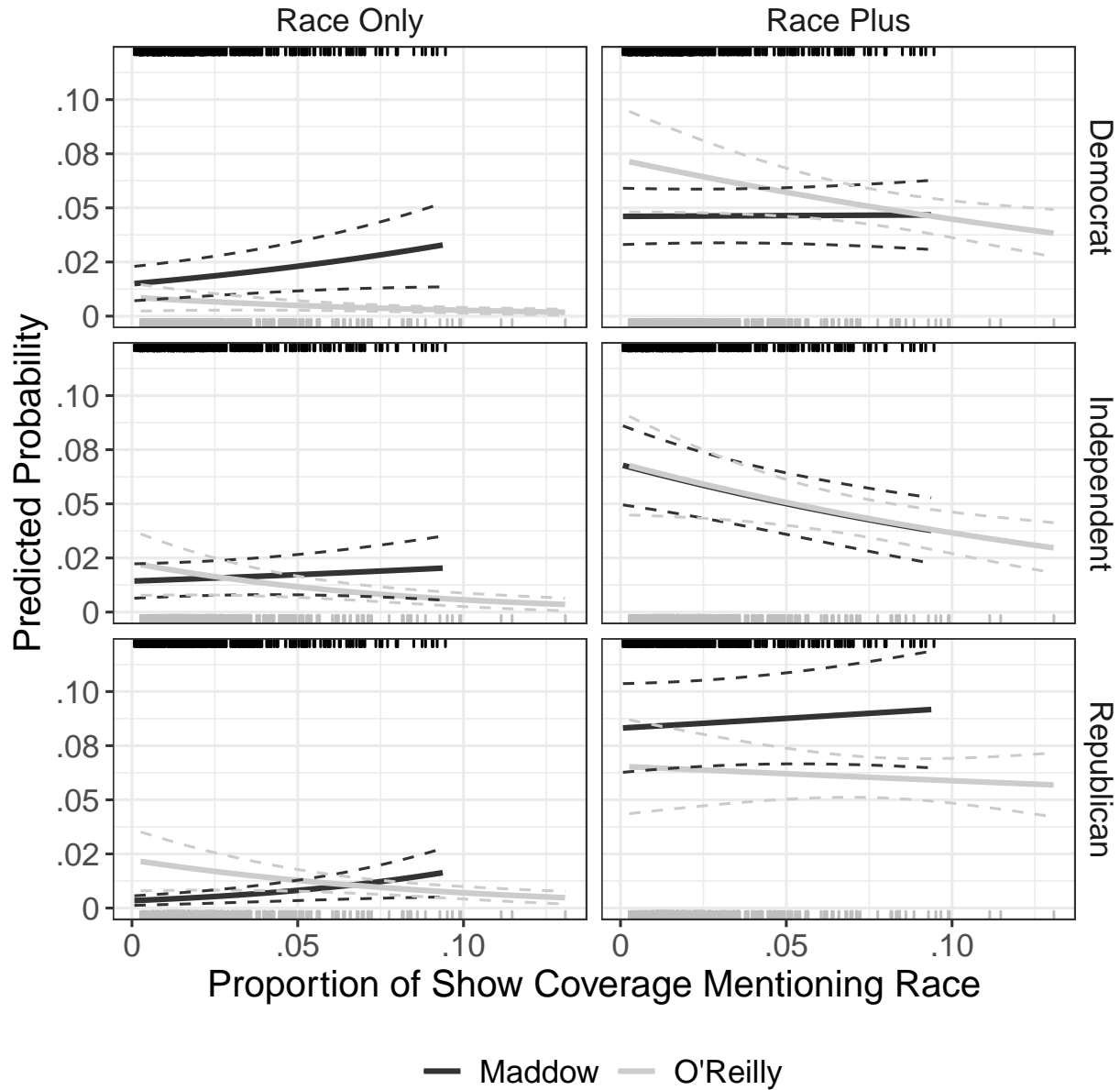


Figure 5: Most important problem response probability and associated 84% confidence intervals by show attention to race. Predictions from probit models. Hashmarks provide the distribution of racial discussion level, shaded by show.

or not rhetoric is consistent with someone's partisan priors does not appear to condition agenda setting effects. The results also offer additional support for the *multi-valent* account of agenda setting. Within each party racially liberal rhetoric has the expected positive agenda setting effect while racially conservative rhetoric has a negative effect. But as with the preceding

tests, agendas appear isolated to racism and race relations, not racialized issues.

Through several tests I find support for the *multi-valent* account of agenda setting. Not only does the amount of attention an issue area receives appear to matter for agenda setting, so too does how the issue is discussed. In fact, covering an issue but doing so in a way that explicitly says it's not an important problem—characteristic racially conservative coverage epitomized by The O'Reilly Factor—appears capable of reducing the degree to which people view racism and race relations as important public problems.

Importantly, the effects are small in absolute magnitude. As I detail in footnote 6, relatively few people report race as an important problem in any given month. The most in the time period is 15% in July 2016, potentially reflecting the shooting deaths of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge and discussion about whether the Black Lives Matter movement motivated these attacks. Despite this, the relative influence is substantial. Maddow discussing race can more than double the probability Whites report that race is an important national problem, although this influence is smaller on the broader *race plus* outcome. Whites' attitudes appear to respond to partisan racial rhetoric in ways that reflect its content. That these effects vary by partisan outlet may help explain why large partisan attitudinal gaps exist in evaluating race relations and race-based events (see Tesler 2016; Neal 2017). Maddow's audience expresses more concern while, if anything, O'Reilly's does less.

The preceding analyses demonstrate that the relationship between partisan media coverage of race and the public's concern with the issue is not directly related to issue attention; rather, outlet appears to matter. But these results may exist for two reasons. First, what the media cover in relation to an issue may shape whether people find it to be an important national problem (Miller 2007). Alternatively, how the media present the content related to an issue matters (see generally Iyengar 1991). It could be how each outlet covers race that shapes these differences, not so much differences in which topics they cover.

## Study 2: Framing Affects Agenda Setting in an Experiment

I turn to an experimental design to address the observational equivalence between frame and content present in Study 1. I fielded this as part of a multi-investigator study on a nationally representative sample of 1,200 U.S. adults from YouGov’s online panel in July 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Participants read a pair of news articles ostensibly from the USA Today (for a similar design, see Miller 2007).<sup>13</sup> Participants first read a story on mortgage interest rates and then read another story about law enforcement civil asset forfeiture practices.<sup>14</sup> The intervention concerns this second story’s framing.<sup>15</sup> Participants were assigned, on a random basis, to a *control* article talking about the practice of civil asset forfeiture, a *race-important* article calling attention to racial biases in the application of civil asset forfeiture and encouraging its repeal because it is discriminatory, and a *race-denial* condition mentioning the same racial biases but downplaying their importance.<sup>16</sup>

I measure problem importance evaluations in two ways, with the order of item type counterbalanced across participants. The first item is the Gallup question from Study 1. I offer respondents the chance to provide up to three open-ended responses. As with the observational analysis I then create *race only* and *race plus* measures. The first codes responses that specifically mention race, racism, and race relations while the second incorporates the same set of racialized issues as before except for immigration given the treatment’s focus.

The second item set, a series of close-ended issue importance items, addresses concerns with the Gallup most important problem item. Some contend it conflates perceptions of is-

---

<sup>12</sup>While YouGov provides survey weights, I report unweighted results to avoid potentially biased estimations of the population average treatment effect (Miratrix et al. 2018).

<sup>13</sup>Each article was an edited version of an actual USA Today story.

<sup>14</sup>Civil asset forfeiture facilitates studying framing effects on perceptions of problem importance over other issues. The issue has received media coverage but has not commanded the attention that other aspects of the criminal justice system with potential racially disparate implementation have. Further, the nature of civil asset forfeiture coverage readily intersects with the types of coverage variation present in the media attention measure used in Study 1. This coverage variation provides the foundation for the framing variation I use in the design.

<sup>15</sup>The frames reflect racially liberal and conservative positions (King and Smith 2014). The appendix contains the treatments.

<sup>16</sup>After each article participants answered two questions evaluating the article on different dimensions to maintain a cover story for the section, and then they completed items capturing most important problem judgments.

sue importance, or salience, and issue problematization, or a desire to change the status quo (Wlezien 2005). Important problems may not be politically relevant and politically relevant issues may not be problems. I therefore include a set of 5 items asking respondents “Of the problems in the country today, how big of a problem is...[Racism/Race relations]?” with responses recorded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from “a very big problem” to “not a problem at all.” These issues include racism/race relations, housing affordability, the economy, the environment, and health care. Comparing across treatments, I expect respondents in the *race-important* condition to rate race as a more important problem than those in the *race-denial* condition. The remaining issues provide insight into whether and how the treatments shift concern about other issues (Hopkins and Mummolo 2017). It could be the case that those in the *race-denial* condition rate these issues as more important than those in the *race-important* condition in a type of hydraulic effect. Alternatively, exposure to information about discrimination and appeals for modifying public policy may generate additional concern about other policies in a broad interventionist shift. Those in the *race-important* condition may place greater importance on these policies than those in the *race-denial* group.

I begin by assessing the *multi-valent*, *traditional*, and *null* accounts among all respondents. I consider first the open-ended item. The left and right panels in Figure 6 present the proportion of responses coded as *race only* or *race plus*, respectively, by treatment group. The vertical lines indicate 84% confidence intervals. The results reinforce the results from Study 1 and point to the influence frames have on problem importance judgments. The *race-important* group was more likely to offer a *race only* response compared to both the *control* and *race-denial* groups. Nearly 22% of those assigned to the *race-important* condition provided such a response compared to 16% in the *control* and 15% in the *race-denial* conditions ( $p = .045$  and  $p = .016$ , respectively). While small in absolute magnitude, the difference in effects relates to a 38-47% increase in the number of responses classified in this category. This is a particularly impressive outcome given the requirement that respondents relate a text-based treatment about a policy to a belief that race relations or racism are important national problems in an open-ended

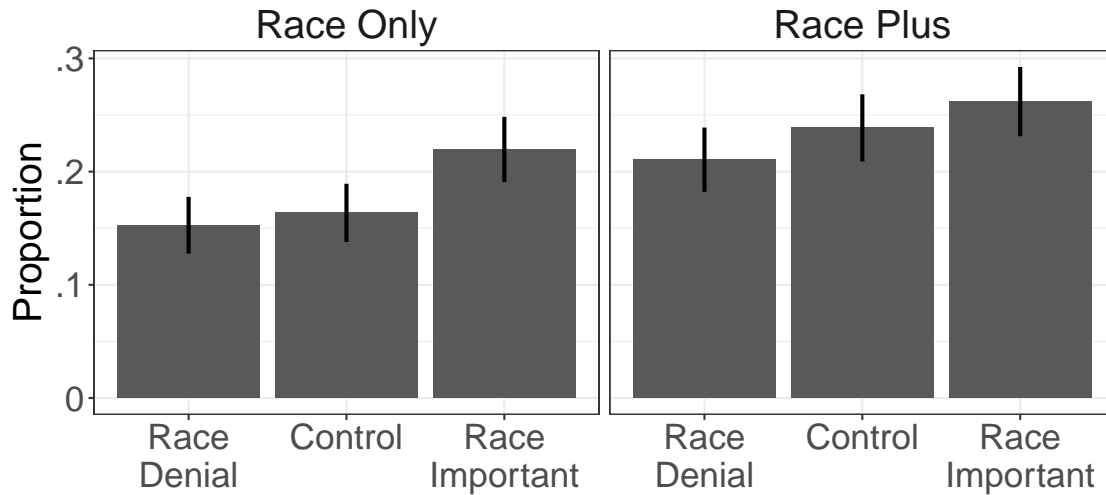


Figure 6: Issue importance mentions and 84% confidence intervals by condition.

format.

The right panel in Figure 6 offers additional consistency with Study 1 results. Compared to the *control*, no clear treatment effects appears on the *race plus* outcome. While the *race-important* and *race-denial* conditions boost and depress mentions, respectively, neither difference is reliably distinguishable from 0 ( $p = .453$  and  $.365$ , respectively). But taken together, divergent information streams may polarize perceptions of importance on this outcome, a result suggested by the Study 1 results. *Race plus* mentions are 5 points more likely in the *race-important* condition than the *race-denial* group, with the difference more precise than the *control* comparisons ( $p = .097$ ).

The difference between the *race only* and *race plus* operationalizations is suggestive of the nature of the treatment effect. Given ongoing debates about race and related issues in summer 2018, an additional piece of information about discrimination in the criminal justice system does little to shift views about the importance of race-related policies (Druckman and Leeper 2012).<sup>17</sup> The treatment then may specifically call attention to how race structures social outcomes, leading to the increased proportion of *race only* responses in the *race-important* con-

<sup>17</sup>As an example, the *race-important* condition contained only 1 additional response classified as mentioning crime or policing than either other condition.



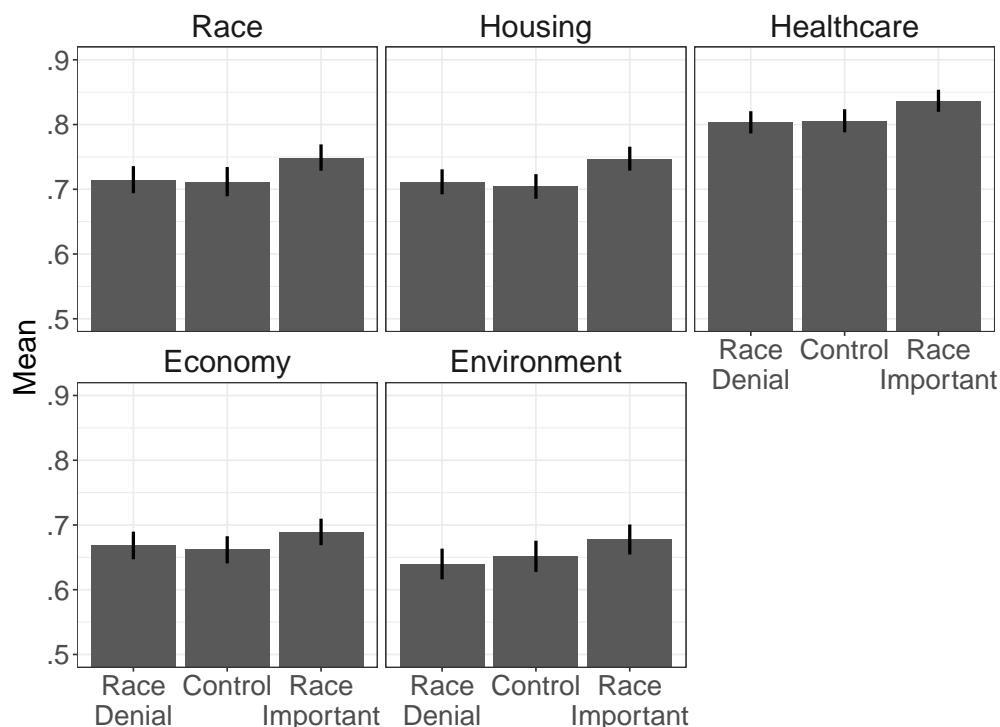


Figure 7: Mean issue importance ratings and 84% confidence intervals by condition. Outcomes scaled 0-1.

dition. This outcome appears important for understanding the mix of considerations people bring to bear when identifying important social problems, even if it is only suggestive. While some 32% of the *race plus* responses in the *control* condition are from additional race-related issues, this decreases to 28% in the *race-denial* condition and 16% in the *race-important* condition. Exposure to information about whether or not race is related to social affairs appears to affect how people understand its role.

Figure 7 extends these analyses to the closed-ended items. I focus first on the race outcome. The results are again consistent with the *multi-valent* account. Relative to the *control*, those in the *race-important* condition were over 3.5 points more likely to rate racism and race relations as a more important problem ( $d = .12, p = .088$ ), while those in the *race-denial* condition differed little ( $p = .891$ ). Further, a similarly sized though less precise difference exists across the *race-important* and *race-denial* conditions ( $p = .117$ ).

The remaining panels suggest that the *race-important* condition's potential agenda setting effect occurs across outcomes. This is an interesting and unexpected result, but only for housing affordability and healthcare are these more reliable increases relative to the *control* ( $p_{\text{housing}} = .027, p_{\text{healthcare}} = .081, p_{\text{economy}} = .282, p_{\text{environment}} = .196$ ). That importance ratings on these issues differ little between the *race-denial* and *control* groups suggest these perceptions do not necessarily follow from mentioning race. Instead, the pattern of results potentially suggests that applying a frame indicative of liberal positions may foster concern with other issues given these issues' integration in mass belief systems (Converse 1964). A shift in perceived importance for one issue may increase importance judgments for others through a process akin to spreading activation (Collins and Loftus 1975). Indeed, averaging together the issue importance ratings for the non-race issue set suggests this may be the case. The average on this combined measure in the *race-important* condition is .74, .03 points greater than the *control* ( $p = .034$ ) and *race-denial* conditions ( $p = .029$ ).<sup>18</sup> That the *race-denial* condition yields no countervailing decrease in importance judgments offers some additional suggestive evidence that the liberal frame of identifying a problem that is worth addressing helps facilitate agenda setting.

I next evaluate whether these results vary by education, race, and partisanship. In separate models I interact treatment assignment with indicators for having a college degree, being White, and party identity.<sup>19</sup> I present the simple difference in treatment effects but also report if differences change after adjusting for plausibly-connected covariates (Kam and Trussler 2017).<sup>20</sup>

Figure 8 focuses on results using the open-ended responses while Figure 9 features the closed-ended items. I focus first on the open-ends. Consistent with Study 1, the results offer little evidence that agenda setting effects divide by individual characteristics. Further, they sup-

---

<sup>18</sup>Cohen's *ds* of .15, and .11, respectively. Randomization inference tests yield a similar *p*-value for the difference relative to the *control* (.079) but also suggest the difference relative to the *race-denial* condition is potentially more reliable (.042).

<sup>19</sup>I again collapse independent learners with their respective parties.

<sup>20</sup>Across models adjustments include race, sex, age, education, and partisanship.

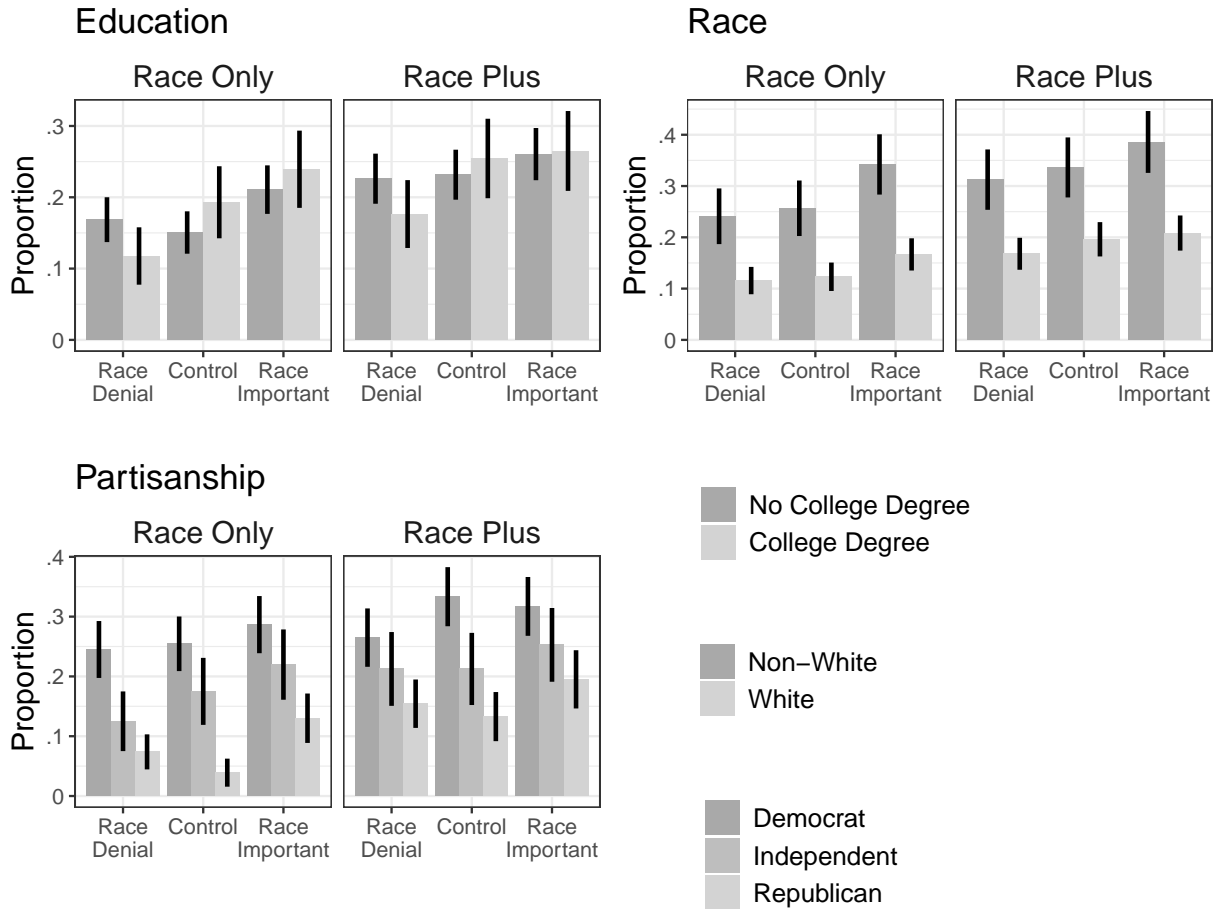


Figure 8: Issue importance mentions and 84% confidence intervals by condition.

port the *multi-valent* account. Compared to the *control* condition, those in the *race-important* condition are more likely to offer a *race only* response, with this usually extending to the *race-plus* response as well. But again, the treatment effect is stronger on the *race only* outcome. Further, these mentions are usually as likely in the *race-denial* and *control* condition no matter one's education, race, or partisanship. The only results opposite this pattern manifests for Republicans, with more problem mentions in the *race-denial* than *control*. But as the confidence intervals indicate, these differences vary in their precision. The key insight is that the support in Study 1 for the *generalists* and *party-consistent* hypotheses, and evidence against the *racial divide* hypothesis, persists in this experimental setting.

Figure 9 indicates such consistent results persist on the closed-ended items. Considering the racism outcome first, little distinguishes the *race-important* condition's agenda setting effect

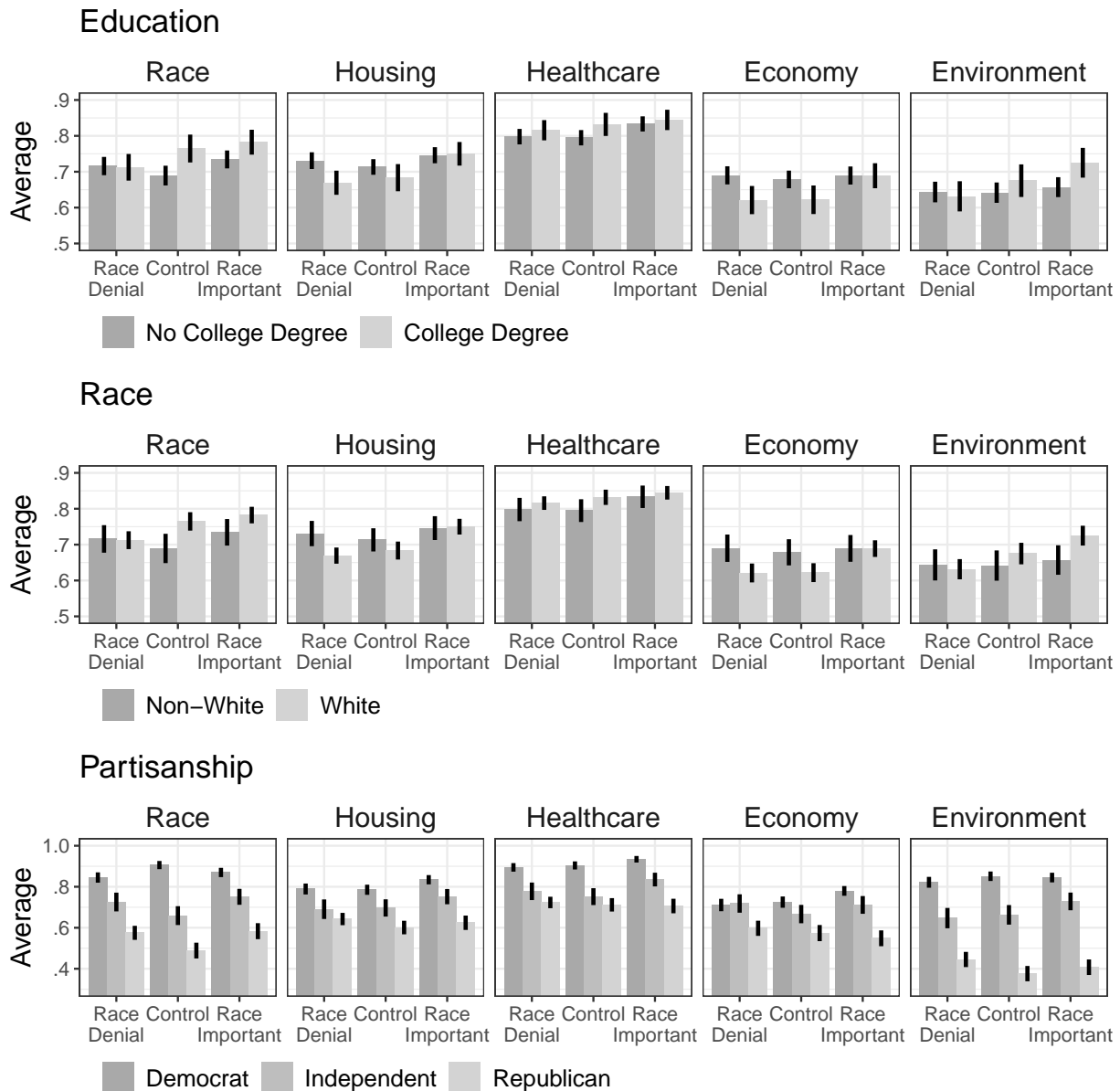


Figure 9: Mean issue importance ratings and 84% confidence intervals by condition and group. Outcomes scaled 0-1.

between college- and non-college-educated or White and non-White respondents. Nor does its effect differ between Independents and Republicans. But compared to Democrats, these other partisans experience stronger agenda setting effects ( $ps < .010$ ) from the *race-important* condition, perhaps due to higher average concern among Democrats. Unexpectedly, Democrats in the *race-important* condition rate racism over 3 points less important compared to the control,

but this difference is imprecise ( $p = .212$ ).

The remaining items also show similar liberalized importance judgments in the *race-important* condition suggested by the full sample. The patterns manifest consistently by education and race, and for Democrats and Independents. Republicans, in contrast, see little variation in importance judgments on these additional outcomes. This exception reinforces the possibility that the agenda setting effect in part results from perceptions government should do something, with this activating associated concepts. But with Republicans predisposed to oppose government as a problem solution, no such general importance shift occurs.

These results corroborate and extend the insights from Study 1. Not only may content affect agenda setting, but framing does so, too. Relative to a control condition where explicit information about race was absent, participants in a condition where a policy was framed as racially discriminatory were more likely to note that race was an important problem. But unlike Study 1, I do not find a depressive effect of racially conservative perspectives on importance judgments. The results also offer interesting suggestive evidence regarding potentially broader impacts for framing on issue importance. While those in the *race-important* condition on average rated the non-race issues as more important than the *control*, no such increase appears in the *race-denial* condition. Future work could investigate the potential for such spillover effects and their consequences (cf. Hopkins and Mummolo 2017). Finally, the results appear consistent across types of Americans, suggesting framing variation has a generalized effect.

## Conclusion

A conventional wisdom holds that talking about race serves as a way to correct past injustices and present wrongs by calling attention to race-related disparities. But I offer evidence suggesting that simply talking about race is not enough. Consistent with expectations from classic agenda setting accounts, concern with race does increase as attention to race increases (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Beckett 1994; Miller and Kros-

nick 2000; Soroka 2002, 2006; Miller 2007), but only when that conversation centers race as an important explanation for social inequities. Further, attention to race that deemphasizes its influence may actually reduce public concern with it. Simply talking about race is not enough; perspective also matters (cf. Wasow 2020). Perhaps most importantly, these results appear to general, not isolated to certain groups in the American public.

While Study 2's results help address Study 1's inability to capture exposure, they do not address the potential importance of source cue effects. Elites like Maddow and O'Reilly are uniquely able to influence beliefs on race because their viewers trust them (Druckman 2001), with this in a polarized political environment (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013). Although motivated to watch by partisanship, that these predispositions increasingly correlate with racial attitudes suggests individuals expect elites to offer some specific perspectives on race. Maddow can more easily frame race as about discrimination, thereby shaping attitudes, in part because this is a consistent position. Without trustworthy sources, individuals' racial attitudes might suppress these framing attempts, limiting elite influence. Although I do not address this directly by varying source cues, the results from Study 2 suggest that highly trusted sources may be sufficient, but not necessary, for framing to influence agenda setting. The articles were ostensibly from the USA Today. That a story from a source with no clear partisan leaning framed in different ways can shift importance judgments suggests source cues, while important, may not be required to alter how people perceive issues related to core predispositions. Further, analyses testing whether partisanship moderates treatment responsiveness yielded no reliable differences, consistent with the moderation analyses conducted for Study 1. Although I motivated my analyses by foregrounding the trust partisans place in party elites, the experimental results suggest that elite influence does not simply follow from their credibility.

While focusing on short-term agenda setting effects, the contribution I find for elite rhetoric may have longer-term implications for mass attitudes. Agenda setting concerns perceptions of national issues, but individuals can internalize elite discourse on race such that they see race as not only nationally important but also personally important. The mass public adopts the frames

(de)emphasizing race's importance and uses these to understand other phenomena (Lippmann 1922). Elites can thus encourage the public to use a particular perspective to understand the world (Boninger, Krosnick and Berent 1995). Elite rhetoric could create issue publics around race where they otherwise do not exist. But because these entities may grow in response to elite discourse, they may organize around preserving, or challenging, the racial status quo. For those seeking to address persistent racial inequality, talking about race matters, but the content of these conversations matters even more.

Beyond race, these results have implications for how we understand public agendas in a partisan polarized political context. An expansion of media choice not only means that provision of content might vary, so, too, can this content's framing (Prior 2007). Polarization exacerbates individuals' tendency to rely on partisan cues over substantive arguments (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013). This is particularly consequential when elites have incentives to offer perspectives on issues that align with party priorities (Levendusky 2013). Rather than a single, general public issue prioritization fractured by some issue publics, the present issue, one increasingly aligned with party differences. Despite calls for bipartisanship and attempts to find solutions to common problems, the foregoing suggests media coverage helps us understand why people may not agree on what problems even exist.

## References

- Acharya, Avidit, Matthew Blackwell and Maya Sen. 2018. *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Arceneaux, Kevin and Gregory A Huber. 2007. "What to Do (and Not Do) with Multicollinearity in State Politics Research." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 7(1):81–101.
- Beckett, Katherine. 1994. "Setting the public agenda: "Street crime" and drug use in American politics." *Social Problems* 41(3):425–447.
- Boninger, David S, Jon A Krosnick and Matthew K Berent. 1995. The causes and consequences of attitude importance. In *Attitude Strength: Antecedents and Consequences*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum pp. 159–189.
- Boydston, Amber E. 2013. *Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carmines, Edward G and James A Stimson. 1980. "The two faces of issue voting." *American Political Science Review* 74(1):78–91.
- Chong, Dennis and James N Druckman. 2007. "Framing Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10(1):103–126.
- Collins, Allan M and Elizabeth F Loftus. 1975. "A spreading-activation theory of semantic processing." *Psychological review* 82(6):407–428.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter. New York: Free Press pp. 206–261.
- Dawson, Michael C. 1994. *Behind the Mule*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Druckman, James N. 2001. "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *The Journal of Politics* 63(4):1041–1066.



- Druckman, James N, Erik Peterson and Rune Slothuus. 2013. "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation." *American Political Science Review* 107(01):57–79.
- Druckman, James N, Matthew S Levendusky and Audrey McLain. 2018. "No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread via Interpersonal Discussions." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(1):99–112.
- Druckman, James N and Thomas J Leeper. 2012. "Learning More from Political Communication Experiments: Pretreatment and Its Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 56(4):875–896.
- Engelhardt, Andrew M. 2019. "The content of their coverage: contrasting racially conservative and liberal elite rhetoric." *Politics, Groups and Identities* Firstview.
- Engelhardt, Andrew M. 2021. "Racial Attitudes through a Partisan Lens." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(3):1062–1079.
- Fazio, Russell H and Bridget C Dunton. 1997. "Categorization by Race: The Impact of Automatic and Controlled Components of Racial Prejudice." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33(5):451–470.
- Gamson, William A. 1992. *Talking Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gamson, William A and Andre Modigliani. 1987. The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action. In *Research in Political Sociology*, ed. Richard D Braungart. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gillion, Daniel Q. 2016. *Governing with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haney López, Ian. 2014. *Dog Whistle Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hopkins, Daniel J and Jonathan Mummolo. 2017. "Assessing the Breadth of Framing Effects." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 12(1):37–57.

- Huckfeldt, Robert. 2001. "The social communication of political expertise." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(2):425–438.
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1991. *Is Anyone Responsible?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto and Donald R Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jardina, Ashley E. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kam, Cindy D and Marc J Trussler. 2017. "At the Nexus of Observational and Experimental Research: Theory, Specification, and Analysis of Experiments with Heterogeneous Treatment Effects." *Political Behavior* 39(4):789–815.
- King, Desmond S and Rogers M Smith. 2014. "'Without Regard to Race': Critical Ideational Development in Modern American Politics." *The Journal of Politics* 76(4):958–971.
- Levendusky, Matthew. 2013. *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt.
- Lodge, Milton and Charles S Taber. 2013. *The Rationalizing Voter*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McCombs, Maxwell E and Donald L Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(2):176–187.
- Miller, Joanne M. 2007. "Examining the Mediators of Agenda Setting: A New Experimental Paradigm Reveals the Role of Emotions." *Political Psychology* 28(6):689–717.
- Miller, Joanne M and Jon A Krosnick. 2000. "News media impact on the ingredients of presidential evaluations: Politically knowledgeable citizens are guided by a trusted source." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(2):301–315.

- Miratrix, Luke W, Jasjeet S Sekhon, Alexander G Theodoridis and Luis F Campos. 2018. "Worth Weighting? How to Think About and Use Weights in Survey Experiments." *Political Analysis* 26(3):275–291.
- Neal, Samantha. 2017. "Views of racism as a major problem increase sharply, especially among Democrats." Pew Research Center.
- Nelson, Thomas E, Kira Sanbonmatsu and Harwood K McClerking. 2007. "Playing a Different Race Card: Examining the Limits of Elite Influence on Perceptions of Racism." *The Journal of Politics* 69(2):416–429.
- Nicholson, Stephen P. 2011. "Dominating Cues and the Limits of Elite Influence." *The Journal of Politics* 73(04):1165–1177.
- Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Russonello, Giovanni. 2020. "Some Republicans Have Grown Wary of Protests Against Racism, Poll Shows." The New York Times.
- Sears, David O and Christia Brown. 2013. Childhood and Adult Political Development. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy, David O Sears and Jack S Levy. New York: Oxford University Press pp. 59–95.
- Sniderman, Paul M, Richard A Brody and Phillip E Tetlock. 1993. *Reasoning and Choice. Explorations in Political Psychology* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Soroka, Stuart N. 2002. "Issue attributes and agenda-setting by media, the public, and policy-makers in Canada." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 14(3):264–285.
- Soroka, Stuart N. 2006. "Good News and Bad News: Asymmetric Responses to Economic Information." *The Journal of Politics* 68(2):372–385.

- Tesler, Michael. 2015. "Priming Predispositions and Changing Policy Positions: An Account of When Mass Opinion Is Primed or Changed." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(4):806–824.
- Tesler, Michael. 2016. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walsh, Katherine Cramer. 2004. *Talking about Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wasow, Omar. 2020. "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting." *American Political Science Review* 114(3):638–659.
- Waters, Mary C. 1990. *Ethnic Options*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press.
- Wlezien, Christopher. 2005. "On the salience of political issues: The problem with 'most important problem'." *Electoral Studies* 24(4):555–579.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

# Appendix

## Experimental Treatments

All participants first read a non-political story about interest rates, presented below. They were then randomly assigned to the *control*, *race-important*, or *race-denial* treatments.

### **USA Today: Mortgage rates drop to lowest since election, but borrowers barely budge**

The lowest mortgage interest rates since last November did little to encourage people to refinance their home loans or take out a new loan to buy a home.

Total mortgage application volume rose just .1%, seasonally adjusted, last week from the previous week, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association (MBA). Volume was nearly 22% lower than a year ago.

A sharp drop in rates usually prompts homeowners to refinance, but those applications rose just 2% for the week and are still down 40% from the same week one year ago, when rates were lower. So many people have already refinanced at rock-bottom rates that the pool of potential applicants is shrinking.

The average contract interest rate for 30-year fixed-rate mortgages with conforming loan balances of \$424,100 or less decreased to 4.12 percent, from 4.14 percent, with points remaining unchanged at .38, including the origination fee, for 80 percent loan-to-value ratio loans.

“Last week, mortgage rates dropped to their lowest level since the week of the November 2016 election,” said Mike Fratantoni, chief economist for the MBA.

Lower rates did nothing to spur home buyers because the drop was not nearly enough to offset fast-rising home prices and a short supply of homes for sale. Mortgage applications to purchase a home fell 2 percent for the week but remain nearly 10% higher than a year ago.

One sign that buyers are struggling increasingly with high home prices is the jump in adjustable rate mortgage applications, which offer a lower interest rate. ARM volume now stands 13% higher than a year ago. In addition, FHA loan applications to purchase a home are only up 4% from a year ago. FHA loans are a favorite among young, first-time buyers with less money to put down on a home.

### *Control*

### **USA Today: Bill Aims to Reform Policing Practices**

Civil asset forfeiture law faces radical reform if a bill in the state legislature passes.

These private property seizures gained traction in the 1980s when law enforcement agencies used them to go after the fruits and tools of organized drug traffickers.

Laws allowed agencies to seize all kinds of property, from commercial real estate to boats and jewelry, that they believed was used in crimes or obtained with crime proceeds.

But well-publicized abuses of the process led to a long-running reform movement among activists on both the federal and state levels.

Asset forfeiture turns the common concept of due process on its head: Police can seize property even when its owner is not even charged, much less convicted of, a crime police suspect is related to the property. Then the burden falls on the owner to prove their belongings are not criminally tainted.

The bill would alter some fundamental aspects of current property seizure practice. For one, forfeitures would have to be tied to a criminal conviction, and even then, the forfeiture would have to be proportional to the offense, meaning, for example, a semi-truck couldn't be taken because the driver had sold a personal amount of marijuana to another driver inside the cab.

#### *Race-important*

#### **USA Today: Bill Aims to Reform Racially Discriminatory Policing Practices**

Civil asset forfeiture law, an effective crime-fighting tool to some, an instance of racial discrimination for others, faces radical reform if a bill in the state legislature passes.

These private property seizures gained traction in the 1980s when law enforcement agencies used them to go after the fruits and tools of organized drug traffickers. Laws allowed agencies to seize all kinds of property, from commercial real estate to boats and jewelry, that they believed was used in crimes or obtained with crime proceeds.

But well-publicized abuses of the process led to a long-running reform movement among activists on both the federal and state levels.

Asset forfeiture turns the common concept of due process on its head: Police can seize property even when its owner is not even charged, much less convicted of, a crime police suspect is related to the property. Then the burden falls on the owner to prove their belongings are not criminally tainted.

Many point to racial disparities in the policy's application. Although information is limited, in 400 federal court cases where people who challenged seizures and received some money back, the majority were black, Hispanic or another minority.

"Civil asset forfeiture perpetuates racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. Reforming this practice makes sure skin color does not shape one's access to the due process rights the Constitution provides," said Jake Miller, the head of the state ACLU chapter, an organization supporting the reform effort.

"This policy is just one example of how the criminal justice system is stacked against minorities. This bill is the first step toward addressing these pervasive racial biases."

The bill would alter some fundamental aspects of current property seizure practice. For one, forfeitures would have to be tied to a criminal conviction, and even then, the forfeiture would have to be proportional to the offense, meaning, for example, a semi-truck couldn't be taken because the driver had sold a personal amount of marijuana to another driver inside the cab.

#### *Race-denial*

#### **USA Today: Bill Aims to Reform “Racially Discriminatory” Policing Practices**

Civil asset forfeiture law, an effective crime-fighting tool to some, an instance of racial discrimination for others, faces radical reform if a bill in the state legislature passes.

These private property seizures gained traction in the 1980s when law enforcement agencies used them to go after the fruits and tools of organized drug traffickers. Laws allowed agencies to seize all kinds of property, from commercial real estate to boats and jewelry, that they believed was used in crimes or obtained with crime proceeds.

But well-publicized abuses of the process led to a long-running reform movement among activists on both the federal and state levels.

Asset forfeiture turns the common concept of due process on its head: Police can seize property even when its owner is not even charged, much less convicted of, a crime police suspect is related to the property. Then the burden falls on the owner to prove their belongings are not criminally tainted.

Many point to racial disparities in the policy's application. Although information is limited, in 400 federal court cases where people who challenged seizures and received some money back, the majority were black, Hispanic or another minority.

“Civil asset forfeiture does not involve racial discrimination. Skin color does not shape one's access to the due process rights the Constitution provides, and reforming this practice does not change that,” said Jake Miller, the head of the state Association of Chiefs of Police, an organization opposing the reform effort.

“Opponents of this policy are trying to make this about race when it's not. They're using race as a distraction to get support for a bill that removes an effective policing practice.”

The bill would alter some fundamental aspects of current property seizure practice. For one, forfeitures would have to be tied to a criminal conviction, and even then, the forfeiture would have to be proportional to the offense, meaning, for example, a semi-truck couldn't be taken because the driver had sold a personal amount of marijuana to another driver inside the cab.