INTRODUCTION

The Political Landscape of Race-Based Appeals

WILLIE HORTON'S racialized, criminalized, and vilified mug shot became the centerpiece of presidential hopeful George H. W. Bush's (and allied political interest groups') 1988 strategy to mar Michael Dukakis's image. First showcased in a set of now infamous political ads, Horton became the subject of headlines in national newspapers and led television newscasts across the country. Deploying the ads drew controversy and sparked debates pitting Blacks against Whites, Northerners against Southerners, and conservative ideologues against their liberal counterparts on issues of racial stereotyping, crime policy, and political campaign ethics. More than two decades later, Horton's image is an enduring icon; it represents persuasive political-campaign communication at its worst—insidious in its intents and contemptible in its targeting of White fear of Black aggression and savagery. The ad's potential was, perhaps, the greatest cause for alarm for those interested in fundamental fairness and racial equality.

This political powder keg spurred new scholarly interest in the intersections of race and political communication by researchers seeking to better understand racialized images and racially coded language and their influence on public opinion. Preceded by and predicated on a number of more limited studies in these areas, the political scientist Tali Mendelberg (2001) described the prevailing findings of the field at that time in her groundbreaking *The Race Card,* which advanced a theory of implicit communication that has driven much of the research in this area for close to a decade.

Mendelberg argued that the post-Reconstruction era in American politics and the post–Civil Rights age in which we now live are distinguished by a

distinct cultural shift away from a norm of racial inequality to one in which egalitarian ideals are pervasive and, in principle, generally adhered to by the majority of the population (members of White society in particular). In the former era, explicit race-based appeals were tolerated and even expected by the primarily White electorate. In the present age, however, Mendelberg claims, such appeals violate an existing norm of racial equality and are tolerated only by the most overt bigots.[1] However, Mendelberg argues that political candidates in this post–Civil Rights period still have the possibility to gain (and interest in gaining) a competitive edge among White voters, whose latent racial prejudices, fears, and resentments may be activated to influence political decisions, whether it be their choice of candidates or their opinions on particular public policy issues.

This cultural shift, along with the politically advantageous possibilities of appealing to race, Mendelberg argued, produced a new, dominating mode for constructing and deploying race-based appeals—one marked by its subtlety and enhanced through its dissemination in visual imagery and racially coded language. Mendelberg's original empirical studies testing these claims led her to conclude that race-based appeals can and do have substantive effects on White voters in ways that disadvantage Black and minority policy interests. Further, she maintains that race-based persuasive appeals are most effective when they are constructed implicitly and when the underlying racial message remains hidden from public view.

In this book, we proceed from the premise that our current situation—twenty years after Willie Horton and approaching a decade since Mendelberg's book was published—demands a renewed look at the political landscape of race-based appeals in American electoral discourse. We argue that while Mendelberg (and many other scholars who have contributed to the varied literatures about race in political communication over the years) have succeeded in telling important aspects of the story about the nature and influence of race-based appeals, the story remains incomplete. This is largely the result of an evolving electorate and political culture that has promulgated new entanglements with race and politics that were nonexistent or not apparent even a decade ago.

However, our understanding of race-based appeals is also incomplete because research to date has primarily focused on a limited number of related, but narrow, issues regarding race and political communication. First, previous research has overwhelmingly dealt with what many see as the most morally, ethically, or ideologically objectionable form of race-based appeals: those that—like the Willie Horton ad—emanate from White candidates or political interests; appeal to negative racial stereotypes, fears, and resentments of African Americans; and target White voters as the principal subject for influence.

Second, the extant literature focuses on narrowly defined outcomes in that researchers primarily measure the effect of race-based appeals by focusing almost exclusively on their propensity to diminish public support for policy issues viewed as favorable to African Americans and other people of color. A third limitation is that research measuring the effects of race-based appeals has rarely juxtaposed candidates' race-based appeals with how the media frames election contests involving minority candidates, thereby shaping the influence that such race-based appeals might have. That is, the effects of race-based appeals have been considered in isolation rather than within a broader context of factors that might mediate their influence.

The arguments and research we present in this book rest on a set of overarching political realities that move beyond some of the limitations detailed above. First, White candidates do not hold a monopoly on race-based appeals, even as they continue to rely strategically on or benefit from them. Candidates of color increasingly appeal to race to serve their own strategic interests in gaining electoral support, though such appeals are constructed differently and used toward different strategic ends. Second, the success or failure of such appeals is integrally related not only to White voters' prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes about people of color, but also to Black and minority voters' attitudes about Whites, about their own perceptions of racial group identification, the degree to which they generally espouse identity politics as a preferred political strategy, and their perception of candidates' positions with respect to their own racial belief systems and ideology. Third, the news media are influential arbiters of race-based appeals, especially in campaigns involving minority candidates, where they become a powerful mediator between candidates and the voting public either by unwittingly supporting the racial message agenda of candidates or by confronting or refusing to communicate a racial frame of reference for a given contest.

Thus, while we, too, rely on certain premises and methods of previous research to address these matters, and although we would not be so arrogant as to claim to tell the "whole" story about the nature and influence of race-based appeals, we set out to add significantly to that story, using previous research as a basis for and means to explore the depths of racialized communication and the role it plays in contemporary American electoral politics. We do so by pursuing three primary objectives. First, we seek to understand how both White and Black candidates use language and visual imagery to construct race-based persuasive appeals. Second, we aim to shed light on the way that race-based appeals from White and Black candidates affect both White and Black voters. Finally, we explore more completely the way that news media cover campaigns involving candidates of color, including the array of both negative and positive consequences such coverage may have on the voting public and election hopes of minority candidates.

THE RACIAL TERRAIN OF CONTEMPORARY ELECTORAL POLITICS

Race, racism, and race-based political appeals are alive and well in America; they play a central role in the political discourses of candidates, affect how race is covered in national and local media of all kinds, shape public opinion and the voting decisions of Americans, and influence how we think and talk about race and race relations. One must only look as far back as the historic 2008 presidential and 2006 congressional elections for evidence. Throughout his historic election, President Barack Obama appealed to Americans across the racial divide. In a few short months his candidacy stirred debate about White Americans' willingness to vote for a Black president, stimulated questions about African Americans' readiness to close ranks and grant him unquestioned support, raised criticism about his leadership and experience, and invited a number of racial attacks from public figures across the ideological spectrum.[2]

During the 2006 elections we watched unfettered images of brown-skinned, Mexican "illegal aliens," undocumented workers, drug traffickers, and welfare recipients in countless television ads—images central to the political advertising and rhetorical appeals of candidates across the country hoping to capitalize on anti-immigrant, anti-Latino, anti-Mexican sentiment to gain political support for their candidacies. Black Republican organizations (such as America's PAC) also threw a barrage of racial messages targeting African Americans across the country with race-based appeals demonizing the Democratic Party as the party of enslavement and championing the Republican Party as the "party of Lincoln."[3]

Incidentally, during the same year, the Republican Party castigated Harold Ford Jr., a Black candidate for the U.S. Senate, for being a slick playboy who promiscuously cavorted with White women.[4] Pundits, politicians, and the press talked about why the Senate candidates Michael Steele, a Democrat from Maryland, and Lynn Swann, a Republican from Pennsylvania, as well as the gubernatorial candidate Ken Blackwell of Ohio, were not "Black enough" to win over Black voters.[5] This particular debate echoed the voices of the congressional foes Earl Hilliard and Artur Davis in Alabama, the mayoral contenders Cory Booker and Sharpe James in New Jersey, and the congressional opponents Denise Majette and Cynthia McKinney in Georgia—all during the 2002 election cycle. In each of those contests, the candidate's discourse addressed the influence of White (and "Jewish") money as the topic of Black authenticity persistently framed their campaigns.[6] Massachusetts elected its first African American governor in 2006, while Henry Bonilla and Ciro Rodriguez fought for the prize of being seen as the most authentic Latino candidate among voters in a majority-Latino congressional district in southern

Texas. In addition, the African American newcomer Keith Ellison became the first Muslim elected to Congress, overcoming obstacles set by those spewing anti-Black and anti-Muslim sentiments.

In the midst of all of this, the 2006 election cycle was fraught with debate surrounding what types of candidates can and should represent minority constituents. During the months leading up to the primary election in the Eleventh Congressional District in New York City (Brooklyn), prominent civil-rights activists—from Jesse Jackson to Al Sharpton—made vociferous objections to David Yassky's candidacy. Yassky, a White city councilman who moved into the district to challenge the crowded field of Black candidates, ultimately lost the seat held by retiring Congressman Major Owens and previously held by Shirley Chisholm. It was the first congressional district designed to fulfill the mandates of civil-rights legislation that ensured equal representation of Black citizens by Black elected representatives.[7]

Today, we find ourselves at an opportune moment in American history. The scholarly community, the media, and, increasingly, citizens at large are more keenly aware of, interested in, and concerned about the nature and effects of racialized communication in electoral politics and racial discourse in the broader sphere of American culture. As shown by the anecdotal references above, the racial terrain of American politics is quite different today and promises to become progressively more complex. Racial diversity proliferates in the electoral field among candidates and voters. African American candidates increasingly run in competitive contests against other African Americans, and more Black candidates are running for seats in the U.S. Senate (not just the House) and for governorships. More often than in earlier decades, they are running competitively in majority-White and non-majority-Black congressional districts (or states). They run more frequently under the banner of the Republican Party than they used to, and they increasingly pursue policy agendas that move beyond Civil Rights–era elected officials' traditional racial group interest politics.[8]

Latino Americans' increased role in American politics is also more solidified than it was a short time ago. In just a decade, Latino elected officials have gone from being virtually nonexistent in the U.S. Senate to having three prominent Latino senators, one of whom—Republican Senator Mel Martinez of Florida—served for a time as general chairman of the Republican National Committee before deciding not to seek re-election. In 1996, there were only seventeen Latino members of the U.S. House of Representatives. No Latinos occupied the governor's mansion in any state. Six Latinos were elected to statewide office, and state legislatures across the U.S. contained only 156 Latino elected officials. Yet in all elected offices, the number of Latino officials has now grown from 3,743 in 1996 to 5,041 in 2005—a 75 percent increase in less than a decade.[9]

This ever expanding diversity of candidates has, and is likely to continue to be, motivated to use—in old and more nuanced ways—various forms of race-based appeals in contemporary political life. Both Black and Latino voters have slowly but steadily withdrawn identification with the Democratic Party and express a greater range of public policy issues they say most concern them—issues that have no explicitly racial component. These and many other realities constitute our contemporary situation regarding race and electoral politics. Yet to date, the extant research in communication and political science generally, and in more specialized fields such as political communication, political psychology, and public opinion, has not fully addressed the complexities of our present circumstances regarding race-based appeals among the American electorate.

RACIAL DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS: NEW QUESTIONS, NEW EVIDENCE

The first four chapters make up the first of this book's two sections. The chapters in Part I present new empirical evidence pertaining to some old, but mostly new, questions we explore about the scope and influence of race-based appeals. What constitutes a race-based appeal, and how are race-based appeals produced? Why do political candidates of all racial backgrounds rely on them? What potential influence might they have on Black and White voters alike? And how does the news media mitigate the influence such appeals might have on minority candidates' electoral success? These are the primary questions we ask in the first four chapters, and we offer empirical evidence that addresses each of them in significant ways. These questions are not completely new; they are questions inspired but largely unaddressed by a relatively limited array of scholarship in political psychology, political behavior, journalism, and media studies. These diverse areas represented in the scholarship share some basic theoretical approaches to the subject of racial discourse in electoral politics. This primarily includes theories about media effects (implicit communication, cognitive priming, framing and public opinion); theories about racial group psychology and behavior (theories of Black identity, Black ideological development, and symbolic and other variable forms of "new" racism); and theories related to visuality and visual culture, as well as rhetorical theory.

In Chapter 1, we explore how stereotypes about people of color find their way into White candidates' political ads and how this feature of White candidates' appeals influences how candidates of color construct and deploy race-based appeals. To do this, we analyze evidence from our content analysis study of some 800 advertising spots used in campaign contests (for federal office) that featured at least one minority candidate. Ultimately, we demonstrate how political ads get imbued with racist potential, how candidates of

color respond accordingly, and how we can sidestep the issue of an individual candidate's intent to focus more effectively on how race-based appeals influence the electoral campaign landscape.

In Chapters 2 and 3, we move away from looking at the racialized content of political ads exclusively and turn our eyes to the range of potential effects such race-based appeals have on potential voters. Given some of the limitations identified above, we have two overarching goals: to demonstrate how both White and Black participants respond to certain race-based appeals, and to determine how race-based appeals affect minority candidates' electoral success. That is, our commitment to the normative ideal of equal representation drives our primary interest in how race-based appeals influence participants' assessment of and propensity to vote for (or not vote for) Black candidates.

In Chapter 4, the final chapter in Part I, we investigate how print journalists cover election contests involving candidates of color. Here, we are primarily interested in whether, to what degree, and how the news media racially frame candidates of color and the potential effect such framing might have on minority candidates' electoral success or failure. Here we present the results of a content analysis of some 2,500 news stories—print coverage of election contests between 1992 and 2006 that featured at least one racial minority.

The evidence and conclusions we present in the four chapters of Part I target three relatively distinct areas. We look at the characteristics of political ads, test the effects of such ads in experiments where participants view only political ads, and consider the racial elements replete within news stories of minority candidates. But this, of course, is not how political communication and voter behavior operate in the "real world." In the remaining three chapters, which make up Part II, we seek to add to our understanding of how racial discourse may work in political campaigns by looking at the empirical questions and evidence from Part I in broader contexts, through three different case studies. In Chapter 5, we use a different lens to demonstrate how race-based appeals get constructed. Here we look at issue-based campaign ads focused on the subject of immigration. In Chapter 6, we detail the racial dynamics (among candidates, the media, and the voting public) of three very different campaigns: an Alabama primary election between Earl Hilliard and Artur Davis for the U.S. House in 2002; the U.S. Senate contest between Mel Martinez and Betty Castor in Florida in 2004, and the U.S. Senate race between Harold Ford and Bob Corker in Tennessee in 2006. Finally, in Chapter 7, we revisit the racial circumstances of the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primary and general elections that produced Barack Obama's historic presidential victory. This chapter serves as an illustrative summary of the conclusions and arguments we make throughout the book.

How do candidates manipulate the visual, verbal, and acoustical content of political advertising messages to construct various forms of race-based

appeals consistent with their underlying strategic goals? What are the varied effects that such appeals have on a variety of voters, their perceptions of minority candidates, and their likelihood to vote for candidates of color? How do the media set a racial agenda in contests featuring minority candidates, and what linguistic and other content attributes are present in media coverage that might prime negative or positive racial sentiment among voters? These are the central questions we seek to answer in the following pages. It represents our attempt to add depth and breadth to the ways we conceptualize, theorize, and understand the relationship between racial discourse and the public sphere of U.S. political campaigns.