Political Awareness in Black and White: The Effect of Attention to Black Political Discourse on Black Opinion Formation

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Abstract: In this paper we argue that variation in Black support for many important political issues can be explained at least in part by the degree to which Blacks attend to political messages originating from Black indigenous information sources. Analyzing data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES), we test the effects of exposure to mainstream and Black political communication on Black American's assessment of an ostensibly non-racial institution, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). We find that because of the racialized characterization of the CIA available within Black information sources and the lack of such discussion in mainstream sources, Blacks who were attentive to Black elite discourse were not only less likely to support the CIA but were also able to connect their racial identity to their opinions about the agency. The results from this analysis highlight the important role that attention to indigenous political communication can play in shaping the opinions of racial and ethnic minorities.

Political Information in Black and White: The Effect of Attention to Black Political Discourse on Black Opinion Formation

Introduction

That racial segregation remains a pervasive feature of life in the United States is well-documented. Research has found that Black and White individuals still have very little day-to-day contact with one another. They live in different neighborhoods, attend different schools and churches, and work at different jobs (Massey and Denton 1993). The dramatic dissimilarities in the life experiences of these groups resulting from this racial isolation has been found to be a powerful predictor of many forms of racial inequality in society. Racial segregation in American public schools persists and has been cited not only by scholars, but also by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as one of the contributing factors to racial disparities in educational attainment.[1] Researchers also continue to find evidence of the impact of residential segregation in a range of racial disparities, including income and wealth crime victimization, and physical and mental health.[2] The persistence of racial inequality—and the ways in which Americans perceive its existence—has profound effects on the political arena, especially as it pertains to public policy. More specifically, the ways in which this information is *communicated* to the American public has broad implications for both political behavior among voters and the policies that result from the actions of these voters.

Despite these advancements in our understanding of how race is lived in America, one consequence of racial segregation has been left virtually unexplored: the ways in which race structures exposure to political information. While both Black and Whites

each have access (albeit at times unequal) to at least some mainstream sources of political information—such as national television network news and daily newspapers—the average White individual has relatively little contact with the types of social and political institutions or networks that mobilize and provide political information to many in the Black community.[3] That is, the racial segregation of American social, religious, media and political institutions has generated a set of essentially Black spaces, through which the political discourse of Black elites is channeled.[4] This paper seeks to examine the consequences of variation in exposure to Black and mainstream political discourse for how Blacks formulate their opinions about politics. We argue that by exposing Black citizens to a distinct set of cues about the meaning and importance of political issues and events, attention to Black elite discourse plays an important role in guiding Black Americans' interpretations of and positions on public affairs in directions often quite different than those suggested by the messages of mainstream political elites. Differences in the distribution of political predispositions among Black individuals are important, too; Black political elites' incentive to define issues in terms that are distinct from those invoked by mainstream political elites derives from those differences. Yet without Black political elites, we argue, Black citizens would lack the information necessary to connect those predispositions to particular events and issues systematically. More specifically, Blacks would lack the wherewithal to display a distinctive racial pattern in opinion formation particularly on issues that have no obvious racial content.

To evaluate this argument we examine Black support for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1996. We begin by discussing the content of Black and mainstream elite discussions of the CIA at this time and examining the rather stark

differences in both the tone and the racial content of elite depictions of the agency. Here we find that while mainstream discussions of the agency focused mainly on the successes and failures of CIA operations outside of the United States, discussions of the CIA within Black elite discourse centered on allegations that the agency was complicit in the trafficking of drugs to largely Black inner-city communities. We then turn our attention to examining how variation in attention to these Black and/or mainstream messages might result in intra-group differences in Black opinion about the CIA. We find that because of the racial content within discussion of the CIA in Black sources and the lack of racial discussion in mainstream sources, Blacks who paid more attention to Black elite discourse were not only less likely to express support for the CIA, but were also able to connect their racial identity to their opinions about this ostensibly non-racial agency. We conclude by discussing how these results contribute to existing theoretical accounts of both the role that attention to political communication plays in shaping American public opinion and the formation of Black opinion.

Theories of Elite Opinion Leadership

Theories of mass opinion formation have found that attention to elite discourse is essential to understanding opinion formation for many political issues. Perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of how elites matter to opinion formation can be found in the work of John Zaller in his 1992 book *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Zaller posits a theory of mass opinion formation (the Receive Accept Sample—RAS—model) that places exposure to elite communication at the beginning of the causal stream of mass opinion formation. In Zaller's model of opinion formation, the influence of political

elites' messages depends upon both the extent of elite agreement and the level of the individual's awareness of the political environment. He makes the case that when elites are in agreement on political issues, those who are the most politically attentive tend to adopt the elite position; awareness simply causes the structure of individuals' opinions to mirror that of political leaders. When elites are in disagreement, however, high levels of political awareness enable individuals to grasp and follow the cues of only like-minded elites; when elites diverge, so do citizens, but only to the extent that they have heard the disagreement, and only in the directions that their political predispositions would send them. Applying his theory to the dynamics of opinion change on a number of issues, Zaller finds, in fact, that changes in elite messages frequently precede changes in mass opinion and that diverging elites produce public disagreement, especially among those he classifies as politically aware.

While Zaller's work offers us a useful framework for thinking about the interaction of elite messages and individuals' levels of political information in shaping their political opinions, the RAS theory's application to racial minority group opinion is not straightforward. In particular, careful attention must be paid to the definitions of the two main moving parts of the model: elite messages and political information. For Zaller, political information or awareness is effectively captured by general or mainstream measures of political information instead of domain, issue, or group-specific measures of political information. That is, as he states, "political information is a relatively general trait that can be effectively measured with a general purpose information scale".[5] This assumption holds, however, only to the extent that information about relevant elite messages can be found in a "general" information environment. But

if the messages of leaders within racial minority communities only appear in segregated information environments—indigenous institutions—and not in mainstream information channels, then imposing singular importance on the "general" or mainstream environment assumes away any significant consequence of attention paid to alternative, racial-group elite discourse.[6] It also may lead us to a mischaracterization of the extent of elite consensus or disagreement on political issues, if disagreement is coming only from those outside the mainstream.

Indeed, political elites rely on quite a number of institutions to reach the American public and they funnel these messages through networks of social organizations, religious institutions, professional and trade associations, interest group memberships, and media outlets. However, missing from Zaller's framework is the idea that different institutions more readily reach some Americans rather than others, and different institutions are more open venues for some elites rather than others. This very simple observation, however, has important consequences for how Blacks might come to understand politics. Specifically, Blacks are privy to the messages that flow through Black institutions and social networks—a range of organizations with few White members—at the same time that Black elites find it difficult to be fully incorporated into mainstream political elite discourse.[7] Through these institutions, then, Blacks hear a set of interpretations of American politics that White Americans—and Blacks who are not privy to these spaces—do not, fostering what we believe are significant differences in the meaning and evaluation of policies.

Black Elites and Black Spaces

One of the more consistent findings in the study of Black political behavior is that individual connections to Black social and political institutions matter. Researchers have found strong evidence to suggest that membership in Black social and political organizations, membership in a Black church, and the use of Black media[8]is strongly associated with, among other things, engagement in certain forms of political behavior.[9] More specifically, membership in Black political organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, has been shown to be related to a range of Black political behaviors, ranging from participating in a protest, to Black campaign activism, and voter turnout.[10] Black church membership, it is argued, influences Blacks' understanding of Black political symbols, such as the idea of Black power, Black political awareness, voter registration, campaign activism, and Black voter turnout.[11][12][13]

While Black institutions seem to be associated with a broad range of Black political attitudes and behavior, explanations of exactly how this contact results in changes in behavior are few. Here we seek to clarify the role of Black institutions by arguing that these institutions also play an especially important role as conduits of Black political information. Whether heard coming from the pulpit, over the radio, read in a Black newspaper/website or conveyed as second-hand accounts via conversations at the barbershop or over social media, contact with Black institutions affords Blacks the opportunity to be exposed to the "Black" perspective of politics.[14] Similar to how attention to mainstream news media shapes the general public's knowledge about politics, knowledge of the goings-on within Black politics and the "Black" interpretation of political issues is obtained through the institutions and social networks that Black

elites use to communicate with the Black public. In other words, by acting as channels of

Black elite discourse, Black political institutions expose those who enter these domains

with alternative elite interpretations of political issues, helping individuals connect their

ideologies and other predispositions to evaluations of politics.

Racial Elites and Black Opinion

The preceding discussion highlights the need for a theoretical framework for

understanding how Blacks come to be informed about politics and the consequence of

using that information to construct their opinions. Despite the connection of Black

institutions to Black political behavior, we still know very little about exactly how these

institutions inspire changes in attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, accounts of elite

influence on opinion must include explanations for how society structures this

information, as well as how exposure to different types of information has different

consequences for opinion. Thus, we argue that in an attempt to advance their own

interests, ideas, and ideologies among their respective racial constituencies, Black

elites—including Black elected officials, journalists, and religious and organizational

leaders—and mainstream elites—those elites who are able to dominate mainstream

discourse—frame political issues, even issues with no apparent racial content, in

substantively different ways. In particular, Black elites regularly offer interpretations of

political events and issues intended to resonate with Black group interests and

identification while mainstream elites seek to mobilize a broader more diverse

constituency whose beliefs and values are often quite different from those in the Black

community. This distinctive framing of public affairs, we argue, implies that those

Blacks who attend closely to the political discourse of Black elites should understand political issues in noticeably different ways from other Blacks whose political information comes largely from mainstream sources. It is, in part, exposure to Black elite messages that induces Blacks to employ their racial attitudes in evaluating political issues, even those issues that on their face appear to have little racial relevance. This, in turn, leads Blacks to have what appear to be liberal positions on a wide range of issues.

Our explanation of Black opinion, therefore, rests on two central arguments. The first is that Black elites funnel a distinct set of political messages—messages that can and often do differ markedly from those of even liberal mainstream elites—through Black institutions. The second contention is that Blacks who are exposed to this information recognize and choose to follow where Black elites lead, even when mainstream partisan elites are carrying on in another direction. These arguments imply that there is a significant segment of the Black community that experiences a somewhat different political information environment than do Whites, and that this asymmetry in exposure to the information provided by Black political elites is one of the essential elements of the Black experience that accounts for variation in Black opinion.

Methods and Procedures

To evaluate this theoretical proposition we turn to understanding Black support for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1996. There are a couple reasons why we have chosen to look at support for the CIA. The first has to do with the fact that the CIA represents an ostensibly non-racial agency whose primary mission has not been a racial one. While there are many issues for which Black and mainstream elites disagree,

most of these issues already heave either explicit racial meaning, as with race targeted issues, or have some previously coded or implicit racial meaning, such as issues like welfare and crime. As we will see later, since race was not an essential defining feature of the CIA before 1996, we would expect that Blacks' racial attitudes and their support for the CIA would not be chronically accessible; thus, Blacks' interpretations of the agency *should* be susceptible to racial cueing. If Black or mainstream elites see fit to racialize the agency, then we should be able to observe changes in Black opinion resulting from this exposure. As expected, significant variation does indeed exist in the content of racial discourse surrounding the agency in 1996.

The second reason for choosing support for the CIA is more practical. While there are many issues for which Black and mainstream elites disagree, support for the CIA in 1996 is one of the few that also appears in a large-N public opinion dataset of Blacks that includes both measures of support for CIA and measures of Black and mainstream awareness to political communication.

Our investigation will begin with a content analysis of Black and mainstream elite discussions of the CIA in 1996. Examining discussions of the agency in Black and mainstream newspapers and magazines from March 1, 1996 to December 31, 1996 we are able to identify differences in the tone and the racial content of Black and mainstream elite depictions of the agency.[15] Most importantly, this time period captures the August 1996 publication of a series of stories in the San Jose Mercury News entitled "Dark Alliance," which outlined the CIA's involvement in trafficking drugs into Black communities in southern California. As we will see in more detail later, while many mainstream leaders and many within mainstream media establishment were largely silent

or dismissive of the allegations offered in the "Dark Alliance" series, Black elites and those in the Black media expressed outraged and were pushing for a governmental investigation into the charges.[16] Having identified the differences in Black and mainstream political discourse we are able to lay out a set of clear empirical expectations for how exposure to Black and mainstream political discourse on CIA will shape Black opinion about the agency. In particular, we are interested in how Blacks with high levels of Black and/or mainstream political information differ from other Blacks who have little or no exposure to Black elite discourse.

As mentioned, our analysis reviews articles dealing with the CIA that were written between May 1, 1996 and December 31, 1996. A total of 138 articles were taken from the Black press, while 72 articles were taken from the mainstream press. Included in the analysis are 10 mainstream periodicals and 30 Black periodicals. Articles are coded as dealing with the CIA's role in drug trafficking if they explicitly described the CIA and its connection to Nicaragua and/or the Contras and its involvement or assistance in the illegal sale, distribution or shipment of drugs into/within the United States. Articles are coded as dealing with Black group interest if and only if they explicitly mention Blacks in the same discussion as the CIA. An article is coded as quoting a Black person if the individual in the article was both discussing the CIA and was identifiably Black.

We test our expectations about the effects of this discourse on opinion using data from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES). Conducted in the fall of 1996, the NBES was in the field only a few months after the "Dark Alliance" publication and right around the time that Black elites began actively forwarding the allegations and pushing for a governmental investigation into the charges. Given the timing of the NBES survey,

the effect of these differences on the way Black and mainstream political elites discussed—or failed to discuss—drug-trafficking allegations against the CIA can be evaluated by looking into the ways Blacks' awareness of Black and mainstream politics shaped their assessment of the CIA. Variation in Blacks' attention to Black and mainstream politics, we argue, will not only determine the ingredients that go into Blacks' opinions about the CIA, but will also influence their general approval of the agency. In particular, because of the racialized nature of the discussion of the agency within in Black political discourse, we expect that Blacks who were attentive to Black politics will use their racial predispositions to help determine their attitudes about the CIA, while Blacks who are attentive mainly to mainstream politics will demonstrate little or no relationship between their attitudes about the CIA and their racial predispositions; consequently, they will be more supportive of the agency.

The CIA, the Drug Trade, and the Black Community

Discussion of the link between the CIA and illicit drugs in Black communities began after the *San Jose Mercury News* ran a series of articles by journalist Gary Webb reporting evidence that suggested the CIA, in their efforts to support the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s, was complicit the in sale of tons of crack cocaine to largely Black street gangs in Los Angeles. Black and mainstream news media outlets reacted very differently to these allegations. In the Black media, discussion of the allegations and coverage of Black organizational leaders' demands for a full investigation became an important, regular part of the news agenda. They were reflecting, in other words, a real engagement of the issue by Black political leaders—including, but not limited to, leaders

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from the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), pastors of

Black churches, and members of the Congressional Black Caucus—who were forwarding

messages that the CIA posed a threat to Black communities. The messages of these

Black leaders sought to excite Black Americans through the use of frames that invoked

racial group interest, with the ultimate aim of demanding political accountability for the

CIA's alleged actions. For example, SCLC board member Dick Gregory—who was

arrested for protesting on the issue in front of the central offices of the U.S. Drug

Enforcement Agency—promised the mobilization of his organization, framing the

experiences of the inner-city of Los Angeles as linked to a general Black group interest:

> This is where the SCLC is important, because we can use that
> network….If we don't get the hearing, we'll penalize the business
> community. We'll call for boycotts at Christmas, Thanksgiving, and take
> it right to the money…. Our neighborhoods, our families, our image has
> been penalized across the world….[17]

An analysis of the Black press' coverage of the allegations reflected the

importance of the issue to the agendas of Black leaders. The charges outlined in Webb's

investigative series sparked outrage among Black leaders, inciting members of the

Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to call for a special investigation of the agency at

their annual legislative conference in early September. Immediately after the CBC issued

their demand for a full government inquiry, the number and frequency of articles about

the CIA in Black press sources rose significantly, as depicted in Figure 1, which displays

the total number of articles about the CIA in the Black press sources employed in a

content analysis of the controversy. While coverage of the agency in the Black press was

sparse before the CBC voiced its concern over CIA involvement in the trafficking of

drugs into inner-city L.A., after the legislators' pronouncement, the CIA became a featured item on the Black press' news agenda. A similar pattern of coverage did not exist in the mainstream press. The results presented in Figure 2 show that although year-over-year coverage of the agency did increase, this was largely due to a sharp rise in coverage during the month of December. Also, as we will soon learn, mainstream discussions of the agency had a much broader focus—unlike the Black press, which focused almost exclusively on the CIA drug trafficking allegations.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Although the story was first broken in a mainstream newspaper in Silicon Valley, the allegations of CIA complicity in channeling crack cocaine into the inner city neighborhoods of Los Angeles were generally met with skepticism and dismissal by both the mainstream media and partisan leaders—Democrats and Republicans alike. Attorney General Janet Reno, in fact, denied the allegations before conducting a full investigation. And despite calls from Black leaders for presidential contenders William Clinton and Robert Dole to respond to the issue, the allegations were not on the agenda of either candidate's campaign.[18] In fact, many questioned the placement of the Dark Alliance series—which was held between the RNC and DNC conventions—arguing that its release in the middle of a Presidential campaign may have actually drowned what little coverage the series would have likely received.[19] When the series did get covered by mainstream media outlets, however, it was often discussed without any mention of race or the Black community, despite the activism and messages of Black leaders. Also

common in the limited mainstream coverage were insinuations that the allegations

amounted to no more than a dismissible conspiracy theory—a characterization that only

furthered racialized arguments among Black elites, who referenced connections to other

Black experiences that engendered distrust in government institutions. In a 1997 paper

published in the *Columbia Journalism Review,* Peter Kornbluh described the mainstream

media reaction to Webb's story:

> The original reporting—on the links between a gang of Nicaraguan drug dealers,
> CIA-backed counterrevolutionaries, and the spread of crack in California—has
> drawn unparalleled criticism from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and
> the *Los Angeles Times*. Their editorial decision to assault, rather than advance,
> the *Mercury News* story has, in turn, sparked critical commentary on the priorities
> of those pillars of the mainstream press.

Kornbluh goes on to note that:

> Yet in spite of the mainstream media, the allegations generated by the *Mercury
> News* continue to swirl, particularly through communities of color.

Content analysis of Black and mainstream coverage of the CIA from August 1996

thru December 1996 clearly describes the priorities of Black and mainstream media when

it comes to covering the agency. As we can see in Table 1, the vast majority of the

coverage of the CIA within the Black media at this time focused on the drug trafficking

allegations (80% of stories) and how the agency's actions related to Blacks (82% of

stories). Given their tendency to dismiss the drug trafficking allegations, the mainstream

press devoted the vast majority of its coverage of the CIA to stories which focused more

generally on the agency's involvement in overseas foreign affairs.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

To say that mainstream media and politicians largely dismissed the story of CIA

culpability in the importation of crack cocaine into the inner-city Black communities of

Los Angeles is not to say that mainstream discussions of the intelligence agency during this period were particularly positive or scandal-free. A number of other CIA scandals surfaced in the fall of 1996 did manage to generate significant consideration by mainstream elites. Allegations of a CIA cover-up of information about American troops' exposure to chemical weapons during the Persian Gulf War attracted significant attention from the mainstream media. Also reported was the story of Harold Nicholson, a CIA agent accused of selling classified information to the Russian government. Even another story of CIA involvement in the shipment of cocaine into the United States merited coverage; in this case the CIA admitted to allowing a shipment to enter from Colombia through Miami as part of an operation of intelligence gathering about a Colombian drug cartel, and then losing track of the shipment. The content analysis results presented in Table 2 support the idea that mainstream coverage of the agency was somewhat mixed in its criticism. The results show that mainstream discussions of the CIA at this time were just slightly negative in tone, as 55% of the stories in the mainstream press offered some sort of criticism of the agency. Black press discussions of the agency were, however, decidedly more negative with 72% of stories in the Black press offering some sort of criticism of the agency. Again, the vast majority of these criticisms focused on the agencies involvement in drug trafficking.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Variation in Meaning—Reflections of Elite Discourse

Given the distinctly racialized messages about the CIA present in Black elite discourse and the near absence of those messages from mainstream information environments, the fielding of the 1996 NBES—from November 8th 1996 to the first part

of January 1997—provides a unique opportunity to investigate the role of Black elites in defining the meaning of a political subject without obvious racial content for Black citizens. Knowing the specific nature of the distinct messages that Blacks attentive to Black politics would have been receiving about the CIA in the time frame that the survey was conducted, we can capture the role of Black elite messages in shaping Black opinion by looking to the relationship between Black political awareness and attitudes about the CIA. Evidence of the influence of Black elites on Black public opinion would lie in the extent to which the relationship between Black political awareness and Blacks' assessments of the CIA is different from the relationship between mainstream political awareness and opinion.

Again, in the fall of 1996 the greatest divergence between the Black and mainstream elite discourse about the CIA was in the *terms* of their discussions about the intelligence agency's performance. Black political leaders, stressing the single story of the CIA's alleged role in facilitating the channeling of crack cocaine into Black communities in Los Angeles, were urging Blacks to see the issue as one with repercussions for Blacks regardless of where they lived. Strong criticisms were being offered about the agency and concerted attempts were being made to mobilize Blacks around the issue through the activation of racial group interest. Thus, Blacks who were attentive to Black politics ought to have incorporated racial group interest into their evaluations of the CIA. Yet, while the concerns of Black elites were not integrated into mainstream political discussions of the CIA, neither was the mainstream discourse pushing for a necessarily positive evaluation of the agency. Hence, while Blacks who attended to mainstream politics—and not Black politics—would *not* have been provided

with the link between their racial attitudes and the CIA, mainstream messages may have

offered another set of reasons for evaluating the agency. These reasons, in turn, should

have activated concerns among those predisposed to question the credibility of

government agencies or concerns about defense spending given the quasi–military status

of the agency.

Hypotheses
> *H1: Given the negative depictions of the CIA present in Black elite discourse (in particular those focusing on the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods), Blacks who were attentive to Black elite discourse should express more negative evaluations of the CIA.*
>
> *H2: Given the somewhat mixed depictions of the agency present in mainstream elite discourse, Blacks who were particularly attentive to mainstream elite discourse should express neutral to perhaps negative evaluations of the CIA.*
>
> *H3: Because Black political discourse about the CIA focused so heavily on discussions of the agencies' suspected involvement in the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods, Blacks who are attentive to Black politics should use their racial identification to evaluate the agency.*
>
> *H4: Given the absence of racial frames in mainstream discussions of the CIA and a focus on espionage and cover-up controversies involving the agency, Blacks attentive to mainstream politics should use non-racial considerations in their evaluations of the agency.*

Measurement in the 1996 NBES

Measuring evaluations of the CIA, awareness of Black and mainstream politics,

and the other relevant predispositions in the NBES is fairly straightforward. Evaluations

of the CIA are captured by respondents' placement of the agency on a standard zero to

one hundred point feeling thermometer. Predispositions regarding government trust are

captured by a question that asked respondents, "How much of the time do you trust the

government in Washington to do what is right?" The responses were coded from zero to

one, with those most trustful of the federal government at zero and those least trustful at one, yielding a scale measure of *dis*trust in the government. Other possible factors in the shaping of Blacks' opinions of the CIA were also added to the analysis. In particular, given the CIA's status as national security agency, with a focus on foreign affairs and apparent quasi-military powers, citizens might connect their general attitudes about national defense to their evaluations of the agency. To account for this influence, a control measure was added that measures the respondent's willingness to support increased federal spending on defense; this measure was coded with those who favored increased spending on defense at one, and those who favored decreased spending on defense at zero.[20] In an attempt to capture attention to mainstream elites, a measure of liberal/conservative ideology was included.

To assess whether respondents view the CIA through a racial lens, we examine if there exists a connection between respondents' attitudes about the CIA and their sense of Black racial group identification. Here, Black racial group identification is measured by a scale of five variables each designed to capture, in different ways, the connectedness Blacks have to their racial group. Similar to the concept of linked fate, the measures we use were generally designed to get at the respondent's acceptance of the idea that what happens to Black people in this country has something to do with what happens to them (See Appendix A for wording and measurement statistics.).

Consistent with previous research, awareness of political discourse is captured with a measure of political knowledge. However, unlike previous research we devise two measures of political awareness: one that captures awareness to mainstream politics and another that seeks to capture awareness to Black politics. The mainstream political

awareness index used here is very similar to the index used in previous studies assessing the effects of general political awareness, which consists of questions about the names and party identification of the respondent's congressperson and senators, as well as identification of the majority party in both chambers. Additionally, respondents were asked nine relevant thermometer score items that allowed them to indicate that they did not know the individual referenced in the question. These individuals were: Richard Lamm, Newt Gingrich, and Ross Perot.[21] If an individual indicated they did not know the individual, they were coded as zero; otherwise, they were coded as 1.

Black political awareness is measured by an index of questions from the NBES that assess knowledge specific to Blacks in the United States. The first set of items were questions that asked the respondents to recall specific pieces of information that those attentive to Black political discourse would be more likely to report correctly: the percentage of Blacks in the United States, the race of their own representative in Congress, the percentage of Blacks in Congress and whether Blacks in the U.S. were better or worse off financially than Whites. Although the survey did not contain items that asked respondents to specifically identify Black leaders, it did contain five relevant thermometer score items that allowed respondents to indicate that they did not know the subject of the question. Respondents seemed quite comfortable indicating when they did not know the political figure they were being asked to evaluate; just under sixty percent of the respondents, for instance, informed interviewers that they did not know who Kweisi Mfume—then-president of the NAACP—was. Similarly, just over half of the respondents indicated that they did not know Carol Moseley Braun, the then-sitting junior Senator from Illinois who was also the first Black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. A

smaller but still notable number of respondents failed to recognize Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.[22] While information about all of these items certainly could have come from mainstream political information sources, the more likely sources are Black institutions considering the relative absence of racial discussions and obvious racial sources found in the mainstream news media.[23]

Using all these measures, we can develop a model that assesses how support for the CIA varies and is conditional on Black and mainstream political information (only mainstream in the case of Whites), as well as how levels of Black and mainstream political information moderate the relationship between group identification (or negative attitudes about Blacks in the case of Whites) and support for the CIA.

Results

We begin our attempt to disentangle the effects of attention to Black and/or mainstream political discourse on Blacks' attitudes about CIA in 1996 by first examining the effects of attention to Black and mainstream discussions of the CIA on Blacks' overall evaluation of the agency. Again, our expectation is that—given the negative depictions of the CIA present in Black elite discourse—Blacks who were attentive to Black elite discourse should express more negative evaluations of the CIA. Moreover, given the somewhat mixed depictions of the agency present in mainstream elite discourse, Blacks who were particularly attentive to mainstream elite discourse should express neutral to negative evaluations of the agency. To test these expectations, we begin by simply looking at the independent effects of Black and mainstream awareness on Blacks' support for the CIA. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. In

the first two columns of Table 3 we see that increases in either Black or mainstream awareness appear to be associated with negative feelings about the CIA among Black respondents. This result is not totally surprising considering that both Black and mainstream sources were at times critical of the agency; however, we certainly expected attention to Black discourse to be *more* negative. By simply eyeballing the relative size of the Black and mainstream coefficients (which can be found in column 1 and 2), there is some sense that attention to Black discourse may in fact lead to *more* negative evaluations of the CIA. The coefficient on the Black awareness variable is roughly nine points larger than the coefficient on the mainstream awareness variable. To test if the effect of Black awareness is in fact different from that of mainstream awareness, we include both Black and mainstream awareness in the same model of support for the CIA. This analysis is presented in column 3 of Table 3. The results presented in column 3 show that once we control for the effect of Black awareness, we observe a significant reduction in the size of the mainstream awareness coefficient. The rather large and statistically significant negative coefficient on the Black awareness measure and the smallish, now indistinguishable from zero (p=.416) coefficient on the mainstream awareness measure confirms our initial expectations that attention to Black discourse seems to be a more systematic predictor of Blacks' negative attitudes about the agency.[24]

[Insert Table 3 here]

To comprehend more fully the meaning of these results, we calculated the predicted CIA feeling thermometer scores at various levels (high and low) of Black and

mainstream awareness along with the 95% confidence intervals. What we see in Figure 3 is essentially the unique effect of Black awareness on support for the CIA. While Blacks who are low in *both* Black and mainstream political awareness or who are only high in mainstream awareness give the agency a somewhat warm rating (around 60 on a 100-point scale), Blacks who either only have high Black political awareness or who have high Black and high mainstream awareness rate the CIA well below 50 at around 40 on the 100-point scale.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The Ingredients of Opinion about the CIA

Having showed that increased attention to Black political discourse as measured by Black political awareness does indeed appear to be related to more negative feelings towards the CIA, we now turn our attention to our second set of expectations which deal with how increased attention to Black political discourse might affect the mix of ingredients that go into Blacks' opinions about the CIA. We know in the case of Black elites, in particular, that their primary motivation was to mobilize Blacks to political action. More specifically, Black elites wanted to encourage political participation that would pressure acquiescence to the demand for an investigation into the specific issue of CIA involvement in drug trafficking; convincing Blacks that their Black group interest was important and relevant to their evaluations of the CIA was a necessary part of this mobilization effort. Thus, because Black political discourse about the CIA focused so heavily on discussions of the agency's suspected involvement in the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods, Blacks who were particularly attentive to this discourse should see their racial in-group identification becoming important to their

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evaluations of the agency. And because of the absence of racial frames in mainstream discussions of the CIA and a focus on espionage and cover-up controversies involving the agency, Blacks who are particularly attentive to mainstream politics should use non-racial considerations in their evaluations of the agency.

We test these expectations by examining the effects of liberal/conservative ideology, Black in-group identification, trust in government and support for increased defense spending on support for the CIA across the four levels of Black and mainstream political awareness discussed in Figure 3: 1) *low Black awareness and low mainstream awareness*, 2) *low Black awareness and high mainstream awareness*, 3) *high Black awareness and low mainstream awareness*, and 4) *high Black awareness and high mainstream awareness*. Each of the independent variables are fairly evenly distributed across the political awareness groups. Although those in the *low Black awareness and low mainstream awareness* group appear to be somewhat more conservative than those in the *high Black awareness and high mainstream awareness* group, very few other differences exist. This relative balance in the distribution of these independent variables across these groups gives us added confidence that the differences we might observe across the groups is likely due to the type of information these individuals were exposed to and not necessary the result of say, for example, highly racially identified Blacks selecting into Black information environments.[25]

Table 4 presents the results of our test of the effects of these independent variables on Black support for the CIA. Beginning with the results for the low Black, low mainstream group presented in column one, we see, not surprisingly, very little evidence of any systematic thinking about the CIA. The effect of Black in-group identification on

support for the CIA among these individuals is small and fails to reach conventional level of statistical significance. This result is not surprising considering that in the absence of information that actually racializes the CIA it is not clear how these individuals would link their racial in-group identity to their support of the agency. The only measure that offers any suggestive meaning to explaining support for the agency among these individuals is distrust in government. Among low awareness individuals, those who distrust government were somewhat more likely to offer negative evaluations of the CIA; however, this result is only marginally significant.

Having demonstrated that racial in-group identification plays, at best, only a minor role in explaining attitudes about the CIA among low awareness Blacks, we now turn our attention to understanding how the importance of racial in-group identification varies across groups of Blacks with different levels of Black and mainstream awareness. Using the *low Black and low mainstream* group as a comparison group, we can now test how the importance of each of our predictors changes across the different types of awareness. In the second row of Table 4 we can see that consistent with our expectations, the only group for which racial in-group identification is related to attitudes about the CIA is for those Blacks with low mainstream awareness but high Black awareness group. The coefficient on racial in-group identification in this group is more than four times the size of the racial in-group identification coefficient in the baseline group *(low mainstream and low Black awareness)*.

Having seen how the different ingredients of opinion changed relative to the baseline, we may also want to compare changes across the *low Black and high mainstream* and the *high Black and low mainstream* groups. This test gives us a more

direct comparison of the effects of attention Black and mainstream communications on support for the CIA. The results of this test look very much like the previous analyses, with the only statically significant difference in the coefficients across the two models is from racial group identification. The difference in the size of the racial group identification coefficients between the *high Black, low mainstream* group and the *low Black, high mainstream* group is even larger than the differences we observed between the baseline (*low Black low mainstream)* group and the *high Black low mainstream* group. The coefficient on Black in-group identification in the *low Black, high mainstream* group is essentially zero compared to the 31-point decrease in support for the agency observed in the *high Black, low mainstream* group (moving from low to high levels of Black in-group identification). Thus, not only were racial considerations more important to high Black awareness Blacks relative to those who pay little attention to politics, but it was also more important relative to those who attend primarily to mainstream politics.

Lastly, non-racial considerations also play a part in explaining Blacks' attitudes about the CIA, but their role is largely isolated to the high mainstream awareness groups. For example, we see that the role of trust in government increases significantly relative to the baseline group for both the *low Black, high mainstream* group (p<.1) and the *high Black, high mainstream* groups (p<.05). Similarly, we see that the effect of liberal/conservative ideology also increases relative to the baseline group for the *high Black, high mainstream* groups (p<.1). These results are consistent with our expectations that given the absence of racial frames in mainstream discussions of the CIA, Blacks attentive to mainstream politics should use non-racial considerations in their evaluations of the agency.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Conclusion

The United States has made significant advancements in trying to repair the damage of Jim Crow segregation on Black life, but vestiges of this institution remain. On a daily basis, most Blacks still have minimal interaction with Whites. The research conducted in this study demonstrates that in modern-day America, the spaces that were created by Blacks to cope with the oppressive nature of segregation continue to influence and shape their opinions on politics. Within these spaces—and particularly as it relates to the media—Blacks are exposed to discourse about issues and problems that face the Black community that differs from mainstream political communication. These findings corroborate the notion that the ways in which Americans—Black, White or otherwise—receive information has a profound effect on the formulation of individual opinion. This is an important point to keep in mind, especially as it relates to the study of voting behavior and political participation, both of which can have direct and indirect effects on the public policy and elite behavior.

The analysis presented here makes two important points. The first is a substantive point about the importance of alternative elite discussions of politics. Here we made the case for considering the effects that indigenous political elites have on structuring the opinions of Blacks. We showed that those Blacks who are not privy to Black elite discourse have a very different understanding politics than those Blacks who get their information primarily from attention to Black elite discourse. Black individuals with high levels of Black awareness were more likely to be exposed to negative depictions of the

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and were more likely to express negative feelings towards the agency. Racialized frames utilized in Black political communication increased the relevance of racial considerations when Blacks evaluated the CIA. These racialized frames that discussed the suspected involvement of the agency in the importation of drugs into the inner-city were absent in the mainstream elite discourse. As a result, Blacks that were attentive to the Black elite discourse were receiving racial cues that heightened the importance of an ostensibly non-racial agency when considering the advancement of Black interests. Blacks that were more attentive to mainstream political discourse were not influenced by these racialized frames; thus, racial considerations were not employed when making evaluations. We hope these findings inspire more scholarly attention devoted to understanding the different ways that indigenous elites can influence minority opinion. Latinos, for example, experience even greater segregation in political information as they are also divided by language (Barreto and Ramirez 2006). How might this segregation lead to differences in Latino opinion?

The second point we hope readers take away from this paper is that measures of mainstream or general political information may not truly capture the effects of Blacks' attention to politics. As we stated earlier, if the messages of leaders within racial minority communities only appear in segregated information environments—indigenous institutions—and not in mainstream information channels, then imposing singular importance on the mainstream environment assumes away any significant consequence of attention paid to alternative, racial-group elite discourse. This is not to say that Zaller was incorrect in his formulation of elite effects on mass opinion; however, it is clear that these effects deserve more contextualization, especially as they pertain to populations whose

norms and values are not represented in mainstream media discourse. Relatedly, we believe this contention may also be extended to any group that is underrepresented in mainstream media coverage, such as Muslims or individuals who identify as LGBTQ. It also may lead us to a mischaracterization of the extent of elite consensus or disagreement on political issues, if disagreement is coming only from those outside the mainstream. Thus, we hope more attention is devoted to developing more precise measures of attention to racial elite discourse.

Figure 1. Number of Articles in the Black Press About the CIA May to December 1996
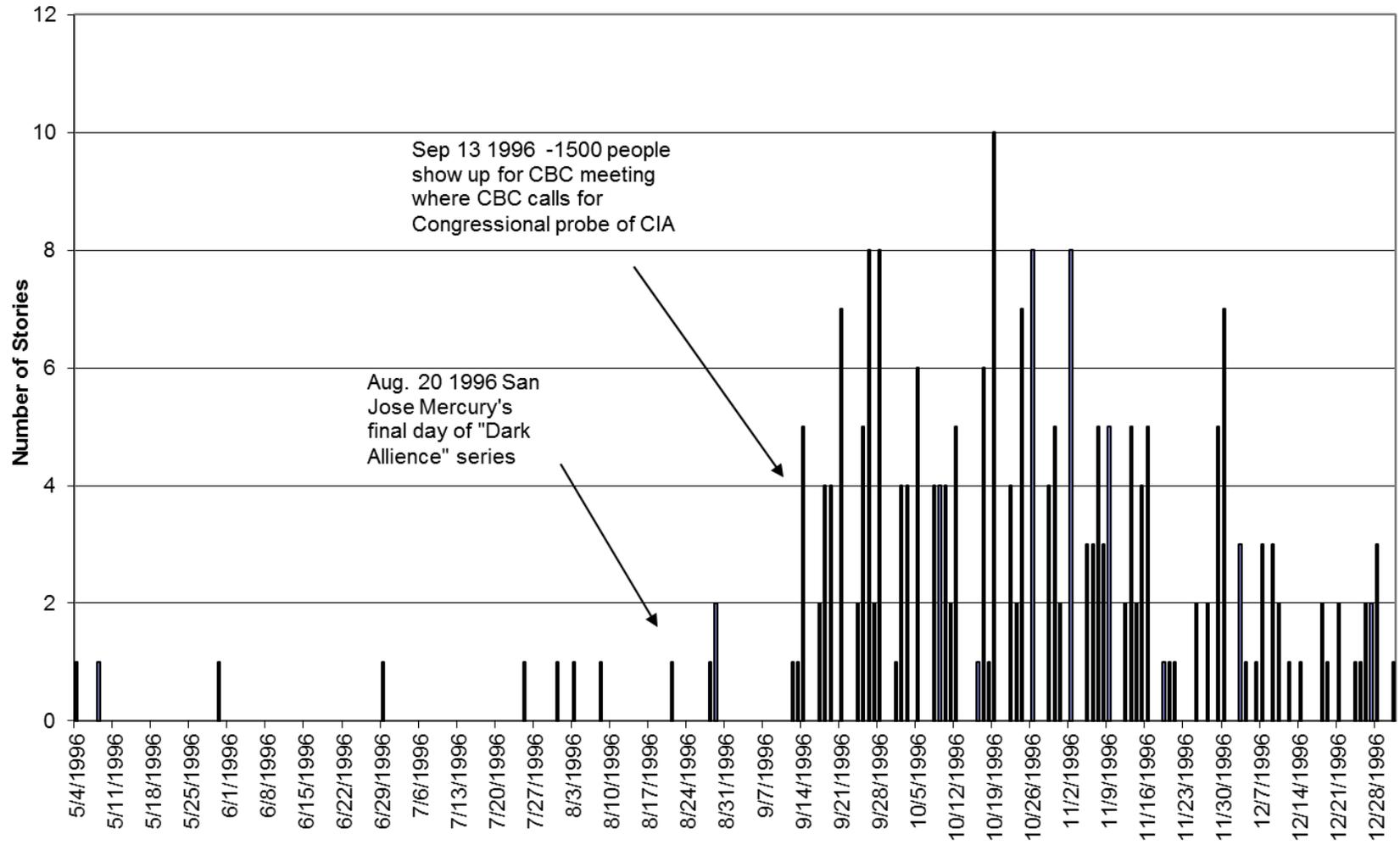
Figure 2. Number of Articles in the Mainstream Press About the CIA May to December 1996

Sep 13 1996 -1500 people show up for CBC meeting where CBC calls for Congressional probe of CIA

Aug. 20 1996 San Jose Mercury's final day of "Dark Allience" series
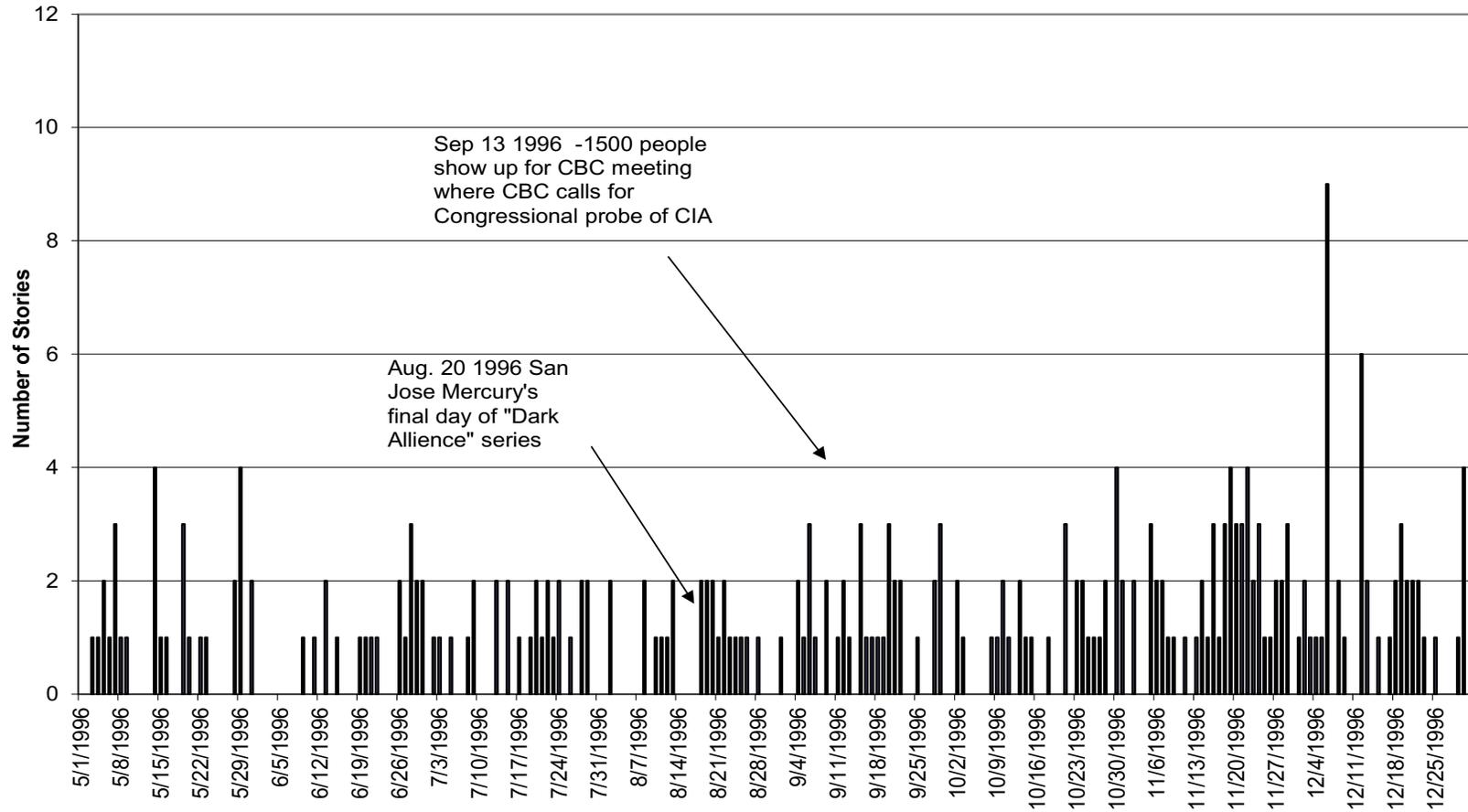
Number of Stories

Figure 3. Predicted CIA Feeling Thermometer Score by Level of Black and Mainstream Political Awareness (95% Confidence Interval)
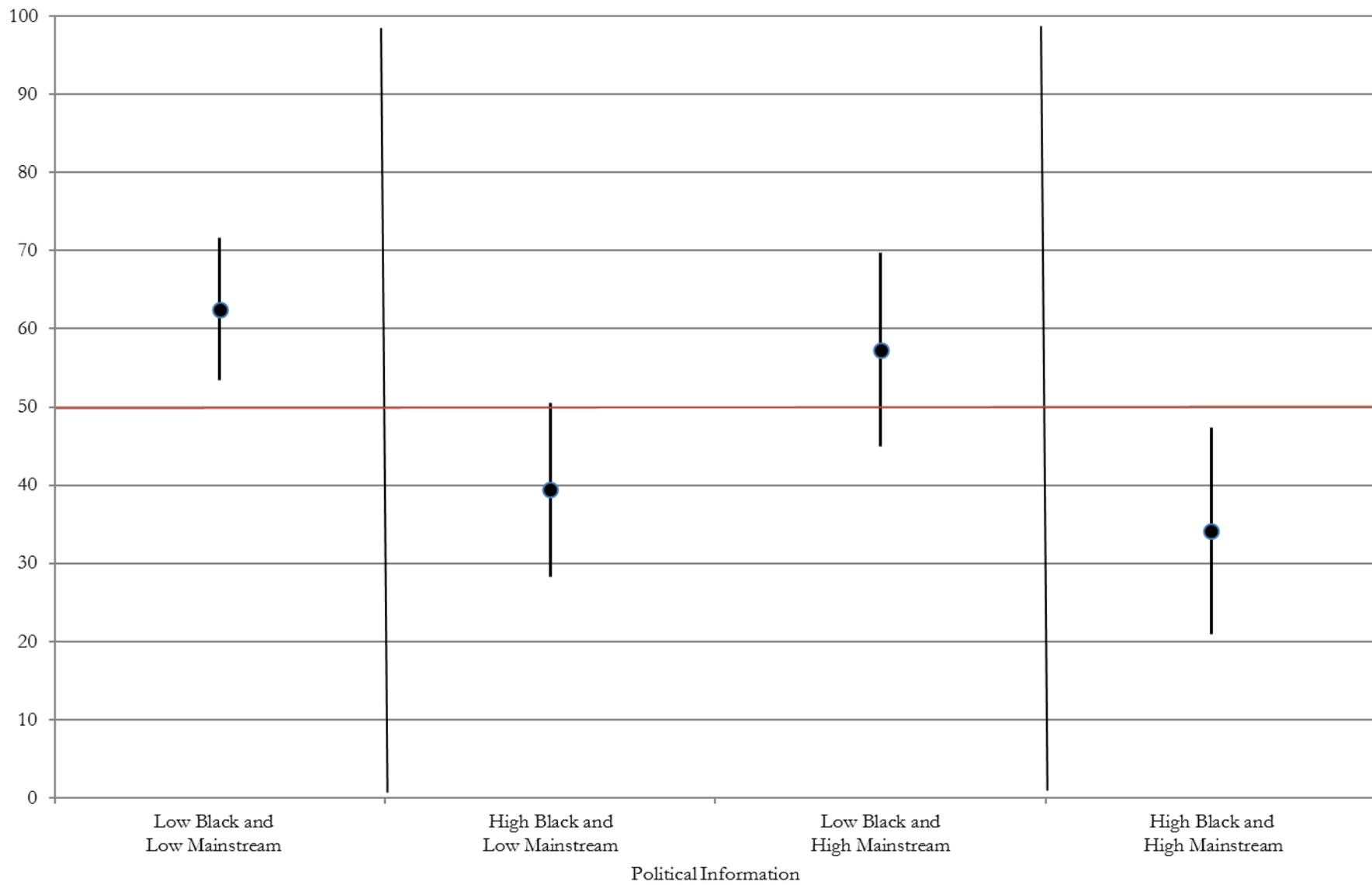
Table 1. Frames used to Describe the CIA in the Black and Mainstream
Press

	Black Press	Mainstream Press	Difference
CIA and African Americans	80.53	16.28	64.25*
	153	14	
Drug Trafficking Allegations	82.11	16.28	65.83*
	156	14	
Foreign Policy Affairs other than those relating to Contras and Drug Trafficking	8.42	77.91	-69.49*
	16	67	
N	190	86	

*Denotes p<.05 for two-tailed test of difference

Table 2. Percentage of Articles Discussing the CIA in the Black
and Mainstream Media that offer a Critical Evaluation of Agency

	Black Press	Mainstream Press	Difference
All Stories	72.02	55.81	16.21*
	139	48	

*Denotes p<.05 for two-tailed test of difference

Table 3. Black Support for the CIA by Black and Mainstream Political Awareness

	1	2	3
Mainstream Political Awareness	-14.70*	-	-5.28
	(5.76)	-	(6.50)
Black Political Awareness	-	-25.68*	-23.17*
	-	(6.20)	(7.09)
Constant	47.56*	54.80*	55.84*
	(4.55)	(4.97)	(5.12)
N	7.39	739	736
Adj-R^2	0.05	0.06	0.07

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients Each model includes controls for southern residence, urban residence, ideology, party identification, education and gender (not shown). *Denotes p<.05 for two-tailed test of the relationship between that variable and feelings of warmth with the CIA.

Table 4. Predictors of Black's Feelings Towards the CIA by Level of Black and Mainstream Political Awareness

	Low Black & Low Ms Awareness (Baseline)	Low Black & High Ms Awareness	High Black & Low Ms Awareness	High Black & High Ms Awareness
Ideology (Liberal)	2.81	-7.24	2.07	-7.18*
	(4.52)	(5.68)	(6.15)	(3.69)
Black In-Group Identification	-5.13	-8.14	-31.63*	-16.52*
	(5.19)	(7.83)	(10.65)	(5.03)
Distrust in Federal Government	-18.29*	-39.60*	-24.36+	-30.33*
	(8.28)	(12.99)	(14.10)	(7.88)
Support for Increased Spending on Defense	6.82	10.31	2.32	9.46*
	(5.10)	(6.65)	(7.78)	(4.17)
Constant	49.32*	51.32*	81.61*	53.86
	(9.54)	(14.44)	(16.80)	(9.90)
N	233	109	105	273
Adj-R^2	0.04	0.16	0.11	0.15

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients from simultaneously estimated models. Each model includes controls for southern residence, urban residence, ideology, party identification, education and gender (not shown). *Denotes $p<.05$ and +denotes $p<.1$ for two-tailed test of the relationship between that variable and feelings of warmth with the CIA within that condition

Notes

[1] (Frankenberg and Lee 2002; Reardon, Yun, and Eitle 2000; Card and Rothstein 2007)
[2] (Condran, and Denton 1987; Massey 1990; Schneider and Phelan 1993; Harris 1999), (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998; Peterson and Krivo 1993), (Schultz et al 2000; Williams and Collins 2001)
[3] (Morris 1984; Harris 1999; Lee 2002; Gandy 2000; Dawson 2001; Haynes 2001)
[4] (Herbst 1994; Dawson 1994; Lee 2000; Harris-Lacewell 2004)
[5] (Zaller 1986; p18)
[6] (see Lee 2000 for more on this point)
[7] (Entman and Rojecki 2001)
[8] Black media is defined here as media that is directed primarily toward Black audiences. The Black media in the United States is primarily a source of entertainment news (Walton and Smith 2003); however, the Black media (like many other exclusively Black institutions) has regularly become a tool for Black elites to efficiently mobilize Black opinion.

[9] (Tate 1993; Dawson 1994, 2001; Harris 1994; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Cohen 1999; McDaniel 2008).
[10] (Tate 1993)
[11] (Aberach and Walker 1970)
[12] (McDaniel 2008; Tate 1993)
[13] (Harris 1994; Tate 1993)
[14] (Herbst 1994; Dawson 1994; Lee 2000; Harris-Lacewell 2004)
[15] Certainly other sources of political communication (i.e., black and mainstream radio) may have offered different perspectives and reached different segments of the black population, however, we have no reason to believe that these frames would be vastly different.
[16] (Kornbluh 1997).
[17] "Dick Gregory Demands Investigation of CIA" San Francisco *Sun Reporter*, October 17, 1996.

[18] Reeves, Larry. "Black Leaders Demand Probe: Will Clinton Aggressively Press for Quick Resolution of CIA-Crack Connection?" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 28, 1996.
[19] (Kornbluh 1997)
[20] Controls for sex, education, income, southern residence, black interviewer, party identification and ideology will also be employed.
[21] Responses to recognition questions about Hillary Clinton, Bob Dole, Al Gore, and Bill Clinton were dropped as less than five percent of respondents indicated that they did not recognize these individuals. The percentage of individuals indicating that they did not recognize Hillary Clinton, Bob Dole, Al Gore, or Bill Clinton fell between .001 and 3 percent. See Appendix A for distribution of included questions.

[22] Responses to the question asking about Jesse Jackson were dropped as less than five percent of respondents indicated that they did not recognize these individuals. Only one respondent indicated that they did not recognize who Jesse Jackson was. See Appendix A for distribution of included questions.

[23] (see Entman and Rojecki 2001)

[24] An F-test of the difference in the relative size of the coefficients on the black and mainstream awareness variables also suggests that the two variables are statically distinguishable (F=4.07, p=.043).

[25] We are not certainly suggesting that selection does not occur, but if Black political awareness, as we've argued, results from social patterns, including racial segregation, that structure contact with environments where black political information is offered, and not from simple information seeking, we should be able to observe evidence of certain types of individuals selecting themselves into these different awareness groups. The most likely and perhaps most damaging (as far as our argument is concerned) pattern of selection would be if highly racially identified blacks simply sought out black political information or perhaps sought out institutions that are more likely to provide this information (black institutions). The results presented in Table 4 suggest that this is not likely the case, particularly when you compare those high in mainstream awareness with those high in black awareness - racial identification does not seem to vary much with the type or level of awareness, thus concerns about selective exposure should be eased.

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