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# Black cultural projection: an analysis of major daily news coverage of successful black mayoral campaigns in major US Cities

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## ABSTRACT

Newspapers often play a significant role in providing knowledge about political matters and may shape public opinion about political figures. However, a focus on newspaper coverage of some of the first Black mayors of major US cities and themes related to racial identity and policy is under-examined. The current investigation adopts an ethnographic content analysis and examines 30 days of major daily newspaper coverage of Black mayoral campaigns in Los Angeles, Detroit, New Orleans, Newark, and Chicago before each mayoral election. Findings reveal that news coverage draws attention to overt racial narratives and emphasizes racial stereotypes. However, news coverage of the candidates' policy proposals was present and often nonracialized. The outcomes suggest that the inclusion of racial identity and policies, while not entirely favorable, may increase awareness of each candidate's policies, potentially contributing to their electability.

## KEYWORDS

Black mayors; critical race theory; cultural projection; politics; newspapers

A robust body of literature examines news coverage of Black political representation in the United States (US), including political figures Barack Obama, the first Black US president and Kamala Harris, the first Black female senator from California and US vice president (Norander, 2017; Perry, 2011; Stiles & Kitch, 2011; Zilber & Niven, 2000). Research that addresses newspaper's representations of Black political figures who served as the first in down-ballot positions, such as mayors, while present in literature, remains scant in mass communication research (cf., Peer & Ettema, 1998). News coverage that depicts Black mayoral candidates is of interest because mayoral races may capture the imagination of Black voters who may not have seen themselves represented in political positions. Likewise, non-Black news consumers' exposure to Black mayoral candidates may sway consideration (for better or worse) of Black political candidates and increase interest in issues significant to Black

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communities (Peer & Ettema, 1998; Stamps & Sahlman, 2021). Not only can representation impact diverse audiences, but research asserts that the presence of Black mayors in large cities is often related to increases in Black employment and labor force participation (Nye, Rainer, & Stratmann, 2015; Piliawsky, 1985).

Black politicians' ascendancy into political office often conveys historical moments, which may be attributed to the news coverage of their campaigns (Gershon, 2012). News coverage has the potential to frame the candidates and their campaigns in ways that may increase voters' awareness of the candidate and their policy positions (Zilber & Niven, 2000). Some Black political figures often demonstrate the ability to "transcend" racial identity, meaning their identities are viewed as universal. Likewise, their policies are embraced by Black and non-Black constituencies (Perry, 2013).

To this end, the current study examines newspaper coverage of five Black political figures, specifically mayors, who served as the first nonwhite representative in their city. The mayors include Kenneth Gibson in Newark, New Jersey; Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, California; Coleman Young in Detroit, Michigan; Ernest "Dutch" Morial in New Orleans, Louisiana; and Harold Washington in Chicago, Illinois. Adopting an ethnographic content analysis, the current analysis bridges insights from critical race theory (Bell, 1992) and cultural projection (Merelman, 1995) to assess major daily news coverage before their election and its role in constructing racial narratives, stereotypes, and policy perspectives of each Black mayoral candidate.

## **Representations of Black individuals in news coverage**

Decades of research document the longstanding tendency of newspapers to portray Black people unfavorably (Dixon, 2008). Content analyses of news media suggest that Black people were (and arguably still can be) characterized as violent and threatening (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). Research acknowledges that news coverage aligns with racist tropes, such as portraying Black individuals as abusers of government programs, including welfare and subsidized healthcare (Stamps & Mastro, 2020). The stereotypes and subsequent racist labeling are often gendered and create an additional barrier for Black men, women, and non-gender-conforming individuals (Norander, 2017). Equally troubling, news coverage often frames criminality and the use of social services as individual failings among Black communities rather than addressing the structural and institutionalized inequities implicated in statistics such as arrest rates and access to equitable childcare and job training (Stamps, 2020b).

Research also posits that the increase in diverse news media platforms, such as streaming services, social media, and on-demand platforms, may provide the opportunity for consumption of favorable Black representation (Stamps & Sahlman, 2021). Dixon's (2017) work posits that news coverage of

Black individuals exist in parity with their racial counterparts due to the expansion of different racial, cultural, and religious identities (e.g., Latinos and Muslim individuals), which are increasingly present in news coverage. This is not to say that favorable Black portrayals are radically apparent or that images have led to Black liberation, as societal evidence will attest. Moreover, the notion of “good” or “bad” media representation remains suspect as each category is seen subjectively. For example, respectable media depictions of Black individuals (e.g., *The Cosby Show*) may create a seemingly favorable outlook but equally endorse harm regarding the limitations of identity and the opportunity to be fully represented within the media landscape (Hopkins, 2012). Moreover, the intersections of race and gender continue to be inflated, placing hierarchy between Black individuals regarding gender identity. However, the representations (positive and negative) of Black identity in news coverage continue to shape group narratives and may impact audiences (Stamps, 2020ab).

### **Representation of Black political figures in news coverage**

News coverage often draws attention to salient social issues and policies, particularly during an election season. However, there is an increased appeal and explicit reference to the racial identity of Black political candidates compared to white candidates within news coverage of mayoral races (Jeffries, 2002; Perry, 2013). Caliendo and McIlwain (2006) found that a political candidate’s racial identity is more likely to be mentioned in news coverage when the individual is nonwhite and represents a majority nonwhite district. Similarly, white political candidates’ racial identity is rarely mentioned in news coverage, creating an assumption that white racial identity is commonplace (Terkildsen & Damore, 1999). Lastly, news coverage situates Black candidates in alignment with issues associated with Black communities (e.g., criminal justice) or frames Black individuals in the context of colorblind interests and promotes universal inclusivity (Citrin et al., 1990; Schaffner & Gadson, 2004).

Even after an election season, news coverage of Black political figures continues to center racial identity. Racial identity typically serves as a measuring stick to evaluate a political figure’s success or failures while in office (Schaffner & Gadson, 2004). To illustrate, Black Congressmembers often receive increased news coverage of race-oriented policies than nonracialized policies (Schaffner & Gadson, 2004; Zibler & Niven, 2000). Gershon (2012) notes that journalists and editors may have a racial bias that influences news coverage of Black politicians. These racial biases often center racial issues to enhance the potential for sensationalized content. Equally, what journalists and editors find newsworthy potentially slants the types of news content related to Black political figures.

Literature that examines news coverage of Black individuals in general, and Black political figures, in particular, demonstrates that often content is highly racialized, trivializes Black voter's interests, and marginalizes salient issues related to Black communities. Moreover, news coverage may include bias and dictate what is acceptable regarding Black identity, the Black community, and Black political leadership using a white racial frame. News coverage that frames Black identity and Black political figures' pursuit of political office is critical and deserves continued attention. Here, theoretical underpinnings of critical race theory, which explores racial identity as a central component in mainstream systems (e.g., news media) and cultural projection, offer essential insight into this phenomenon.

### **Critical race theory**

In an attempt to understand the institutional underpinnings that facilitated covert and overt racism toward Black individuals, scholars conceptualized critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1992) within the discipline of critical legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). CRT explores how conventional declarations of neutrality are often a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege among dominant (i.e., white) groups in society. Scholars who coined CRT realized that progress made during the Civil Rights Movement in many ways had stalled, and gains (e.g., voting rights) from the movement were rapidly eroding under the guise of racial-neutral progress. In mass communication research, CRT is adopted to investigate the media, its representation of individual groups, and its perpetuation of racist tendencies (de la Garza & Ono, 2016; Stamps, 2020a). Work converging CRT and mass communication aims to shift the focus to racial identity and representation by recounting history from the perspectives of underrepresented racial groups and addresses issues of inclusion, power, and social change. Acknowledging racial identity, racism, and the role of systems in upholding racial hierarchy is fundamental in society and meaningful within CRT (de la Garza & Ono, 2016).

Scholars demonstrate the utility of CRT within the mass communication discipline. Cranmer and Harris (2015) adopt CRT to identify racialized narratives in film that highlighted racial tension between racial groups, showcased Black leadership, and recognized the work of Black figures in the promotion of racial progress. Espousing CRT, Stamps (2020a) examined depictions of Black male television characters and argued that historically, Black men were depicted unfavorably. However, they suggest that current portrayals offer counter-narratives associated with progress, and the images may benefit Black audiences in the form of cultural capital. Lastly, mass communication scholars applied CRT in post-apartheid South Africa news coverage and examined the intersection of racial identity and power dynamics. This work investigated how identity and authority influenced which groups were covered

in the news and how narratives of subordinate racial groups were often minimized in news content (Govenden & Chiumbu, 2020). According to the authors, news coverage privileged the powerful and individuals who benefit from class status, thus rendering racial identity an afterthought and limiting the opportunities for inclusion and equality in South African news media.<sup>1</sup>

News coverage historically frames Black identity as hostile, deviant, and has upheld racial hierarchy, privileging non-Black individuals (Stamps, 2020b). Accordingly, CRT provides a valuable lens to examine racialized narratives among a subset of Black mayoral candidates and draw attention to racial identity, representation, and the potential influence of news narratives on audiences. This is of specific interest as each mayoral campaign in the current study led to successful outcomes, which placed Black mayors in a leadership role of large metropolitan cities. From a critical standpoint, news coverage that emphasizes racial identity may project images in distinctive ways that can benefit the individuals presented in such content. Here, cultural projection is introduced to situate imagery and its implications regarding Black identity.

### **Cultural projection**

Cultural projection describes the efforts to promote and project desirable images of individuals to shift unfavorable attitudes directed at the groups portrayed (Merelman, 1995). Merelman acknowledges that Black images in entertainment media, news coverage, sports, and postage stamps often promote Black identity in the US. Moreover, the concerted effort to project Black identity in media is designed to achieve political favor and increase social capital, suggesting that “all forms of Black cultural projection weaken hegemony” (Merelman, 1995, p. 275).

Research notes that one of the oldest forms of Black cultural projection occurred within the Black press, Black radio, and Black television outlets (Johnson, 2017). Scholarship within this domain focused on the projection of favorable Black racial identity in radio (Johnson, 2004), television (Smith-Shomade, 2008), and museums (Johnson & Pettiway, 2017). As presented in major daily newspapers, Black identity may offer the same option, positioning Black individuals in such a way to increase social capital and frame Black identity as positive and inclusive. Everett (2002) and Johnson and Pettiway (2017) note that cultural projection within a majority non-Black society modernizes the media landscape and elevates Black narratives. This work suggests that Black cultural projection in news coverage, which includes the

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<sup>1</sup>In response to a reviewer comment, we added quotations marks around the term “negro” as it may be considered a derogatory term, but this may not have been the case when each mayoral candidate ran for office.

presence of racialized narratives and tropes, specifically among pioneering Black mayoral candidates, may be influential in the same way as Black cultural projection in other forms of mass media.

Discussions of racial identity in news coverage often increase during political campaigns, particularly when Black figures run for political positions (Perry, 2013). Likewise, newspapers tend to focus on sensationalized topics, with racial identities at the forefront, such as underrepresented racial group voter turnout, racialized social issues, and racial group tension (Hutchings & Valentino, 2004). The focus on racial identity and racial narratives in news coverage suggest that racial identity is inescapable in its analysis of nonwhite political figures and illustrates how Black cultural projection may increase the attention toward or raise awareness of Black political figures.

### **The mayoral candidates**

Kenneth Gibson became mayor of Newark, New Jersey, in 1970. Gibson previously lost the mayoral position in 1966 to incumbent Mayor Hugh Addonizio. However, Gibson garnered initial support during the 1966 election by pledging to tackle urban issues such as homelessness in Newark and strengthen sectors such as education (Fried, 2019). In 1970, mayor Addonizio was on trial for corruption, contributing to Gibson's increased support before the 1970 mayoral election. During the 1970 elections, white voters' support was spread among other candidates, which presented Gibson an advantage. Additionally, community groups, including the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and United Brothers mobilized to garner support for Gibson in Newark's nonwhite racial communities (.). Gibson's 1970 victory began his first of four terms as Newark's first Black mayor.

In 1973 Coleman Young became Detroit's first Black mayor. Young's campaign focused on criminal justice reform, specifically ending police brutality against Black communities (Coleman Young Foundation, n.d.). Simultaneously, Detroit faced many societal and economic issues, including a labor movement that resulted in a lack of protection for Black union workers (Thompson, 2017). In Detroit, the Black community viewed Young's mayoral victory as an opportunity to focus on solutions to address inequity and white racial resentment often unacknowledged by previous city officials (Young, 1997). The voting results from Young's victory were split along racial lines, but his success was the beginning of five terms as mayor.

After an initial failed attempt at the mayoral position in Los Angeles, California, to incumbent Sam Yorty in 1973, Tom Bradley became the first Black mayor of Los Angeles, California. Bradley's win arguably resulted from the significant support of nonwhite racial groups. Bradley's campaign

emphasized his commitment to criminal justice reform and inclusion, which was critical during a strained relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and the city's nonwhite racial communities (Felker-Kantor, 2018). Bradley would serve five terms as mayor of Los Angeles and, to date, is the only Black individual to serve as mayor of Los Angeles.

Ernest "Dutch" Morial became the first Black mayor in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1977. Morial's victory was attributed to the increase in Black voter turnout and the split among white voters and non-Black candidates (Piliawsky, 1985). Morial captured 58% of the Black vote in the open primary in 37 Black precincts. However, Morial's success cannot be fully attributed to support from Black and other nonwhite racial groups. Prominent New Orleans multicultural political groups, Southern Organization for Unified Leadership (SOUL), and Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP) were unenthusiastic about Morial's campaign (Hirsch, 1992). The city's oldest Black newspaper, *Louisiana Weekly*, also endorsed a white candidate in the primary and did not endorse anyone in the run-off election (Hirsch, 1992). The lack of support from established organizations led Morial to run a grassroots campaign that included speaking in public venues. Morial connected directly with Black voters by meeting constituents face-to-face across New Orleans. His grassroots efforts also secured 19% of the white vote (Piliawsky, 1985). Morial served two terms, the limit for mayors in New Orleans.

In 1977, Harold Washington was unsuccessful in his first bid for mayor in Chicago, Illinois; however, he succeeded in 1983. Washington relied heavily on grassroots outreach, meeting voters face-to-face during his political campaign (Travis, 2017). Washington coupled his on-the-ground tactics with partnerships with various grassroots organizations to build relationships with racially diverse communities (Grainey et al., 1984). Seeking to spur a strong voter turnout among Black constituents, Washington tackled issues including equitable treatment in the workplace and policies that promoted racial inclusion (Grainey et al., 1984). Washington won a second term as mayor, but his tenure was cut short when he suffered a heart attack in 1987 (Grossman, 2017).

The list of Black mayors used for the current investigation is not all-inclusive as the research team, at random, chose from a list of Black mayors that (a) served in major US cities with (b) a major daily newspaper in circulation at the time of their candidacy. Notable Black mayors not included in the analyses include Carl Stokes of Cleveland, Ohio, and Walter Washington, appointed mayor of Washington, DC. However, the five mayoral candidates examined within the study campaigned in such a way that garnered news coverage in the major daily newspapers in their respective cities. Critical race theory and cultural projection are applicable in this context as news



coverage of each mayoral candidate draws attention to racial identity, in many ways elevated Blackness, and centered the five mayoral candidates' experiences and policy preferences before their elections.

Taken together, theoretical assumptions rooted in CRT and cultural projection indicate that (a) racial identity is important in understanding news coverage of Black politicians and (b) racial narratives, which are often discussed in news coverage when Black politicians campaign, may increase awareness of racial identity and the individuals who embody Blackness. Equally important, news coverage of each candidate in their perspective major daily newspapers elevated Black identity and, in turn, may have contributed to the awareness of the candidates' campaign and influenced voter turnout. From this integrated perspective, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What themes, if any, emerged regarding racial narratives in major daily news coverage of the mayoral candidates during the 30-day time frame before their mayoral elections?

RQ2: How were racial identities constructed via racial stereotypes in the major daily newspaper coverage of the mayoral candidates during the 30-day time frame?

RQ3: Within news coverage, to what extent did the mayoral candidates' policies and positions on social issues emerge during the 30-day time frame?

## Method

The current examination adopts ethnographic content analysis (ECA), a reflective qualitative technique that applies a constant comparison method to discover emergent patterns and themes in mass communication texts (Altheide, 1987). Altheide (1987) notes the practice of examining social interactions (e.g., journalists' news coverage of Black mayoral candidates) and the ability to recognize notable features specific to the subject matter (e.g., racialized narratives). The method of analysis allows for the discovery of related and symbolic themes derived from media content (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To illustrate, a recurring theme or illustration, the use of racial narratives or stereotypes in news coverage, reflects the information presented to readers, which may increase awareness of, and perceptions about the subject matter. News coverage often addresses Black racial identity in ways that trivialize Black individuals, and white individuals remain nondescript and normalized (Stamps & Mastro, 2020). Appropriately, we seek to understand if this practice was apparent in the data and if the findings denote a form of cultural projection, which may have contributed to each successful mayoral campaign. In the reflexive iterative process, the research team noted racialized narratives, racial stereotypes, and mentions of the mayoral candidate's policies. The group

sought to understand the nuanced ways major daily news coverage of Black mayoral candidates contributed (positively or negatively) to their elections.

### **Data collection**

Data collection consisted of assembling articles from major daily newspapers in the cities where the mayoral races occurred. The newspapers included *The Los Angeles Times* ( $n = 49$ ), *The Star-Ledger* ( $n = 45$ ), *Detroit Free Press* ( $n = 45$ ), *The Times-Picayune* ( $n = 51$ ), and *The Chicago Tribune* ( $n = 60$ ) (see Appendix for additional publication information). Data were collected in a multistage process. Initial lists of news articles from each news outlet were compiled for the 30-day time frame leading to the conclusion of each candidate's mayoral campaign. The focus on 30-days of news coverage allowed collecting data that included candidate debates, press tour events, and commentary on the candidates and their opponents' policies. Each major daily newspaper article was compiled and included article URL links or microfilm of the hard copy article, along with a list of the article's title, publication date, and the staff writers' name(s). News articles that mentioned only media appearances, such as announcements of scheduled campaign debates, were excluded from the analysis. In total, 250 news articles were examined.

### **Data analysis and validity strategy**

The research team included the authors of the current study, all of whom were professors in communication studies at data collection. Each researcher completed a comprehensive data coding sheet for each article. The coding sheet included keywords and contextual cues regarding racial identity, racialized narratives, and mentions of the candidates' policies in each news article. Based on the coding sheets, the authors grouped text that addressed each research question into clusters and integrated findings into narrative form based on the research questions (Bernard et al., 2016). Each data coding sheet, the list of articles, and early drafts of narratives that addressed each research question were available for the entire research team to offer member checking and promote consensus on recurring patterns identified across data. Research team members exchanged summaries of news coverage of each candidate based on each research question, which created the opportunity for a reflexive iterative process and allowed for rechecking and comparison of findings. Like previous qualitative-focused research, there was an emphasis on coherence and cohesiveness for verification versus validity measures that seek numerical importance (Bernard et al., 2016).

## Findings

RQ1: What themes, if any, emerged regarding racial narratives in major daily news coverage of the mayoral candidates during the 30-day time frame before their mayoral elections? Racial narratives included text that denotes racial identity as a driving force within the news article.<sup>2</sup>

Often journalists rely on racial narratives to sensationalize news content, draw attention to racial group dynamics, or rile up their readership (Stamps & Mastro, 2020). To understand if this practice was implemented among the data set, themes around racial narratives were explored. These intended actions by journalists were present within the current data set. Most notable were the themes of (a) **racial appeal**, or the draw for racialized voters and communities (both Black and non-Black) to respond (positively or negatively) to the presence of a Black candidate; (b) **racial comparisons**, where news coverage compared the Black mayoral candidates to their non-Black counterparts, drawing specific attention to racial identity, and (c) **racial alignment**, which denoted when racial narratives were discussed to bring attention to issues often associated with racial identity.

To illustrate, in the *Newark Star-Ledger*, news coverage of Gibson, the mayoral candidate in New Jersey and former city engineer turned politician, often addressed the burden Gibson had with balancing his appeal among Black communities while also accommodating white voters. Twenty percent of the articles emphasized that Gibson's mayoral election was the first time a "negro" had a real chance of winning, particularly among white voters who responded favorably to his candidacy. Articles in the *Newark Star-Ledger* focused on Gibson and the racial identities of voters and often discussed how white individuals would act to Gibson's presence as a mayoral candidate. For example, coverage drew attention to Gibson's affiliation with the Black and Puerto Rican Convention, a committee organized to select and support candidates who serve in the best interest of underrepresented racial communities and how general voters (i.e., white) would respond. News coverage also detailed an occasion when white demonstrators described Gibson as a Black racist and suggested that he held racial animosity toward white people, despite Gibson emphasizing his efforts toward racial inclusion.

News coverage of Morial, the mayoral candidate in New Orleans, also drew attention to racial appeal. Articles often highlighted that Morial was the first Black individual to serve on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. His success in becoming mayor was often attributed to the garnered support from voting precincts' racial make-up and the appeal of his political ambition among Black voters. Articles addressed voting precincts' racial

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<sup>2</sup>The data set resulted in over 250 articles analyzed for the current study. Accordingly, only direct quotes are referenced in the findings section. A list of all articles and specific subject matter cited in the findings section can be accessed by contacting the first author.

breakdown and emphasized Morial's success tied to each voting blocs' racial identities. News coverage also discussed the lack of support for Morial from Black political organizations SOUL and COUP. It acknowledged that Morial garnered 57.9% of the votes cast in Black precincts despite lacking support from race-centered community organizations (Gillis, 1977).

Racial comparisons were also present within the data, as many journalists took the liberty to pit the mayoral candidates against their counterparts based on racial identity. For example, the *Detroit Free Press* news coverage included indirect and direct references to Coleman Young's racial identity. In describing the political positioning and campaign tactics of each mayoral candidate, a cutline under a photo of Young read, "A symbol of what's wrong with America," compared with his opponent, John Nichols, that read, "A symbol of blackjack rule." The images, solely of each candidate standing in the frame, showcased Young as an ailment that would impact the innocence of Detroit and Nichols as being politically strategic in his choices as a politician. Both visuals lacked context but placed the racial identities of the candidates as the centerpiece of the article and showcased a comparison of candidates solely on their visual representation. Arnett's (1973) news coverage in the *Detroit Free Press* further demonstrated a form of racial comparisons, as seen in this news heading: "HARD CHOICE: I have decided to vote for Coleman Young for Mayor. Now let's have some more letters. The first constituent who writes in to call me a ni\*\*er-lover will be awarded a roundtrip to Bob-Lo Island, aboard a three-inch plank." This illustration demonstrated the strain of racial narratives and how racial comparisons, in this instance, between the journalist and mayoral candidate, would prompt animosity among readers.

Racial alignment often appeared as a form of racial narratives demonstrated by journalists who underscored issues associated with racial identity. For example, racial narratives often noted alignment between the Black mayoral candidates and organizations whose vision or mission statement centered on racial identity and racial progress. The *Los Angeles Times* news coverage often aligned Tom Bradley with the Black Panther Party, a political organization focused on social programs to mitigate racial and class inequalities and minimize police brutality, particularly in Black and Latinx communities. News coverage discussed Bradley's opponent losing a court case where he sought to distribute mailers that defamed Bradley with headlines such as, "In May 1968, Bradley supported a Black Panther complaint against the police department" (Oliver, 1973). The case was settled, and the judge declared that the statement's phrasing, along with other text, had to be reworded and flyers destroyed. Unfortunately, the news coverage repeated the defamatory comments and potentially promoted the racial narrative that Bradley was anti-police by proxy to issues and organizations related to racial identity.

Racial alignment was also present in data that framed candidates favorably. For instance, news coverage of Harold Washington's bid for mayor in the *Chicago Tribune* considered him a reflection of the Black Chicago electorate's long-awaited opportunity to exert influence by occupying the city's top post. News coverage routinely underscored the shift in power and racial dynamics as the articles' alignment with influential racial figures became a talking point. Luminaries like Rainbow Push Coalition founder Reverend Jesse Jackson, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, and racial justice champions Coretta Scott King campaigned for Washington during his mayoral bid. As shown in news coverage, this support signaled a notable shift in racialized alignment that Washington was afforded.

RQ2: How were racial identities constructed via racial stereotypes in the major daily newspaper coverage of the mayoral candidates during the 30-day time frame?

Racial stereotypes are often not explicit or overtly expressed in the mainstream news coverage (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Typically, newspapers, in an attempt to present two sides of a story, equate racially demeaning and bigoted statements as objective reporting and, in doing so, publish various forms of microaggressions and often uphold racist beliefs (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2006). These practices are documented in news coverage of Willie Horton during the Bush campaign (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005) and more recently regarding the 45<sup>th</sup> presidential administration and the numerous dog whistles and subsequent news coverage that highlighted numerous Black racial stereotypes (Kilgo, 2021). Like decades of news coverage that promoted racial stereotypes, the same practices were prevalent in the data set.

Journalists and editors discussed racial stereotypes without explicitly noting the bias presented in such coverage. In the following headline, "A Black Child of Detroit Seeks to Lead Us," the intersection between Young's racial identity and preparedness for the role of the mayor is discussed. Young's racial identity and experience are framed as interchangeable, potentially signaling to readers that Young's racial identity is intertwined with his political knowledge and competence; however, this was not prominent with news coverage of his non-Black opponent. The stereotype of Black people as deficient or incompetent, solely based on racial identity, is rampant in literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dixon, 2008), and within the data, these false comparisons were present.

News coverage of Harold Washington's bid for mayor was often framed around racial stereotypes as articles promoted his opponents' use of discriminatory racial jargon. Bernard Epton, Harold Washington's mayoral rival, used smear tactics to associate Washington with integrity issues, focusing on racial stereotypes of Black people as untrustworthy and dangerous. Washington often acknowledged the attacks publicly in news coverage regarding his racial identity and would state such in interviews. In a *Chicago Tribune* front-page article, "An Irate Washington Retaliates," Washington stated, "Lies. Lies. Lies.

Anything goes. Old Harold can take it. After all, he's Black. That's what it's about. He's Black. The press will print it and then they'll ask questions after they print it" (Frantz & Locin, 1983).

News coverage, which centered on racial narratives promoted by the mayoral candidate's non-Black opponents and printed by major daily newspapers, was not singular. Often in the *Los Angeles Times*, Bradley was labeled as anti-police by his opponent, which was unchallenged by reporters. These statements were shared aloud at campaign events, and the newspaper's journalists questioned voters' beliefs and attitudes on the topic, offering legitimacy to the narrative. However, this news coverage promoted an unfounded generalization as Bradley served as a police officer and later a lieutenant in the police force.

Opponents and non-Black individuals primarily referenced racial stereotypes regarding Bradley, and the news coverage of slanderous remarks remained unchecked by journalists. An additional example included news coverage that printed racialized stereotypes of Kenneth Gibson, which were quotes from Gibson's opponents and direct statements from non-Black voters. Hugh Addonizio, the mayoral incumbent, described Gibson as ignorant and referred to Gibson as politically greedy. Addonizio told Black voters that they needed to reelect him if they did not want "streets running with blood" (Hillman, 1970). Lastly, coverage discussed white demonstrators describing Gibson as a Black racist. The stereotypes mentioned in news coverage that described Gibson as ignorant, greedy, and an instigator of violence often align with traits affiliating Black men with deviance, lack of educational attainment, and threats to society (Dixon, 2008).

News coverage of Coleman Young referred to him as hard scabbled and streetwise and created a convoluted association with racial stereotypes, which included labeling Black men as aggressive and dubious. The *Detroit Free Press* news coverage emphasized that Young possessed an uneven temperament and needed to consider his use of language in speeches and interviews. The *Detroit Free Press* news coverage steadfastly ignored favorable qualities about the candidate. To illustrate, The *Detroit Free Press* published content such as, "He [Young] did everything in the bounds of reason to earn a dime" and identified Young as "an accomplished streetfighter" promoting implicit racialized language (Arnett, 1973). As a result of these actions, news coverage often promoted negative racial stereotypes to readers.

Building on the adoption of racial stereotypes, news coverage of Tom Bradley, similar to the other mayoral figures, consistently reported on bystanders' statements and framed Bradley's potential successful campaign as correlated with increased crime and an impending coup by Black militants and leftists. Journalists often mentioned Bradley's racial identity before discussing narratives that associated Black people with criminality. In contrast to the practice of overtly stating Bradley's racial identity, his opponent's white racial

identity was rarely mentioned in news coverage. Lastly, news coverage often referenced both candidates' loud and anger-driven engagement with one another, but the descriptors were presented in the same paragraph that discussed Bradley's comments and actions. News coverage of his opponent's behavior was discussed as a one-off or coverage with condensed, potentially dismissing or minimizing Bradley's opponent's unfavorable traits or stereotypes. For example, in front of high schoolers in Chatsworth, California, a majority white suburb, Bradley's opponent stated that "Bradley, a Black, has done nothing for Blacks." Bradley's opponent goes on to tell reporters, "it is true, unfortunately, that Bradley has been getting a big vote based on his color, not his merit." The coverage positioned Bradley as a racial token, discredited his experience, and aligned his attraction as a mayoral candidate solely to skin color. However, journalists did not note the temperament or uncouth demeanor of the speaker or the unhinged tone beset for a high school audience.

The *Chicago Tribune* generated editorials that intensified racial identity by focusing on how voters would make decisions at the polls. Leading up to the mayoral race, the newspaper dedicated its "letters to the editor" section to the mayoral candidates. Whether intentional or unintentional, this action made racial identity and the adoption of racial stereotypes a centerpiece in printed materials. Multiple published pieces featured pictures of mail from readers, specifically after the newspaper endorsed Washington, and showcased audiences' angered responses that reinforced numerous negative racial stereotypes. The Tribune's hands-off approach to audiences' reactions and continued publication of readers' hate speech, and use of negative racial stereotypes were frequent in news coverage.

The choice by newspapers to promote racial stereotypes, either by proxy or as a form of "fair" reporting, was insensitive, but equally important, suggested to readers that Black individuals, and similarly Black political figures, are viewed through an unfavorable lens. The use of racial stereotypes showcased how columnists and journalists were afforded liberties to weave their subjective observations and bias into news coverage. Repeatedly, news coverage tapped into accessible racial stereotypes in implicit ways that accentuated the notion that Black political figures exist between incredulous virtue and criminality. The newspaper's leadership penned a large portion of the news articles, and authorship included associate editors and numerous journalists, thus providing validity to the outlets' publications.

RQ3: Within news coverage, to what extent did the mayoral candidates' policies and positions on social issues emerge during the 30-day time frame?

The mention of political narratives, which included each mayoral candidate's policy positions and attitudes toward social issues relevant to their respective city, is important in news coverage leading up to an election. The

increased awareness and goodwill afforded to political figures within news coverage are significant; however, the details in how each candidate will approach governing may be just as important. The data provided here suggest that (a) recognition of the Black mayoral candidates' political narratives was present within news coverage, and (b) the coverage was often framed absent of a racialized context. The latter point supports previous research and denotes a shift from the overwhelming racialized general news coverage often found in mainstream news outlets (Sylvie, 1995).

*The Star Ledger's* news coverage of Gibson's policies often emphasized a nonracial narrative. It included healthcare and medical access issues, such as Medicaid expansion, improved hospital care, and increasing neighborhood health centers. News coverage also highlighted Gibson favoring rent control and his challenge to the New Jersey election laws that required voters to have state residency for 40-days before elections.

*The Times-Picayune* captured Morial's belief that for New Orleans to thrive, everyone would need to work together irrespective of racial identity, age, and class. Morial's policies, as highlighted in news coverage, included efforts to reduce utility rates, improve public education, and strengthen police departments and city services. Morial sought to solve New Orleans' socioeconomic issues, address the class divide, and news coverage often sidelined racial group differences when discussing Morial's opinions of social issues.

News coverage in the *Detroit Free Press* further illustrated an emphasis on policy and social issues absent a racialized context. The *Detroit Free Press* coverage from a televised mayoral debate presented Young's 10-point policy plan that he would put forth in his first 100 days as mayor. The plan addressed the city's ailing economy and how Young planned to reduce crime. News coverage also cited that prominent Detroit businesspeople endorsed Young and financially contributed to his campaign due to his knowledge of Detroit and willingness to address major concerns in the city. The Detroit Common Council President, Mel Ravitz, endorsed Young and stated that as a legislator, Young knew the practical skills of politics and had favorable policies that would benefit Detroit.

Bradley and his opponent's policy positions were presented equitably in the *Los Angeles Times's* news coverage. Content described the candidates' differences outside of identities and focused on their attitudes and beliefs on various policies. News coverage noted that Bradley's opponent favored drilling oil in the Pacific Palisades. Bradley was not opposed to this action but wanted to limit drilling at and around the Pacific Palisades' beaches. Several debates took place between Bradley and this opponent during the 30 days leading up to the election, and news coverage often cited their policy talking points. For example, Bradley and his opponent differed in positions on infrastructure and transportation. Bradley called for studies to understand where the extension of freeways should be constructed, and he proposed using freeway lanes for



high-speed buses. Bradley and his opponent also supported efforts toward increasing transportation throughout Los Angeles. However, Bradley was open to free busing but stated his concern with cost. His opponent was not supportive of free busing and downplayed additional research on the subject.

The *Chicago Tribune* was limited in its news coverage of Washington's policy preferences. The overshadowing of Washington's policy preferences in news coverage was demonstrated as his interest in reforming the police department, protecting Chicago's labor workforce, and challenging the political elite was briefly noted in news coverage. Toward the end of Washington's campaign, news coverage from the *Chicago Tribune* discussed his 52-page booklet titled "The Washington Papers," which outlined his positions on 11 policies to be addressed should he be elected mayor (Anderson & Locin, 1983). US Senator and former astronaut John Glenn endorsed Washington and Glenn shared deep sadness that racial identity overshadowed Washington's qualifications and policy positions. Lastly, news coverage of a single televised debate focused on Washington and his candidate's policies, including expanding employment opportunities and city services such as parks to lower socioeconomic communities. To counter the lack of news coverage on policies, Washington's aides ridiculed the *Chicago Tribune* because he did not garner news coverage related to important voter issues. To combat the lack of news coverage concerning policy, Washington reduced his daily appearances and general stump speeches. Washington focused on intimate gatherings with voters to discuss specific issues related to that group.

## Conclusion

The current study, a comprehensive case study that examined major daily news coverage of several first Black mayors, contributes to communication and media scholarship in several areas. First, the adoption of CRT, particularly attention toward racial identity and its role in major daily newspapers' coverage of Black mayoral candidates, elevate discussions of how racial identity is framed within news coverage and how identity may drive narratives that could harm or help political candidates. The current research underscores the power accorded to major daily newspapers in upholding or downplaying racial narratives and individual characteristics, thus reinforcing previous work on the role of media in promoting racial stereotypes (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). Likewise, previous work acknowledged newspapers as a source of perpetuating inadequate and racially insensitive depictions of Black political figures (see Sylvie, 1995) and promoting racial identity as central, thus dismissing social issues within news coverage (Peer & Ettema, 1998). However, tempering the dissemination of policies and social issues by Black candidates was not present within the current data set (Moore, 1990). This finding suggests, although mildly, that news coverage of this nature may raise awareness of candidates,

their policy positions, and, wholistically, their Blackness. Also, the findings here imply, similar to previous research, that mayoral coverage, particularly of Black political figures policy preferences, is fairly equivalent to that of non-Black political figures (see Sylvie, 1995).

Second, this work extends Black cultural projection to include major daily newspapers. Research notes that news coverage historically erases or marginalizes Black communities (Dixon, 2008). However, Merelman (1995) asserts that cultural projection, explicitly of Black identities, may allow the group to envision favorable descriptions and narratives and thus elevate social standing. This is important for Black mayoral candidates looking to garner voters from different racial groups. Newspapers have a sordid history of framing and upholding negative stereotypes, and accordingly, news coverage discussed within the current investigation demonstrated similar outcomes. However, nonracialized, non-stereotypical policy news coverage emerged, suggesting an expansion of the types of news content presented on Black political figures. Both actions by journalists, drawing attention to racial stereotypes and the inclusion of race-neutral policies and social issues, are important as cultural projections of Black racial identity may have increased the awareness of the candidates and potentially garnered support among Black and non-Black constituents within each candidates' respective cities. Although the assertion is anecdotal as the current work did not draw correlations between news coverage, voter turnout, and voter support, the speculation of diverse news coverage as a contributing factor toward the candidates' increased awareness and success should be considered. Each candidate won their bids for mayor; the role of nonracialized policy news coverage in these outcomes is a critical angle to explore further.

As with all research, this work is not without limitations. First, this study is limited in its analyses of a subset of individuals, including five Black male mayors and news coverage from a single major daily newspaper where the mayoral campaigns took place. Similar to previous work, the investigation centers on case studies or a subset of criteria (Nye et al., 2015; Peer & Ettema, 1998). However, future examinations may consider taking a quantitative approach and conduct content analyses. There are numerous Black mayors, past and present, across varying cities of different sizes in the US, adding to the potential for a more robust investigation. Second, from a historical perspective, the current study sought newspaper coverage of Black mayors that served as the first within a large US city. While this contribution is suitable, examples of media representation of mayors within additional media platforms, including television, radio, and other media forms, are missing. Future research may add to the contextualization of cultural projection of Black mayors in additional mass media outlets. Third, the current sample solely acknowledges Black mayors who identified as male, missing the vital role of Black women who have served as mayors within US cities. As

of late, 19 Black women have served as mayors of large US cities, and literature centered on media representation and Black women mayors is essential.

The work presented here aimed to contribute to previous literature that examined the relationship between Black political figures and their representation in news coverage. Scholars may wish to explore a comparative analysis that reviews news coverage of white candidates and Black candidates in the same news outlet. Additional directions include exploring the differences between major daily news coverage and Black-owned newspapers or investigating differences in news coverage over time, considering that the more recent decade now reflects a Black US president and vice president. Despite these limitations, findings suggest that centering racial identity (i.e., CRT) and examining racialized news coverage (i.e., cultural projection) of mayoral candidates may be uniquely associated with increased awareness among readers and potentially impact voter turnout and subsequent victory for the mayoral candidates.

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## Appendix

### *Newspapers Included in Analysis*

Newspaper	City, State	Years in Circulation
Chicago Tribune	Chicago, IL	1847 – current
Detroit Free Press	Detroit, MI	1831 – current
The Star-Ledger	Newark, NJ	1832 – current
The Los Angeles Times	Los Angeles, CA	1881 – current
The Times-Picayune	New Orleans, LA	1837 – current