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Running on Race: How Minority Candidates Navigate Race in Campaign Messaging in Contemporary American Campaigns

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

by

Joyce Huang Nguy

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Running on Race: How Minority Candidates Navigate Race in Campaign Messaging in Contemporary American Campaigns

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

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Professor Natalie Masuoka, Chair

How do candidates of color navigate race in contemporary American campaigns? Existing scholarship has largely emphasized a "deracialization" strategy, in which candidates of color avoid explicit discussions of race to minimize racial backlash and improve electoral viability. However, as the number of candidates of color continues to grow and racial demographics and norms shift, I argue that the contemporary political environment has altered both the costs and incentives of talking about race. Further, dominant theories of race in campaigns do not adequately explain the behavior of non-Black minority candidates, particularly Asian and Latino candidates. I advance a framework in which racial identity messaging can function as a strategic political asset, though the ways candidates deploy race are shaped and constrained by their racial position. I examine this through two dimensions of campaign messaging: candidate self-presentation and issue emphasis/framing. Using original content analyses of the official campaign biographies and issue platforms of all candidates running in the 2024 U.S. House primary elections, I show that contemporary campaign behavior does not reflect a universal

deracialized strategy. Instead, most Asian and Latino candidates, particularly Asian candidates, foreground their racial and ethnic identities in campaign self-presentation, and unlike Black candidates, do so even in majority-White constituencies. Republican candidates of color also use racial and ethnic narratives to signal conservatism and distinguish themselves ideologically. I further show that candidates of color exhibit patterns consistent with racial issue ownership by emphasizing issues associated with their racial and ethnic groups and explicitly invoking identity in policy discussions. To examine how minority candidates are perceived by voters, I fielded a nationally representative survey experiment among White Americans. I find that a hypothetical Asian candidate is perceived as less patriotic and less representative of America than an equivalent White candidate, while White Democratic respondents perceive a Latino candidate as more competent on civil rights and immigration. By moving beyond the Black-White binary that has long dominated scholarship on race and campaigns, this project contributes to broader debates about representation and the evolving role of race in American politics.

The dissertation of Joyce Huang Nguy is approved.

Lorrie Frasure

Efren Perez

Christopher Stout

Natalie Masuoka, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

to women; to girls; to survivors

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VITA

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1 Introduction

1.1 A Tale of Two Candidates: Janelle Bynum vs. Lori Chavez-DeRemer

In the 2024 election for Oregon's 5th Congressional District, two women of color competed for the same congressional seat in one of the most competitive races in the country. Bynum, the only Black woman legislator in the state's House, first secured the Democratic nomination by defeating White progressive candidate Jamie McLeod-Skinner in the primary by a wide margin. She then went on to the general election to challenge Lori Chavez-DeRemer, the Republican incumbent in one of the most expensive and intense races in the state. Bynum ultimately defeated Chavez-DeRemer, making history as Oregon's first Black Congressmember in the process.

Even so, Bynum did not choose to center the historic nature of her candidacy based on race in her campaign messaging; rather, she notably abstained from any explicit references to her identity as a Black candidate. Instead, Bynum largely centered her campaign narrative on her gender identity, highlighting her experiences as a mother and the daughter of teachers as a key influence in driving her into public service. And although she centered much of her policy advocacy around progressive hot-button issues, paying heavy attention to the issue of abortion, there were also no mentions of racial issues, or race at all, from her campaign policy priorities. Bynum's reluctance to discuss race on the campaign trail reflects a "deracialized" campaign strategy; a strategy that assumes that mentioning race or priming racial considerations can be electorally damaging for candidates of color, and thus strives to dilute the negative impacts of race by avoiding it at all costs (Hamilton 1977; McCormick and Jones 1993)

Her opponent, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, adopted a markedly different approach when it came to race. Although she similarly did not advocate for racial policies or mention race in the issues she championed, throughout her campaign Chavez-DeRemer openly emphasized her identity as a Latina, explicitly incorporating her racial and ethnic identity as a source of pride and distinction into the narrative of her campaign. For example, her official campaign biography highlighted the historic nature of her political career, noting that "in 2010, she was elected mayor and became Happy Valley's first female and first Latina elected mayor." It further emphasized that she became "the first Latina and first female Republican elected to the U.S. Congress in Oregon.". Rather than avoiding mentioning race, as Bynum did, Chavez-DeRemer's decision to highlight her Latina identity presents an interesting contrast – especially given that she was running as a Republican, a party whose leaders and supporters have often criticized minority politicians for engaging in "identity politics" or "playing the race card."

Ultimately, Bynum beat Chavez-DeRemer in the general election, albeit by only 2.7 percentage points. Despite this, however, these contrasting campaign strategies in regards to race raise an important question: why did Chavez-DeRemer decide to "racialize" instead of "deracialize"? If race has historically disadvantaged minority candidates, why do we see some minority candidates emphasizing their racial/ethnic identities in their campaigns, while others do not? In a contemporary American context marked by increased diversity in both the candidate pool and the electorate, how are candidates navigating racial dynamics in their campaign messaging?

In this dissertation, I advance an underexplored framework of examining racial dynamics in campaigns in which racial/ethnic identity messaging is not considered a universal liability for candidates of color, but as an asset that can be strategically leveraged via campaign messaging.

In doing so, I make two key arguments. First, that existing frameworks that theorize how candidates of color should navigate race are outdated, and that the contemporary political context has reduced the constraints and increased the incentives to explicitly engage in racial messaging. Second, that the race of the minority candidate differentially incentivizes and constrains racial messaging.

1.2 Race and Contemporary American Campaigns

That race has always been a powerful weapon to wield in American campaigns is undisputable. Historically, it has been White candidates who have brandished this weapon, primarily through campaign messaging that tapped into deeply embedded racial cleavages to mobilize racially resentful white voters (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Banks and Bell 2013). An example of the power of a racial message used to induce racial animus is the infamous Willie Horton ad, in which George H. Bush's campaign induced racially charged fear and threat in order to gain the support of voters. A more contemporary and explicit example of the exploitation of racial cleavages for electoral gain comes from President Donald Trump's campaigns, throughout which he explicitly specifically leveraged attacks on a wide range of racial/ethnic minorities. From calling Mexicans "rapists and murderers", to calling the coronavirus the "Kung Flu", to suggesting that Haitian immigrants eat household pets, it is evident that racist campaign messaging has resonated with racially resentful voters; or, at the very least, has not been enough to dissuade voters from voting for the candidate who exploits these racial cleavages.

With this in mind, it is no wonder that racial messaging has largely not similarly been considered to be a strategic campaign tool available for minority candidates. Instead, the persistence of racial animus against racial/ethnic minorities in the mass American public has

acted as a barrier for candidates of color to win elected office in the first place (Terkildsen 1993; Sigelman et. al 1995; Marin and Blinder 2021). Therefore, many candidates of color have employed deracialized campaign strategies, accepting that they must do so in order to attempt to gain representation in political office (Hamilton 1977; McCormick and Jones 1993). And yet, the assumption that the "price of the ticket"is racial silence may be an outdated one (Harris 2012).

For one, America is at a racial crossroads (Smith and King 2024). In the last decade, social movements such as Black Lives Matter have helped to bring racial discourse to the forefront of mainstream politics. In particular, the summer of racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd ignited a spark of awareness and racial consciousness that have contributed to mainstream political elites, and even white Americans, calling for racial justice. Indeed, as American political parties have become increasingly polarized along racial lines, with racially conservative voters sorting into the Republican Party and racially liberal voters into the Democratic Party (Glaser 1998; Valentino and Sears 2005; Mason and Wronski 2018; Jardina 2019; Mason 2022), it seems that many white Democrats have moved towards racially liberal ideologies (DeSante and Smith 2020), even showing increased preferences for Black candidates (Mikkelborg 2025).

At the same time, minority voters have become an increasingly participatory force, with the power to change electoral outcomes. Most notably, the number of eligible Asian and Latino voters have exponentially increased, and have in recent elections been key deciding voting blocs for some of the most competitive elections across the country. As American demographics continue to trend towards an increased racial/ethnic minority population, the incentive for candidates to appeal to and mobilize minority voters has also increased. Candidates and campaigns have accordingly attempted to use group-based appeals that work to promote turnout

and support among key groups (Valenzuela and Michelson 2016; Collingwood 2020; Dassonville, Stubager and Thau 2025).

In this sense, minority candidates may have the upper hand on White candidates, given their shared racial/ethnic identities or shared marginalized status with this growing bloc of voters; however, although minority voters have historically shown support for co-racial or co-ethnic candidates (Tate 1994; Dawson 1994; Barreto et. al 2007; Leung 2022; Sadhwani 2022), the preference or support for co-racial/co-ethnic candidates may not necessarily be automatic if the candidate does not appear to authentically represent their racial/ethnic communities (Dovi 2002; Lemi 2021; Wamble and Clemons 2026). Indeed, as the salience of race increases in contemporary politics, there is increasing evidence that voters across the political spectrum seem to prefer a racialized to deracialized candidates of color, if messaged correctly; and that a deracialized candidate may actually demobilize minority voters from turning out in the first place (Stout 2015; Leslie, Stout and Tolbert 2019; Stout 2020; Karpowitz et. al 2021). Taken together, these political and demographic developments suggest that the contemporary American context is more conducive to racial messaging than ever before.

In addition to new political developments that have contributed to changing racial norms and incentives to appeal to race, changes to the candidate pool itself has contributed to the need to update our understanding of racialized campaign messaging. Our understanding of racialized campaign strategies have largely stemmed from examinations of Black Democratic candidates, who have made up the majority of minority candidacies throughout American history. Therefore, the majority of scholarship and strategy revolving around race in campaigns have emerged from the candidacies of such Black Democrats.

However, the emergence and increase of Asian and Latino candidates, as well as candidates of color running on Republican platforms, across the last few decades complicate existing frameworks of how candidates of color navigate race. I argue that we cannot, and should not, apply the same frameworks that originated with Black Democratic candidates in mind across racial/ethnic groups; especially when Asian and Latino candidates occupy unique and distinct positions in the American racial hierarchy that contribute to their differential racialization. Thus, the increasing presence of these candidates creates a critical opportunity to understand how a candidates' race shapes their campaign strategies, and move beyond the White–Black binary that has long limited both scholarly and strategic campaign thinking.

1.3 Why is this Important?

There are two primary reasons why examining how minority candidates navigate race and racial messaging in contemporary American campaigns is important. The first reason is largely pragmatic; that is, campaigns must be proactive in anticipating and understanding what types of messages and strategies work in order to have the best chance of winning elections. These strategies must be adaptive and evolve with contemporary contexts; running campaigns on outdated frameworks, therefore, is highly unpractical. This research aims to provide candidates and campaign strategists with a comprehensive understanding on whether, when, and how candidates are engaging with race in their campaigns, providing a snapshot of the broader racial political landscape.

The second reason for why this project is timely and important is a more normative one. That is, the assumption that minority candidates must deracialize to win elections carries troubling implications for representation. Advice to deracialize or perceptions of deracialization as a most risk-averse strategy reinforces a political norm in which electoral viability is contingent

on minimizing or suppressing racial/ethnic identities, experiences, and the concerns of marginalized communities. Campaigns are meant to communicate about the priorities, constituencies, and forms of representation candidates intend to pursue once in office. While some voters of color may support deracialized candidates in the hope that they will deliver substantive representation once in office (Mansbridge 1999; Tate 2003), candidates who run deracialized campaigns may be less likely to pursue policies that explicitly address racial inequality or target minority interests because such commitments were never central to the campaign message presented to voters in the first place.

For example, Barack Obama is often cited as running a largely deracialized campaign, and while celebrated for being America's first Black president, during his two-term presidency he spoke about race less than any previous president while in office (Gillion 2016). This silence during his presidency has been criticized for failing to substantively advance racial issues on the national agenda (Harris 2012; Price 2016). Therefore, deracialized descriptive politicians may degrade trust in descriptive representatives over time among voters of color; indeed, racial representation may only be as good as those who are willing to actually talk about race rather than avoid it.

Therefore, the primary contribution of this project is to challenge the assumption that candidates of color must pay the "price of the ticket" to run for political office. At the same time, however, it recognizes that the "cost" of representation is inherently unequal; that processes of racialization differentially impact both the ability to use specific campaign strategies, and the barriers that candidates of color face on the path to elected office.

1.4 Dissertation Road Map

Chapter 1 is the introduction, and here I laid out my initial argument for why studying racial dynamics and campaign messaging is important, and why an update is needed to existing literature on racial campaign strategies as racial dynamics change in both the electorate and the candidate pool. I end the chapter with the goal of the dissertation: to explore how candidates of color are leveraging their racial/ethnic identities in their campaign messaging in contemporary American campaigns.

In Chapter 2, I first outline the literature on how race has shaped campaign messaging, from racial animus to the deracialization strategy. I then provide a detailed argument for why an update is needed to existing literature on racial campaign strategies as racial dynamics change in both the electorate and the candidate pool – especially as it pertains to the inclusion of Asian, Latino, and Republicans of color in the study of race and campaign strategy. Building upon extant literature that argues against treating racial/ethnic minorities as a monolithic group, I argue that existing literature has not yet factored in how different racial/ethnic minority candidates beyond Black candidates must navigate race; especially as they are distinctly racially positioned in the American racial hierarchy and are perceived through distinct racial stereotypes. In doing so, I conclude why we must critically update our understanding of the conditions under which candidates are more or less incentivized to racialize their campaign messaging. I then outline a theory of when using racial/ethnic identity in campaign messaging can be advantageous for candidates of color.

In Chapter 3, I present a first intervention and update to the deracialization literature by examining whether contemporary candidates of color are "deracializing" their campaign self-presentations; or, on the other hand, utilizing their racial/ethnic identities in their campaign images, and in what conditions and how they do so. Through examining the campaign websites

of congressional candidates running for the House of Representatives in the 2024 primary election cycle, I first show that Asian and Latino candidates are much more likely to showcase their racial/ethnic identities as integral to their campaign image compared to Black and White candidates. I find racial differences in racial presentation; Black candidates are more likely to use historical events, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and organizations, such as the NAACP; and Asian and Latino candidates typically pair their racial/ethnic identities with immigrant narratives. While Republican candidates are not typically associated with "playing the race card", I show that Republican candidates of color also frequently utilize their racial/ethnic identities in their self-presentation, although the ways in which they frame their racial/ethnic identities differs substantially from the racial narratives of Democratic candidates of color.

In Chapter 4, I turn my focus from how candidates emphasize race in their campaign self-presentation to examining how candidate race shapes candidates' issue agendas and issue framing. I ask: do candidates of color leverage their racial/ethnic identities in their campaign issue platforms? Here, I build upon well-established theories of issue ownership to theorize about the possibility of "racial issue ownership", whereby candidates of color can strategically run on issues or frame issues in such a way where they have a race-based advantage. I measure this in two ways. First, I examine whether there are systematic differences on the basis of race on the types of issues that candidates emphasize on their policy platforms. Then, I observe whether candidates are explicitly establishing racialized connections to an issue domain by using their racial/ethnic identities and experiences to frame the issue.

I extend upon this idea in Chapter 5, where I ask: can candidates of color expand the types of issues they "own"? In Chapter 4, candidates of color were much less likely to discuss foreign policy; however, when they did so, they often used their racial/ethnic identities to frame

their expertise on the issue. Thus, I see whether Asian and Latino candidates, for whom racial issue ownership is less clear, can leverage an association with the immigrant experience and foreignness may be used in a way that provides them an advantage in the domain of foreign policy. Through a survey experiment fielded to a nationally representative sample of White respondents, I examine whether Asian and Latino candidates are advantaged when they use a region-specific framing of foreign policy compared to White candidates running on the same policy.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I reiterate the major findings from each chapter of the project, and discuss the limitations of the current project. I end with recommendations for future venues of research, especially as trends of a diversifying electorate and candidate pool continue to change the American political landscape.

2 Towards an Updated Understanding of the Role of Race in Campaign Messaging

2.1 White Racial Attitudes: The Value of Campaigning on Racism

Before we can understand how prior research has theorized about the campaign strategies of candidates of color, we must first acknowledge that race has consistently structured campaign messaging throughout American history. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, American political candidates, particularly in the South, frequently benefitted from exploiting racism to gain and maintain political power (Glaser 1998; Maxwell and Shields 2019; Collingwood 2020). Racism, then, was a commonly deployed and formalized tool in campaign messaging strategies that were designed to both maintain, normalize, and reinforce systems of racial inequality, and secure the support of white voters (Mendelberg 2001; Lopez 2013).

However, the passing of Civil Rights legislation following the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s put into place legal protections against racial discrimination. As legal frameworks increasingly were constructed to target discrimination on the basis of race, a “norm of racial equality” was seemingly embraced by the mass public (Greeley and Sheatsley 1971), with conservatives touting "the end of racism" (Roth 1994; D'Souza 1995). And yet, racism and white racial attitudes did not disappear overnight with the passage of the Civil Rights Act (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Devine and Elliot 1995; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). Instead, the old-fashioned explicit racism of the past was simply replaced by newer forms of subtle or “symbolic” racism (Sears and McConahay 1973; Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears and Henry 2003).

Despite the face-value norm of equality, the pervasiveness of pre-existing racial dispositions and racial animus, typically against Black Americans, have continued to play a major role in influencing Americans' political evaluations. For example, negative white racial attitudes have continued to be associated with opposition to policies that implicate racial minorities (Sears et. al 1980; Sears and Citrin 1985; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Gilens 1995; Kinder and Sander 1996) and increased support for white candidates who invoke racial attitudes (Kuzenski, Bullock and Gaddie 1995). Therefore, it was clear to political elites that capitalizing off of racial cleavages remained an advantageous strategy to win the favor of racially resentful whites.

With this incentive in mind, political communications scholars have examined how campaigns could activate racism at the benefit of a political candidate without violating norms of equality. The foundational literature on racial messaging in elections in a post-racial era comes from Tali Mendelberg's (2001) book: "*The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*". The primary argument behind Mendelberg's racial priming hypothesis is that politicians cannot use explicit racial messaging because it would be a violation of the "norm of racial equality". According to the theory, once voters are aware of the racial content of an appeal, they will dismiss it because they will perceive it as violating shared norms of racial equality or the prohibition against racist speech.

Instead, Mendelberg argued that racial rhetoric in American campaigns must be more implicit and subtle than the explicit racist rhetoric of the past – for example, racially coded language such as using language like "inner city" and "tough on crime" could implicitly activate racial attitudes and increase support from racially resentful voters, but language that explicitly used race, such as "African Americans" or "Blacks", was not tolerated. Although there is some

debate considering the racial priming hypothesis (Huber and Lapinski 2006), there is nonetheless much evidence to support the idea that campaign messaging that activates negative racial attitudes can be a politically advantageous strategy (Valentino et al. 2002; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Banks and Bell 2013).

2.2 Negative Racial Attitudes and Minority Candidates' Campaign Strategies

The prevalence of these negative racial attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities in the American electorate has contributed to Whites' opposition to the political candidacies of racial minorities, in particular Black Americans (Sears and Kinder 1971; Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972; Kinder and Sears 1981; Abramowitz 1994). The Civil Rights Era, however, assisted in the process of increasing the number of racial/ethnic minorities in elected office; since the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which led to the creation of majority-minority districts, there was an immediate and significant increase in Black representation in elected office (Canon 1999; Gay 2001). While majority-minority districts helped to somewhat diversify representation in American government, the ability for Black candidates to appeal to voters outside of Black majority-minority districts has nonetheless long been a primary barrier to an increase in representation in national political offices.

Even though scholars have long noted the importance of descriptive representation for a diverse democracy (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 1999; Tate 2003; Casellas 2010; Grose 2011), that minority candidates face race-based barriers to office is a well-documented explanation for why racial representation in American political office has not reached parity with the diversity of the American population. One of the most cited reasons for why Black candidates have historically had a difficult time appealing to voters outside of majority-minority districts are due to the idea that their race cues pervasive negative perceptions and stereotypes, which can be particularly

harmful to their electoral prospects (Key 1984; Bullock and Campbell 1984; Terkildsen 1993; Sigelman et. al 1995; Liu 2001).

For one, Black candidates are often perceived as less intelligent and less competent than their white counterparts (Terkildsen 1993). They are also more likely to be seen as ideologically liberal (Sigelman et al. 1995; Karl and Ryan 2016; Fulton and Gershon 2018; Meyer and Boyle 2021) and as primarily focused on advancing the interests of their own racial group (Stout 2015; Wu and Huber 2024), which can be particularly threatening to voters who benefit from the racial status quo (Stephens-Dougan 2020). These racialized perceptions can have particularly negative consequences in low information contests, where race can be a particularly powerful heuristic in voters' evaluations (McDermott 1998). Taken together, the literature has largely supported the idea that candidates of color, but in particular Black candidates, face race-based barriers when attempting to win over voters outside of their racial in-group.

2.2.1 The Concept of Deracialization

In response to these long-standing race-based barriers to office, a primary focus of the academic literature on how minority candidates navigate race in their campaigns has been that of the deracialization strategy – a strategy where race is deliberately not mentioned and purposefully avoided in candidates' campaign messaging (Hamilton 1977; McCormick and Jones 1993). One of the primary assumptions behind the deracialization strategy is that candidates must be able to appeal to the white vote. In order to do so, it is believed that minority candidates can alleviate the impact of racial disadvantages by avoiding race in their campaign messaging altogether. In doing so, minority candidates may avoid showing any potential favoritism towards specific minority racial or ethnic groups in order to not alienate white voters

(Swim and Miller 1999), and avoid priming racial stereotypes, such as ideological liberalism, and trait-based racial stereotypes such as competence and intelligence.

Since Hamilton's (1977) introduction of the deracialized strategy, minority candidates have widely been documented to engage in "deracialized" campaigns, including Barack Obama during his presidential campaigns (Harris 2014; Johnson 2014; Johnson 2017). Even given the success of Obama in reaching electoral victory at the top of the ticket, there is much debate in the academic scholarship of the strategy' s effectiveness and limitations (McCormick and Jones 1993; Liu 2003; Orey and Ricks 2007; Juenke and Sampaio 2010; Gillespie 2012; McIlwain and Caliendo 2013; Stout 2015; Stout 2020), and inconsistencies in how the literature has interpreted a "deracialized" campaign strategy (Anderson and Junn 2010; Price 2016; Stephens-Dougan 2020).

The Argument Against Deracialization

While the concept of deracialization has been a focal point in studies on minority political campaigns, it is not a strategy without consequence. While deracialization is often framed as a pragmatic strategy to avoid triggering white backlash, this approach misunderstands the influence of campaigns. Research shows campaigns rarely persuade; instead, their central role is mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Green and Gerber 2008). By downplaying race, deracialized campaigns by candidates of color may not necessarily be able to persuade racially resentful voters to vote for them, while at the same time demobilizing the very minority voters who form the core of a candidate's potential coalition (Austin, Middleton, and Wright 2004). In practice, then, the deracialization strategy at its core discounts minority voters as secondary, a "necessary" sacrifice for a tenuous promise of support from white voters.

Thus, one of the major pitfalls of the deracialization strategy is that it can actively demobilize minority turnout (Citrin et. al 1990; Orey 2006; Stout 2015). Observational case studies have highlighted this pitfall. Specifically in contexts in which the support and turnout of minority voters can change electoral outcomes; for example, Austin and Middleton (2004) explore the failure of Anthony Villaraigosa to win mayoral office in Los Angeles, claiming that his deracialized campaigns strategy failed to both mobilize the Latino community and attract the Black vote; groups that were both necessary to win the Los Angeles seat. In another Los Angeles race, Citrin et al. (1990) argued that California gubernatorial candidate Tom Bradley's deracialized approach in his first electoral run led to lower levels of Black turnout at the polls, which could have made the difference in an election where Bradley and his opponent were only separated by 2 percentage points.

Lastly, while some studies have shown that even voters of color can sometimes prefer deracialized candidates (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011; Tate 2012), Stout's (2020) work argues that the racial ideology of Black voters has largely shifted in the modern political context. From a relative embrace of colorblind and racially conservative ideologies in the 90's and 2000s, Black voters now increasingly show more motivation to turn out and support racially liberal candidates; to the point that Black and even Latino voters are less likely to turn out to vote for a candidate who does not speak to race (Stout 2015; Stout 2020).

Inconsistencies in The Concept and Measurement of Deracialized Campaign Messaging

In addition, there has unfortunately been no consistent measurement of what exactly constitutes a "deracialized" campaign, making it difficult to examine whether or not "deracialization" truly "works" in terms of diffusing negative racial perceptions and winning elections. One of the most utilized definitions of the deracialization strategy comes from

McCormick and Jones (1993), who define a deracialized campaign as one that avoids the "polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit reference to race-specific issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent, thus mobilizing a broad segment of the electorate for purposes of capturing or maintaining public office" (76). According to McCormick and Jones, a deracialized candidate avoids discussing explicitly or implicitly racialized policies such as voting rights, civil rights, immigration, and affirmative action, and will also distance themselves from other racial minorities by avoiding public appearances with racial minority groups.

However, this definition of a "deracialized" campaign is narrow in that managing racial perceptions is not always as simple as avoiding the discussion of racial issues. Instead, at its core, the deracialization strategy assumes the need to distance oneself from their identity as a racial minority (Stephens-Dougan 2020). The literature that shows how candidates of color, but in particular Black candidates, attempt to carefully control their image and presentation, not just the issues they discuss, emphasizes this point (Sriram and Grindlife 2018; Brown and Lemi 2021). Indeed, Andersen and Junn (2010) find experimental evidence to support that the simple framing of Barack Obama as a Black candidate, compared to a "deracialized" framing, reduced support for Obama, showing that candidates of color do not necessarily avoid racialized perceptions by simply avoiding advocating for racially progressive issues.

2.3 Rethinking Deracialization in an Era of Racial Polarization and Diversity

The conventional wisdom in the political science discipline holds that candidates of color must *deracialize* to remain electorally viable and appeal to a broader coalition of voters. However, the deracialization strategy is, in Hamilton's own words, not a "one-size-fits-all" strategy; as all campaign strategies, both the candidate and context influence the calculus in

campaign messaging. Thus, the political conditions under which the deracialized framework developed have shifted in important ways. I argue that the assumption that candidates of color should deracialize requires theoretical updating for three key reasons.

First, social norms surrounding race have changed, as American politics has undergone profound partisan sorting and racial realignment (Smith and King 2024). Race is now deeply embedded in partisan identity (Jardina 2018), and the parties are more racially distinct—and more polarized—than at any point in the modern era. Thus, explicit racist messaging is not uniformly punished in the way earlier scholarship assumed, particularly within co-partisan audiences, (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018; Stout 2020). Second, a diversifying electorate has simultaneously shifted the electoral calculus to needing to increasingly mobilize support from minority voters. Finally, and most importantly, existing empirical work has focused disproportionately on Black candidates—particularly Black Democrats—raising open questions about whether the logic of deracialization travels across racial groups and partisan contexts.

These key developments suggest that the core question is not whether deracialization is the best campaign strategy for candidates of color, but rather how these developments may change how we understand how candidates of color strategically navigate race when running for office in the current American political context. The sections that follow elaborate each of these points and develop a revised theoretical framework for understanding how candidates of color may leverage race in contemporary American campaigns.

Contemporary Racial Dynamics: Partisan Polarization and Changing Racial Norms

Over the past half century, race has become one of the most powerful organizing forces of partisan conflict in American politics. The modern alignment of racial groups and parties traces back to the civil rights era, when the Democratic Party's embrace of civil rights legislation

and the Republican Party's subsequent appeals to disaffected White voters reshaped the electoral landscape, particularly in the South (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Shafer and Johnston 2006). These developments initiated a broader process of partisan racial realignment in which White racially resentful voters increasingly sorted into the Republican Party, while racial and ethnic minority voters became core constituencies of the Democratic coalition (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tesler 2016; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019; Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022). Over time, race has become deeply intertwined with partisan identity itself, as racial attitudes and group-based considerations increasingly structure political preferences and party attachments (Mason 2018; Jardina 2019; Hopkins and Washington 2020; Engelhardt 2021; Schram and Fording 2021). Contemporary American politics thus reflects not only ideological polarization but also a form of racialized partisanship in which the parties represent distinct racial coalitions and advance competing narratives about race, inequality, and the role of government (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016).

That partisan polarization and sorting on the basis of race has influenced racial norms is evident in the fact that Americans seem more willing to embrace explicit racist messaging. The racial priming hypothesis advanced by Mendelberg (2001) argues that racial appeals are most effective when conveyed implicitly, as explicit racism risks triggering social norms and producing electoral backlash. Yet recent political developments raise questions about whether these constraints remain as strong as the theory predicts.

Donald Trump's successful presidential campaigns in 2016 and strong performance in 2020 occurred despite the frequent use of explicitly racialized and anti-immigrant rhetoric, suggesting that such messaging may no longer carry the same electoral penalties.Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek (2018) argue that the election of Barack Obama and the rise of Trump

may have contributed to a shift in the boundaries of acceptable racial messages in politics, although they caution that it is difficult to identify precisely when or why such a shift occurred. One possibility is that the underlying acceptance of racially resentful appeals among some White voters never actually declined, but instead remained obscured by social desirability pressures that discouraged both voters and candidates from openly expressing such views (Newman et. al 2020). In this sense, candidates who might otherwise have employed more explicit racial rhetoric may have refrained from doing so due to fears of reputational or electoral backlash. However, Trump's electoral success suggests that candidates who employ overtly racialized messaging are not necessarily punished in the contemporary electorate. Indeed, some scholars argue that Trump's rhetoric may have had an emboldening effect, increasing the willingness of voters—and potentially other political elites and candidates—to express racially resentful attitudes more openly (Crandall et al. 2018; Newman et al. 2020).

Simultaneously, however, as the Democratic Party increasingly positions itself as the party of racial liberalism, the electoral constraints that once discouraged explicit discussions of racial progress may have weakened (Arora 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). This shift has been in part driven by changes among White voters themselves; White Democrats have become substantially more racially liberal over time, adopting attitudes and policy preferences that are more supportive of racial equality and government intervention to address racial disparities (Hopkins and Washington 2020; Engelhardt 2021; Fording and Schram 2020). Recent scholarship further suggests that these attitudinal shifts have produced new forms of racial empathy among White liberals. For instance, Chudy (2019) finds that a non-trivial share of White Americans experience "racial sympathy," an affective response rooted in recognizing and lamenting Black disadvantage, which in turn increases support for policies framed around racial

inequality. These attitudinal changes may also influence electoral behavior. Consistent with this possibility, Stout (2020) finds that White Democrats can be mobilized by explicitly racialized Democratic candidates, and emerging evidence suggests that some White Democrats have become more willing to support Black candidates in Democratic primaries (Mikkelborg 2025). As a note, however, this existing literature has not examined whether this preference for Black Democratic candidates extends to other minority candidates of color.

Some scholars have questioned, however, whether white liberals have truly embraced racial progressivism (DeSante and Smith 2020). For example, even liberal whites seem to exhibit some degree of hesitancy to accept racial messaging that calls out white people for not doing enough to end racism (Stout 2015; Lienesch 2022), suggesting that the relationship between liberal whites and acceptance towards racially progressive messaging may be conditional. That is, despite aligning themselves with increasingly racially liberal beliefs, the readiness of these individuals to endorse or engage with statements that implicate their own group in systemic inequalities can be not well received by White liberal voters.

Even so, it is nonetheless impressive to observe that the way that we talk about race in national discourse has shifted considerably, and that white liberals are willing to be part of a coalition that embraces racial progressivism, however conditional that coalition may be. Smith and King (2024) outline this historical shift in their book, "*America's New Racial Battle Lines: Protect versus Repair*." Notably, they point out that the polarization of race on both sides has paved two paths forward—those who seek to "protect" the country by defending against racially progressive policies and ideologies, and those who seek to "repair" it by pursuing racial progress and reparations. They argue that major historical shifts, such as the election of Trump and the Black Lives Matter movement, have created new dynamics in racial politics. This divide presents

new racial and social norms, which in turn presents new opportunities for candidates who can effectively engage with the shifting landscape by explicitly engaging in racial messaging to appeal to either racially conservative or progressive constituencies.

Shifting Demographics, Shifting Contexts, and Shifting Racial Considerations

In tandem with the unprecedented party polarization on the basis of race and the embrace of explicit racial messaging, the demographics of the American electorate have also shifted. In the past, campaign messaging strategies have primarily been geared towards appealing to white voters. The fixation of strategic messaging with the presumption of the median voter as white and persuadable contributes to the neglect of the minority vote—whom whites/party elites may consider as securely captured and/or insignificant (Frymer 1999; Hajnal and Lee 2011) —and reinforces the power of whites in American politics. While white voters continue to play a dominant role in U.S. politics, there has been a significant rise in the number of eligible non-white voters.

With this demographic shift, we have also experienced a noticeable increase in the power of the minority electorate, especially among the Asian and Latino voters, who remain the fastest growing groups in the American electorate. While Asian and Latino voters have leaned towards a preference for Democratic candidates, they are not similarly historically electorally captured to the extent that Black voters are (Frymer 1999). Indeed, a large portion of Asian and Latino voters remain non-partisan; meaning that, unlike strong partisan identifiers, they may be more likely to be persuadable and mobilized by campaign messaging. With minority voters, but especially Asian and Latino voters, now positioned as crucial voters with the power to swing election outcomes (Wong et. al 2011; Barreto and Segura 2014) capturing their support is more important than ever – especially as neither major American political party has done a particularly

good job at reaching out to Asian or Latino voters in the past, which in part has contributed to the large proportions of non-partisan identifiers in these panethnic racial groups (Hajnal and Lee 2011).

Thus, shifting demographics and the increased influence of minority voters present both opportunities and challenges for candidates seeking to navigate the increasingly complex landscape of American electoral politics. On one hand, white candidates are seeking to potentially win over and capture these growing blocks of minority voters (Collingwood 2020). On the other hand, minority candidates are also navigating this complex racial and political landscape, in which they must consider potential trade-offs between appealing to white voters and mobilizing co-racials and other voters of color; all while simultaneously navigating potential disadvantages due to their racial status.

The Diversification of the Candidate Pool Across Race and Party

Lastly, the need to update the literature on racial campaign strategies stems from the diversification of the candidate pool itself. Although Black candidates have historically struggled to gain seats outside of majority-minority districts, Asian American and Latino candidates are increasingly finding electoral success in diverse and majority-white districts. Although some of the existing literature has explored the extent to why these Asian and Latino candidates seem to be able to win over voters outside of their racial/ethnic group (Collet 2008; Juenke and Sampaio 2010; Visalvanich 2017a; Lublin and Wright 2023), the extant literature has done little to explore how the role of their campaign messaging strategies has contributed to their electoral successes; and indeed, what unique barriers to elected office that these candidates may face that are different from the struggles of Black candidates.. Although Asian and Latino candidates are, like

Black candidates, racial/ethnic minorities, I argue that we should be careful to apply existing frameworks of racial messaging to these distinct racial groups.

In particular, I propose that there are differential incentives to prime racial considerations according to racial group positioning and subsequent stereotyping. In a majority of the campaign literature, Black candidates serve as the default case for understanding how racial attitudes against Blacks impacts their ability to talk about race (Hamilton 1977; McCormick and Jones 1993; Orey and Ricks 2007; Stout 2015). The pervasiveness of anti-Black attitudes in American society has resulted, rightfully, on much of the existing scholarship on race and campaigns assuming that highlighting race, but particularly Black racial identity or issues meant to serve the interests of Black voters, is inherently risky. Asians and Latinos, on the other hand, face different racialization compared to Blacks in America. These varied racialized associations shape whether racial identity or racial associations is seen as an electoral asset or liability.

2.4 It's Not Black and White! Variation in Racial Positioning and Stereotypes

To understand how Asian and Latino candidates fit in in terms of navigating their campaign messaging, we must understand how these groups fit into the American racial hierarchy. I present in Figure 2.1 Zou and Cheryan's (2017) racial position model, which visualizes how the four major racial groups are positioned within the racial hierarchy in the United States across two axes of subordination. The y-axis represents an inferior to superior dimension, whereas the x-axis represents a foreign to American dimension. In this model, Whites are seen as both superior and American; Blacks are seen as inferior but American; Asians are seen as superior, but foreign; and Latinos are seen as both inferior and foreign. These racial positions are maintained by, reinforced by, and feed into racial group-based stereotypes. For example, with Black communities being perceived as "inferior", Black candidates are then

associated with racial stereotypes of being less competent and less intelligent compared to their "superior" White counterparts (Huddy and Terkeldson 1993; Sigelman et. al 1995).

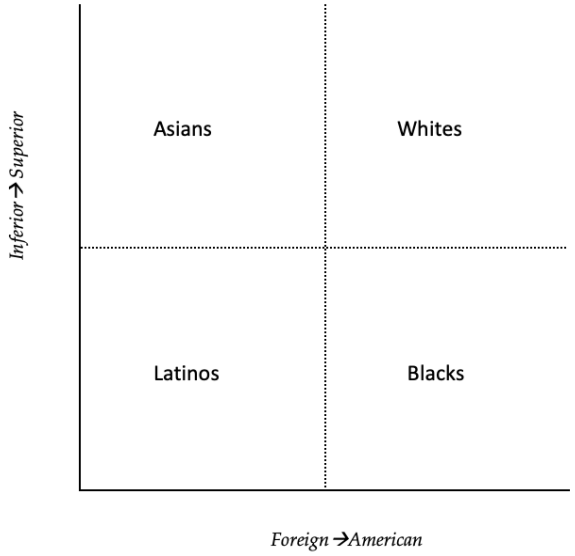


Figure 2.1 Two Axes of Subordination, Adapted from Zou and Cheryan (2017)

On the basis of this racial positioning and subsequent stereotyping, it is clear that Asian Americans and Latinos face different racialization compared to Black communities in the United States. These varied racialized associations may shape whether leveraging their racial identity or racial associations is seen as an electoral asset or liability. Latinos, for instance, share the "inferior" position with Black Americans, and this translates into trait-based political evaluations; Latino candidates, similar to Black candidates, are often perceived as less competent and intelligent compared to White candidates (Sigelman et. al 1995). However, the perceptions of foreignness add an additional layer to the potential for negative racial associations. For instance, Latino candidates may worry that emphasizing their Latino identity or associations with the Latino community will trigger backlash from voters who hold anti-immigration or xenophobic sentiments, especially given the group's strong association with immigration and perceived foreignness (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013). Asian Americans, who also occupy

the "foreign" axis alongside Latinos, may also be vulnerable to being negatively perceived by those who question their American-ness or view them to be a foreign threat (Lee and Hong 2020; Lee 2022)

On the other hand, Asian Americans simultaneously occupy the "superior" axis. "Not quite white, yet above all, not Black" (Kim 1999), Asian Americans are often perceived through the "model minority" stereotype, which may enhance perceptions of competence, intelligence, and work ethic (Visalvanich 2017b). Given that these traits are well-aligned with what voters value in political leadership, Asian American candidates occupy a unique space; instead of using campaign messaging to counter negative racial stereotypes, Asian American candidates may instead be incentivized to lean into these relatively valorized racial perceptions to their advantage. That is, instead of "running from race", they may choose to instead "run on race" – a stark contrast to their Latino and Black counterparts, for whom associations with race have been documented as negatively impacted their candidacies.

Yet this potential advantage may be offset by the simultaneous association of a "forever foreigner" stereotype, which positions Asians—and, similarly, Latinos—as outsiders regardless of generational status (Kim 1999; Zou and Cheryan 2017). For Latinos, this is compounded by associations with undocumented immigration, which can trigger anti-immigrant sentiment (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013). In both cases, racial/ethnic identity priming risks activating perceptions of foreignness; a racialization that Black Americans in general do not similarly contend with.

In addition to the increased diversity in terms of race, more and more candidates of color are increasingly running on Republican platforms. While non-white candidates have disproportionately run as Democrats, recent work documents a noticeable pipeline of non-white

Republican candidacies, along with the institutional and electoral constraints these candidates face within the GOP (Mundy 2025). At the same time, scholarship on minority Republicans emphasizes that race does not disappear or become irrelevant when candidates of color enter this racially conservative party; instead, it shapes how these candidates navigate skepticism from both co-ethnics and white co-partisans (Fields 2016).

This matters because the racial considerations facing Republicans of color are structurally different from those facing most Democratic candidates of color. On one hand, Republican candidates of color may be positioned (at least in principle) to persuade or mobilize co-racial and co-ethnic voters by serving as descriptive representatives or credible messengers; having the potential to pull minority voters towards the Republican Party. On the other hand, Republican candidates of color must win within a party whose mass base is overwhelmingly white, within a contemporary context where racial resentment is more tightly linked to Republican identification, creating incentives to manage stereotype-based expectations and to signal ideological and group-position compatibility to white co-partisans (Leslie, Stout and Tolbert 2019).

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Racial Identity as a Strategically Deployed Political Resource

As discussed in the previous section, recent developments (racial polarization, increased incentive to appeal to minority voters, and the diversification of the candidate pool) suggest that the traditional assumption that candidates of color must avoid race or treat race as a political liability limits viewing race as a potential asset for candidates of color. Rather than treating racial/ethnic minority status solely as a liability for candidates of color, candidates may be able to **s**trategically leverage their racial/ethnic identity and racialized perceptions as electoral assets;

especially when those racial associations convey trait-based or issue-based advantages. In this sense, racial/ethnic identities can serve not only as a constraint but also as a political resource that candidates can deploy strategically.

There are two strategic approaches to navigating race. I introduce these approaches not as rigid or mutually exclusive categories, but as analytic lenses that clarify the multiple ways racial identity can be deployed in campaigns. In practice, candidates may blend or move between these strategies, or these strategies may be interpreted differently; therefore in the following empirical chapters, I do little to distinguish between these categories. The purpose of this distinction is only to explore the ways in which racial/ethnic identities may be deployed and framed by candidates of color that do not abide by strict definition of a deracialized strategy.

The first is relatively more explored in the literature, and can be described as a *defensive, counter-stereotypical* strategy. Not to be confused for a deracialized strategy, these specific tactics still follow the assumption underlying deracialization that consider how a candidates' race may be a potential *disadvantage.* However, they differ in that they use racial messaging to counter the potential disadvantages. Given that even deracialized candidates cannot necessarily prevent the public from racializing them (Terkildsen 1996; Terkildsen and Damore 1999; Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; Tesler 2016), minority candidates may wish to take control of a racial narrative rather than allow their silence to project stereotypes onto them. In this context, candidates may prefer to shape the meaning of their identities rather than allow stereotypes to fill the gap. Such appeals may be especially useful for candidates seeking to reassure skeptical White voters. These narratives effectively communicate, "*Despite the fact that I am a racial minority…*" and attempt to manage uncertainty that might otherwise be attached to the candidate.

In this sense, if racialization is unavoidable, strategic racial messaging may be preferable to silence.

These defensive strategies have been represented in recent literature that has explored when minority candidates discuss race; this includes strategies such as racial distancing or "Black blame," in which candidates invoke negative stereotypes of co-racial groups to signal alignment with the racial status quo (Harris 2012; Price 2016; Stephens-Dougan 2020). Or, candidates may engage in "white washing," where minority candidates may emphasize their connections and similarities to whiteness (Hutchings et. al 2020). An example of this is exemplified by Obama highlighting his bi-racial identity. Other candidates may consider a multidimensional approach, such as "toggling" (Collet 2008) or "situational deracialization" (Franklin 2010) strategies, which switches their messaging depending on the audience.

Another defensive, but racialized strategy that minority candidates can use is "racial incoluation"; where candidates reframe the narrative to highlight their backgrounds in such a way that emphasizes that they have overcome stereotypes (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011; McIlwain 2013). They find some evidence that Whites liked minority candidates who emphasized their backgrounds of having overcome disadvantages as people of color. Mel Martinez, a Cuban American elected to the US Senate in 2004, told a story of "growing up as a racial minority in a foster family but working hard to pull himself up" (p. 174). However, a key aspect of this racial inoculation strategy contends that minority candidates emphasizing their racial background must tell a story that is *counter-stereotypical.*

Counter-stereotypical racial messaging can be deployed by candidates of color across the political spectrum (Stephens-Dougan 2020). However, because the parties have increasingly sorted along racial ideological lines, Republican electorates tend to include a higher

concentration of racially resentful voters. This creates a strategic incentive for Republican candidates of color to use counter-stereotypical racial messaging, especially when running in Republican primary elections. Although white conservatives do not appear to systematically penalize co-partisan candidates of color, and may even support them at rates comparable to or higher than white candidates (Hood and McKee 2015), there is evidence that these candidates can particularly benefit from adopting racially conservative or counter-stereotypical messages.

For example, Leslie, Stout, and Tolbert (2019) show that white voters, particularly white Republicans, prefer racialized Black conservatives over deracialized Black conservatives. They interpret this pattern through expectancy-violation dynamics: when Black candidates espouse conservative racial positions, their messages are perceived as especially credible precisely because they defy stereotypical expectations Related work similarly demonstrates that racially resentful voters are not uniformly averse to Black candidates when partisan and ideological cues signal in-group alignment (Karpowitz et al. 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest that Republican candidates of color may face weaker incentives to deracialize than classic theories imply. Instead, they may be able to frame racial messaging strategically—both by signaling credibility to co-ethnic voters and by receiving affirmative responses from white Republicans when adopting coalition-consistent or counter-stereotypical racial positions (Hood and McKee 2015; Leslie, Stout, and Tolbert 2019; Karpowitz et al. 2021).

Once again, all of these listed strategies, I argue, cannot be labeled as a "deracialized" strategy. Rather, each of these tactics is a distinct racial strategy that can be beneficial for candidates of color. However, there are other ways in which racial messaging can be deployed that are not necessarily counter-stereotypical. That is, the way in which a candidate may be able to "run on race" is affirmative: candidates may use racial identity and minoritized status as

political assets. Rather than merely managing bias, they can present identity as evidence of political qualification, lived knowledge, and representational value. These narratives communicate "*Because I am a racial or ethnic minority…*". This logic aligns with Wright's (2022) findings that candidates use "experiential" racial narratives to show how racialized experiences shape their political commitments, justify their leadership credentials, and ground their policy priorities.

One way using racial/ethnic identity in campaign messaging may be advantageous is simply by activating favorable trait-based perceptions. However, the differential racialization of racial/ethnic minorities means this avenue may be more or less accessible, depending on the candidates' race. For some minority candidates, racial trait-based stereotypes may be particularly advantageous. For example, Asian American candidates may be especially well positioned to benefit from relatively valorized stereotypes that associate Asians with intelligence, diligence, or technical competence. In such cases, presenting oneself as Asian American may do more than signal descriptive representation; it may also prime voters to attach positively valued traits to the candidate.

Even if a candidates' racial/ethnic identity does not automatically confer advantageous trait-based perceptions, it can be framed in such a way to do so (Chong and Druckman 2009). For example, although Asian Americans and Latinos struggle with perceptions of foreignness, this association can also open doors to be framed in an advantageous manner. Because Asian Americans and Latinos are persistently racialized through immigration, they may be able to frame this association through an immigrant success narrative that mitigates any potential damaging effects that priming race or ethnic identity might have. Narratives emphasizing assimilation, hard work, patriotism, and the American Dream (what Hainmueller and Hopkins

(2015) describe as the qualities of an "ideal" immigrant) can counter stereotypes of foreignness and resonate positively with voters across party lines. In this way, pairing racial or ethnic identity with immigrant narratives may transform potential liabilities into compelling credentials.

Racial/ethnic identity may also provide issue-based advantages when a candidate's background appears congruent with a particular policy domain. By framing an issue in connection to their racial or ethnic identity, candidates may strengthen perceptions that they possess distinctive knowledge, credibility, or lived experience on that issue. When voters see a candidate's identity and issue profile as naturally aligned, they may be more likely to view that candidate as authentically connected to the issue and therefore especially qualified to address it (Arbour 2014). In this sense, framing an issue in a way where a candidates' race or ethnicity provides additional credentials on the issue, making their connection to the issue appear both natural and credible.

Beyond activating advantageous trait-based or issue-based advantages, these explicit affirmative usages of racial/ethnic identity may also help mobilize co-racial and co-ethnic voters. Existing research shows that descriptive representation can increase political engagement among voters of color by activating feelings of empowerment, linked fate, and the belief that the candidate will advance group interests (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 2003; Barreto 2010). But these effects may not arise automatically. A co-racial candidate who remains silent on race, or who distances themselves from identity, may fail to generate the trust or shared sense of purpose that underlies mobilization (Stout 2020; Wamble and Clemons 2026). Descriptive presence alone, then, may not be enough; candidates may need to actively signal that they are "one of them" (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011) Priming racial/ethnic identity through descriptive presentation or experiential racial rhetoric may therefore strengthen perceptions of commonality,

especially among voters whose racial group consciousness or linked fate is not already high. These appeals may be particularly effective in contexts where race is already politically salient (Valenzuela and Michelson 2016; Stout 2020).

Finally, explicit references to race/ethnic identity may also help candidates build support beyond their own racial group. In diverse constituencies, candidates often need to assemble broad, multiracial coalitions. Yet shared minority status does not automatically produce solidarity across racial minority groups. Research in political psychology suggests, however, that cross-racial commonality can emerge when experiences of marginalization are made salient. Pérez (2021), for example, finds that priming racial subordination can increase perceptions of shared fate even across different racial groups. Candidates can therefore use identity-based messaging not only to mobilize their own group, but also to appeal across groups by emphasizing shared experiences of exclusion, struggle, or discrimination. Moreover, explicitly drawing on racial identity may make such appeals seem more authentic, helping candidates avoid the perception of "cheap talk" that can undermine similar messages when delivered by White candidates (Collingwood 2020).

However, the costs and incentives to attempt to activate minority and cross-racial minority support is likely uneven based on the candidates' race. In the case of Black candidates, the potential costs of priming racial/ethnic identity are compounded by the fact that there may be relatively little to gain in return. Black voters often assume descriptive representation from co-racial candidates, inferring shared group interests or ideological alignment without needing explicit racial cues (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994; White and Laird 2020). This creates a "ceiling effect": because identity already signals certain commitments, and because Black voters are a reliably loyal base for Black Democrats, overt racial self-presentation may have limited strategic

payoff. Moreover, when running in diverse districts, Black candidates may not gain additional support from other minority groups. For instance, while Black voters respond positively to co-minority cues from Latino candidates, Latino voters do not show the same receptivity to Black candidates invoking cross-minority appeals (Adida, Davenport, and McClendon 2016).

For Asian and Latino candidates, the calculus looks different. Linked fate can shape political behavior among these groups, but it is less consistent and often requires activation (Junn and Masuoka 2008; Sanchez, Masuoka, and Abrams 2019). The relative unreliability of co-racial and co-ethnic mobilization (Valenzuela and Michelson 2016; Chong 2019; Leung 2021) creates stronger incentives for Asian and Latino candidates to explicitly reference identity in order to activate solidarity among a less predictable base. For example, tying racial/ethnic identities with immigrant identity provides an opportunity for broader connection and mobilization outside of one's racial or ethnic group. Panethnic labels like "Asian" or "Latino" encompass multiple subgroups, but appeals to immigrant experience may unify across them. Schildkraut (2013), for instance, finds that Latino immigrants often evaluate political representation through shared immigrant identity rather than subgroup membership. In this way, immigrant narratives not only mobilize co-ethnics but also offer cross-racial coalition potential among voters with diverse migration stories.

Lastly, as relative newcomers to U.S. electoral politics with less entrenched representation compared to Black candidates, Asian and Latino candidates may feel a need to clarify what their racial identity means politically: what will it mean to elect an Asian or Latino representative? Offering such racial clarification can reduce voter uncertainty and improve candidate evaluations (Glasgow and Alvarez 2000; McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger 2003).

2.6 Conclusion

The existing literature on race and political campaigns has largely approached race as a liability that candidates of color must carefully manage. The dominant expectation has been that minority candidates must deracialize their campaigns to remain electorally competitive, particularly in majority-white electorates. Yet the contemporary political context—characterized by partisan racial polarization, evolving racial norms, and a diversifying electorate—suggests that this assumption may no longer fully capture the strategic incentives facing candidates of color. This dissertation therefore proposes a revised framework that considers both that race/ethnic identity can be utilized in campaign messaging, but that the incentives and constraints of using race as a campaign tool, and how it is framed, is conditional upon the race and party of the candidate.

The chapters that follow first aim to use real-world campaign messaging behavior to examine whether and how racial/ethnic identity is being used as a campaign tool, and to whether the usage of race/ethnic identity varies across candidate race and party. In examining real-world campaign behavior, these chapters broaden our perspective on the role of race in shaping the strategies of contemporary candidates. Rather than treating race as a constraint that candidates must avoid, this dissertation demonstrates how candidates can strategically deploy racial/ethnic identities as a political resource, reshaping our understanding of racial representation and campaign strategy in modern American elections.

3 E-Racing Identity or Descriptive Presentation?

3.1 Introduction

In 2024, then-California State Senator Dave Min ran in one of the most competitive congressional races in the country: California's 47th Congressional District. A historically Republican stronghold that had only previously been flipped by Democrat Katie Porter, Porter's decision to seek the gubernatorial seat left the 47th House seat with no incumbent. The district drew fierce competition in a crowded primary, one where all competitors knew that this particular district would be consequential in determining the majority party in control of the 119th Congress. Besides its role in determining partisan control of the House, CA–47 is unique in that it embodies the changing demographics of American politics. Although still a majority-white district, Asians and Latinos, who are the fastest growing racial minority blocs in the country, make up over 40% of the district population. In a district where every vote counts, candidates must present themselves in a way that is attractive to a broad coalition of voters.

For non-White Democratic candidates such as Min, CA–47 exemplifies the type of election context where candidates may be particularly advised to employ a "deracialized" campaign strategy – a strategy that considers that the minority racial status of the candidate may negatively affect a candidate of color's ability to garner broad support amongst voters (Hamilton 1977; McCormick and Jones 1993; Orey and Ricks 2006; Stout 2015). Aside from avoiding racial policy advocacy, the deeper assumption underlying the theory of deracialization is the idea that white voters will not support a candidate of color who does not deemphasize their racial identity (Stephens-Dougan 2021).

And yet, Min did not necessarily "deracialize". Instead, Min made his Korean American immigrant story a central pillar of his campaign image. On his official campaign website, he wrote: "I'm running for Congress because, as a first-generation Korean American, I want my kids to grow up in the same California that attracted my parents and so many immigrants like them to come plant roots here….their story – which is like that of so many Orange County families – is a constant inspiration to me, especially with the American Dream under attack". In this biographical account, rather than minimizing race, Min centers it: using his identity as a Korean-American child of immigrants as a key foundation of his character and political motivations.

Min's candidate presentation serves in stark contrast to another, similarly competitive campaign discussed earlier: in 2024 in Oregon's 5th Congressional District. Janelle Bynum, a Black woman running in the 5th districts' Democratic primary, chose to avoid race in how she presented herself as a political candidate. Bynum's campaign biography showed that while she did explicitly "run as a woman" – that is, highlighting her identity as a mother, a daughter, and her commitment to education – she omitted any references to race. It could be the case that, as a Black woman, she did not feel the need to explicitly mention race, given that she would be perceived as Black regardless of whether she highlighted it or not. Perhaps this choice can be attributed to district racial composition: unlike CA–47, the district is 79% White. Thus, even with a 10% Latino population, Bynum had to consider that she could not win the district without winning over white voters; therefore incentivizing her to avoid race in her campaign messaging.

While we cannot directly ascertain the reasoning behind each candidates' self-presentation strategy in regard to race, the difference between Bynum and Min nonetheless invites a reevaluation of the necessity of a deracialized campaign, given that both went on to win

their respective primaries, and both won their House seat in the general election. To be sure, we cannot solely attribute these electoral outcomes to campaign messaging alone. However, Min's victory alludes to the case that he did not face electoral-changing backlash by "playing the race card" or using "identity politics"; at least when it comes to using race as a means to strategically present himself as a candidate.

This chapter advances the study of campaign messaging and deracialization theory in two ways. First, it broadens the definition of a "racialized campaign" beyond policy advocacy to include self-presentation strategies. The area of candidates self-presentation allows us to more clearly see how candidates incorporate, or do not incorporate, their racial/ethnic identities and experiences in their campaign messaging. I ask: when do and which candidates highlight their racial/ethnic identity in their campaign presentation? Are candidates "deracializing" their campaign self-presentation, or deploying their racial/ethnic identities and narratives as part of their campaign image? Second, it incorporates analysis of Asian and Latino candidates alongside Black and White candidates, showing how these non-Black minority candidates make choices in their campaign presentation strategy regarding race.

To explore how candidates leverage racial identity in their campaigns, I leverage an original dataset of all primary candidates running on a major party platform for the U.S. House of Representatives. (N=1,603), and pull all biographical text from each candidates' official campaign websites. Through a content analysis of the campaign biographies of Black, White, Asian and Latino congressional candidates running for the House of Representatives in 2024, I identify which candidates use their racial or ethnic identities or experiences in constructing their campaign persona, and how they do so. Through this analysis of real-world campaign behavior, I show that candidates are not universally deracializing their campaign image, and show that the

employment of racial identity narratives are strategically varied across race, party, and district context, offering insight into how candidates navigate racial messaging in an era of diversity and polarization.

3.2 The Role of the Candidate and Campaign Self-Presentation

While early political science scholarship stressed the importance of issue-based appeals (Downs 1957; Key 1966; Weisberg and Rusk 1970; Fiorina 1981), decades of research show that most Americans are not consistently attentive to issues or policies (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Instead, voters rely heavily on heuristics—most notably partisanship—to guide their choices (Campbell et al. 1960; Dancey and Sheagley 2013). This reliance on partisan cues has only deepened with the heightened polarization of American politics, where voters increasingly behave in lockstep with their party and are less likely to split their tickets (Hopkins 2017). In addition, party realignment and geographic sorting have produced more "safe" seats and fewer swing districts, creating an electoral landscape in which the decisive contest often occurs in the primary rather than the general election (Jacobson 2004; Boatright 2013).

Consequently, candidates matter most in primaries, where party labels offer less differentiation (Wattenberg 1999). When partisan cues are weak or unavailable (e.g., nonpartisan elections, closed primaries), voters turn to other signals. As Fenno (1978) argues, candidates cultivate a presentation of self that is vital to building and maintaining a connection to voters, and impart the impression of the candidates' qualifications to lead. One way candidates can do this is through visual presentation, choosing specific stylistic presentations and images to attempt to connect with voters and establish leadership quality (Rosenberg and McAfferty 1987). However, candidate presentation is not only visual; it is also how they create a narrative that tells voters who they are, what they stand for, and why they are the best candidate for the job. In these

narratives, candidates can strategically choose what attributes or stories they would like to highlight, downplay, or omit in order to portray the best candidate image and win over voters (Arbour 2014).

While we would assume that all rational candidates engage in strategic *impression management*—that is, the effort to control how they are perceived by voters (Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990)—this process is more involved for candidates with minoritized identities. Those who do not fit the dominant prototype of political leadership must navigate not only general campaign image construction but also the added burden of managing identities that may be electorally disadvantageous. In other words, minority candidates face more impressions to manage, as they must carefully consider how their identities may be perceived by voters.

For instance, research on women in politics shows that female candidates often contend with gendered stereotypes that associate femininity with emotionality or passivity—traits that conflict with dominant expectations of leadership (McDermott 1988; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Dolan 2010; Schneider and Bos 2014). As a result, they must make strategic choices about how to present themselves in ways that neutralize or overcome these biases that male candidates do not need to similarly consider. The robust literature on women candidates outlines distinct campaign strategies that considers how gender factors into the evaluations of their candidacy (Winfrey and Schnoebelen 2019).

One way that women candidates may choose to navigate the potential for gender bias is to avoid gender associations completely (Bystrom 2004). For example, Stalsburg and Kleinberg (2016) find that women candidates are less likely than male candidates to showcase their children or families. Alternatively, instead of avoiding gender completely, they may wish to employ it in such a way that actively emphasizes counter-stereotypical, "masculine" traits (Bauer

2017). Still others may "run as a woman" – that is, center their identity as a woman not as a liability, but as a central reason for why they are suited to lead (Niven & Zilber 2001). This approach demonstrates the possibility of turning a visible heuristic into an asset rather than working against it, leveraging gendered expectations to enhance credibility and trust (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003). The choice of which strategy to employ is rarely uniform; it depends heavily on the candidate and their campaign context. What works for one candidate may not work for another, making it difficult to identify a single "best" approach. Still, these varied strategies highlight an important insight: because visible heuristics like race and gender are difficult to erase, candidates may at times benefit from incorporating them into their self-presentation rather than attempting to minimize them.

Similar to women candidates, candidates of color must run their campaigns with the awareness that their race may shape how voters evaluate them. In applying a similar framework, candidates of color may choose to "run on race": that is, utilizing their racial or ethnic identities or experiences rather than avoiding it. When it comes to race, however, the literature has tended to frame identity not as a potential asset but primarily as a liability. The dominant emphasis has been on *deracialization*—the strategy by which candidates of color avoid or downplay racial identity in order to appeal to broader, often majority-white electorates (Hamilton 1977; Perry 1991; McCormick and Jones 1993; Johnson 2017).

That candidates of color, especially Black candidates, are aware that their presentation matters is apparent in their campaign behavior. In one of the first studies to analyze the messaging of candidates of color in their political advertisements, McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) find that Black candidates spend a majority of advertisement messaging focusing on their self-presentation rather than advertising their policy positions; suggesting that racial minorities run

under the "guiding assumption that minimizing White voters' racial thinking is either not possible or not enough to persuade them to vote for them" (p. 39). It is clear that candidates of color engage in racialized impression management self-presentation strategies, determining if, when, and how they will avoid or highlight their racial identities in their bid for office.

3.3 Empirical Expectations

As I have outlined in my theoretical framework, the decision to emphasize racial identity can be advantageous, but the risks and incentives vary by a candidate's race, party, and electoral context. Although I cannot observe candidates' internal cost–benefit calculations directly, a strategic-candidate assumption implies that campaign rhetoric reveals perceived constraints and opportunities. Accordingly, whether and how candidates highlight racial identity provides observable evidence of how candidates assess the political risks and payoffs of invoking race.

My primary expectation is that the race of the candidate shapes the costs and incentives of emphasizing identity, producing systematic variation across groups. Specifically, I expect Asian and Latino candidates to be more likely than Black and White candidates to highlight their racial/ethnic identity. I expect this because Asian and Latino candidates may feel more likely to need to explain their candidacies as relative racial newcomers; and they are more able to frame their racial/ethnic identities in politically advantageous ways, compared to Black candidates. Although White candidates are not the focus of this study, I anticipate they will be far less likely to foreground racial or ethnic identity. As the historically dominant group in American politics, White candidates face little pressure to manage racial impressions or to defend their candidacies on the basis of identity, unlike their minority counterparts.

However, the calculus can change when candidates face the potential to mobilize voters of color, and thus racial context is an important consideration for candidates who invoke racial

identity appeals. Classic deracialization theory suggests that candidates should be cautious about priming race in majority-white districts, where doing so risks activating negative racial attitudes. If all racial groups view racialized self-presentation as risky, we would expect candidates to downplay racial identity in such contexts. By contrast, if references to identity are seen as safe or even advantageous, district racial and partisan composition should have little bearing on whether candidates emphasize it. Because priming Black identity is most strongly associated with the activation of negative attitudes (and because White candidates in majority-white districts have little incentive to mobilize voters of color) I expect racial context to shape the campaigns of Black and White candidates more than those of Asian and Latino candidates, whose racial/ethnic presentations may be perceived as less likely to trigger backlash or perhaps be well-received from White voters.

Lastly, both Democratic and Republican candidates of color are incentivized to present themselves with their racial/ethnic identities, even if the motivations and framing of that identity differs. For Democratic candidates of color, the incentive may be to use their racial identity to highlight shared racial experiences to mobilize voters of color and racially liberal white voters. For Republican candidates of color, despite being on a party platform that rejects identity politics, racial identity and experiences may be used defensively to present a counter-stereotypical image and reassure white Republican voters. Therefore, I expect that while Republican candidates of color may be slightly less likely than their Democratic counterparts to engage in "identity politics" in their campaign self presentation, I expect that the primary variation will not be whether they center identity in their campaigns, but rather how they do it.

3.4 Methods

I draw on an original dataset of all candidates who ran in the 2024 primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. Using Ballotpedia.com, I compiled the names, party affiliations, and incumbency statuses of every candidate in each congressional district. I restrict the dataset to candidates running on a major party platform as Democrats or Republicans.

Primary elections are a particularly useful context for analyzing candidate messaging because voters within the same party must choose between multiple co-partisans. Without cross-party competition, partisanship alone is not as useful as a cue, and therefore candidates must distinguish themselves from their intra-party opponents. This creates a strategic environment where self-presentation and identity cues, such as race, gender, or personal background, may play a larger role in voter evaluation (McDonald, Porter and Treul 2020). When candidates are vying for the support of co-partisans who share similar policy preferences, self-presentation becomes an increasingly important tool for candidates to differentiate themselves.

Coding candidate race is difficult due to the fact that candidates do not have to disclose racial or ethnic information when filing to run for office. Thus, I utilize established processes in political science research to attempt to ascertain the race/ethnicity of each candidate (Dyogi Phillips 2022; Porter 2025) I first considered any racial self-reports via official biographical information. In the case that this was not available, I relied on candidates' affiliations with race-based organizations (i.e., Hispanic Business Association, Asian Pacific American Caucus), candidate names, endorsements from ethnic or racial organizations, social media/news reports, and, as a very last resort, official pictures of the candidate.[1] Through this process, I end up with a

[1] I code candidates as White, Black, Asian, Latino, Other, or Multiracial. For multiracial candidates, I create a primary race variable to be either White, Black, Asian or Latino. I filtered out those labeled as "Other", who I cannot account for in my current theoretical framework.

total of 1,112 Whites, 100 Asians, 234 Blacks, and 157 Latinos, yielding a total sample of 1,603 candidates. To be sure, there were other non-White candidates who did not fit these four categories, such as Native American or MENA candidates. However, the current projects' theoretical framework and sample size leads to only being able to analyze these four racial groups.

In addition to race, I also consider other candidate attributes, such as gender. While it might seem intuitive that candidates with multiple marginalized identities face a "double disadvantage" based on both race and gender (Gay and Tate 1998), experimental evidence offers mixed conclusions of whether this is the case (Bejarano 2013; Gershon and Monforti 2021; Greene, Matos and Sanbonmatsu 2022). Women of color already elected into office are more likely than their race-only or gender-only counterparts to incorporate their intersectional identities and experiences in how they present themselves as representatives (Brown and Gershon 2016; Wright 2022). I expect to observe similar behavior for women of color candidates. I used a similar process to code for candidate race and apply it to candidate gender. Using biographical information first, candidates were coded as a woman if they explicitly stated their status as a woman or used pronouns in reference to themselves that are associated with women. I cross-checked gender coding with the Center for American Women and Politics database.

I also consider the vast literature that suggests that the campaign behaviors of incumbents are different from that of challengers (Jacobson 1987; Jacobson 2015). Incumbents enjoy a relatively safe status, and therefore typically have less incentive to engage in risk-taking campaign behavior, unless the competitor poses a real challenge (Druckman et. al 2009). On the other hand, research has shown that challengers who perceive a potential disadvantage in

qualifications or experience may make up for that lack of experience by using identity-based narratives, essentially replacing political experience with personal experience. Therefore, we may see that challengers are more likely than incumbents to use identity-based presentation styles and narratives (McDonald, Porter and Treul 2020).

To allow examination of the role of campaign context, I appended the candidate-level dataset with district-level Census data of racial demographics. To account for the role of competition, I identified whether the congressional seat was open, where no incumbent ran. In races with no incumbent advantage, we should expect that challengers are more incentivized to actively campaign (Druckman et. al 2009).The type of primary election may also shape candidate strategy (Hirano et. al 2010). In closed primaries, candidates are appealing only to registered partisans, whereas in non-closed primaries they must also consider independents and, in some cases, voters from the opposite party. To account for this, I code each primary as either closed or non-closed. Lastly, although the analysis focuses on primary elections, I include Cook's PVI to account for the broader strategic environment. Even in closed primaries, candidates may anticipate how they will perform in the general election and consider how they will be perceived by voters outside their party.

Campaign Websites as Data

To assess how candidates present themselves in terms of their racial or ethnic identities, I analyze the official campaign biography pages featured on each congressional candidate's website. Druckmann et. al (2009) is among the first to highlight the benefits of campaign websites as important sources of political communications data, and uses campaign websites to determine whether or not incumbents and challengers behave differently in their campaigns. Candidate websites are a good way of figuring out what kinds of messages and appeals are being

made by candidates because they meet three important criteria: they are mostly 1) unmediated (i.e., straight from the candidate or campaign itself), 2) complete (covering a full range of rhetorical strategies) and 3) representative of the population of campaigns (Druckman et. al 2009). Campaign websites have been used widely as data in the study of political communications to examine the behavior of political elites (Niven and Zilber 2001; Brown and Gershon 2016; Porter, Treul and McDonald 2018; McDonald et. al 2024). This accumulation of research shows how rich of a tool websites can be to pull information about the variation that exists in candidate messaging strategies.

After constructing the candidate-level dataset, I worked with a team of undergraduate researchers to compile and archive the official campaign websites for each 2024 congressional candidate. Specifically, I directed the team to specifically collect links to the candidates' campaign biography pages. One of the benefits of using the biographical page to analyze self-presentation styles is that it is the most consistently available section across campaign websites: nearly every candidate with an official campaign website — approximately 85% of the full candidate pool — included a biography page or section on their website, allowing me to maintain consistency in my unit of analysis. To extract text from campaign websites, I used the R package RTextTools to scrape all textual content from the biography pages approximately two weeks prior to each election. After scraping the text from each webpage, I manually reviewed and cleaned the text to verify that all substantive content had been captured accurately. The final cleaned text from each candidate's biography page was then appended to the dataset for analysis.

While keyword search lists have been used in the Black politics literature to identify appeals to Black communities (Gillion 2016; Haines, Mendelberg and Butler 2019; McDonald, Porter and Treul 2020; Garcia, Stout and Tate 2026), capturing the extent to which candidates

speak about non-Black racial/ethnic groups is more difficult. Vishwanath's (2025) study examining the newsletters of White legislators is the only study so far to do so, and this study provided me with a general template for my keyword search. I first start with a list composed of racial/ethnic labels (such as "Asian", "AAPI", "Latino", "Latina", "Hispanic", etc.), Asian and Latino ethnicities ("Vietnamese, "Chinese, "Puerto Rican", "El Salvadorian", etc.). This is in addition to a more general racial keyword list, such as "African American", "Black", "of color", "minority", "racial", and "racism". I also included ethnic labels for Whites ("Irish", "Italian", "Jewish", "Polish", etc.).

With this base of keywords, I then approached the coding process by closely reading the biographies of all candidates of color in my dataset, along with a random sample of 200 White candidates for comparison. Through this careful case-by-case reading, I added words to the list of racial and ethnic keywords that occurred multiple times throughout these sample cases that were not yet on the base keyword list. For example, through this process, I added organizations such as the NAACP and historically Black fraternities and sororities to the keyword list. In addition, I uncovered that a majority of the Latino and Asian candidates incorporated immigration narratives alongside ethnic or racial identity mentions. Thus, I added words such as "immigrant", "immigrated", etc. to identify those candidates who used immigrant narratives in their self-presentations.[2]

Using this keyword list,[3] I initially coded candidates as 1 if their biographies contained one or more of these words, and 0 if not, creating a measure that indicates whether their racial or

[2] I also created two additional disaggregated binary measures that separately consider racial/ethnic identity and immigrant identity in order to be able to disaggregate my analysis to look at these separately. I present analysis with disaggregated identity measurements in Appendix A, Table A2.
[3] The full list of keywords used for coding racial/ethnic identity messaging is included in Appendix A, Table A3.

ethnic background was emphasized. After automated keyword matching, I validated each matched biography by systematically checking the context of the matched keyword. If the keyword did not pertain to race (for example, if "Black" was matched to "Black belt"), they were recoded. For candidates biographies' where no keywords matched, I went through manually and coded whether they explicitly acknowledge race or ethnicity. Therefore, I end up with a dichotomous dependent variable that indicates whether a candidate explicitly references their own or their family's racial or ethnic identity.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Patterns of Racial/Ethnic Identity Presentation

I first examine patterns of racial identity presentation to determine which candidates across race discuss their racial/ethnic identities in their campaign biographies. Figure 3.1 displays the share of candidates in each racial group who mention their racial or ethnic background in their biographies. Racial/ethnic identity presentation varies sharply by race: only 5.2% of White candidates do so, compared to 38.7% of Black candidates and majorities of Asian and Latino candidates. A chi-squared test confirms significant overall differences ($p < .05$). Pairwise tests (Appendix A Table A1) show that White candidates are significantly less likely than all non-White groups to reference identity ($p < .001$). Among candidates of color, Black candidates are less likely than both Asian and Latino candidates to talk about their race/ethnicity ($p < .001$), though Asian and Latino rates are statistically indistinguishable ($p = 1.00$). This similarity should be interpreted with caution, as the number of Asian and Latino candidates for the House (though reflecting another historically diverse year) remains relatively small compared to the larger pools of White and Black candidates.

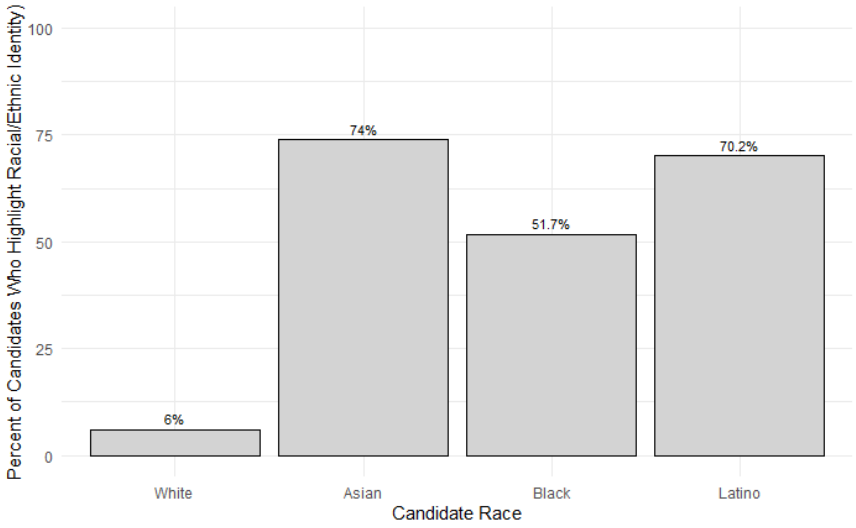


Figure 3.1: Percent of Candidates Who Highlight Racial/Ethnic Identity by Racial Group

While the breakdown by candidate race reveals important variation, I theorized that these patterns also depend on the electoral environments in which candidates run. To begin to parse out these relationships, I visualize whether this relationship holds across racial groups by examining variation in identity presentation by candidate race and district racial composition, shown in Figure 3.2 below.

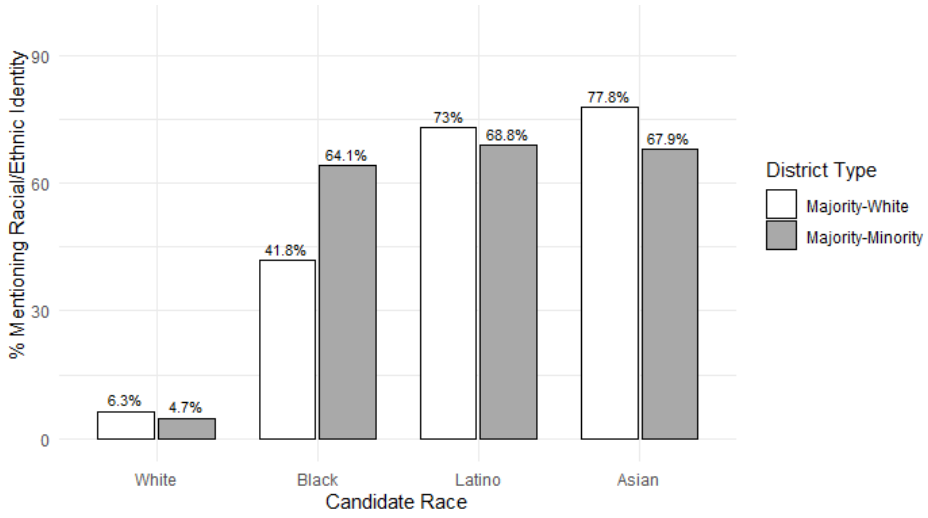


Figure 3.2: Racial/Ethnic Identity Presentation by District Racial Composition

Consistent with expectations of a deracialized strategy, Black candidates appear to use racialized presentation less in majority-White districts than when they run in majority-minority

districts. For Asian and Latino candidates, however, the association runs in the opposite direction. The pattern is theoretically informative in such that there seem to be differential relationships across race between key variables and how candidates present themselves in regards to race. These dynamics suggest that, unlike Black candidates, Asian and Latino candidates may not perceive racial or ethnic identity emphasis outside majority-minority districts as inherently risky, supporting the broader claim that the perceived costs of "playing the race card" vary across minority groups.

While these comparisons provide a useful first look at who uses racialized self presentations and when, they cannot rule out the possibility that other factors are driving these observed differences. To address this, I estimate a logistic model that incorporates this measure alongside controls for competitiveness, partisanship, incumbency, gender, and seat status, in order to assess whether racial differences in identity self-presentation persist once candidate- and district-level characteristics are taken into account.

3.5.2 Predictors of Racialized Self-Presentation

To better answer the question of what determines who and when candidates use racialized self-presentation messaging, Figure 3.3 presents predicted probabilities of identity self-presentation by candidate race, holding other factors constant. The full model is available in Appendix A Table A2. Even after adjusting for gender, partisanship, incumbency, partisan competition (Cook's PVI), seat status, district racial composition (measured as % White), and primary type, racial differences remain pronounced. Using Black candidates as the baseline comparison group, both Asian and Latino candidates are significantly more likely than either Black or White candidates to highlight their racial or ethnic identities. These results suggest that the observed racial patterns are not simply artifacts of other candidate- or district-level

characteristics, but reflect meaningful differences in how candidates across racial groups present themselves.

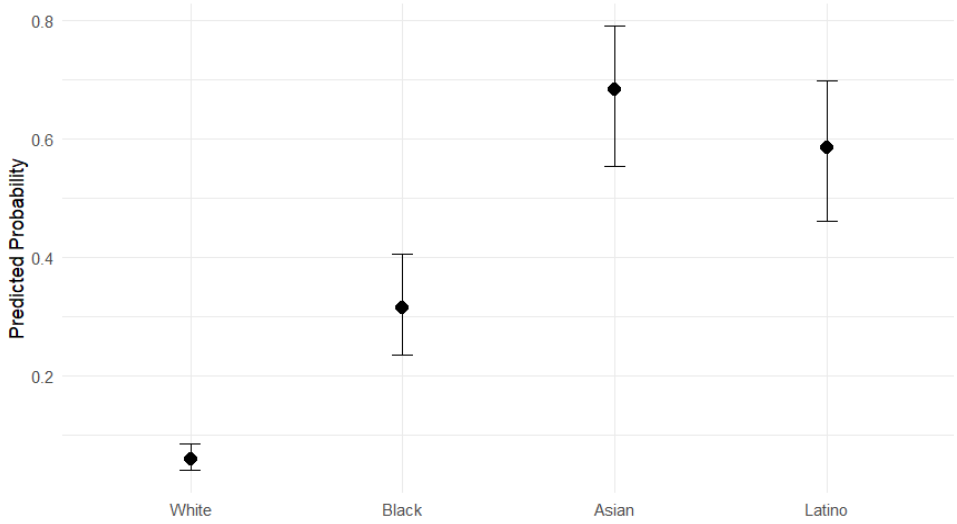


Figure 3.3: Predicted Probability of Racial/Ethnic Identity Presentation by Racial Group

In fact, one of the most striking findings from the model is that once candidate- and district-level factors are taken into account, race itself remains the strongest and most consistent predictor of racial/ethnic identity self-presentation. Beyond race, only the partisan composition of the district and candidate gender achieve positive statistical significance. That is, candidates running in more Democratic-leaning districts were more likely to deploy their racial identities than candidates running in Republican-leaning districts. Women are also significantly more likely to highlight their racial identity than men, a finding that aligns with scholarship suggesting women of color often acknowledge multiple marginalized identities in their campaigns (Brown and Gershon 2016; Wright 2022).

The significant relationship with district partisan composition underscores the importance of partisan dynamics in campaign messaging strategies. One interpretation is that partisan polarization has reshaped the calculus of racialized self-presentation; Democratic districts create an environment where candidates of color may feel freer to express diverse identities without

fear of backlash. By contrast, in Republican-leaning districts, candidates of color may perceive greater risks to emphasizing race and therefore avoid doing so. In this sense, partisan context, rather than racial context alone, helps structure whether racial/ethnic identity presentation is seen as safe or advantageous.

Importantly, however, the model also shows that while district partisan context predicts the likelihood of racial/ethnic identity presentation, candidate partisan affiliation does not. In other words, being a Republican or Democrat does not determine whether a candidate highlights their racial or ethnic identities. To emphasize this point, I illustrate the relationship of race and party on racialized self-presentation in Figure 3.4.

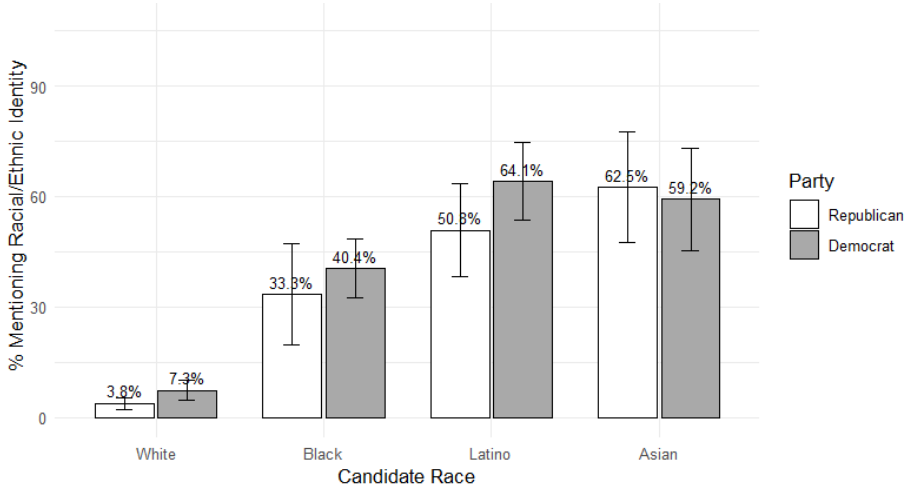


Figure 3.4: Percent of Candidates Who Highlight Racial/Ethnic Identity by Candidate Race and Party

That there is seemingly no significant relationship between candidate's party affiliation and racial/ethnic identity self-presentations is somewhat surprising given that Democratic platforms are often associated with "identity politics" while Republican platforms explicitly reject them. The explanation, I argue, lies in the competing incentives that candidates face within each party, which can offset one another. Democrats may feel pressure to downplay identity in majority-white districts while still needing to mobilize diverse bases in Democratic strongholds. Republicans, conversely, may emphasize identity to counteract stereotypes, to reinforce their

conservative credentials, or to highlight their representational distinctiveness. These dynamics help explain why partisanship does not cleanly predict *whether* racial/ethnic identity is employed, but instead shapes *how* identity narratives are framed once deployed. In the following qualitative analysis, I investigate the variation of how candidates use racial/ethnic identity narratives.

3.6 How Racial Identity Narratives are Differentially Employed in Campaign Self-Presentation

Having established when and where candidates emphasize racial/ethnic identity, I now turn to *how* they do so. While the statistical models reveal broad patterns (namely that racial/ethnic identity presentation is strongly predicted by candidate race, and, to a lesser extent, candidate gender and partisan context), they cannot capture the content, framing, and rhetorical strategies embedded in these presentations. A qualitative analysis of campaign texts allows me to examine the substance of how candidates present their racial/ethnic identities. In this section, I explore the question: *How do candidates across parties and racial groups narrate their racial/ethnic identities as part of their campaign images?*

The goal of this qualitative analysis is not to generalize to all candidates, but to illustrate the different ways racial narratives can be framed once candidates choose to foreground them. First, I explain the general qualitative similarities and differences in how Black, Asian, and Latino candidates use racial self-presentations. This is to examine whether there are similar or distinct ways in which candidates of color use racial/ethnic presentations. Next, I compare candidates of the same race running in similar contexts but in different parties to illustrate how candidate partisanship shapes the framing of racial narratives. Second, I compare candidates of

the same race and party but running in different contexts, to illustrate differences in the *depth and elaboration* of identity presentations.

3.6.1 Race Shapes Racial/Ethnic Identity Self-Presentation

Across racial and ethnic groups, one of the most consistent shared strategies is what can be understood as a "firsts" narrative, in which candidates highlight the historic or symbolic significance of their candidacy. For instance, Democratic candidate Liz Johnson (GA–12) writes that her "bid for Georgia Insurance Commissioner made her among few women and even fewer women of color to gain a major party nomination for a statewide executive office". These narratives consistently and most frequently appear across the candidacies of candidates of color, regardless of partisan affiliation, and is a clear and relatively low-cost way for candidates to link their racial/ethnic identity as a symbol of personal achievement and collective group advancement. At the same time, while these broad strategies are shared, the content and meaning of these racial/ethnic experiences systematically differs across racial groups.

Black candidates, for example, are less likely than Asian American and Latino candidates to explicitly identify as Black. In contrast, Asian American and Latino candidates do often explicitly state their race or ethnicity, and commonly tie their racial/ethnic identities to immigrant narratives, either experienced first-hand or their proximity to the immigration experience. For example, candidates such as Republican Anita Chen (CA–17) describe herself as the daughter of immigrants from Taiwan, while Lou Correa recounts how his parents immigrated from Mexico and worked in labor-intensive jobs—his mother cleaning hotel rooms and his father working in a paper mill—to provide opportunities for their children. These narratives tie race and immigration as indistinct experiences. This is not to say that Black or White candidates do not emphasize ethnic or immigrant narratives; however, the majority of Asian and Latino candidates

are in closer proximity to experiences of migration and immigration, which results in these variations of campaign presentation.

Black candidates, however, are most likely to be more implicit in their racial/ethnic identities, signaling race more through organizational structures (such as attendance in an HBCU, membership in a historically Black fraternity or sorority, or connections to the NAACP), or through symbols and historical events, particularly those tied to slavery, segregation, voting rights, and civil rights. For example, candidates like Democrat Evangeline Hundley (SC–5) highlight her parents' participation in civil rights marches, education during segregation and integration. Similarly, Devin Davis (LA–2) writes: "We deserve better but we have to fight for it. That's what our ancestors did to end slavery and segregation, that's what I and many others did to end Jim Crow juries in Louisiana. That's why I'm running for Congress".

While this form of historically and organizationally grounded candidate self-presentation is most common among Black candidates, it is, like all campaign strategies, not entirely exclusive to non-Black candidates. For instance, Mark Takano (CA–39) references how his grandparents and parents were incarcerated during Japanese American internment: "His family roots in Riverside go back to his grandparents, who, along with his parents, were sent to Japanese American Internment camps during World War II". Juan Vargas (CA–42) describes his parents' history, "Juan's parents moved to the United States from Mexico in the late 1940s as part of the Bracero Program". These examples illustrate that other racial/ethnic minorities can and do use symbolic racial historical events as part of their campaign presentation. However, such references appear less consistently and are typically more episodic than the deeply embedded historical framing observed among Black candidates.

These patterns show that there are racialized repertoires for racial/ethnic storytelling that shape how different candidates of color formulate their biographical information in regards to race. However, other factors, such as candidate partisanship, plays an influence in how these racial/ethnic identities are ultimately deployed as a political narrative.

3.6.2 Partisanship Shapes Racial/Ethnic Identity Presentation

Party affiliation provides candidates with distinct rhetorical incentives: Democrats, whose base is composed of minority voters and liberal white voters, use identity to highlight inequality, representation, and coalition-building, while Republican candidates typically draw on their racial/ethnic identity to affirm conservative values such as patriotism, lawfulness, and self-reliance.

To illustrate this, I compare two Asian American men running in majority-white but racially diverse districts: Republican candidate George Song (NJ-5) and Democratic candidate Mark Chang (MD-3). These candidates share similar demographic and electoral contexts—both are challengers in districts that are majority white (59% and 57%, respectively) but include a non-trivial percentage of Asian, Latino, and Black populations. Table 3.1 summarizes their attributes and electoral context. Although not a perfect comparison, by holding the racial context relatively constant, this comparison allows me to better isolate how partisanship shapes identity presentation framing among Asian candidates in non-co-racial, but somewhat diverse, electoral environments.

Table 3.1: Comparing Same-Race, Similar-Context, Different Parties: The Case of Asian American Candidates

	George Song	Mark Chang
Race	Asian	Asian

Party	Republican	Democrat
Gender	Man	Man
Incumbent	No	No
% White in District	59%	57%

> *George Song (R)*: "George is the son of Korean immigrants who came here legally in search of the American Dream. With only a few dollars, the clothes on their backs, and an unwavering determination, they achieved success and paved the way for our family's future generations…I am blessed beyond measure, but as I've examined our landscape the last few years, it is clear to me that our district is not what it used to be. As a Korean American, he knows what it feels like to not have a seat at the table. He understands why immigrants want to come here, but he also acknowledges that our border crisis and illegal immigration compromise our nation's security and present an enormous drain on our public resources. What does an open border with no rules say about my parents and other immigrants who worked so hard and followed the laws to live here?"

> *Mark Chang (D)*: "Running to become Maryland's first-ever Asian American member of Congress, Mark knows the struggles Maryland families face. His parents immigrated here in the mid-1970s from war-torn South Korea and opened a corner carry-out in an underserved area of Annapolis. His mom died of a brain aneurysm when Mark was young, leaving his dad the family's sole breadwinner. Mark watched his father work sixteen-hour days selling fried chicken, subs, and sodas—yet still not always able to make ends meet. In high school, Mark went to work delivering newspapers so his family could pay the mortgage, cover utility bills, and put food on the table. He knew education could help him get ahead, so he went to HBCU Morgan State, took out loans to graduate from University of Maryland Baltimore County, then earned an MBA from Loyola University. Mark became the first Asian American to serve in the executive branch of Anne Arundel County government, then served as staff for a state senator, and was later elected as the first Asian American delegate from Anne Arundel County…Inspired by his own upbringing, Mark focuses on ensuring families have the resources to put food on the table. Once the kid who couldn't afford school lunch, Mark now works to invest in education and support for students in need. Mark and his family faced hate and discrimination growing up, which led him to support legislation addressing hate crimes and expanding voter access."

These candidates both incorporate their racial and immigrant identities into their campaign biographies. However, while they draw on similar biographical elements (such as being the children of Korean immigrants and growing up in working-class families) the way they frame these narratives reflects distinct partisan orientations. Song, a Republican, constructs his racial presentation in strong alignment with the model minority, emphasizing legal immigration, hard work, and American exceptionalism. He then connects this immigrant narrative to reinforce a conservative position on immigration policy, contrasting his parents' lawful path with current critiques of undocumented immigration and border policy. In this sense, his racial/ethnic

narrative is used to affirm his conservatism and validate policy preferences aligned with Republican values.

In contrast, Democratic candidate Chang ties his narrative primarily to a deep understanding of systemic inequality, and uses it as a foundation for championing progressive, inclusive public policies. He further broadens his coalitional appeal by highlighting his choice to attend an HBCU, signalling that he seeks to represent more than a single co-ethnic or co-racial constituency. Thus, while both candidates center their immigrant identities and racial backgrounds, they do so in ways that are ideologically consistent with their parties.

To illustrate partisan variation in framing racial/ethnic identity further, I compare the case of Republican candidate Luisa Del Rosal and Democratic candidate Eddy Morales, who also ran in majority-white districts, although with a decent population of Latino voters. The comparison of key variables for the two candidates is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Comparing Same-Race, Similar-Context, Different Parties: The Case of Latino Candidates

	Luisa Del Rosal	Eddy Morales
Race	Latina	Latino
Party	Republican	Democrat
Gender	Woman	Man
Incumbent	No	No
% Latino	19%	14%
% White	56%	64%

> *Luisa del Rosal (R):* Luisa has seen this path before, south of our border. She knows where it ends: in the waste, despair, and poverty of socialism. Luisa is dedicated to saving American exceptionalism because she has seen the alternative to a free and just society. Luisa grew up in Mexico, with metal bars on her windows, where there was no rule of law and where individual ambition and talent were not given free rein. Instead of resigning herself to not achieving her dreams, Luisa sought something more: the limitless opportunity of the United States of America. That is why she came to Texas legally and followed the rules to become a United States citizen… Luisa stepped up to run against a liberal Democrat for the Texas House

> on a platform of better schools, safe streets, strong family values, and more good-paying jobs. She served as the founding Executive Director of a group that helps elect conservative Republican Hispanics across Texas, and later as Chief of Staff for a Republican U.S. Congressman to advance our shared conservative values. Luisa is a committed Republican because her experience as an immigrant made her passionate about empowering people with freedom, opportunity, and personal responsibility. She found those things in Texas. Luisa will fight to secure our border and defend our Second Amendment rights.
>
> *Eddy Morales (D*): For as long as I can remember, my communities have looked out for and supported me. I learned that none of us can do this work alone, and that to succeed we must always do it together. That is the energy I hope to bring to Congress. My story is one of community. From the very beginning, I learned from my mom how to be brave and how to treat family and those who lived around us. My mom came to this country from Mexico, crossing the border hidden in the trunk of a car because she wanted better opportunities for her children. We first lived for a time in Los Angeles, but after just a few years my mother moved us again. This time, my older brother was driving as we fled a dangerous situation. She brought us to Oregon to escape domestic violence, and I started to learn English in school. Although my mom was never able to learn the language or earn her citizenship because of our broken immigration system, she never stopped helping people. Mom shared meals, laundry detergent, and money. She was always feeding and helping others—family, neighbors, strangers, even people she couldn't communicate with. She invited everyone in. She knew how to make a meal for four people stretch to feed eight, and she always made more room at the table. One dinner at a time, my mother built and strengthened our community. That is the community I have been working to build since my first organizing experience: a boycott of PictSweet mushrooms during my freshman year in college, in protest of the terrible conditions faced by farm workers. This success taught me how people can come together with a goal and work for change. I learned firsthand that working people could build power. I continued organizing as a student at the University of Oregon, where I established a housing code in the city of Eugene. My first job out of college was with the United States Student Association, where we fought for abortion rights, for living wages, and for the rights of DREAMers…We are running for Congress—**juntos**.

Like Song, del Rosal's biography illuminates a conservative, immigrant, patriotic frame. By contrasting life in Mexico with the "limitless opportunity" of the United States and stressing that she came to the U.S. legally, she is explicit in positioning herself away from associations of illegal immigration. She further drives a counter-stereotypical narrative by connecting her racial/ethnic identity to serve as justification for her substantive conservative policy agenda (border security, law-and-order, and gun rights), while at the same time sharing mainstream conservative values (family, work).

Morales, a Democrat, on the other hand, presents a racial narrative centered around community, inequality, and collective empowerment. In a national environment where immigration is highly contested and Latinos are often stereotyped through the lens of criminalization, Morales' choice to foreground his mother's border-crossing story is notable. Through focusing his story on his immigrant mother, he tells a story of immigrant resilience,

care, and hard work. In doing so, he is able to tie his identity to advocating for issues that disproportionately impact the Latino community, such as the rights of DREAMERs, but also other issues that affect other marginalized groups, such as abortion.

These contrasts underscore two analytical points. First, partisanship shapes the *framing* of racial or ethnic identity: conservative candidates tend to present it as proof of assimilation and ideological fit, while progressive candidates often frame their minority status as a precursor to establishing their progressivism.

3.6.3 Varying Degrees of Racial/Ethnic Identity Presentation

The coding of biographies in my analysis combines all racial identity mentions into a single measure. Yet not all racial identity appeals take the same form, nor are they likely to have the same political effects. Within the deracialization framework, any invocation of race carries potential risk, but the magnitude and meaning of that risk depend on *how* identity is presented. Some candidates make only brief, symbolic references, signaling diversity without linking identity to community experience or political commitments. Others construct more developed narratives that embed racial identity into lived experience, intersectional identity, and policy agendas. These distinctions matter: symbolic nods are relatively lower-cost, while more substantive narratives carry greater risk but can also enhance authenticity, generate solidarity, and heighten the mobilizing potential of identity appeals. To illustrate these dynamics, I compare Jennifer Tran (CA–12) and Ashwani Jain (MD–6), two Asian American Democrats who both ran in open-seat contests in 2024. Their contrasting biographies highlight how candidates make different strategic calculations about the depth of racial identity presentation depending on context (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Comparing Same-Race, Same-Party, Different Context

	Jennifer Tran	Ashwani Jain
Race	Asian	Asian
Party	Democrat	Democrat
Gender	Woman	Man
Incumbent	No	No
Open Seat	Yes	Yes
% Asian	21%	9%
% White	33%	60%

The primary difference between the two candidates is the degree of partisan competition following the partisan primaries, as well as the racial composition of the district. In Tran's case, California's 12th district is racially diverse and safely Democratic. She ran against Lateefah Simon, a Black candidate who was endorsed widely by establishment Democratic politicians, such as California Governor Gavin Newsom, meaning that Tran faced an uphill battle to beat Simon. In response to this context, Tran devised her campaign persona to attempt to appeal to the diverse constituency of CA-12:

> "As the daughter of Vietnamese refugee parents, her family faced poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural prejudice—but persevered, eventually opening a nail salon business. She saw firsthand that her family and community—especially Black, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islanders—were vulnerable, in part because of a lack of public support. This propelled Dr. Tran to pursue undergraduate degrees in Urban Studies and Planning and Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego, and eventually complete a Ph.D. from USC focused on issues that matter to her community. Dr. Tran's intersectional life experiences as a queer Vietnamese American woman from Oakland have forged her into an inclusive, determined, and effective leader."

Here, Tran explicitly ties her experiences as the daughter of Vietnamese refugees to her experiences with racial discrimination. While maintaining a resiliency narrative, she strays from the model minority myth presentation by directly connecting her experiences with marginalization to that of other marginalized racial groups. She points to this as a primary driver

behind her career choices and education, and brings in a queer intersectional identity to further emphasize a marginalized status that may broadly resonate with multiple groups. In a diverse, strongly Democratic district, presentations such as this are likely well-received. Indeed, Tran advanced in the crowded Democratic primary, beating out eight other competitors. Even though she lost to Simon in the general election, Tran did more than just prime her Vietnamese identity; she created a narrative centered around it.

To contrast this, Jain ran for Maryland's 6th Congressional District also in a crowded Democratic primary. He, too, ran in a district where the Democratic-establishment backed candidate, April McClain Delaney, was expected to be the frontrunner in the Democratic primary. The primary difference between Jain and Tran is that while California's 12th district was reliably Democratic, Maryland's 6th district leaned Democratic but was not considered a safely Democratic district – meaning there was considerably more pressure for whoever won the Democratic primary to be able to safely secure the seat in the general election. In addition, in contrast to California's 12th district's diverse constituency, white voters make up a comfortable majority of the district. Nevertheless, Jain's biography read: "I am running not just to be Maryland's first millennial and first Asian American in Congress, but because I have specific policy solutions to open the doors of opportunity for our community"

Jain did not "deracialize"; like Tran, Jain highlights his status as an Asian American trailblazer. At the same time, the depth and framing of their identity narratives diverge significantly. In contrast to Tran, Jain's biographical statement utilizes his identity only as a brief qualification in passing. That is, his identity as a millennial and Asian American candidate is acknowledged, but it is not substantively tied to any particular community experience or structural inequality. Instead, his identity serves more as a symbol of representational progress,

while the focus shifts quickly to his policy credentials and solutions-based campaign. This contrast highlights a broader trend among Democratic candidates: some use identity narratively and intersectionally to build solidarity and frame policy goals (as Tran does), while others invoke identity symbolically and aspirationally, using it as a marker of diversity without extensive elaboration (as seen in Jain's case).

Both "count" in my coding scheme as racial identity presentations, but this comparison highlights a limitation of the coding: it treats an identity mention and substantive narrative alike. Recognizing this distinction is crucial because it shows that candidates navigate different incentives depending on context—safe, diverse Democratic districts may invite expansive, intersectional narratives like Tran's that promise more substantive racial advocacy and representation, while more competitive contexts may encourage more restrained or symbolic gestures like Jain's.

3.7 Discussion/Conclusion

Do candidates deracialize their campaign presentation? How, and under what conditions, do candidates include their racial/ethnic identities as part of their campaign image? Drawing on 1,603 campaign biographies from the 2024 cycle, I find clear evidence that candidates explicitly highlight their racial or ethnic identities and craft race-based narratives in their campaign presentations. Patterns of racial self-presentation vary sharply across race, party, and district context, underscoring the need to revisit deracialization strategies in an era of polarization and expanding diversity among non-Black minority candidates. Asian and Latino candidates are the most likely to emphasize racial/ethnic and immigrant identities, often intertwining these narratives. Black candidates employ racial identity presentations less frequently, particularly in majority-white districts, consistent with deracialization expectations. Yet racial context is less

predictive for Asian and Latino candidates, suggesting that invoking racial/ethnic identity are not uniformly perceived by these candidates as triggering white backlash. Finally, while it may be counterintuitive that Republican candidates "play the race card," I find that party affiliation does not predict whether racial identity is invoked, but it does shape its framing: Republicans often use identity to validate ideological fit, while Democrats connect it to equity and representation.

This chapter advances the study of campaign messaging and deracialization theory in two ways. First, it broadens the definition of a "racialized campaign" beyond policy advocacy to include racial self-presentation. Second, it incorporates Asian and Latino candidates alongside Black and White candidates, showing how newcomers to electoral politics occupy distinct racial positions that shape both their strategic choices and voter evaluations. However, while the 2024 cycle features the largest number of Asian and Latino candidates to date, the sample remains comparatively small, which has limited prior large-N studies and did not allow me to run more nuanced quantitative analysis. To address this gap, I present qualitative case studies that reveal not only how often candidates use their racial/ethnic identities in their campaign presentation, but also how they construct them.

One key takeaway is that not all presentations of racial/ethnic identity are alike. Some candidates make symbolic, low-cost references to their background, signaling diversity without linking it to broader commitments. Others construct substantive narratives that tie identity to community advocacy, structural inequality, or intersectional experiences. Regardless, the normative implications of candidates being empowered to run as racial minorities is substantial: Even if purely just symbolic, racial narratives from political elites have broader representational consequences. If rhetoric itself is a form of representation, then normalizing marginalized identities and experiences on mainstream campaign platforms can help shift political norms,

reducing the perception of such identities as electoral liabilities and reframing them as authentic signals of leadership and belonging.

However, campaign self-presentation is only one dimension of campaign strategy. While candidates may invoke their racial or ethnic identities in describing who they are, an equally important question is whether and how those identities translate into the policies they pursue. Thus, I explore the role of race in shaping campaign policy agendas and issue framing in the following chapter.

4 Is Race the Issue? How Race Shapes Campaign Issue Platforms and Issue Framing

4.1 Introduction

In 2019, Taiwanese American entrepreneur Andrew Yang announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination, self-describing himself in such a way that quickly became a defining feature of his campaign: "the Asian man who likes math." Embraced through his ubiquitous "MATH" hats—short for *Make America Think Harder*—the slogan was more than a self-branding gimmick. Rather, Yang leaned wholeheartedly on this stereotype by building his campaign agenda upon this racialized foundation, positioning himself as a data-driven entrepreneur who was particularly qualified to address the issues of technological advancements and the economy; a candidate uniquely equipped to "bring a calculator to the Oval Office." This message, while controversial, seemed to resonate well with voters; Yang reportedly sold tens of thousands of MATH-branded hats, and his campaign was known for his focus on economic competence.

Although all candidates have strong incentives to talk about the economy as a core issue, Yang's campaign illustrates how a candidate's racial identity can be strategically integrated into campaign messaging outside of their self-presentation. By choosing to base his primary campaign agenda around the economy and technological advancements, Yang drew on widely held racial stereotypes associated with Asian Americans, such as the "model minority": a racial stereotype that links Asian Americans with mathematical ability, technical skill, and economic mobility, and run on an issue platform that are largely congruent with these prevailing racial stereotypes. Further, Yang's campaign made sure that this connection was clear by explicitly

linking his ability to advance his policy priorities to his racial identity, using his racial identity as a means to strengthen claims of issue ownership and credibility.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to an area of campaign strategy that scholarship on racial messaging in campaigns has primarily focused on: the policy priorities of candidates of color. McCormick and Jones' (1993) definition of a deracialized campaign itself states that a deracialized campaign is one that "defuses the polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit reference to *race-specific issues*, while at the same time *emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent*, thus mobilizing a broad segment of the electorate for the purposes of capturing or maintaining public office" (p. 76). Under this framework, race operates largely as a constraint on the ability of candidates of color to run on "race-specific" issues, either because doing so primes negative racial predispositions or signals a narrow commitment to minority interests.

Yet this logic overlooks the possibility that candidates' racial identities may also be used in a way that could be advantageous, particularly through issue ownership. In this chapter, I theorize about the possibility of racial issue ownership, in which candidates can use their racial/ethnic identities to their advantage by strategically emphasizing issues that are associated with their racial/ethnic group. Let us consider the example of Yang's campaign once again. Although there was resistance and criticism on Yang's weaponization of the model minority stereotype in his campaign messaging, he was nevertheless effective in building upon pre-existing racial stereotypes to connect to his ability to handle specific issue domains. Thus, he did not attempt to lean away from racialized associations; instead, he played into them, and used them in such a way that positioned him to be a credible leader to address economic growth (Johnson and Visalvanich 2025). Even though he ultimately did not win the Democratic

presidential bid, the amount of support his candidacy received is commendable for one of the first Asian American candidates on the top of the ticket. Yang therefore presents a clear example of how a minority candidate uses race in an attempt to gain an electoral advantage, especially as a means to distinguish themselves as leaders on specific policies or issues.

Accordingly, this chapter examines whether candidates of color craft their issue platforms and messaging with race in mind. The chapter proceeds as follows: First, I begin by reviewing the literature on campaign issue platform formation and theories of issue ownership. Building on this work, I develop a theory of racial issue ownership, arguing that candidates from different racial minority groups may strategically emphasize distinct issues based on how their racial/ethnic groups are racialized by the American public. Theoretically, by emphasizing racially "owned" issues, candidates of color can improve their evaluations among voters. After examining whether the issue platforms of candidates across race differs, I then examine whether their discussion of issues differ in terms of utilizing racial/ethnic identity framing.

I look for evidence of racial issue ownership in two ways. First, I examine whether the issues in which candidates of color choose to emphasize systematically differ from the policy agendas of White candidates. If there are differences in the types of issues that candidates discuss across racial groups, I examine whether those differences are in alignment with issues typically associated with racial/ethnic minorities. Using text extracted from the issue priority pages of candidates' official campaign websites, I first establish that issue ownership can be observed via candidate's campaign behavior by examining what issues candidates from political parties chose to emphasize. I find that candidates' behavior strongly align with theories of partisan issue ownership, with Democratic candidates more likely to run on Democratic-owned issues and Republican candidates more likely to run on Republican-owned issues. After establishing that we

can observe issue ownership via candidates' campaign behavior, I analyze whether candidates within the same party vary across race in the choice of issues they choose to run on. I find that while all Democrats, regardless of race, are equally as likely to run on explicitly racial issues such as civil rights and racial justice, after accounting for district-level and candidate-level covariates, there are meaningful racial differences in issue emphasis. That is, compared to White Democrats: Latino Democrats are more likely to campaign on immigration; Black candidates are more likely to emphasize the issues of policing and housing; and all minority candidates (Asian, Black, Latino) are more likely to run on education, all else equal.

Issue emphasis, however, is only half of the story. To more accurately capture whether candidates perceive their race to be advantageous when discussing policy priorities, I examine whether candidates use their racial/ethnic identities to explicitly position themselves as leaders in certain issue domains, a strategy I call "racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization". I argue that this provides more explicit evidence that candidates use racial/ethnic identity as a means to "own" an issue domain. I find that candidates of color across political parties disproportionately use frame specific issues in terms of their racial/ethnic identities, but especially Asian and Latino candidates. Racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization also varies by the type of issue discussed; these frames typically occur more in policy domains that are already more emphasized by candidates of their respective racial groups (such as immigration and civil rights). However, I note that candidates also use their racial/ethnic identities to "trespass" on issues that are non-racial, and not typically associated with candidates of color, such as foreign policy and national security.

This chapter provides evidence that candidates' campaign behavior is influenced by race, but that some candidates take advantage of racialized perceptions by running on specific issues

and forefronting their racial/ethnic identities to discuss policies. By mapping theory onto real-world observed campaign behavior, I contribute to existing literature on issue ownership and how candidates of color across racial groups attempt to leverage racial considerations.

4.2 The Foundations of the Campaign Policy Agenda

Campaign issue agendas are integral to a campaign: they are an arena in which candidates describe the issues they will prioritize, their views on such issues, and outline their plan on addressing these issues. In doing so, candidates provide information to voters that can influence how voters perceive them (Petrocik 1996; Abbe et. al 2003). This begs the question: what determines a candidate's campaign agenda?

One important consideration is that of the context of an election, both nationally and locally (Sides 2006). That is, if in a given election a specific issue is of particular importance, this context exerts pressure on candidates to talk about these issues. District-specific context may drive some of this variation; for example, when candidates run in rural districts, they should be more likely than those running in urban districts to address farming infrastructure as part of their campaign platform. The demographics of the district also matter in the way that their votes matter: when districts are composed of large racial/ethnic minority populations, we should expect that candidates may benefit from addressing issues important to these communities. Catering part of a candidates' issue agenda towards addressing local issues and group concerns signals to voters that they are particularly in tune with the community's specific needs.

Outside of local context, national context can also influence the issues that are addressed in a campaign. Exogenous events, especially those that are covered in the media (Erbring et al. 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), can increase the saliency of an issue, placing that issue on the forefront of political considerations and forcing politicians to engage with them (Zaller 1992;

Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). Take, for example, a major event such as the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11. Following this event, candidates increasingly campaigned on issues of national security and international relations (Strach and Sapiro 2011).When an issue reaches heightened salience, candidates are expected to address it in order to appear responsive to voters' priorities and may face electoral penalties for remaining silent (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kamphorst 2024).

The issue of racial inequality provides a contemporary illustration of this dynamic. Although conventional campaign strategy often cautions against explicit discussion of race, the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020—following the murder of George Floyd—substantially altered these incentives. Stout (2020) argues that in this context, race became an unavoidable national issue, making racial silence increasingly costly for candidates. During election cycles where race was extremely prevalent in national discourse, voters of color were more willing to reward racially liberal candidates who addressed racial issues, and punish candidates who failed to engage racial issues in their campaign messaging (Stout 2020).

The Role of Party: Partisan Issue Ownership

One of the primary functions of a campaign is that it has the ability to prime voters and set the agenda. Campaign messaging can prime voters by emphasizing certain issues and avoiding others, with the goal of inducing voters to put more weight on those issues when choosing among candidates (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Johnston et al. 1992; Page 1978; Petrocik 1996). Therefore, campaigns strategically evaluate which issues they are most likely to be evaluated favorably on, and then run on those issues to gain an electoral advantage.

For much of the twentieth century, American political parties played a dominant role in structuring campaign platforms and policy priorities. Party organizations exercised substantial

control over nominations, messaging, and candidate positioning, and candidates largely operated as representatives of broader party coalitions rather than independent political brands (Schattschneider 1942; Key 1949; Aldrich 1995). Therefore, voters tend to hold well-established predispositions about which political parties "own" particular issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013). In measurements of issue ownership, while issue ownership may sometimes change, public opinion surveys consistently report that voters view the Democratic Party is typically viewed as "owning" issues such as education and social welfare, whereas the Republican Party are perceived as more strongly associated with foreign policy and national security (Therriault 2015).

Because the reception of a campaign message is conditional on the messenger's perceived credibility (Arceneaux and Kolodny 2007; Iyengar and Valentino 2000), a candidates' partisan affiliation plays a large role in determining what issues they can credibly run on. That is, a Republican candidate may have more difficulty running on an issue such as social welfare, given that their partisan reputation affords them less credibility to address the Democrat-owned issue. Therefore, candidates tend to emphasize issues on which their party is perceived as more credible and competent (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013). When candidates run on issues where their party's position aligns favorably with public opinion, they can reap electoral benefits (Hernson et. al 2019). This is not to say that candidates only run on issues in which their party is viewed favorably; however, given that candidates are incentivized to highlight only what is advantageous in their campaigns, research has shown that campaigns behave largely in alignment with emphasizing their advantaged issues (Petrocik 1996).

Over time, however, electoral reforms, the professionalization of campaigns, and the rise of candidate-centered campaigns have weakened formal party gatekeeping and expanded

candidates' autonomy in shaping how they present their policy agendas to voters (Fenno 1978; Wattenberg 1991). Contemporary campaigns have become increasingly candidate-centered: while parties continue to structure ideological boundaries and issue reputations, individual candidates now exercise greater discretion in deciding which issues to emphasize, how to frame them, and how to tailor their platforms to their own personal backgrounds and identities (Arbour 2014) A candidate's partisan affiliation, of course, still plays a major role in what policies a candidate chooses to run on. However, other candidate-level attributes outside of partisan identity also play a role in determining what issues a candidate will emphasize.

The Role of the Candidate in Campaign Issue Agendas

Outside of partisanship, candidate-level attributes can contribute to what types of issues candidates can run on. For example, an individuals' personal record and experiences can expand the types of issues that they can be credibly perceived to address (Sellers 1998; Holian 2004). For example, Arbour (2014) finds that when candidates have developed a personal reputation addressing a specific issue, that candidate is much more likely to emphasize that issue, regardless of issue salience, party ownership, or district ideology. That is, someone who has won multiple awards for community-based service and volunteer work in low-income communities, but is running on a Republican platform, may still be able to run on the Democratically "owned" issues of social welfare and addressing poverty, even in the absence of partisan issue ownership. That is, candidates can use these records as a means to "trespass" on "owned" issues that they might not have otherwise been perceived to be associated with.

Candidates may similarly use their occupational or work experience to exert ownership over an issue, such that a medical doctor may be perceived as much more credible in terms of addressing healthcare (McDermott 2005; Mechtel 2014; Atkeson and Hamel 2020). Indeed, they

may even be able to use their backgrounds to invoke issue ownership over related issues; for example, McLaughlin, Geras, and Rhinehart (2024) find that veterans do not receive a boost in evaluations when discussing national security, but do receive a boost in evaluations when running on addressing a related issue, such as crime. Importantly, this more personal candidate-centered campaign strategy may be especially helpful to help distinguish the candidate in cases where party is constant, where voters cannot solely depend on partisanship as their primary heuristic. In this way, a candidates' own personal identity and background can expand or constrain the issues they can credibly address.

Unlike occupational credentials or policy records, which require intentional messaging to become available heuristics for voters, immutable social identities such as gender and race are automatically available cues that are difficult to conceal, and racial/gendered associations are often automatic in the minds of voters. Indeed, research has shown that gender acts as a strong cue: voters tend to associate women candidates with greater competence on so-called "feminine", compassion-based issues such as education, childcare, and social welfare, while men are more often perceived as better suited to address "masculine" issues like national security and the economy (McDermott 1997; Hernson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Fridkin and Kenny 2009). In response to these gendered expectations, some women candidates may adopt counter-stereotypical issue strategies, such as running on national security and the economy, in an effort to mitigate potential disadvantages. Others, however, may see these issue associations as advantageous and seek to capitalize on these associations through "gender issue ownership," emphasizing issue domains on which women are perceived as particularly credible and competent (Hernson, Lay, and Stokes 2003). Under this strategy, women who choose to run "as women" in their policy platforms may choose to explicitly leverage their gender associations as

an advantage, priming favorable gendered associations by focusing their campaigns on issues such as education, abortion, or other compassion-related policies rather than avoiding them, thereby leveraging perceived advantages in these domains.

In theory, emphasizing women-owned issues should confer an electoral advantage by aligning campaign messages with voters' expectations of candidate competence and priming these issues to be at the forefront of voters' considerations. Indeed, Hernson, Lay and Stokes (2003) do find that women who run on "feminine" issues seem to have an electoral advantage, providing some evidence that gendered issue ownership strategies succeed in electing women politicians. However, there is limited evidence that women systematically leverage this advantage. Studies consistently find that women candidates are no more likely than men to emphasize gender-stereotypical issues in their campaigns, particularly once partisanship and district context are taken into account (Larson 2001; Bystrom et al. 2004; Dolan 2005; Dolan and Lynch 2017). In short, while theoretically a woman candidate running on "women's issues" can be an electorally advantageous strategy, it does not consistently translate into observed differences in campaign strategies among men and women candidates.

4.3 The Potential of "Racial Issue Ownership"

Similar to research on women candidates, it is reasonable to expect that candidates of color may be perceived as more credible on certain policy domains compared to White candidates. Yet despite extensive scholarship on partisan and gender-based issue ownership, research examining whether racial minority candidates "own" particular issues remains remarkably limited. This gap raises a fundamental theoretical question: if scholars recognize partisan and gendered forms of issue ownership, is there an analogous form of racial issue ownership? Like partisan and gender issue ownership, in which issues are perceived through a

partisan or gendered lens and therefore become strongly associated with a specific party or gender, I define racial issue ownership as the process through which particular policy domains become associated with specific racial groups in the minds of voters, such that candidates from those groups are perceived as especially credible or legitimate advocates on those issues and, in turn, may strategically emphasize them in their campaigns.

Racial issue ownership is more difficult to conceptualize and observe than other forms of issue ownership; whereas the literature has come to a general consensus about what issues are owned by parties and what issues are "feminine" and which are "masculine", there is little consensus of defining what exactly constitutes a "racial issue". Santia and Bauer (2022) illustrates an example of the broadness in which the literature has defined a "minority issue", defining them as "those that disproportionately affect racial/ethnic minorities, such as economic disparity, immigration, and civil rights. Some minority group issues may also affect non-minority groups, such as social welfare policies, but minority group issues are frequently framed through the lens of minorities". In their coding of "minority issues", they include: "poverty, economic disparity, affirmative action, civil liberties, race relations/civil rights, Medicare, Social Security, welfare, Obamacare, immigration, and local issues".

Clearly, their definition of minority issues span across simply the issue of civil rights, racial justice, or immigration. This is because while issues such as civil rights and immigration are often explicitly associated with race, many other policy domains, such as social welfare, affordable housing, crime and public safety, and educational inequality also disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minorities, and are often associated with racial and ethnic minorities in the minds of voters, even without being framed explicitly as a "racial issue" (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Gilens 1999). That implicit associations between race and issue domains have been

exploited in campaigns to activate race-based considerations is not new (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Therefore, policy issues need not be explicitly racial to become so; rather, they can quickly acquire racial meaning in voters' minds, with some domains being more prone to racialization than others.

One of the ways in which issues can become racialized is through the candidates' racial minority status themselves. That is, the minority status of a candidate can be powerful enough of a source cue for voters to evaluate the policies in which they champion through a racial lens. For example, Tesler's (2012) provides compelling evidence that racial attitudes in the American public towards a politician can "spill over" into attitudes towards policy areas. He finds that American voters high in racial resentment express greater opposition to healthcare policies when framed as proposed by Barack Obama versus Bill Clinton, demonstrating the strong influence that a politicians' race has on evaluating their policies.

Lastly, the concept of racial issue ownership may be further complicated by heterogeneity across racial minority groups themselves. Previous studies that define "minority issues" often conflate minority issues with racial minorities as a whole (Santia and Bauer 2022). However, as a majority of past literature on candidates of color focused exclusively on Black candidates, much of what has previously been linked as a "racial issue" has been primarily centered upon those in which directly are associated with Black communities. While there may be much overlap in what constitutes a general "minority" issue, I argue that because minority groups are racialized differently, not all "minority" issues may be automatically associated with every minority candidate. For example, while issue domains such as civil rights and voting rights are beneficial for all marginalized groups, Black communities are the group that has historically been associated with these issues. In addition, prevalent racial stereotypes about Black

communities that assign traits such as laziness and criminality have contributed to the racialized connection between issues such as poverty and crime (Pefley, Herwitz and Sniderman 1997; Gilens 1999). It is unclear, however, whether the same racialized issue domains, automatically trigger racial associations with Latino or Asian communities; or in fact, if there are issues that are so closely associated with these groups that they can be thought of as "owned" by Latino or Asian candidates.

4.3.1 Do "Latino Issues" or "Asian Issues" Exist?

Where the literature of the link between policies and racial groups extends beyond Black–White dynamics, it has primarily centered on the association between Latinos and immigration. A substantial body of research shows that immigration has become racialized as a Latino issue through elite rhetoric, media portrayals, and demographic change, generating perceptions of cultural and economic threat among non-Latino voters (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hopkins 2010; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Perez 2015; Reny and Manzano 2016). Capitalizing on these associations, experimental studies have often leveraged the issue of immigration to implicitly prime group-based attitudes towards Latinos (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Valentino, Brader and Jardina 2013), establishing the clear connection between the issue and the racial group.

While anti-immigrant attitudes may affect support for Latino candidates (McConnaughy et. al 2010), the association with immigration need not always be electorally harmful. Indeed, the only work to directly examine whether a racial or ethnic group can "own" an issue and electorally benefit from it is Shortle and Johnson's (2017) study. In their study, they find that Latino candidates benefit electorally from emphasizing immigration due to the strong associative link between immigration and Latinos in voters' minds. Specifically, they found that Latino

candidates who advocated for pro-immigration policies were evaluated as stronger leaders, more trustworthy, more qualified, and more experienced than a White candidate using the same immigration message. This persisted even when the stance on the policy of the politician changed; that is, although pro-immigration messages from Latino candidates were the best evaluated, even anti-immigration messages showed an increase in evaluations of the Latino candidate in comparison to the White candidate with the same anti-immigration stance. Altogether, the authors conclude that Latino candidates can particularly benefit by running on the issue of immigration. This study provides strong evidence that minority candidates can leverage strong racialized associations to their advantage.

Immigration, of course, is not limited to Latino communities. Although Latinos have become strongly associated with immigration in the public imagination, recent immigration flows to the United States have increasingly originated from Asia. Asian Americans, like, Latinos, contend with "forever foreigner" stereotypes; that is, regardless of nativity status, Americans often view Asian and Latino communities as foreign. However, unlike Latinos, Asian Americans are not typically associated with unauthorized immigration. Instead, experimental studies that cue Asian Americans in the context of immigration often emphasize high-skilled migration, professional visas (such as H-1B programs), or educational mobility rather than border enforcement or "illegal" immigration (Wong et al. 2011; Pérez 2015). Relatedly, experimental and observational research have tapped into racialized connections to Asian Americans via policy debates over education and meritocracy, particularly affirmative action in higher education, where Asians have been portrayed as both high-achieving and unfairly disadvantaged by admissions policies (Poon et al. 2016). These associations reflect broader "model minority" stereotypes that characterize Asian Americans as academically successful,

economically mobile, and technically competent (Lee 1996; Kim 1999). Given that racial stereotypes shape issue associations, Asian candidates may be perceived as especially credible on issues related to education, the economy, and innovation, in addition to immigration.

In all, these group-specific histories and racialized associations suggest that racial issue ownership, if it exists, may not be uniform across candidates of color but instead vary by racial group and issue domain. Table 4.1 below summarizes expectations of the types of issues associated with each racial group. In all, the robust literature on race associations with Black communities and candidates can give us a stronger idea of what they may be able to "own", but it is much less clear with Asian and Latino candidates.

Table 4.1: Racial and Racially Associative Issues

Minority (general)/ Black	Racial justice/Civil Rights; Voting Rights; Social Welfare (Housing, Poverty, General Inequality)
Asian	Economy, Education, Immigration
Latino	Immigration

How Parties and Race Interact on the Issues

Lastly, we must account for the close alignment between race and party in the contemporary United States, given the increased alignment of the Democratic Party and racially progressive issues. In general, the Democratic Party has increasingly positioned itself as the party that owns issues such as racial equality, issues such as racial justice, civil rights, and voting rights have become normalized within the mainstream Democratic platform. In addition to the Democratic Party's alignment with racial progressivism, the Democratic Party has in general also conferred an advantage over other social issues, such as LGBTQ and women's issues. As a whole, the Democratic Party has become increasingly associated with addressing inequality and more aligned with multiple marginalized groups.

This raises the possibility that partisan affiliation alone may confer ownership over racial issues or associative-racial issues, regardless of a candidate's racial identity; that is, a Democratic candidate need not be themselves a racial/ethnic minority to be perceived as credible when running on "minority issues". However, candidates of color competing in Democratic primaries may enjoy an additional credibility or trait-based advantages over White co-partisans by addressing these issues in which they are perhaps perceived as more credible to address. While Democrats across all races may be viewed as credible or authentic when running on racially progressive issues, voters may perceive that racial minority candidates are more experienced or qualified to credibly address issues that impact racial/ethnic minorities. Therefore, the congruent cues of racial minority status and Democratic partisanship may increase their favorability among Democratic primary voters, especially among voters who hold addressing racial issues as a top priority.

By contrast, the Republican Party does not have an association with advocating for racially progressive policies. White Republicans, then, are likely the most constrained in their ability to run on racially progressive issues, as their partisan and racial identities are misaligned with racial progress. Republican candidates of color, by comparison, may be better positioned to "trespass" (Petrocik 1996; Sides 2006; Banda 2013). That is, Republican minority candidates may be able to strategically leverage their minority status to credibly engage with racial issues or issues that may be associated with helping minorities, even though these issues are typically associated with Democrats. In this way, racial identity may expand the range of issues candidates feel that they are advantaged to address, even in the absence of partisan ownership.

4.4 Study 1: Racial Differences in Issue Agendas

4.4.1 Methods

As I reviewed, it is difficult to define in a principled way what constitutes a "racial issue". Nevertheless, there is strong reason to suspect that a candidate's racial or ethnic identity may confer an advantage when engaging racial or race-adjacent policy domains. Rather than imposing a subjective classification of which issues are "racial," I instead use candidates' revealed behavior to infer what they perceive to be electorally advantageous issue domains.

Although issue ownership is most commonly measured through voter perceptions in survey data, there have been scholarly debates on whether issue ownership can be measured via surveys, with different question wording producing different results (Therriault 2015). To avoid this, I rely on prior work that demonstrates that perceptions of issue ownership are often reflected in candidate behavior (Sellers 1998; Brazeal and Benoit 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008). Petrocik (1996), for example, shows that candidates in the real-world strategically emphasize issues on which they are perceived to hold an advantage. Thus, I rely on this assumption that candidates choose to campaign on issues they believe provide them with a relative electoral advantage. If we observe that candidates of color are more likely than White candidates to run on certain issue domains, holding other factors constant, we can infer that they are doing so because of a perceived race-based electoral advantage.

In order to examine whether the campaign platforms of minority candidates differ from that of white candidates, I utilize the same dataset of official campaign websites of candidates running in the 2024 primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. Instead of analyzing candidates' biography pages, however, I examine all text from each candidates' policy pages. It is important to note that while almost every candidate with a campaign website had biographical information, not all candidates published an issues page. Of the 1,603 primary

candidates, 32.6% either did not have a policy platform, or their policy platform was inaccessible at the time text was pulled from the site. Candidates without a policy platform did not differ systematically from those who did on observable characteristics except for incumbency status; that is, incumbents were more likely to have a policy platform compared to challengers. This aligns with previous work on campaign websites, where challengers, specifically low-quality challengers with limited resources, are generally less likely to have a website or post a campaign platform (Porter, Treul, and McDonald 2024).

To examine differences in policy platforms, I first separate each candidate's issue text into discrete policy domains. Most candidates organized their websites with individual issue pages or with clearly labeled thematic headers, which allowed for straightforward categorization. When candidates provided a single issues page without internal headings, I segmented the text and assigned each segment to its appropriate issue domain. Following standard issue-categorization conventions (Porter, Treul and McDonald 2024), I classify policy text into the following domains: economy; immigration; healthcare; environment and energy; policing and public safety; foreign policy and national security; civil rights and social justice; LGBTQ+ issues; women's issues; social welfare; housing and infrastructure; voting rights and governance; values and constitutional rights; and agricultural and rural issues. Any remaining content that did not fit these categories was coded as "other." Examples of issues discussed in the "other" category include animal rights, technology and cryptocurrency. I operationalize the dependent variable as a dichotomous measure indicating whether a candidate who provided a viable issues platform discussed each policy domain; candidates without an issues platform are omitted from the analysis.

4.4.2 Descriptive Results

Before examining racial variation in issue platforms, I first analyze partisan differences in candidates' issue emphasis as a means to validate the idea that candidates' behavior generally aligns with patterns of partisan issue ownership that are documented in the literature. If Democratic and Republican candidates systematically prioritize the issue domains they are theoretically expected to "own," this provides evidence that candidate behavior is a valid indicator of perceived issue advantage. Establishing this benchmark supports the use of campaign behavioral data to infer strategies of issue ownership in my subsequent analyses.

In Figure 4.1, I present a visualization representing the percentage of candidates in each major political party who discussed each issue in the 2024 Congressional primary election cycle. In line with expectations of partisan issue ownership, Democrats as a whole discussed the issues of education, healthcare, the environment, women and abortion, infrastructure, housing, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ issues more than Republican candidates. In contrast, Republican candidates were more likely to run on immigration, foreign policy and national security, and spent more time discussing their ideological values and constitutional rights. Issues such as the economy, policing and safety, voting and governance, and agricultural/rural issues were issue areas in which partisan ownership is much less clear, as candidates of both parties seemed to be equally as likely to include them in their campaigns. However, this is to be expected given that these issue domains are widely perceived as "valence" issues, issues that are universally important and electorally salient, encouraging candidates from both parties to emphasize them regardless of partisan identity.

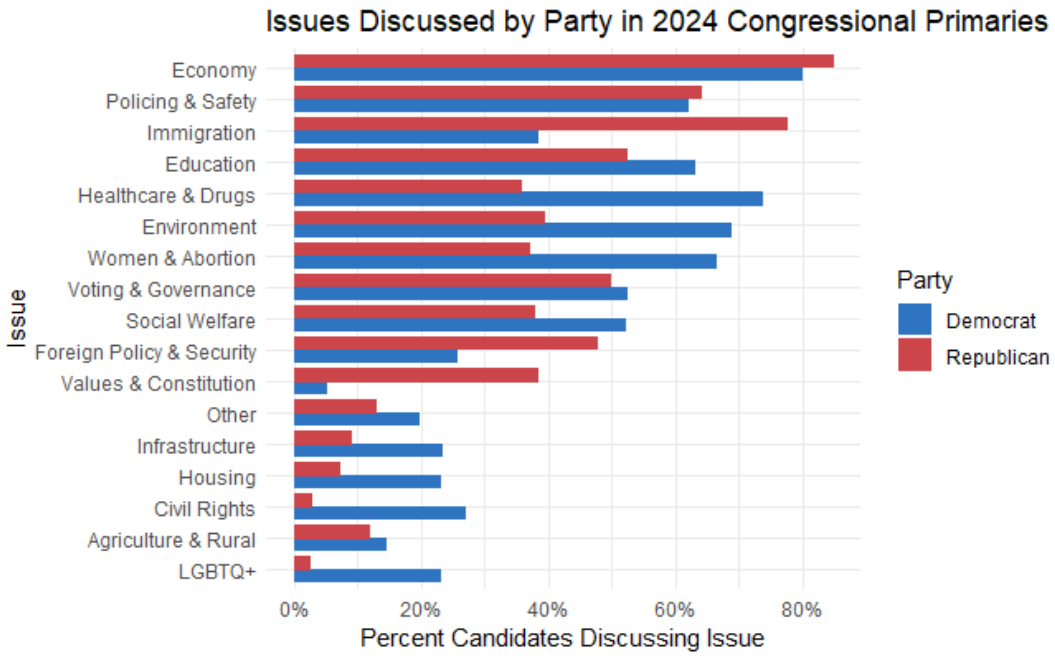


Figure 4.1: Issues Discussed in the 2024 Congressional Primaries, by Party

Now that I have established that candidate behavior can reflect trends of issue ownership, I now turn to my main analysis to examine whether there are observable differences between racial minority candidates and white candidates. With partisanship playing a major role in determining a candidate's agenda, I first compare racial minorities as a whole to their White counterparts within the same political party. I aggregate all racial minorities into one group at this stage because this provides a conservative baseline test of whether *any* differences exist between White and non-White candidates holding party constant. If no systematic differences emerge at this aggregate level, there is little reason to expect meaningful variation across specific racial groups. If differences do appear, however, this suggests that further investigation is needed. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 present these comparisons for Democratic and Republican candidates, respectively.

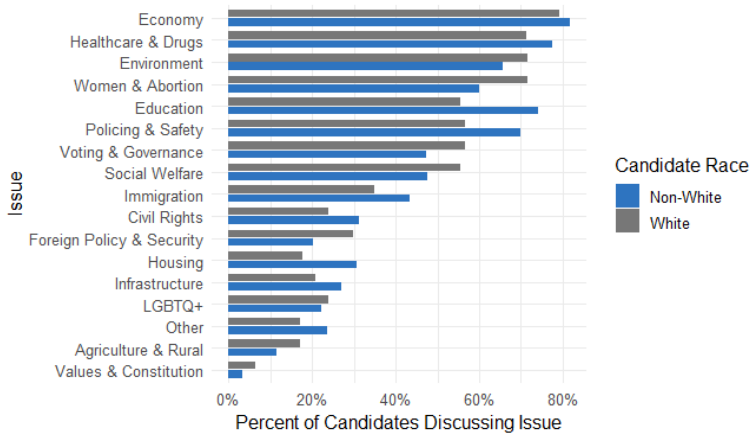


Figure 4.2: Issues Discussed by Democratic Candidates, by Race

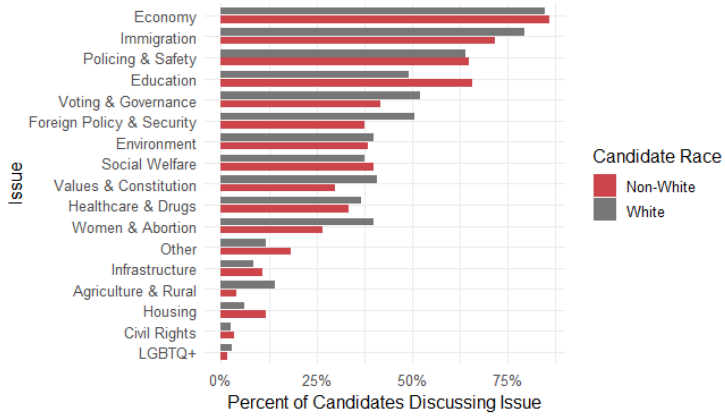


Figure 4.3: Issues Discussed by Republican Candidates, by Race

In general, these figures indicate that there are relatively few differences in the policy platforms of White and non-White candidates within the same party. Most notably, for issue domains most explicitly associated with minority communities, such as civil rights, voting rights, and immigration, minority Democratic candidates seem to be more inclusive of these issues on their platforms compared to white but the difference is not large. This may reflect the extent to which the Democratic Party has incorporated civil rights into its mainstream national platform, where White Democratic candidates are equally likely as their minority counterparts to incorporate civil rights as a key issue in their platform.

One discernable difference, however, is that candidates of color in either party are more likely than their White partisan counterparts to emphasize the policy domains of education and housing; policies that are often associated with racial/ethnic minorities (Bobo 1998; DeBell Tighe 2012; 2017). This is interesting because although education and housing are considered squarely Democratically owned issues, Republican candidates of color seem to include these in their platforms more than White Republicans.

Another interesting trend in these descriptives is that both Democratic and Republican candidates of color alike seem to both be less likely than their White counterparts to address foreign policy and national security as well as women's rights and abortion. However, these descriptive patterns may reflect the influence of other factors, such as gender, incumbency, or district context, rather than race per se. I therefore turn to logistic regression to assess whether racial differences in issue emphasis persist once these alternative explanations are taken into account.

4.4.3 Modeling the Effect of Race on Issue Emphasis

While the descriptive trends are informative, they do not isolate the independent effect of candidate race from district racial and partisan context or other candidate characteristics. The following models address this limitation. I run a series of logistic models dependent variable is whether or not a candidate discussed that issue (1/0), and where the primary independent variable of interest is the candidates' racial group (non-White candidates of color compared to white candidates). The model controls for individual-level factors (incumbency and gender) while also considering district-level variables, such as racial demographics and partisan competition. Given the influence of partisanship, I run each model separately on Democrats and

Republicans, visualized in Figure 4.4 where the dotted line represents White co-partisan candidates as the baseline with 95% confidence intervals.

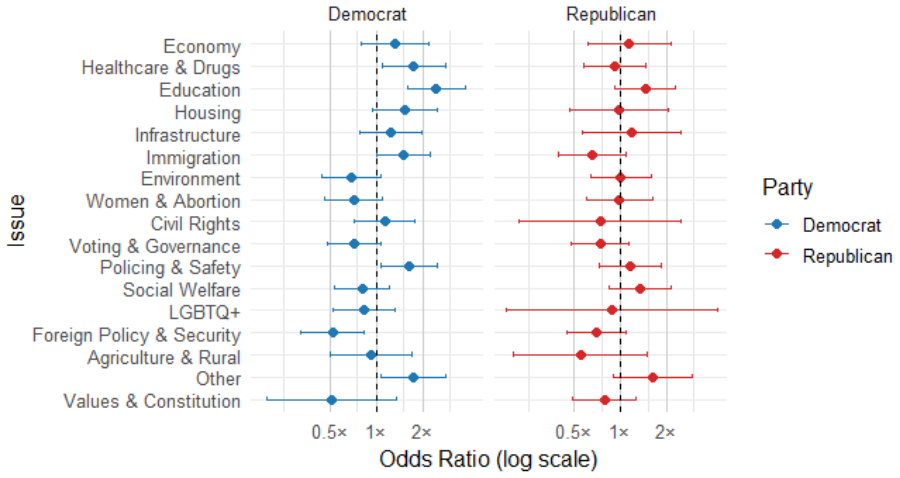


Figure 4.4: Logit Model: Issue Emphasis by Race and Party

Expectedly, the small size of the Republican of color sample makes it difficult to come to any strong conclusions of racial differences in issue emphasis, but the model seems to suggest that in general Republicans of color do not differentially emphasize issues compared to their white counterparts, at least at the statistical significance cutoff of $p<.05$. Thus, I find no statistically significant evidence that supports the idea that Republican candidates of color are more likely to "trespass" on racial issues or Democratically-owned issues compared to their white partisan counterparts.

However, there are notable racial differences in issue emphasis within the Democratic Party. After accounting for relevant candidate and district characteristics, Democrats of color are more likely than White Democrats to discuss healthcare and drugs, education, policing and safety, and other issues. Notably, these are not explicitly "race-specific" domains; however, they are policy areas that are frequently racialized in public discourse and readily interpreted through a racial lens. The fact that candidates of color disproportionately emphasize issue domains that are race-adjacent therefore provides suggestive evidence of racial issue ownership in practice.

Democrats of color, however, are less likely than White Democrats to discuss foreign policy and national security, a pattern that remains even after accounting for additional covariates. This relationship is consistent among Republicans of color compared to White Republicans as well, and even with the small sample size this relationship is close to reaching statistical significance. This is interesting because although the Republican Party has established clear ownership over matters of foreign policy, Republican candidates of color seem to be more likely to shy away from even this well-owned issue. One possible explanation is that candidates of color may, on average, have less prior foreign-policy–related experience than White candidates, such that they are more cautious to run on an issue that they are seen as less qualified to address. While I cannot directly pin down the mechanism for this observation, nonetheless this disparity in issue emphasis is notable and warrants further investigation.

Of course, one of the primary points of this dissertation is to expand past the White/Black binary when it comes to examining campaign strategy. That is, there is reason to suspect that some issues may be more emphasized by one racial minority group over the other, given racial associations that may benefit them. I break down analysis by race among the Democratic Party. Given that disaggregating the small sample of Republican candidates of color by race and issue provides too small of a sample to produce meaningful models, I am limited to modeling Democratic candidates by race and issue only. Appendix Figures B1, Figure B2, and Figure B3 show how Asian, Black, and Latino Democratic candidates compare to a white Democratic baseline, respectively, on each issue domain. For brevity, I report below only those issue domains in which we expected there to be a difference, based on racial associations with each racial group. I include the domains of civil rights, immigration, education, housing, and policing and safety in Figure 4.5 below.

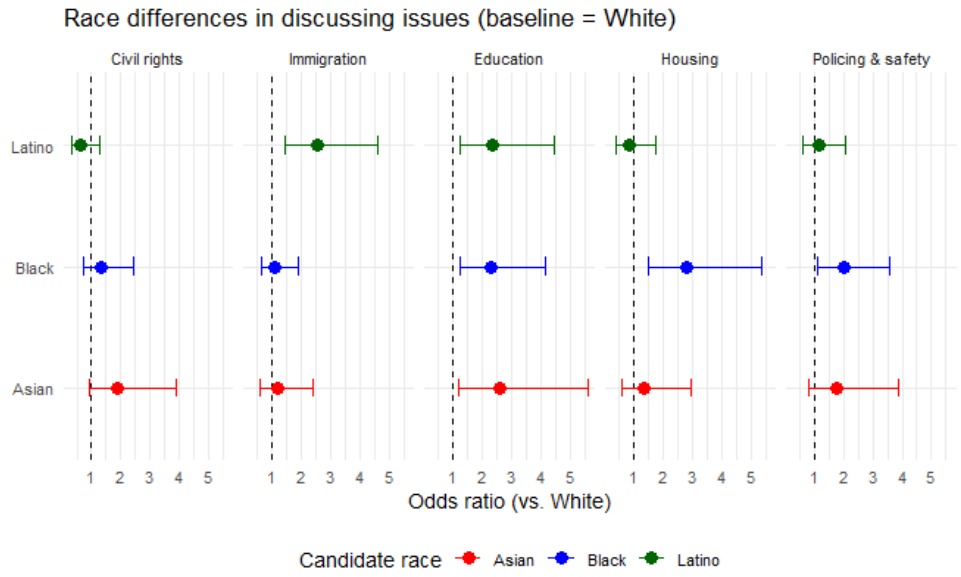


Figure 4.5: Logit Model: Issue Emphasis by Race among Democrats

This disaggregated analysis reveals patterns that were obscured when candidates were simply grouped as "White" versus "non-White." Rather than a single minority–majority contrast, the figure demonstrates meaningful heterogeneity in issue emphasis across different racial minority groups that was obscured by the aggregate analysis. Consistent with expectations, Latino Democratic candidates stand out on immigration: they are substantially more likely than White Democrats to emphasize this issue, underscoring the continued centrality of immigration to Latino political representation and campaign strategy. Indeed, that Latino candidates are more willing to run on immigration reflects the lesson learned from Shortle and Johnson's (2017) study: that racial groups can "own" issues, and that running on these "owned" issues can be strategically advantageous.

The figure also indicates that Black Democratic candidates are more likely than White Democrats to foreground housing and policing and safety, aligning with longstanding links between Black representation and attention to addressing inequality. Although housing and policing and safety can be considered "universal" or "non-race-specific" issues, Black candidates

may be able to gain an advantage by discussing these issues given that they have been so strongly associated with the Black community in the minds of American voters, and this link is reflected in candidates' campaign choices.

One of my expectations was that Asian candidates would be more likely than White candidates to talk about education. This is true; however, other candidates of color (Latinos and Blacks) are also more likely than Whites to talk about education. This suggests that education in general is a domain in which candidates of color feel comfortable engaging with. However, given the relatively small number of Asian candidates in the sample, this estimate may understate the true difference; with a larger Asian sample, the distinction from both White and other minority candidates might be even more pronounced.

Finally, disaggregation across race shows differences in issue emphasis that were previously obscured in the aggregated analysis. That is, when minority Democratic candidates were pooled together, there appeared to be no meaningful difference in discussing civil rights/racial justice compared to White Democratic candidates. The race-specific estimates, however, suggest that Asian Democrats are modestly more likely than White Democrats to discuss civil rights, even if this difference is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Given the small Asian sample, this non-significance should be interpreted cautiously rather than as evidence of no effect. Substantively, this pattern may reflect two dynamics: (1) Asian Democratic candidates may feel less electoral constraint in raising civil rights claims compared to other minority Democrats, and (2) they may strategically emphasize civil rights in Democratic primaries to signal solidarity with racial justice priorities, an association perhaps more readily assumed for Black and Latino candidates but less automatically granted to Asian candidates.

4.4.4 Discussion

Do candidates of color run on different policy platforms compared to their white counterparts? Do candidates of color engage in racial issue ownership behavior when choosing their issue platforms? Controlling for relevant covariates, analysis of congressional candidates' campaign issue platforms provide some evidence that minority candidates selectively emphasize issues they perceive as electorally advantageous on the basis of racial associations. Among Democratic candidates, candidates of color are more likely than White candidates to discuss education. Beyond this general pattern, distinct racial differences emerge. Black Democratic candidates are significantly more likely than White Democrats to emphasize housing and policing and public safety, while Latino Democratic candidates are more likely to emphasize immigration. All Democratic candidates of color are more likely than their white counterparts to run on education.

That racial minority groups emphasize a different subset of issues that are consistent with racialized expectations of racial issue ownership is substantively meaningful. Rather than pursuing a fully deracialized campaign strategy, these candidates appear to engage in a strategic form of issue selection that leverages existing racial associations. By emphasizing issues that are widely understood to disproportionately affect their communities, candidates of color may activate racialized considerations and provide more weight to such issues in voters' minds, which can help improve their electoral chances.

However, just because candidates run on certain issues more does not necessarily mean they do so with the conscious intention to tap into racially advantageous issue associations. Instead, one reason why candidates of color may be more likely to run on racially associated issues is simply because these are important to their racial groups, signalling that they will be good substantive representatives to their communities if elected to office. It could also be that the

candidates themselves care particularly about the issue; that Black candidates care more about policing could reflect a history of police brutality, and that Latinos care more about immigration could also be due to threats especially to the Latino immigrant community and proximity to the immigrant experience. However, regardless of the *intention* behind choosing to run on these issues, it is nonetheless important to note that the race of the candidate does indeed seem to shape their campaign behavior.

In all, I provide some evidence that race plays a factor in shaping a candidate's issue agenda strategy. Importantly, however, these findings speak only to *which* issues candidates choose to discuss, not *how* they discuss them. Accordingly, I shift my attention from issue selection to how issues are framed. This allows me to operationalize how candidates invoke race or differentiate their policy agendas in an additional way: by examining whether candidates of color are more likely than White candidates to employ their racial/ethnic identities as a means to "own" an issue.

4.5 Study 2: Racial Differences in Issue Framing

Political scientists who study campaign messaging have focused almost exclusively on *which* issues candidates emphasize, devoting far less attention to *how* candidates discuss those issues. Yet issue emphasis alone obscures meaningful variation in campaign communication. Therefore, models of campaign strategy should incorporate not just what issues are discussed, but also the rhetorical choices campaigns make to address these issues. Candidates can address the same issue in fundamentally different ways, employing distinct frames, narratives, and cues that carry different political implications (Chong and Druckman 2007). In order to craft messaging, a campaign will frame the issue to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" (Entman, 2004, p. 417). Framing does not persuade individuals to adapt

a candidate's position on an issue, but instead is intended to increase the weight given to a particular aspect of an issue (Anderson 1981; Nelson and Oxley 1999).

Therefore, I now shift the analytical focus from issue emphasis to issue racialization. Importantly, however, I do not examine all instances in which candidates bring up race in the framing of an issue. Instead, given my focus is on the concept of racial issue ownership, I look at cases in which candidates engage in racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization.

4.5.1 Establishing Ownership: The Strategic Logic of Identity-Based Issue Racialization

While racial differences in issue emphasis have exposed how candidates of color may rely on implicit racial associations to gain an advantage over a given issue, I argue that candidates can explicitly claim ownership over issues by connecting the issue to a candidates' own racial/ethnic/immigrant background. This is a strategy I call *racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization*. This racialization occurs when candidates invoke their racial, ethnic, or immigrant identities or related experiences while discussing policy issues.

It is not unheard of that candidates use their marginalized identities to frame issues. For example, scholarship on women candidates provides some evidence that framing issues by priming their identities as mothers or by bringing attention to their family to prime favorable associations (Deason, Greenlee and Langner 2015; Deason 2021). In a controlled experiment, Stalsburg (2010) found that those who prime their identities as mothers are seen as particularly competent on issues related to children, boosting support for her.

Why would candidates invoke their racial identities in discussions of policy when "playing the race card" can be politically contentious? Much like women candidates who link policy positions to their identities as mothers, candidates who draw on racialized lived experience personalize political issues, differentiate themselves from competitors, and claim

experiential authority over particular policy domains. By anchoring policy discussion in a personal identity, candidates position themselves as uniquely credible messengers with the legitimacy to speak on specific concerns. This strategy parallels other forms of experiential authority in political communication: candidates who invoke identities such as veteran status when addressing related policy domains benefit from enhanced perceptions of competence and credibility (McLaughlin, Geras, and Rhinehart 2022). Similarly, framing policy through racial or ethnic lived experience may increase perceptions of authenticity, a trait that voters value and reward (Stiers et al. 2019).

4.5.2 Methods: Coding Identity-Based Issue Racialization

To capture this distinction, I employ a combination of keyword matching (from the previous chapter) and manual validation to first code whether candidates racialized each issue domain. An issue was considered racialized if they discussed race in any form, including mentioning race in general, specific racial/ethnic minority groups, or use their racial/ethnic identities in framing the issue. An issue was considered identity-racialized if they explicitly used their racial/ethnic identities or experiences to frame the issue. Coding decisions are dichotomous (0/1), and Table 4.2 provides illustrative examples that clarify the coding scheme.

Table 4.2: Examples of Racialization and Identity-Based Racialization Coding

Issue	Issue Text	Racializes Issue	Identity-Based Racialization
Education	*Jesus Mendoza (AZ–3)* Future-Proofing America The institutional lock-ins driven by the pursuit of unbridled growth have come at the cost of our community's well-being. It's time to reassess our priorities, focusing on improved training in traditional trades, classical education, and advanced sciences to enhance everyone's quality of life through education.	No	No
	Summer Lee (PA–12)	Yes	No

Healthcare	Our healthcare system is fundamentally broken…The COVID-19 pandemic only further exposed the inequities in our healthcare system. **Black, brown, and indigenous adults are more likely to be uninsured than the national average. At the same time, Black people have higher maternal mortality, infant mortality, asthma rates among kids, and are more likely to die from cancer than anyone else. For marginalized communities, access to healthcare is a decision between life and death**.		
‘ **Immigration**	*Delia Ramirez (IL–3):* IMMIGRATION ROOTED: **Delia is the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants** who worked tirelessly to secure a brighter future for her and her siblings. **She is also the only member of Congress who is married to a DACA recipient and understands firsthand the importance of creating a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients.**.. READY Delia has been a **champion for immigrant families** in Congress. **She unwaveringly advocates for a pathway to citizenship for the more than 11 million undocumented people in the U.S. She is fighting to allow DACA recipients the ability to permanently adjust their legal status, to eliminate the case backlog in immigration court, to reduce fees so that more people can file for citizenship, and to end deportations to keep families together.**	Yes	Yes

4.5.3 Results

First, I show what percentage of each issue domain was racialized at all, conditional upon those that discussed that issue. Figure 4.6 visualizes this, where we can interpret this graph as of the candidates who discussed civil rights, over 89% of these candidates mentioned race in their framing of the issue. The top five most racialized issues are the domains of civil rights, followed by immigration, education, housing, policing and safety. These issues are familiar in that these are the issues run on most by Democratic candidates of color. While racialization is not common in many issue domains, this figure demonstrates that a non-trivial proportion of candidates are mentioning race in some form when they frame their discussion of an issue.

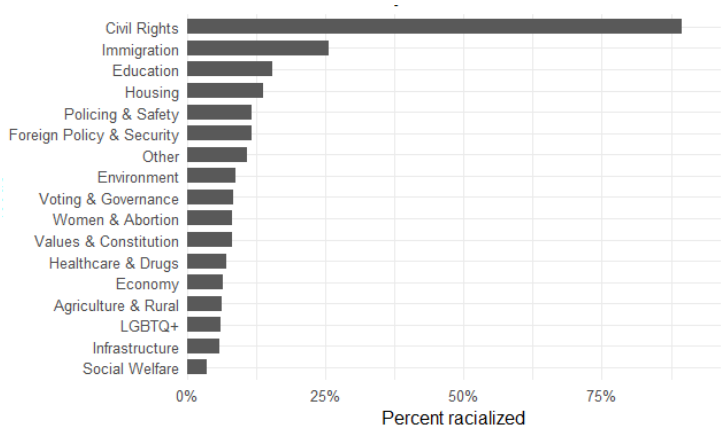


Figure 4.6: Percent of Candidates who Racialized a Given Issue

However, given that my primary focus is not whether they racialize the issue, but rather whether they use their racial/ethnic identities or experiences to frame ownership of the issue, I next show, out of instances of issue racialization, what proportion of racialization used a racial/ethnic identity-based frame, which I visualize in Figure 4.7 . These figures show that identity-based racialization is not as prevalent as general issue racialization; in fact, only 17% of all issues racialized used a racial identity based frame. However, I show in Figure 4.8 that, as expected, candidates of color are much more likely to use such identity-based frames compared to White candidates, with 70% of all instances of identity-based issue racialization being attributed to candidates of color.

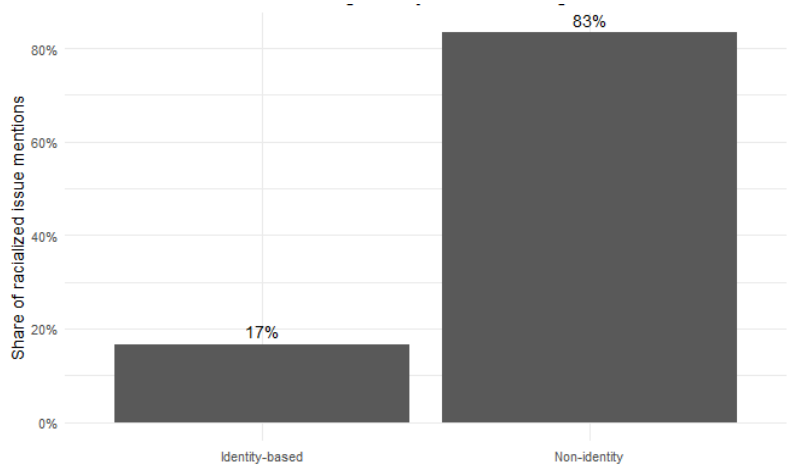


Figure 4.7: Percent of Issues Identity Racialized and Generally Racialized

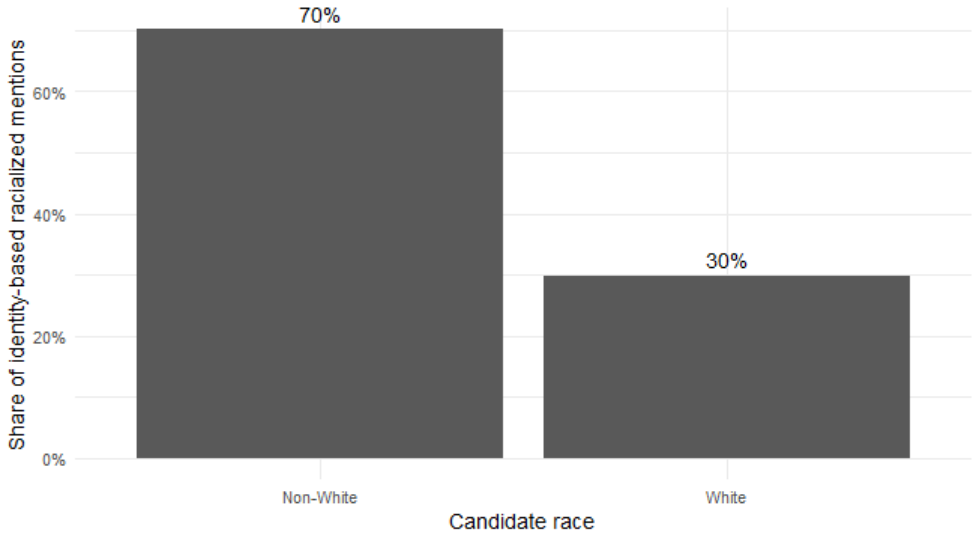


Figure 4.8: Identity-Based Racialization, by Race

Among these candidates of color, I examine which groups are more susceptible to using racial/ethnic identity-based issue framing. I run a logistic model where the dependent variable is using identity-based racial framing of any issue (0/1), controlling for relevant covariates. I then calculated predicted probabilities of using racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization with race as the key predictor. I show the model by race where White candidates are the baseline in Figure 4.9; bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

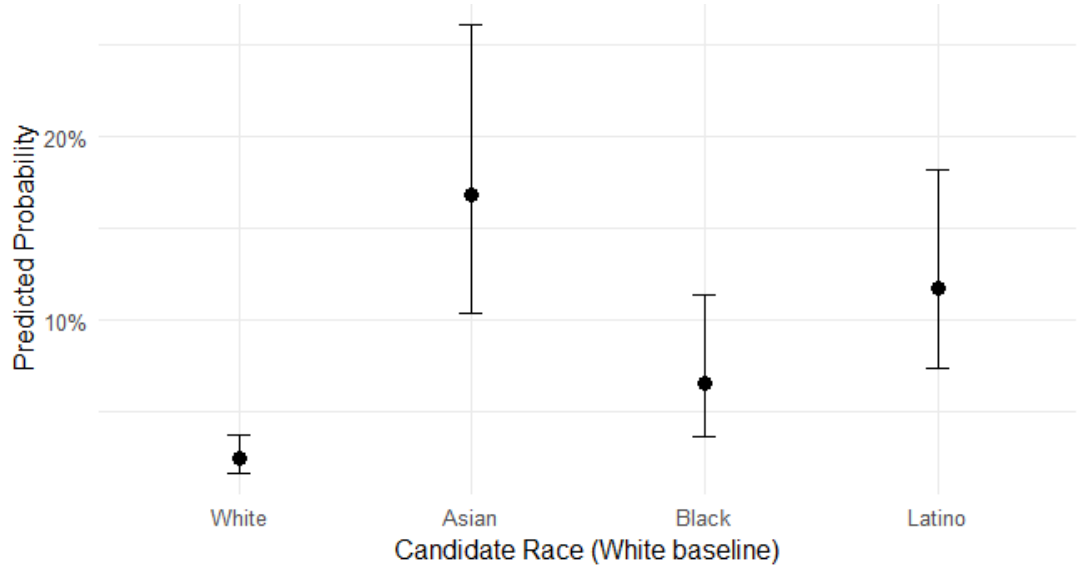


Figure 4.9: Predicted Probability of Racial/Ethnic Identity-Based Issue Racialization, by Race

I find that, compared to White candidates, Asian, Black, and Latino candidates are all significantly more likely to employ racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization when discussing issues. When comparing candidates of color to one another, however, important differences emerge. Latino candidates are not statistically more likely than Black candidates to use racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization, whereas Asian candidates are. One possible explanation is that stereotypes associated with Asian candidates are comparatively more favorable than those associated with Black and Latino candidates, lowering the electoral risks of priming an Asian American identity. This pattern mirrors the findings from the previous chapter, which showed that Asian candidates are, overall, the most likely to racialize their self-presentations.

What Issues are Racial/Ethnic Identity-Racialized?

Now that I have established a pattern of who engages in racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization in general, now we will examine the types of issues discussed using a candidates' race/ethnicity across candidate race and party. In Figure 4.10 and 4.11, I visualize the percentage of Democratic and Republican Asian, Black, and Latino candidates who used identity-based racialized framing when discussing a given issue. Again, I remove any issues in which less than 5 candidates engaged in racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization, which accounts for the number of missing issues among Republicans in Figure 4.11.

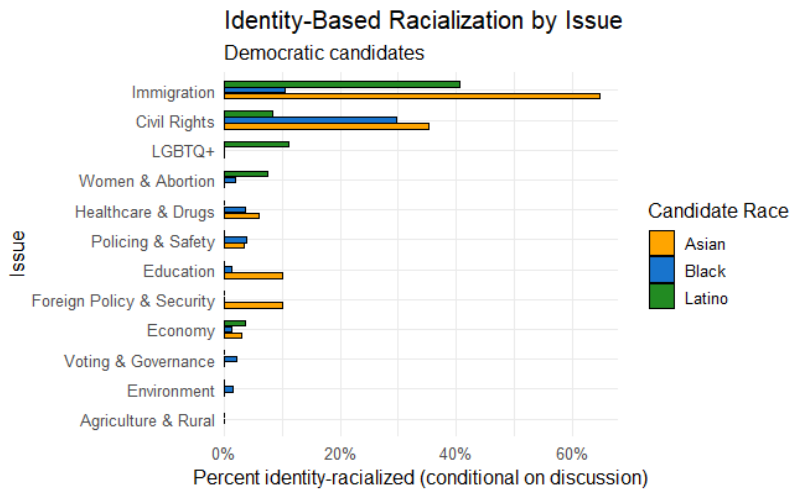


Figure 4.10: Racial Differences in Identity-Based Racialization Among Democratic Candidates

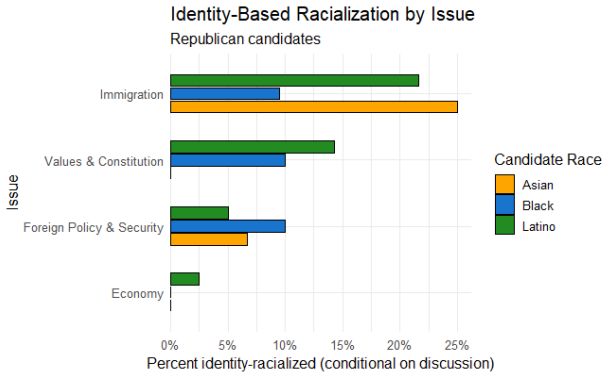


Figure 4.11: Racial Differences in Identity-Based Racialization Among Republican Candidates

I find that the types of issues that candidates of color use racial/ethnic identity issue framing can be found among the types of issues that are consistent with what we have seen candidates to already "own". For example, Latino and Asian candidates in both political parties use their racial/ethnic identities to discuss immigration; Asian Democrats do so with education; and Black Democratic candidates do this with civil rights, policing, and voting rights. In this way, identity-based issue racialization in these realms may seek to make explicit the association of the issue with the race of the candidate.

However, candidates also seem to use their racial/ethnic identities to expand the types of issues they can talk about. For example, Black Democrats additionally use their identities in

discussion of healthcare, in particular discussion of personal experiences with healthcare disparities. Latino Democrats similarly insert racial/ethnic identity-based narratives in discussing women's issues and LGBTQ issues; which, although I do not visualize the gendered nature of identity-based racialization here, I find to be primarily driven by Latina candidates who use intersectional frameworks of solidarity to apply to their advocacy for other marginalized groups. Asian Democrats, in addition to immigration and education, frequently use identity-based racialization in their discussions of healthcare, civil rights, and even foreign policy. In examining how and why they do this in their healthcare policy discussions, I present an example from Bhavini Patel, who ran for Pennsylvania's 12th District:

> "BHAVINI BELIEVES IN Access to Affordable Healthcare…As the child of an immigrant, I understand firsthand the challenges of navigating lack of access to affordable healthcare and the economic fears associated with unexpected illness. Every American deserves to live without fear of health scares transforming the trajectory of their life outcomes. In Congress, I will stand up to greedy pharmaceutical companies, fight for access to high-quality affordable healthcare and work to lower drug prices and the cost of insurance."

Here, Patel invokes her identity as an immigrant to reinforce the idea that she has had personal experiences and difficulties with navigating the healthcare system, which helps to establish that she is knowledgeable about how the most marginalized communities also struggle with navigating healthcare.

In the realm of civil rights, while Black candidates are already well associated with the issue, Asian and Latino Democrats must also signal to Democratic voters of their minority status and personal stake in addressing the issue, and thus invoke their own personal experiences to reinforce their minority status and prime solidarity with other racial/ethnic minorities. For example, Democratic incumbent Pramila Jayapal of Washington's 7th District writes in her "Racial Justice" section that she "has been fighting for racial justice her whole life. As a woman of color and an immigrant, she knows exactly what it means to be in the minority."

In addition, Latino candidate Ritchie Torres of New York's 15th district makes the connection that "Economic, racial, environmental and social justice are inextricably bound together. In Congress, Ritchie is committed to championing justice for working people in NY-15. Communities like the South Bronx are plagued by disinvestment and neglect. Ritchie will center his fight for justice on the communities that have been left behind. The greatest asset that I bring to public life is the wisdom of lived experience. I don't come from a political family. I don't come from privilege. I don't have fancy degrees but I know what it's like to grow up in poverty. Those lived experiences not only inform who I am, but are going to motivate much of what I do in Washington, D.C."

In this messaging, both Jayapal and Torres make use of lived experience tied to race to justify their unique qualifications to address racial justice. Jayapal is explicit in her identity as a woman of color and an immigrant as the reason for why she both understands the minority experience and why she will best be able to address it. While Torres does not talk about his lived experience in terms of race, by discussing his lived experiences in the context of a justice-based agenda, the message is implied that he has lived the experiences those in his diverse district have, and that he will be able to authentically represent his district because of these experiences.

For the few instances of observed racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization among Republicans, it seems that a majority of these racial/ethnic identity-based frameworks are used to reinforce their conservative stance on issues. For example, one popular identity-racialized domain, outside of immigration, is an issue domain I labeled as "Values and the Constitution". I present an example from Latino Republican candidate Luisa del Rosal, who ran for the open seat in Texas' 26th Congressional District. She writes in a section entitled "Values Rooted in Faith and Family":

> "There is a cultural rot spreading in the roots of American society….Democrats use Marxist identity to divide America by race, class, and sexual identity, pitting neighbor against neighbor and citizen against citizen in a false zero-sum game. As a Hispanic immigrant, Luisa rejects the left's attempts to divide our nation. The foundation of America is built on individual liberty and equal opportunity. Luisa is living the American Dream. Her story is living proof that if you work hard in America, your opportunities are limitless. Democrats have no answer for that!"

Del Rosal makes a clear and explicit connection to her identity as a Hispanic immigrant to protecting "American values". In doing so, she simultaneously uses her identity to be seen as qualified and credible to address "cultural rot", while also reaffirming her conservatism to her Republican base. In a less explicit example of identity-based racialization in the domain of discussing the issue of values, Juan Ciscomani, the Latino incumbent running for Arizona's competitive 6th district, notes in a section entitled "American Values":

> "Washington liberals are losing sight of what it is to be an American – worse, many of them seem ashamed of being Americans…Juan will stand up to extreme ideas like Critical Race Theory, which teaches that race matters more than hard work and individual effort. He knows from personal experience that's not true, and Juan will fight to stop these dangerous ideas at every turn. Our country's future depends on it. Juan and his family are living the American Dream – a dream he will fight to protect."

While not as explicit as del Rosal, in this example Ciscomani invokes his personal experience coming from a Latino immigrant family member to reject claims associated with Critical Race Theory, contrasting racialized structural explanations with individual effort and hard work. By grounding this argument in his lived experience as a Latino, Ciscomani is able to establish ownership of the issue while reinforcing core conservative values such as individualism and meritocracy. This form of racialization allows Republican candidates of color to engage race in ways that bolster ideological credibility and authenticity, and in addition may persuade Latino voters, who make up 24% of Arizona's 6th district, by priming shared experiences and reframing racial identity in ways that align Latino identity with conservative values rather than progressive racial politics.

Foreign Policy as an Issue of Interest

Of particular interest is the domain of foreign policy. While I did not include Whites in the racial breakdown above, I include a comparison of Whites vs. Non-Whites by political party in their usage of racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization in Appendix Figure B4. I observe that White and Asian Democrats, and Republicans of color, seem to especially use their racial/ethnic identities to frame their issue positions. This may present as a unique in-roads for candidates seeking to expand their coalition. Given that the issue is dominated by Republican candidates, Asian and White Democratic candidates may be drawing on personal or familial ties to regions of origin, refugee histories, or lived experience with geopolitical conflict to establish experiential authority across issue domains not typically considered "Democratic" issues. In the case of Republicans of color, they may use identity-based racialized framings to attempt to gain credibility in an issue domain not typically associated with the strengths of racial/ethnic minority candidates. I will explore this in detail in the next chapter.

4.5.4 Discussion

In this section, I shifted from examining issue emphasis to assessing whether candidates explicitly deploy racial or ethnic identity frameworks when discussing specific policy areas—that is, whether they explicitly use identity-based racialization to "own" an issue. Overall, candidates of color in both parties are more likely than their White partisan counterparts to use identity-based racialization when discussing issues. However, this pattern varies meaningfully across issue domains and racial groups.

First, there is variation across racial groups of those engaging in racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization. In general, Asian and Latino candidates, but specifically Asians candidates, appear more likely than White candidates to employ racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization. Second, racial differences emerge by issue area. In most issue domains, candidates

of color are more likely than White candidates to invoke identity frameworks, but an exception appears among White Democrats: White Democratic candidates are more likely than Democratic candidates of color to reference their racial/ethnic identities only when discussing the issues of foreign policy and agriculture. This suggests that White candidates may also draw on their racial/ethnic identity to claim ownership, especially in areas where they may perceive that drawing on their White or ethnic identity to be advantageous.

When examining differences in the types of issues that candidates of color claim racial/ethnic identity-based ownership in, I find that, in general, their explicit race-based ownership claims are congruent with the types of issues they are already most likely to run on. That is, Asian and Latino candidates are especially likely to use identity-based issue racialization in discussing immigration, reinforcing conventional associations between these groups and immigration politics. While all Democratic candidates of color were more likely than White Democrats to discuss education, racial/ethnic identity-based racialization of education policy is largely driven by Asian candidates, suggesting that while all candidates of color run on education more so than White candidates, Asian candidates are also willing to make the racial association between education and their race explicit to voters. Lastly, Black candidates most consistently use their racial identities and experiences to discuss civil rights, policing, voting rights – all issues areas in which they already hold a strong implicit racial association with.

Importantly, however, identity-based racial framing seems to allow for more flexibility in claiming ownership over other issue domains that are not already implicitly associated with race. For example, Latino candidates, but particularly Latinas, are especially likely to racialize LGBTQ+ and women's issues, often through an intersectional framework that emphasizes solidarity and overlapping marginalizations. This is consistent with literature that shows that

women of color are most likely to invoke identities and experiences in their campaign messaging compared to their male and White counterparts (Brown and Gershon 2019).

Lastly, racial/ethnic identity-based racialization in foreign policy and security, a non-racialized issue, is driven primarily by Republicans of color and White and Asian Democratic candidates. This is particularly surprising, given that foreign policy was significantly less likely to be an issue that candidates of color, especially Democrats of color, are willing to run on compared to their white counterparts. Thus, in the instances in which they do talk about foreign policy, that they do so using their racial/ethnic identities is especially interesting, and reflects the possibility of the usage of ethnic diasporic ties and migration experiences to be used towards "trespassing" on non-racial, non- "owned" issues.

4.6 Conclusion

How do candidates navigate race in their issue agendas? Do candidates use race to "own" issues? I explore these questions in two ways, using candidates' real-world campaign policy platforms to determine whether candidates behave in such a way that aligns with a theory of racial issue ownership. First, I examined whether candidates of color are more likely to run on racial or racially-associative issue domains. I argued that even though candidates of color may emphasize "universal" issues such as housing, education, and immigration, by virtue of their status as a candidate of color there is already a racialized association that can be used towards improving their evaluations through the strategic choice of choosing their policy platforms. By priming voters to give weight to issues that are congruent with the race of the candidate, candidates can leverage this congruency to improve evaluations from voters.

I find that, controlling for relevant covariates, minority candidates do not treat all issues equally, but instead selectively emphasize issues. For example, among Democratic candidates,

candidates of color are more likely than White candidates to discuss education. Beyond this general pattern, distinct racial differences emerge. Black Democratic candidates are significantly more likely than White Democrats to emphasize housing and policing and public safety, while Latino Democratic candidates are more likely to emphasize immigration.

That minority candidates emphasize a different subset of issues that are largely consistent with racialized expectations about issue ownership is substantively meaningful. Rather than pursuing a fully deracialized campaign strategy, these candidates appear to engage in a strategic form of issue selection that leverages existing racial associations. By emphasizing issues that are widely understood to disproportionately affect their communities, candidates of color may activate racialized considerations that can improve their evaluations.

However, some candidates may attempt to make the connection between race and issue ownership explicit by framing an issue as connected to their racial/ethnic identities or experiences. By examining issue framing, rather than simply variation in issue selection, I find even more evidence in campaign behavior that candidates perceive their racial/ethnic identities to give them a boost when it comes to racially-associative issues. However, I also find that while candidates of color and Democrats are less likely to run on issues such as foreign policy and national security, when they do do so, these candidates often use their racial or ethnic identities to frame the issue. This suggests that campaigns perceive these domains as particularly amenable to racial/ethnic identity framing. I will explore this dynamic in the following chapter.

5 Can Race Travel? Racial Advantage Beyond Traditional Issue Domains

5.1 Introduction

The issue of foreign policy has been especially politically salient in contemporary American politics. One country that has been consistently on the radar of American foreign policy is China, as it continuously rises as a global superpower. Candidates across the political spectrum, but especially candidates running on Republican platforms, frequently frame China as a geopolitical threat to the U.S., warning of economic competition, espionage, and national security risks. For example, during the 2024 election cycle Republican candidate Michael LiPetri (NY–3) argued on his campaign website that "America has a lot of enemies, chief among them, China," warning that the Chinese Communist Party is attempting to infiltrate American institutions and influence domestic politics. Many other candidates in 2024 included calls to hold China accountable for the COVID-19 pandemic.

While such messaging fits squarely within the Republican Party's broader foreign policy agenda, it also contributes to narratives that have been linked to rising anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. For example, scholars have shown that political rhetoric, especially by political elites, tying China to national threats—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—contributed to increased hostility toward Asian Americans broadly in the American public (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020; Jeung and Nham 2020; Tessler, Choi and Kao 2020; Chan, Kim and Leung 2022; Reny and Barreto 2022).

Given these dynamics, one might expect Asian American candidates in particular to avoid discussion of China altogether. Asian Americans in the mass public have long been associated with stereotypes of foreignness and conditional belonging in the United States (Tuan

1998; Kim 1999; Cheryan and Monin 2005). Geopolitical tensions involving Asian countries have the potential to heighten these perceptions, making Asian Americans particularly vulnerable to suspicion about national loyalty or foreign allegiances (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zou and Cheryan 2017; Lee and Sheng 2024).

Indeed, as I found in the previous chapter, most Asian American candidates in the 2024 election cycle largely avoided foreign policy in general in their campaign messaging, and those who did address it often relied on ambiguous, generic messaging, such as "Peace through Strength" or "Maintaining International Diplomacy". Yet some candidates did the opposite. Representative Michelle Steel, for example, a Korean-born Republican incumbent representing California's 45th congressional district, prominently emphasized confronting China in her campaign platform. On her website, Steel declared that "Communist China continues to be one of our greatest threats abroad," arguing that the United States must hold the Chinese government accountable for its growing geopolitical influence and human rights abuses.

Steel's messaging presents an interesting puzzle. As a foreign-born Asian American candidate with an accent, Steel is vulnerable to the same foreignness stereotypes that Asian Americans frequently encounter. Yet rather than avoiding an issue that could potentially activate those stereotypes, she chose to emphasize it. One interpretation is that this strategy allows Steel to distance herself from potential suspicions about national loyalty by signaling a hardline stance against China. At the same time, foregrounding Asia-related foreign policy may also allow her to claim a form of credibility or expertise on the issue. This example raises a broader question: can candidates of color leverage racial identity to claim credibility on, or, "own", other issues that are not traditionally associated with race?

In the last chapter, I made the argument that candidates of color can strategically leverage their issue platforms to emphasize issues that their racial group is perceived to "own", or frame issues using their racial/ethnic identities in order to gain an advantage in that issue. However, Democratic candidates of color in particular typically do this primarily in issues in which they are already advantaged, such as civil rights, immigration, and education. While running on these issue domains and leveraging race/ethnicity in the framing of these issues may perhaps extend advantages for Democratic candidates of color running against White Democrats in closed primary elections, running on these issues alone may not be able to capture a broader coalition of voters, particularly if they seek to capture Republican-leaning voters. Thus, for those who seek to capture a broader coalition of voters, they may attempt to gain an advantage over issues that may not be associated with their party, but may be associated with their race. Thus, I pivot in this chapter to examine what other issues racial/ethnic minority candidates may be able to own.

In this chapter, I ask: can candidates of color have race-based advantages on other issues? In particular, I focus on the issue domain of foreign policy. I choose to focus on foreign policy because in the last chapter, I find that Democratic candidates of color are much less likely than White Democratic candidates to mention foreign policy on their issues platforms. However, when Asian Democratic candidates did discuss foreign policy, many used their racial/ethnic identities to frame the issue Among Republicans, the most pronounced difference in issue platforms between Republicans of color and White Republican candidates was in the realm of foreign policy, where Republicans of color were also less like likely than their White counterparts to mention foreign policy; again, however, Republicans of color who did include foreign policy on their platforms used their racial/ethnic identities as a means to talk about their policy positions on the issue.

While the discrepancy in issue emphasis may be due to systematic differences in military or foreign policy experience, that candidates of color are less likely to discuss foreign policy is especially interesting when considering the case of Asian and Latino candidates. Given that Asian and Latino candidates deal with the "forever foreigner" stereotype, they may be careful to avoid priming the stereotype by avoiding addressing foreign affairs; especially foreign affairs with parts of the world that are associated with Asian and Latino communities. However, the lens that I have consistently used throughout this dissertation is that racial associations may not necessarily be disadvantageous. In this chapter, I explore whether this is the case in a survey experiment.

5.2 Foreign Policy as a Campaign Issue

First, what is foreign policy? Scholars typically define foreign policy as the set of strategies and actions governments pursue in their interactions with actors outside their national borders in order to advance national interests and influence international outcomes (Rosenau 1969; Hill 2003; Hudson 2005). Obviously, this definition encompasses a wide range of areas; "managing relationships" may mean economic/trade relationships, managing conflicts or war, or maintaining diplomatic relations with non-U.S. entities. While U.S. foreign policy is complex and is subject to changing contexts, especially dependent upon the President and Congress (Hilsman 1964; Farnham 2004), the general consensus of American foreign policy is to "serve American interests". Although Americans often disagree on specific foreign policy positions, scholars note that there is broad consensus on several core objectives of U.S. foreign policy, including protecting national security, maintaining global leadership, supporting allies, and advancing American economic interests (Kohut and Stokes 2006).

It is important to note, however, that the definition of American interests may change depending on the actors in charge of creating foreign policy and setting the agenda (Scott and Rosati 2020). While research has pointed to how the public, organizations and institutions, and the President shape U.S. foreign policy (Jacobs and Page 2005), other scholars have pointed to how Congress has increasingly gained influence over foreign policy decisions, especially in relation to foreign economic policy given that Congress has the power of the purse (Pastor 1980). Given that congressional members play a role in influencing U.S. foreign policy, congressional candidates must decide whether they choose to include foreign policy on their campaign platforms, and how they talk about it.

Foreign policy issues—such as national security, diplomacy, and international conflict—are often perceived by voters as an issue domain that requires particular competence, strength, and leadership (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Ghosh and Bhowick 2024). For some candidates, then, running on foreign policy as a prominent issue domain can be particularly advantageous, especially if they are successful at conveying their ability to address the issue. Thus, even though members of Congress exercise only partial control over foreign policy outcomes, congressional candidates frequently campaign on foreign policy (Mayhew 1974; Petrocik 1996).

Who "Owns" Foreign Policy?

One of the most consistent findings from the partisan issue ownership literature is that foreign policy is a strongly Republican owned issue domain (Petrocik 1996; Hayes 2005; Sides 2006; Egan 2013). Although public opinion can shift over time and across specific international events, studies spanning several decades find that Americans tend to view Republicans as more competent on issues involving national defense and foreign affairs (Aldrich, Sullivan, and

Borgida 1989; Holsti 2004). As a result, Republican candidates are more likely to frequently emphasize foreign policy and national security in their campaigns as a way to signal competence and gain advantages by priming voters with issues that they are perceived to "own" by virtue of their partisan affiliation.

In addition to the majority of American voters perceiving Republican candidates as being more competent in addressing foreign affairs, there is also a gendered dynamic. That is, the American public often perceives that men are more capable than women in handling foreign affairs, perceiving the domain to be a "masculine" issue (Dolan 2005). The mechanism behind this preference is thought to be that feminine stereotypes associated women candidates with being "weak", and that there is a natural association between men and military experience that confers a gendered advantage (Schroeder 2017). Women candidates can attempt to counteract their baseline disadvantage in addressing foreign policy by framing their stances as "hawkish", taking hard-line, aggressive foreign policy positions (Post and Sen 2020; Schwartz and Blair 2020; Kim and Kang 2022). These counter-stereotypical framing strategies can sometimes pay off; for example, Humayun (2025) finds that hawkishness by female legislators in Pakistan can attenuate the credibility challenges associated with being on a foreign policy legislative committee.

Thus, in the domain of foreign policy, the literature consistently shows that men and Republicans are viewed as more capable of handling national security and international affairs (Petrocik 1996; Hayes 2005; Sides 2006; Post and Sen 2020). There is little scholarship examining whether similar dynamics operate along racial lines. However, research in political psychology and sociology suggests that perceptions of American national identity and leadership are often associated with whiteness. For example, studies show that Americans implicitly

associate being "American" with being white (Devos and Banaji 2005), and that white individuals are more likely to be perceived as prototypical leaders compared to racial minorities (Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips 2008). Taken together, these literatures suggest that white candidates benefit from racialized implicit advantages on issues associated with authority and national defense. While the existing scholarship does not explicitly conceptualize foreign policy as a racially "owned" issue, these findings imply that whiteness, like Republican partisanship and masculinity, may confer credibility advantages in domains such as national security and foreign affairs.

Framing Foreign Policy

While Democrats, women, and candidates of color may not hold a baseline advantage in the realm of foreign policy and thus may choose to exclude discussion on their campaign platforms, candidates cannot always avoid discussing foreign policy; particularly when international conflicts or geopolitical tensions make the issue highly salient to voters. When confronted with an issue that their party does not traditionally "own," candidates may instead attempt to reshape how the issue is evaluated by voters. One common strategy is via issue framing**,** in which candidates emphasize dimensions of a policy domain that align with the reputational strengths, traits, or values associated with their personal identities, such as party, race, or gender. Rather than competing directly on their opponent's terms, candidates highlight aspects of the issue that activate evaluative criteria they are perceived to handle well (Petrocik 1996; Sides 2006; Egan 2013).

This strategy is especially relevant in the domain of foreign policy. Although foreign policy and national security are widely perceived as Republican-owned issue domains, Democratic candidates may attempt to "trespass" on these issues by framing them through

themes that align with Democratic reputations for compassion, diplomacy, and humanitarian concern. Rather than emphasizing military strength or geopolitical competition, Democratic candidates can choose to instead focus on diplomacy, human rights, refugee protection, and international cooperation. These types of frames encourage voters to evaluate foreign policy through moral and humanitarian considerations, dimensions that align more closely with stereotypes associated with the strengths of the Democratic Party (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Hayes 2005). An illustrative example comes from Democratic incumbent Raúl Grijalva (AZ–7). On his campaign website, Grijalva writes:

> "I believe that the best policies address the root causes of national and international conflicts rather than exploiting fear or offering a false sense of security. Unfortunately, Congressional Republicans have resorted to fear tactics and xenophobia to push hawkish policies and prevent immigrants from seeking refuge in our country. Instead of promoting an environment of hatred and intolerance, our domestic and foreign policies should occupy the moral high ground and reflect the best of American values: acceptance of diversity, inclusiveness, and a commitment to civil rights. Since I was elected to Congress, I have helped make sure that we exercise a high degree of caution before we enter into costly wars that risk the lives of our servicemen and women. In addition, I have worked to ensure that the United States remains a nation where the world's most vulnerable people can find refuge and live in peace. I have opposed efforts by Republicans to close our nation to refugees and asylum seekers with his shameful travel ban…"

By emphasizing peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and refugee protection/civil rights, Grijalva situates foreign policy within a moral framework that reflects Democratic priorities while simultaneously contrasting his approach with what he characterizes as Republican reliance on fear-based rhetoric and hawkish policies. In doing so, Grijalva engages with foreign policy while encouraging voters to evaluate the issue through dimensions that favor Democratic reputational strengths.

Similar strategies may also be employed by women candidates, who are often stereotyped as more compassionate and empathetic than their male counterparts (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Women candidates may therefore frame foreign policy through themes of humanitarian protection, civilian safety, and conflict prevention in ways that align with gendered expectations

of compassion and care. For example, Democratic candidate Zerqa Abid (OH–15) stated on her issues page entitled "Foreign Policy and National Security":

> "Zerqa is a mother, a grandmother, an anti-war activist and an anti-gun violence advocate. She always advocates for saving the lives of innocent people first. She strongly advocates for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in any and all cases that involve the lives of civilians. She will advocate to restrict funding and weapon sales to any foreign government or entity suspected of human rights violations and violations of international law. However, she will support funding for global health and nutrition programs, refugee and disaster assistance, etc."

By emphasizing humanitarian concerns and civilian protection, Abid situates foreign policy within a compassionate and moral framework associated with feminine leadership. Her references to being a mother and grandmother especially prime this identity, encouraging voters to view her foreign policy stance as consistent with both her gender and her party.

The effectiveness of such strategies may vary across candidates. While men like Grijalva may be able to benefit from adopting more conciliatory or humanitarian foreign policy frames, women candidates face additional constraints. Research suggests that women can be penalized for adopting "dovish" positions on national security issues, as voters may interpret these positions as confirming stereotypes that women are weaker on defense (Post and Sen 2020; Blair and Schwartz 2023). As a result, although framing provides a mechanism for candidates to engage with issues they do not traditionally own, the strategic benefits of particular frames may depend on how they interact with existing stereotypes.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how candidates can engage with foreign policy (even when it is not traditionally associated with their group) by emphasizing aspects of the issue that align with their perceived strengths. Rather than avoiding the issue entirely, candidates may strategically frame foreign policy in ways that activate evaluative criteria favorable to their political coalition.

5.3 Racial/Ethnic Identity Framing and Foreign Policy

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the other ways in which candidates may successfully "trespass" on issues is through the emphasis of their personal records, qualifications, or identities (Sides 2006; Arbour 2014). In terms of foreign policy, mentioning one's military experience or veteran status can be advantageous (McLaughlin, Geras and Rhinehart 2022), especially for Democratic candidates who aim to appear competent in an issue owned by the Republican party. Outside of military experience or veteran identity, one way in which candidates can combine both issue framing and identity-based qualifications is through framing foreign policy through a combination of both racial/ethnic identity and region-specific issues.

For example, in the context of the 2024 election a large proportion of candidates mentioned the conflict in Israel/Gaza as primary points of concern, especially given that a majority of primary elections occurred as college campuses were conducting large-scale protests and demonstrations in response to Israel's war tactics against Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank. Candidates who may otherwise not have addressed foreign policy were forced to speak on the extremely polarizing issue. One particular piece of interest are the White Democratic candidates who emphasized their Jewish ethnic and religious identities when addressing Israel/Gaza. For example, Democratic incumbent candidate Jerry Nadler (NY–12) wrote on his campaign website:

> "As the last remaining Jewish Member of Congress from New York, Jerry is a national leader within the Democratic party on all issues related to Jewish values, and especially Israel. Jerry has always been a strong supporter of a two-state solution and believes that both the Israeli and the Palestinian people possess the right to self-determination and security. He has consistently repudiated the extremism on both sides of the debate–Jerry has called on the Israeli government to adhere to democratic norms while vehemently condemning any rhetoric denying Israel's right to exist. Jerry has also been a singularly outspoken voice against pernicious antisemitism…"

Another example of a candidate using their Jewish identity to frame their region-specific foreign policy messaging is that of Democratic candidate Isaac (Ike) McCorkle (CO–4):

> "Ike's father Leon Bienn's family is Jewish and Ike has family in Israel (and serving in the IDF) who were directly affected by and are involved in the war. The brutality and barbarism displayed by the terrorists on Oct 7th cannot be tolerated."

While these candidates differ in their positions on Israel, their messaging consistently underscores the value of invoking Jewish identity and connections to the Jewish community when discussing the issue. The value in identity is further reinforced by non-Jewish candidates; for example, the opening line of Tom Suozzi's (NY–3) statement on Israel describes him as "Congress's most reliable non-Jewish Democrat in support of Israel." Together, these examples suggest that candidates perceive strategic value in signaling racial/ethnic identities in the framing of foreign policy issues tied to an associated group or region.

5.4 Can Asian and Latino Candidates "Own" Foreign Policy?

Building on evidence that candidates leverage identity to claim credibility in region-specific foreign policy domains, I consider whether Asian and Latino candidates can similarly establish ownership over region-specific foreign policy issues. In particular, I examine whether racialized associations with Asia and Latin America can translate into perceived competence in U.S.–China and U.S.–Mexico relations.

A large body of scholarship documents that Asian and Latino individuals in the United States are frequently racialized as "perpetual foreigners," regardless of citizenship status or generational tenure. Despite longstanding histories in the United States, continued immigration from Asia and Latin America has reinforced the association between these groups and foreignness in the public imagination (Tuan 1998; Kim 1999; Zou and Cheryan 2017). This "forever foreigner" stereotype is typically understood as a disadvantage, as it can undermine perceptions of belonging and national identity.

However, this same stereotype may be strategically leveraged under certain conditions. In the domain of foreign policy, perceived foreignness and proximity with foreign experience can be reinterpreted as a form of experiential or cultural proximity that enhances credibility, if framed in the correct way. That is, Asian and Latino candidates may be viewed as possessing unique insight, knowledge, or personal connection to the regions in question, allowing them to frame their racial or ethnic background as a qualification rather than a liability. If voters interpret these racialized associations as informative cues about candidates' expertise or familiarity with international affairs, then foreignness may be transformed into an advantage in specific policy domains.

This argument builds on theories of issue ownership, which suggest that candidates are perceived as more competent on issues that are associated with their group. Extending this logic, I propose a framework of *racialized issue ownership*, in which candidates may gain credibility not only on traditionally racial domestic issues linked to their racial or ethnic identity (e.g., immigration or civil rights), but also on international issues tied to regions with which their group is closely associated. Through campaign messaging, candidates may be able to activate favorable race-based associations through issue emphasis and framing. The racial issue ownership framework, therefore, generates the following hypothesis: candidates whose racial or ethnic background is associated with a specific world region will be perceived as more competent in addressing foreign policy issues related to that region.

5.5 Methods

To test whether this is the case, I designed a survey experiment to identify whether Asian and Latino candidates are rewarded or punished for running on region-specific foreign policy issues, relative to White candidates running on the same issue. I fielded an online experiment

through the data collection firm, Dynata, in March of 2026. Dynata recruited participants through "open enrollment" and "by-invitation-only" via direct email and through online marketing channels. In total, 1,617 White, non-Hispanic respondents over the age of 18 completed the study. Since I am interested in measuring perceptions of congressional candidates, I only included respondents that were eligible to vote within the sampling framework.

Research Design and Description of Experimental Conditions

First, all respondents recruited to the study completed standard demographic questions. These pre-treatment questions included measures about respondents' race/ethnicity, age, gender, partisanship, and voter registration status. Quotas were set on age, gender, and partisanship to ensure a sample was as close to nationally representative as possible. After the treatment was administered, I also asked respondents to report the degree of education they received, as well as their level of interest in politics. I present the degree of balance across these demographics across conditions in Appendix Table C1.

After screening out those who did not meet the sampling requirements, respondents were randomly assigned into one of six experimental conditions, varying both race of the candidate (White, Asian, or Latino) and a region-specific foreign policy domain (U.S.-China relations or U.S.-Mexico relations). The random distribution of respondents to each treatment condition is detailed in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Distribution of Respondents in Each Experimental Condition

	U.S-China Relations	U.S.-Mexico Relations
White candidate	N = 274	N = 265
Asian candidate	N = 269	N=270

Latino candidate	N = 264	N= 274

Independent Variables: Candidate Race and Foreign Policy Region

In each condition, respondents were asked to carefully read a news article of a candidate running for Congress who has hosted a town hall to discuss the issues they plan to address if elected to office. The news article was made to mimic a real-world article written by the Associated Press. In each condition, the race of the candidate was indicated both by variation of the last name of the candidate and explicit mention of their race/ethnicity in the news article itself, as the first Asian/Latino/Irish candidate running to represent their district. The full experimental stimuli, as well as survey questionnaire, can be found in Appendix D.

In each condition, the candidate's foreign policy focus is framed around either U.S.–China or U.S.–Mexico relations. I selected China and Mexico because, although these countries are clearly not representative of the full diversity of Asian or Latin American countries, Asians and Latinos in the United States are frequently stereotypically associated with these nations. Indeed, Chinese and Mexican immigrants make up some of the largest ethnic groups in their respective racial/panethnic groups. These strong associations make foreign policy framing based on China and Mexico particularly relevant for examining how voters interpret foreign policy messages based on racialized perceptions.

Additionally, outside of Israel and Russia/Ukraine, China and Mexico were among the most frequently referenced foreign nations in the context of the 2024 congressional campaigns. Both countries represent major U.S. trade partners while also being commonly portrayed in political discourse as potential threats to U.S. economic and national security interests. Using these cases therefore enhances the external validity of the experiment by grounding the

treatments in foreign policy debates that voters are likely to recognize from contemporary discourse.

Main Dependent Variables: Issue Ownership and Candidate Favorability

After respondents were assigned to their experimental condition, in order to ensure that the treatment was administered, a true/false manipulation check was asked immediately following the treatment asking what issue the candidate they read about had discussed, either U.S-China or U.S.-Mexico relations. A vast majority of respondents (98.2%) correctly identified the region-specific domain that each candidate discussed, which increases confidence that respondents were paying attention to the treatment article.

Respondents were then asked a battery of questions to measure perceptions of issue ownership[4]. Three questions in a battery are asked to measure how respondents perceived the competence, qualifications, and trustworthiness of the candidate that they read about in addressing either U.S.-China or U.S.-Mexico relations. Responses from the three questions are then averaged and scaled into an index between 0-1 to make a single measurement of issue ownership. Favorability of the candidate is measured by a standard 0-100 feeling thermometer question, and rescaled between 0-1 for interpretation.

Additional Dependent Variables: Other Issue Ownership and Candidate Traits

While not the primary focus of the experiment, after respondents are asked the primary dependent variables of interest, I ask respondents to in general evaluate each candidate (Chang, Cohen, and Gonzalez) on how competent they would be in addressing other issues. These issues include: foreign policy, lowering taxes, education, civil rights and immigration. I ask for the primary reason that while we have knowledge about what issues Black candidates, and to some

[4] These questions were adapted from existing studies of racial issue ownership (Shortle and Johnson 2017)

extent, Latino candidates, are perceived to be better equipped to address, we do not yet know how voters perceive what types of issues, if any, that Asian candidates may be more competent to handle. Thus, adding these questions further contributes to the literature on the role of race in candidate evaluations.

In addition to asking respondents to evaluate other issue competencies, I also ask respondents to evaluate each candidate on a battery of traits. The traits evaluated follow a majority of candidate evaluation literature such that it asks to rate each candidates' intelligence, leadership, competence and compassion. However, I also ask respondents to evaluate candidates on traits such as patriotism and perceptions of how well they would represent America. I ask these questions in particular because Asian and Latinos' distinct perceptions of foreignness may or may not map onto race-based disparities in candidate perceptions. Responses for these additional questions were all measured on a sliding scale from 0 to 10, with 10 being the most competent on a particular issue/very representative of a given trait. Each response was then rescaled from 0-1 for interpretability. Given that these questions appeared at the end of the survey well after the treatments were administered, I do not expect that the experimental treatments will have a significant influence on these trait-based and other issue evaluations of these candidates. [5]

5.6 Results

First, I produce a series of balance tests on relevant covariates (education, political interest, age, gender, college education, and partisanship). I produce these balance tables in Appendix Table C1. I find balance on all covariates across treatment conditions, which means

[5]I compare trait and issue evaluation responses for each candidate by treatment and find little to no within-candidate difference in evaluations by treatment. I report these results in Appendix C, Table C2.

that there should be confidence that the observed influence of the treatments are due to the treatment itself, and not due to differences in sample across treatment conditions.

Next, I provide a test of my main dependent variable, issue ownership. I begin with evaluating differences in evaluations in my U.S-China relations conditions between Connor (the hypothetical White candidate), Chang (the hypothetical Asian candidate), and Gonzalez (the hypothetical Latino candidate). In Figure 5.1, I show bar graphs representing each candidate's mean issue ownership evaluations, with bars representing 95% confidence intervals.

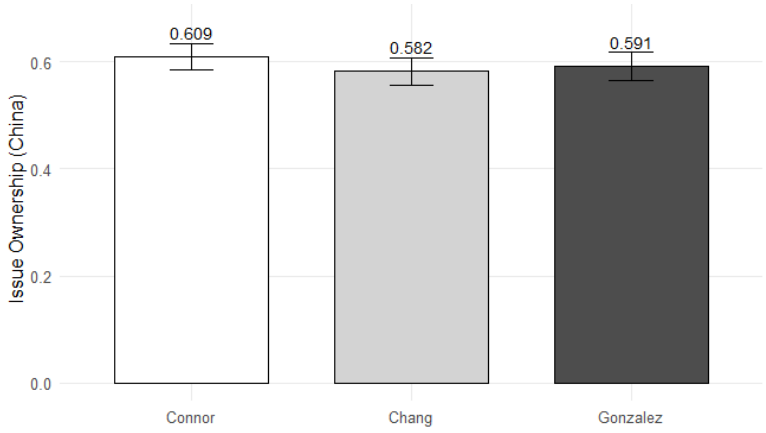


Figure 5.1: Evaluations of Issue Ownership on U.S.-China Policy

In the case of U.S-China policy, I do not find evidence to support my issue ownership hypothesis; that is, the Asian candidate is not evaluated more positively compared with the White candidate, nor is the Asian candidate perceived as "owning" the issue compared to the Latino candidate also running on U.S.-China policy. On the contrary, the only statistically significant difference on the $p<0.05$ level that I observe when disaggregating the issue ownership measure to its singular components (qualification, experience, and trustworthiness) is that the Asian candidate is perceived as slightly less experienced in the domain of U.S.-China relations compared to the White candidate (shown in Appendix Figure C1, U-S. Mexico shown in Appendix Figure C2).

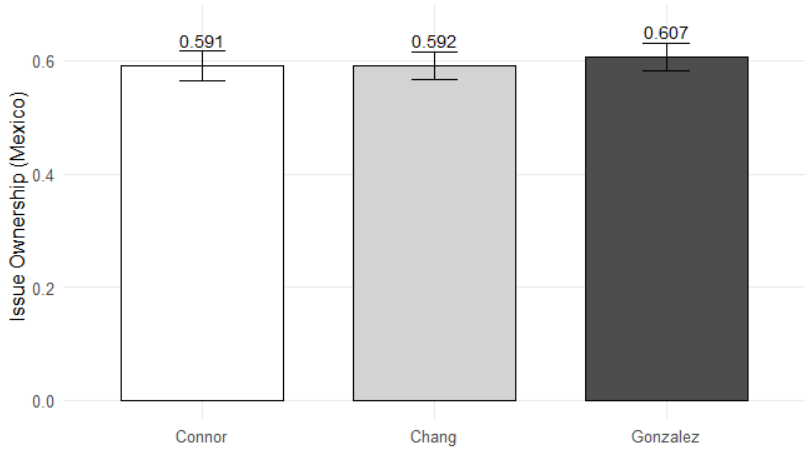


Figure 5.2: Evaluations of Issue Ownership on U.S.-Mexico Policy

Turning to examining issue ownership of U.S.-Mexico relations, I show differences in evaluations in Figure 5.2. Again, I do not find strong evidence to support my issue ownership hypothesis; that is, the Latino candidate is evaluated more positively compared with the White and Asian candidate discussing the same issue, but this relationship does not reach statistical significance.

These null results by experimental treatment in issue ownership are consistent across all analyses. In separating respondents by respondents' partisanship, I again find null results, which are shown in Appendix Figures C3 and C4. In analyzing candidate favorability as the main dependent variable by treatment, which I show in Appendix Figure C5, I also uncover insignificant differences in favorability ratings; the Asian/Latino candidate is not evaluated more favorably when framing foreign policy in the U.S.-China/U.S.-Mexico context versus in the U.S. Mexico/U.S.-China context. Overall, I do not find evidence that Asian or Latino candidates are perceived to "own" the issue of region-specific foreign policy, even when emphasizing their Asian/Latino identities.

Trait-Based Evaluations

While the experimental manipulation of framing region-specific foreign policy issues did not yield significant results in terms of issue ownership, I now turn to understanding how in general respondents evaluated the Asian and Latino candidates in comparison to the White candidate. In Figure 5.3, I show changes in the average evaluations of traits compared to the White candidate as the baseline. I find that while the Asian and Latino candidate drew about equal evaluations to the White candidate in terms of intelligence, competence, leadership, and compassion, the Asian candidate is notably rated about ~ 4 percentage points less patriotic compared to the White candidate, and this difference is significant at the $p<.05$ level. In addition, while not statistically significant, the Asian candidate is also evaluated as about ~2.8 percent less representative of America compared to the White candidate. Surprisingly, the Latino candidate was not similarly evaluated in terms of patriotism and representation of America; even as Latino and Asian Americans are similarly stereotyped as foreign.

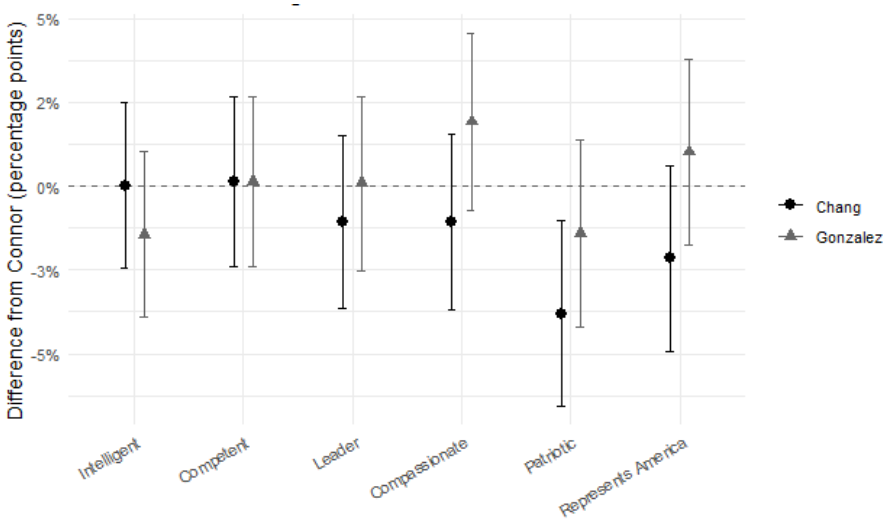


Figure 5.3: Trait Evaluations of Asian and Latino Candidate, Compared to White Candidate

I further investigate whether these evaluations are driven by partisanship. To do so, I compare the average trait evaluations for each trait, comparing how Democrats versus Republicans and Independents combined perceived candidates of color. I display these results in

Figure 5.4, where the baseline is the White candidate, and where points represent the average percent difference between the White candidate and the Asian/Latino candidate in each partisan group. Each bar represents 95% confidence intervals.

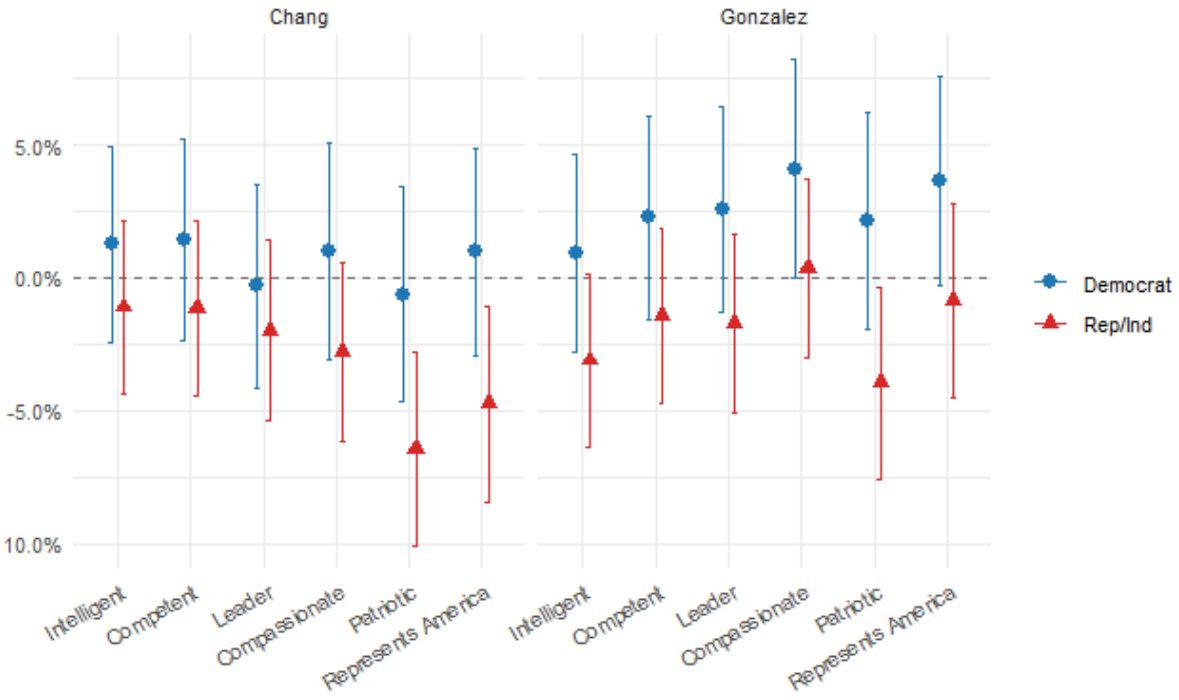


Figure 5.4 Trait Evaluations of Hypothetical Asian and Latino Candidate, by Respondents' Partisanship

I uncover heterogeneity in trait evaluations by party. When disaggregating by party, negative evaluations of the Asian and Latino candidates seem to be driven by Republican/Independent respondents. For example, Asian candidates are perceived by Republican/Independent respondents as less patriotic (~ -6 percentage points) and less representative of America (~ -4.9 percentage points) compared to the White candidate. Meanwhile, Democratic respondents seem to report similar trait-based evaluations of Asian candidates, compared to the White candidate. Meanwhile, Republicans/Independents in the sample perceive Latinos as ~4 percent less patriotic than the White candidate. While bordering

on statistical significance at the alpha = .05 level, Republicans/Independents also see Latinos as less intelligent, while Democratic White respondents perceive Latinos as more compassionate.

Issue Competence

In Figure 5.5, I present changes in average competence evaluations across issue areas, using the White candidate as the baseline. For foreign policy, education, and tax policy, there are no meaningful differences in perceived competence between Asian or Latino candidates and the White candidate. I note, however, that the perception of competency in foreign policy domains may be driven by the experimental manipulation; it is unclear whether the absence of the treatment would result in variation in competency evaluations in general foreign policy.

In terms of racial variation in issue competency, the Latino candidate is rated slightly more competent, by approximately 0.5 percentage points, on civil rights and immigration. This pattern is consistent with Shortle and Johnson (2017), who find that Latinos are perceived to "own" immigration, and it aligns with broader research suggesting that Latino candidates, like Black candidates, are often viewed as more ideologically liberal, which may enhance their credibility on civil rights issues (Sigelman et. al 1995). In contrast, I find no statistically significant differences in competence evaluations for the Asian candidate compared to the White candidate across any issue domain.

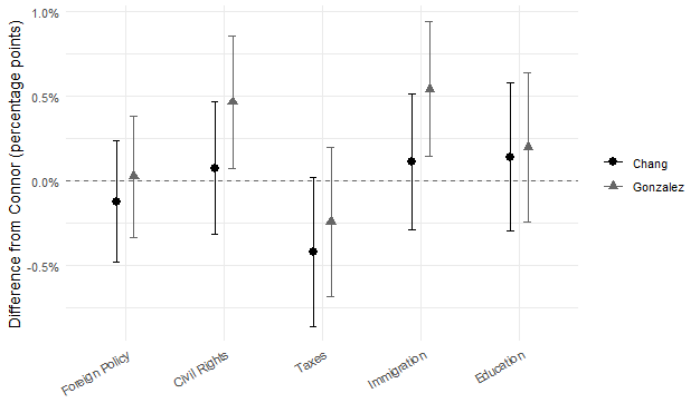


Figure 5.5: Issue Competence by Candidate Race, Relative to Hypothetical White Candidate

I again uncover heterogeneity in evaluations by party, which I show in Figure 5.6. The figure shows that the difference in evaluations of the Latino candidate is driven by Democratic White respondents. Democratic Whites also seem to perceive the Latino candidate as more competent to address the issue of education. Republican White respondents, however, rated the Latino candidate as less competent than the White candidate in terms of lowering taxes. On the other hand, Republican and Democratic respondents alike seem to report similar levels of competencies for each issue domain for Asian candidates when compared to the White candidate.

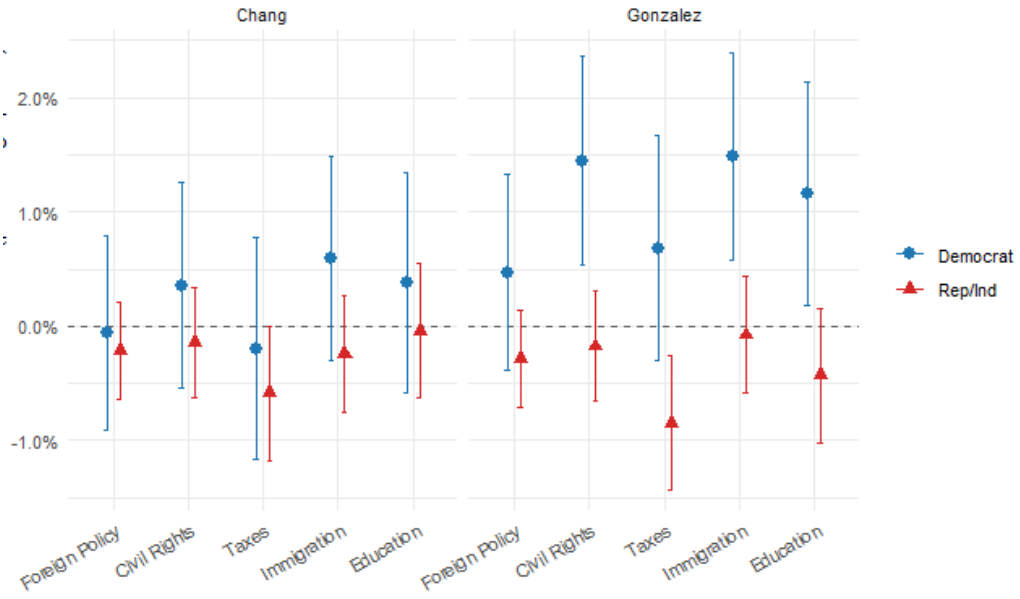


Figure 5.6: Issue Competence by Candidate Race, Relative to Hypothetical White Candidate, by Respondents' Party

5.7 Discussion and Conclusion

I set out to test the hypothesis that Asian and Latino candidates could gain an advantage in foreign policy when their messaging is framed around region-associated domains. However, I find no evidence supporting my expectations. The experimental manipulation did not increase

perceptions of Asian or Latino candidates' competence, qualifications, or trustworthiness on foreign policy, nor does it improve their overall favorability.

One possible explanation for the lack of effect of the experimental treatment is that the framing of the foreign policy experimental treatment was intentionally designed to be relatively neutral (that is, neither extremely "hawkish" nor extremely "dovish") in order to avoid strongly priming partisan responses. However, this neutrality may have inadvertently weakened the treatment. The framing combined both "dovish" and "hawkish" elements, potentially making candidates' positions appear ambiguous rather than clearly defined. While prior research suggests that ambiguity in position-taking can benefit White candidates (Hersch and Schaffner 2013), Asian and Latino candidates may not be afforded the same flexibility (Piston et. al 2018). In this context, ambiguity may fail to signal competence or may even undermine perceptions of credibility, thereby contributing to the absence of significant variation in candidate evaluations.

However, it is important to note that while region-specific issue framing did not improve evaluations of Asian and Latino candidates, it also did not result in penalties from White respondents. In other words, although these candidates did not gain an advantage, they were not necessarily disadvantaged by engaging in region-specific foreign policy discourse. In addition, I did not find that the Asian or Latino candidate was perceived as less competent in the issue of foreign policy in general. This finding is notable given that Asian and Latino candidates, similar to Black candidates, often avoid emphasizing foreign policy, potentially due to concerns about being perceived as lacking the experience or credentials to speak credibly on the issue. The results here suggest that such caution may not be necessary, at least among White voters. However, backlash from white voters may be more evident in times where the foreign nation is

presenting a salient threat; in which case, candidates associated with that region may be particularly penalized.

At the same time, discussion of region-specific foreign policy may resonate more strongly with voters who have close ties to those regions, such as ethnically Chinese or Mexican Americans, and those who recently immigrated from the region in particular. If so, candidates may still derive electoral benefits from engaging these issues within their own communities, even if such appeals do not shift evaluations among White voters. Future research should directly test this possibility by oversampling immigrant and ethnic groups.

Turning from my experiment, I did find meaningful results in examination of other issues that I asked the respondents to rate the candidates' competency on. While the experimental treatment yielded null results, I do find evidence that the Latino candidate was perceived to be more competent to address the issue of immigration and civil rights compared to the white candidate. This is important because it replicates the findings from previous studies and also shows that civil rights is an issue domain in which Latino candidates, in particular Democratic candidates, are perceived as qualified to address. Thus, for voters where civil rights is an important issue, or in contexts where there is national attention on civil rights, Latino candidates may be able to credibly gain advantages over White opponents.

I do not find similar patterns among Asian American respondents. This null result is somewhat unexpected. Like Latinos, Asian Americans have substantial and relatively recent ties to immigration, which would suggest that Asian candidates might also be perceived as more competent on immigration-related issues. However, this expectation is not borne out in the data. One possible explanation is that public understandings of immigration in the United States are racialized in ways that are more strongly associated with Latino populations, thereby limiting the

extent to which Asian candidates are viewed as credible "owners" of the issue. Even when Asian Americans share similar structural or demographic connections to immigration, these associations may not translate into political advantage because immigration is more firmly linked, both in media narratives and public discourse, to Latino identity.

At the same time, stereotypes such as the "model minority" may elevate generalized perceptions of Asian Americans in domains like education or technical expertise in the public, but these perceptions do not appear to extend to issue-specific political competence among Asian candidates. Taken together, these findings suggest that racialized issue ownership is uneven across minority groups and is shaped less by objective group characteristics than by socially constructed associations between race and particular policy domains.

The absence of heightened competence evaluations for Asian candidates on civil rights or immigration may also reflect Asian Americans' racially triangulated position in the United States. As Claire Kim argues, Asian Americans are simultaneously positioned as outsiders and relatively valorized in comparison to other racial minorities. This dual positioning may weaken their baseline association with issues such as civil rights and immigration, which are more strongly tied to groups that have historically been constructed as politically marginalized. As a result, while Asian Americans are racialized as non-White, their perceived proximity to whiteness may limit their ability to claim ownership over these issue domains, thereby constraining the extent to which Asian candidates are seen as especially competent in addressing them. This can be a potential disadvantage among Asian Democratic candidates, as it may be on the baseline more difficult to convince Black and Brown voters of their qualifications to address racial discrimination and civil rights if elected to office. Therefore, Asian American Democratic

candidates may need to spend more time explicitly engaging with civil rights issues in order to appeal to minority voters.

Building on this pattern, these dynamics may extend beyond issue-specific competence to broader trait evaluations. That is, while Latinos are perceived as better able to handle the issue of immigration, paradoxically the Asian candidate, but not the Latino candidate, was perceived as less patriotic than the White candidate. This finding toward the Asian candidate, but not the Latino candidate may be due to social desirability mechanisms, particularly among White liberal respondents. Nonetheless, this finding further underscores that Asian candidates are not as uniformly advantaged as previous studies have suggested (Visalvanich 2017; Dublin and Wright 2023). Future studies should test how lower levels of perceived patriotism may disadvantage Asian candidates, and how Asian candidates may attempt to counteract this perception through campaign messaging strategies.

This chapter provides a first test of whether Asian and Latino candidates can expand the range of issues they are perceived as competent to address on the basis of their race, particularly in domains not traditionally associated with their racial or ethnic identities, such as foreign policy. The findings suggest clear limits to this possibility. While Latino candidates appear to benefit from established associations with immigration and civil rights, Asian candidates do not experience comparable advantages, and in some cases face distinct disadvantages in broader trait evaluations such as patriotism. Understanding these evaluations are critical for explaining both the strategic choices candidates make when it comes to campaign messaging, and the broader patterns of representation that emerge in American politics.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Overview

At the time of writing this reflection, the primary elections for the 2026 midterm elections are well underway across the United States. While there are not yet definitive numbers of who is running for office, we can expect that the trend of record-breaking numbers of candidates of color running for office (and winning) will continue as the supply and demand for descriptive representation grows with the diversification of the American electorate.

This project started with a simple, albeit broad question: how does a diversified candidate pool and electorate complicate our existing understanding of racialized campaign strategies? How do candidates of color navigate race in contemporary American campaigns? The broadness of such a topic was intentional, in that most can acknowledge that there are an incomprehensible number of ways in which the topic could be examined. On my end, I chose to do so by first examining how real-world candidates behaved in two areas: in candidate self-presentation, and both the choice and framing of the policy platforms.

Although these are relatively well-explored areas in the general campaign strategy literature, there are two primary reasons why I argued that we must re-examine these domains through a racialized lens that accounts for the distinct incentives and constraints faced by candidates of color. To be clear, the key contribution I make here is that the diversification of the candidate pool itself mandates new theoretical frameworks for understanding how race structures the campaign strategies of candidates of color. As Asian and Latino candidates increasingly run to represent the fastest-growing electorate blocs in the United States, we cannot and should not apply existing frameworks of racial campaign strategies that were conceptualized with Black candidates in mind to understand them. Instead, I argue that we should consider the ways in

which racial minorities are distinctively racialized as a strong influence on the campaign strategies of candidates of color, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of racial/ethnic identities and experiences in their campaign messaging.

I find evidence that this is the case particularly in the realm of campaign self-presentation. I found that while Black and White candidates typically used a "deracialized" self-presentation style, Asian and Latino candidates, but Asian candidates in particular, emphasize their racial/ethnic identities when presenting themselves as candidates to the public. These observations provide stark contrast to the conventional wisdom that warns Black candidates to avoid race at all costs. The fact that Asian and Latino candidates are willing to highlight their race and racial/ethnic experiences, even in majority-white electoral contexts, while Black candidates are much less likely to do so, speaks to the way race can be leveraged as an advantage, but that this advantage is not as available to some minority candidates compared to others.

Next, I examined whether candidates of color engaged in "racial issue ownership" behavior; the idea that candidates of color may perceive that their race/ethnicity confers specific advantages over specific issues, leading them to be more likely to run on issues that they are advantaged in on the basis of their race/ethnicity. I first examine whether candidates of color systematically ran on different issue agendas compared to their white counterparts, and whether or not any differences in issue agendas aligned with racial advantages or disadvantages. Although I did uncover some evidence of these patterns, more importantly I find that candidates of color, but especially Asian and Latino candidates, are more likely to use what I call "racial/ethnic identity-based issue racialization" in their discussion of issues, where they leverage their racial/ethnic identities as a core foundation for their ability/dedication to address the issue

and/or to justify their position on the issue. This type of race-based issue framing suggests that some candidates see their race/ethnicity as a strategic advantage that can be leveraged to distinguish themselves on the issues from their competition.

Building upon this idea that racial/ethnic identity may confer an advantage on specific issues, I examine the extent to which Asian and Latino candidates may be able to "own" issues traditionally not associated with race; namely, region-specific foreign policy. Although my survey experimental manipulation yielded null results, I was able to glean that the Asian candidate was perceived as substantially less patriotic and less representative of America compared to a hypothetical white candidate, especially among White Republicans. In addition, I find that White Democrats perceive the Latino candidate as better able to address issues of immigration and civil rights, in alignment with racial stereotypes, but surprisingly the Asian candidate was not evaluated as more competent on issues that would be stereotypically associated with Asian Americans, such as education, immigration or the economy. These findings suggest that Asian Democratic candidates in particular must work harder to be perceived as racially liberal compared to that of Latino or Black Democrats; and that, even as the ideologies of Latinos exist across the ideological spectrum, they are on the baseline perceived similarly to Blacks as more ideologically liberal. Future research should continue to tease out the nuances in candidate traits and issue evaluations for Asian and Latino candidates as they continue to enter the candidate pool for political office in order to better understand their specific race-based barriers to office.

6.2 Limitations of Research

There are, of course, multiple limitations of this project. First, I do not provide a statistical analysis of whether those who use racial/ethnic identity, in their self-presentation or

issue platforms, are less likely to win their respective primary elections. I do this for the primary reason that the central aim of this project is to understand how candidates deploy racialized strategies, rather than to estimate their electoral consequences. Whether a candidate ultimately wins or loses provides limited insight into an acceptance of these racialized strategies, as electoral outcomes likely reflect multiple other factors rather than any single messaging choice. As such, for this project it is more appropriate to examine how and how often candidates deploy these strategies, since these measures align more closely with the theoretical focus on strategic behavior, rather than the downstream outcomes of electoral success. I therefore cannot make the claim that candidates who engage in the racialized campaign messaging I outline in this project have different electoral outcomes.

Next, I made the choice to examine primary elections rather than general elections. This choice was made for both practical and substantive reasons: practical, because primary elections allows for a larger sample size of candidates; and substantive, because fewer and fewer general House elections are truly competitive, and thus primaries are where emerging candidates face their chief obstacle to office. However, I recognize that candidates who move on to the general election stage may switch their campaign strategies after winning in the primary election cycle; in this project, I do not explore whether or not this is the case. Future research should determine whether Asian and Latino candidates who racialize their campaign images in the primary election cycle then deracialize when running in general elections; and whether those who continue to racialize their campaign self-presentations are able to win in competitive general elections.

I also intentionally chose to analyze only elections for candidates running for the House of Representatives, given that these elections are the most likely to produce successful diverse

candidates given the frequency of House elections, and the relative size of their districts compared to their states However, candidates running for the House of Representatives face different challenges compared to that of a Senate or Gubernatorial candidate, who must win over a majority of their state. Thus, future research should look at campaigns for other levels of government.

There were a number of variables that I did not at present have the capacity to control for in my quantitative analysis, especially with already limited numbers of Asian and Latino candidates in one election cycle. However, future research can compile a dataset across multiple election years to build a larger analytical sample in order to control for an array of other covariates, such as the age of the candidate or the candidates' ideology scores, that may contribute to campaign messaging strategy variation. The ability to append these variables to the dataset were not in the scope of this project, but future iterations of this project should consider these as integral factors.

Lastly, I chose to only include in my analytical sample and theoretical framework candidates within the four major racial/ethnic groups in the United Sates: Asian, Latino, Black, and White. Of course, there were candidates who did not fit into these categories; namely, MENA and Native American candidates. In the future, as more of these candidates emerge, future research should consider revising the present theoretical framework to include how these particular groups may navigate race in their campaigns.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

Contrary to expectations that candidates of colors should deracialize, I show that candidates of color are not uniformly doing so. Instead, they can, and often do, use their racial/ethnic identities when presenting themselves as candidates, and for Latino and Asian

candidates especially, do so even in majority-white districts. Further, that candidates across race use their racial/ethnic identities as a rhetorical strategy in the framing of their policy positions, suggesting that racial/ethnic identities can be an important tool in a campaign's arsenal, if deployed correctly.

Importantly, the implications of this shift extend beyond campaign strategy to the broader meaning of representation itself. One of the central normative stakes of this project is the idea of what is communicated when candidates of color choose to deracialize. When candidates avoid explicit discussions of race or downplay their racial identities, this may do more than simply reflect strategic caution; it can reinforce the implicit norm that only certain types of candidates (namely, racially neutral or racially avoidant candidates) are electable. In this sense, adopting deracialized campaign strategies risks reproducing the very boundaries of political inclusion that descriptive representation is meant to challenge. If candidates of color must mute discussions of race in order to be viable, then representation remains constrained not only in who can win office, but in what kinds of experiences and perspectives are considered legitimate within political discourse.

By contrast, the increasing presence of candidates who openly engage with their racial and ethnic identities has the potential to reshape these norms. As more candidates of color reach the "main stage" of electoral politics, the act of foregrounding race may itself become less politically costly. Over time, this normalization can expand the range of acceptable campaign discourse, making it more feasible for candidates to speak authentically about the experiences and policy concerns of their communities without facing disproportionate backlash. In this way, descriptive representation does not simply change who holds office; it can also transform how politics is discussed and whose perspectives are centered.

Notably, this dynamic holds even in cases where candidates of color deploy their racial or ethnic identities in ways that do not align with traditionally progressive racial politics. Even when candidates use their racial/ethnic identities to support more conservative or counter-stereotypical positions, the act of keeping race visible within political discourse is itself consequential. Bringing race to the forefront (regardless of counter-stereotypical framings, or specific policy stance) ensures that race remains a salient dimension of political debate. In contrast, the systematic avoidance of race risks narrowing the scope of political dialogue, limiting both substantive representation and opportunities for public engagement with issues of inequality and belonging.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that the growing presence of candidates of color may have effects that extend beyond electoral outcomes. As candidates increasingly experiment with strategies that foreground racial/ethnic identities, they contribute to an evolving set of norms about what political representation looks like in a diverse democracy. Whether these shifts ultimately lead to more inclusive and responsive forms of governance remains an open question. However, what is clear is that the strategic campaign choices of candidates of color in regards to race reflect the changing racial landscape and the boundaries of political discourse in the United States.

7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix A

Table A1: Pairwise Proportion Test Across Racial Groups on Racial Identity Self-Presentation

Group 1	Group 2	P-Value
Black	Asian	1.7 e-06
Latino	Asian	1
White	Asian	2.8 e-72
Latino	Black	8.2 e -05
White	Black	3.7 e-35
White	Latino	1.3 e-72

Table A2: Full Logistic Model of Predictors of Identity-Based Campaign Presentation

Predictors of Identity-Based Campaign Presentation

	Dependent variable:		
	Race/Immigrant ID	Racial ID Only	Immigrant ID Only
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Black	2.003***	2.262***	0.449
	(0.217)	(0.228)	(0.332)
Asian	3.563***	3.302***	3.283***
	(0.286)	(0.279)	(0.284)
Latino	3.120***	3.198***	2.697***
	(0.257)	(0.265)	(0 .274)
Republican	-0.169	-0.281	-0.089
	(0.176)	(0.181)	(0.204)
Incumbent	0.287	0.303	-0.031
	(0.200)	(0.207)	(0.239)
Cook's PVI	0.017*	0.015*	0.006

	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Open Seat	0.161	0.178	-0.055
	(0.201)	(0.206)	(0.236)
%White	0.416	0.611	-0.162
	(0.569)	(0.584)	(0.634)
Woman	0.434*	0.454*	0.299
	(0.174)	(0.178)	(0.207)
Closed Primary	0.105	0.164	-0.018
	(0.184)	(0.189)	(0.221)
Constant	-3.058***	-3.427*** -	2.970***
	(0.403)	(0.419)	(0.449)
Observations	1,378	1,378	1,378

Note: *p<0.05; >**p<0.01; >***p<0.001

Table A3: List of Racial/Ethnic Keywords

Black	African American	Brown
Hispanic	Latino/a/e/x	Chicano/a
Argentinian	Mexican	Puerto Rican
Dominican	El Salvadorian	Columbian
Cuban	Venezuelan	Brazilian
Asian	Pacific Islander	Korean
Filipino/a	Vietnamese	Japanese
Chinese	Pakistani	Indian
affirmative action	immigrant	immigrated
John Lewis	HBCU	Alpha Phi Alpha
Delta Sigma Theta	Kappa Alpha Psi	Omega Psi Phi
Phi Beta Sigma	Iota Phi Theta	Alpha Kappa Alpha
Zeta Phi Beta	Sigma Gamma Rho	Martin Luther King
Chinese Exclusion Act	Immigration Act of 1965	Vincent Chin
Vincent Chin	segregate/segregated/segregation	Voting Rights
George Floyd	Breonna Taylor	Bracero
Cesar Chavez	United Farm Workers	Dolores Huerta
equity/equality	reparations	Nazi
KKK/Ku Klux Klan	of color	Civil Rights
White	Irish	Italian

Jewish	race/racism/racial	minority/minorities
Brown	indigenous	native
BIPOC	interracial	multiracial

7.2 Appendix B

Figure B1: Comparing Issue Emphasis Between Asian and White Democrats

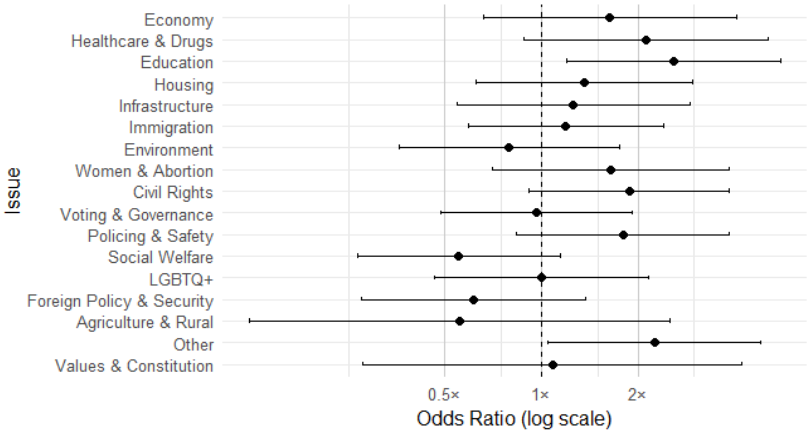


Figure B1: Comparing Issue Emphasis Between Black and White Democrats

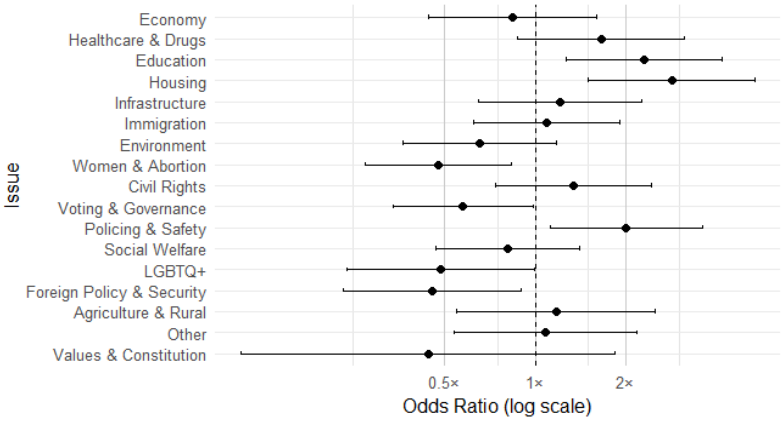


Figure B2: Comparing Issue Emphasis Between Latino and White Democrats

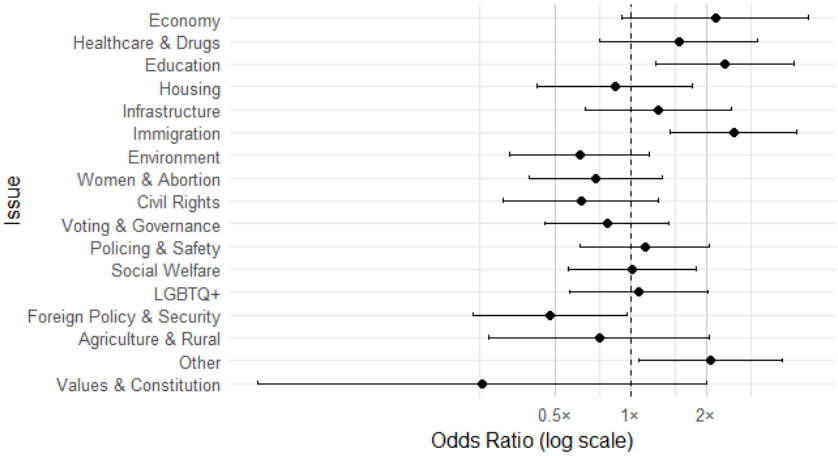
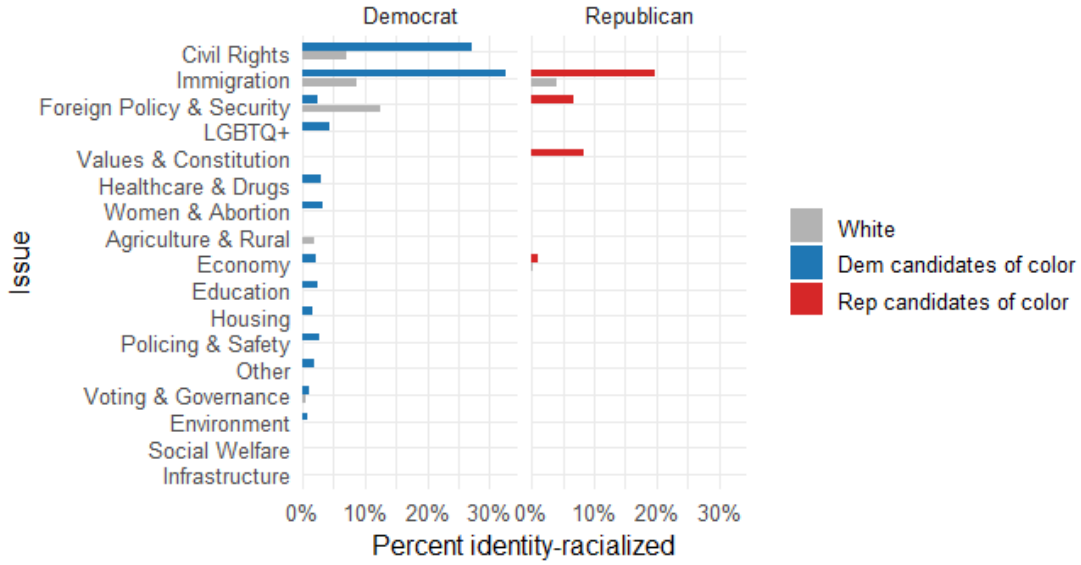


Figure B3: Racial/Ethnic Identity-Racialized Issues by Race and Party, White vs. Non-White



7.3 Appendix C

Table C1: Balance Tables of Relevant Covariates

Treatment	N	Mean Age	% Republican	% College Educated
1	274	50.4	56.2	52.9
2	269	49.0	49.8	48.7
3	264	49.8	51.1	49.6
4	265	50.7	50.6	49.1
5	270	48.5	54.8	54.4
6	274	49.8	54.4	52.2

Figure C2: Evaluations of Hypothetical Candidates' Ownership of U.S.-China Relations

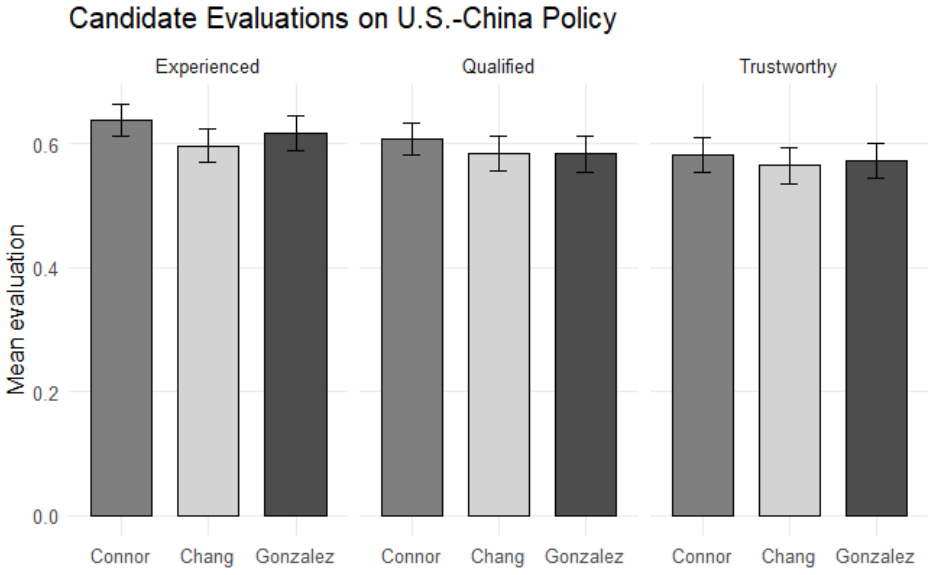


Figure C3: Evaluations of Hypothetical Candidates' Ownership of U.S.-Mexico Relations

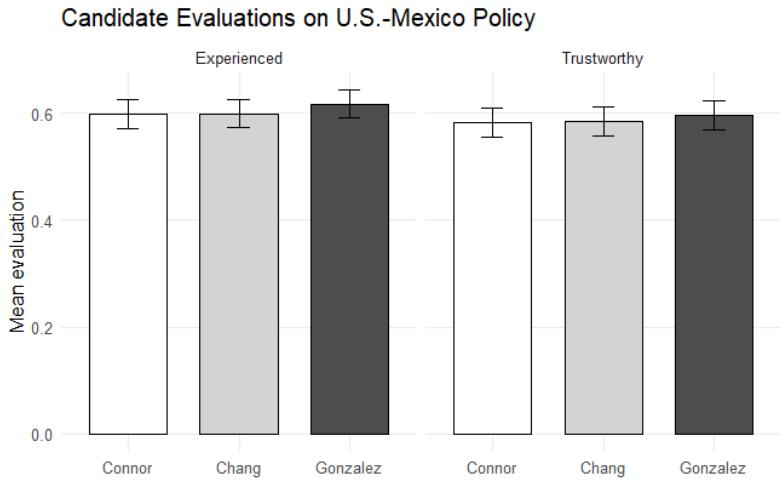


Figure C4: Evaluations of Hypothetical Candidates' Ownership of U.S.-China Relations, by Respondents' Partisanship

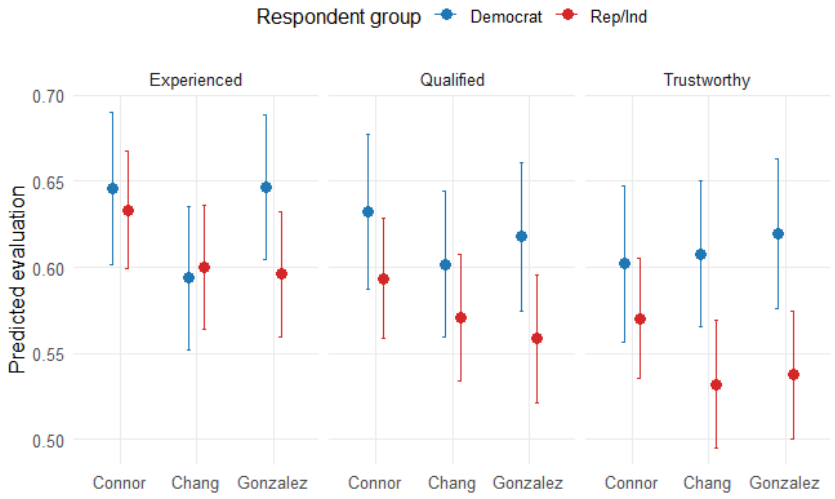


Figure C5: Evaluations of Hypothetical Candidates' Ownership of U.S.-Mexico Relations, by Respondents' Partisanship

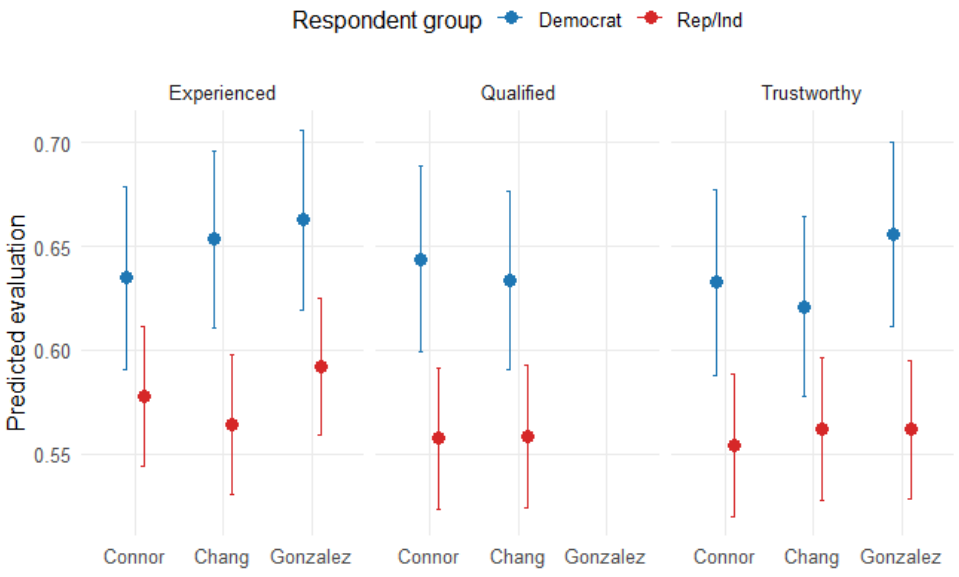


Figure C6: Feeling Thermometer Evaluations by Foreign Policy Condition

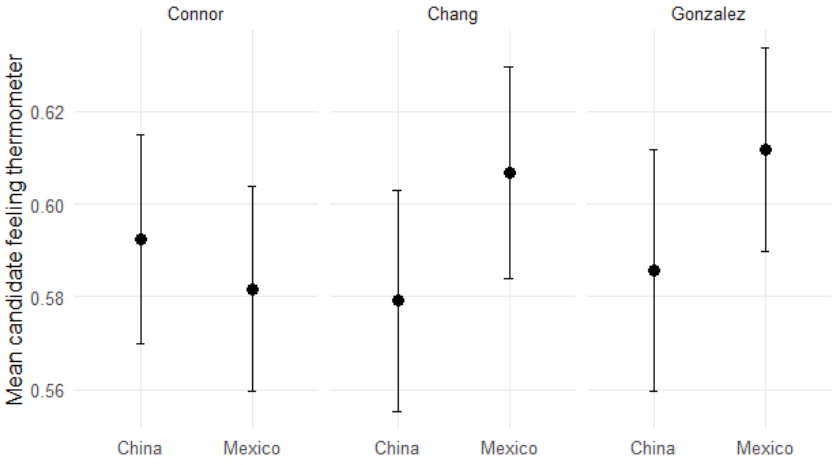


Table C2: Comparing Issue Competence Across Treatment Conditions

Candidate	Issue	Average Competence: (U.S.-China Condition)	Average Competence: (U.S.-Mexico Condition)	P-Value
Connor	Foreign Policy	8.0	7.7	0.21
	Lowering Taxes	8.5	8.3	0.539
	Immigration	7.0	7.3	0.42
	Education	8.4	8.3	0.75
	Civil Rights	7.9	8.0	0.69
Chang	Foreign Policy	7.7	7.8	0.65
	Lowering Taxes	7.5	8.5	0.004
	Immigration	6.8	7.7	0.001
	Education	8.3	8.7	0.20
	Civil Rights	7.8	8.4	0.02
Gonzalez	Foreign Policy	7.7	8.1	0.27
	Lowering Taxes	8.3	8.0	0.53
	Immigration	7.3	8.1	0.05
	Education	8.5	8.7	0.74
	Civil Rights	8.2	8.6	0.37

Table C3: Comparing Trait Evaluations Across Treatment Conditions

Candidate	Trait	Average Competence: (U.S.-China Condition)	Average Competence: (U.S.-Mexico Condition)	P-Value
Connor	Intelligent	6.6	6.4	0.13
	Compassionate	6.0	6.1	0.68
	Strong Leader	6.2	6.0	0.31
	Patriotic	6.5	6.2	0.07
	Represent America	6.5	6.0	0.01
Chang	Intelligent	6.3	6.4	0.70
	Compassionate	6.1	6.4	0.09
	Strong Leader	6.1	6.1	0.87
	Patriotic	6.5	6.2	0.26
	Represent America	7.8	8.4	0.02
Gonzalez	Intelligent	6.5	6.5	0.87
	Compassionate	5.6	6.2	0.001
	Strong Leader	5.9	6.0	0.67
	Patriotic	5.9	6.1	0.29
	Represent America	5.9	6.2	0.14

7.4 APPENDIX D: Survey Instrument

Pre-Treatment Questions:

Q1: gender: What is your gender identity?

Man	1
Woman	2
Non-binary	3
Something else	4

Q2: partisanship: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, an independent, or something else?

Democrat	1
Republican	2
Independent	3
Something else	4

Q3a: partisanship: Do you consider yourself a Strong [Democrat/Republican] or Not Very Strong [Democrat/Republican]

Strong [Democrat/Republican]	1
Not very strong [Democrat/Republican]	2

Q3b: partisanship: If you had to choose, would you consider yourself closer to the Democratic Party, or the Republican Party?

Closer to Republican Party	1
Closer to Democratic Party	2
Neither	3

Q4: age: In what year were you born? __ __ __ __

[DROP-DOWN MENU WITH YEARS TO 110]

\

Q5: edu: What is the highest level of education you completed?

Grades 1-8	1

Some High School, but did not graduate	2
High School graduate or GED	3
Some college	4
Associates, 2-year degree	5
Bachelors, 4-year degree	6
Post-graduate degree	7

You will read about an article about a candidate running for congressional office, who recently hosted a town hall discussing the issues he plans to address. After you read the article, you will be asked a series of questions.

Treatments

U.S. News

Candidate James Chang Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–China Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Chang, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Asian American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-China relations.

"China is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with China in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address China head-on. My background and experiences as an Asian American well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and China."

U.S. News

Candidate James Chang Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–Mexico Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Chang, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Asian American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-Mexico relations.

"Mexico is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with Mexico in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address Mexico head-on. My background and experiences well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico."

U.S. News

Candidate James Connor Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–China Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Connor, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Irish American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-China relations.

"China is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with China in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address China head-on. My background and experiences well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and China."

U.S. News

Candidate James Connor Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–Mexico Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Connor, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Irish American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-Mexico relations.

"Mexico is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with Mexico in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address Mexico head-on. My background and experiences well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico."

U.S. News

Candidate James Gonzalez Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–China Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Gonzalez, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Latino American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-China relations.

"China is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with China in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address China head-on. My background and experiences well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and China."

U.S. News

Candidate James Gonzalez Hosts Town Hall

Calls for Stronger Leadership on U.S.–Mexico Relations



--Associated Press

(U.S. News) – James Gonzalez, a candidate running for the U.S. House and the first Latino American candidate running in his district, hosted a town hall event on Tuesday. During the town hall, he addressed multiple issues, but focused in particular on the importance of addressing U.S-Mexico relations.

"Mexico is a critical trade partner with the U.S. We need politicians who understand and know how to work with Mexico in the 21st century to advance American interests," he said. "We need leaders who are prepared to manage this relationship, protect American interests, and who can address Mexico head-on. My background and experiences as a Latino American well-position me to manage the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico."

Manipulation Check:

True or False: The candidate I just read about discussed addressing [U.S.-China/U.S.-Mexico] relations.

True (1)

False (2)

Post-Treatment

Foreign Policy Specific Issue Ownership

For the following statements, please select how much you agree or disagree with each statement by choosing a number between 0 and 10. Choosing 0 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement; Choosing 10 indicates that you strongly agree with the statement.

[Johnson/Gonzalez/Chang] is **experienced** in the issue of **[U.S.-China/U.S.-Mexico]** relations

[Johnson/Gonzalez/Chang] is **qualified** to address the issue of **[U.S.-China/U.S.-Mexico]** relations

[Johnson/Gonzalez/Chang] is **trustworthy on** the issue of **[U.S.-China/U.S.-Mexico]** relations

0_____10

Candidate Feeling Thermometer

I would like to get your feelings towards the candidate you just read about. I'd like you to rate that candidate using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the candidate and that you don't care too much for that candidate. You would rate the candidate at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the candidate.

0_____100

Other Issue Ownership

Members of Congress routinely have to work on a variety of policies. Please tell us how **qualified or competent** you think [Johnson/Chang] is to handle the following issues by choosing a number between 0 and 10 from the range below. Choosing 0 indicates that the candidate **is not qualified or competent** on the issue; Choosing 10 indicates that you would consider the candidate as **extremely qualified or competent** in addressing the issue. [Rotate and Randomize Order]

- Lowering Taxes

- Education
- Civil Rights
- Immigration
- Foreign Policy

0_____10

Candidate Traits

Please tell us how you would evaluate [Johnson/Chang/Gonzalez] on the following traits by choosing a number between 0 and 10. Choosing 0 indicates that you think the candidate does not possess this trait; Choosing 10 indicates that you would consider the candidate as **extremely possessing this trait.** [Rotate and Randomize Order]

In general, how **intelligent** do you think the candidate is?

In general, how **competent** do you think the candidate is?

In general, how **strong of a leader** do you think the candidate is?

In general, how **compassionate** do you think the candidate is?

In general, how **patriotic** do you think the candidate is?

In general, how well do you think the candidate would **represent American interests**?

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