

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

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

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Introduction

That racial segregation remains a pervasive feature of life in the United States is well-documented. Research has found that black and white Americans still have very little day-to-day contact with one another. They live in different neighborhoods, attend different schools and churches, and work at different jobs (Massey and Denton 1993). The dramatic dissimilarities in the life experiences of these groups resulting from this racial isolation has been found to be a powerful predictor of many forms of racial inequality in society. Racial segregation in American public schools, cited not only by scholars, but also by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, as one of the contributing factors to racial disparities in educational attainment, remains—despite the Court’s desegregation orders (Frankenberg and Lee 2002; Reardon, Yun, and Eitle 2000; Card and Rothstein 2007). Researchers also continue to find evidence of the impact of residential segregation in a range of racial disparities, including income and wealth (Condran, and Denton 1987; Massey 1990; Schneider and Phelan 1993; Harris 1999), crime victimization (Green, Strolovitch and Wong 1998; Peterson and Krivo 1993), and physical and mental health (Schultz et al 2000; Williams and Collins 2001).

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

Americans each have access (albeit at times unequal) to at least some mainstream sources of political information—such as national television network news, cable news and daily newspapers and internet news—the average white American has relatively little contact with the types of social and political institutions or networks that mobilize and provide political information to many in the African American community (Morris 1984; Harris 1999; Lee 2002; Gandy 2000; Dawson 2001; Haynes 2001). That is, the racial segregation of American social, religious, media and political institutions has generated a set of essentially black spaces, through which the political discourse of black elites is channeled (Herbst 1994; Dawson 1994; Lee 2000; Harris-Lacewell 2004).

This paper seeks to examine the consequences of variation in exposure to black and mainstream political discourse for how black Americans formulate their opinions about politics. We argue that in an attempt to advance their own interests, ideas, and ideologies among their respective racial constituencies, African-American elites—including black elected officials, journalists, and religious and organizational leaders—and mainstream elites—those elites who are able to dominate mainstream discourse—frame political issues, even issues with no apparent racial content, in substantively different ways. In particular, black elites regularly offer interpretations of political events and issues intended to resonate with African American group interest and identification while mainstream elites seek to mobilize a broader more diverse constituency whose beliefs and values are often quite different from those of African Americans. This distinctive framing of public affairs, we argue, implies that those African Americans who attend closely to the political discourse of black elites should understand political issues in noticeably different ways from other blacks whose political information comes largely

from mainstream sources. It is, in part, exposure to black elite messages that induces blacks to employ their racial attitudes in evaluating political issues. This will be the case particularly for those issues that on their face appear to have little racial relevance, leading these blacks to have what appears to be highly racialized and fairly liberal positions on a wide range of issues.

To evaluate this argument we examine black support for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1996. We begin by discussing the content of black and mainstream elite discussions of the CIA in 1996 and examining the rather stark differences in the tone and the racial content of black and mainstream elite depictions of the agency. Here we find that while mainstream discussions of the agency focused mainly on the successes and failures of covert CIA operations outside of the United States, discussions of the CIA within black elite discourse centered mainly on allegations that the agency was complicit in the trafficking of drugs to largely black inner-city communities. We then turn to examining how this variation in awareness to black and/or mainstream political discourse might result in intra-group differences in black opinion about the CIA. Here we find that blacks who were more aware of the workings of black elite discourse were not only less likely to express positive feelings for the CIA but it was only when blacks were attending to the goings-on in black politics that they were able to connect their beliefs about their racial in-group to their opinions about this ostensibly non-racial agency. We conclude by discussing how these results contribute to existing theoretical accounts of both the role that political awareness plays in shaping American public opinion and the formation of black opinion.

Theories of Elite Opinion Leadership

Theories of mass opinion formation have found that attention to and awareness of elite discourse is essential to understanding opinion formation for many political issues. Perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of how elites matter to opinion formation can be found in the work of John Zaller, specifically his 1992 book *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Here, Zaller posits a theory of mass opinion formation (the Receive Accept Sample—RAS—model) that places exposure to elite communication at the beginning of the causal stream of mass opinion formation. In Zaller's model of opinion formation, the influence of political elites' messages depends upon both the extent of elite agreement and the level of the individual's awareness of the political environment. He makes the case that when elites are in agreement on political issues, those who are the most politically attentive tend to adopt the elite position; awareness simply causes the structure of individuals' opinions to mirror that of political leaders. When elites are in disagreement, however, high levels of political awareness enable individuals to grasp and follow the cues of only like-minded elites; when elites diverge, so do citizens, but only to the extent that they have heard the disagreement, and only in the directions that their political predispositions would send them. Applying his theory to the dynamics of opinion change on a number of issues, Zaller finds, in fact, that changes in elite messages frequently precede changes in mass opinion, and that diverging elites produce public disagreement, especially among those he classifies as politically aware.

While Zaller's work offers us a useful framework for thinking about the interaction of elite messages and individuals' levels of political information in shaping their political opinions, the RAS theory's application to racial minority group opinion is

not straightforward. In particular, careful attention must be paid to the definitions of the two main moving parts of the model: elite messages and political information. For Zaller, political information or awareness is effectively captured by general or mainstream measures of political information not domain, issue, or group-specific measures of political information. That is, as he states, “political information is a relatively general trait that can be effectively measured with a general purpose information scale” (Zaller 1986; p18). This assumption holds, however, only to the extent that information about relevant elite messages can be found in a “general” information environment. But if the messages of leaders within racial minority communities only appear in segregated information environments—indigenous institutions—and not in mainstream information channels, then imposing singular importance on the “general” or mainstream environment assumes away any significant consequence of awareness paid to alternative, racial-group elite discourse (see Lee 2000 and Towner, Clawson, and Waltenburg 2006 for more on this point). It also may lead us to a mischaracterization of the extent of elite consensus or disagreement on political issues, if disagreement is coming only from those outside the mainstream.

Indeed, political elites rely on quite a number of institutions to reach the American public and they funnel these messages through networks of social organizations, religious institutions, professional and trade associations, interest group memberships, and media outlets. However, missing from Zaller’s framework is the idea that different institutions more readily reach some Americans rather than others, and different institutions are more open venues for some elites rather than others. This very simple observation, however, has important consequences for how black Americans

might come to understand politics. Specifically, African American citizens are privy to the messages that flow through black institutions and social networks—a range of organizations with few white members—at the same time that African American elites find it difficult to be fully incorporated into mainstream political elite discourse (Entman and Rojecki 2001). Through black institutions, then, African Americans hear a set of interpretations of American politics that white Americans, and blacks who are not privy to these black spaces, do not, fostering what we believe are significant differences in the meaning and evaluation of policies.

Black Elites and Black Spaces

One of the most consistent findings in the study of black political behavior is the apparent link between engagement in politics and contact with black social and political institutions. For example, contact with black political organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, has been shown to be related to a range of black political behaviors; from participating in a protest, to black campaign activism, and voter turnout (Tate 1993). The black church has also been shown to be a powerful tool for black political mobilization. Black church attendance is related to an increased understanding of black political symbols, increased black political awareness, and has been shown to directly influence black voter registration, campaign activism (McDaniel 2008; Tate 1993), and turnout (Calhoun-Brown 1986; Harris 1994; Tate 1993). Other black social and political institutions such as the black media and historically black colleges and

universities have also been implicated in influencing black's attitudes about race and political awareness.

In this paper we seek to clarify the role that black institutions play in structuring black political behavior by arguing that black institutions play an especially important role as conduits of black political information. Beginning from the premises that contact with black institutions is largely structured by the dynamic of racial segregation; we argue that contact with black institutions affords African Americans the opportunity to be exposed to the "African American" perspective of politics (Cohen 1999; Herbst 1994; Dawson 1994; Lee 2000; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Clawson, Strine and Waltenburg 2003). Much like awareness of mainstream political discourse shapes the general public's knowledge about politics, knowledge of the goings-on within black politics and the "black" interpretation of political issues is obtained through the institutions and social networks that black elites use to communicate with the black public (See Towner, Clawson, and Waltenburg 2006). In other words, by acting as channels of black elite discourse, black political institutions expose those who come in contact with them to alternative elite interpretations of political issues, helping these individuals connect their ideologies and other predispositions to evaluations of politics.¹

Theory of Racial Elites and Black Opinion

The preceding discussion highlights the need for a theoretical framework for understanding how black Americans come to be informed about politics and the

¹ This is not to say that all black institutions are the same or that the messages that get channeled through them are the same but that black political elites have access to and frequently utilize these institutions. Thus, to the extent that black elite messages are unified we should expect this unified message to be heard through these institutions.

consequence of that information for how they construct their opinions. Despite, the connection of black institutions to black political behavior we still know very little about exactly how these institutions inspire changes in attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, accounts of elite influence on opinion must include explanations for how society structures this information and for how exposure to different types of information has different consequences for opinion. Thus, we are arguing that in order to mobilize their respective racial constituencies African-American elites and mainstream elites frame political issues, even issues with no apparent racial content, in substantively different ways. In an attempt to appeal to their largely black audience, black elites regularly offer interpretations of political events and issues intended to resonate with African American group interest, however, because mainstream elites are constrained by the diverse preferences of their constituency they are under pressure to avoid such explicit racialization (Towner, Clawson, and Waltenburg 2006). This distinctive framing of political issues and events, we argue, suggests that African Americans who attend closely to the political discourse of black elites may come away with a very different understanding of the political world than those blacks whose political information comes largely from mainstream sources.²

Ultimately, our explanation of black opinion rests on two central arguments. The first is that black elites funnel a distinct set of political messages—messages that can and often do differ markedly from those of even liberal mainstream elites—through black institutions. The second contention is that blacks who are exposed to this information recognize and choose to follow where black elites lead, even when mainstream partisan

² The idea here is that these racial frames will prime racial considerations among African Americans which they will then use to formulate their political judgments (See White 2007 for more on this point).

elites are carrying on in another direction. These arguments imply that there is a significant segment of the black community that experiences a somewhat different political information environment than white Americans, and that this asymmetry in exposure to the information provided by black political elites is one of the essential elements of the black experience that accounts for variation in black opinion.

Methods and Procedures

To evaluate this theoretical proposition we turn to understanding black support for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in 1996. We choose to look at opinions about the CIA because of the particular way in which the CIA became racialized in the fall of 1996. As we will see in more detail later, before the fall 1996, race (at least as it relates to black/white race relations) was not a prominent feature in either black or mainstream elite discussions of the CIA (either explicitly or implicitly). Yet following the August 1996 publication of a series of stories in the *San Jose Mercury News* entitled “Dark Alliance,” which outlined allegations of the CIA’s involvement in trafficking drugs into black communities in southern California, discussions of the agency, especially within black political discourse, changed significantly. To fully understand the differences in black and mainstream elite discussions of the Mercury News story we conducted a content analysis which examines variation in the how the agency was discussed in black and mainstream newspapers and magazines from March 1, 1996 to January 1, 1997. With these data we are able to identify differences in the tone and the racial content of black and mainstream elite depictions of the agency.³

³ We choose to analyze black newspaper accounts largely out of convenience, certainly other sources of political communication (i.e., black and mainstream radio) may have offered different perspectives and

The second reason for choosing to examine opinions about the CIA is more practical. While there are many issues for which black and mainstream elites disagree, the CIA in 1996 is one of the few issues that also appears in a public opinion dataset containing a large representative sample of African Americans and that also includes both measures which assess opinions about CIA and measures of black and mainstream awareness to political communication. Conducted in the fall of 1996, the post-election component of the National Black Election Study (NBES) began collecting data only a few months after the publication of the “Dark Alliance” series and right around the time that black elites began actively forwarding the allegations and pushing for a governmental investigation into the charges. Given the timing of the NBES and the unique set of measures, these data offer a unique opportunity to parse out the effects of black and mainstream elite frames on black support for CIA.⁴

The CIA, the Drug Trade, and the Black Community

How exactly did black and mainstream elites react to the “Dark Alliance,” story? In the following paragraphs we will examine media accounts of fallout from the “Dark Alliance,” story and detail, though these accounts, black and mainstream elite responses (or lack thereof) to the allegations that the CIA was complicit in the trafficking of drugs into black communities. To be clear, although we examine how this story was covered in the black and mainstream press we are not interested solely in the effect of the press or the news media on public attitudes. Much like Zaller (1992) treatment of political

reached different segments of the black population, however, we have no reason to believe that these frames would be vastly different.

⁴ Ideally we would like to compare black’s attitudes with that of whites, however, there does not appear to be any data which would allow us to make such direct comparisons.

awareness what we are interested in is the effect of the internalization of elite messages emanating from black and/or mainstream political discourse. This information is typically conveyed in the form of policy frames which ultimately originate from political elites. These frames may then be covered in the mainstream press but they can also get passed along through personal exchanges, social media or simply conveyed directly to the public through campaign or social movement activities.

Discussion of the link between the CIA and illicit drugs in black communities began after the *San Jose Mercury News* ran a series of stories by journalist Gary Webb which suggested that that the CIA, in their efforts to support the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s, was complicit in the sale of tons of crack cocaine to largely black street gangs in Los Angeles. Black and mainstream news media outlets reacted very differently to these allegations. In the black media, discussion of the allegations and coverage of black organizational leaders' demands for a full investigation became an important, regular part of the news agenda. They were reflecting, in other words, a real engagement of the issue by black political leaders—from the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), to pastors of black churches, to members of the Congressional Black Caucus—who were forwarding messages that the CIA posed a threat to black communities. The messages of these black leaders sought to excite black Americans, through the use of rhetoric that invoked racial group interest, to demand political accountability for the CIA's alleged actions. SCLC board member Dick Gregory, for example, who was arrested for protesting on the issue in front of the central offices of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, promised the mobilization of his organization, framing

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

"The CIA has always kept the Senate and the House in the dark. When they don't have dirt on people, they find some. This is the first time that the Black community has had documentation. We have always been told to play fair. If this had been about White people, it would have been on the front pages of every newspaper in America."⁵

An analysis of the Black press' coverage of the allegations reflected the importance of the issue in the agendas of black leaders. The charges outlined in Webb's investigative series sparked outrage among black leaders, inciting members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to call for a special investigation of the agency at their annual legislative conference in early September. Immediately after the CBC issued their demand for a full government inquiry, the number and frequency of articles about the CIA in black press sources rose significantly. Figure 1, displays an overtime depiction of the total number of articles about the CIA in the black press sources via our content analysis of the controversy. While coverage of the intelligence agency in the black press was sparse before the CBC voiced its concern over CIA involvement in the drug trafficking scandal, after the legislators' pronouncement, the coverage of the CIA in the black press spiked. A similar pattern of coverage did not exist in the mainstream press. The results presented in Figure 2 show that although at the end of the year coverage of the agency did increase, it was largely limited to the month of December. We will also see that, unlike the black press which focused almost exclusively on the CIA

⁵ Brown, Janice Frink. "CIA drug scandal escalates." *Afro - American Red Star* [Washington, D.C]. September 28, 1996: A1.

drug trafficking allegations, mainstream discussions of the agency had a much broader focus.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Although the drug conspiracy story was first broken in a mainstream newspaper in Silicon Valley, the allegations of CIA complicity in channeling crack cocaine into the inner city neighborhoods of Los Angeles were generally met with skepticism and dismissal by both the mainstream media and partisan leaders—Democrat and Republican. Attorney General Janet Reno, in fact, denied the allegations before conducting a full investigation. And despite calls from black leaders for presidential contenders William Clinton and Robert Dole to respond to the issue, the allegations were not on the agenda of either candidate’s campaign.⁶ In fact, many questioned the placement of the Dark Alliance series, between the RNC and DNC conventions, arguing that its release in the middle of a Presidential campaign may have actually drowned what little coverage the series would have likely received (Kornbluh 1997). When the series did get covered by mainstream media outlets, however, it was often discussed without any mention of race or black communities, despite the activism and messages of black leaders. Also common in the limited mainstream coverage were insinuations that the allegations amounted to no more than a dismissible conspiracy theory—a characterization that only furthered racialized arguments among black elites, who referenced connections to other black experiences that engendered distrust in government institutions. In a 1997 paper

⁶ Reeves, Larry. “Black Leaders Demand Probe: Will Clinton Aggressively Press for Quick Resolution of CIA-Crack Connection?” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 28, 1996.

published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Peter Kornbluh described the mainstream media reaction to Webb's story:

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

Kornbluh goes on to note that:

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

Content analysis of black and mainstream coverage of the CIA from August 1996 to January 1997 clearly describes the differing priorities of black and mainstream media when it comes to covering the agency. As we can see in Table 1, the vast majority of the coverage of the CIA within the black media at this time focused on the drug trafficking allegations (80% of stories) and how the agency's actions related to African Americans (82% of stories). Given their tendency to dismiss the drug trafficking allegations, the mainstream press devoted the majority of its coverage of the CIA to stories which focused more generally on the agency's involvement in overseas foreign affairs.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

To say that mainstream media and politicians largely dismissed the story of CIA culpability in the importation of crack cocaine into the inner-city black communities of Los Angeles is not to say that mainstream discussions of the intelligence agency during this period were particularly positive or scandal-free. A number of other CIA scandals surfaced in the fall of 1996 that did manage to generate significant consideration by mainstream elites. Allegations of a CIA cover-up of information about American troops'

exposure to chemical weapons during the Persian Gulf War attracted significant awareness from the mainstream media. Also reported was the story of Harold Nicholson, a CIA agent accused of selling classified information to the Russian government. Even another story of CIA involvement in the shipment of cocaine into the United States merited coverage; in this case the CIA admitted to allowing a shipment to enter from Colombia through Miami as part of an operation of intelligence gathering about a Colombian drug cartel, and then losing track of the shipment. The content analysis results presented in Table 2, support the idea that mainstream coverage of the agency was somewhat mixed in its criticism. The results show that mainstream discussions of the CIA at this time had a slight negative tone as 55% of the stories in the mainstream press offered some sort of criticism of the agency. Black press discussions of the agency were, however, decidedly more negative with 72% of stories in the black press offering some sort of criticism of the agency. Again the vast majority of these criticisms focused on the agency's involvement in drug trafficking.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Given the distinctly racialized messages about the CIA present in black elite discourse and the near absence of those messages from mainstream information environments, the fielding of the 1996 NBES, from November 8th 1996 to the first week of January 1997, provides a unique opportunity to investigate the role of black elites in defining the meaning of a political subject without obvious racial content for black citizens. Knowing the specific nature of the distinct messages that blacks who were attentive to black politics would have been receiving about the CIA in the time frame that

the survey was conducted, we can capture the role of black elite messages in shaping black opinion by looking to the relationship between black political awareness and attitudes about the CIA. Evidence of the influence of black elites on black public opinion would lie in the extent to which the relationship between black political awareness and blacks' assessments of the CIA is different from the relationship between mainstream political awareness and opinion of the agency.

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

agencies or concerns about defense spending given the quasi–military status of the agency.

Hypotheses

H1: Given the negative depictions of the CIA present in black elite discourse (in particular those focusing on the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods), blacks who were attentive to black elite discourse should express more negative evaluations of the CIA.

H2: Given the somewhat mixed depictions of the agency present in mainstream elite discourse, blacks who were particularly attentive to mainstream elite discourse should express neutral to perhaps negative evaluations of the CIA.

H3: Because black political discourse about the CIA focused so heavily on discussions of the agency’s suspected involvement in the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods, blacks who are attentive to black politics should use their racial identification to evaluate the agency.

H4: Given the near absence of racial frames in mainstream discussions of the CIA and a focus on espionage and cover-up controversies involving the agency, blacks attentive to mainstream politics should use non-racial considerations in their evaluations of the agency.

Measurement in the 1996 NBES

Measuring evaluations of the CIA, awareness of black and mainstream politics, and the other relevant predispositions in the NBES are all fairly straightforward.

Evaluations of the CIA are captured by respondents’ placement of the agency on a standard zero to one hundred point feeling thermometer. Predispositions regarding government trust are captured by a question that asked respondents, “How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” The responses were coded from zero to one, with those most trustful of the federal government at zero and those least trustful at one, yielding a scale measure of *distrust* in the government.

Other possible factors in the shaping of African Americans’ opinions of the CIA were

also added to the analysis. In particular, given the CIA's status as a national security agency, with a focus on foreign affairs and apparent quasi-military powers, citizens might connect their general attitudes about national defense to their evaluations of the agency. To account for this influence, a control measure was added that measures the respondent's willingness to support increased federal spending on defense; this measure was coded with those who favored increased spending on defense at one, and those who favored decreased spending on defense at zero.⁷

To assess whether or not respondents were viewing the CIA through a racial lens we examine whether or not there exists a connection between the respondents' attitudes about CIA and their sense of black racial group identification. Here, black racial group identification is measured by a scale of four variables each designed to capture the degree of connectedness blacks have to their racial group. Similar to the concept of linked fate, the measures we use were generally designed to get at the respondent's acceptance of the idea that what happens to black people in this country has something to do with what happens to them (See Appendix A for wording and measurement statistics.).

Consistent with previous research, awareness of political discourse is assessed using a measure political knowledge (i.e., Zaller 1988; 1992). However, unlike previous research we devise two measures of political awareness: one that captures awareness to mainstream politics and another that seeks to capture awareness to black politics. The mainstream political awareness index used here is very similar to that used in previous studies assessing the effects of general political awareness; it consists of questions about the names and party identification of the respondent's congressperson and senators, as

⁷ Controls for liberal/conservative ideology, sex, education, income, southern residence, black interviewer, party identification and ideology will also be employed.

well as identification of the majority party in both chambers. Additionally respondents were asked nine relevant thermometer score items that allowed them to indicate that they did not know the individual referenced in the question. These individuals were: Richard Lamm, Newt Gingrich, and Ross Perot.⁸ If an individual indicated they did not know the individual they were coded as zero otherwise they were coded as 1.

Black political awareness is measured by an index of questions from the 1996 NBES which assess knowledge specific to blacks in the United States. The first set of items were questions that asked the respondents to recall specific pieces of information that those attentive to black political discourse would be more likely to report correctly: the percentage of blacks in the United States, the race of their own Representative in the U.S. Congress, the percentage of blacks in the U.S. Congress, and whether or not blacks in the U.S. were better or worse off financially than whites. Although the survey did not contain items that asked respondents to specifically identify black leaders, it did contain five relevant thermometer score items that allowed respondents to indicate that they did not know the subject of the question. Respondents seemed quite comfortable indicating when they did not know the political figure they were being asked to evaluate; just under sixty percent of the respondents, for instance, informed interviewers that they did not know who Kweisi Mfume was - the president of the NAACP at that time. Similarly, just over half of the respondents indicated that they did not know Carol Moseley Braun, the then-sitting junior Senator from Illinois who was also the first black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. Smaller but still notable numbers of respondents failed to recognize

⁸ Responses to recognition questions about Hillary Clinton, Bob Dole, Al Gore, and Bill Clinton were dropped as less than five percent of respondents indicated that they did not recognize these individuals. The percentage of individuals indicating that they did not recognize Hillary Clinton, Bob Dole, Al Gore, or Bill Clinton fell between .001 and 3 percent. See Appendix A for distribution of included questions.

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.⁹ While information about all of these items certainly could have come from mainstream political information sources, the more likely sources are black institutions considering the relative absence of racial discussions and obvious racial sources found in the mainstream news media (see Entman and Rojecki 200; Wolseley 1990).¹⁰

Using all these measures, we can develop a model that assess how support for the CIA varies conditional on black and mainstream political awareness and assess how levels of black and mainstream political awareness moderate the relationship between group identification (or negative attitudes about blacks in the case of whites) and support for the CIA.

Results

We begin our attempt to disentangle the effects that awareness of black and/or mainstream political discourse had on blacks' attitudes about CIA in 1996 by first examining the relationship between awareness of black and mainstream discussions of the CIA on blacks' overall evaluation of the agency. Again our expectation is that given the negative depictions of the CIA present in black elite discourse, blacks who were attentive to black elite discourse should express more negative evaluations of the CIA and given the somewhat mixed depictions of the agency present in mainstream elite discourse, blacks who were particularly attentive to mainstream elite discourse should express neutral to negative evaluations of the agency. To test these expectations, we

⁹ Responses to the question asking about Jesse Jackson were dropped as only one respondent indicated that they did not recognize who Jesse Jackson was. See Appendix A for distribution of included questions.

¹⁰ Additionally, knowledge of this information and these individuals likely reflects greater awareness of information coming from black elites.

begin by simply observing the relationship between black and mainstream awareness on blacks' support for the CIA. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. In the first two columns of Table 3 we see that increases in either black or mainstream awareness appear to be associated with negative feelings about the CIA among black respondents. This result is not surprising considering that both black and mainstream sources were at times critical of the agency; however, we certainly expected the effect of awareness of black discourse to be *more* negative than that of awareness of mainstream discourse. By simply eyeballing the relative size of the black and mainstream coefficients, across column 1 and 2, there is some sense that awareness of black discourse may in fact lead to *more* negative evaluations of the CIA. The coefficient on the black awareness variable is roughly nine points larger than the coefficient on the mainstream awareness variable. To test if the effect black awareness is in fact different from that of mainstream awareness we include both black and mainstream awareness in the same model of support for the CIA - this analysis is presented in column 3 of Table 3. The results presented in column 3 show that once we account for the effect of black awareness we observe a significant reduction in the size of the mainstream awareness coefficient. The rather large and statistically significant negative coefficient on the black awareness measure and the smallish, now indistinguishable from zero ($p=.486$) coefficient on the mainstream awareness measure confirms our expectation that awareness of black discourse seems to be a more systematic predictor of blacks' negative attitudes about the agency.¹¹

[Insert Table 3 here]

¹¹ An F-test of the difference in the relative size of the coefficients on the black and mainstream awareness variables confirms this result ($F=4.07$, $p=.043$).

To more fully comprehend the meaning of these results we calculated the predicted CIA feeling thermometer scores at various levels (high and low) of black and mainstream awareness along with the 95% confidence intervals. These results, presented in Figure 3, more clearly illustrate the negative relationship between black political awareness and support for the CIA. Here we see that while those blacks who scored low on *both* black and mainstream political awareness and those blacks scored high on mainstream awareness but not black awareness tended to give the CIA a somewhat warm rating (around 60 on a one-hundred point scale), those blacks who scored highly on black political awareness (regardless of their mainstream awareness score) rated the agency significantly lower, at around 40 on the one-hundred point scale.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The Ingredients of Opinion about the CIA

Having shown that increased awareness to black political discourse, as measured by black political awareness, does indeed appear to be related to more negative feelings towards the CIA we now turn our awareness to our second set of expectations which deal with how increased awareness to black political discourse might affect the mix of ingredients that go into blacks' opinions about the CIA. We know in the case of black elites, in particular, that their primary motivation was to mobilize blacks to political action, and to encourage political participation that would pressure acquiescence to the demand for an investigation into the specific issue of CIA involvement in drug trafficking - convincing blacks that their black group interest was important and relevant to their evaluations of the CIA, was a necessary part of this mobilization effort. Thus, because

black political discourse about the CIA focused so heavily on discussions of the agency's suspected involvement in the importation of drugs into inner city Los Angeles neighborhoods, for blacks who were particularly attentive to this discourse we should see their racial in-group identification becoming important to their evaluations of the agency. And because of the absence of racial frames in mainstream discussions of the CIA and a focus on espionage and cover-up controversies involving the agency, blacks who are particularly attentive to mainstream politics would likely use non-racial considerations in their evaluations of the agency.

We test these expectations by examining the effects of liberal/conservative ideology, black in-group identification, trust in government, and support for increased defense spending, on support for the CIA across the four levels of black and mainstream political awareness discussed in Figure 3: 1) *low black awareness and low mainstream awareness*, 2) *low black awareness and high mainstream awareness*, 3) *high black awareness and low mainstream awareness*, and 4) *high black awareness and high mainstream awareness*.¹² Table 4 presents the results of our test of the effects of these independent variables on black support for the CIA. Beginning with the results for the low black, low mainstream group presented in column one, we see, not surprisingly, very little evidence of any systematic thinking about the CIA. The effect of black in-group identification on support for the CIA among these individuals is small and fails to reach conventional level of statistical significance. This result is not surprising considering that in the absence of information that actually racializes the CIA it is not clear how these individuals would link their racial in-group identity to their support of the agency. The

¹² Levels of mainstream and black awareness were created by selecting on cases above and/or below median value of each measure.

only measure that offers any suggestion of explaining support for the agency among low awareness individuals is distrust in government. Here, those who distrust government were somewhat more likely to offer negative evaluations CIA.

Having demonstrated that racial in-group identification plays, at best, only a minor role in explaining attitudes about the CIA among low awareness blacks, we now turn our awareness to understanding how the importance racial in-group identification varies across groups of blacks with different levels of black and mainstream awareness. Using the *low black and low mainstream* group as a baseline/comparison group we can now test how the importance of each of our predictors/independent variables changes across the different types of awareness relative to this baseline. Looking at Table 4, the bolded results indicate a statistically significant ($p < .05$) change in the size of that coefficient from the same coefficient in baseline model.¹³ Here we can see that consistent with our expectations, the only group of black respondents for which the relationship between racial in-group identification and feelings about the CIA is different from the baseline condition is those blacks who score low on mainstream awareness but high on black awareness. The coefficient on the racial in-group identification variable in this group is more than four times the size of the racial in-group identification coefficient in the baseline group (*low mainstream and low black awareness*). To better understand this result, we calculated the predicted effect of racial in-group identification on support for the CIA within the low mainstream awareness and high black awareness group.

¹³ Tests across models were conducted by running separate models simultaneously and testing for statically significant slope chances from one model to the next. We also estimated these models using a single model that includes 3-way interactions of Black Awareness X Mainstream Awareness X the attitudinal measures; a similar pattern of results emerges. Given the complexity of interpreting and presenting estimates produced from models that include 3-way interactions we choose instead to report the roughly equivalent results presented here (see Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001 for more on this approach).

Setting all other variables at their means, these predictions suggest that, all else equal, blacks who do not identify closely with their racial group would rate the CIA rather highly, at about 72 (95%CI - 58.0, 85.6) on the feeling thermometer scale, while those blacks who are highly racially identified would rate the agency only at around 23 (95%CI - 14.9, 33.1) on the feeling thermometer scale. We can contrast this with predictions from the baseline group (*low mainstream and low black awareness*) which suggest that blacks who did not identify closely with their racial group would likely rate the CIA, at about 54.7 (95%CI - 46.8, 62.6) on the feeling thermometer scale, while those blacks who were highly racially identified would likely rate the agency at around 43 (95%CI - 46.6, 67.2) on the feeling thermometer scale. These results suggest that although the black elite interpretation of the CIA clearly divided blacks it seemed to have the intended effect of racializing the actions of the CIA and thus mobilizing the opinions of the majority of blacks who identified closely to their racial group.

Having observed an increase in the relevance of black in-group identity when comparing the *low black and low mainstream awareness/baseline* group to the *high black awareness, low mainstream awareness* group, we now turn to a more direct test of the effect of awareness to black and mainstream communications on support for the CIA by contrasting the differences in the mix of ingredients that go into black's feelings about the CIA across the *low black and high mainstream awareness* group and the *high black and low mainstream awareness* group. The results of this test, look very much like the previous analyses, the only statically significant difference in the coefficients across these two models is from racial group identification. The difference in the size of the racial group identification coefficients between the *high black, low mainstream* group and the

low black, high mainstream group is roughly 24 points and statically significant ($p < .02$). Thus, not only were racial considerations more important to blacks with high black awareness when they were compared to those who pay little awareness to politics but racial considerations were also more important to blacks with high black awareness when they were compared to those who attended primary to mainstream politics.¹⁴

Non-racial considerations also play a part in explaining the black's attitudes about the CIA, but their role is largely isolated to the high mainstream awareness groups and their influence is often only marginally significant. For example, there is some evidence that the effect of liberal/conservative ideology increases relative to the baseline group for the *high black, high mainstream* groups ($p < .10$). Similarly, there is also some suggestive evidence of an increase in the relevance of trust in government relative to the baseline group for the *low black, high mainstream* group ($p = .14$). The uncertainty of these results indicate that given the diversity of frames present within mainstream political communication, identifying a single predictor of black's feelings about the CIA among those individuals in the high mainstream awareness groups is likely a bit more difficult but the relevance of race to those individuals with high black awareness seems pretty clear.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Selective Exposure

¹⁴ A statistically significant negative relationship between support for the CIA and black racial group identification can also be observed in the high black, high mainstream group ($p < .05$). The coefficient on black racial group identification in this model is marginally distinguishable from the coefficients in the baseline (low black, low mainstream) group model ($p = .13$) and the high black, low mainstream group model ($p = .10$). This seems to highlight the saliency of racial appeals for blacks. Despite being exposed to information that may contradict the racial frames present in black political discourse the relevance of race to evaluations of the CIA remains for blacks who attend to black political information.

Lastly, despite the consistency of the results presented above there may still be concerns about the exact nature of this pattern of results. For example it could be the case that highly racially identified blacks are simply seeking out black political information (and not mainstream information) or perhaps seeking out institutions that are more likely to provide this information (black institutions). If this were the case it would suggest, among other things that, black political awareness is merely a proxy for racial group identity and that regardless of the kinds of information they are exposed to, highly racially identified blacks hold negative views of the CIA. Although this is certainly a concern, we do not think this pattern of results reflects this type of selective exposure. While we cannot totally account for selection, we can assuage some concerns by examining if there are any differences in the kinds of individuals that score high or low on our measures black and mainstream awareness.¹⁵ If black political awareness, as we have argued, results from simple social patterns, including racial segregation, that structure contact with environments where black political information is offered, and not from the type of motivated information seeking just mentioned, then we should *not* observe particularly large differences in the distribution of the independent variables across different levels of black and mainstream awareness. For example, if highly racially identified blacks were more likely to score high on measures of black awareness and not mainstream awareness this would suggest that blacks were likely selectively exposing themselves to black information instead of being directed to environments where black political information is offered by simple social patterns.

¹⁵ In much the same way that an experimentalist might test to see if randomization balanced out differences across group of subjects.

The results presented in Table 5 provide some evidence to suggest that the pattern of selection described above is probably not driving the results we saw earlier. As we can see in Table 5, each of the independent variables is fairly evenly distributed across the political awareness groups. Although those in the *low black awareness and low mainstream awareness* group appear to be somewhat more conservative and less highly racially identified than those in the *high black awareness and high mainstream awareness* group, very few other differences seem to exist. Of particular note is the lack of any real difference in the distribution of black in-group identity between those blacks who score high on black awareness and low mainstream awareness and those who score low on black awareness and high mainstream awareness. The relative balance in the distribution of these independent variables across these groups should give us added confidence that the differences we observe across the groups is likely due to the type of information these individuals were exposed to and not simply the result of highly racially identified blacks selecting into black information environments.

[Insert Table 5 here]

Conclusion

The United States has made significant advancements in trying to repair the damage of Jim Crow segregation on African American life but vestiges of this institution remain. On a daily basis most African Americans still have minimal interaction with whites. The research conducted in this study demonstrates that in modern day America the spaces that were created by blacks to cope with the oppressive nature of segregation continue to influence and shape their opinions on politics. Within these spaces African

Americans are exposed to discourse about issues and problems that face the black community that differs from mainstream political communication.

The analysis presented here makes two important points. The first is a substantive point about the importance of alternative elite discussions of politics. Here we made the case for considering the effects that indigenous political elites/institutions have on structuring the opinions of African Americans. We showed that those blacks who are not privy to black elite discourse have a very different understanding of politics than those blacks who get their information primarily from awareness to black elite discourse. Black individuals with high levels of black awareness were more likely to be exposed to racially charged negative depictions of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency through their exposure to black political communication and as a consequence were more likely to express negative feelings towards the agency. Additionally, the racialized frames utilized in black political communication increased the relevance of racial considerations when blacks evaluated the CIA. These racialized frames that discussed the suspected involvement of the agency in the importation of drugs into the inner city were absent in the mainstream elite discourse, as the content analysis made clear. As a result, African Americans that were attentive to the black elite discourse were receiving racial cues that heightened the importance of race to their assessment of an ostensibly non-racial agency. Blacks that were more attentive to mainstream political discourse were not likely to be exposed to these racialized frames thus racial considerations were not employed when making evaluations. We hope these findings bring attention to understanding the different ways that indigenous elites can influence minority opinion. Latinos, for example, experience even greater segregation in political information as they are also

divided by language (Barreto and Ramirez 2006). How might this segregation lead to differences in Latino opinion?

The second point we hope readers take away from this paper is that measures of mainstream or general political information may not fully capture the effect of black's awareness to politics. As we stated earlier, if the messages of leaders within racial minority communities only appear in segregated information environments—indigenous institutions—and not in mainstream information channels, then imposing singular importance on the mainstream environment assumes away any significant consequence of awareness paid to alternative, racial-group elite discourse. This is not to say that Zaller was incorrect in his formulation of elite effects on mass opinion, however it is clear that these effects deserve more contextualization, especially when it comes to populations whose norms and values are not represented in mainstream media discourse. Relatedly, we believe this contention may also be extended to any group whose opinion leaders are underrepresented in mainstream media coverage such as Muslims or LGBT members. It also may lead us to a mischaracterization of the extent of elite consensus or disagreement on political issues, if disagreement is coming only from those outside the mainstream. Thus we hope more awareness is devoted to developing more precise measures of awareness to racial elite discourse.

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

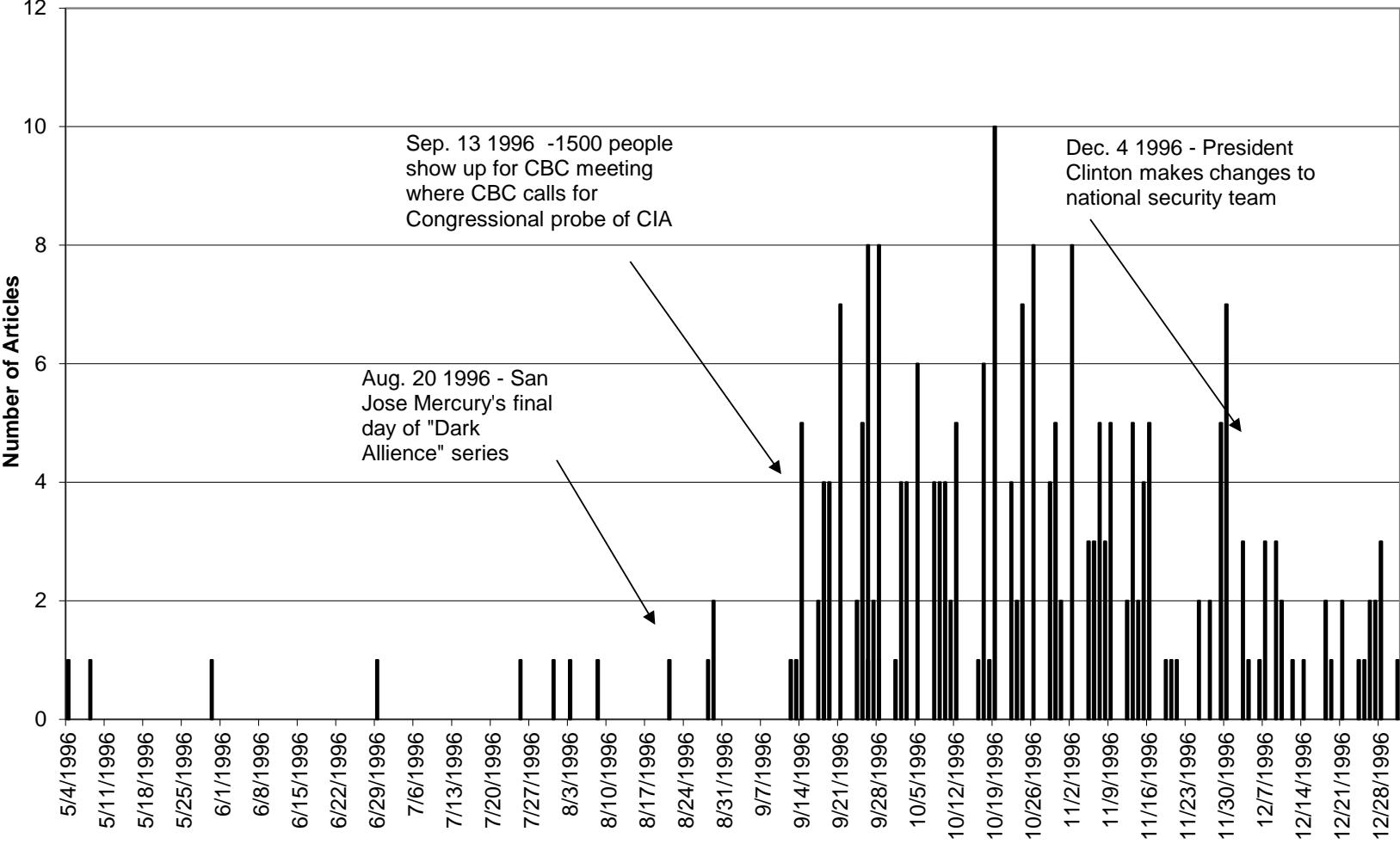


Figure 2. Number of Articles in the Mainstream Press About the CIA May to December 1996

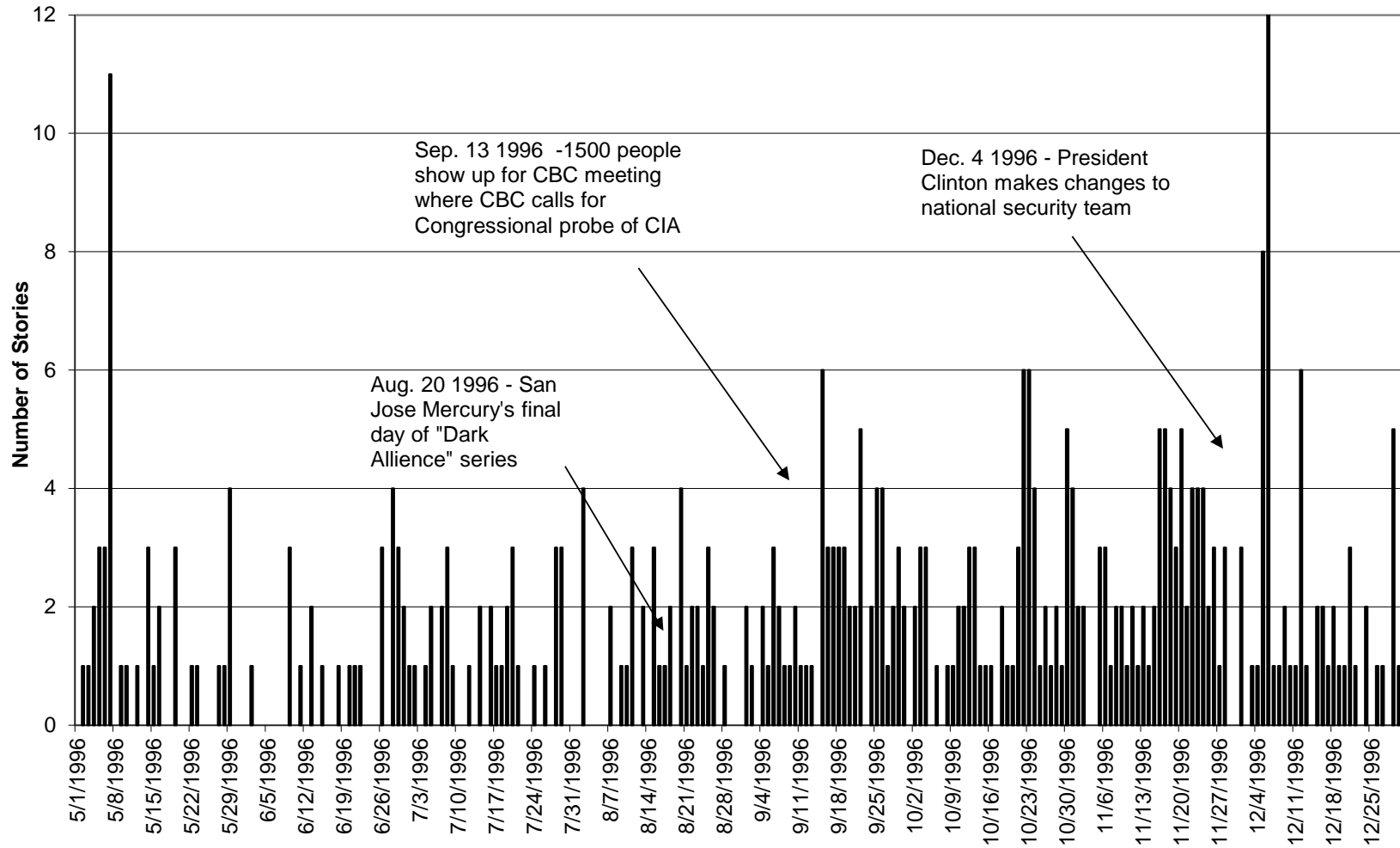


Figure 3. Predicted CIA Feeling Thermometer Scores by Level of Black and Mainstream Political Awareness (with 95% Confidence Intervals)

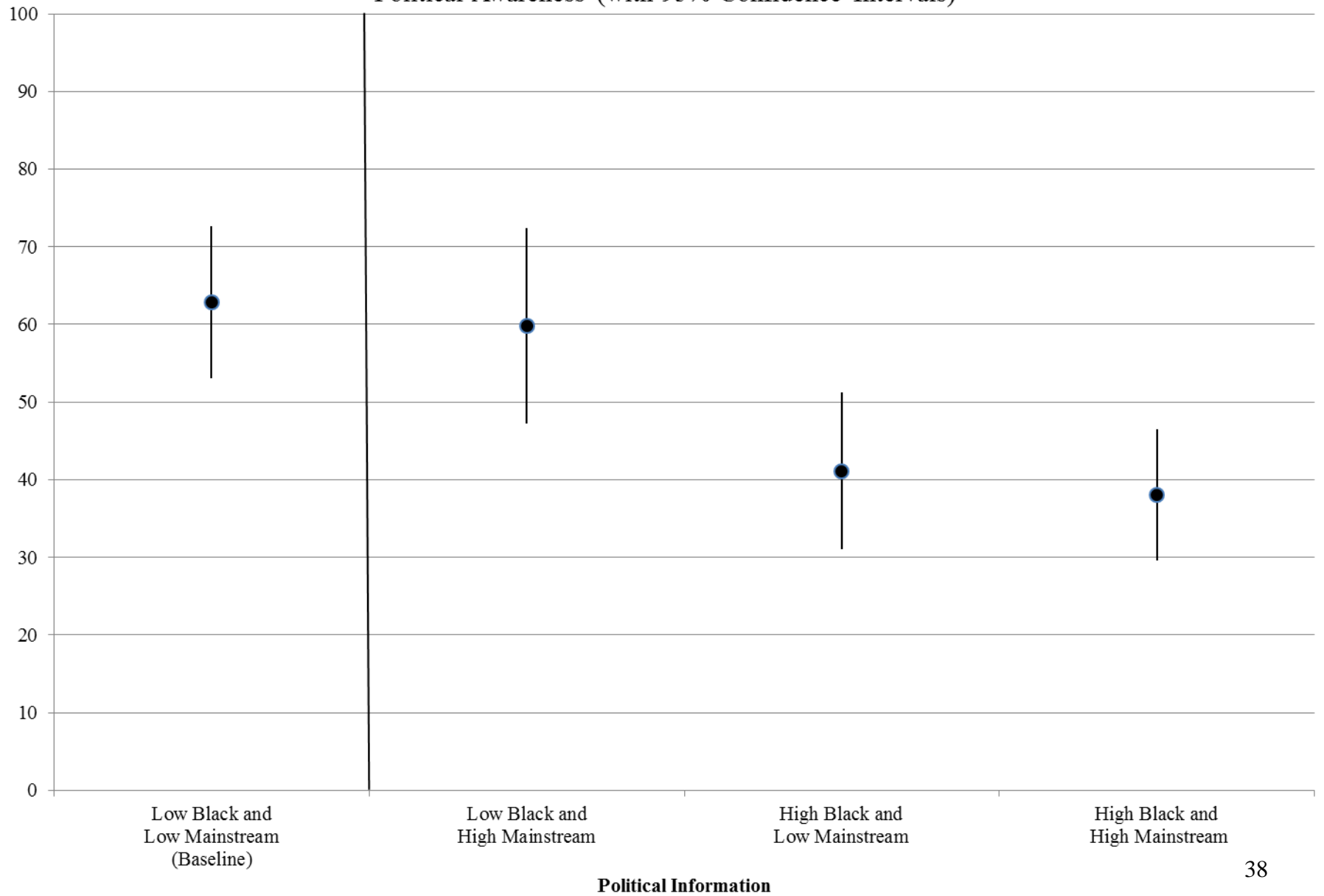


Table 1. Frames used to Describe the CIA in the Black and Mainstream Press

	Black Press	Mainstream Press	Difference
Describes CIA's actions as they (explicitly) relate to African Americans	80.53	16.28	64.25*
n	153	14	
Drug Trafficking Allegations	82.11	16.28	65.83*
n	156	14	
Foreign Policy Affairs other than those relating to Contras and Drug Trafficking	8.42	77.91	-69.49*
n	16	67	
N	190	86	

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

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

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

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

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

	1	2	3
Mainstream Political Awareness	-9.54* (3.97)	- -	-3.06 (4.39)
Black Political Awareness	- -	-23.78* (5.79)	-21.73* (6.44)
Constant	43.80* (4.36)	52.41* (4.96)	52.09* (4.98)
N	741	740	739
Adj-R ²	0.05	0.06	0.07

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

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

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

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients from simultaneously estimated models. Each model includes controls for southern residence, urban residence, ideology, party identification, education and gender (not shown). Bolded results indicate a statically significant ($p < .05$, two-tailed, χ^2) slope change from the baseline condition (low black awareness and low mainstream awareness condition). *Denotes $p < .05$ and +denotes $p < .1$ for two-tailed test of the relationship between that variable and feelings of warmth with the CIA within that condition.

Table 5. Mean Scores by Level of Black and Mainstream Political Awareness

	Low Black & Low Ms Awareness (1)	Low Black & High Ms Awareness (2)	High Black & Low Ms Awareness (3)	High Black & High Ms Awareness (4)
Liberal Ideology	0.40	0.55	0.50	0.60
sd	0.37	0.40	0.41	0.37
Black In-Group Identification	0.57	0.66	0.68	0.72
sd	0.32	0.28	0.25	0.26
Distrust in Federal Government	0.55	0.57	0.59	0.59
sd	0.20	0.35	0.19	0.17
Support for Increased Spending on Defense	0.55	0.50	0.44	0.37
sd	0.32	0.35	0.33	0.33
N	233	109	105	273

Note: Entries represent valid cases from analysis presented in Table 5.