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THE ASIAN AMERICAN VOTE: THE ROLE OF RACE IN NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2008 DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of race dominated the media coverage of the 2008 elections, beginning with the Democratic primaries. The “black,” “white,” “Latino,” and “Asian” votes were common demographic breakdowns used to gauge candidate support for Barack Obama vs. Hillary Clinton. Though receiving less media coverage than blacks and Latinos due to their comparatively smaller demographic presence, Asian American voters garnered brief national media attention when they supported Clinton over Obama overwhelmingly in California and New York. According to exit polls, Asian Americans elected Clinton over Obama by a margin of 75% to 23% in California, and 86% to 14% in New York. This paper briefly explores what the media coverage of Asian Americans’ support for Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama reveals in terms of biased racial framing of candidates of color compared to white candidates. Drawing upon U.S. news media – including print and wire – representations of Asian American voters, I discuss the coverage of race in the 2008 Democratic primary elections.¹ My findings show how media portrayals of Asian American support for Hillary Clinton focus on Clinton’s individual characteristics – past experience,

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¹ A LexisNexis search of all U.S. print and wire between 2007 and June 2008 revealed fifteen television, radio, and print segments containing references to Asian American voters in the Democratic primary elections. Of the fifteen, eight have national distribution, one has multi-regional distribution, five have regional distribution, and one is an ethnic newspaper targeting Asian Americans.

policies and other personal merits – rather than her race.² In contrast, media portrayals of Asian American non-support for Obama focus primarily on race, citing group-level prejudice and racial tensions.³ These biases demonstrate how the mainstream news media perpetuates the myth that only people of color are raced – not whites.

I. “THE KNOWN ENTITY”: NON-RACED EXPLANATIONS FOR CLINTON SUPPORT AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN VOTERS

During the Democratic primaries, the news media framed the support for Clinton over Obama among Asian American voters in non-raced ways. Some coverage even went so far as to claim that race has nothing to do with potential reasons why Asian Americans rallied behind Hillary Clinton, as demonstrated by this excerpt from *Time* magazine:

Experts have speculated about a variety of possible reasons having little to do with race: Like other new immigrants, Asian Americans are more conservative in their choices for leaders, and therefore likely to go with the known entity – which in this race, thanks to her husband and her time in the White House, is Clinton.⁴

Moving deliberately away from raced explanations, such individualistic frames focus on Clinton’s personal qualifications, such as her past presence in U.S. politics and her connection with her husband, President Bill Clinton. Another mainstream news segment demonstrates how the news media persists in its focus on the Clintons’ past policies and presence:

They remember good times in the 1990s. There was a lot of benefits on not only the economy, but other policies that benefited immigrants, and in particular, Asian-Americans that would cause them to remember the Clintons in fondness.⁵

Overall, the framing of Asian American support based on Clinton’s past presence and policies focuses on her individual rather than group

² Among the nineteen explanations of why Asian Americans would favor Hillary Clinton, sixteen (85%) made no mention of her race or any comparisons of her race to that of Asian Americans.

³ Among the fifteen explanations of why Asian Americans do not favor Barack Obama, eleven (73%) made either specific reference to his race or contrasted his racial standpoint to that of Asian Americans.

⁴ Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, *Does Obama Have an Asian Problem?*, TIME, Feb. 18, 2008, available at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1714292,00.html>.

⁵ Professor Matt Barreto, University of Washington, *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees: Uncovering America: Race, Gender and Politics* (CNN television broadcast Feb. 15, 2008) (transcript available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0802/15/acd.01.html>).

attributes.⁶ This contributes to the myth that white candidates succeed in politics based on their merits – experience, policies, *etc.* – rather than any racial privilege.

II. “ASIAN AMERICANS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE VOTING FOR A BLACK CANDIDATE”⁷: RACED EXPLANATIONS FOR ASIAN AMERICANS VOTING AGAINST OBAMA

In contrast to the non-raced explanations of Asian American support for Hillary Clinton, speculations on why this group did not vote for Barack Obama fixated on race. Many claimed that Asian Americans are outright racist against blacks. This excerpt from *Time* magazine cites an Asian American academic to bolster the article’s claim that Asian Americans are racist:

“Maybe it’s just my cynicism speaking, but you look at those numbers and on some level there has to be some element of race,” says Oliver Wang, a sociology professor at California State University at Long Beach. While not discounting the myriad cultural reasons that could explain the support for Clinton, “on a gut level my reaction is that at least some Asian Americans are uncomfortable voting for a black candidate.”⁸

Besides outright racism, other media explanations cited racial tensions between Asian Americans and African Americans, like this comment from Fay Wattleton, an African American correspondent on CNN:

I think there are tensions between African American and Asians around affirmative action issues at the higher education levels. And I think we can’t ignore those. Now, whether they show up in the electorate and how deep those divides are, but the tensions do exist.⁹

This description exemplifies how the media frames people of color: the dominant pattern is to search for racial reasons to gauge support, or lack of support, for a candidate of color. In this case, the media cites racial tensions between Asian Americans and African Americans surrounding affirmative action as a potential reason for Asian American non-support of

⁶ Though Clinton’s gender is mentioned more often than her race, it is still comparatively less than individual-level attributes.

⁷ Cullen, *supra* note 4.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Faye Wattleton, *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees: Uncovering America: Race, Gender and Politics*, *supra* note 5.

an African-American candidate, even though, historically, whites are the major racial group rallying against affirmative action.

CONCLUSION

The news media presents cultural generalizations that pit minority groups against one another while perpetuating the myth that whites do not benefit from the current racial hierarchy. Asian American support for Clinton is framed in terms of her merits rather than white racial privilege. The idea that whites have no race, but that all other groups are racially marked is a central tenet of critical whiteness studies, which argue "whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world."¹⁰ The media's rare attribution of racial privilege to white dominance is a powerful vehicle for perpetuating dominant racial ideology. And while whiteness becomes invisible in terms of race, other non-white identities are all the more racialized by comparison.

Not only does the news media frame people of color racially, it also frames them as racists. Racial prejudice and racial division are common frames used to explain Asian American non-support for Obama. Representations of Latino support for Clinton over Obama take a similar route in citing racism among Latinos. Despite media biases in terms of citing racial tensions between Asian Americans, Latinos and African Americans, the recent Obama presidential victory has disproved such theories with evidence of overwhelming support for Obama from Asian Americans and Latinos. Perhaps the news corps will learn a lesson on race relations from this historical election and rethink its biased coverage of race in political elections.

¹⁰ BIRGIT BRANDER RASMUSSEN ET AL., *THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF WHITENESS* 10 (2001).