ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is More Better? Effects of Newsroom and Audience Diversity on Trait Coverage of Minority Candidates

Mingxiao Sui[1] 🆔 and Newly Paul[2]

[1]Department of Communication Studies, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL, USA
[2]Mayborn School of Journalism, University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA
Corresponding author: Mingxiao Sui, email: msui@uab.edu

Abstract

This article examines how the racial composition of newsrooms and that of the news audiences influence campaign coverage of candidates. Using observational data compiled from multiple sources for analyses, our findings suggest that candidate trait coverage is influenced by what we term *racial congruence* at two levels. First, when the number of non-white journalists increases in newsroom, white candidates are more likely to receive positive trait coverage than non-white candidates, which is likely compounded by multiple constraints racial minority journalists face in the newsroom. This racial congruence phenomenon is also present in areas with large non-white adult populations. The larger this population, the higher is favorable news coverage for non-white candidates compared to white candidates. The race of candidates, journalists, and audiences does not have a combined effect on news coverage, indicating that the effects of more diverse newsroom members are not necessarily driven by market incentives.

Keywords: candidate traits; newsroom diversity; minority candidates; minority audience; racial congruence

Though the US population has become more racially diverse over the past decade, the racial[1] composition of public office holders largely remains white (Pew Research Center 2019). In 2015, 91 members in the US House and Senate were non-white; this number grew to 106 in 2017 and 132 in 2020 (Congressional Research Service 2020). As the number of racial minority candidates competing for political office continues to rise, especially at state and local levels, researchers continue to ask: Do racial minority

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[1]The two concepts—"ethnicity" and "race"—are admittedly different, yet the process of racialization of all non-white groups (see Omi and Winant 1994) is salient here as we consider non-white newsroom reporters and candidates. For the sake of brevity and clarity, this study adopts "racial minority" to identify all non-white groups, including those from traditionally classified different racial and ethnic groups.

candidates get a fair shake from the press? Historically, the answer would be no. When minority candidates run, they often receive scant news coverage or coverage focusing disproportionately on race or race-related issues rather than campaign issues (McIlwain 2011; Wu and Lee 2005). Coverage of candidates, officeholders and nominees who are women of color is particularly skewed (Lucas 2017; Towner and Clawson 2016). These patterns in coverage are often attributed to the predominance of white, male culture in newsrooms[2] (Bravo and Clark 2019), or the preferences of mainstream (i.e., white, English-speaking) audiences (Abrajano and Singh 2009).

Taking a different approach from scholars focusing on the role of newsroom diversity on news content (e.g., Gilens 1999; Nishikawa et al. 2009), our research explores how *racial congruence* between the newsroom, the candidates, and the audience influences coverage of candidate traits. Voters often rely on their perceptions of candidate traits to form an overall impression about the candidate, which in turn influences vote choice (Bartels 2002; Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Hayes 2011). People pay more attention to negative messages than positive information (Fiske 1980), and negative traits weigh more in voters' overall assessment of candidates (Fridkin and Kenney 2011). If the media disproportionately highlight negative traits of racial minority candidates, or cover fewer positive traits in comparison to white candidates, voters could evaluate minority candidates negatively, which may affect their chances of getting elected. Moreover, skewed coverage of minority candidates could reinforce negative stereotypes associated with minorities or limit their broad appeal by connecting them with a limited set of—mostly race-related—issues (Schaffner and Gadson 2004; Zilber and Niven 2000).

Our findings suggest that newsroom diversity and audience demographics matter. As the percent of minority reporters in the newsroom increases, news outlets are less likely to associate non-white candidates with positive traits such as competence, experience, and reliability, but more likely to do so for white candidates. This finding—though not as hypothesized—speaks to the constrains that minority journalists face in the newsroom (see Shafer 1993; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Ziegler and white 1990). We also find that the larger the size of the voting-age non-white population, the faster favorable news coverage ratchets up for non-white candidates than for white candidates. We discuss the implications of this mixed evidence for racial congruence in our conclusion.

Racial Diversity in Campaign News Coverage

Previous research concludes that candidates who belong to racial minority groups typically earn less media attention during campaigns (Besco, Gerrits, and Matthews 2016). When they do earn coverage, it often disproportionately focuses on their race (Major and Coleman 2008; McIlwain 2011), stereotypes (Zilber and Niven 2000), the novelty of their candidacy (Gershon 2012; Ward 2017), or racialized issues such as immigration or welfare (Ward 2016a). Zilber and Niven (2000) found that though Black representatives portrayed themselves as having diverse interests and representing the interests of all their constituents, the media tended to depict them as powerless

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[2]As of 2018, non-white journalists comprised 22.6% of the US newsroom workforce (ASNE 2018). Out of the 293 newspapers ASNE surveyed in 2018, only 15 had a staff population with 50% or more non-white journalists.

in Washington and narrowly focused on racialized issues. In biracial elections where one candidate is a minority, the media tend to focus disproportionately on the race of the minority candidate (Schaffner and Gadson 2004; Terkildsen and Damore 1999). When a woman of color is winning at the polls, she is less likely to enjoy the spike in coverage that a white male candidate would get, and is likely to be covered using racialized frames (Besco, Gerrits, and Matthews 2016).

Negative coverage is also linked with candidates' race and gender. Gershon (2012) found that white men, white women, and minority men who were members of the House earned almost an equal amount of positive coverage when they ran for reelection during the 2006 midterm elections, while women of color candidates got disproportionally more negative coverage compared to the other groups. Other studies indicate that racial backgrounds only influence coverage of nonincumbent candidates. In Tolley's (2015) analysis of the 2008 Canadian federal election, for example, in open-seat races where both candidates were challengers, only white candidates received positive coverage of their qualifications.

Together, these findings suggest that journalists often consider minority candidates' gender and race as novel and newsworthy; however, intense focus on these aspects could create the unintended effect of highlighting white and male candidates as the default political candidate (Ward 2016b) while constraining perceptions of minority candidates' expertise to a narrow set of racialized issues. In addition, minority candidates are at a disadvantage if journalists consider them newsworthy only when race and gender are broadly salient, such as in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary election when Black congresswomen received increased media attention due to the spotlight on gender and race (Lucas 2017).

Influence of Newsroom Diversity

Newsroom diversity is often offered as a solution to the problem of racism in journalism. A Reuters' survey of newsroom leaders (Cherubini, Newman, and Nielsen 2020) found that in the wake of the Black Lives Matters protests, 42% of respondents cited improving ethnic diversity as the most pressing diversity priority for the next year while only 18% mentioned gender diversity as a priority. Scholars also consider newsroom diversity an important factor to improve the coverage of minority groups (Caliendo 2018; Saldaña, Sylvie, and McGregor 2016). The expectation is that "female and minority reporters are able to provide a non-white or nonmale perspective in the news" (Zeldes and Fico 2005, 373). Research supports this view. For example, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found that journalists belonging to racial minority groups possess a strong sense of racial identity and are driven by the need to represent their in-group members. In practice, non-white reporters are more likely than their white colleagues to include non-white sources in stories (Zeldes and Fico 2005), which is a result of the social responsibility norms that motivate journalists to accurately portray the nation's diversity (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947). Non-white journalists use lesser racist and discriminatory language in coverage of events such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Leopold and Bell 2017).

On the aggregate level, however, minority journalists contribute to a very small portion of the stories (see Ziegler and white 1990), partially due to the limited editorial freedom reporters have in selecting stories and determining how they are

used in news broadcasts (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Numerous studies show that minorities remain underrepresented in the news. This is caused by biases in news production (Clark 2017). Both producers of content and owners of news media are still predominantly male, middle aged and white, and their influence is felt in gatekeeping practices, story selection, and frames and sources used in stories (Bravo and Clark 2019).

Further, newsroom culture may prevent minority journalists from changing traditional patterns in coverage. Black and Latino journalists are still subject to traditional journalistic norms established by white-majority newsrooms and may fear being perceived as unprofessional or fear the loss of potential for career advancement if they advocate on behalf of their communities (Johnston and Flamiano 2007; Nishikawa et al. 2009; Wilson 2000). Faced with an ever-shrinking newsroom population and resources, journalists may also find themselves unable to conduct community outreach to build a database of diverse sources. For example, journalists on a tight deadline found there was "virtually no time to develop sources within minority communities" (Clark 2014, 9). Newsroom budget and staffing cuts over the last several years have offset prior gains in newsroom diversity, stalling the trend in newsroom diversity growth and producing a plateau between 2012 and 2015 (Sui et al. 2018). The commercially oriented media system in the US coupled with the increasingly competitive media landscape adds complexity to newsroom diversity as a solution to inequities in coverage.

Influence of Audience Diversity

The demographic composition of audiences also shapes the volume and nature of minority candidate coverage. Most news organizations are driven by profits and gear content toward target audiences, often defined by demographics (Abrajano and Singh 2009; Branton and Dunaway 2008; Hamilton 2004). For example, ethnic newspapers in areas populated by Latino, Korean and Chinese immigrants tend to provide more news about immigrants' home nations than the US (Lin and Song 2006). Grose (2006) found that Latino officials are more likely to be covered by Latino media outlets and the likelihood of coverage increases when candidates represent predominantly Latino districts.

The tone used to cover minority populations depends on audience demographics and geographic location (Branton and Dunaway 2009a, 2009b). For example, although both Spanish-and English-language news programs target women aged between 18 and 34 years, Spanish-language news depicts immigrants more positively than the latter (Abrajano and Singh 2009). Distance from the US-Mexico border also influences the amount and tone of immigration news coverage. The tone of coverage is largely negative in places close to the border, except predominately Latino markets (Branton and Dunaway 2009a). In towns distant from the border, newspapers do not allocate much coverage to immigration, and the tone of coverage is comparatively positive, even in predominately white markets (Branton and Dunaway 2009a). Overall, in places where racially diverse newsrooms cater to a large and diverse population, there is increased focus on racialized issues such as immigration and welfare, based on perceptions that these issues are important to the audience (Sui et al. 2018).

The Importance of Trait Coverage in Electoral Campaigns

Though race-related factors affect many aspects of minority candidate coverage, this study concentrates on trait coverage. Candidate traits—in addition to other factors such as partisan identity or campaign issues—play an important role in vote choice (Hayes 2011). Trait evaluations act as heuristics to help voters determine how a candidate is different from the opponent and the extent to which the candidates share their values (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016).

Traits ascribed to candidates depend on many factors, including social identity (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; Sigelman et al. 1995), the type of office for which they are running (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b), and political party (Hayes 2005; Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016). Broadly speaking, voters tend to associate men, candidates running for executive office, and the Republican Party with traits such as toughness, which signifies expertise on issues such as foreign policy and national security (Barnes and O'Brien 2018). On the other hand, Democrats, women, and those running for legislative offices are associated with empathy and compassion, or traits associated with competence on social welfare issues such as healthcare and education (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; 2009; Krook and O'Brien 2012).

Trait evaluations of minority candidates are often stereotypically driven; minority candidates are often perceived as more liberal and more inclined to advocate for racialized issues than white candidates (Fulton and Gershon 2018; Lerman and Sadin 2016; Sigelman et al. 1995). Candidate trait evaluations are increasingly related to party. In the 1980s, most voters associated the office of the president with qualities such as integrity and decency; but with the growth of polarization in the late 2000s, positive traits are ascribed only to candidates from their own party (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016).

Voters' perceptions of candidate traits also depend on media coverage, which provides cues about candidates' traits (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016; Wintersieck and Carle 2020). Campaign news often favors trait coverage over issues (Dunaway et al. 2013), in part because voters consider candidate traits an important measure of electability. But imbalances between trait and issue coverage can have electoral ramifications. For example, women candidates are thought to be disadvantaged because they get more trait-based coverage than men (Dunaway et al. 2013; Fowler and Lawless 2009), especially when they run for executive offices such as governor or president which are associated with masculine traits and issues (Meeks 2012). Disproportionate emphasis on traits and resultant deficits in issue coverage are potentially harmful to women and candidates of color, especially if they preclude opportunities to demonstrate issue competencies.

When local news focuses disproportionately on traits, it primes voters to rely on them as the primary criteria to evaluate candidates (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In addition, by focusing on the race and gender of candidates, the news media activates racial and gender stereotypes which are more frequently connected to trait inferences (Fridkin and Kenney 2011). For example, as race-based local news coverage of Obama increased, negative racial stereotypes were primed, and liberals became significantly more likely to rate him as untrustworthy (Wintersieck and Carle 2020).

On the other hand, trait coverage does not always harm candidates. Voters tend to evaluate candidates positively when the media highlights counter-stereotypic information—i.e., traits not commonly associated with the candidate's political party or

social identity (Hayes 2011). Moreover, given the growth in political polarization, trait coverage outside those indicative of partisanship or ideology may be relatively ineffective for shifting perceptions among partisan voters (Hayes and Lawless 2015). However, recent evidence suggests that in certain elections, trait coverage may be particularly important in voters' decision-making process. The American public has never been good at articulating coherent sets of policy preferences, and trait-based evaluations require less political sophistication and cognitive processing (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016). Similar cognitive biases may explain why coverage of candidates' negative traits is more powerful and durable relative to coverage of positive traits.

Hypotheses

Theories of social identity and self-categorization provide the foundation for our expectation that racial congruence should matter for trait coverage—specifically, that candidate trait coverage is a function of the interplay between the racial characteristics of candidates, newsroom personnel, and audiences. As social animals, we self-identify as members of groups to feel a sense of belongingness, esteem, and pride. We do this by unconsciously inferring positive qualities upon our own group (or in-group), and negative qualities on the out-group (Calhoun 1994; Kunda 1990).

Racial in-groups are formed by people who identify with the racial identities of other members in the group (Markus 2008; Omi and Winant 1994). When group identity is race-based and there is a history of associated racial conflict, people are more likely to ascribe positive qualities to in-group members than out-groups (Devine 1995). Based on shared racial identity, people are likely to think that they "share other similarities, such as culture, histories, values, and viewpoints, leading to greater identification" (Coleman 2011, 340). These implicit beliefs and stereotypes are beyond conscious awareness, easy to activate but hard to control (Blanton and Jaccard 2008), and arise from habit or "unconscious associations stored in long-term memory" (Payne et al. 2010, 1). They are in stark contrast to explicit biases that are effortful to recall, consciously monitored, and deliberately evoked (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006). Studies have found that implicit bias affects support for government policies (Banks and Hicks 2016; Knowles, Lowery, and Schaumberg 2010), attitudes toward candidates (Plant et al. 2009) and voting behavior (Payne et al. 2010).

Journalists, like everyone else, identify with certain groups based on shared characteristics (see Fiske 1995; Johnson 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1979) such as age, gender, and race (Jost and Hamilton 2005). Consequently, journalists' racial identity may override their professional identity to affect the way they report news (Husband 2005; Johnson 2010; Matsaganis and Katz 2014). Social identity theory provides many reasons to expect journalists to provide more positive portrayals of candidates of the same race relative to those with different racial identities, even without their conscious awareness. First, racial cues often arouse or intensify people's feelings of group solidarity, resulting in in-group favorability (see Tajfel 1981; Turner et al. 1987). This is especially true for racial groups that are underrepresented in US politics (Chong and Rogers 2005). This is consistent with the idea of linked fate, which contends that some individuals in racial groups feel inextricably tied as a whole, such that they will consider the needs of their own racial group when making decisions (Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Simien 2005).

The presence of more minority journalists in the newsroom may implicitly affect the process of news production (Johnson 2010) by providing in-group representation in the newsroom for minority candidates. Presumably, driven by unconscious in-group favorability, non-white journalists are more likely to cover their in-group members (i.e., minority candidates) and do so in a more positive, nuanced, and complex manner. Thus, we propose the following racial congruence hypotheses:

H1 (Candidate-newsroom Congruence Hypothesis): As the percent of non-white newsroom staff increases, non-white candidates are likely to receive (a) more positive trait coverage and (b) less negative trait coverage than white candidates.

As suggested by the economic theories of news (Hamilton 2004), the production of news depends on the demographic characteristics and preferences of audiences (also see Branton and Dunaway 2009a, 2009b). News outlets may infer preferences for white candidates among white audiences, and preferences for minority candidates among minority audiences (Branton and Dunaway 2008). If so, outlets in markets with substantial minority audiences will be more likely to cover minority candidates positively:

H2 (Candidate-audience Congruence Hypothesis): As the percent of non-white audience increases in the news media's target market, non-white candidates are likely to receive (a) more positive trait coverage and (b) less negative trait coverage than white candidates.

These expectations do not presume news portrayals of candidates are racist; instead, the racial traits of candidates, audiences, and journalists serve as implicit cues in the news production process, influencing news coverage of in-group and out-group candidates. When these three race-related factors interact, an amplification effect is likely to occur. For example, when non-white readers constitute the majority in a news market, it can lead to perceptions about market preferences, which shape profit incentives for the news organizations. A desire to cater to the preferences of a predominant group in the market, or an effort not to alienate a substantial portion of the market may increase the likelihood of positive coverage for non-white candidates. While minority journalists may generally tend to pitch more stories about minority candidates and with favorable depictions than their white colleagues, they may feel especially comfortable doing so under favorable market conditions. It may also be that minority journalists are always more likely to offer more material for positive minority candidate coverage, but that news managers are more likely to accept these contributions under said favorable market conditions. Thus, we posit that:

H3 (Candidate-newsroom-audience Congruence Hypothesis): The likelihood for non-white candidates to receive (a) more positive trait coverage and (b) less negative trait coverage than white candidates from a racially diverse newsroom is higher in markets with larger minority audiences.

Data and Method

To get the appropriate data for testing the hypothesized racial congruence effects, we used several sources. We started with the Candidate Emergence in the States Project

(Juenke and Shah 2015), an expert-coded database of legislative candidates running for offices in 2012, including their race, ethnicity, and gender. Next, we used Access World News[3] to collect news articles covering each state legislative candidate documented in the Candidate Emergence in the States Project database, using their first and last name as the search term.[4] We excluded op-eds and editorials from the search. Following extant work, we isolated our search of candidate coverage to "September 1—Election Day" (Dunaway et al. 2013). This produced our initial dataset, which included 3,247 news stories about 1,414 state legislative candidates from 295 newspapers circulating in 13 states (including CA, CO, FL, GA, IL, LA, MI, NC, NM, NV, NY, OH, and PA) between September 1 and the Election Day.

Next, two trained researchers manually coded all 3,247 articles to categorize the trait coverage associated with a given candidate (also see Online Supplement B for full codebook). During this process, we identified 1,088 articles that did not cover any of the candidates in the Candidate Emergence in the States Project database.[5] These articles were eliminated.

Finally, we used the 2012 American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) Newsroom Census data and the State Legislative Election Returns (SLERs) data (Klarner et al. 2013) for information on newsroom diversity and the racial composition of each state legislative district. Out of the 295 newspapers in our initial dataset, 115 participated in the 2012 ASNE survey, allowing for the retrieval of their newsroom demographic data. We removed articles from the 180 newspapers that did not appear in the ASNE database. These steps—as illustrated in Figure 1—produced our final dataset that contains 984 news articles about 591 legislative candidates from 115 newspapers circulating in 13 states. These 984 news articles were eventually used for analyses reported in this article.

Variables and Measurements

Dependent Variables. Our dependent variables capture whether a news article links a candidate to positive or negative traits, which were manually coded by two researchers. To maximize intercoder validity, we referred to extant scholars' (Dunaway, Shah, and Paul 2016; Hayes and Lawless 2015) measures of traits associated with candidate viability, which itemize positive traits such as "accomplished," "contemplative," "responsible," "hardworking," and "knowledgeable," as well as negative traits such as "careless," "clueless," "incompetent," and "ineffective" (see Online Supplement B for more trait measures).

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[3]The Access World News is a most comprehensive archive of over 400 local newspapers in the US, thus allowing an exploration of candidate coverage across diverse states and news outlets. This exhaustive search functionality across diverse media outlets helps improve the generality of our findings.

[4]In an effort for an exhaustive search, we use "OR" between all candidates' names so that our search captures articles mentioning either only one candidate or multiple candidates.

[5]The first question in coding protocol was "Is the target candidate mentioned/covered in the story?" which asked coders to identify if the news article covers a target candidate that is specified in the Candidate Emergence in the States Project data. For example, if the Candidate ID is "0CA1&2012&Bosetti&Rick&1," coders need to identify if a given news story covers/mentions Rick Bosetti, a 2012 candidate for the state of California. It turned out that 1,088 out of the 3,247 articles were not about the targeted candidates; instead, they happened to have mentioned the same first name or last name as of the candidates' names.
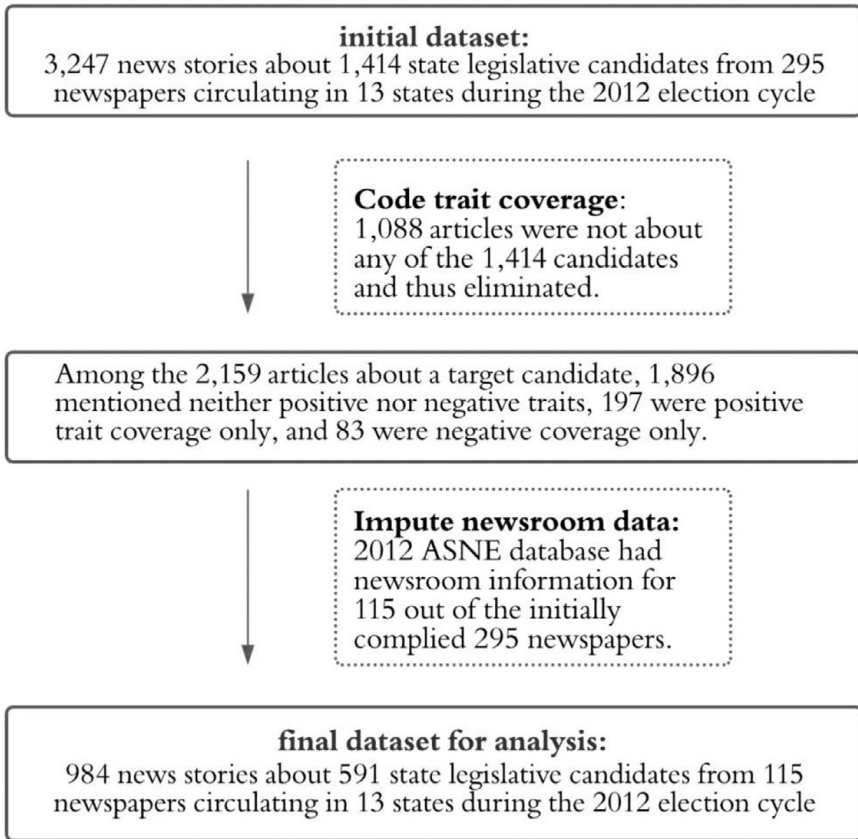
initial dataset:
3,247 news stories about 1,414 state legislative candidates from 295 newspapers circulating in 13 states during the 2012 election cycle

Code trait coverage:
1,088 articles were not about any of the 1,414 candidates and thus eliminated.

Among the 2,159 articles about a target candidate, 1,896 mentioned neither positive nor negative traits, 197 were positive trait coverage only, and 83 were negative coverage only.

Impute newsroom data:
2012 ASNE database had newsroom information for 115 out of the initially complied 295 newspapers.

final dataset for analysis:
984 news stories about 591 state legislative candidates from 115 newspapers circulating in 13 states during the 2012 election cycle

Figure 1. An illustration of data preparation steps that led to loss/change in the number of news articles for analysis.

Two coders were first asked to judge whether a story was about any specific candidate—if not, the coding procedure was terminated; if yes, they were asked to code whether the article explicitly talked about or suggested some positive traits [or negative traits] about the candidate. If a news article included one or more words/phrases/sentences[6] indicating positive traits, it was coded as 1 for the "positive trait coverage" variable, which represents "at least one positive trait mention." If it mentioned no positive traits at all, regardless of any mentions of negative trait or neutral traits, it was coded as 0 and indicates "no mention of positive traits at all." The same scheme was used to code the "negative trait

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[6]Beyond the pool of "traits," our coding also accounts for short phrases and sentences that indicates a positive/negative trait. For example, "But Levine *wasn't without resources*;" and "Bonta *gained support for his experience* as an elected official…" were coded as positive traits; by contrast, "… and *political newcomer* Jonathon Sosa …" and "His Republican opponent Jason Clark speaks of bipartisanship that an *entrenched Ammiano* cannot reach" were identified as negative traits.

coverage" variable, where 1 indicates "at least one negative trait mention" and 0 represents "no mention of negative traits at all."[7]

This manual coding method produced two dependent variables where (*Positive Trait Coverage*) is a dichotomy capturing whether a news article highlights one or more positive traits for a given candidate (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.70$).[8] The other dichotomous variable (*Negative Trait Coverage*) captures whether a news story associates a candidate with one or more negative traits (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.89$).[9]

Independent Variables. The first independent variable, (*Non-White Candidate*), captures the racial classification for each state legislative candidate running for office during the 2012 election cycle. Race was coded[10] in the Candidate Emergence in the States Project (Juenke and Shah 2015), and we used this in our sample of legislative candidates (see Online Supplement A for details of the coding process). This variable was measured dichotomously at the candidate level and captured whether a candidate is non-white, including Latino, African American, Asian American, or multiracial.

Our second independent variable, (*%Newsroom Minority*), captures the extent of newsroom diversity for each of the newspapers covering the races in our database. It focuses on the racial composition of reporters and is measured as the total percentage of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and multiracial reporters in the newsroom. Data for this variable were drawn from the 2012 ASNE Newsroom Census.

The third independent variable is (*%Minority Audience*), which captures the total percentage of non-white voting-age population for the state legislative voting district[11] in which the newspaper is located. Based on the idea that campaign coverage is crafted with the pool of potential voters in mind, we rely on the SLERs's index to scrapple the percentage of voting-age minority populations (including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and multiracial people) within each state legislative district. *Percent Minority Audience* is measured at the state legislative district level.

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[7]Though ratios that capture the varied extents to which a candidate is associated with positive/negative traits also pertains to our question, this study is more interested in the possibility that a non-white candidate may receive positive/negative trait coverage.

[8]For both dependent variables, intercoder reliability was assessed by having two coders categorizing 12% of the news article sample (400 out of the 3,247 news stories we initially complied). We then used these categorizations to calculate the extent of agreement between the coders.

[9]Note that the coders first used all articles to code (*Positive Trait Coverage*) and then repeated this process to code (*Negative Trait Coverage*). Some articles thus had a mix of both positive and negative traits. However, among the 984 articles in final dataset, 919 mentioned neither positive nor negative traits, 50 were positive trait coverage only, 14 were negative coverage only, and only one article mentioned both positive and negative traits. Also due to this limited power of analysis, we proceeded with analyses using two dichotomous variables below. But see Online Supplement H where we conducted additional analyses comparing nontrait stories (where neither positive nor negative traits were mentioned) with stories that have positive (or negative) traits only.

[10]Four individuals coded the dataset using a race/ethnicity rubric. Intercoder reliability was tested with 10% of the sample; we had a 98% match rate. See Online Supplement A for details.

[11]Whereas this study sought to find a more valid measure to capture target audience compositions, there was no publicly available database that documents demographic data for state legislative districts or that for the newsrooms.

Control Variables. Based on extant literature, we controlled for a total of five variables in our models. The first three were drawn from the Candidate Emergence in the States Project and were measured on the candidate level. They include: *Incumbent* —a dummy that captures whether a state legislative candidate was currently incumbent for the position they were running; *Women Candidate* that captures whether the candidate is a woman (versus man); and *Minority Opponent*, which captures whether a candidate's opponent is white or one of the other racial categories. The second set of control variables capture the characteristics of newspapers and their audiences. As newspapers with a large circulation differ from small news organizations in their selection and presentation of news stories (Hayes and Lawless 2015),[12] this study controls for *Circulation,* a dummy variable drawn from the 2012 ASNE Newsroom data to capture whether a newspaper has a circulation of 10,000 and above[13]; and % *Male Audiences*, which is measured at the state legislative district level and captures the percentage of male adults in each state legislative district's voting-age population.

Final Dataset for Analysis

In sum, the final dataset ($N = 984$) was comprised of 984 news articles from 115 newspapers about 591 legislative candidates running for offices in 13 states. Out of the 984 articles, 51 were coded as "1" (at least one positive trait mention) and 933 were coded as "0" (no positive traits were mentioned at all) for the "positive trait coverage" outcome variable. For the other dependent variable "negative trait coverage," 15 were coded as "1" (at least one negative trait mention) and 969 were coded as "0" (no negative traits were mentioned at all). These low occurrences of trait may simply reflect the journalistic norms of objectivity, which is also in line with previous studies that found trait coverage took up a substantively small portion of newspaper coverage of gubernatorial campaigns (Dunaway et al. 2013; Kahn 1995). The electoral impact of trait coverage at such low volumes remains an open question. We will return to this point in section "Discussion."

Among the 591 legislative candidates in our final dataset, 80.37% were male and 17.60% were currently incumbents for the positions they were running in 2012. Regarding their racial background, 77.66% were white, 8.12% were Black, 6.43% were Latinos/Hispanics, and the other 7.78% were Asians, Native Americans, or other non-white categories. In terms of partisanship, 288 were Republicans, 264 were Democrats, and the other 39 were Independents, Libertarians or without party affiliation. In addition, 88 legislative candidates had a non-white opponent and the other 503 had a white opponent running for the same position. Also see Online Supplement C for the measurement and descriptive statistics of each variable.

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[12]Studies suggest the race of editors and media owners can affect news coverage. Owner demographics were not controlled for in this study, however; there are few data sources on the racial characteristics of news owners. Though the ASNE data documented supervisors' demographics, it was unclear if the supervisors referred specifically to news editors or other positions (e.g., newspaper distributor supervisors).

[13]As this study focuses on the moderating role of audiences, it seeks to capture large news organizations with wide audiences where journalists may exercise news judgment and appeal to audiences (Dunaway 2011). For all newspapers used for analysis a circulation of 10K is the median, which we then chose as the cutoff for the computed dummy variable.

Results

This study investigates the impact of racial characteristics associated with newsrooms, legislators, and audiences—what is also referred to as racial congruence effect—on two outcome variables: positive trait coverage and negative trait coverage.

For each dependent variable—as displayed in Tables 1 and 2—we modeled three interaction effects to test our hypothesized conditional relationships, while controlling for a set of confounding variables.[14] Though the unit of analysis for our dependent variable is news article, our predictors are measured on multiple levels including news organization, candidate, and legislative state district levels. Thus, to correct for the heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation issues associated with nested data, we clustered all models by the combination of three nesting variables—news organization, legislative candidate, and legislative state district.[15] In addition, because

Table 1. Penalized maximum likelihood estimation models predicting news coverage featuring positive traits (versus no mentions of positive traits at all)

	Baseline model	H1a (Model 1.2)	H2a (Model 1.3)	Three-way (Model 1.4)
Non-white candidate	−0.08(0.39)	0.65(0.50)	−2.50(1.28)[#]	−1.44(1.60)
%Minority reporter[a]	0.74(0.60)	1.24(0.66)[#]	0.77(0.60)	1.32(0.93)
%Minority audience[a]	1.72(1.05)	1.70(1.06)	−0.12(1.33)	0.11(2.07)
Non-white candidate X %Minority reporter	–	−2.28(1.19)[#]	–	−3.08(4.73)
Non-white candidate X %Minority audiences	–	–	6.94(3.02)*	6.08(3.98)
%Minority reporter X %Minority audience	–	–	–	−0.46(4.12)
Non-white candidate X %Minority reporter X %Minority audience	–	–	–	1.98(10.31)
Minority opponent	−0.22(0.46)	−0.12(0.46)	−0.27(0.48)	−0.12(0.47)
Incumbent	0.26(0.37)	0.23(0.37)	0.15(0.38)	0.12(0.38)
Female candidate	0.75(0.31)*	0.77(0.31)*	0.76(0.31)*	0.77(0.32)*
Circulation > 10K	−0.33(0.41)	−0.31(0.42)	−0.24(0.42)	−0.24(0.42)
%Male audience[a]	7.02(5.82)	6.42(5.90)	8.41(5.68)	7.05(5.81)
%Votes received[a]	−0.27(0.80)	−0.24(0.81)	−0.62(0.82)	−0.53(0.84)
Constant	1.52(4.06)	0.87(4.14)	3.06(3.99)	1.83(4.15)
Wald χ^2	16.05[#]	19.69*	21.17*	23.77*

Note. N = 984. All variables are dichotomous except for those with an "a" subscript, which are continuous variables and were logged to account for skewness. Entries are coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. [#]$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$

[14] In Online Supplement F, the expanded models also controlled for partisanship, Southern states, and other variables that may affect candidate trait coverage. The substantive conclusions remain unchanged with these specifications.

[15] We utilized Stata's group () command to generate a cluster variable that is the combination of these three nested variables. Clustering on groups of (news organization, candidate, and state) is a restrictive way to correct for the dependence of error terms, as it doesnot account for serial correlation over time. However, as the observations for analysis in this study are drawn from the same time period (year), serial correlation is not necessarily a concern here. Also, it is because we attribute correlated error terms mostly to autocorrelation within different groups rather than to serial correlation. Despite that, we conducted multilevel logistic regression analysis with state, news organization, and candidate as the group variables, which reveals largely the same results as these clustered models reported here. As a result, our results and findings are quite robust.

Table 2. Penalized maximum likelihood estimation models predicting news coverage featuring negative traits (versus no mentions of negative traits at all)

	Baseline model	H1b (Model 2.2)	H2b (Model 2.3)	Three-way (Model 2.4)
Non-white candidate	0.19(0.71)	−0.71(1.42)	−0.13(1.08)	−0.58(1.81)
%Minority reporter[a]	1.02(1.08)	0.63(1.12)	1.00(1.08)	0.33(1.46)
%Minority audience[a]	−3.54(2.18)	−3.41(2.16)	−4.24(2.77)	−4.42(3.62)
Non-white candidate X %Minority reporter	–	2.35(2.47)	–	1.86(3.32)
Non-white candidate X %Minority audiences	–	–	1.98(3.92)	1.95(6.35)
%Minority reporter X %Minority audience	–	–	–	2.44(7.67)
Non-white candidate X %Minority reporter X %Minority audience	–	–	–	−1.89(12.09)
Minority opponent	0.88(0.77)	0.83(0.79)	0.90(0.77)	0.86(0.78)
Incumbent	−0.13(0.71)	−0.18(0.73)	−0.18(0.72)	−0.20(0.73)
Female candidate	−2.27(1.46)	−2.27(1.45)	−2.28(1.46)	−2.24(1.45)
Circulation > 10K	0.25(0.72)	0.22(0.72)	0.23(0.72)	0.19(0.72)
%Male audience[a]	29.21(12.48)*	28.31(12.34)*	28.97(12.40)*	28.77(12.26)*
%Votes received[a]	1.64(1.38)	1.67(1.37)	1.61(1.39)	1.67(1.39)
Constant	15.93(8.58)#	15.44(8.43)#	15.92(8.54)#	15.93(8.45)#
Wald χ^2	10.64	11.66	10.88	11.89

Note. $N = 984$. All variables are dichotomous except for those with an "a" subscript, which are continuous variables and were logged to account for skewness. Entries are coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. #$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$.

some predicting and control variables had extremely skewed distributions, we used log transformation to address the skewed data, as denoted in Tables 1 and 2.

Consistent with previous work (Dunaway et al. 2013; Kahn 1995), this study reveals that trait coverage constituted a substantively small portion of newspaper coverage of gubernatorial campaigns—51 out of the 984 news stories targeting a given candidate[16] in our final dataset were categorized as "positive trait coverage" stories, and 15 out of the 984 stories were categorized as "negative trait coverage" stories. This low volume of trait coverage requires us to follow recommended strategies for dealing with rare events data, "binary dependent variables with dozens to thousands of times fewer ones (events, such as wars, coups, presidential votes, decisions of citizens to run for political office, or infections by uncommon diseases) than zeros ('nonevents')" (King and Zeng 2001, 138).[17] Following previous work, we employed rare-event logistic regression (King and Zeng 2001) and penalized maximum likelihood estimation (Coveney 2015) to reduce estimation bias. Both produced consistent and robust estimates—we report results using penalized maximum likelihood estimation here and present the results of the rare-event logistic regression in Online Supplement D.

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[16]This study focuses on trait coverage associated with a specific candidate, rather than if a story is trait related. See additional explanation in footnote 5.

[17]Rare event does not refer to the rarity of observations, but rather the small portion of cases representing the occurrences of a particular event like war. One example King and Zeng (2001) provided in their paper was a dataset with 303,814 dyads (pairs of countries) for each year since World War II, among which only 0.34% (or 1,042) dyads were at war.
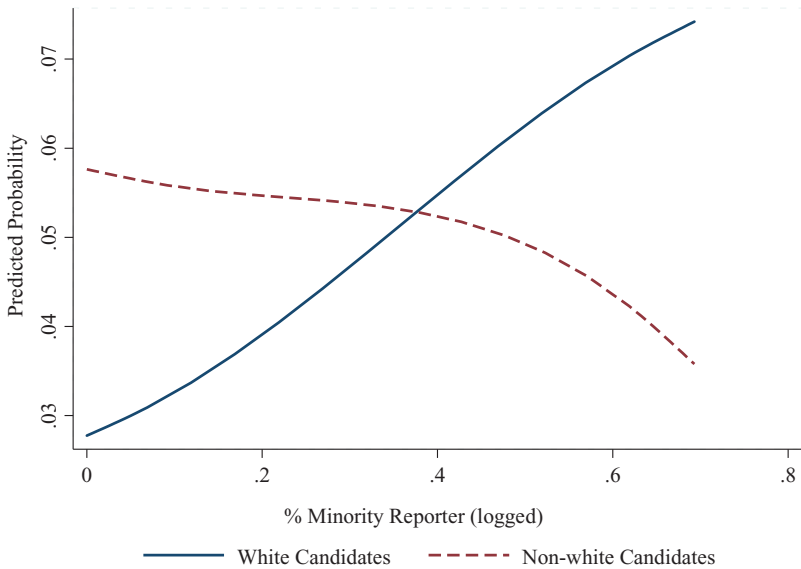
Figure 2. Predicted probability of news coverage featuring positive traits, by candidate's race and newsroom diversity.
Note. Figure is generated using (H1 test) in Table 1, which illustrates a two-way interaction effect between candidates' ethnicity and the percentage of minority journalists in newsroom.

Moderating Effects of Minority Journalists and Audiences

We begin with the finding that the relationship between candidates and positive trait coverage is conditioned by the newsroom demographic make-up (Model 1.2: $b = -2.28$, two-tailed $p = 0.055$, 95% CI $[-4.60, 0.04]$). As plotted in Figure 2, the predicted likelihood of positive traits coverage is about 3% higher for non-white candidates than for white candidates when there are no minority reporters in the newsrooms; and this difference minimizes with an increase in the number of minority journalists. In newsrooms with a big portion of minority journalists, there is a slightly higher likelihood of producing more positive trait stories for white candidates than for non-white candidates, with the other factors remaining constant. We also compared the effects resulting from a 10th to 90th percentile change in the continuous (*%Minority Reporter*) variable. For newsrooms ranking among the 10th percentile, the predicted probability of receiving positive trait coverage for non-white candidates was about 3.12% higher than that for white candidates. For news media ranking among the 90th percentile, the predicted probability of receiving positive trait coverage was 4.86% lower for non-white candidates than for white candidates. Thus, although our model suggests the difference in receiving positive trait coverage between white and non-white candidates is conditional on the percentage of minority journalists in the newsroom, the direction of this change is opposite to our expectation. Thus, H1a has mixed support.

Audience demographics also affect mentions of positive candidate traits (Model 1.3 in Table 1: $b = 6.94$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI $[1.03, 12.85]$). Figure 3 illustrates that the predicted possibility of positive trait coverage for white candidates was almost
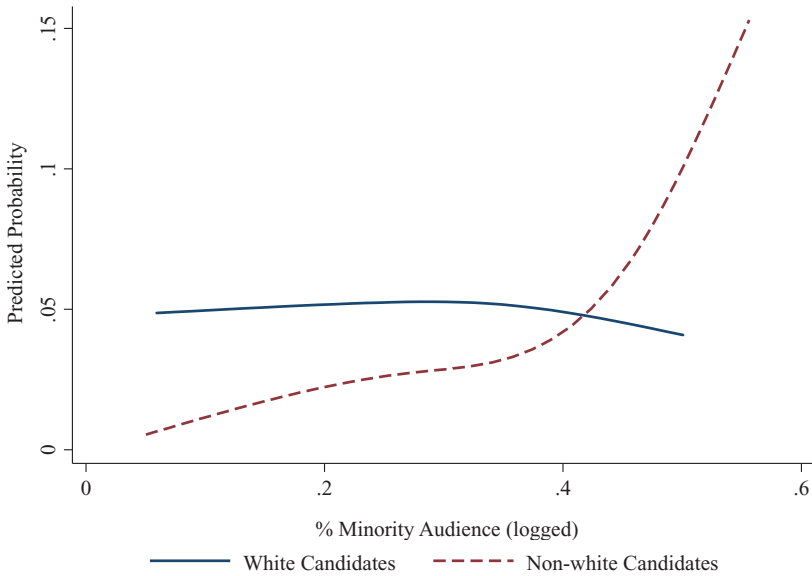
Figure 3. Predicted probability of news coverage featuring positive traits, by candidate's race and audience diversity.
Note. Figure is generated using (H2 test) in Table 1, which illustrates a two-way interaction effect between candidates' race and the percentage of minority voting-age audiences in each newspaper's circulating state district.

identical across media markets that differ in the portion of minority audiences, as denoted by the solid line. When turning to news coverage of non-white candidates, however, the likelihood of news stories featuring positive traits dramatically increases when voting-age minority audiences constitute a large portion of the population in the newspaper's area of circulation, as denoted by the dashed line. We again compared the effects resulting from a 10th to 90th percentile change in the continuous (*%Minority Audience)* variable: in media markets ranking in the 10th percentile, the predicted probability of receiving positive trait coverage for white candidates is about 4.97% higher than for non-white candidates. On the other hand, when media markets rank in the 90th percentile in terms of the minority audience composition, the predicted probability of receiving positive trait coverage for non-white candidates is 4.01% higher than that for white candidates. This lends support to H2a that as the percent of non-white audiences increases in the news media's target market, non-white candidates are likely to receive more positive trait coverage than white candidates.

This study also hypothesized a three-way interaction effect between minority reporters, candidates, and audiences on patterns of news coverage (H3a); however, our models did not yield statistically significant estimates (see Models 1.4 and 2.4 in Tables 1 and 2).[18] We also found little evidence for our hypotheses regarding candidate coverage with negative traits (H1b, H2b, and H3b).

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[18]To allow a more intuitive interpretation of the three-way interaction effects as well as to minimize the possible multicollinearity involved with three-way interaction tests, we split the data by candidates' ethnicity

Robustness Checks

Together, we find that with all the other factors remaining fixed, non-white candidates are less likely to receive positive trait coverage than white candidates from news outlets where the percent of non-white reporters in newsroom is high (Figure 2); however, when news outlets see a large portion of non-white audiences in their media market, non-white candidates are more likely to receive positive trait coverage than white candidates (Figure 3). While the sections above discuss several explanations for this finding, it is necessary to empirically test other explanations. In particular, the lack of evidence for a three-way interaction effect between candidates, journalists, and audiences may suggest that minority journalists' favorability toward non-white candidates was not necessarily affected by the preference of audiences in a diverse market. If so, is there something else about the newsroom, political candidates, or even political races that could explain the pattern of coverage?

To test this idea, we conducted a series of multivariate penalized maximum likelihood logistic regressions with (a) the percentage of non-white supervisors in newsroom, (b) the incumbency status of candidates, and (c) the competitiveness of the races. These variables were used as contingent factors for testing the interaction effect between the race of candidates and that of journalists. In all cases, the three-way interaction effects were statistically insignificant (see Online Supplement G), suggesting these are not necessarily the reasons that drive a more diverse newsroom to produce more positive trait coverage for white candidates.

Discussion

While recognizing that race is an important determinant for media coverage of legislators (Husband 2005; Tolley 2015), we know little about how reporters, candidates, and audiences operate in tandem to affect trait coverage of candidates. Through an analysis of campaign coverage about candidates running for state legislative offices during the 2012 election cycle in 13 states, we investigate a conditional *newsroom-candidate congruence* phenomenon.

With regard to positive trait coverage for candidates at the state legislative level, we find that when newsrooms feature a large percent of non-white reporters, non-white candidates become less likely to receive positive trait coverage than white candidates. This finding, though opposite to what we hypothesized, indicates that the newsroom-candidate interplay is complicated. Our follow-up models indicate that newsroom characteristics such as the percentage of minority supervisors, and election level factors such as the competitiveness of the race or candidate incumbency may not affect this newsroom-candidate interplay. The possible cause for this trend could be other factors that were not measured in this study. Ideas of professionalism and deeply entrenched news-gathering routines could be preventing minority journalists from breaking the norm and challenging traditional patterns of news coverage

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and rerun the analyses to explore the two-way interaction between the demographic make-up of the newsroom and that of the media market. Although the two-way interaction effect was oppositional in the "white candidates only" model and the "non-white candidates only" model, this interaction effect was statistically insignificant in both subset analyses. This thus failed to reject the null hypothesis that this interaction effect may not differ by the candidates' ethnicity. See Online Supplement E for detailed discussion and results.

(Nishikawa et al. 2009). While white reporters attributing positive traits to non-white candidates would not raise eyebrows, minority reporters doing the same could be perceived as unprofessional and biased (Shafer 1993). More research is needed to investigate this further.

When it comes to negative trait coverage, we see little evidence that the newsroom composition contributes to any gap that may exist between white and non-white candidates. As displayed in Table 2, non-white candidates are slightly more likely to receive negative trait coverage than white candidates, which lends support for the argument that "non-white candidates do not fit the norm of politicians as do white candidates, and this distinction is often considered novel and newsworthy by the media" (Besco, Gerrits, and Matthews 2016, 4645). However, this study finds this difference to be statistically insignificant. Moreover, this variance is not conditional on the dominance of white journalists in the newsroom, indicating that an increased presence of non-white reporters may not necessarily reduce the negative trait coverage of non-white candidates. Although these results do not echo much of the existing literature (Sui et al. 2018; Saldaña, Sylvie, and McGregor 2016), they are a valuable point of departure signaling the importance of partitioning candidate coverage by specific traits, issues, tones, etc., when responding to claims of news bias against non-white candidates.

Our results show support for the *candidate-audience congruence* hypothesis. When the proportion of minorities in a newspaper's circulation area rises, positive trait coverage for non-white candidates increases. Candidate trait coverage is thus influenced by market level audience demographics. News organizations are sensitive to the demands of target audiences in a given market, and audience taste subconsciously acts as a cue that influences journalists' coverage of candidates (Branton and Dunaway 2008; Sui et al. 2018). Thus, in areas with a high proportion of minority audiences, the news media ascribe positive traits to minority candidates in coverage. Other election level factors not measured in this study could also explain this finding. For example, we know that minority candidates are more likely to get elected in majority–minority areas (Marschall, Ruhil, and Shah 2010). Minority candidates could be spending campaign resources in areas with large minority populations. They could be sending promotional materials to reporters, offering exclusive interviews with the press, organizing publicity-generating events such as meet-the-candidate forums (Issenberg 2012) or establishing media outreach through field offices (Darr 2016), all of which could contribute to increased positive coverage. These same factors may have also contributed to the relatively unchanged possibility of positive coverage for white candidates, regardless of the varied portions of minority audiences across media markets (see Figure 3). It is possible that white candidates in our database did not have much media outreach in these majority–minority areas, or the white candidates were not scrutinized through lens of race, such that their positive trait coverage remained equivalent across media markets with varied percent of non-white audiences.

Lastly, the lack of statistically significant estimates for the three-way interaction effects between the race of candidates, journalists, and audience market is interesting. Though recent work has identified economic motive as one possible route through which newsroom diversity can work to leverage news coverage of traditionally underrepresented minority groups (Sui et al. 2018), this study suggests an exception. In the case of trait coverage, the impact of newsroom racial composition is not conditioned on a need to appeal to the diversified market. Instead, other factors may

drive this tendency, such as minority journalists' aversion against being pigeonholed into in-group member-specific assignments (Pritchard and Stonbely 2007), especially when their white colleagues assume they are hired to fill racial quotas (Shafer 1993). Driven by time pressures, minority journalists may also intentionally seek to cover white candidates who dominate politics and are thus more accessible. Other studies also indicate crucial interference that comes from media owners, which "act as racial arbitrators by limiting racial emphasis" (Terkildsen and Damore 1999, 680). Yet, given our focus on the outlet-level observational data, we cannot explore the impact of these factors. Future studies can add more nuance by exploring whether and how an individual journalist may react differently depending on the racial identities of legislators and the racial composition of market audiences. Though we find a modest overall impact of newsroom diversity on candidate coverage in this study, the racial composition of the newsrooms is known to affect other areas such as issue coverage (Sui et al. 2018), portrayals of Latinos (Sui and Paul 2017) and other minority communities (Jenkins 2012).

While this study represents one of the first steps in understanding the influence of racial congruence on candidate trait coverage, a few caveats are necessary to address. Though it examines the cross-sectional correlation between reporters, candidates, and audiences, this relationship may not be static or exogenous. As our data come from the height of the 2012 election cycle when news coverage was likely more focused on the competitive presidential campaign rather than state legislative races, it is possible that our results may underestimate the extent to which racial congruence affects news coverage of state legislative candidates. News coverage off-cycle from presidential campaigns may yield different patterns. More research across more election cycles and contests is needed to examine this racial congruence effect. Second, we use the district level racial composition of voting-age populations as a proxy for the demographics of the newspapers' audiences. This could be problematic given the presence of specialty media directed at minority groups or the presence of two or more newspapers of differing ideologies circulating in the same geographical area and having different audiences. In the absence of publicly available data on a newspaper's audience demographics, future research should endeavor to find more accurate measures for this variable. Another point to note is that this study compares white candidates with non-white candidates as a whole. Though researchers found significant differences in how the media cover candidates belonging to one minority group over another (Gershon 2012), data-related limitations unique to our dataset made it difficult for us to conduct group-wise comparisons of various minority groups. As elucidated above, our final dataset had a low volume of trait coverage. When viewed by legislative candidates' racial backgrounds, we also noticed stark differences: out of the 51 positive trait articles, 40 were about white candidates, 5 were about Black candidates, 6 were about Latino/Hispanic candidates, and none was about Asian/Native American/Other candidates. Out of the total of 15 articles featuring at least one negative trait, 13 were about white candidates and the other two were about Black candidates. We encourage future studies to conduct finer-grained analyses to investigate this.

This study is one of the first systematic examinations of how the race of reporters, candidates, and audiences intersect to influence the news coverage of in- and out-group candidates. We develop, test, and demonstrate strong support for the candidate-audience congruence effect on candidate trait coverage. From an empirical perspective, it sheds light on the conditions under which news media improve the

portrayals of non-white candidates running for public office. This line of inquiry is particularly important electoral environments in which the number of minorities seeking office is growing; and we hope more scholars will join us to expand this work. Some options for future research include focusing on a more nuanced measurement of trait coverage—for example, measuring positive/negative trait coverage on the paragraph or sentence level and focusing on the counts of trait coverage, or comparing trait coverage to nontrait stories (i.e., stories with a focus on horserace or strategy). Scholars should also examine the impact of additional variables such as the presence of media conglomerates in media markets. In addition, a qualitative approach can help address questions such as how the construction of diversity in the newsroom can be problematic, especially in the presence of white-passing newsroom staff who could be used to check the diversity requirement while being pressured by their supervisors to not be overly contentious.

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Author Biographies. Mingxiao Sui is an assistant professor in Department of Communication Studies at University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL.

Newly Paul is an assistant professor in Mayborn School of Journalism at University of North Texas, Denton, TX.