

Absence of Diversity: Market-Based Journalism, Vote-Seeking Candidates,  
and Racial Cues in Media Programming

Shanto Iyengar

Stanford University

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans with devastating force. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, news coverage focused exclusively on the unprecedented scope of destruction and the thousands of residents left stranded in the city. Within forty-eight hours, however, the media began to feature reports (mainly unsubstantiated) of violence, looting, and crime. In fact, between August 31 and September 2, fifteen percent of all broadcast and print news reports on Katrina made some reference to crime.<sup>1</sup>

Why was crime a news story in the context of this overwhelming disaster? In an idealized sense, news is supposed to serve as a mirror of “reality;” in the case of Hurricane Katrina, the unmistakable reality was the suffering of local residents and the inability of government organizations to deliver relief. The fact that news reports paid significant attention to crime suggests that “mediality” (media accounts of events) is often a distorted mirror of events.

This chapter considers the behavior of the media, especially with respect to news coverage of racial issues. As the case of Hurricane Katrina illustrates, violent crime -- an issue that casts minorities in a relatively harsh light -- is treated as especially newsworthy. The media’s preoccupation with crime and other divisive issues can be attributed to two sets of factors; first, the failure of society to require news programming in the public interest and second, the essentially self-interested behavior of news organizations and public officials.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is derived from a content analysis of 41 major national newspapers and three television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC).

### News as “Public Service”

In democratic societies, the broadcast media are obligated to deliver a variety of public services. In return for the provision of costless access to the publicly owned airwaves, radio and television stations must provide “payback” in the form of regular public affairs programming that informs and educates citizens on the issues of the day. The concept of public service broadcasting, introduced in Britain and adopted by most other democracies before World War II, treats the broadcast media as a major pillar of the democratic process. Broadcasters are mandated to provide a vibrant public forum in which citizens encounter significant diversity of perspectives on political issues and voice for all groups, no matter their size or influence (Benton Foundation, 1999). In recommending the creation of public broadcasting in the United States, the Carnegie Commission emphasized the value of providing citizens with media programming that would allow them “to see America whole, in all its diversity.”

A major impetus to congressional adoption of the Carnegie Commission recommendations was the perception that commercial broadcasters could not be relied on to deliver informative content representing the myriad of groups and perspectives making up contemporary America. This pessimism was well founded. Research demonstrates that two sets of factors significantly influence news media civic performance -- regulatory policy and market forces (see Iyengar and McGrady 2006; Bishop & Hakanen, 2002)). Regulatory policy consists of two key elements; first, the establishment and continued support of a government-funded broadcasting network and second, the enforcement of regulations that require privately owned media to deliver minimum levels of public affairs programming. The US lags behind the rest of the world on both these regulatory factors. PBS receives trivial government funding and has never been able to reach a significant share of the national audience (see Figure 1). In Europe,

on the other hand, public broadcasters receive significant government subsidies and attract 30-40 percent of the television audience. Public broadcasters in Europe attract large audiences despite the higher public affairs content and cultural diversity of their programs.

<Figure 1 here>

The great majority of Americans tune in to commercial television, and what they watch is entirely determined by corporate owners. The governmental agency charged with regulating the media (the Federal Communications Commission) has adopted an increasingly laissez-faire approach in light of extensive free market competition which is thought to ensure delivery of diverse perspectives on political and social issues. Most other democracies, while also moving in the general direction of deregulation, continue to maintain significant control over the content provided by both public and private broadcasters. Swedish public television, for example, “is obliged to carry cultural and quality programming, and 55 percent of its programming must be produced regionally outside Stockholm” (Williams, 2003 p. 39). Canadian law requires Canadian broadcasters to provide media programming that is “predominantly and distinctly Canadian,” and which reflects the multiracial and multilingual nature of Canadian society.

Market forces are just as important to understanding media performance. In societies where the media are predominantly privately owned (such as the US), owners face strong incentives to minimize delivery of public affairs programming. To be profitable, news organizations must attract a substantial audience; programs that are watched by larger audiences attract more advertising revenue and ultimately drive out less entertaining or dramatic, but more “substantive” or minority-oriented programming. In effect, the customer for private broadcasters is the advertiser and not the viewer; the broadcaster is motivated to attract the largest possible audience at the lowest possible cost. The end result is the delivery of programming with

superficial content but wide appeal. In sum, weakened government regulation and competition between profit-seeking news organizations together ensure that the public service component of media delivery will be minimal. The entertainment value of programming consistently takes precedence over substantive content (see Hamilton 2003).

The trend away from strict governmental regulation and towards infotainment is occurring worldwide. The impact of these forces, however, varies depending on other institutional factors, most importantly, the strength of political parties. Countries with strong political parties are less dependent on the news media to provide an electoral forum and educate voters. In these countries, parties control the selection of candidates and can count on their supporters to cast “informed” (i.e. party-line) votes; whether the media provide substantive or superficial coverage of public affairs is less consequential to the ability of citizens to participate. But a very different scenario applies to the United States. Over the past several decades American political parties have lost control over campaigns, and party leaders currently have little say in the selection of candidates (Polsby 1983). Autonomous and well-financed candidates hire professional consultants and strategists to run their campaigns and often take positions at odds with their party. The consultants are only interested in winning the particular race, even if it means using controversial, sometimes false, and divisive media messages. Since many Americans lack strong ties to a political party, these messages significantly influence how they cast their votes. In this world of entrepreneurial candidates and “floating voters,” a candidate’s media strategy can influence the eventual outcome.

### Overview

This chapter considers the implications of weak government regulation, privately owned media, and candidate-controlled campaigns for American news organizations’ treatment of race

and ethnicity. I begin by describing changing patterns of news consumption in America and the gradual emergence of local television news as a major news source. Next, I show that local news programs systematically over-emphasize the issue of violent crime and frame the issue in ways that encourage viewers to associate crime with racial minorities. This pattern of news coverage has predictable consequences; there is evidence of a racial double standard in the public's views about both crime and poverty. Whites react more harshly to black than white criminal suspects and also respond more generously to white than black victims of natural disasters.

Next, I turn to the use of racially coded "wedge" appeals in American political campaigns. Candidates for national and statewide office spend vast sums on television advertising hoping to attract votes by "selling" their candidacies. Since the 1960s, campaign ads have frequently cast racial minorities and policies that promote minority interests as threats to white voters. Typically, these ads are aired by Republican candidates who hope to persuade white Democrats to cross party lines.

All told, news coverage and campaign advertising both feature media messages that broadly caricature African- and Hispanic-Americans. The effect is to exacerbate long-standing racial divisions and discord. The lack of a strong public broadcaster, coupled with the absence of programming requirements applicable to commercial media outlets mean that most media consumers will inevitably encounter stereotypic treatment of racial minorities. Under these circumstances, the prospects for racial and cultural inclusiveness are less than promising.

## Where Americans Get Their News

Two trends describe Americans' consumption of news over the past century. The first concerns the gradual replacement of print by broadcast news sources. With the development of radio in the 1920s and the immediate popularity of radio news, newspapers began to surrender their position as the market leader. The arrival of television in the 1950s only accelerated this shift, and the national newscasts aired by ABC, CBS, NBC soon emerged as the dominant source of daily news. In 1969, at the height of their dominance, the combined audience for network news accounted for three-fourths of all American households. More people (approximately twenty-five million) tuned in to any one of the network newscasts in the late 1960s than subscribed to the top twenty daily newspapers combined. As shown in Figure 2, the current audience for CBS News -- the least popular of the three major network newscasts -- easily surpasses the circulation of USA Today.

<Figure 2 here>

The development of cable broadcasting in the early 1980s weakened the major networks' monopoly hold on the audience. CNN, the first "all news" cable network was formed in 1980 to be followed by Fox, CNBC, and MSNBC. By 2002, 82 percent of American households had access to cable news channels.

The spread of cable television coincided with an even greater threat to network news -- the increasing proliferation of local news programming. Responding to the low cost of producing local news and strong audience demand, station owners began to air multiple local newscasts and hybrid entertainment-news programs each day. In the 1960s most television stations broadcast a single local newscast; today local news runs continuously. In the Los Angeles area, for instance, the three network-affiliated television stations air a total of 7.5 hours

of local news each day between 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM. The explosion in local news availability created a serious problem for network news; people began to watch local rather than national news. Between 1993 and 2003, the combined audience for the three evening newscasts dropped by nearly 30 percent -- from forty-one million to twenty-nine million.

Recent breakthroughs in digital technology have transformed how Americans get their news still further. As the personal computer begins to rival television as the gateway to the outside world, competition for news audiences has intensified. The traffic to Internet news sites is already heavy; as of early 2005, nearly one in three Internet users read a newspaper online. Today, virtually every major news organization reproduces its news offerings online, giving consumers instant, on-demand access to the news. The major Internet portals all provide access to news, but their content derives exclusively from conventional sources (newspaper, wire services, or television news). In some cases, such as MSNBC, media and technology companies have joined forces hoping to create synergy between established providers of news content (NBC) and technological giants (Microsoft).

### **The Economics of News**

Every day, major events and issues occur in the world at large with significant consequences for Americans. One expects these same events and issues to appear in the news. This “mirror image” definition stipulates close correspondence between the state of the real world and the content of news coverage. During times of rising joblessness, the news focuses on unemployment; when thousands of Sudanese civilians are massacred, the spotlight shifts to the Sudan and to US policy on Africa.

There are several challenges to the mirror image definition of news, but the most compelling is that news is simply what sells (Kalb, 2001; Hamilton, 2003). American consumers

are free to choose from a wide array of news providers. Facing competition, rational owners inevitably choose to further their own interests rather than provide public service to the community. Thus, the content and form of news coverage are subject to the same logic that drives all other economic activity: minimize costs and maximize revenues

Since all American news outlets (with the exception of National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service) are privately owned, their survival depends on the size of their audience. Advertising is the principal source of revenue for publishers and broadcasters. The price of advertising depends on the size of the audience; the more popular the program, the greater the profit margin. Thus, “ratings” are the lifeblood of the broadcasting industry. The A.C. Nielsen Company conducts quarterly ratings “sweeps” during the months of February, May, July, and November. The result of each sweeps period locks in advertising rates for individual programs and stations until the next period. Programs that suffer a decline in their ratings stand to lose significant revenue, so owners do their utmost to maintain or improve their ratings. In the case of news programs, the implications are obvious: entertainment value trumps substantive content. Thus, one-half of all network news reports broadcast in 2000 had no policy content; in 1980 the figure was approximately one-third (Patterson, 2000). “Sensationalized” reports accounted for 25 percent of network news in the 1980s, but 40 percent in 2003. Clearly, news organizations have learned that fluff is more profitable than substance.

The expansion of local news programming in the 1980s and 1990s provides a compelling case study of the responsiveness of television station owners to economic constraints. First, local news is inexpensive to produce. The typical local newscast can be staffed by four or five all-purpose correspondents, an anchor or two, a weather forecaster, and a sports correspondent. Local news correspondents, in contrast with their network news counterparts, do not command

extravagant salaries. Infrastructure costs for local news programming are similarly limited; for the typical news station, the single most expensive budget item is the monthly lease of a helicopter to provide immediate access to breaking news. All told, therefore, the cost of putting together a local newscast is modest.

Cost is only half of the programming equation. Local news is especially enticing to owners because it attracts large audiences. In many markets, more people tune in to local than network news (see Figure 3). Not only is local news close to home and the source of both useful (the weather forecast and traffic reports) and personally engaging (the latest sports scores) information, but public affairs content can also be presented in ways that appeal to viewers. It is no accident that the signature “issue” of local news coverage is violent crime. From armed bank robberies to homicides, “home invasions,” carjackings, police chases, and gang wars, violence occurs continually in local newscasts. Conversely, little time is devoted to nonviolent crimes such as embezzlement, insider trading, or tax evasion, because they lack the “action” to command the attention of the viewing audience. Thus, “if it bleeds, it leads” is the motto of local news directors.

<Figure 3 here>

Stories about crime convey drama and emotion and provide attention-getting visuals. The allure of this combination for news directors is apparent across the country. In Los Angeles, for example, English-language commercial television stations aired a total of 3,014 news stories on crime during 1996 and 1997. As shown in Figure 4, the overwhelming majority of these reports focused on violent crime. The crime of murder, which accounted for less than 1 percent of all crime in Los Angeles County during this period, was the focus of 17 percent of crime stories. In fact, the number of murder stories equaled the number of stories focusing on all forms

of non-violent crime (all data are from Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). The results were identical across all six television stations whose offerings were examined.

<Figure 4 here>

Los Angeles television stations are not especially distinctive. A study of fifty-six different cities by Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman (1997) found that crime was the most prominently featured subject in the local news, accounting for more than 75 percent of all news coverage in some cities.

Not only does broadcast news highlight violence, it also links the issues of race and crime (Entman, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Over 50 percent of the crime stories in the Los Angeles study provided information about a specific suspect. As shown in Figure 4, more often than not, the suspect was non-white. These findings parallel a detailed study of the three major weekly news magazines on the basis of which the author concluded that “criminals are conceptualized as black people, and crime as the violence they do to whites” (Elias, 1990, p. 5).

Of course, the representation of different ethnic groups in crime news may reflect real-world trends. Research by Gilliam and Iyengar (1996) compared television representation of minority suspects with actual arrest rates for different races in Los Angeles. The authors computed population adjusted crime rates for whites, Hispanics and African-Americans showing the degree to which these groups were either over- or under-represented in both violent and non-violent crime. Their data showed that although African-Americans committed violent and non-violent crime at about the same rate, television coverage of black crime focused more (by a factor of 22 percent) on violent crime. In the case of Hispanic-Americans, their actual participation in violent crime exceeded their participation in non-violent crime by 7 percent, but as represented in the news, the disparity was 14 percent. Conversely, news coverage of white

crime was distinctly more non-violent than violent (by a factor of 31 percent), even though whites are only slightly more likely (by 7 percent) to engage in non-violent rather than violent crime. Thus, this study concluded that local news over-represented violent crime by African-Americans and Hispanics, and under-represented violent crime by whites.

### Effects of Crime News on Audience Opinion

Given the prominence of crime in news programming, an obvious question concerns the effects of racially “scripted” crime news on the viewing audience. One distinct possibility is that repeated exposure to news about crime makes the audience more aware and fearful of crime. In fact, communications scholars have documented a striking relationship between the level of news coverage and public concern for any given policy issue. An early statement of this “agenda-setting” hypothesis was formulated by Cohen (1963): the media, Cohen said, “may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*” (p. 13). In other words, the media sets the public agenda.

There is ample evidence of media agenda-setting with respect to crime; over the past two decades Americans have regularly identified crime as among the three most important problems facing the country. This correspondence between the public and media agenda, in and of itself, does not establish the influence of the media. The media and the public may simultaneously respond to the same real-world events (see Behr & Iyengar 1985). This is possible because unlike most issues, crime can be directly experienced. During periods of rising crime, for example, more people are victimized (or come in contact with crime victims), thus making them more concerned about the issue.

Examination of trends in actual crime rates, news coverage of crime, and public concern for crime does not lend support to the notion that real-world experiences shape both public

concern and news coverage. In fact, over the past two decades the over-time trends in Americans' concern for crime and actual crime rates have moved in opposite directions! As shown in Figure 5, the FBI nationwide violent crime index has declined significantly since the early 1990s. Despite the overall reduction in crime, the percentage of the public that cited crime as an important national problem increased substantially during this same period. Not coincidentally, the decade of the 1990s also witnessed a dramatic increase in the availability of local television news. Figure 5 suggests, at least in the case of crime, that public concern is more responsive to what appears on the television screen than to the state of the real world.

<Figure 5 here>

Repeated exposure to violent crime has made the American public fixate on crime as a political problem. (As we will note shortly, this fact has not gone unnoticed among those who seek elective office.) But is it sheer frequency of exposure or more subtle, qualitative aspects of crime news that drives public opinion on crime? Scholarly research suggests that the way in which the media frames the issue does matter. In an extensive content analysis of network news, Iyengar (1991) identified two distinct genres of news coverage for policy issues. "Thematic" framing encompasses news reports that place policy issues in some collective or societal context (e.g. rising crime rates in major urban areas or changes in the criminal justice system). "Episodic" framing, on the other hand, focuses on particular instances or exemplars of policy issues (e.g. the arrest of a suspect in the JonBenet Ramsey case). Not surprisingly, broadcast news tilts heavily in the direction of episodic reports; during the decade of the 1980s, for example, thematic stories accounted for only ten percent of network news coverage of both crime and terrorism (Iyengar, 1991).

How television news frames crime affects viewers' attributions of responsibility for the issue. When television news provides viewers with a collective or contextual frame of reference for crime (thematic framing), viewers are more likely to attribute responsibility (both in terms of responsibility for causing the problem and curing the problem) to societal factors. Thus, after watching a thematic report people cited unemployment and racial discrimination as potential causes of crime, and recommended improved educational opportunities for the poor as an appropriate remedy (see Iyengar, 1996). But when provided with the dominant episodic frame -- news coverage focusing on a particular crime -- they attributed responsibility not to societal or political forces, but to the attributes of particular individuals or groups. For example, viewers cited amorality, laziness and greed as relevant causes of crime. The predominance of episodic framing means that most Americans are drawn to dispositional rather than societal accounts of crime.

More-recent work has extended the analysis of media frames to local news. Typically, local crime reports provide a physical description of the suspect in the form of a police sketch, security camera footage or a mug shot. Race is a personal attribute that is evident in an episodic news report, whereas poverty and other social factors are not. Episodic framing thus necessarily introduces racial stereotypes into the public's understanding of crime (for a similar argument, but applied to the issue of poverty, see Gilens, 1996). Viewers are compelled to evaluate their racial beliefs in light of what seem to be empirical realities. Lacking the focus on an individual suspect, thematic framing directs the viewers' attention to alternative and more contextual accounts of crime.

The regular coverage of crime by television news coupled with the dominance of episodic framing constitutes a strong implicit signal that members of minority groups are prone

to engage in violent crime. Public opinion polls show that the news audience has accepted this message; that minorities are violence-prone is “deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of Americans ...” (Quillian and Pager 1999; also see Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz 1998).

Experimental research by Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) has confirmed the particular importance of racial cues in episodic crime reports. Using computer-based editing techniques, the researchers presented the *same* individual as either a white or an African-American male suspect. Their results showed that when the suspect was depicted as African-American, the number of viewers who endorsed punitive criminal justice policies increased significantly. More tellingly, the researchers found that when the news story on crime made no reference to a criminal suspect, a significant number of viewers mistakenly recalled that the suspect was non-white.

The most recent example of crime news exacerbating racial bias comes from the previously cited study of news coverage of Hurricane Katrina. This study manipulated media framing of the disaster. The investigators presented one set of study participants with a news report that focused on looting and disorder in the aftermath of the disaster (the “crime frame”). Other participants read a news report that focused exclusively on the death and damage caused by the hurricane, with no reference to crime (the “disaster frame”). This report framed Katrina in either thematic (discussion of the scope of the disaster with no reference to individual victims) or episodic (the efforts of one family to relocate) terms. After reading the news report, participants were asked a series of questions concerning the appropriate level of government assistance for hurricane victims. As shown in Figure 6, participants exposed to the report on crime and looting

recommended significantly lower amounts of financial assistance for hurricane victims.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this study documents that when the news links natural disasters with crime, people see the victims of the disaster as less deserving.

<Figure 6 here>

In short, non-stop coverage of crime by television news encourages racial stereotyping. By associating crime with the actions of minorities, mere exposure to crime news is sufficient to prompt the expression of beliefs and opinions hostile to minorities.

### **Wedge Appeals in Political Campaigns**

Consider the following scenario. As the 2008 election approaches, the economy is stagnant, a gallon of gas costs \$3.00, Osama bin Laden remains at large, and American troops die every day in Iraq. A clear majority of the public thinks the country is on the wrong track. Under these conditions, voters direct their wrath at the party controlling the White House. Boxed in by an unpopular war and concerns over the economy, Republican candidates have a strong incentive to change the subject by campaigning on so-called wedge issues. Based on the idea of “divide and conquer,” a wedge issue pits voters against each other not on the basis of their party affiliation, but their race or ethnicity.

Racial issues have divided Americans ever since the Civil War. In the most recent iteration of racial politics, white candidates present themselves as opponents of policies or programs that benefit minorities. Recently, the emergence of the immigration issue has injected a parallel division between Latinos and Anglos into campaigns. When California’s Republican Governor Pete Wilson ran a television ad in 1994 that began with the line “They keep coming,” most Californians immediately understood what he meant.

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<sup>2</sup> The average amount of assistance awarded by participants in the crime frame condition was significantly lower than the averages in both other conditions.

Cultural identity, or “family values,” provides an alternative basis for dividing voters. Initially introduced by President Nixon in 1968 as an appeal to conservative southern Democrats, “family values” has since broadened into a code word for religious fervor and opposition to non-mainstream lifestyles. A call for family values is generally interpreted as opposition to abortion, feminism, gay rights, and sex education in the public schools.

Wedge appeals based on race occurred in both the 1988 and 1996 presidential campaigns, with crime and illegal immigration, respectively, as the featured issues. Senator Robert Dole’s attempts to run as a strong opponent of illegal immigration in 1996 made little difference in his overwhelming loss to President Bill Clinton. But in 1988, the election may well have turned on the notorious “Willie Horton” ad in which a Republican group attacked Michael Dukakis for his support of prison furlough programs. This ad featured an African-American convict who had committed a violent crime while on a weekend furlough. The ad’s controversial content generated extensive media attention across the country, the “Dukakis is soft on crime” message was recycled across the country, and Vice President Bush overcame what was then a double-digit deficit in the polls.

Wedge issues are used more frequently in state and local races. In 1990, the conservative North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms was locked in a close Senate race with Democrat Harvey Gantt (the African-American mayor of Charlotte). During the closing days of the race, Helms released an ad that condemned the use of affirmative action in employment decisions. This ad is credited with eliciting a significant increase in white turnout leading to Helms’ re-election.

In some races, wedge issues influence the eventual outcome indirectly by deterring one side from speaking out (for fear of offending white voters). In 1998, for instance, the groups opposing Proposition 209 (a measure that called for an end to affirmative action in California)

tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to persuade President Clinton to visit the state and speak out against the measure. At the time, Clinton's national popularity stood at nearly 60 percent, and Clinton led Dole by more than 20 points in California polls. Despite this thick security blanket, Clinton refused to get involved in the campaign until the very last days of the campaign, when he made a campaign speech in Oakland. His involvement proved too little, too late; on Election Day, Proposition 209 passed easily.

In more recent campaign cycles, immigration has overshadowed affirmative action as the wedge issue of choice. The country's pre-occupation with terrorism in the post 9/11 era gives opponents of immigration a compelling rationale -- "lets not give potential terrorists easy entry into America." Given the size of California's immigrant population and the state's proximity to Mexico, it is not surprising that the golden state finds itself in the forefront of the battle to limit immigration. To illustrate how the immigration issue has shaped California politics, I use two case studies: the 1994 race for governor between incumbent Republican Pete Wilson and Democratic challenger Kathleen Brown, and the 2003 special election to replace Democratic governor Gray Davis.

### **The 1994 Campaign: "They Keep Coming"**

As the incumbent governor, Pete Wilson faced an especially challenging reelection in 1994. In his first term, he had presided over high unemployment and a net out-flow of businesses. Wilson's Democratic opponent was the popular and well-known Kathleen Brown. The Brown campaign seized upon the recession as her signature issue; Brown's ads emphasized Wilson's inability to deliver economic relief, and her own economic expertise (Brown was state treasurer). Using the economy as her theme, Brown established a substantial lead over Wilson.

Recognizing that he could not win a debate over the state of the economy, Wilson campaigned instead as a crime fighter and opponent of illegal immigration. He linked his candidacy to two well-known statewide propositions. Proposition 184 required the state to adopt a “three strikes” law and Proposition 187 limited or eliminated illegal immigrants’ eligibility for a variety of government services. Both measures passed easily.

Wilson’s efforts to change the subject were aided by Brown, who decided to engage Wilson on crime and immigration despite her well-known opposition to the death penalty and support for immigrants’ rights. The Brown campaign even released an ad attacking Wilson’s decision to parole a violent offender. Predictably, this ad provoked a series of Wilson counter-attacks on the subject of crime. Gradually, the California electorate was exposed to a genuine “dialogue” on the issues of crime and immigration and voters’ impressions of the candidates became increasingly colored by their opinions on these issues. On crime and immigration, most voters (including many Democrats) favored Wilson over Brown. As a result, Brown’s support eroded over the course of the 1994 campaign (see Figure 7) and Wilson won reelection by a comfortable margin.

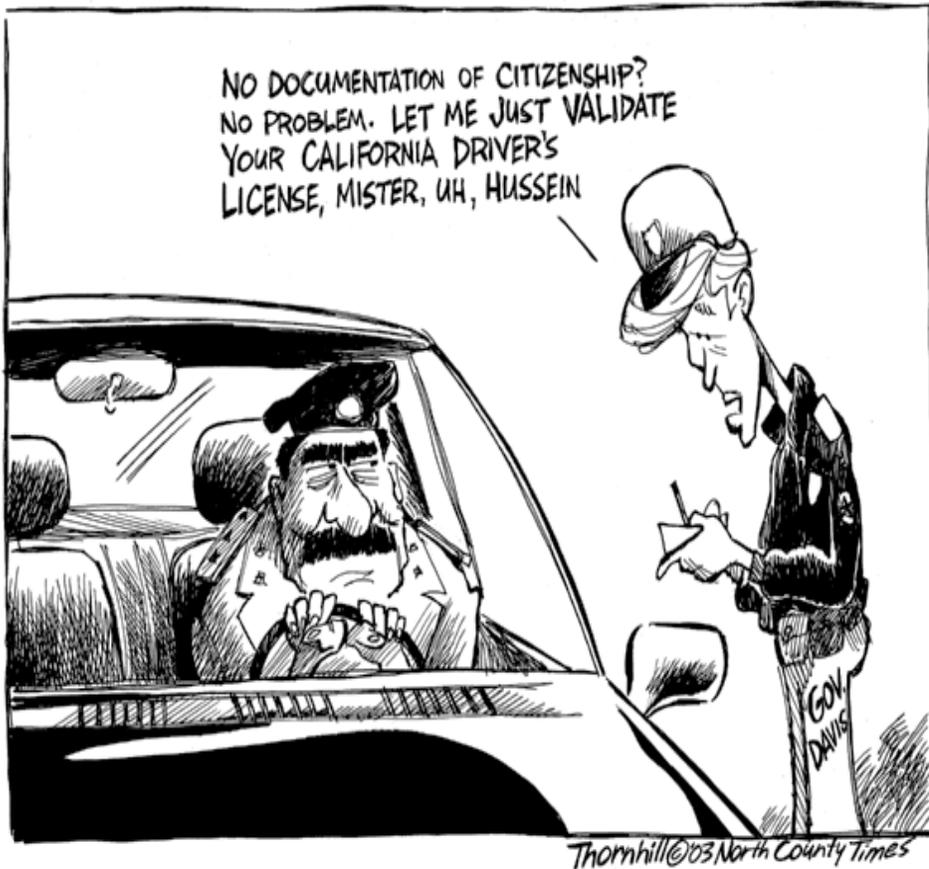
<Figure 7 here>

### **Drivers’ Licenses and the Terminator**

In 2003, less than one year after his re-election, Governor Gray Davis found himself the target of a recall campaign. Despite the substantial plurality of registered Democrats statewide, the measure passed, Democrat Davis was removed from office, and voters selected Republican movie star (from a ballot that included more than 100 candidates) Arnold Schwarzenegger as their new governor.

The conventional wisdom attributes these dramatic events to the state's continued economic woes, overcharging by energy companies, and general sense that state government was "broken." Fed up with politics as usual, voters were willing to send the relatively colorless and unpopular incumbent home in favor of a celebrity figure uncontaminated with prior political experience.

This standard account of the recall of Davis and the election of Schwarzenegger misses one important ingredient of the recall campaign -- Davis' much-publicized decision to sign into law a bill (SB 60) that provided drivers' licenses to people who had entered the state illegally. Under this bill, applicants without social security cards would be eligible for licenses if they provided a taxpayer identification number and one other form of personal documentation. Davis had initially vetoed the bill, but reversed himself and signed it into law (hoping to boost his standing with Hispanic voters and thus stave off the recall) in September 2003.



As far as public opinion was concerned, SB 60 was anathema (see Table 1). By overwhelming margins, Californians felt that the bill threatened national security. Among whites, opponents outnumbered proponents by a factor of 3:1. For voters concerned with immigration, then, Schwarzenegger -- who had pledged to repeal the bill -- was clearly the more desirable candidate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Governor Schwarzenegger's first legislative action, carried out on December 1 2003, was to sign the repeal measure into law.

**Table 1**  
**Immigration in the 2003 Recall Campaign**

Some people say that allowing illegal immigrants to get a driver's license will result in more insured drivers and safer roads. Others say that giving driving licenses to illegal immigrants will hurt national security. What do you think?

	ALL RESPS	WHITES	NON-WHITES
More insured, safer roads	26	21	35
Hurt national security	56	64	44
Haven't thought about it	15	12	16
More insured, safer roads	32	25	44
Hurt national security	69	75	56

Source: Knowledge Networks statewide survey of 1124 CA residents

How did voter sentiment on the driving license issue play out in the recall election? A pre-election survey asked a representative sample of likely voters to evaluate Governor Davis' record in office (most thought he had performed very poorly), to indicate their feelings about Arnold Schwarzenegger, and, of course, to indicate their vote choice on the recall question and the replacement candidate ballot. Although evaluations of Davis and Schwarzenegger were influenced primarily by party identification (Democrats were less critical of Davis, Republicans more enthusiastic about Schwarzenegger), voters' position on the drivers' license bill had almost as much impact on their candidate evaluations. Overall, immigration was a more powerful predictor of vote choice than the energy crisis, social issues such as abortion or gay rights, or generalized cynicism over state government. The recall election was less about economic mismanagement or disaffection from state government and more about controlling immigration (for a more detailed analysis, see Iyengar, 2004).

The successful use of immigration as a wedge issue in the 1994 and 2003 campaigns suggests that the political environment in California has changed little over the past decade. This may seem paradoxical, given the substantial changes in the ethnic composition of the state population. Whites accounted for 60 percent of the adult population of the state in 1992, but only 47 percent in 2008 (Citrin & Highton, 2002; Public Policy Institute of California, 2008). The Latino share of the population, on the other hand, increased from 24 to 33 percent. However, the size of the two groups among the voting population has remained relatively stable. Whites accounted for 79 percent of California voters in 1992 and 70 percent in 2008, while the Hispanic share of the voting population increased from 10 to 15 percent over this same period. Thus, the increase in the Latino population has not translated into a corresponding increase in the Latino electorate (see Citrin & Highton, 2002; Public Policy Institute of California, 2008). Even allowing for considerable Latino skepticism over SB 60, one suspects that the outcome of the 2003 special election may have been different had the Latino share of voters matched their share of the adult population. Latinos remain significantly under-represented in the electorate, while whites still account for the vast majority of voters. Interestingly, the 2008 California electorate is a virtual replica of the 1980 population -- 70 percent white and only 14 percent Latino. In short, whites have retained their dominant political status, primarily because of low turnout among Latinos.

Given the distribution of ethnicity within the electorate, it should come as no surprise that candidates resort to appeals that capitalize on white racial identity. Were the situation reversed, and Latinos the majority electoral group, it is unlikely that issues of illegal immigration or eligibility for driver's licenses would gain significant political traction. An axiom of political campaigns is that candidates respond to the preferences of voters, not non-voters; until the Latino

vote begins to match the Latino population, the incentive to use wedge appeals remains strong. For those who seek less divisive campaigns, the answer lies in civic outreach and get-out-the-vote campaigns.

### Conclusion

Candidates for elective office and owners of news outlets both behave as rational actors – the former seek to maximize their vote share, the latter their audience share. Neither has any compelling interest in the effects of their media presentations on race relations. As long as crime news attracts and holds a substantial audience, television stations will continue to highlight violence and mayhem; as long as wedge appeals entice voters to cross party lines, Willie Horton-type ads and grainy images of immigrants sprinting across freeways will continue to play a significant role in advertising campaigns.

The impact of racial cues in news programs and campaign advertising is especially influential in shaping white Americans' views about race for the simple reason that most whites have little personal contact with minorities. Despite the ever-increasing diversity of the American population and the passage of significant civil rights laws, most white people still live in racially homogeneous enclaves (Charles 2003; Massey & Denton, 1993; Denton, 1994). The people they see and interact with on a daily basis are overwhelmingly white (see Charles, 2003). Unable to think of specific instances that might contradict the association between ethnicity and anti-social or dysfunctional behavior, they uncritically accept the implications of racially biased media messages. The vicious circle expands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Whites' frequency of interpersonal contact with members of minority groups does not, in and of itself, contribute to weakening of racial prejudice and stereotyping. In fact, there is considerable evidence that whites living in areas characterized by a significant minority population are more threatened and hence more apt to buy into traditional stereotypes (see Taylor, 1998; Dixon and Rosenbaum, 2004).

What might be done to break out of this circle? On the media side, we can not expect any shift away from “infotainment” unless society imposes minimum “public service” obligations on broadcasters (see Bishop & Hakanen, 2002). In almost every other democratic society, broadcasters are treated as public trustees; in exchange for their free access to the publicly owned airwaves (worth billions of dollars), they are required to deliver some minimal degree of public service. In addition to providing more extensive and frequent coverage of public affairs, American broadcasters should also be required to air programs representing a wide array of cultural and political perspectives from the Black Muslims to the Christian Coalition.

An alternative means of increasing the public’s potential exposure to substantive news programming is to strengthen the standing of the public broadcaster. As we noted at the outset, PBS has a tiny audience share when compared with most European public broadcasters. But PBS’ ability to attract viewers has been compromised by the cutbacks in government financing. At present, PBS receives only a trivial portion of its operating budget from the federal government and is forced to devote significant amounts of broadcast time to fund-raising. In stark contrast, the BBC’s annual revenues derive almost exclusively from government funds. Obviously, the BBC has much more freedom to develop programming initiatives that not only address important issues of the day, but which also attract a significant number of viewers.

Finally, it is difficult to imagine what might be done to discourage candidates from using divisive campaign rhetoric. As a form of political speech, campaign advertising is protected by the First Amendment, and as long as whites turn out to vote in greater number than non-whites, playing the “race card” is rational candidate behavior. In recent years Congress has passed legislation designed to make candidates more accountable for the content of their advertising; the “in person” rule, for instance, requires candidates to appear in their ads and assure the viewer

that they “approved” the content. This requirement may serve as a disincentive for candidates to campaign on the basis of race. A further deterrent is the tendency of the news media to “fact check” the content of candidate advertising. Since 1988, most major news outlets have taken to running “ad watches” in which they scrutinize and critique the accuracy of campaign ads. If each time a candidate produced an ad featuring an “us against them” appeal, he/she was cited by the press as a “race baiter,” this would surely discourage campaign consultants from pursuing the strategy.

In the final analysis, however, the behavior of candidates and news organizations is dictated less by government strictures or efforts at monitoring and more by the behavior of consumers. The strongest disincentive to the use of racial appeals in campaigns is the possibility of a voter revolt: if the candidate who runs an ad featuring his support for the construction of a wall along the US border suddenly finds that his support has dropped by ten points after the airing of this ad, he will surely advertise on some other issue. If television stations that feature the most gruesome footage of violent crime in their news programming discover that they are losing viewers to other sources, they will switch to some other formula. Ultimately, it is audience demand that is responsible for the supply of media programming. In that sense, consumers and voters get what they deserve. Whether that delivery is consistent with racial harmony in a functioning democratic society is another question.

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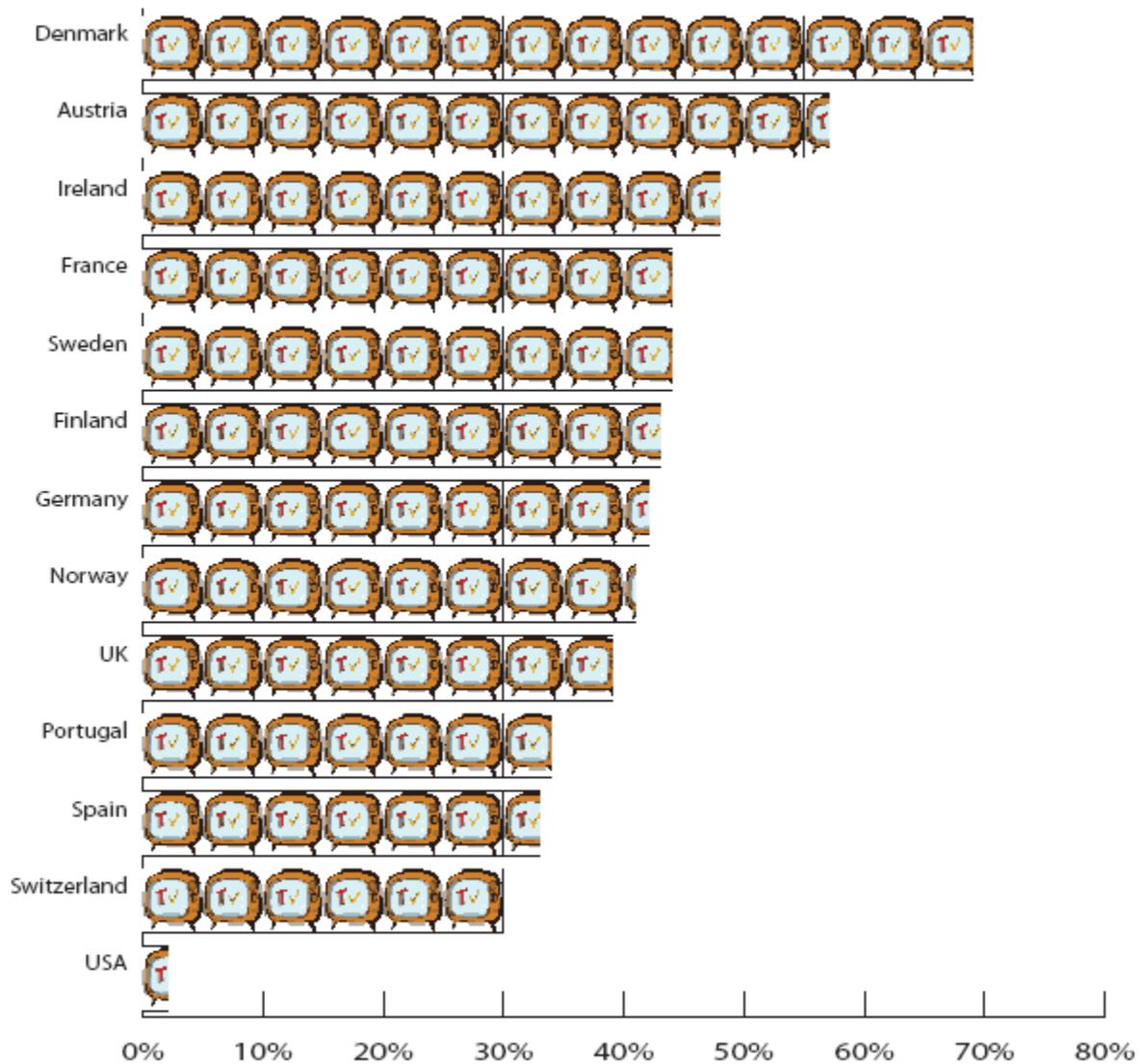
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**Figure 1: Audience Share by Public Broadcaster**



Source: Hallin, D.C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Fig. 2 : Broadcast vs. Print News Audience**

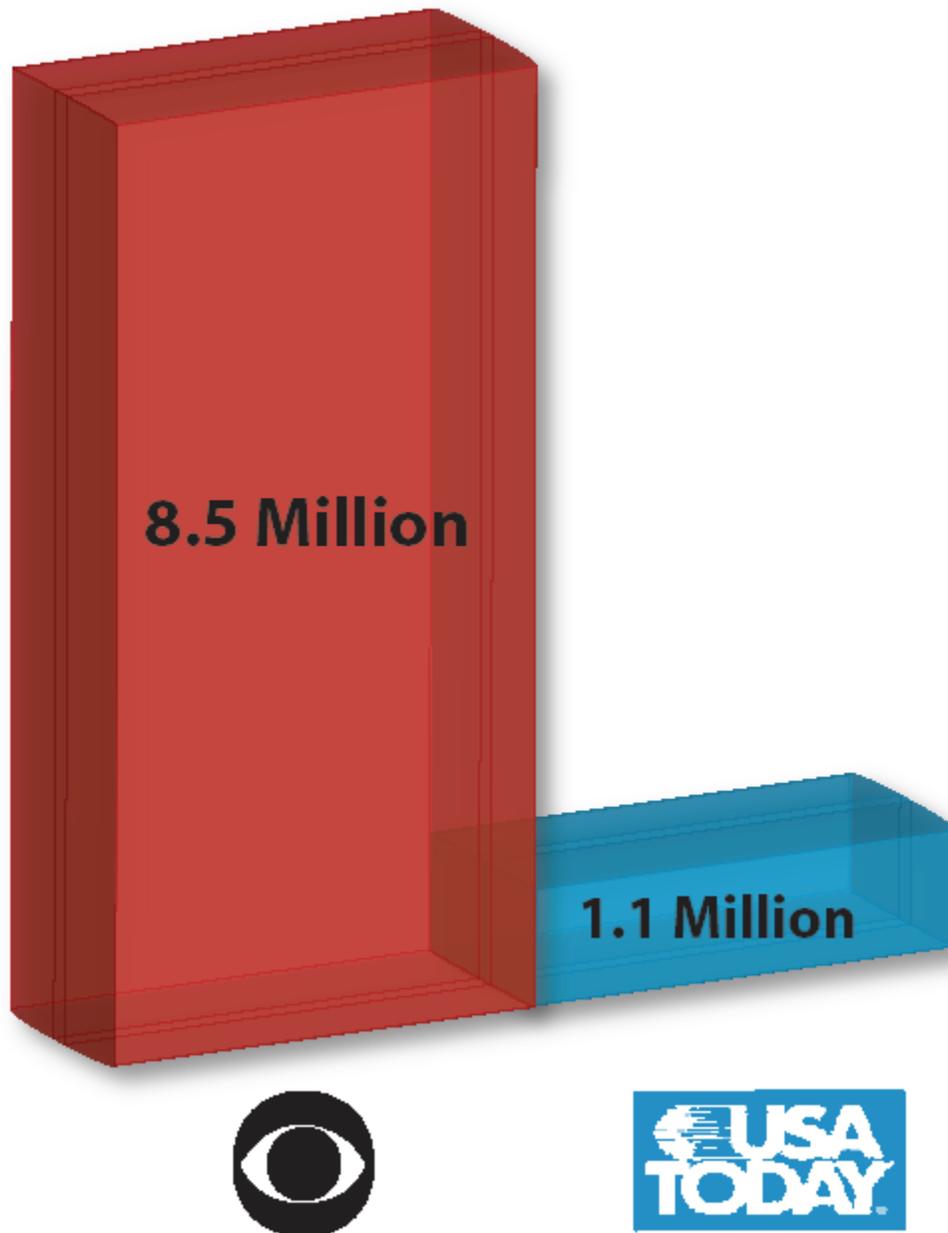
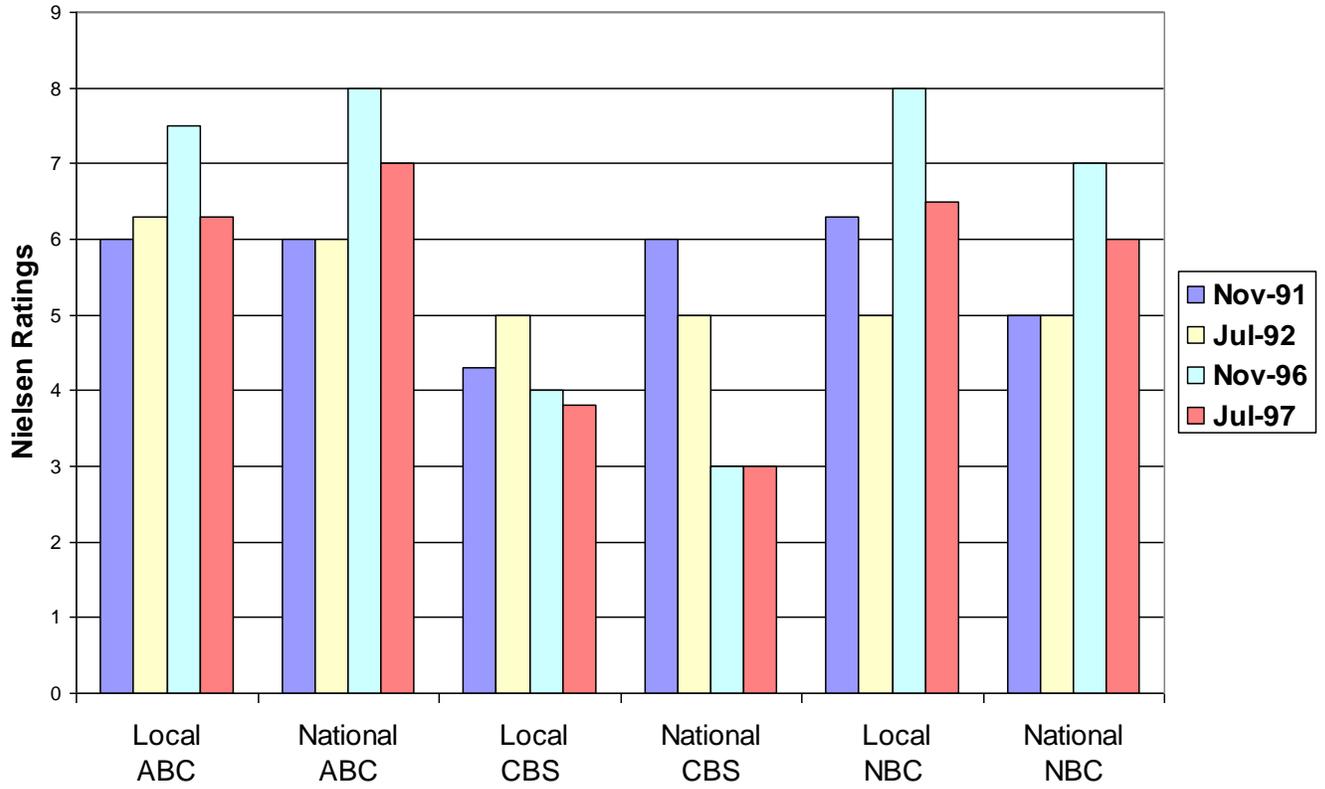
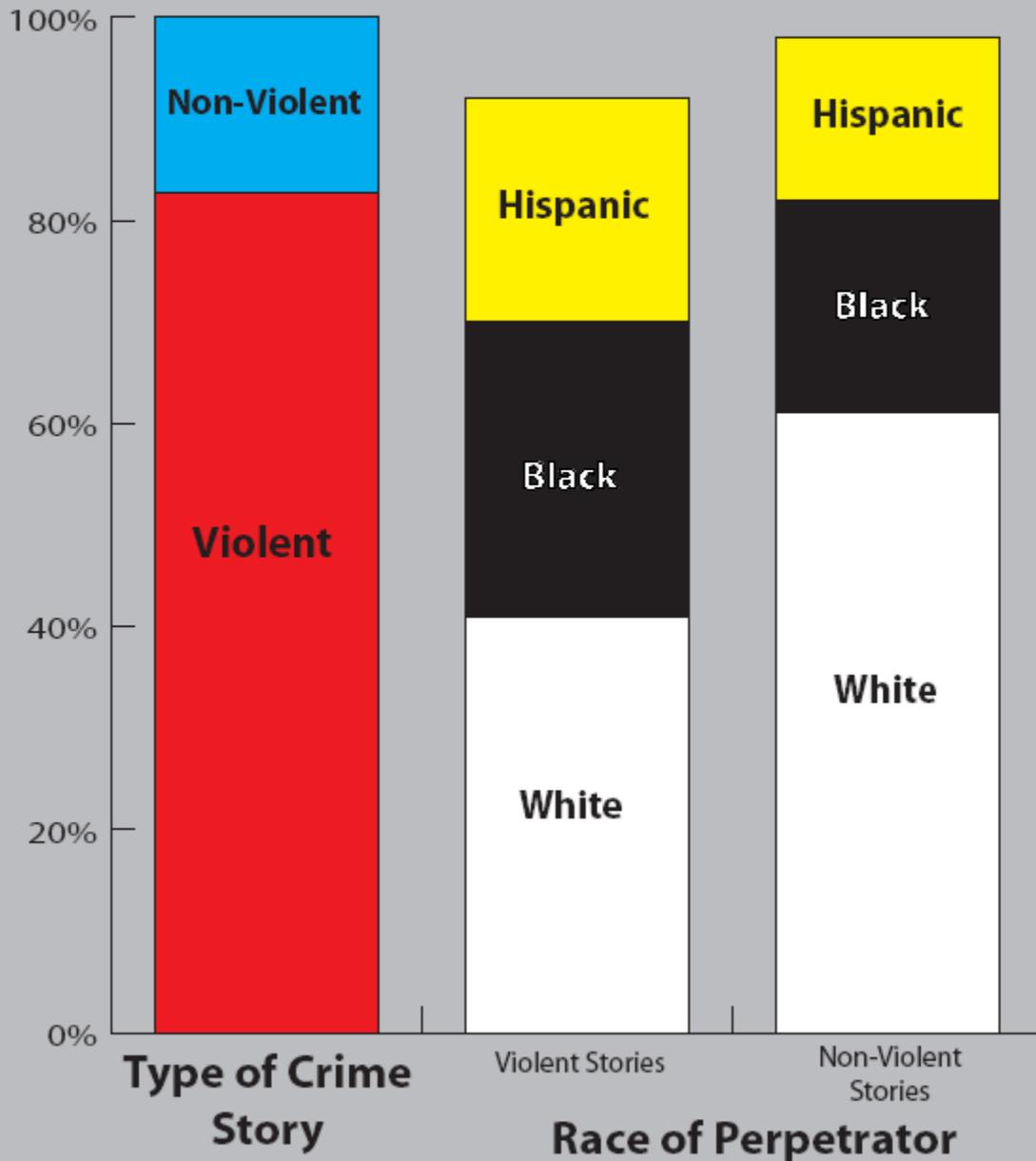


Figure 3: Local v National News in the LA Media Market



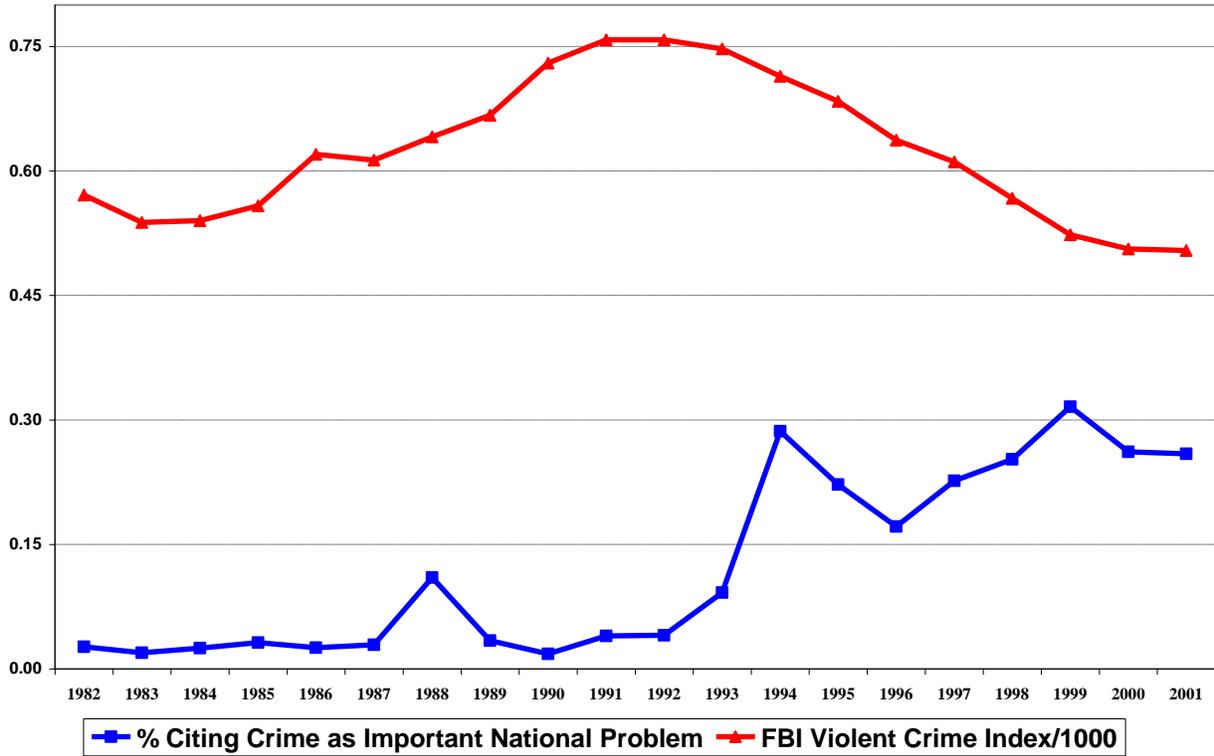
# Fig. 4: Content of Television Crime Coverage

Los Angeles, 1996-1997

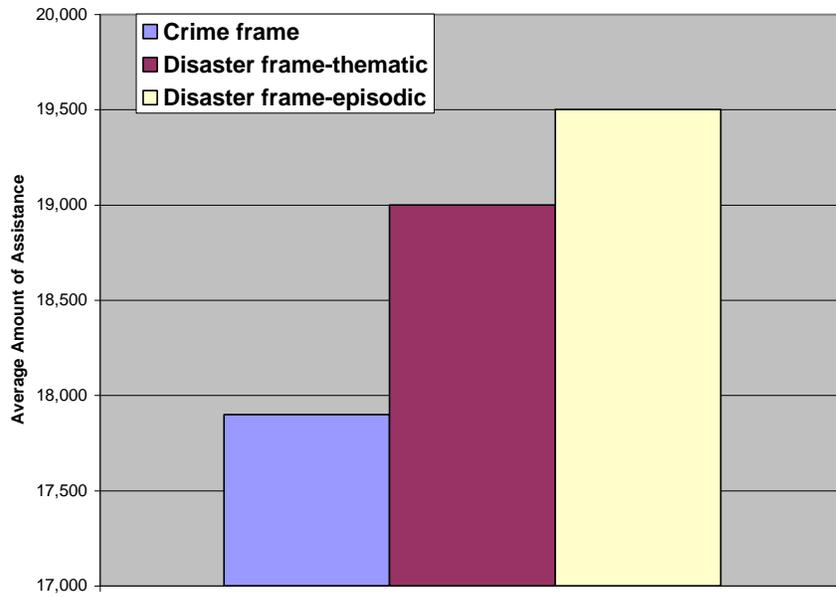


Source: Gilliam and Iyengar (2000).

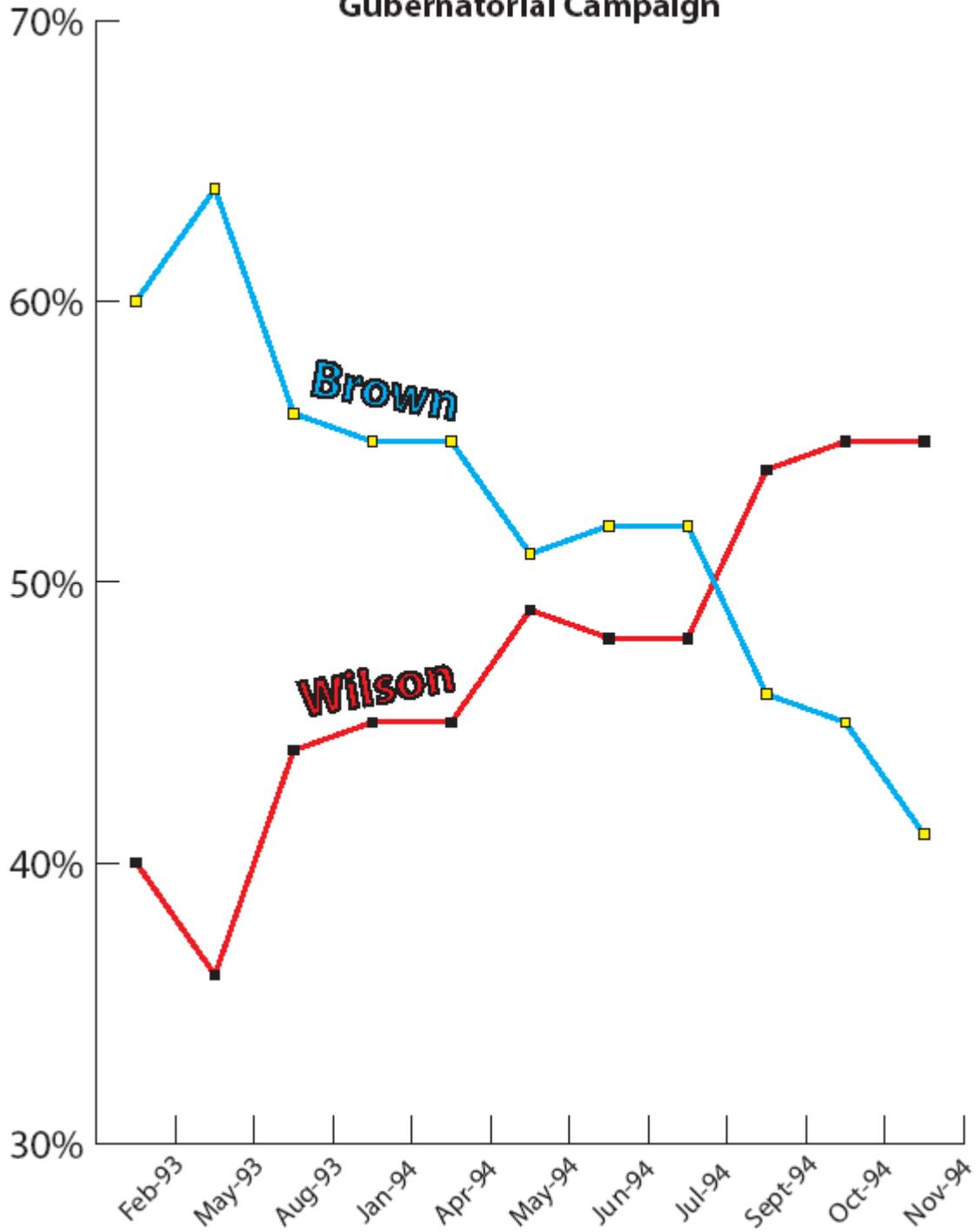
Figure 5: Real-World Cues and Public Concern for Crime, 1982-2001



**Figure 6: Framing Effects on Level of Recommended Disaster Relief**



**Figure 7: Erosion of Support for Brown in 1994 California Gubernatorial Campaign**



Source: Field Poll

Figure 8: White vs. Latino Turnout in California

