

**The
Mass Media
and the
Dynamics of
American
Racial
Attitudes**

Paul M. Kellstedt

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Paul M. Kellstedt explains the variation in Americans' racial attitudes over the last half-century, particularly the relationship between media coverage of and American public opinion on race. The analyses reveal that racial policy preferences have evolved in an interesting and unpredictable (if not unpredictable) fashion over the past fifty years. There have been sustained periods of liberalism, where the public prefers an active government to bring about racial equality, but these periods have invariably been followed by eras of conservatism, where the public wants the government to stay out of racial politics altogether. These opinions respond to cues presented in the national media. Kellstedt then goes on to examine the relationship between attitudes on the two major issues of the twentieth century: race and the welfare state. Although formerly distinct in the public mind, during the mid-1960s, race was "fused onto" the cluster of welfare-state issues. Since then, the over-time fluctuations of these two series have been indistinguishable. Moreover, the shift in the relationship is a function of media coverage of the issues of race and poverty.

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*To the Kellstedt women:
Deb, Abigail, and Elizabeth*

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Preface

The kernel of insight that eventually led to my doctoral dissertation – and, finally, to this book – occurred in my apartment in Minneapolis on a cold winter day in 1994. As a young graduate student, I was fortunate to be taking seminars at the time when two pathbreaking works in the study of public opinion were first being published: John Zaller’s *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* and James Stimson’s *Public Opinion in America*. Although these books were both immediately hailed as important new works, and both spoke in a fresh voice about the nature of public opinion, they were actually quite disconnected from one another, and remain so today. This, in my view, is unfortunate. The reason for this disconnection is that they approached the subject from very different perspectives – Zaller from the more traditional individual level, and Stimson from the quite different macro, time-series level. But why, I wondered, weren’t these two insights connected? Didn’t Zaller’s theory of the survey response have aggregate, over-time implications? Weren’t these implications testable? Couldn’t the tools and methodologies that Stimson pioneered be used in the analysis? In the strictest intellectual sense of the word, I am indebted to Zaller and Stimson for showing the rest of us new ways to study public opinion. Without *both* of their works, mine would not be possible.

My debt to Stimson goes beyond this, however. As a student of his at the University of Iowa and the University of Minnesota, I had grown accustomed to approaching all political questions from his longitudinal point of view. On that day in my apartment, I did what I usually did

when I had an idea – I tried to talk to Jim immediately. I reached him on the phone at his home across town and relayed the core of the idea, unsure of whether it would excite him at all. I remember Jim’s reaction exactly: “Start writing.” He meant it quite literally. It was vintage Stimson in every sense of the word (including the brevity). Most important, it was intellectually energizing. No one who has ever worked with Jim will find any of this at all surprising. I relay the story as a bit of my own intellectual history, and to acknowledge the enormous debt I owe him. He is welcome to claim as much of the credit for this work as he wants. Knowing Jim, he wouldn’t dream of taking any of the credit, though – and not because it might not be up to his high standards. That’s just the kind of advisor and friend he has been, and I’m greatly in his debt.

Others who helped shape my work in its embryonic stages include other members of my dissertation committee at Minnesota: John Freeman, John Sullivan, David Fan, and Antonio Merlo. Fan, in particular, patiently taught me the ins and outs of content analysis, especially the rigors of creating a dictionary of ideas. Freeman offered tireless encouragement as well as the perspective of someone not specializing in American politics but engrossed by any idea that was scientifically testable. Also at Minnesota, Wendy Rahn offered a number of challenging and constructive criticisms.

The dean of the faculty at Brown University, Kathryn Spoehr, generously provided me with a sabbatical leave during the 1999–2000 academic year, without which this book would not have been possible. I spent part of that year as a Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The staff, faculty, and my fellow Fellows provided an environment rich in ideas and caffeine that led to a significant reshaping of this project. Edie Holway of the center did everything possible to make my life as comfortable and productive as possible. I thank Rich Morin, B. J. Bullert, Christina Holtz-Bacha, Jonathan Mirsky, Richard Parker, Anna Greenberg, Tami Buhr, and particularly Lance Bennett, Tim Cook, Taeku Lee, and Tom Patterson for their encouragement and stimulating conversations. This book is a better product for their input.

Various colleagues and friends have read a portion or, in the case of a generous few, all of this manuscript in its various stages. This list includes John Transue, Eric Lawrence, Bud Kellstedt, Christina Wolbrecht, Suzie DeBoef, Don Green, and Claudio Cioffi-Revilla.

I had the opportunity to present various portions of this work at several seminars, which led to feedback that helped correct several mistakes I had made and clarify portions that were vague. Thank you to Nicole Krassas and her colleagues at Eastern Connecticut State University, to the Shorenstein Center at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and to the Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University for lively discussions and for allowing me to present unfinished work.

Also at Brown, I feel indebted to several years' worth of students in my undergraduate classes on public opinion and American democracy. In their active listening to and engagement with my lectures on the nature of racial attitudes, they helped to clarify my thinking considerably. In particular, the geological metaphor that I use in the concluding chapter is the product of discussions that took place in class. I am certain that my teaching has benefited my research; whether my research has benefited my teaching will have to be left up to my students to decide.

None of this work would have been possible without the considerable help of numerous research assistants who helped me amass the data used in this book. At the University of Minnesota, Greg Belshe, Rowzat Shipchandler, and Ethan Cherin all helped with the scanning of *Newsweek* archives. At Brown University, Jackie Delamatre, Vera Brunner-Sung, Stefanie McGowan, and especially David Primo helped to sift through the media data to help me make sense of it. Those media data were collected with the aid of a grant from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9423125), for which I am grateful.

Thanks to the *American Journal of Political Science*, which granted permission to revise my article "Media Framing and the Dynamics of Racial Policy Preferences" and include it here as Chapter 4.

On a more personal level, I feel grateful for all of the support I received in the writing of this book from my closest friends and family members. My friends at the Evangelical Covenant Church in Riverside, Rhode Island, provided unceasing encouragement. They allowed me to be real with my feelings about how the book was going – celebrating the

joys and helping me deal with the rough spots – without ever making me feel that their love for me depended on the book’s success. The number of individuals that comes to mind here is simply too big to list them all, which goes a long way in showing what a wonderful, healing community I am lucky to be a part of. They have been instruments of God’s grace to me.

My familial debts are substantial. My father, Lyman (Bud) Kellstedt, a just-retired member of my own profession, read every page of this book and provided by far the least unbiased feedback I have ever received. Try as he did to be an objective critic, he failed miserably at this task and instead turned into a relentless cheerleader. The good news is that I needed him to be the cheerleader, and for succeeding splendidly in that role I thank him profoundly.

But the largest familial debts I owe are to my wife, Deb, and our two daughters, Abigail and Elizabeth. On days when things didn’t go so well for me, I could always, always count on walking through the front door to the joyous cries of “Daddy’s home!” and tight hugs around my neck. I would never have had the energy to finish this book without them. I have been forever changed by the unconditional nature of their love. I dedicate this book to my Kellstedt women with all of the love I can give back.