



Racialized Coverage of Congress: The News in Black and White

David Niven, Jeremy Zilber

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This examination of the causes, severity, and implications of racially stereotyped media coverage of Congress incorporates original analysis of congressional media coverage and interviews with congressional press staff. The news media often portray African-American members as being primarily interested in race, overly concerned with local matters, and wielding little legislative influence. By contrast, the images African-American members attempt to project of themselves are more complex and comprehensive than the images the media communicate. The authors offer a psychological explanation for this phenomenon, the Distribution Effect, in which those who are numerically rare in an occupation tend to be lumped together rather than treated as individuals. Their findings suggest that it is the media, rather than members of Congress, who are responsible for the racialized images that appear regularly in the press. This results in an advantage for white incumbents trying to attract votes but presents an obstacle to be overcome for African-American politicians.

This study will appeal to political science, media studies, and racial studies scholars. It incorporates content analysis of the newest forum of communication, congressional Internet web sites, to disclose how white and African-American representatives in fact have similar media priorities.

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