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RACE-OF-INTERVIEWER EFFECTS IN A PREELECTION POLL
VIRGINIA 1989

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Abstract All published preelection surveys of the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial contest overestimated the vote share of the black candidate and eventual victor, Douglas Wilder. We offer a "social desirability" interpretation of the polls' inaccuracies and hypothesize that claiming support for Wilder was the socially desirable response for some whites, especially when the interviewer was black. We show a race-of-interviewer effect on the vote intention of white respondents of 8–11 percentage points in a preelection survey of Virginia voters. The effects were greatest among white Democrats and among whites who were more uncertain of their vote intention. We discuss the implications of these findings for race-of-interviewer research and for improving the accuracy of preelection forecasts in contests with black and white opposing candidates.

The vote returns that came in on the evening of the 1989 gubernatorial election in Virginia held an unexpected surprise. All the published preelection polls, as well as an exit poll completed on election day and broadcast as the polls closed, showed the black candidate, Democratic Lieutenant Governor Douglas Wilder, as having a decided lead over his white opponent, Republican Marshall Coleman. Estimates of Wil-

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der's lead in the final preelection polls of the four major survey organizations in the state ranged from a 4 to an 11 percentage point advantage.[1] But the actual results gave Wilder a victory by the narrowest of margins, 50.3% to 49.7% (just 6,741 votes out of a total of 1.79 million ballots cast). The overestimation of Wilder's victory margin in the 1989 preelection polls was similar to the patterns seen in several other black-white statewide contests, such as the 1982 Bradley-Deukmejian gubernatorial election in California, and Wilder's own victory for lieutenant governor in Virginia in 1985. In each of these elections, the black candidate enjoyed a substantially greater share of the votes in preelection polls than he actually garnered on election day.

Why were the polls wrong in Virginia? The unrealistic results cannot be attributed solely to sampling error: several polls found the Wilder margin to be statistically significant, and the fact that all the polls fell on the same side of the true mean suggests a systematic bias rather than random error. No doubt some of the variability in the poll results has its origin in the "normal" culprits responsible for preelection polling inaccuracies, for example, imperfect sampling procedures, last minute shifts of voting preferences, faulty estimates of the likely electorate, and improper allocation of undecided voters (Bradburn and Sudman 1988; Crespi 1988; Roll and Cantril 1980). To this list, however, we add another source of preelection polling error arising specifically in elections with black and white opposing candidates: under certain contextual conditions, white respondents are more reluctant to report intentions to vote for the white candidate, and more willing to report intentions to vote for the black candidate, than they are to cast their ballots for those candidates on Election Day. The existence of this type of "social desirability bias" in preelection polls is difficult to prove since the institution of the secret ballot rightly prevents the researcher from checking any respondent's expressed voting intention against his or her actual vote. However, the existence of social desirability bias can be inferred from a number of more readily measurable patterns, the most significant of which is that white respondents tend to report different voting intentions depending on whether the person who interviews them is white or black. In this paper, we present evidence of a race-of-interviewer effect in a preelection survey of Virginia voters, explore the conditions under which the effect is most likely to

1. The major polls and their final estimates of voter preference were: Mason-Dixon Opinion Research, Inc. (October 30–November 1), Wilder 48 percent, Coleman 44 percent, undecided 8 percent (N = 825); *Washington Post* (October 30–November 2), Wilder 52 percent, Coleman 41 percent, undecided 7 percent (N = 751); *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (October 27–November 1), Wilder 45 percent, Coleman 36 percent, undecided 19 percent (N = 852); and the Commonwealth Poll, Virginia Commonwealth University (September 21–October 19), Wilder 44 percent, Coleman 38 percent, undecided 18 percent (N = 451). All were conducted by telephone.

occur, and assess the implications of these effects for electoral and other opinion surveys dealing with racial issues.

Prior Research

Studies reporting effects of the race of the interviewer on responses to survey questions are not uncommon in public opinion research. Several studies show tendencies of black respondents to report more favorable attitudes toward whites to white than to black interviewers (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson 1988b; Schuman and Converse 1971), and more recent work has shown significant race-of-interviewer effects on white responses to racially oriented questions as well (Campbell 1981; Cotter, Cohen, and Coulter 1982; Hatchett and Schuman 1975–76; Sudman and Bradburn 1974). While most research has found effects mainly on race-related items, Schuman and Hatchett (1974) also report significant race-of-interviewer effects on black attitudes about the political system, patriotism, and democratic values. The most common explanation for all these effects is that individuals seek to avoid offending interviewers of the opposite race because of "interpersonal deference," "courtesy to a polite stranger," or more simply a general desire to be agreeable. On certain kinds of survey items, individuals react in part to the social pressure of the interview situation and tend to respond based on their expectations of the interviewers' preference. Much related work suggests that individuals tend to give socially desirable responses to other survey questions, for example, those relating to voter turnout (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson 1988a; Silver, Anderson and Abramson 1986); the race-of-interviewer effect shows that, especially with racially oriented questions, the "socially desirable" response depends in part on who is asking the question.

Such logic could certainly apply to expressed voter preferences in certain preelection surveys as well. Pollsters typically expect some respondents in preelection surveys to refuse to state their vote intentions and others to misstate it, yet they generally have no reason to suppose that the probabilities for refusal, concealment, and prevarication are systematically different among supporters of either party's candidate. While this tacit assumption of equiprobability of error may hold in most elections, in election contests with black and white opposing candidates, social desirability pressures of various forms may be present and may significantly bias estimates of the likely vote outcome.

In general, individuals may feel some social pressure to claim support for a black candidate in the interview situation. Few individuals in modern American society want to appear antiblack, as social norms

regarding race have become increasingly egalitarian in recent years (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985). Voicing support for a white candidate in a black-white contest, however, might be interpreted by the interviewer as a race-based vote; hence, there may be a subtle pressure on white voters to claim to support the black candidate, no matter what their true preference (and actual future behavior) may be.

This pressure should be felt most strongly, and be more directly observable, under a specific contextual condition, that is, when a white respondent is being surveyed by a black interviewer. In many recent local and statewide elections pitting white and black candidates against one another, blacks have been nearly unanimous in their electoral support of the black candidate. Whites have varied in their degree of bloc voting, with varying proportions of whites giving their vote to the black candidate in different contests. Thus, respondents who are asked their voting preference will have a good idea of the likely preference of a black interviewer but will not be as certain about the likely preference of a white interviewer. In the eyes of the respondent, a white interviewer might be quite likely to support the white candidate, but a black interviewer would be viewed as almost certainly supporting the black candidate. While individuals surveyed in other kinds of electoral contexts could also make estimates of the preferences of interviewers based on gender, accent, or race as well, the special circumstance of black and white opposing candidates may make both interviewer preferences and racial divisions in the electorate more salient for the respondent. Thus, to the extent that social desirability motivates individual responses, race-of-interviewer effects should be seen most clearly in surveys during these types of election contests.

The 1989 Virginia election in particular is an ideal setting in which to test for such social desirability effects. Not only was Douglas Wilder bidding to become the nation's first elected black governor, but he was doing so with much media fanfare in the heart of the old Confederacy. The Democrats had won the two previous gubernatorial elections in the state (Charles Robb in 1981 and Gerald Baliles in 1985), and the incumbent Baliles enjoyed widespread popularity, making Wilder a competitive candidate at the outset of the contest. Wilder ran a highly credible campaign as a qualified, major-party candidate, ably portraying his white opponent as tending toward conservative extremism. Coleman's attacks on various episodes in Wilder's earlier career failed to do much damage to Wilder's public credibility. Thus, white voters who had supported earlier Democratic candidates had few convenient "excuses" for withholding support for Wilder, no obvious reason for it other than a negative reaction to the candidate's race.

By the end of the contest, moreover, it was apparent that the race

issue had been a significant part of the overall electoral landscape. The candidates themselves rarely, if ever, broached the racial dimensions of the contest during the campaign, but the national media "insisted on branding Wilder a black politician [even though] he was determined not to run as one" (Sabato 1991, chap. 5). And while white voters themselves denied that race would play a role in their decisions, with only 12 percent saying in our survey that the race of the candidates would be "very" or "fairly important" in their vote decision, 64 percent of whites also perceived Wilder as likely to help blacks "a lot" once in office compared to only 16 percent for Coleman, indicating the potential for racially polarized voting. The election outcome, moreover, showed that Wilder ran 4 percentage points behind the victor in the lieutenant governor's race, Donald Beyer, and 13 points behind Attorney General Mary Sue Terry, both of whom are white. These results fueled much speculation that race may have been an important, though "subterranean and unmentionable" aspect of the electoral campaign (Sabato 1991, chap. 5). Given this context, we hypothesize that social pressures related to race would influence responses to preelection surveys: voicing support for Wilder would be the socially desirable response for whites, especially when the interviewer was black.

Data

The data used in the study are from a statewide survey of Virginia residents conducted by the University of Virginia's Center for Survey Research between October 22 and November 2, 1989. A total of 362 respondents were surveyed, of whom 256 were registered voters. The survey was conducted by telephone, with approximately one-third of all completed interviews conducted by black interviewers. The interviewers were graduate and undergraduate students at the University, many of whom had previous telephone interviewing experience. All were carefully trained in techniques for telephone interviewing.

Although there is no face-to-face contact between interviewers and respondents with telephone interviews, several studies have reported race-of-interviewer effects in telephone surveys (Cotter, Cohen, and Coulter 1982; Meislin 1987; Morin 1989). Three processes may lead to these effects: respondents may correctly identify the race of the interviewer through accent or speech pattern and adjust their answers accordingly; interviewers state their names at the outset of the survey, and names can sometimes be taken as cues to racial identity; or the interviewer may (consciously or unconsciously) use verbal cues, into-

nations, or inflections that elicit certain responses to questions of particular importance or salience to the interviewer.[2] Whatever the mechanism, we may expect a race-of-interviewer effect in surveys that deal with racial issues or that are conducted in racially polarized electoral environments, even when the interview is conducted by telephone.

Telephone numbers were fed to each interviewer station randomly from a larger pool of randomly selected telephone numbers of Virginia households. We limit our analysis to only white and black interviewers, and report no results for the 59 respondents interviewed by Asian-American or Asian students. Because of limitations of sample size, we focus only on white respondents, 149 of whom were surveyed by white and 103 by black interviewers.[3]

The voting preference of each registered voter was determined by asking: "If the election for Governor were held today, who would you vote for? The Democratic candidate, Douglas Wilder, or the Republican candidate, Marshall Coleman, or aren't you sure how you will vote?" For those who said they were "undecided," a follow-up question was asked: "Which way do you lean as of today, toward Douglas Wilder or toward Marshall Coleman?"[4]

Results

The results of the initial race-of-interviewer test are shown in table 1. As can be seen, reported preference for Wilder differs by 8 percentage points depending on the race of the interviewer (44 percent among white interviewers, 52 percent among blacks), while reported preference for Coleman differs by 11 points (44 percent among white interviewers, 33 percent among blacks). The percentages of undecided voters are almost equal, with a slightly higher figure among respondents

2. Meislin (1987) reports the results of an earlier study in which over three-quarters of respondents correctly identified the race of the interviewer.

3. The percentage of interviewed blacks in our sample was 16 percent, almost exactly their numbers in the Virginia electorate, but too small to permit reliable statistical analyses. Among these respondents, we did find that blacks interviewed by blacks were 11 percent more likely to claim support for Wilder than blacks interviewed by whites. This finding is consistent with the results shown below for white respondents, but we do not elaborate on the results for black respondents because of the very small number of cases.

4. We should note that the sequence of questions may also act as a contextual factor that may heighten the race-of-interviewer effect. In our survey, vote intention was asked about two-thirds of the way through a 20-minute interview script. Party identification was measured well after the vote intention questions, but racial attitude questions were near the beginning of the interview, as were a series of questions asking respondents to identify the race and sex of various candidates. These questions may have increased the salience of racial orientations for respondents, but we doubt that they account fully for the patterns found in our survey.

Table 1. Voter Preference among Whites by Race of Interviewer

	White Interviewers (%)	Black Interviewers (%)
Wilder	43.8	52.2
Undecided	12.4	14.9
Coleman	43.8	32.8
N	105	67

NOTE.—$\chi^2 = 2.06$, 2 *df*, $p = .36$, Cramer's $V = .11$.

interviewed by blacks. The Wilder-Coleman percentage split differs rather markedly depending on the race of the interviewer; nevertheless, the differences in this bivariate table are statistically insignificant.

Part of the reason for the lack of a statistically significant effect is no doubt due to the small number of respondents in the sample. However, it was also the case that in our study, blacks were more likely to interview white Republicans than were white interviewers, as 46 percent of all completed interviews by blacks were with Republicans, compared to only 33 percent of completed interviews by whites.[5] Thus, the pool of white respondents interviewed by blacks was more likely to be pro-Coleman than respondents interviewed by whites, mitigating the effect of the race of the interviewer in the bivariate table. Table 2 shows the voter preference results for each party group separately, and here significant and more substantial race-of-interviewer effects can be seen.

For example, among white Republicans (including Independents who lean Republican), the percentage who favor Coleman differs by 18 points depending on the race of the interviewer (69–51 percent).

5. The assignment of telephone numbers to interviewers was done completely randomly, and scheduled callbacks were, whenever practical, assigned to the same interviewer. The differences in party affiliation among respondents interviewed by blacks and whites, then, seems to be due to more than chance (and the chi-square value for this percentage difference is 3.41, $p = .06$). Quite possibly, this pattern may be due to selective refusal rates among whites when surveyed by blacks over the telephone. Our data indicate that approximately 31 percent of all contacts that black interviewers made with all respondents resulted in an immediate refusal, while only 16 percent of contacts made by whites refused to be interviewed. While we do not know the party identification or other characteristics of the individuals who refused to be interviewed, we do know that respondents interviewed by blacks were disproportionately located in northern Virginia and other suburban locales throughout the state, areas with relatively strong Republican loyalties, as judged by previous statewide surveys. Thus, we infer that rural, white Virginians had higher refusal rates when called by a black interviewer. Differential refusal rates were probably heightened in our poll by our use of a respondent selection procedure at the outset of the interview as described by Troldahl and Carter (1964).

Table 2. Voter Preference among Whites by Race of Interviewer and Party Identification (in percent)

	Republicans		Independents		Democrats	
	White Interviewer	Black Interviewer	White Interviewer	Black Interviewer	White Interviewer	Black Interviewer
Wilder	26.5	27.0	16.7	63.6	70.5	94.7
Undecided	4.1	21.6	50.0	9.1	11.4	5.3
Coleman	69.4	51.4	33.3	27.3	18.2	0.0
N	49	37	12	11	44	19
χ^2	6.69		6.46		4.98	
	(.04)		(.04)		(.08)	
Cramer's *V*	.28		.53		.28	

NOTE.—Republican and Democratic groups include independent "leaners"; Independents include "apoliticals." Numbers in parentheses are level of probability.

The number of undecideds differs by 18 points, with support for Wilder equal at 27. The chi-square for the entire Republican subgroup is 6.69 with 2 *df,* significant at the .05 level. When interviewed by blacks, then, white Republicans are significantly less likely to report a preference for the white candidate and more likely to report being undecided. Among white Democrats (and Independents who lean Democratic), the results are similar in magnitude (Cramer's V of .28 for both party groups), but the Democrats show strong differences in their expressed support for both Wilder and Coleman depending on the race of the interviewer (percentage differences of 24 points for Wilder and 18 points for Coleman). This suggests that without taking into account potential race-of-interviewer effects, estimates of the likely vote for the black (Democratic) candidate may be biased particularly among white Democrats, while estimates of the likely vote for the white (Republican) candidate may be biased for both major party groups. Finally, among pure Independents, race of interviewer is related to vote choice as well. Although the sample size is extremely small for this group ($N = 23$), the table does indicate that a substantially greater percentage of respondents interviewed by blacks claimed support for Wilder than those interviewed by whites.

The results in this table suggest that bivariate comparisons of responses to white and black interviewers are not sufficient to determine a race-of-interviewer effect if the types of respondents interviewed by whites and blacks differ in systematic ways. These possibilities increase, of course, in surveys with smaller samples and if refusal rates to interviewers of different races differ based on some attitude or demographic factor relevant to the vote. Race-of-interviewer effects, then, can best be demonstrated after controlling for such factors in multivariate analysis. Table 3 shows the results of logistic regression analyses predicting individuals' probabilities of expressing a vote intention for Coleman and Wilder with race of interviewer and party identification as independent variables, along with other relevant political and demographic factors as control variables.

Two important political variables, aside from party identification, appear in the models: individual attitudes toward abortion, which was a major issue dividing Wilder and Coleman during the campaign, and racial attitudes, which potentially could exert independent influence on whites' votes for a black candidate in any black-white contest. We measured abortion "liberalism" by counting the negative responses to three questions concerning possible restrictions on a woman's ability to obtain a legal abortion.[6] We constructed the racial attitudes scale

6. The exact wording of the questions was: (1) "The laws about abortion ought to be changed to make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion"; (2) "It ought to be

Table 3. Logistic Regression Model Predicting Vote Intention for Coleman and Wilder

	Coleman Model		Wilder Model	
Variable	Coefficient	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.
Race of interviewer (0 = black, 1 = white)	1.04*	.41	−1.00*	.42
Party identification	.61*	.12	−.60*	.12
Racial liberalism	−.38	.24	.41†	.22
Abortion liberalism	−.49*	.22	.83*	.25
Education	−.04	.08	.07	.08
Age	.01	.01	.00	.01
Income	−.17	.19	.34†	.20
Constant	−1.62		−1.17	
Percent correctly classified	72.7		77.3	
Mean of dependent variable	.40		.47	
Estimated R^2	.30		.34	
N	172		172	

NOTE.—Predicted probability of Coleman vote intention for "average" respondent and black interviewer = .24; predicted probability of Coleman vote intention for "average" respondent and white interviewer = .47; predicted probability of Wilder vote intention for "average" respondent and black interviewer = .64; and predicted probability of Wilder vote intention for "average" respondent and white interviewer = .40.

* Significant at .05 level (two-tailed).

† Significant at .10 level (two-tailed).

based on counting the racially "liberal" responses to four questions measuring support for racial equality, affirmative action programs, attitudes about the pace of improvement in societal conditions for blacks, and beliefs about the ease with which blacks and whites can get jobs.[7]

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legal for a woman to get an abortion if she is pregnant as a result of rape or incest"; and (3) "If a young woman under the age of 18 wants to get an abortion, the law should require that her parents be notified even if she doesn't want them to know about it." There were four response categories for each question, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. We took as the liberal response "agree" or "strongly agree" to question 2, and "disagree" and "strongly disagree" to questions 1 and 3.

7. The exact wording of these questions was: (1) "Black people and white people ought to be treated equally in every way"; (2) "These days it is a lot harder for a black person to get a good job in Virginia than it is for a white person"; (3) "Government and private companies should be making more effort to hire blacks and other minorities even if it means giving blacks preferential treatment"; and (4) "Some people are trying to improve conditions for blacks in Virginia. Do you think that those who want to improve conditions for blacks are trying to do it too quickly, not quickly enough, or just about right?" There were four response categories for each of the first three questions, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. We took as the racially liberal response "agree" or "strongly agree" to the first three questions, and "not quickly enough" for the last.

We also included standard demographic variables such as education (measured in years of schooling), age, and income (measured as annual household income with five categories from "less than 10,000 dollars" to "greater than 60,000 dollars").

The results show that race of the interviewer is a significant factor in predicting expressed vote intentions for both Coleman and Wilder, independent of the effects of all other variables. While party identification, abortion, and, to a lesser extent, racial attitudes and income are all relevant to vote intention, whites also appear to respond to the cue represented by the interviewer's race in voicing their support for the white or black candidate. Because logistic models do not yield linear probability estimates, there is not a constant effect of the race of the interviewer on the probability of expressing an intention to vote for one or another candidate. However, one way of reporting the effect of the race of the interviewer is to show the differences in predicted probabilities of vote intentions for Wilder and Coleman among "average" white respondents who are interviewed by whites and by blacks, that is, among whites who are at the mean on all other independent variables (cf. Aldrich and Nelson 1984). The results of these calculations are shown in the note to table 3 and indicate that the average white respondent interviewed by whites has a .23 greater estimated probability of expressing intentions to vote for Coleman, and a .24 lesser probability of expressing intentions to vote for Wilder, than their counterparts interviewed by blacks. This is strong evidence for the existence and strength of a race-of-interviewer effect in this election survey.

Race-of-Interviewer Effects and Strength of Voter Commitment

Given that race-of-interviewer effects may occur in preelection surveys, it is of critical importance to discover the types of respondents among whom these effects are greatest, so that appropriate measures to improve the predictive capability of the poll may be taken. In previous race-of-interviewer research, some specification effects have been reported for education, social status, and place of residence, though the differences in the magnitude of effects for these demographic categories have been modest (Anderson, Silver, and Abramson 1988a; Campbell 1981; Hatchett and Schuman 1975–76). We tested for such differential effects by including an interaction term in the logistic regression model between the race of the interviewer and each of the other independent variables. Thus, for example, a race-of-interviewer and racial liberalism interaction effect would indicate that individuals

who are more racially liberal were more (or less, if the interaction effect were negative) influenced by the interviewer's race than were racially conservative respondents.

In the interaction models predicting vote intention for Wilder, only the interaction of race of interviewer with party identification was statistically significant, indicating that Democrats were more likely to report differential vote intentions to whites and blacks than were Republicans. This finding confirms the pattern shown in table 2. While we cannot provide a definitive explanation for why this pattern occurs, one possibility is that white Democrats feel "cross-pressured" between their traditional party affiliation and race, and they minimize this conflict in the preelection interview by responding on the basis of the race of the interviewer to a greater extent than traditional Republicans.

In the model predicting vote intention for Coleman, none of the interaction terms with party, racial or abortion liberalism, or the demographic terms was statistically significant, and thus we conclude that the race-of-interviewer effect in general operated similarly across individuals with different political and attitudinal characteristics. However, we did test one additional interaction effect of special importance for preelection polling. A common hypothesis in studies that estimate question wording and order effects in surveys, though not one that has received clear empirical support (cf. Schuman and Presser 1981), is that when individuals are relatively uncertain of their preferences, they should be more likely to respond to "extraneous" contextual cues. In electoral polling, this suggests that individuals who are least committed to a given candidate may be more likely to be influenced by environmental cues, one of which is the race of the interviewer. The pattern reported above of white Democrats responding to the race of the interviewer more than other party groups could also be explained by this process, as Democrats may have less intense preferences because of the cross-pressure between party and race and, hence, more susceptibility to interviewer effects. Table 4 presents more direct evidence supporting the "uncertainty" hypothesis.

In this table, we divide the sample into two groups: those who expressed a vote intention on the initial vote preference question asked of all registered voters; and those respondents who claimed they were initially "undecided" and were asked the follow-up question concerning which candidate they "leaned" toward supporting. If the uncertainty hypothesis is correct, we would expect race-of-interviewer effects to be greater among those who say they are initially undecided than among those who offer a candidate preference with no further probe necessary. This hypothesis is strongly supported by the data presented in the table. For initially decided respondents, there is al-

Table 4. Preferences of Initially Decided Respondents and Probed Preferences for Initially Undecided Respondents by Race of Interviewer (in percent)

	Vote Preference of Initially Decided Respondents		Probed Preference for Initially Undecided Respondents	
	White Interviewer	Black Interviewer	White Interviewer	Black Interviewer
Wilder	55.1	58.7	22.2	38.1
Undecided	. . .	. . .	36.1	47.6
Coleman	44.9	41.3	41.7	14.3
N	69	46	36	21
χ^2	.04 (.85)		4.73 (.09)	
Cramer's *V*	.04		.29	

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are level of probability.

most no race-of-interviewer effect, with differences of 3 or 4 points in preference for a given candidate. Among whites who were asked the follow-up "leaning" question, however, race-of-interviewer effects are substantial and are statistically significant at the .10 level. Here reported vote intention for Wilder is 16 points greater for respondents interviewed by blacks than by whites, and vote intention for Coleman is 27 points greater for respondents interviewed by whites than by blacks.

In interpreting this result, we must consider an alternative explanation for the greater race-of-interviewer effect observed among those who initially claimed to be "undecided." It is conceivable that this is merely a selection effect: this would be so if the "undecided" response to the initial question was selected by some of our white respondents as a means of masking their vote intention. After all, white respondents who did not want to "offend" the black interviewer on the initial preference question could do so either by declaring their intention to vote for the black candidate or by reporting that they were undecided.

However, our data do not support this thesis. If white respondents were using the initial "undecided" response as a mask for their intentions, then we would expect more "undecided" responses on the initial vote preference question among those interviewed by blacks than by whites. But only 31.3 percent of the white registered voters interviewed by blacks initially claimed to be "undecided," no greater pro-

portion than the 34.2 percent figure among those interviewed by whites. We can reasonably conclude that those reporting themselves to be "undecided" to black and white interviewers were equally genuine in the uncertainty of their voting preference.

We can assess the net impact of respondent uncertainty on the race-of-interviewer effect by expanding the logistic regression model for Coleman from table 3 to include dummy variables indicating the respondent's membership in the following categories: initially decided and interviewed by a white; initially decided and interviewed by a black; and initially undecided and interviewed by a white. The baseline category is all respondents who were initially undecided and were interviewed by blacks. We report the results from this model in table 5.

The table shows that the estimated difference in logit coefficients for initially decided individuals interviewed by whites and blacks is .61 (2.65–2.04), and this difference is statistically insignificant. Thus the estimated probability of expressing a preference for Coleman among initially decided voters does not depend on the race of the interviewer. For the initially undecided voters, however, the estimated difference in the logit coefficient for respondents interviewed by blacks and whites is 2.16, and this difference is statistically significant at the .01 level. The difference in effects corresponds to a .25 greater probability that the "average initially undecided white respondent" will express a vote intention for Coleman to a white interviewer than to a black, providing clear evidence that initially undecided voters are more likely to be influenced by the cues of the interview situation than voters with a stronger initial preference.

Discussion and Conclusions

We extend previous research by finding a significant race-of-interviewer effect on expressed voter preferences in a preelection survey, a result that, to our knowledge, has not previously been reported. The effect is, in electoral terms, relatively substantial, as whites are 8–11 percentage points more likely to voice support for the black candidate to black than to white interviewers, and to voice support for the white candidate to white interviewers than to black. This suggests that as such electoral contests become more frequent in American politics, pollsters and survey researchers need to be aware of the race-of-interviewer biases that may emerge on voter preference questions as well as on racial attitude and participation items.

Further, we find that the effects were concentrated among white voters who were least committed to a particular candidate, as mea-

Table 5. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Vote Intention for Coleman, including Uncertainty/Race-of-Interviewer Effect Interaction

Variable	Coefficient	S.E.
Initially decided, white interviewer	2.65*	.75
Initially decided, black interviewer	2.04*	.76
Initially undecided, white interviewer	2.16*	.77
Party identification	.63*	.12
Racial liberalism	−.48†	.25
Abortion liberalism	−.47*	.23
Education	−.05	.08
Age	.00	.01
Income	−.24	.20
Constant	−2.57	
Percent correctly classified	77.3	
Mean of dependent variable	.40	
Estimated R^2	.37	
N	172	

NOTE.—Predicted probability of Coleman vote intention for "average" initially undecided respondent and black interviewer = .05; and predicted probability of Coleman vote intention for "average" initially undecided respondent and white interviewer = .30.

* Significant at .05 level (two-tailed).

† Significant at .10 level (two-tailed).

sured by an "undecided" response on an initial vote preference question. Expressed support for the black candidate depended on the race of the interviewer most strongly among white Democrats as well. These patterns suggest that individuals are influenced by the race of the interviewer when they are unsure of their preferences, when they are asked to state their vote intentions when their opinions have not yet crystallized, or when their voting predispositions based on party and race are in conflict. If our findings can be generalized, they indicate that party identification and degree of certainty that an individual feels about his or her intended vote will be important specification factors in predicting the likelihood that individuals will be influenced in their responses by the race of the interviewer.

A more practical consequence of the race-of-interviewer effects seen here is that they may seriously distort preelection forecasting in black-white contests.[8] The extent of the bias depends, of course, on how

8. At least one of the four major polling organizations in Virginia, the Commonwealth Poll from Virginia Commonwealth University, has confirmed a race-of-interviewer effect in their last preelection poll, although of a smaller magnitude than in our survey (Keeter 1990).

large the effect is and the number of interviews with white respondents completed by blacks (as well as possible differences in white refusal rates when contacted by white and black interviewers). Determining whether responses to whites and blacks are the respondent's "true" attitude has proven difficult for much race-of-interviewer research, but in the electoral context we may use the actual aggregate vote distribution by race as a measure of accuracy. Judged by this standard, it is clear that the white interviewer data here provide a more reliable estimate of future vote intention. In our poll, support for the candidates was at 49 percent for Wilder and 39 percent for Coleman among all white respondents, and at 44 percent for each candidate among only those white respondents surveyed by white interviewers (see table 1). Given that Wilder's actual white support, as estimated by several methods, was approximately 40 percent on Election Day, it is clear that the white interviewer data yield more predictive accuracy.[9]

Our findings lead to one unambiguous recommendation: survey organizations must record the race of interviewers and check for these effects whenever they conduct polls in black-white electoral contests. In random telephone polls, it is scarcely possible to match the race of interviewer and respondent at the time of the interview. But in future black-white contests researchers may be well advised to use only the data obtained by white interviewers in making electoral predictions of the white vote, despite the loss of efficiency involved in doing so (cf. Fowler 1984, pp. 113–14).

Several qualifications, however, should be made to this recommendation. First, it is by no means inevitable that the racial context of all elections, or all survey situations in elections with black and white opposing candidates, will lead to race-of-interviewer effects. Thus we do not recommend unconditionally the use of only white interviewers to interview white respondents, even where this might be practical. Rather, we suggest using both black and white interviewers in order to test for race-of-interviewer effects in preelection surveys. If such effects are found, then the white interviewer data are likely to be more accurate.

Second, the finding that race-of-interviewer effects were found principally among undecided voters suggests that less bias will result if pollsters do not probe respondents for their preferences after an initial vote intention question. The drawback to this approach, of course, is that many more "undecided" voters will be present in published polls,

9. A CBS–New York Times exit poll published in *Time* (Shapiro 1989) showed white support at 39 percent. Further, given that most estimates of the composition of the Virginia electorate put the percentage of blacks at approximately 16–17 percent, the proportion of whites who supported Wilder—given close to unanimous Wilder support among blacks—could have been little more than 40 percent.

making predictions of the ultimate vote outcome more difficult. But given the recent pattern of erroneous predictions by pollsters in black-white contests, this recommendation may be useful in forcing survey researchers to construct better means than presently used for allocating undecided voters in such racially oriented electoral contexts. One intriguing possibility is to allocate undecided voters by race (Guterbock and Finkel 1989; Hugick 1990; Sussman 1985), which, while not necessarily describing accurately the individual-level dynamics of preference formation during a campaign, nevertheless would have yielded an almost perfect prediction of the distribution of white votes in the 1989 contest.

In general, we believe that the finding of a race-of-interviewer effect in a preelection survey should be used to alert the pollster to the possible hidden importance of race in the election. If race-of-interviewer effects exist, they indicate that some portion of the white electorate is responding to racial cues in the overall electoral context. Under some conditions, it may even be the case that white support for the black candidate that is reported to white interviewers in preelection polls is also overstated, especially among initially undecided voters. The interpretation of this pattern would be that respondents believe that the social norm in general is not to voice antiblack attitudes or preferences; thus individuals who support the white candidate may be less likely to admit this to either a white or a black interviewer.[10] Thus, testing for race-of-interviewer effects can have important diagnostic implications for assessing the racial tenor of a given contest and for improving predictions of electoral outcomes.

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10. See Sussman (1985) for a discussion of this possibility in the 1985 Virginia election for lieutenant governor and Clymer (1989) for an overview of polling problems in the 1989 election.

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