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Burying the Hatchet? Elite Influence and White Opinion on the Washington Redskins Controversy*

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Objective. Is the opinion of white Americans regarding the continued use of the Washington Redskins' team name influenced by their exposure to elite rhetoric that supports a team name change and views the team's name as offensive? *Methods.* In order to explore the potential for elite opinion leadership on white opinion, this article employs a survey experiment embedded in the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study in which respondents were randomly exposed to a message attributed to either Senator Harry Reid (a Democrat), Senator John McCain (a Republican), or NBC Sports broadcaster Bob Costas that details their opposition to the team's name. *Results.* Testing hypotheses derived from the scholarship on elite opinion theory, this article finds that exposure only to a message from Costas on this issue leads respondents to more strongly support a team name change and to more clearly view the term "Redskins" as offensive. Our results (1) further the scholarship on public opinion concerning Native American mascots, (2) suggest the conditions under which the barriers to change in sporting institutions may continue to evolve, and (3) speak to the limits of political elite influence.

On May 10, 2013 in an interview with *USA Today* Daniel Snyder, the owner of the National Football League's (NFL) Washington Redskins, said in response to a reporter's question concerning a potential change to the team's name: "We will never change the name of the team. It's that simple. NEVER—you can use caps" (Brady, 2013). This comment set off a firestorm of controversy and rekindled a movement by a number of Native American¹ groups to pressure the NFL and Snyder to consider an alteration to the team's name.

The recent public discussion over Snyder's refusal to change the team's name played out in a number of political domains. In the spring of 2013, 10 members of the U.S. Congress sent Snyder, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, and owners of the additional 31 NFL

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¹Following King (2016), we use Native Americans and American Indians interchangeably in this text when referring to indigenous people. We refer to the NFL franchise by its current name and when we use the term "Redskins" alone to reference the term's usage as the team mascot, we refer to it in quotation marks in order to acknowledge its contested status. This approach, however imperfect, is intended to reflect its fraught usage in current politics—the evolving public and political understanding of its problematic nature is our focus herein.

teams a letter asking for a change to the team's name, arguing that "Native Americans throughout the country consider the 'R-word' a racial, derogatory slur akin to the 'N-word' among African Americans or the 'W-word' among Latinos" (Jones, 2013). The movement against the use of the term "Redskins," spearheaded by the National Congress of American Indians and the Oneida Indian Nation, gained traction throughout the summer of 2013 when a number of prominent media figures and outlets publicly vowed to not use the term.²

By the fall of 2013, the controversy surrounding the use of the term "Redskins" reached the White House. President Barack Obama, in an interview with the Associated Press, publicly denounced the team's name, stating: "If I were the owner of the team and I knew that the name of my team, even if they've had a storied history, that was offending a sizable group of people, I'd think about changing it" (Nakamura, 2013).³ Finally, in May 2014, 50 members of the U.S. Senate signed a letter calling for the NFL to pressure Snyder to change the team's name (Hulse and Schneider, 2014).

These comments came in the wake of published evidence that public support for the continued use of the Washington Redskins name may have shifted. In 1992, when asked if the team should change its name, a resounding 89 percent of respondents opposed a name change according to the results of a ABC News/Washington Post poll (1992).⁴ In justifying his continued support for the team's name, Snyder asserted that the overwhelming public support for the continued use of the term "Redskins" was reason enough to retain the name (Maske, 2014). However, more recent polls fielded in the wake of increasing elite discussion regarding the future of the team's name have shown a trend toward the liberalization of the public's attitudes on the issue. For instance, a 2015 Huffington Post/YouGov poll found that 23 percent of Americans supported changing the team's name (Moore, 2015).

These recent polls raise questions about the extent to which the increased attention by political and media elites to the issue may impact public opinion toward support for a change to the team's name. In this article, we ask: *Do* elite proclamations concerning Washington's professional football team's name influence public opinion, and if so, what types of elites are the most influential? The public statements made by both political and media elites provide a unique opportunity to test the predictions of elite opinion theory in a sporting context. According to this theory, when elites present clear and consistent interpretations of an issue, public opinion on the issue will reflect elite opinion with individuals in the mass public mimicking the message of the elite who (1) most closely resembles the respondent's partisan identity and/or (2) is viewed as legitimate, respected, or trustworthy by the respondent in question (Arceneaux, 2008; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Zaller, 1992). However, recent work has found that on issues for which the public holds clear and informed opinions on topics of high salience, that (1) members of the mass public either rely on their own predispositions in shaping their opinions (Feldman et al., 2012), or (2) mass opinion is more likely to reflect the opinions of respected nonpolitical elites—such as members of the mass media—more than the rhetoric of political elites (Bullock, 2011). The lack of clarity regarding the extent of elite influence leads us to explore whether political elites or nonpolitical elites are more

²Among those who vowed to end the use of the term were the editorial boards at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Slate*, *The New Republic*, sports columnists such as Peter King and Bill Simmons, and television anchors Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann, and Bob Costas (Morrison, 2013).

³As a part of their "Change the Mascot" campaign, the Oneida Indian Nation aired radio ads contesting the mascot across media markets where the NFL team played its regular season games (Oneida Indian Nation, 2013). Days after Obama's statement, the Oneida Indian Nation staged a protest coinciding with the NFL Fall Meeting.

⁴Seven percent of respondents expressed support for a name change.

effective in influencing public opinion on a symbolic, nonpolarizing, nonpolitical, but highly salient issue in which the public may hold clear and informed opinions.⁵

While some may question the political relevance of the debate over the Washington Redskins, we argue that sports are a particularly compelling arena to apply our questions about race and public opinion because of the unique social and political context that constitutes sport itself. In the United States, there exists an overwhelming, if not also misleading, presumption that sports are mere leisure and recreation (Zirin, 2013). Sports are purportedly “apolitical” even as they also paradoxically stand as supposed proof of progressive change wherein society openly (or semi-openly) grapples with issues of racial integration and inequality (Carrington, 2013; Hartmann, 2003; Tygiel, 1997) and sex equity (McDonagh and Pappano, 2007; Sharrow, 2017). Likewise, the institutions and discourses that constitute sport play a role in the social constructions of race and gender (e.g., Carrington, 2010; Hoberman, 1997; Sharrow, 2017). Additionally, within political institutions sports not only serve as a site for promoting neoliberal social policy (Hartmann, 2016), but also as a location for both symbolic *and* overt projects of nation building and asserting national identity (e.g., Newman and Giardina, 2010; Thomas, 2012). Thus, casting sports as “outside” of politics disguises the co-constitutive relationship between political discourse and sporting culture (Green and Hartmann, 2012). In light of this work, our study presents a unique opportunity to test how public opinion responds when the false boundaries between these domains collapse and both political and nonpolitical elites directly engage on sporting issues.

To test the veracity of the predictions emanating from elite opinion theory and to apply them to this distinctive context, we employ a survey experiment administered in the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). In the experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of three treatments. In each of these treatment conditions, respondents were exposed to a fictionalized quote attributed to (1) Republican Senator John McCain, (2) Democratic Senator Harry Reid, or (3) NBC broadcaster Bob Costas in which the elite in question expressed the belief that the term “Redskins” is offensive to Native Americans and vocalized their belief that the team should change its name. Respondents were then asked their opinions concerning the offensiveness of the term “Redskins” and their level of support for a team name change.

We find that exposure to elite messages on the controversy over the Washington Redskins does indeed lead respondents to alter their opinions in line with the directives of elites, but only for respondents exposed to statements attributed to NBC broadcaster Bob Costas. This result holds when we explore if a respondent’s level of affinity toward the elite in question leads him or her to express opinions that align with the position of that elite. Finally, we find little evidence of the exclusive influence of partisanship on respondent position, as elite messages from elites who share a respondent’s partisan identity (or, “co-partisan elites”) do not affect the attitudes of co-partisan respondents toward the name controversy. Our findings not only provide further evidence concerning the limits of partisan elite influence (Bullock, 2011; Feldman et al., 2012; Karp, 1998), but also suggest that on symbolic, nonpolarizing, and highly salient issues nonpolitical elites may have a unique impact in altering the dynamics of public opinion.

This article begins with an overview of scholarship regarding Native American mascot controversies in professional and collegiate sports, including an evaluation of public opinion

⁵This is not to suggest that the use of Native American mascots and images do not have detrimental, symbolic effects on evaluations of indigenous people. Research indicates that indeed they do (Burkley et al., 2017; Freng and Willis-Esqueda, 2011; Fryberg et al., 2008). Instead, we mean to suggest that this issue, compared to others in American politics, remains relatively nonpolarized in public debate.

on the issue. We then examine elite opinion theory and provide a more comprehensive discussion of the central predictions of the theory as they relate to this controversy. We follow this discussion by spelling out our research design and discussing our findings in light of our hypotheses. The article concludes by speaking to the implications of our findings for the literatures on elite opinion theory, media influence, and public opinion toward the appropriation of Native American symbols.

Literature Review

Native American Mascot Controversy: History and Public Opinion

In this section, we bring into conversation scholarship on the history of the Washington Redskins controversy with the social science literature on public opinion regarding this evolving issue. The current controversy is situated in a long history of conflict over the meaning and ownership of Native American symbols. The critiques at stake in the recent resurgence of public debate echo elements of scholarly dialog that demonstrates how Native American stereotypes buttress the construction of white American identity and operate to marginalize indigenous people (e.g., Deloria, 1998, 2004; Guiliano, 2015). Representations of Native American figures, in sports and elsewhere, have served to invent false American Indian traditions (King and Springwood, 2001b). These representations demean indigenous customs while also enabling white appropriation of American Indian culture and symbols (Guiliano, 2015; Staurowsky, 2004, 2007). Such dynamics reposition whites as stakeholders in mascot and naming controversies and preclude Native Americans from access to full cultural citizenship (Strong, 2004). Although white American culture has naturalized these practices, activism on mascot and naming issues are but one mode of American Indian resistance to these trends.

For decades, a number of civil rights, religious, educational, athletic, and American Indian tribal organizations have charged that the use of Native American mascots to represent university, high school, and professional sports teams is racially insensitive and they have called for the end of the use of these mascots (Fryberg et al., 2008; King and Springwood, 2001b). In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) acknowledged this growing movement and announced a policy that colleges and universities with Native American mascots were no longer allowed to display images of such mascots during NCAA-sponsored events. As a result, a number of universities and colleges in the past decade have retired the use of Native American nicknames, symbols, and mascots or have obtained official support for their continued use from individual American Indian tribes (King, 2010; King and Springwood, 2001a; Spindel, 2000).

In contrast to the events at the college level, professional sports teams have resisted public pressures to alter their allegiance to Native American imagery and mascots (King, 2016). League officials argue that these images and monikers celebrate rather than denigrate Native Americans and point to widespread public support for the continued use of these images, mascots, and names (Spindel, 2000). The controversy has led to a burgeoning social science literature that examines public opinion toward the use of Native American mascots and nicknames by professional, collegiate, and high school sports teams (Fenelon, 1999; King et al., 2002; Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez, 2009; Price, 2002; Sigelman, 1998; Williams, 2007). A central debate in this work concerns the extent of support for the use of these symbols among Native Americans. One set of scholars has found that the majority of Native Americans sanction the use of symbols, mascots, and imagery (see

Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2004; Price, 2002), but others argue that overwhelming numbers of Native Americans view these images and team names as offensive and endorse changing these names (King et al., 2002; Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez, 2009). These studies reflect the evolving nature of the debate among some key stakeholders, but they have not explored the factors that may be of importance in predicting (or, for that matter, moving) public opinion concerning the use of Native American imagery in professional, college, and high school athletics more generally.

Of the limited studies that have examined this question, researchers have found that a majority of Americans do not view Native American team names as offensive nor do they support changing the team names (see Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez, 2009; Sigelman, 1998). In accounting for the distribution of opinion on these issues, scholars have found that respondent's race helps to predict opinion. Relative to whites, Native Americans and African Americans are more likely to view the use of Native American imagery as offensive (Fenelon, 1999; Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez, 2009; Williams, 2007). Others have uncovered that self-identified sports fans and participants are less likely to view the use of Native American symbols as objectionable (Bresnahan and Flowers, 2008; Sigelman, 1998; Williams, 2007).⁶ Finally, Bresnahan and Flowers (2008) find that Democrats, more so than Republicans, are likely to view these terms as unacceptable.

Although these studies provide a useful starting point, they provide relatively little guidance for understanding how exposure to proclamations from media or political elites concerning the Washington Redskins may alter respondents' views on the debate. Scholars of this issue have yet to pay heed to contextual factors like the impact of elite rhetoric, which is surprising given the demonstrated impact of elite rhetoric elsewhere in the public opinion literature (Lee, 2002). In order to draw out this point, we explore the utility of the predictions of elite opinion theory in accounting for public opinion on the Washington Redskins.

Elite Opinion Theory

Elite opinion theory is grounded in the assumption that most people form their political opinions by relying on informational shortcuts instead of carefully researching the details of every policy issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Lee, 2002; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992). According to elite opinion theory, the actions and statements of political elites are the primary shortcut that people use in deciding where they stand on a given political issue. However, not all elites are thought to influence the public. Political elites who are viewed as legitimate, trustworthy, or knowledgeable by the public are the most likely to alter the contours of public opinion (Friedman, 2012; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Sears and Kosterman, 1994).

Extending this logic, recent work on partisan- motivated reasoning has further examined the impact of political elite characteristics on public opinion (Arceneaux, 2008; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson, 2009; Taber and Lodge, 2006). These studies have concluded that exposure to rhetoric from co-partisan elites are far more influential than appeals delivered by elites representing the opposing party (Arceneaux, 2008; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson, 2009; Taber

⁶Notably, this research was conducted either before, or shortly after, the 2005 NCAA policy shift. Additional research is required to understand whether the ban on Native American symbols at the college level, a move that presumably denaturalized the use of such mascots and images, may have altered these findings.

and Lodge, 2006; Zaller, 1992). More importantly, these studies have also concluded that co-partisan elite influence persists even when the messages communicated by these leaders contradict the issue positions traditionally supported by the party in question (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010).

This extensive literature on elite influence thus leads to the following two hypotheses as they relate to the impact of elite rhetoric on public opinion toward the “Redskins” controversy:

- H1: (*Co-partisan elite hypothesis*): Exposure to an elite message regarding the Washington Redskins naming controversy delivered by a co-partisan elite will prompt respondents to express opinions in line with this co-partisan elite.
- H2: (*Cross-partisan elite hypothesis*): Exposure to a message regarding the Washington Redskins naming controversy delivered by a cross-partisan elite will have no significant impact on the attitudes of the respondent exposed to this message.

While the impact of political elites, particularly co-partisan political elites, in shaping public opinion has become foundational to understanding the origins and dynamics of public opinion, a number of scholars have explored the various boundaries of elite influence on public opinion (Bullock, 2011; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus, 2012; Nicholson, 2011; Wallsten and Nteta, 2016). In investigating the limits of elite influence, a number of studies have concluded that given the “rational ignorance” of the mass public, mass opinion is most likely to mimic the views of partisan elites when the issue at question is remote, abstract, and complex (Brody, 1991; Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson, 2002; Gerber and Jackson, 1993; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Zaller, 1992). However, for issues in which the mass public has extensive experience, interest, or knowledge, or when information regarding more complex issues is provided by a nonpolitical, but trusted, source, scholars have found clear and consistent evidence that mass opinion *deviates* from the positions of political elites (Bullock, 2011; Feldman et al., 2012; Nicholson, 2011; Wallsten and Nteta, 2016). This leads Feldman et al. to conclude that “to the extent that relevant information is available, easy to understand, and comes from a trusted source, citizens may be able to arrive at a well-reasoned position on an issue independently of political elites” (2012:501).

This body of scholarship leads to two additional, competing hypotheses concerning the extent of elite influence over mass opinion concerning the future use of the term “Redskins” to represent Washington’s professional football team:

- H3: (*First-hand knowledge hypothesis*): Exposure to an elite message on the Washington Redskins naming controversy delivered by a political or a nonpolitical elite will have no significant impact on the opinion of respondents exposed to either message.
- H4: (*Respected nonpolitical elite hypothesis*): Exposure to an elite message on the Washington Redskins naming controversy delivered by a nonpolitical elite who the respondent views favorably will prompt the respondent to express opinions on the Washington Redskins’ name in line with the nonpolitical elite in question.

Data and Methods

To test the effects of elite messages on attitudes toward the “Redskins” naming debate, we make use of data from a survey module embedded in the 2014 CCES. The CCES is an online survey of over 55,000 Americans conducted by YouGov on the behalf of over 40 colleges and universities (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2014). The CCES uses data

culled from the U.S. Census Bureau, voter registration databases, the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, and the Current Population Survey to gather a representative sample of respondents from the YouGov database of thousands of “opt-in” volunteers.

Our experiment ran in the postelection portion of the CCES in November 2014, and acquired a total of 949 non-Hispanic white respondents. As noted above, whites more so than nonwhites express stronger support for maintaining the use of Native American team names, mascots, and imagery and are less likely to believe that the uses of Native American imagery, mascots, and names are derogatory to Native Americans (Fenelon, 1999; Laveay, Callison, and Rodriguez, 2009; Williams, 2007). Thus, given that we are interested primarily in the ability of media and political elites to sway the opinions of the mass public in a more progressive direction on this issue, our subsequent analysis is restricted to non-Hispanic white respondents in our sample, thereby subjecting our hypotheses to the strictest test.

In our survey experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to one of four treatments.⁷ Respondents in the control condition were asked to respond to a question concerning the changing of the team name, followed by a question on whether or not the team name is offensive to Native Americans. Respondents in the remaining three experimental conditions were each asked a similar version of both of these questions concerning the team name. However, in each experimental condition these respondents were also randomly and simultaneously exposed to a quote attributed to either Senator John McCain (R-AZ), Senator Harry Reid (D-NV), or NBC broadcaster Bob Costas. This quote detailed the elite’s opposition to the term “Redskins” as well as his support for a change to the team’s name.

To remind respondents of the elite’s opposition to the team’s name, we also included a highlighted sidebar located underneath a picture of the elite in question that detailed his support for a name change as well as his position and partisanship when appropriate. Each of the experimental conditions were identical except for the picture denoting the elite in question, the attribution of responsibility for the quote in the sidebar, and the wording of the question.⁸ To maximize the external validity of our experiment, we quoted directly from the 2014 letter to the NFL signed by 50 members of the U.S. Senate in the question regarding support for changing the team’s name (see Jones, 2013). In crafting the question concerning the offensive nature of the term “Redskins,” we also quoted directly from Senator John McCain’s response to a question regarding the continued use of the term to denote Washington’s professional football team.⁹ In order to ensure that these statements were also in line with the manner in which McCain, Reid, and Costas have presented their views on these issues, we culled and reviewed their public statements on this issue through a search of Lexis Nexis beginning on October 5, 2013 (the day after Obama made his comments concerning the Washington Redskins) until May 22, 2014 (the day after the Senate letter to the NFL). Additionally, in justifying our selection of Reid, McCain, and Costas as the elites in question, we argue that we chose the most prominent

⁷Analysis of the randomization suggests that none of the demographic variables predicted variation on the treatment group variable; therefore, we are confident that respondents in our sample were randomized into one of the four conditions. Additional randomization tests were conducted on subgroups of respondents divided by partisan affiliation and affect toward Costas, Reid, and McCain. Once again, none of the demographic variables predicted variation on the treatment group variable. Results of our randomization tests are available on request.

⁸See the online appendix for question text and treatment images. The photos used in each treatment are as similar as possible. It should be noted that the Costas’s photo does not include an American flag in the background.

⁹Speaking to the Associated Press Sports Editor conference, Senator John McCain said of the offensive quality of the team’s name, “I do believe if the Native American community views this as offensive, then it’s offensive” (Litman, 2014).

Republican, Democratic, and sports media elites who have expressed public opposition to the continuing use of the term “Redskins.”¹⁰ Third, we note that in selecting three white men to present the case for changing the name of Washington’s professional football team, we control for the potential confounding impact of varying either the race or gender of the elite messenger on the opinions of our respondents.

Results

Does exposure to an elite message condemning the use of the term “Redskins” alter public opinion? In testing our hypotheses, we employ an ordinary least squared regression (OLS) model in which each of our treatment conditions were represented by a dummy variable and respondents in the control condition serve as the baseline group and thus were excluded from the model (Ladd, 2010).¹¹ This technique allows for ease of interpretation insofar as the coefficients for each of the experimental treatments tell us if there are significant differences between respondents exposed to an elite message and those in the control condition. Additionally, given the high levels of correlation between items that measure support for a team name change and the belief that the term “Redskins” is offensive, we index these two items in the analysis that follows.¹² Our index is scaled 0–1, such that 1 represents opposition to both a team name change and the belief that the team’s name is not offensive, and 0 indicates the strong belief that the team should change its name and that the team’s name is offensive. Finally, we exclude respondents who live in the DC metropolitan area (Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC) as well as respondents who indicated that their favorite NFL team was the Washington Redskins from our analysis.¹³

Figure 1 charts the coefficients and confidence intervals derived from this OLS model. As the figure demonstrates, there is little support for the *first-hand knowledge hypothesis* as exposure to a message delivered by NBC broadcaster Bob Costas has a significant impact on the opinions of respondents in our survey experiment. More specifically, we find that respondents who read a quote attributed to Costas that condemns the use of the term “Redskins,” relative to respondents in the control condition who were not exposed to any message at all, are more likely to support a name change and to see the team’s name as offensive ($b = -0.09, p = 0.013$). However, respondents exposed to a statement attributed to McCain ($b = -0.04, p = 0.206$) or Reid ($b = -0.05, p = 0.149$), relative to respondents in the control condition, are no more likely to express liberal views on these issues.

According to elite opinion theory, citizens who view nonpolitical elites in a favorable light may be more likely to be swayed by proclamations made by these elites on certain issues when compared to messages articulated by political elites. In order to test the *respected nonpolitical elite hypothesis*, we examine the impact of exposure to elite rhetoric on the Washington Redskins among respondents who expressed positive views of each of the elites in question, presented in Figure 2. In order to ascertain how respondents viewed each elite,

¹⁰Some may question why we did not include President Obama in our experimental treatments given his public support for a name change. Given the growing number of studies that have found that the mere mention of President Obama triggers white respondents to rely on their racial attitudes when shaping their policy preferences, we decided against the inclusion of Obama as an experimental condition (e.g., Tesler, 2012, 2015; Tesler and Sears, 2010).

¹¹Full regression models for Figures 1–3 are available in Appendix S4.

¹²Alpha scale reliability among whites is 0.91 between measure of team name change and support for offensive quality of term “Redskins.”

¹³This resulted in 38 respondents being excluded from the analysis for residing in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and 17 respondents being excluded for their status as a self-declared Redskins fan.

FIGURE 1
White Support for Redskins Index by Experimental Treatment, 2014 CCES (N = 901)

Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

FIGURE 2
White Support for Redskins Index by Elite Thermometer and Experimental Treatment, 2014 CCES

Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

FIGURE 3

White Support for Redskins Index by Partisanship and Experimental Treatment, 2014 CCES

Horizontal bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

in the preelection phase of the 2014 CCES, we asked respondents to indicate their level of affect toward McCain, Reid, and Costas.¹⁴ In establishing a baseline of positive affect toward our elites, we restricted our analysis to respondents who gave each elite at least a score of 51 on a 0–100 feeling thermometer. As detailed in Figure 2, we find little evidence that the opinions of respondents who expressed positive assessments of either McCain ($b = 0.02$, $p = 0.676$) or Reid ($b = -0.15$, $p = 0.086$) and who were exposed to messages from these elites significantly differed from the opinions of like-minded respondents in the control condition. However, we do find that respondents who view Costas favorably and who were exposed to a quote attributed to Costas on the Washington Redskins expressed more progressive opinions on the future of Washington’s professional football team name when compared to like-minded respondents in the control condition ($b = -0.14$, $p = 0.019$).

According to the predictions of elite opinion theory, political messages, irrespective of the content of these messages, when delivered by a co-partisan elite will lead respondents exposed to these messages to mimic the opinion offered in these messages. Figure 3 explores the *co-partisan elite hypothesis* as it relates to exposure to messages concerning the debate

¹⁴In assessing the level of affect for each elite we asked respondents: “Now we would like to get your opinion on several groups, organizations, and individuals in our society. For each group, organization, or individual we will ask you to tell us how you feel about the group, organization or individual on a feeling thermometer using a scale of 0 to 100. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward that group, organization or individual; the lower the number, the colder or less favorable you feel. You can pick any number between 0 and 100.” This item was asked in the preelection portion of the CCES (fielded in October 2014).

over the Washington Redskins delivered by a co-partisan elite.¹⁵ As seen in Figure 3, contrary to expectations, we find that Democratic respondents who read a quote attributed to Senator Harry Reid, relative to Democrats in the control condition, are no more likely to express support for a team name change or to believe that the term “Redskins” is offensive ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.71$). Similarly, exposure to a message delivered by Senator John McCain has no significant impact on the views of Republicans exposed to this quote when compared to the opinions of Republicans in the control condition ($b = -0.01$, $p = 0.76$). In line with the expectations of the *cross-partisan hypothesis*, we note that the opinions of both Democratic and Republican respondents who were exposed to cross-partisan messages on the issue of the Washington Redskins controversy were unchanged when compared to Democratic and Republican respondents in the control condition. Notably, we do find among our sample of Democratic respondents that exposure to a Costas quote does lead respondents to express higher levels of support for a team name change and the belief that the team’s name is offensive ($b = -0.15$, $p = 0.004$). However, Republican respondents who were exposed to the Costas quote do not significantly differ in their opinion when compared to Republicans in the control condition ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.57$).

Discussion

Does exposure to an elite message on the topic of the future of the Washington Redskins team name influence public opinion on this issue? Using data from a survey experiment fielded in the 2014 CCES, we find evidence that sports media elites, more so than political elites from either party, matter in accounting for the contours of white public opinion on this issue. More specifically, we find that respondents exposed to a message delivered by either Senator McCain or Reid are no more likely to change their opinions concerning the offensive quality of the term “Redskins” than are respondents in the control condition. Neither are these same respondents swayed in their opinions regarding the team changing its name away from its current incarnation. However, exposure to a message from NBC broadcaster Bob Costas does lead respondents to express higher levels of support for a team name change and the belief that the term “Redskins” is offensive.

Additionally, given our analysis showing that the opinions of self-identified Democrats and Republicans in our sample are not swayed by exposure to a message from Senators Reid and McCain, respectively, we find little evidence that individuals are more swayed by proclamations delivered by co-partisans. Remarkably, contrary to the predictions associated with elite opinion theory, a nonpartisan elite *is* the most influential voice in the debate concerning the Washington Redskins. This is particularly true among Democrats in our sample and among respondents who feel positively toward Bob Costas. In short, in keeping with our *respected nonpolitical elite hypothesis*, we find that Costas, the longtime NBC broadcaster, is a more influential elite on this issue than is either senator in our experiment. Our results suggest that Costas, a nonpartisan media elite can influence public opinion as it concerns the future of the “Redskins” team name.

What then explains our discovery of media elite influence as it pertains to the controversy regarding the Washington Redskins? In line with the key tenets of elite opinion theory, we believe that public opinion on this issue is best understood as emanating from the

¹⁵In measuring partisanship, we identified Democrats and Republicans as those who identify with their party (either strongly or not so strongly) as well as independents that lean toward either party. We exclude true independents from this analysis to isolate the effect of a respondent’s partisan predispositions on the likelihood of accepting a message from a co-partisan or counter-partisan elite.

discussions, debates, and disagreements of elites to whom the mass public looks to define their political attitudes and shape their political behaviors. Beginning with the early work of Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) and Downs (1957), numerous scholars have hypothesized that the “rational ignorance” of ordinary citizens leads them to pay little attention to political affairs and to rely instead on cues from political elites when forming their political judgments. Our results point to the conclusion that on the issue of the future of the Washington Redskins, the public also exhibits “rational ignorance” concerning the dynamics of this debate, and as such relies on the proclamations of elites. Yet, given that the debate over the Washington Redskins is widely perceived as a relatively symbolic and nonpolarizing issue, our results suggest that the mass public looks not to political elites for direction on these types of issues, but to the proclamations of media elites who may be viewed as a more knowledgeable, trusted, and experienced source on these issues (Zaller, 1992). In line with the work of Bullock (2011), our finding provides further evidence of the boundaries of political elite influence on public opinion, as public opinion on these types of issues is more strongly swayed by the frames provided by nonpolitical elites.

Our results concerning the influence of Bob Costas also challenge the existing findings of the theory of partisan- motivated reasoning that posits that co-partisan elites exhibit the greatest power to alter public opinion on political issues (Arceneaux, 2008; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson, 2009; Taber and Lodge, 2006). What then accounts for the power wielded by Costas specifically? We argue, in line with the predictions of the reception acceptance model of opinion change (RAS), that Costas’s nonpartisan and neutral status is exactly what makes him influential in the eyes of the public (Friedman, 2012; Sears and Kosterman, 1994). Costas’s status as a sports media elite, in particular, may make him especially likely to be considered trustworthy on sporting controversies. According to the RAS model, when media elites who are viewed by the public as a trustworthy, respected, and legitimate publicly speak out on a political issue the public will follow the declarations of the media elite in question (Friedman, 2012; Sears and Kosterman, 1994). This point has also been articulated by Lupia and McCubbins (1998) in their landmark book, *The Democratic Dilemma*. This book asserts the premise that given the costs associated with the principal-agent problem, citizens in representative democracies rely on the opinions of “speakers” to formulate their political opinions (Lupia, 1994). These “speakers” include interest groups, political candidates, and media commentators, but what is imperative is that citizens view these individuals as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and in congruence with the individual citizen’s interests. When “speakers” hold this unique set of characteristics, citizens are more likely to be persuaded by the opinions expressed by these speakers on a range of topics, including issues in which the respondent has extensive knowledge. In the case of the “Redskins” debate, Costas’s status as a nonpolitical, sports insider may naturalize his perceived authority over sporting controversy. Furthermore, rather than being perceived as an “outsider” to the debate, his “insider” status to the sporting world may also depoliticize the same opinion that, when articulated by senators, seems to violate the precept that “sports and politics should not mix” (Zirin, 2013). Given Costas’s long history in broadcasting the NBA, MLB, and NFL playoff and championship games as well as hosting NBC’s Olympics coverage, it is no surprise that the public views Costas as a knowledgeable figure in the realm of sports. Costas’s status as a trusted voice is best reflected by his consistently high rankings in surveys of the nation’s most popular sports broadcasters as well as his regular appearances in lists of the nation’s most influential media personalities (Lewis, 2015).

On the other hand, the inability of both Senators Reid and McCain to influence public views on the Washington Redskins may also reflect widespread questions concerning their knowledge and trustworthiness on issues germane to the politics of sports, buttressed in part by the public perception that politics do not “belong” in sports (Green and Hartmann, 2012). Given their elected positions, it is likely that on political issues the public does indeed look to the declarations of elites to help form their opinions. However, when the issue in question does not directly connect with a political elite’s area of expertise, it is likely that the public looks to other sources, such as media elites, to better develop their own views on the issue. Correspondingly, as noted above, elite influence may be muted when citizens doubt the elite’s motivation for speaking out on an issue (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). These conclusions dovetail with studies of social influence where scholars have found that individuals who are perceived to be making personal or material sacrifices in promulgating their cause are more likely to be viewed in a positive light relative to individuals whose expressed opinions have no material or personal impact on their well-being (Brown, 2000). Unlike Costas, whose expression of a political opinion on the Washington Redskins may adversely affect his journalistic reputation as well as his future broadcasting opportunities, the expression of an opinion on the Washington Redskins by McCain or Reid will likely not have a deleterious impact on either of their political careers.

While we believe our results contribute to existing work on public opinion regarding the contested use of Native American imagery as well as work on elite opinion theory, we also suggest that there is still more work to be done. First, future work should provide more clarity regarding why Republicans are unaffected by elite rhetoric on the “Redskins” naming issue. Recent polls have found that 90 percent of Republicans oppose a team name change, thereby far outdistancing Democrats (among whom only 59 percent oppose name change) on this issue (Trujillo, 2014). Given the overwhelming opposition to a team name change expressed by Republicans, it is imperative to understand the reasons why Republicans express such high levels of support for the continued use of the team’s name. Furthermore, research should investigate the conditions under which elites may sway Republican opinion on this issue, if at all.

Second, future experiments should more systematically examine the content of elite messages on this issue (from Native American, political, and media elites) in order to get a more complete picture of the nature of elite rhetoric (e.g., whether there is a polarized or unified elite communication environment and whether the nature of elite discourse differs by region, over time, or by elite position). Future work should also explore if elite messages in *support* of the continued use of Native American mascots and imagery delivered by the political and nonpolitical elites have a similar effect on public opinion. Scholars should also examine if Costas’s public views on gun control, health-care reform, or human rights similarly influence public opinion and if other well-respected media figures can also shape public opinion in a similar fashion. Relatedly, future scholarship should explore the extent to which Costas’s public views on sport-specific issues, such as Title IX, paying college athletes, or elite-athlete doping, could be more persuasive than similar views articulated by political elites. Finally, future studies should consider varying the identities of the messenger, with an eye toward the inclusion of political actors beyond the U.S. Congress, to further test the viability of elite opinion theory in explaining mass opinion change, on this issue and beyond. As indigenous leaders from within the Oneida Nation (and other tribal groups) continue to remain active in public debate, scholars should also consider designing research that evaluates the impact on public opinion when American Indians speak out against these issues on behalf of their own communities. Exploring these contingencies will serve to deepen our knowledge on this contentious and evolving topic.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix S1: Experimental Treatment A, Senator Harry Reid (D-NV)

Appendix S2: Experimental Treatment B, Senator John McCain (R-AZ)

Appendix S3: Experimental Treatment C, NBC Broadcaster Bob Costas

Appendix S4: OLS Regression for Redskins Index by Treatment Condition, 2014 CCES

Appendix S5: Survey Instrument