THE PERMEABILITY OF RACIAL ATTITUDES IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

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Tᴀsʜᴀ S. Pʜɪʟᴘᴏᴛ, *Race, Republicans and the Return of the Party of Lincoln*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007, 224 pages, ISBN 978-0-472-09967-2. Cloth, $75.00.

Zᴏʟᴛᴀɴ L. Hᴀᴊɴᴀʟ, *Changing White Attitudes toward Black Political Leadership*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 230 pages, ISBN 978-0-521-85747-5. Paper, $25.99.

Mᴇʟᴀɴʏᴇ T. Pʀɪᴄᴇ, *Dreaming Blackness: Black Nationalism and African American Public Opinion*. New York: New York University Press, 2008, 240 pages, ISBN 978-0-814-76745-0. Paper, $22.00.

During the historic 2008 election, media pundits from far and wide proclaimed that Barack Obama was coming to power in a new post-racial era. The most enduring divide in American politics had apparently become passé, and the racial cleavages that have defined the social, economic, and political landscape since the country's founding somehow had become transformed. The actual election results did little to support this point of view, however. Approximately ninety-five percent of Black Americans supported Obama, as did approximately two-thirds of Latinos and Asian Americans. White Americans did not reject Obama out of hand, with forty-three percent supporting him, but race was not inconsequential to the vote (Pasek et al., 2009). Race clearly mattered in 2008, as it does now.

Pondering the larger matter of how of the Obama Presidency may, if at all, change the nation's collective racial dynamic brings us back to a central question that has been the subject of debate among behavioral scholars for decades. How permeable are people's racial dispositions? Do individual racial attitudes change over time, or do new generations bring different racial views with them, advancing the nation ever so slowly toward reconciliation? Are racial views a product of socialization, or are they a function of context, conflict, and individual attributes? Three interesting books, all written shortly before Obama's victory, speak to different aspects of this

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central question—to the permeability of racial stereotypes and racial ideologies in the context of American politics.

Tasha S. Philpot's *Race, Republicans and the Return of the Party of Lincoln*, tackles this topic as it pertains to American party politics. Her research focuses on the extent to which political parties are able to change their party images in the minds of the electorate through symbolic gestures and carefully crafted rhetoric. Drawing from prior research in political science and social psychology, Philpot develops a theory of image change that focuses on the important individual predispositions that facilitate acceptance or rejection of new kinds of campaign information. Her main expectation is that individuals with less accumulated information (and less interest) in a given topic will be more receptive to party image strategies, whereas those who are most invested in a given issue (and who possess a great deal of stored information and fairly crystallized views) will be more immune to the influence of symbolic image appeals.

While Philpot's theory is broad and potentially applicable to a wide range of topics, her book particularly examines the effectiveness of Republican efforts to change their racial image during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. In order to explore her theory, she uses data from widely available public opinion surveys; original survey data with embedded experiments; focus groups; content analyses of newspaper and magazine convention coverage; textual analyses of convention speeches and party platforms; and other less commonly-used surveys. Marshalling data from a vast array of sources, Philpot shows quite convincingly that, consistent with her theory, African Americans were the most resistant to Republican Party efforts to change their racial image, whereas Whites (especially those for whom questions of race are less important) were more receptive to this strategy. Philpot's experimental research on Democratic efforts to distance themselves from African Americans further reinforces her perspective, as Southern Whites were particularly unmoved by racially conservative Democratic Party appeals. The implications of this work are that party images are pretty durable and difficult to change, and that when parties make symbolic gestures to attract groups outside of their traditional coalitions, they meet with limited success, at best.

While the party image appeals undertaken by Republicans fell squarely into the symbolic realm, Philpot's focus group participants clearly indicated that rhetoric is not always enough. On balance, Black participants voiced a need for actual policy changes from the Republicans before symbolic gestures could be seen as credible. Whites, on the other hand, were less concerned with race, more focused on class differences between the parties, and showed more receptivity to the racially-symbolic overtures offered by the Republican Party. Experiments conducted on various media frames pertaining to the party conventions, however, found that when information pertaining to symbolic gestures is accompanied by a reminder that the party platform remains unchanged, neither Blacks nor Whites respond to these appeals.

The ramifications of Philpot's work in the Obama era foreshadow an even more durable connection between Black voters and the Democratic Party. In Philpot's view, "the totality of the political symbols one associates with a political party is known as a *party image*. Party images form because at some point, political parties become synonymous with certain policy positions and groups in society" (p. 11). To the extent that Obama—the nation's first African American president—becomes synonymous with the Democratic Party, opportunities for Republicans to reach across racial lines to attract Black support should only become less likely. By the same token, the strong symbolic link between Blacks and Democrats may further enhance the Republican Party's appeal among White voters, especially those who may have been unmoved by prior Party attempts to appear racially inclusive.

In all, this is an engaging and well-written book, filled with important insights that advance our collective knowledge about racial politics and party-building communication strategies that, remarkably, have been understudied by students of campaigns and elections.

Zoltan L. Hajnal's book, *Changing White Attitudes toward Black Political Leadership*, also deals with the question of change and the extent to which White voters' racial views are potentially transformed by their experiences living in Black-led cities. Hajnal's study looks at White behavior and attitude change in the context of urban mayoral politics, maintaining that White voters are more likely to oppose Black challengers than Black incumbents because of the uncertainty that Black challengers pose to White constituents. From Hajnal's information theory perspective, once a Black candidate wins, Whites acquire information about Black mayors that typically allay their fears, and, as a result, Black incumbent mayors tend to garner more White support than do Black challengers in cities that have never had a Black mayor.

Hajnal compiles an impressive and largely original data set, including aggregate level voting, demographic and budgetary data on specific cities, content analyses of local campaign coverage, and large "n" surveys to explore and substantiate his claims. His voting analyses indicate an average six percent increase in White support (from thirty to thirty-six percent) for Black incumbents over Black challengers, which does not seem particularly stunning given traditional levels of electoral incumbency advantage. His boldest propositions, however, concern the effect that Black incumbents have on White racial attitudes toward Black leadership and the Black community. Using cumulative data from the American National Election Studies, Hajnal provides empirical support for the proposition that longer exposure to Black leadership results in more positive White views of the Black community. As he explains in Chapter 1,

> "When black challengers run for office, many white residents are uncertain about the consequences of black leadership and fear that black leaders will favor the black community over the white community, thereby reversing the racial status quo. . . . But if a black challenger is able to overcome white opposition and win office, most white fears are not borne out. Black leadership may lead to marginal changes to a few aspects of black well-being, but for the vast majority of the white community, the world under black leadership is strikingly similar to the world under white leaders" (p. 15).

Hajnal argues that while much of the Black empowerment literature has focused on the meager gains achieved by Black communities through descriptive representation, very little has assessed the influence that Black leadership has had on the views and voting behavior of their White constituents. From Hajnal's perspective, once White voters realize that Black mayors are not going to do anything substantial to help the Black community, they come to appreciate the Black mayor and the Black community in new ways. Key to Hajnal's prediction that Black mayoral leadership results in less racist views among Whites, Black mayors—first and foremost—must assure the White community that they will be trustworthy guardians of the racially unequal status quo. To the extent that Black mayors achieve little for the Black community, they are likely to be more popular among Whites. According to Hajnal, Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson was able to overcome White anxieties by breaking a strike by largely Black garbage workers. Coleman Young garnered Detroit's White support after laying off nearly 4000 municipal workers, and Tom Bradley became the darling of Los Angeles's White voters by focusing his mayoral agenda almost exclu-

sively on downtown redevelopment projects that provided few, if any, material benefits to the poor Black community. While Hajnal does not argue that enhanced popularity among Whites is an apt tradeoff for governing policies that serve middle class business interests at the expense of the poor, he does maintain that the boost in White warmth toward Blacks is an underappreciated and significant byproduct of Black representation.

Hajnal's interesting account of mayoral politics implicitly raises an important counterfactual question that the author never fully addresses. If Black mayors, once in office, become willing to introduce redistributive policies aimed at improving the economic fate of the urban poor, what happens to Whites racial views? Based on Hajnal's information theory and his survey research findings, one must presume that positive opinion change among Whites is almost wholly contingent on learning that Black leaders will not engage any policy that might harm the White community. Were Black mayors to challenge the racial status quo—to make concerted efforts to enhance opportunities and resources in poor urban communities—they would not likely generate warm racial attitudes among many White voters. Given this, it is not obvious that one necessarily should celebrate the increasing White acceptance of Black leadership, as this embrace is all too contingent on maintaining urban regimes that privilege the interests of Whites and the business class over the needs of the urban poor.

Hajnal's information theory about Black leadership takes on even greater importance the context of the Obama Presidency. If Hajnal's theory is generalizeable beyond city politics (and the rationale suggests that it should be), then the various policy choices Obama makes while in office may leave an indelible mark—good or bad—on racial attitudes within the mass public. As urban scholars have noted for decades, Black leaders fall under much greater scrutiny than White leaders because many people assume that Blacks who attain power will show favoritism to the Black community at the expense of other racial groups (Reed 1999). No doubt, Obama is similarly wary of racial scrutiny, but even when he tries to present his policy initiatives in race-neutral, universalistic packages (e.g., health care), charges of racial favoritism still abound. The partisan climate that surrounds presidential politics, in particular, may limit the potential for racial progress and may even exacerbate the racial divisions in the party system, as documented in Philpot's work.

Whereas Philpot and Hajnal explore Black and White attitudes in the context of somewhat conventional American politics, Melanye T. Price's *Dreaming Blackness* steps into the less conventional realm with its focus on ideology, specifically the pervasiveness of Black Nationalist views within the Black public. At the onset of her book, Price provides an historical rendering of Black Nationalism that extends beyond the familiar discussions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, noting that Black Nationalism has taken many forms over the course of the country's history.

Using this history as her guide, Price defines contemporary Black Nationalism as rooted in four general principles. "These principles are support for self-determination through control of homogenous black institutions, support for black economic and social independence in the form of self-help programs, psychological and social disentanglement from whites and white-supremacist notions of black inferiority, and support for a global or pan-African view of black community" (p. 3). Price further maintains that Black Nationalism in the contemporary era is best conceived of as a continuum of beliefs that ranges from strong adherence to strong rejection of Black Nationalist ideals. Strong Black Nationalists, in this typology, exhibit dominant African American identities, a collective (as opposed to individualistic) outlook regarding community uplift, systemic attributions for Black poverty, negative affect toward Whites, and an explicit association between Whites and the

dominant government institutions that perpetuate racial inequalities. At the other end of the spectrum, Black Nationalist Rejecters demonstrate more fluid racial and national identities, greater individualistic views regarding community uplift, more Black blame and individual failure as explanations for racial inequalities, and a race-neutral view of government institutions.

Using a multi-method approach that includes focus groups and survey research, Price explores the magnitude of Black Nationalist beliefs within the African American mass public. Her assessment, drawn from the focus groups, suggests that most of the participants fall into the moderate nationalist categories, "not because their views are necessarily ambiguous or indecipherable but because they actually had divided loyalties that have led them to support some tenets of Black Nationalism and not others" (p. 79). Her survey research findings using the 1994 National Black Election Study (NBES) indicate an even lower level of adherence to Black Nationalist principles; only twelve percent fall into one of the two nationalist categories, while almost sixty percent reject nationalist sentiments.

On balance, the most successful chapters in this elegantly written book use evidence from the focus groups. Through the narrative of their conversations, Price constructs a clear picture of the often conflicted sentiments present in Black public opinion. These chapters provide a nuanced and fascinating insight into Black political ideologies and the extent to which they are conditioned by age and class. Several important and, arguably, counterintuitive findings emerge in this work. First, Price clearly shows that even among the small proportion of Blacks who adhere to a "Strong Black Nationalist" ideology, the impetus remains to participate in a political system that Nationalists find irrevocably flawed and biased against them. In describing one of the focus group participants, Price provides an apt example:

> "She quoted Malcolm X, suggested that his principles were the solution to black liberation, subscribed to the major tenets of Afro-centrism, and had carved out an almost exclusively black existence, yet she was adamant that black people need to exercise their right to vote" (p. 97).

Throughout this book, Price shows that American values (as opposed to Black Nationalist values) regarding democracy and capitalism are deeply embedded in current Black public opinion. Price observes that her Black participants, like the mass public at large, show little constraint in the form of ideological thinking, and that for many Blacks, Nationalist opinions reside quite comfortably aside views that stress individual responsibility and Black blame. The focus group participants, for example—even those who fell at the more extreme end of Black Nationalist ideology—broadly invoked Black blame *and* system blame as root causes of racial inequality. While Price does not directly reference Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) work on social dominance orientation, their theory provides an apt framework from which to interpret many of Price's observations. In particular, the power of American individualism as a legitimizing myth is overwhelmingly on display in this work, as all of her participants in some form or another engage in the racial blame game.

Nationalist ideologies, according to Price, ebb and flow in their importance to the Black mass public, and she suggests that Black frustration may eventually result in a re-birth of Black Nationalism. Price does acknowledge, however, that Black Nationalist movements probably will not gain traction in the short-term, given the Obama Presidency. The powerful individualistic narrative that resounds from Price's participants, however, provides another compelling, and perhaps more sustainable, reason that Black Nationalist ideology will remain on the fringes of Black politics for

the foreseeable future. To the extent that structural explanations for Black inequality are overshadowed or muddled by individualistic attributions—especially among elites who come from the Black middle class—it is difficult to imagine Black Nationalism making a substantial comeback as a political force.

Dreaming Blackness offers a number of important critiques of the current racial politics literature. In particular, Price questions the measurement and utility of the traditional "linked fate" measure in explaining Black public opinion. The results from her focus groups strongly suggest that linked fate is a constant, in that most Blacks feel connected at some level with the Black community. The more interesting question, from Price's viewpoint, is how individual Blacks perceive "community." As she argues in Chapter 2,

> "Knowing and interacting with Blacks across economic classes (within clearly delineated limits) is desirable to all participants. It is also true that, with mixed feelings, these participants see themselves as inextricably linked by shared racial group membership. This is significant for any discussion of linked fate because it tells interested scholars that the link constantly referenced and implemented as an explanatory variable may be an unwanted tether for some and a welcome connection for others" (p. 58).

If this book suffers from one weakness, it would be the empirical chapters that use the NBES, as Price's analyses generate few robust findings. In spite of this shortcoming, *Dreaming Blackness* is an extremely worthwhile and enjoyable read for any scholar interested in the evolution of Black politics. Black Nationalism in its purist form may not be making a comeback, but Price convincingly demonstrates the residual influence that Black Nationalism has on contemporary African American political thought.

On balance, Price, Hajnal, and Philpot's books provide novel insights into the permeability of racial attitudes, and their theories face their most rigorous empirical test to date given the election of the nation's first African American president. Barack Obama is not only the President, but he is also the de-facto leader of the Democratic Party. To some extent, his success or failure in this role should have ramifications for White and Black racial attitudes and ideologies. Racial beliefs are deeply rooted. Rhetoric alone does little to change that; however, actions can have consequences. Time will tell whether the Obama Presidency will represent a transformational event in the nation's racial history. From the perspectives of these three books, such a transformation seems rather unlikely.

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