

INTRODUCTION

Race and the Bully Pulpit: The U.S. Presidency and the Quest of Equality in America

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In calling for articles for this special issue we sought to feature the institution of the US presidency and its implications for racial and ethnic politics in the United States. It was our sense that the race, ethnicity, and politics (REP) literature would benefit from such an emphasis by increasing and complementing the modest amount of extant research on the presidency within the subfield. At the time, bringing in racial dimensions would enrich the presidency research. While presidency scholars have often used case studies about issues racial and ethnic politics to develop theories about the functioning of the institution (see, for example, Graham, 1990; Milkis *et al.*, 2013; Tichenor, 2016), presidential studies *writ large* has been slow to adopt core theoretical perspectives from the REP subfield.

Similarly, the insights from the rich tradition of research on the US presidency propagated by pioneering scholars of color—like Barnett (1983), Walters (1988), and Walton (1985) has been largely unrecognized and underappreciated. Since behaviorism emerged as the dominant approach to the study of racial and ethnic politics in the 1970s. The election of Barrack Hussain Obama as the 44th president in 2008 generated a resurgent interest in the presidency and the role that the institution plays in racial and ethnic politics with the REP subfield (Tesler and Sears 2010; Sanchez *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2013; Price, 2016; Tillery, 2019). Our goal with this volume is to support this burgeoning movement. To that end, we have sought to prompt, promote, and to provide critical assessment of the extent and the ways in which “presidential-related” activities—including presidents, presidential administrations, policies, as well as election processes—acknowledge, engage, frame, or conceptualize ideas, and emphasize (or ignore) social factors, public policies, as structured by factors relevant to race and racial equality (or inequality) in US politics. Our goal is to spur the growth of presidential research in the REP subfield to rival the rich traditions that the field maintains in Congressional studies (Minta, 2011; Wallace, 2014; Tate 2018) and State and Local politics (Browning *et al.*, 1986; Grimshaw, 1995; Hero 1998).

The six articles that comprise this special issue have risen to the challenge of our call. They fall roughly into three very common trajectories of research on the US

presidency: research on presidential rhetoric, research on the ways that US presidents attempt to marshal the institutional resources of the office to promote policy change, and public opinion research about how different segments of the electorate respond to the persons who have held the office. What is unique about all of these articles is that they break new ground in the field of presidency studies by centering the dynamics of racial and ethnic politics.

Anne Flaherty's article "A New and Coherent Strategy?" Presidential Attention and Rhetoric in the Era of Indian Self-Determination" (2021) examines one of these traditional resources: presidential rhetoric. Using a dataset comprised of all public statements and articles of the presidents from 1969 to 2016, Flaherty analyzes both the level of attention and the rhetorical frames that each president from Nixon to Obama use to describe indigenous American rights. Flaherty's analysis reveals that most of these presidents have paid scant attention to Native issues, compared to their overall volume of public statements. Flaherty also found that Presidents Clinton and Obama were the most attentive to the issues facing indigenous communities. In addition, presidents have used very different rhetorical frames to address Native issues and peoples in their public statements and the "self-determination" frame, which was the dominant way to think about the rights of Native Americans at the close of the Civil Rights era, has lost its rhetorical force in the post-Civil Rights period.

Morris Levy's and Rodney Hero's article "Unequal Values: Equality and Race in State of the Union Addresses, 1960–2018" (2021) also examines how US presidents deployed rhetoric about (in)equality and other fundamental beliefs. Through automated text analyses and systematic hand-coding of State of the Union Addresses, Hero and Levy analyze the extent to which US presidents in the Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights eras have talked about equality and inequality during their most important annual address to the nation. Hero and Levy find that despite intense media attention and more frequent elite discourse about rising inequality over the period examined, US presidents have made very few references to inequality as a social problem. Moreover, they found that there have been almost no references to racial *inequality* since the height of the Civil Rights era. What Levy and Hero do find American presidents talking a lot about in State of the Union addresses is economic individualism. Indeed, they claim that this value has been the "major focus" relative to other core American values in State of the Union addresses. For Levy and Hero, the scant presence and the framing of equality talk in these speeches is indicative of ambivalence and caution about equality within America's history as a racially discriminatory polity.

Desmond King's and Robert Lieberman's article, "'The Latter-Day General Grant': Forceful Federal Power and Civil Rights" (2020), examine the dynamics that allow presidents to move beyond the rhetoric to action. They examine the role of the institution of the presidency promoting and protecting African American civil rights, particularly in the context of a federal system.

Focusing on one of the most storied cases from the Civil Rights Era—the Kennedy administration's intervention to support James Meredith's crusade to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962—King and Lieberman excavate a theoretical portrait of how US presidents can marshal the resources at their disposal to play a positive role for change within a federal system that largely invests their office with negative

powers. King and Lieberman argue that what we saw with President Kennedy's actions to support the integration of the University of Mississippi was a case of "Forceful Federalism." They describe "Forceful Federalism" as the confluence of four "processes" within the executive branch: standard-setting, coercion, associationism, and fiscal authority. By drawing on these resources, King and Lieberman argue, American presidents can potentially play a major role in the trajectory of the civil rights state. They also provide an answer to why all progressive presidents are unable to play a strong role by pointing to the fact that it is rare for the four processes that are the constitutive elements of Forceful Federalism to "align with each other so that the state can pursue and achieve difficult policy aims in a focused way." With this essay, King and Lieberman provide a new framework for thinking about the contingent nature of presidential power in the field of civil rights policy.

Matthew Jacobsmeier's article "The Evolution and Implications of Perceptions of Barack Obama's Ideological Positioning" (2020), points to some of the key dynamics constraining the ability of US presidents to govern in the post-Civil Rights Era: the rise of affective polarization and negative partisanship grounded in white racial resentment and grievances. Jacobsmeier examined voters' perceptions of President Obama's ideological positioning from 2006 to 2016. He found that, in general, whites perceived Obama to be significantly more liberal than respondents who identified themselves as members of other ethnic and racial groups. Jacobsmeier also found that whites who scored higher on the racial resentment scale tended to see Obama as more liberal than did those respondents who exhibited less racial resentment. Interestingly, he also found that while perceptions of Obama's ideological positioning were racialized from the beginning of his presidency, they became more racialized between 2012 and 2014. Finally, Jacobsmeier found that the legacy of the Obama era might be evidence of what he calls an "ideological stereotyping of Democratic candidates" in national elections.

Beyza Buyuker, Amanda Jadid D'Urso, Alexandra Filindra, and Noah Kaplan's article "Race Politics Research and the American Presidency: Thinking About White Attitudes, Identities, and Vote Choice in the Trump Era" (2020) continues the theme of analyzing the role that white racial attitudes playing shaping voting preferences in presidential elections. The authors critically evaluated four theories explaining whites' support for Trump: racial resentment, xenophobia, sexism, and white identity. Using data from three ANES studies, they tested the relative explanatory power of all four approaches in predicting a vote for Trump during the 2016 Republican primary, the 2016 election, and intent to vote for him in 2020. Buyuker's, D'Urso's, Filindra's, and Kaplan's results suggest that xenophobia was the most consistent predictor of a vote for Trump across all of the models that they tested. They also found significant effects for racial resentment and sexism. The authors find clear evidence that concerns about white identity mobilized Trump voters in the 2016 presidential primary but were not as pronounced an influence in the 2016 general election, as theoretical expectations would have suggested. The authors conclude that this may have been the case because of the complexities of the 2016 election involved identity considerations beyond race.

Kjersten Nelson's article "You Seem Like a Great Candidate, But...: Race and Gender Attitudes and the 2020 Democratic Primary" (2021) points to the intersectional

dimensions of vote choice in the Democratic Party's 2020 nominating contest. The article examines the impact of racial and gender attitudes on self-identified Democratic voters in the 2020 presidential primary, which had the most diverse candidate field in the nation's history. Nelson found evidence that racial resentment, hostile sexism, and modern sexism enhanced the assessments on several evaluative criteria of the white male candidate, while depressing the assessment of the one Black woman candidate in the field. Nelson found that these attitudes were most pronounced among white respondents. Nelson's article points to the fact that racial and gender attitudes shape presidential elections long before general election cycles by winnowing diverse candidates from the field. It also shows how this effect plays out even within Democratic electorates.

Individually and collectively these articles pose and pursue central issues regarding race and the most visible institution in US government, the presidency. Both the racial politics and the institutional research can mutually inform each and provide a better overall understanding of American politics.

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