BARACK OBAMA AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN RACIAL POLITICS[1]

Rogers M. Smith

Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania

Desmond S. King

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Abstract

In 2008, following a campaign in which racial issues were largely absent, Americans elected their first Black president. This article argues that Obama's election does not signal the dawn of a postracial era in U.S. politics. Rather, it reflects the current structure of racial politics in the United States—a division between those who favor color-blind policies and seek to keep racial discussions out of politics, and those who favor race-conscious measures and whose policies are often political liabilities. The Obama campaign sought to win support from both camps. Only if pervasive material racial inequalities are reduced can such a strategy succeed in the long run.

Keywords: Barack Obama, Postracial, Color-Blind, Racial Orders, Race-Conscious Policies

Barack Obama's rise to the presidency has been accompanied by much debate, in both academia and popular political discourse, over whether his success represents a "postracial" politics or is the harbinger of a postracial era in U.S. politics (e.g., Connerly 2008; Street 2008; Bobo and Dawson, 2008, p. 1; Sinclair-Chapman and Price, 2008, p. 739). Though there is great skepticism, particularly in academia, about whether the United States is genuinely moving beyond a politics shaped by racial divisions, even skeptics accept that Obama ran a postracial, or at least a "race-neutral," campaign (Baiocchi 2008; Sinclair-Chapman and Price, p. 741). Here we seek not to challenge but to give greater specificity to these contentions by analyzing the 2008 presidential campaign strategies and the prospects for racial equity in the nation's future through the lens of what we have argued to be the basic structure of American racial politics: the continuing clashes between America's rival racial institutional orders (King and Smith, 2005; 2008).

Rogers M. Smith and Desmond S. King

WAS IT A POSTRACIAL ELECTION?

To understand if it makes sense to analyze the present and future of U.S. politics in postracial terms, we begin with the question, should we simply accept that the United States has already entered an era of postracial politics? After all, a major party nominated and elected a presidential candidate commonly seen as Black, and neither that candidate nor his opponent focused on race or racial issues during the campaign and in their proposed policy choices facing the country. Surely this silence about race and racial policies is a defining characteristic of a postracial politics.

Though we agree that a postracial politics would display such silence, race may be excluded from discussion for different reasons, as the nineteenth-century gag rule showed. We argue that modern alliances on racial issues, not the absence of racial concerns, moved discussions of race to the margins of both campaigns in 2008. Note that not only was Barack Obama the first non-White candidate ever to be nominated by a major party in the United States for either president or vice-president but also, though all of humanity probably originated in Africa, Obama was the first person of known, modern African descent to be nominated and elected in a country with a European-descended majority population anywhere in the world, including all of North America, South America, Australia, and Asia, as well as Europe. Many of those continents have far from trivial percentages of African-descended populations. It is simply inconceivable that such a broad pattern of political exclusion, dating back for more than six centuries, can be altered without consciousness of race playing a significant part.

It may be said, however, that although Americans grasped the momentous novelty of Obama's candidacy, racial equity in the United States has improved so greatly it is understandable that neither candidate focused on race nor race-related problems. That contention is, if anything, even more of a nonstarter. The familiar, painful litany of the United States' continuing and severe racial gaps in material well-being encompasses virtually every dimension of life, from economic well-being to health to housing to education to the criminal justice system. And though the United States has become a more multiracial nation and is becoming still more so, the sharpest divides remain between Blacks and Whites. We summarize those gaps only because they must remain a baseline for any credible analysis of American racial politics.

Economic Well-Being

In 2007, as the current deep recession was just beginning, the poverty rate among African Americans was already 24.5%, almost three times what it was for non-Hispanic Whites (8.2%) (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2008). Among Blacks, 11.2% were in deep poverty, with incomes less than 50% of the official poverty rate, compared with 3.4% non-Hispanic Whites. And significant inequalities persist above the poverty line: African American median household income in 2007 was 62% of the median non-Hispanic White household income (Danzinger and Danzinger, 2006, pp. 16, 27). African American family members also had to work for longer hours and more weeks a year to achieve their incomes. Thomas M. Shapiro estimates that in 2000, middle-income Black families had to work the equivalent of twelve more weeks per year than White families to earn the same money (Shapiro 2004, p. 7). And as Shapiro and Melvin Oliver (2006) have long argued, when we move from income to wealth, the disparities become sharper still. By 2004, the "black-white median net worth ratio" was 0.10, meaning that Blacks controlled ten cents of net assets for every dollar of net worth possessed by Whites (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006, p. 204).

Health

Blacks today remain nearly twice as likely as Whites to lack health insurance, 19.5% to 10.4% (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2008). The Black infant mortality rate is more than twice that of Whites—13.7 per 1000 births versus 5.7 and 5.6, respectively—and life expectancy for Black men is six years less than for White men, while for Black women it is five years less than for White women (National Center for Health Statistics 2007, pp. 50, 167). Stress-related chronic diseases are a prominent source of these lower life expectancies (Geronimus and Thomson, 2004, p. 249). These worrying statistics arise in part from other inequalities, such as differing labor market opportunities and participation rates. In 2000, roughly 33% of Black men over eighteen years old were not participating in the labor force, compared with 15% of White men—a ratio that held for men in their prime earning years, thirty-one to fifty years of age (Katz et al., 2005, p. 82).

Housing

There is still a large gap between Black household heads who own their own homes (48.4% in 2003) and Whites who do so (75%), and the gap grew between 1990 and 2003, even though home ownership also rose in both groups (Katz et al., 2005, p. 104; Center for Responsible Lending 2004). That disparate home ownership is not equally stable, either. The Center for Responsible Lending has reported that in 2002, Blacks were "3.6 times as likely as whites to receive a home purchase loan from a subprime lender, and 4.1 times as likely as whites to receive a refinance loan from a subprime lender" (Center for Responsible Lending 2004). The higher rates of subprime lending persist even at higher income levels (Fernandez 2007). These circumstances have made it inevitable for Blacks to be especially likely to lose their homes during the current foreclosure crisis.

Education

As the Supreme Court has become increasingly reluctant to view patterns of school segregation as constitutional violations, U.S. schools have become still more segregated: "The percentage of black students attending majority nonwhite schools increased in all regions from 66 percent in 1991 to 73 percent in 2003–4" (Orfield and Lee, 2006, p. 9). If all students were reaching the same levels of educational attainment, that trend might not cause such concern. But in 2000, just 12% of Black men aged 24–30 years had graduated from college compared with 30% of White men, while Black women graduated at the rate of 15%, compared with a rate of 33% for White women (Katz et al., 2005, pp. 93–94). *Separate* is still too strongly associated with *unequal* in American education as a whole.

Incarceration

Perhaps most notoriously, African Americans have been massively and disproportionately affected by the U.S. explosion in incarceration in the last three decades—the rise of what has become known as the "prison-industrial complex" (Schlosser 1998). By 2005, Black men were incarcerated at a rate of 4682 per 100,000, compared with 709 per 100,000 for White men; and Black Women were incarcerated at a rate of 347 per 100,000, compared with 88 per 100,000 for White women (Katz et al., 2005, p. 128). The war on drugs has been decisive to this pattern: rates of drug use among Whites and African Americans are not reflected proportionately in arrests

(Sentencing Project 2008, p. 2). Cumulatively, these statistics make it impossible to conclude that there are no longer significant race-related policy issues in the modern United States. To understand why both major candidates largely shied away from discussions of race and the racial dimensions of policy issues, and what these circumstances portend for the future under President Obama, we must grasp the structure of racial politics in the United States today.

RACIAL INSTITUTIONAL ORDERS

We contend that the structure of racial politics today, as in the past, is composed of rival *racial institutional orders*. These orders are durable alliances of political actors, activist groups, and governing institutions united by their agreement on the central racial issue of their time, which their conflicts help to define. They seek political power to resist or advance the measures that promote greater material race equality and that are politically pivotal in their time (King and Smith, 2005). So far, there have been three eras of rival racial orders, interspersed with periods of transition. In each of these eras, one order has promoted arrangements thought to advantage those labeled *White*, while a rival order has sought to end many of those advantages.

The three eras thus defined are the *slavery era*, which spans from 1789 to 1865, when maintaining and extending slavery were the battleground issues; the *Jim Crow era*, which following a transition period spans from the mid-1890s to 1954, when maintaining and extending *de jure* segregation and effective Black disfranchisement were the central issues; and the modern era of *race-conscious controversies*, which after a transition period spans from the mid-1970s and continues today, with its defining battles over whether public policies should be "color-blind" or "race conscious" (King and Smith, 2008, pp. 686–688).

During the slavery and Jim Crow eras, the strength of each of the rival racial orders fluctuated over time, but one side eventually achieved a decisive and enduring victory. In the transition periods following these eras, coalitions re-formed in support of or in opposition to different policies, with each side claiming to accept the positions that ultimately prevailed from the previous period. Thus champions of Jim Crow did not seek to restore legal chattel slavery. They instead advocated "separate but equal policies" that antisegregation forces argued, convincingly, were efforts to perpetuate White supremacy, but in different forms and through different means.

Today proponents of color-blind policies do not seek to restore *de jure* Jim Crow segregation laws. Indeed, both modern advocates of color-blind policies and modern proponents of race-conscious policies see themselves as the true heirs of the triumphant antisegregation civil rights movement, and both criticize their opponents for betraying its aims. For color-blind alliance members, the civil rights movement centered on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, famed hope that persons would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. They believe race-conscious measures violate that aspiration and perpetuate racial divisions. For race-conscious alliance members, the civil rights movement's central aim was to reduce deeply entrenched, unjust, material racial inequalities. They see their opponent's rejection of race-targeted policies as perpetuating and even exacerbating pervasive inherited White advantages, whether or not that outcome is intended.

We have argued that these two modern racial orders emerged initially over issues of affirmative action in employment, but they also formed in response to legislative and judicial struggles over other issues, including majority-minority districts, census

categories, school vouchers, and much more (King and Smith, 2008, p. 700n1). Their structure is as follows:

Color-Blind Order, 1978–2006

Most Republican Party officeholders and members after 1976

President, 1980–1992, 2001–2006

Some conservative, neoconservative Democrats

Majority of Supreme Court after 1980

Most lower federal court judges, many state judges after 1980

Some White-owned businesses and business lobbyists

Conservative think tanks/advocacy groups (e.g., Center for Individual Rights, Cato Institute)

Fringe White supremacist groups

Christian-right groups (e.g., Family Research Council)

Conservative foundations (e.g., Bradley Foundation)

Race-Conscious Order, 1978–2006

Most Democratic Party officeholders and members

President (mixed support), 1993–2000

Some liberal, pro-corporate Republicans

Some federal, state judges

Many civil service members of executive agencies

Many large businesses, minority-owned businesses

Most labor unions

Military leadership

Liberal advocacy groups (e.g., ACLU)

Most non-White advocacy groups (e.g., NAACP, National Council of La Raza, Asian American Legal Defense Fund)

Liberal religious groups (e.g., National Council of Churches)

Liberal foundations (e.g., Soros, Ford)

Note that some members of the color-blind order, such as White supremacists, clearly support color-blind policies such as affirmative action for strictly tactical, politically potent means to preserve White advantages, while other members undoubtedly support these policies sincerely. Though we are unable to judge their proportions or motives, we presume most proponents of color-blind policies genuinely believe these measures are best for both racial progress and justice.

Note also that these modern coalitions cannot be adequately grasped in class terms: the business sector is divided on race-conscious measures, while most unions, formerly frequent opponents of civil rights reforms, now largely support them. But in sharp contrast to the racial alliances of the Jim Crow era, the modern rival racial orders are much more closely identified with the two major political parties. Whereas both parties before 1954 contained segregationists and antisegregationists, today

Republicans overwhelmingly favor color-blind policies and the great majority of Democrats favor race-conscious measures, as indicated by their party platforms since 1976 (King and Smith, 2008, p. 691). This partisan polarization on racial issues is consistent with and may indeed be a significant contributor to the heightened partisan polarization documented by many political scientists (e.g., McCarty et al., 2006). And primarily because most U.S. voters are White, and most Whites oppose race-conscious policies, the color-blind alliance rose to predominance in the last two decades of the twentieth century along with the GOP, though without ever wholly eclipsing race-conscious proponents, institutions, and policies (King and Smith, 2008, p. 692).

MODERN RACIAL ORDERS AND THE 2008 ELECTION

Consider what this structure of partisan-allied rival racial orders meant for both the McCain and the Obama candidacies. First, Senator McCain, as the champion of the color-blind alliance, could not openly express concern about the race of his opponent: after all, the ideology of his coalition was that race should be treated as politically irrelevant. At the same time, simply because Barack Obama appears Black to most Americans, his candidacy undoubtedly raised worries among many in the color-blind order that a President Obama would expand pro-Black racial preferences in many ways. But unless Obama provided an opening by strongly advocating such policies, which he was careful not to do, the McCain campaign had the challenge of making those concerns salient to voters without explicitly speaking of race. This may account for the McCain ads asking, "Who is the real Barack Obama?" and claiming that McCain was in contrast "the American president Americans have been waiting for" (Kurtz 2008; Raasch 2008). McCain also accused Obama of pursuing a socialist agenda (Curl 2008). And at its close, the McCain campaign spotlighted Joe the Plumber, who repeatedly urged the electorate to "Vote for a real American, John McCain" (Bash 2008). All these tropes represented efforts to raise doubts and to plant fears about Obama, and for at least some of those who favored color-blind policies, those fears must have included concerns that he would champion racial preferences.

Obama faced complementary strategic challenges when campaigning for the presidency as a Black American at a time when most voters leaned toward color-blind policies. Press coverage based on interviews with White working-class voters suggest it would have been enormously difficult for him to speak extensively about race and racial equity issues without triggering widespread anxieties over his support of more expansive race-targeted programs, anxieties that might well have insured his defeat (Wallsten 2008; Simkins 2008). At the same time, his racial identity and his background as a civil rights lawyer meant many proponents of race-conscious measures were willing to presume he would be far more sympathetic to their concerns than his opponent would, without Obama having to articulate a specifically racial agenda. Even so, Obama would have alienated important segments of his core supporters if he had explicitly repudiated race-conscious programs and policies. Hence his best option was to campaign in ways that were largely "race neutral" in the policies he foregrounded, while retaining in the background indications of constrained but continuing support for race-conscious measures such as affirmative action.

Obama made very clear in his book of policy and campaign positions, *The Audacity of Hope*, that he did indeed favor this strategy for these reasons. In his chapter "Race," Obama offered "a word of caution" about whether "we have arrived

at a 'postracial' politics" or "already live in a color-blind society" (Obama 2006, p. 232). He referred briefly to the statistics on persisting racial inequalities we have reviewed, as well as to his own personal experiences of racism. Obama then argued, in accord with moderate race-conscious proponents, that "affirmative action programs, when properly structured, can open up opportunities otherwise closed to qualified minorities without diminishing opportunities for white students"; and he added that "where there's strong evidence of prolonged and systematic discrimination by large corporations, trade unions, or branches of municipal government, goals and timetables for minority hiring may be the only meaningful remedy available" (p. 244). But Obama also stressed his understanding of the arguments of those who favor color-blind measures. He advocated an "emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific programs" as not only "good policy" but also as "good politics" (p. 247). He concluded:

> Proposals that solely benefit minorities and dissect Americans into "us" and "them" may generate a few short-term concessions when the costs to whites aren't too high, but they can't serve as the basis for the kinds of sustained, broad-based political coalitions needed to transform America (p. 248).

In so arguing, in his book and campaign, Obama sought to build a new, broader coalition that blended those Americans who predominantly favor color-blind policies but who do want to see real material racial progress and can tolerate a few race-conscious measures, with those who think substantial race-conscious measures are needed, but who are willing to see them put on the back burner if progress is indeed being achieved through other means. He did this, for the most part, simply by not talking about race and by minimizing its likely impact on the election, thereby permitting color-blind and race-conscious advocates to interpret his rhetorical emphases on both unity and change in terms congenial to them. But Obama did, of course, feel compelled by the controversy over the racial views of his longtime pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, to address race directly in his speech at the National Constitution Center on March 18, 2008.

There, in contrast to the dominant approach in his campaign, Obama stated, "Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now." He called attention again to persisting material racial "disparities," many of which, he argued, "can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow." To the dissatisfaction of some critics, Obama suggested only briefly that "current incidents of discrimination" were also sources of those inequalities. But he did argue, as we have here, that anger "over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition," and he contended that conservative politicians and commentators "exploited fears of crime" and built careers "unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice" (Obama 2008a).

Nonetheless, Obama counseled against labeling "the resentments of white Americans" as "misguided or even racist." Instead, echoing his arguments in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama urged "the African-American community" to bind "our particular grievances" with "the larger aspirations of all Americans" by focusing on "investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable to previous generations." He urged "all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that

investing in the health, welfare and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper" (Obama 2008a).

In these ways, Obama adroitly restated the central theme of his campaign as embodied in his own life story: the nation must continue to strive to achieve the promise of *e pluribus unum*: "That out of many, we are truly one" (Obama 2008a). He neither minimized the persistence of racial inequalities nor repudiated all race-conscious measures, but his emphasis remained on programs, principles, and purposes designed to further the shared values and goals of all Americans.

BEYOND THE 2008 ELECTION

Aided by a not particularly adept opponent representing a party tied to two long-lasting, increasingly unpopular wars and the worst economic crisis since the Depression, Obama won his historic victory the following November. But he also said in his National Convention Center speech, "I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy" (Obama 2008a). And so the question remains: if the structuring of American racial politics via struggles between color-blind and race-conscious racial orders helps explain the ways the major party candidates dealt with race in the 2008 campaign, what does the electoral success of Obama's strategy of foregrounding universal programs without repudiating all race-conscious measures suggest for whether an Obama administration will move and should move the nation further toward a postracial era?

Again, the starting point for any credible answer must be the long-standing and entrenched material racial inequalities that are present in virtually all spheres of American life. As Obama himself acknowledges, as long as those racial disparities persist, it is a virtual certainty that racial divisions will be visible in American politics as well. The first answer to whether the United States is on its way to a postracial political future, then, is that it depends on whether Obama's combination of "mostly universal/partly race-conscious programs" succeeds in improving many of those patterns of material inequality. At this juncture, when much of what Obama will seek to do concretely remains unclear, it is obviously not possible to assess how much success he will have—but the fact that his administration will be trying to reduce severe material racial gaps while at the same time leading the nation to overcome its worst economic crisis in modern times suggests strongly that the prospects for dramatic progress in the foreseeable future are not good. If in Obama's first term the nation's economy appears at least to be moving in the right direction, he may be able to sustain and even broaden his coalition, making a second term and further change possible. But the notion that Americans will make enough advances in reducing racial inequalities to foster a postracial politics seems utopian.

That conclusion will not seem particularly surprising or controversial to most readers. But there is also a second, somewhat less obvious reason that Obama's election and his program do not signify a postracial American political future, much less the achievement of a postracial United States in the present. This reason might be termed the *multicultural challenge*. It is a challenge that goes to the heart of Obama's core promise: to embrace the diversity of Americans and yet to find ways to "bridge our differences and unite in common effort—black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American; Democrat and Republican, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, disabled or not," as he put it in his Ohio "closing statement" near the end of the campaign. All Americans are to come to feel and act politically as "one nation, and one people" who will together "once more choose our better history" (Obama 2008b).

One reason this promise is so challenging is Americans do not agree on what constitutes their "better history." Some see the spread of religious diversity and considerable secularity, for example, as advances for freedom. Others see those developments as a retreat from the United States' true calling to be a shining "Christian nation." Some believe their country's "best history" centers on the realization of ideals arising in historically Anglo-American cultural traditions. Others see those cultural traditions as historically responsible for the repression of communities and identities that they regard as most valuable and most their own. Put more broadly, the difficulty is that it may well be impossible to give any specific content to the putative shared, unifying values and purposes of Americans, without appearing to fail to recognize and accommodate adequately the diversity of values and purposes Americans in fact exhibit.

Obama, of course, presents his own identity as a preeminent example of how unity can be forged from a background encompassing a remarkably broad mix of races, religions, nationalities, geographic residences, educational systems, and economic statuses. But his identity has arguably been forged most of all by his choices to embrace much that characterizes dominant but contested forms of American identity, including Christianity over Islam or secularity, U.S. patriotism over cosmopolitanism or foreign allegiances, and a stress on unity across the races over racial separatism. Among the race-conscious coalition that forms a substantial part of Obama's political base, there are many who favor a more overtly multicultural America. This vision depicts a greater diversity of community identities, both subnational and transnational, which would be not only tolerated but also actively assisted by public systems of political representation, public aid programs, educational curriculum, legally recognized group rights, and many more. Even if by some miracle severe racial inequalities were sharply alleviated during an Obama administration, controversies will likely still remain over whether the kind of unity out of diversity that he offers as a shared national ideal really fulfills the aspirations of all, or even most, of the persons and communities whose differences he seeks to bridge. And because those diverse aspirations include differing visions among members of existing racial groups, it is likely that a United States marked by such controversies will still not be a United States whose politics can credibly be deemed postracial. Nor is it at all clear that it should be: multicultural ideals have force in part because there are good reasons to doubt the propriety of a strongly unified sense of American national identity and purpose.

But even if it is not likely that the United States has entered or stands on the threshold of a postracial political era, and even if there are legitimate debates over whether that goal is desirable, it is also true that the election of 2008 made real a form of racial progress that many of us thought virtually impossible. Because it did, there is a basis for believing that an Obama administration may be able to reduce at least some unjust racial inequalities and to foster among Americans a more broadly shared sense of common values and purposes that embraces legitimate forms of diversity. Admittedly, the difficulties in making such progress increase every day that the current economic crisis deepens; but crises often bring great opportunities as well as great challenges. If that conclusion seems optimistic, we submit that at this historical moment, more than most others, it is permissible to entertain what the new president—following Reverend Wright—has appropriately termed *the audacity of hope*.

Corresponding author: Professor Rogers M. Smith, Department of Political Science, 209 Stiteler Hall, 208 South 37th Street, Room 217, Philadelphia, PA 19104. E-mail: rogerss@sas.upenn.edu

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NOTE

1. Blame and credit for all our collaborative works should be apportioned equally. The order of the authors' names indicates only which author initiated a particular project. We are grateful to Timothy Weaver for excellent research assistance. All errors are our own.

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