

developments that play out in the executive branch or, for that matter, through state courts. If, as Gøsta Carlsson puts it, “research is a game against nature in which nature counters with a strategy of concealment,” one of the lingering challenges of studying state politics is that the legislative chambers—where consistent data are more easily recovered—are rarely the only sites of action (“Lagged Structures and Cross-Sectional Methods,” *Acta Sociologica* 15, 1972, p. 323). This is especially true when considering the highly intergovernmental nature of many significant state policies.

These limitations are perhaps natural for a study that aims to capture broad trends rather than contextual details. Yet they also highlight a need for greater institutionalized collaboration between scholars in the fields of federalism and state politics. For example, studying subtler changes in policy implementation over time would likely benefit from the establishment of a scholarly network of the sort pioneered by Richard Nathan and his colleagues at the Rockefeller Institute of Government.

Thus in addition to its own accomplishments, *Red State Blues* hints at the important discoveries that could be made were political scientists to establish a more permanent “observatory” for the study of state-level democracy. Given some states’ recent implementation of voter-roll purges, the emergence of anti-protest legislation, and other episodes of “constitutional hardball,” creating such an observatory seems more important than ever.

Race and the Obama Administration: Substance, Symbols, and Hope. By Andra Gillespie. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. 256p. \$120.00 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S1537592720000766

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Andra Gillespie’s measured and insightful book on the meaning of the election of President Barack Obama in terms of racial equity and progress is a valuable and significant contribution to this ongoing debate. Several books and articles critiquing Obama’s effectiveness as a champion of Black causes—public education, police shootings, health care, and housing—conclude that he was disappointing (e.g., see Melanye T. Price, *The Race Whisperer: Barack Obama and the Political Uses of Race*, 2016; Fredrick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Fall of Black Politics*, 2012; Tanehisi Coates, “My President was Black,” *The Atlantic*, 2017; “How the Obama Administration Talks to Black America,” *The Atlantic*, 2013; and “Is Obama Black Enough?” *Time.com*, 2007). However, Gillespie parses out the policy issues from the cultural ones and suggests that we adjust our assessments of Obama accordingly,

especially because the executive branch is institutionally weak.

This book is well organized; it begins with reporting data on public perceptions of characteristics of Blacks and Whites, as well as perceptions of which issues citizens deemed most important during Obama’s two terms. These data provide the foundation for the creative and brilliant deployment of descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative data. Gillespie uses multiple methods to try to answer the central question of the book: What good did a Black president do for Black people? Survey data, interviews, and content analysis are used to render an absorbing inquiry into the complex array of triumphs, failures, and nonstarters around issues relevant to racial equity.

Gillespie begins by reminding us that President Obama was elected while the country was still in the throes of the Great Recession. The public was expecting Obama to revive the economy. Concerns about jobs, health care, and government dysfunction quickly followed. Over the first term, she cites evidence from the Associated Press Racial Attitudes Surveys (in 2010 and 2012) that reflect an uptick in racial resentment. This increase in racial resentment is a bit surprising, because Obama ran a deracialized campaign and continued to downplay both his own identity and racial issues throughout his first term. Gillespie highlights an aspect of racial electoral politics that we rarely mention: that Blacks share the “kitchen-sink” concerns of every other citizen, and racial inequalities can take a back seat to other issues such as jobs and health care.

Taking discrete measures of Black progress, Gillespie examines data on homeownership, loans made to small businesses, scores on standardized tests, income, hate crimes, wealth, and health. The conclusion regarding the record on standardized test scores is a bit problematic. She argues that although some postulated that Obama’s election might improve test scores, the data indicate that the racial gap on the SAT has not changed since 1997 and has only slightly narrowed on the ACT. However, it is unclear what these data have to do with the Obama administration unless Gillespie is referring to Claude Steele’s racial threat theory. It would make sense that the racial threat posed by standardized tests would still be relevant in the face of increased racial animus. Conversely, the election of a Black president might boost scores by affecting students’ self-perceptions. Perhaps a short discussion of Steele’s work would have strengthened the connection between this measure and Obama’s presidency. Gillespie also notes that enrollment in colleges and universities rose and fell during both terms. One aspect that she does not discuss is the revitalization and expansion of Pell Grants (Doug Lederman and Paul Fain, “The Higher Education President,” in *Inside Higher Education*, 2017). Changes in the Pell Grants program are part of the story of policies that benefit Blacks and would have rounded out the analysis.

Next, Gillespie uses the case study method to test the idea that Obama was a "paddling duck," an officeholder who appears to be moving smoothly across the lake but is paddling furiously just beneath the surface. Was Obama working assiduously to improve conditions for Black people while maintaining his deracialized identity for the sake of appearances? Gillespie examines press releases from four Cabinet departments (Labor, Education, Health and Welfare, and Justice) across the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations to answer this question. She also considers federal reports issued in the wake of police shootings of unarmed Blacks, and finally, she dissects how each president handled presidential pardons and commutations.

Gillespie uses these data in creative ways to answer her question. When looking at memos and press releases from the various departments, for example, she does not require that race is specified or that the memos include language about Blacks. Instead, she examines industries with an overrepresentation of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Gillespie's findings indicate that there was indeed a bit of paddling going on beneath Obama's gliding over the political waters. The differences are most apparent in the disposition of pardons and commutations. Presidents Clinton and Bush pardoned more white-collar criminals than Obama, whereas Obama tended to commute more sentences for violent crimes. What makes this work stand out is how carefully Gillespie treats her findings. She points out that pardons and commutations are no substitutes for systemic failures. She also incorporates most of the work done by scholars about the Obama years in making her assessments.

When Gillespie turns to symbolic representation and rhetoric, she again demonstrates an exceptional facility for the innovative use of available data. The integrity of her work emerges in each chapter, as she explains to the reader what we can and cannot infer from the data. She is forthcoming about how the data fall short of offering iron-clad explanations. Gillespie also references those outstanding scholars who have published critiques of Obama and seamlessly weaves in their contributions (Michael Dawson, *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics*, 2011; Lorrie Frasure, "The Burden of Jekyll and Hyde: Barack Obama, Racial Identity and Black Political Behavior," in *Whose Black Politics? Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership*, ed. Andra Gillespie, pp. 133–54, 2010; Shayla Nunnally, "African American Perspectives of the Obama Presidency," in William Crotty, ed., *The Obama Presidency: Promise and Performance*, pp. 127–50, 2012). She finds some presidential press conferences that support her argument that Obama was committed to transcending race but also (as did the other three presidents) that he tended to default to individualistic explanations for inequalities as opposed to systemic causes.

Moving into the value and meaning of symbolic representation, Gillespie compares the number and substance of the many commencement addresses made by both Barack and Michelle Obama. She finds that Barack Obama was more likely to rebuke African Americans when speaking to an African American audience. The Obamas also accepted more invitations from historically black colleges and universities. This recognition matters, and what political leaders state in their speeches adds context and nuance to policy decisions.

An overview of the Obamas' public personas and the kinds of artists invited for a White House performance, especially those televised on the Public Broadcasting System, may not seem significant. However, Gillespie convinces us that these kinds of culturally symbolic activities matter when it comes to elevating minority groups' sense of belonging. She follows this chapter with one that reveals an intriguing finding: that Blacks were not, as many people believe, "Obamabots." Black people were in fact somewhat skeptical when rating Obama's overall performance.

It is difficult to connect disparate sources and build a cohesive argument, but Gillespie manages it quite well. This book is an excellent source of information about how the Obama presidency was both "politics as usual" and "transformative politics." She demonstrates that the question of whether Obama's election and time in office signaled an era of hope for achieving full equality for African Americans cannot have a "yes" or "no" answer. Gillespie reminds us that context matters and that the executive branch is constrained by many factors, not the least of which is our two-party system.

The most remarkable feature of this work is that Gillespie makes her methodology clear and accessible to nonacademics. Although the general public may not care to scrutinize the results of her regression models, they will understand the findings through her smooth and engaging prose. Gillespie also points out the shortcomings of her methodology every step of the way. She leads us to other scholars whose work challenges her own. Finally, Gillespie carefully calibrates her data, making this work an excellent example of the best of political science research.

Can America Govern Itself? Edited by Frances E. Lee and Nolan McCarty. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 368p. \$99.99 cloth, \$28.99 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592720000092

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The title of this book raises a critically important question that, so often, produces a depressing answer: Is US democracy doomed, destined to collapse on itself because of the pressures of shrinking equality and rising polarization?