

# **A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON ON THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA**

**Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**

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**HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.:** Thank you so much, Bill, for doing this interview for the *Du Bois Review*. When did you decide that Barack Obama was a serious, viable candidate for the presidency, and what sealed it for you about him?

**WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON:** What sealed it for me was when he won the Iowa caucuses. After hearing his victory speech afterward, I said to myself, *This guy is on his way. He is really a serious candidate.* Prior to that time, Skip, I was somewhat skeptical. In fact, I had given some consideration to working for Hillary Clinton in the fall because I didn't think Barack was a viable candidate. My view changed following the victory in Iowa.

**GATES:** I was out at Stanford, and I fell asleep before the election results. And I woke up with CNN on, and it was 2 AM, and it was that speech that was going on. And I jumped out of bed. It was the first time that he had really moved me since the convention speech.

**WILSON:** Right.

**GATES:** But I felt like I felt when I used to hear Bobby Kennedy speak. And then I sent Oprah an e-mail immediately, you know [*laughter*]. This guy is here, you know. I'm serious.

**WILSON:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**GATES:** What was the lowest moment during the primary season for you?

**WILSON:** The public's reaction to that video clip of Reverend Wright's incendiary comments. I thought that Obama might not be able to recover from the political fallout. I was very, very worried until he gave that brilliant race speech in response to the uproar over Reverend Wright, which got him back on track.

**GATES:** What was brilliant about that speech?

**WILSON:** Well, there are several things that were brilliant about it. First of all, as I point out in my new book, *More Than Just Race*, that speech is a model for what I consider to be effective political framing. Because in appealing to the goodwill of the American people, he emphasized points that I'm sure resonated with them, including points

that highlighted the importance of helping people to help themselves. You see, Americans tend to support programs that attempt to develop a level playing field, including programs that enable people to help themselves. For example, as the research of Larry Bobo and his colleagues so clearly demonstrates, although a significant majority of Whites don't support quotas and numerical guidelines, they will support programs that provide scholarships for Black students who get good grades in school. And they support training and education programs to help Black workers improve their chances for employment, programs to help people to help themselves. Obama's speech on race appealed to that kind of sentiment. But even more important, from my point of view, was the comprehensive vision of the factors that contribute to racial inequality in this society, a vision that not only highlighted structural impediments, such as the legacy of slavery and discrimination and the lack of economic opportunities for low-skilled Black males, but also the cultural responses to these structural inequities—responses that actually perpetuate poverty and social disadvantages. So, he integrated both structural and cultural factors, and that's what impressed me a great deal. He did not uncouple the cultural factors from the structural ones like Bill Cosby did. He displayed in this speech a comprehensive understanding of the impact of race in America, and after listening to that speech, I said to myself, *This guy is really sophisticated.*

**GATES:** Were you surprised at the continuing Black nationalist critiques that he's not Black enough?

**WILSON:** Yeah, I think those critiques are ridiculous, quite frankly. I mean here is a man who is addressing issues that are central to the Black community. I have listened with some irritation to critiques by Black intellectuals that his stimulus package does not address issues that affect the poor, including poor Blacks. Such critiques show how ill informed these critics are. For example, included in the stimulus package is a "making work pay" credit that even low-income families who don't make enough to pay income tax can claim, an extended period for the receipt of unemployment benefits, health insurance for the jobless whose insurance was covered by previous employers, a temporary increase in the earned-income tax credit, a lowering of the income threshold for the receipt of the child tax credit, and so on. All of these provisions would help poor workers, including poor Black workers. But even more important, President Obama also has focused on what I consider to be some very important race-specific programs. For example, he is going to create what he calls twenty promised neighborhoods patterned after the Harlem Children's Zone, which is an excellent model. Geoffrey Canada's mission, when he created the Harlem Children's Zone, was to flood a number of blocks in Harlem with educational, social, and medical services to create a comprehensive safety net for the children in that area. However, during the campaign, when I was cochair of Obama's urban policy committee, I was somewhat concerned that he was placing so much emphasis on the Harlem Children's Zone because that program had not been rigorously evaluated.

**GATES:** Hadn't been scaled up.

**WILSON:** Well, it hadn't been evaluated more importantly. It had been sort of scaled up in Harlem because it went from twenty-four blocks to one hundred blocks, and the program is now reaching about 4000 parents and 7500 kids, okay. So Canada has scaled up the program in Harlem. Canada was able to get corporate leaders to support him, and he now has an annual budget of roughly \$58 million. But the program had not been rigorously evaluated when I was working on the campaign in the primaries, and I was just fearful that a rigorous evaluation could possibly yield trivial results. I no longer have that concern. Roland Fryer, our brilliant young economist here at Harvard, has evaluated this program using a rigorous random assignment design, which includes a control group of students

who are not in the program and an experimental, or a treatment, group. And Skip, the preliminary results of this evaluation are absolutely spectacular. They are unbelievable. You see, the Harlem Children's Zone includes two public charter schools that differ from the regular public schools in the sense that the teachers were selected on the basis of their ability to teach students and on their dedication, not on whether they had a degree from a school of education. Moreover, the students are in school 60% longer than those in the regular public schools, including a very short summer vacation. Skip, the results of this evaluation are spectacular. Here we have kids from some of the most impoverished backgrounds, mostly from poor single-parent families, whose scores on the cognitive test far exceed those of kids in the public schools of New York. The math scores are especially dramatic and compare favorably with those of kids who live in upper-middle-class White suburbia. The charter school was one of the last major components of the program, and it was opened in 2004. Of the kids in the third grade, who benefited from entering the program when they were in kindergarten, 100% scored at or above grade level in math in 2007 in one of the charter schools, and 97% in the other school. Moreover, 87% of the kids in the eighth grade scored at or above grade level in math, even though they did not have the benefit of early exposure to the charter school. To repeat, here are kids from some of the most impoverished backgrounds performing as well in math as those kids in upper-middle-class suburbia.

And not only the math scores, but even the verbal scores are quite impressive. As I point out in my book *More Than Just Race*, living in poor segregated neighborhoods for long periods of time has an adverse effect on verbal ability, as measured by the cognitive tests. And these effects linger on even after these kids leave these neighborhoods. So it takes time to overcome the effects of living in chronic economically poor segregated neighborhoods on verbal skills. Nonetheless, even the verbal scores have improved dramatically, especially for the kids who are younger. And now they're talking about selecting these kids for this program from a lottery at the time they're born, when they come out of the womb. And so as this program continues, the scores are going to be even more spectacular.

I am so pleased that Roland Fryer is evaluating this program. You know Roland is not like a typical economist relying solely on mathematical models. He recognizes that in order to come up with a comprehensive explanation of the success of this program, he needs the help of sociologists and others who understand social behavior and group interaction, and that's what he's doing. He's examining both the quantitative data and the qualitative data collected for the evaluation, and I understand that he's going to be asked by Arne Duncan, the new secretary of education, if he hasn't already been asked, to help design the twenty promised neighborhoods for the Obama administration, which as I indicated will be patterned after the Harlem Children's Zone.

Now to get back to your question, here's a Black president addressing issues that fundamentally affect Black people, poor Black people. And it just saddens me to hear these ill-informed Black nationalist critiques.

**GATES:** What do you think motivates their critique? Did they expect that the first Black president would be Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, you know?

**WILSON:** You know, they're so consumed with the traditional views that if he's a Black president, he should be speaking specifically to race-specific issues and so on. If Obama had followed their wishes, he would not be president of the United States.

**GATES:** He'd be a visiting professor in African American Studies [*laughter*].

**WILSON:** And Black people realized that. I was very impressed with Black voters during the primaries and the general election. They didn't jump on the Obama

bandwagon initially. They were for Hillary Clinton because they didn't think Obama stood a chance of getting elected. They thought that he was not a viable candidate among White voters. They wanted to get rid of the Republican political control of the White House and the Congress, so they weren't going to waste their vote. However, Obama's stunning victory in the Iowa caucuses in early January and his strong second-place finish in the New Hampshire primary convinced a substantial number of Blacks that many White Americans are prepared to vote for a Black man for president of the United States. African American voters jumped on the Obama bandwagon and displayed a level of political sophistication that was truly extraordinary. Basically, they did not insist that Obama tailor his message to address the needs of Blacks. They gave Obama the slack he needed to navigate the treacherous racial terrain. They did not rally to the defense of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright when Obama had to break with him, and they were critical of some Black leaders and Black intellectuals who maintained that Obama should be talking more about race-specific issues. Ordinary Blacks realized that he had to reach out to Whites, he had to reach out to Hispanics, he had to reach out to Asians, you know. And they recognized he needed to communicate an inclusive message.

**GATES:** That he had to be president of all the people.

**WILSON:** Precisely. And this reminds me of an interesting conversation that I had with a Black taxi driver who drove me from the airport in South Bend, Indiana, to the University of Notre Dame, where I was to deliver a lecture in early February 2008. He had just read Jesse Jackson's attack on Obama in the *Chicago Sun Times*. He asked me, "What is wrong with Jesse Jackson?" And I remember him saying, "How is Obama going get elected president in this White society by talking constantly about issues that don't affect White people. Let the man get elected, then we can raise questions about how he plans to deal with the problems of Blacks!"

That's a very sophisticated remark. Much more sophisticated than a lot of these Black intellectuals who have been trashing Obama because his messages were not tailored to Black people.

**GATES:** Absolutely. When and where did you first meet Obama, and what was it like?

**WILSON:** Well, I met him in 1996, he was campaigning for the state legislature in Illinois, and a law school professor, friend of mine, a law school professor at the University of Chicago, who's now teaching at Yale University, invited a group of us to come to her house to hear him discuss campaign issues. So we were sitting in her living room listening to him, and I was thinking, during that meeting, wouldn't it be great if this young man could become a national politician? Of course, at that time, I never dreamed he was going to be the president of the United States. I would have just been happy if he had simply become a member of Congress.

**GATES:** And, what was he like?

**WILSON:** I found him very, very engaging, and I found that his message really resonated with me because he was talking about coalition building, and the need to address issues that would pull people together. And as I listened to him, I was thinking that he fully recognized the political importance of generating a sense of interdependence, where groups come to recognize that they can't achieve their goals without the help of other groups. That's the recipe for successful coalition building. If you can't generate a sense of interdependence, then coalitions collapse, and that's what he talked about. And that is so important, and I thought that this guy has his finger on the pulse.

**GATES:** What is your greatest hope for Obama's first term, and what is your greatest fear?

**WILSON:** Well, my greatest hope is that he will, with his policies, effectively deal with this terrible economic crisis. I think if he can do that before the end of his first term, he will definitely be reelected. That's my greatest concern. Obama has selected brilliant people to work with him; he has some great ideas; he's very smart. I think he will help to ease international tensions, but my greatest concern, my greatest hope is that he's able to overcome this economic crisis.

My greatest fear is a terrorist attack. You have Dick Cheney going around saying that Obama's policies will make us less safe. Dick Cheney and George Bush are the ones who have made us less safe. Their policies and actions have increased the possibility of another terrorist attack. Okay, so that's what worries me. If there's a terrorist attack during the time Obama is in office, then they will place the blame on him and try to deflect attention from policies and actions of the previous administration that heightened, not diminished, international tensions and the animosities of the terrorists. So that's my greatest fear, a terrorist attack.

**GATES:** What does the election of Obama mean for the racial divide in America?

**WILSON:** I think, and some people will say, I'm overly optimistic, but I really do feel that his election has helped to bridge the racial divide somewhat. We still have a long way to go, but I do think his election has helped to bridge the racial divide. I like the way he frames the issues as he attempts to get people to understand the nature of race relations in this society and to appreciate the need to address issues of race in constructive ways. I strongly believe that he will use the bully pulpit to bring races together, not apart. He will create a sense of interdependence, that I just talked about, by getting people to recognize that they have more commonalities than differences and that they cannot accomplish their desired goals without the help of other people. Social psychological research on group interdependence reveals that when groups believe that they need one another, they are more likely to overcome their prejudices and join in programs that foster mutual interaction and cooperation. Moreover, when people from different groups come together, their perceptions and behaviors tend to change. I think that the Obama presidency will create this sense of interdependence. Whether it will last beyond his presidency remains to be seen. But only the most myopic observer would deny that we have made racial progress in this country. The Obama presidency will strengthen the foundation that makes continued progress possible, a foundation that encourages, not discourages, frank and thoughtful discussions of both structural and cultural forces that interact to create or perpetuate racial inequality.

Here's another issue I should raise in this connection. Economic problems tend to generate social tensions. If you have a demagogic leader who does not hesitate to fan or exploit the fears of citizens during hard economic times, things could really get ugly. When people are uptight and worried about their jobs, history has shown that demagogic leaders often seek political gain or media attention by using negative populist messages to shift the focus from the real source of our problems on to Blacks, other people of color, and immigrants, often leading to a demagogic mobilization of racism against these groups. But Obama has been able to very effectively use positive messages to bring people together, not divide them. In terms of race relations, he is the right president during these hard economic times because social tensions are indeed high.

**GATES:** You know it's a great point. What does Obama's election mean for the class divide in this country? What does it mean for poor Blacks, for the urban poor who've been such a centerpiece of your work?

**WILSON:** Well, you know, Obama is also very aware of class problems. It reminds me, did you read his first book? *Dreams from My Father*?

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**GATES:** Mm-hmm.

**WILSON:** Well you may recall he talked about his meeting, first meeting with Reverend Wright, and he talked about the importance of addressing the issue of class inequality. And he was talking about my book *The Declining Significance of Race*. And Reverend Wright wasn't hearing any of this. Wright said, "That Black brother from the University of Chicago talking about the declining significance of race, what country does he [*laughter*] live in?"

**GATES:** I'd forgotten that, but you remembered it.

**WILSON:** Yeah, well I remember it because there was a recent article in the *New Yorker*, and the author of the article referred to this exchange between Obama and Wright. See, in *The Declining Significance of Race* I argued that economic class position had become more important than race in determining Black life chances. And Obama was talking about the need to pay more attention to class inequality.

Now what will his election do for the class divide in the Black community? I think that by trying to improve conditions of the Black poor, he will hopefully create programs to address their plight so that they will not continue to slide further and further behind more privileged Blacks, as they have done during previous administrations. Scaling up programs patterned after the Harlem Children's Zone is one example.

**GATES:** Does the election of Obama mean that we are in a so-called postracial society, finally done with racism in America?

**WILSON:** Absolutely not. This whole idea of a postracial society is ridiculous. Race still is a very important factor, and the reason for this is not only the lingering racism in American society despite Obama's election—and I want to come back to another point that I forgot about White people's reaction to Obama since he's been elected—but as long as you have a disproportionate number of Black people concentrated at the very bottom of the economic ladder, race is going to continue to be a factor in our society. Because economic disadvantage will continue to be associated with negative responses like crime, drug consumption, broken families, and so on. And until we deal effectively with the overwhelming concentration of Blacks in low-paying jobs, and in the jobless ranks—conditions that represent the legacy of previous racial discrimination, segregation, and racism—race will continue to be an important factor in American society. As the late Black economist Vivian Henderson put it, it's as if racism, having put Blacks in their economic place, where you have a disproportionate number of Blacks at the bottom of the economic ladder, stepped aside to watch changes in the economy destroy that place. Now let me just elaborate on the latter point. Because you have so many Blacks in these disadvantaged positions in the changing economy, it makes them extremely vulnerable. Two things are happening. Actually, I'm not talking now about the downturn in the economy, overall that certainly is a major factor, but there have been two ongoing processes that have adversely affected Blacks. Number one is the computer revolution, which rewards skilled workers, including skilled Blacks, and displaces low-skilled workers, including high school dropouts today, and that's a major problem in the Black community.

**GATES:** 50%.

**WILSON:** They have absolutely no chance in this society. So, the computer revolution is one thing. The second thing is the growing internationalization of economic activity where low-skilled Blacks are competing not only with other low-skilled workers in this country but also with low-skilled workers around the world. Blacks are very vulnerable to this development. For example, take the apparel industry. Forty percent of the workers in the apparel industry are Black, and the apparel

industry has been hard hit by the globalization of the economy. We shipped the jobs off to Bangladesh and these other places.

**GATES:** 46% of the Black workers?

**WILSON:** 40% of all workers in the apparel industry are Black. And that industry has been hard hit. Blacks have borne the brunt of the deindustrialization as well. A higher percentage of Black workers have been displaced because of deindustrialization than that of any other group of workers. Manufacturing industries have been relocated not only to the suburbs but to places around the world. So as long as you have Blacks in those vulnerable economic positions, it's ridiculous to talk about a post-race society. Because you have so many Blacks who are vulnerable to these kinds of economic changes, many of them are not going to be able to respond to these changes in ways that are positive. Many of them will turn to drugs, to crime, become estranged from families. And unless we deal with the economic plight of poor Black people, a significant percentage of Black people overall, it's ridiculous to talk about a post-race society.

**GATES:** But can we target them specifically as a group?

**WILSON:** Yes, I think it's important to do that. As I pointed out in *More than Just Race*, the question is not whether the policy should be race neutral or universal, the question is whether the policy is framed to facilitate a frank discussion of the problems that ought to be addressed and to generate broad political support to alleviate them. I now feel that in framing public policy, we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty; on the contrary, we should highlight them in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously confronted and that there is an urgent need to address them. And the legislation to address the issues of race and poverty should be framed in a way to generate a sense of fairness and justice to combat inequality and to make Americans aware that our country would be better off if these problems were seriously confronted and indeed eradicated.

Let me say one other thing before I forget. You asked me what does the Obama election mean for poor Blacks, and I mentioned that he will create programs to address their plight. Indeed, his new White House Office of Urban Affairs is gearing up to propose a series of new programs to address urban poverty. This office requested and recently received a memo from me on some of my suggestions of ways to combat urban poverty in the inner city. However, I also want to point out that I think that the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States has and will continue to have huge symbolic significance. Blacks feel more proud of themselves, and this may help to undermine the defeatist feeling, especially among young kids who see this powerful symbol of Black progress. I was on a conference call of Black leaders a day before the election, and Barack Obama spoke for about ten minutes, and one of the things he said to us resonated—"Our grandchildren seeing Michelle and the kids roaming around the White House will think differently about themselves."

**GATES:** Honestly, did you ever think you would live to see an African American president? Does it alter your own sense of the possible?

**WILSON:** I mentioned before that when I first met Barack Obama and heard him discuss political issues, I thought it would be great if he could become a national politician. But at that time, 1996, it never occurred to me that he could become president of the United States. But to be honest Skip, when he was elected to the Senate in 2004, I did think about the possibility of his being elected president of the United States. Let me tell you why I had that thought. I have always felt that a Black politician's political message could trump the issue of race when he or she ran for

political office. Take for example, Deval Patrick's gubernatorial election in Massachusetts. Like Obama, Patrick won because of his great appeal across economic, racial, and ethnic lines, and he dramatically demonstrated that a Black politician can indeed generate widespread support with the right message—an inclusive message. His election reinforced the view, in my mind, that a politician's message, not his or her race, is of primary importance.

I first developed this view when I closely followed Jesse Jackson's campaign in the 1988 Michigan caucuses when he ran against Michael Dukakis. Jackson, who is often viewed as a polarizing figure, transcended the racial divide in a stunning upset of Dukakis. Jackson not only won landslide victories in Detroit, but he also drew a surprising measure of White support in the Upper Peninsula and in cities like Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, and Saginaw. Like Patrick and Obama, Jackson's popularity was based on the broad appeal of his message, which focused on jobs, a higher minimum wage, education, housing, and day care for working women. Jackson's victory in Michigan made me realize that Black candidates can draw political support from non-Black voters if their political messages address the constituents' basic concerns. However, unlike Obama, Jackson was not always consistent with that message. And in the other primaries that year, his message was far less inclusive. But Obama has always been consistent with his inclusive messages. And I honestly believed back in 2004 that if he ran for president that he would stand a good chance of getting elected. I felt that the strength of Obama's unifying political messages would undercut the importance of race as a defining factor in the success or failure of his presidential campaign.

My belief that his message would ultimately trump race was seriously challenged during the primaries because the color of his skin did seem to be a major drawback. The negative ads and messages with racial undertones were somewhat effective in the primaries because a significant percentage of voters were not paying close attention to the campaign. Sometimes it is necessary to change only a few minds to swing an election. That is why campaigns resort to negative personal attacks when they are behind. To unsophisticated White voters who might have had some doubts about voting for a Black man, all of these negative messages reinforced the view that he was different from them. Race in this instance did indeed matter. However, the negative messages did not get any traction in the general election because people were paying closer attention. You cannot make wise decisions if you don't have good information. People were better informed in the general election. They were able to see Obama in action. They followed his campaign, they watched the debates—they saw how smart and informed he is. They saw his political sophistication, his demeanor, and therefore the efforts to describe him as dangerous, a terrorist, a Muslim, and so on fell flat. Indeed, they seem to have backfired. McCain's favorability ratings plummeted while Obama's increased. To repeat, Obama had to perform brilliantly in the debates and on the campaign trail to render these messages ineffective. You can't make wise decisions if you don't have good information. And people were better informed during the general election because people were paying attention and therefore had more adequate information.

Now people who overemphasize the importance of race are somewhat dumb-founded not only by Obama's popularity since he has become president but by the popularity of Michelle Obama as well. According to the opinion polls, Obama's popularity is higher than that of the previous five incoming presidents at this point in their presidency—almost three months after entering office. And Michelle Obama's popularity, as first lady, is significantly higher at this point than either that of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, or Laura Bush. And the Obamas' popularity

cuts across party lines and even includes a notable percentage of voters who voted for John McCain. Having good information matters. Americans are concerned about the economic crisis and therefore they are paying attention and are better informed as a result. And they are indeed impressed with the performances of both Barack and Michelle Obama, regardless of their race.

For a video version of the interview, visit the Events section of the Du Bois Institute Web site: <http://dubois.fas.harvard.edu/events>; or the *Du Bois Review* homepage at the Cambridge Journals Online site: [http://journals.cambridge.org/jid\\_DBR](http://journals.cambridge.org/jid_DBR)

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