POST-RACISM?

Putting President Obama's Victory in Perspective[1]

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Abstract

Does President Obama's momentous election victory signify a new, post-racism era in America? Many observers, such as a *New York Times* science editor, think so. But, unfortunately, this claim is premature for a host of reasons. [1] It took "a perfect storm" of interlocking factors to elect Obama. [2] Many bigots actually voted for Obama. [3] Two logical fallacies underlie this too-optimistic view. [4] Racist attitudes and actions repeatedly occurred throughout the campaign. [5] White Southern and older voters both demonstrated that rank racism remains. [6] Increased turn-out of young and minority voters was crucial. The paper closes by considering what changes in American race relations may take place during the Obama presidency.

Keywords: Post-Racism, Obama, 2008 Election

INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama arrived upon the public stage almost two decades ago when he was elected the first African American editor of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review*. Publishers soon offered him book contracts. In his engaging and candid volume, *Dreams From My Father*, Obama modestly attributes this sudden attention to ". . .America's hunger for any optimistic sign from the racial front—a morsel of proof that, after all, some progress has been made." (Obama 1995, p. xviii)

Since Obama won the presidency, this national hunger for racial optimism is overflowing with self-congratulation. The codeword for this phenomenon has become "post-racism"; the claim is that we are now entering a new era in America in which race has substantially lost its special significance. As the *Wall Street Journal's* Peggy Noonan phrased it: "[A] long-suppressed people have raised up a president. It is moving and beautiful and speaks to the unending magic and sense of justice of our country" (2009, p. A-11). To be sure, Obama's election represents a major step forward, one that I never thought I would live to see. But, unfortunately, America's "unending magic and sense of justice" remains under test in race relations.

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Ever since the 1960s, many White Americans have believed that the nation's race problems were fundamentally solved by the Civil Rights Movement. A national probability survey conducted in 2000 found that a majority of White Americans believed this fiction. Thirty-four percent believed racial equality has been achieved already; another 18% believed that it will soon be achieved (Bobo et al., 2001). Note, too, how America in 2004 "celebrated" the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision while it ignored the failure to implement the historic ruling (Pettigrew 2004). Consequently, African Americans themselves are generally held to be responsible for any inequalities that may persist—a current form of "blaming the victim" (Ryan 1976).

With Obama's victory, this urge to erase clean the nation's four-century racist slate has become even more irresistible. As just one notable example, consider John Tierney's column in the *New York Times* three days after the presidential election titled "Where Have All the Bigots Gone?" (Tierney 2008). A self-proclaimed libertarian, Tierney lacks advanced scientific training but, oddly enough, is a science editor for the *Times*. He is best known for his piece—"Recycling is Garbage"—which achieved the dubious distinction of setting the paper's record for oppositional mail. Obama's triumph proved to Tierney's satisfaction that racism is rapidly disappearing from the United States, that the social science "crowd" whose intensive research reveals that racial bigotry is consciously and unconsciously still widespread throughout America is simply biased and wrong. The science editor makes this claim despite literally thousands of studies documenting the real presence of conscious and unconscious racism in the minds of Americans (and people generally) and incontrovertible evidence of the direct and indirect effects of such prejudice on discriminatory treatment in housing discrimination, job selection, medical treatment and judicial fairness.

To support his position, Tierney first misreports survey data. For example, he claims that decades of surveys show that racism is in "steep decline." This is true only for particular measures of blatant prejudice; measures of more subtle prejudice do not show any such "steep decline." He then cites just one opinion piece that was routinely turned down by peer-reviewed journals and finally published in a nonrefereed publication. Tierney's assumption that Obama's election indicates that American racism has vanished is equivalent to saying that Benjamin Disraeli and Margaret Thatcher becoming prime ministers essentially ended anti-Semitism and sexism in the United Kingdom.

Clearly, the momentous occasion of Obama's presidential triumph needs to be placed in perspective. Toward this end, six points deserve special emphasis. First, it took "a perfect storm" for Obama to win. Second, many White bigots actually voted for Obama. Third, two logical fallacies underlie the post-racism contention. Fourth, racist attitudes and actions repeatedly erupted during both the primary and final campaigns. Fifth, in many southern states, the White vote for Obama significantly shrunk from the 2000 and 2004 Democratic Party totals, and the elderly White Democratic vote throughout the nation similarly declined. Finally, the increases in both voter registration and turnout of young, minority, and independent voters were critical. Let's examine each of these inter-connected phenomena, because each undercuts the sweeping claim of post-racism.

THE PERFECT STORM

It took four decades of steady Black political progress to prepare the scene for the 2008 presidential race. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was without question the most effective civil rights legislation of the twentieth century. Just prior to the act, only

about one hundred Black Americans held elected office in the entire United States; today almost 10,000 Blacks occupy elected offices of all kinds (Bositis 2003). These gains have been most notable in the South. Without the marked increase in Black votes, for instance, Harvey Johnson would not have become mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. It is also encouraging that African American politicians have gained high office in areas where White voters are a large majority—such as the governorships in Massachusetts and my native state of Virginia, a senatorial seat from Massachusetts, and the mayors of Los Angeles, California, Rochester, New York, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and many other cities.

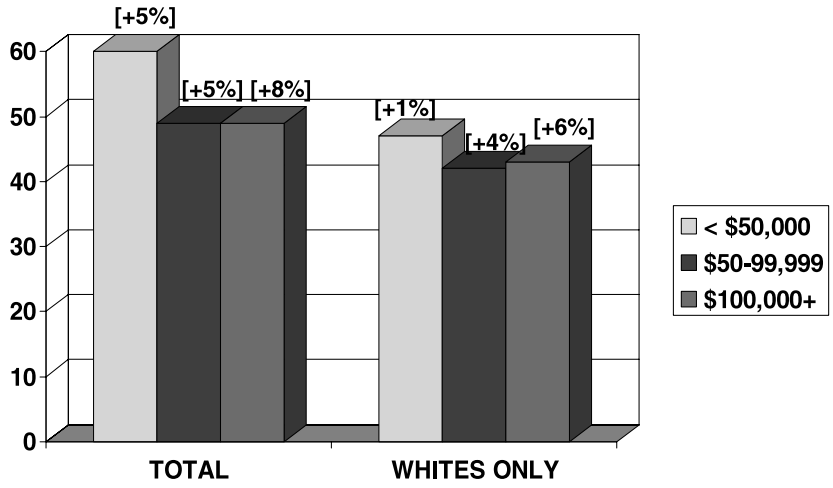
Yet even with this long preparation, Obama's decisive victory in 2008 required "a perfect storm." Not to take away anything from his obvious intelligence, cool charisma, oratorical skill, and well-organized campaign, Obama has also needed some political good fortune throughout his career. When running for the U.S. Senate in Illinois in 2004, he trailed in the polls in both the primary and final races. But his major opponent in the Democratic Party primary, Blair Hull, had to drop out of the race due to a marital scandal. Then, in the final race, his major Republican foe, Jack Ryan, also had to drop out of the race due—once again—to a marital scandal (Dupuis and Boeckelman, 2008).

Next, Obama had the good fortune of being selected to give the keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Party Convention; and this provided him with a national audience to demonstrate his remarkable speech-making ability. The national buzz about him as a future presidential aspirant started with that memorable address.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, he revealed surprising toughness, confidence, and the ability to assemble and manage a dedicated and able staff. His caucus success in Iowa was an absolutely necessary start to his campaign. This victory in the sixth Whitest state in the nation (89% non-Hispanic White in 2007) convinced many voters, especially skeptical Blacks, that he was indeed a serious candidate who, unlike previous Black presidential candidates, could garner White votes. Surveys showed from that point on Black voters throughout the nation overwhelmingly swung their support behind him and away from Hillary Clinton. This translated into primary wins across the South starting with South Carolina.

The crucial triumph in Iowa was no accident. Obama had on his staff political operatives who had had previous success in Iowa caucuses, and they planned his campaign with precision. But the perfect storm also required that his more experienced and well-financed principal opponent, Hillary Clinton, be too confident at the beginning and then run an inept campaign. Similarly, in the final campaign, John McCain ran an equally inept campaign highlighted by the spectacular blunder of choosing Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate. To Obama's credit, these bungling campaigns of his opponents were answered with one of the most modern and disciplined presidential campaigns in American history.

Moreover, 2008 offered the Democratic Party a golden opportunity to revive itself after eight long years of George W. Bush's disastrous administration—six years of which the Republican Party controlled all three branches of government. In 2004, exit-poll data revealed the two major parties were almost evenly divided in party identification. By 2008, however, the Democrats had a 10% advantage in party identification—38% to 28% (Pew Research Center 2008c). And at the close of his second term, only 22% of Americans in a *New York Times* poll expressed a favorable view of Bush's eight years in office—a record low for any president since national probability surveys began (Nagourney and Connelly, 2009). Likewise, a post-election Pew survey found only 13% were "satisfied" with the way things were going in the country compared with 55% who thought so when Bush took office in 2000.



These data are drawn from the exit-poll results of the Pew Research Center (2008a).

Fig. 1. Obama's Voting Percentages by Income: Change from 2004 Presidential Election in Brackets

Not surprisingly, then, the same poll found only 11% of Americans thought history would judge Bush favorably (Allen 2009).

Yet even all these promising elements might well not have been enough for Obama's victory. The final and possibly necessary component of the perfect storm was the sudden and severe turndown in the economy. Indeed, 63% of voters in an exit-poll listed the economy as most important issue facing the nation compared with only 10% listing the Iraq war (Pew Research Center 2008a). With McCain widely perceived as incapable of handling the crisis and Obama coolly following the advice of leading economists, the final piece of the necessary conditions were in place for a victory of the first African American president.

Using exit-poll results, Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide insight into Obama's successful campaign. Figure 1 shows that he garnered increased support from all income levels in comparison with Kerry's returns in 2004. Note the sharp 6% gain among relatively wealthy White voters in spite of Obama's oft-repeated pledge to raise Federal income taxes on those with incomes above $250,000. Figure 2 reveals the marked expansion in Democratic voting among urban dwellers; but observe that suburban Whites did not show a predicted increase.

Party affiliation and ideology still played their typically major roles. Figure 3 shows that Obama effectively attracted more votes from independents and moderates—a point to which we shall return. But it is important to note, however, that the 2008 election results showed no evidence of a major ideological realignment—as some have speculated. Pew surveys found little change between 2004 and 2008 in the percentages identifying themselves as conservative (34% to 33%), moderates (45% to 44%) or liberals (21% to 23%) (Pew Research Center 2008b).

MANY BIGOTS VOTED FOR OBAMA

A fundamental mistake of the post-racism advocates is their assumption that a White vote for a Black candidate for president is proof that the person is not prejudiced and

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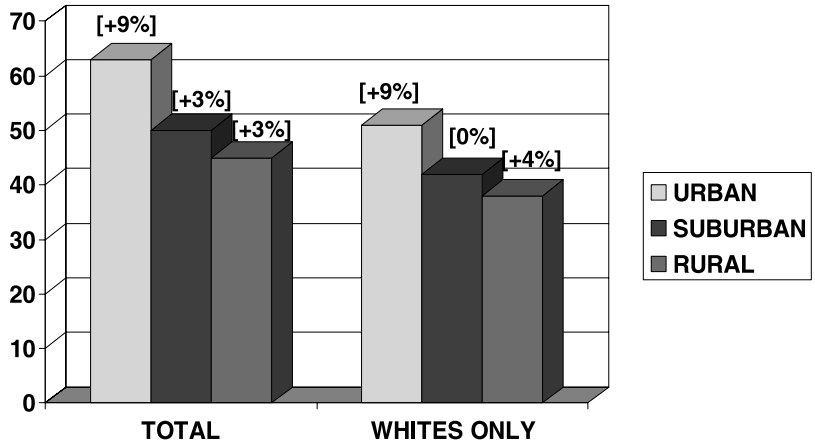
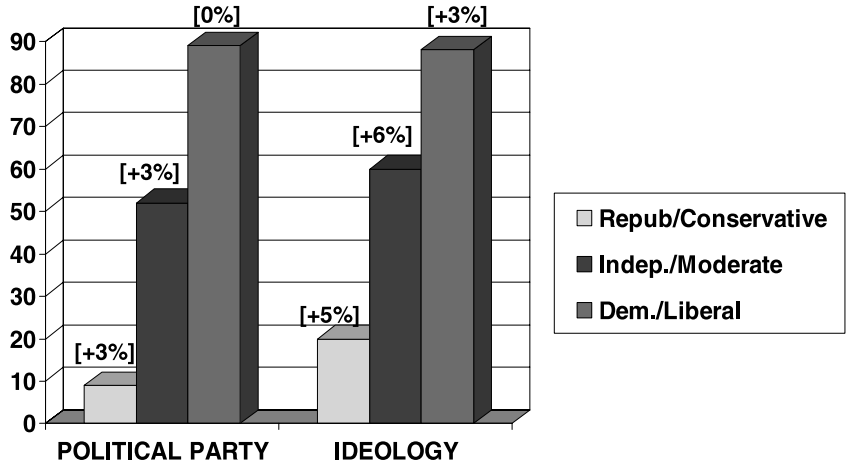


These data are drawn from the exit-poll results of the Pew Research Center (2008a).

Fig. 2. Obama's Voting Percentages by Urbanism: Change from 2004 Presidential Election in Brackets



These data are drawn from the exit-poll results of the Pew Research Center (2008a).

Fig. 3. Obama's Voting Percentages by Party and Ideology: Change from 2004 Presidential Election in Brackets

would not racially discriminate in other situations. Given the gravity of the nation's economic crisis, this assumption was especially mistaken in 2008. Prejudiced people, like all of us, act in diverse, even conflicting ways in different situations. Hence, one survey found that a third of White Democrats ascribed one or more negative adjectives—violent, boastful, lazy, irresponsible—to African Americans, yet 58% of them still supported Obama (Fournier and Tompson, 2008). And while Nebraska voters gave one of its electoral votes to Obama, they also passed by 58% to 42% a ban on race- and gender-based affirmative action. Previously voters in California, Michigan and Washington State had passed similar referenda, yet all three provided Obama wide winning margins in 2008.

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Racist views do not exist in a psychological vacuum. Prejudiced attitudes compete and interact with other views which, under certain circumstances, can have far greater salience and importance than racism for a person. The economic crisis is one such circumstance and played directly to this phenomenon. With Obama looking more competent than McCain on economics, pocketbook issues became dominant. For many not-too-entrenched bigots, fears about losing their jobs and homes overcame their racial concerns.

Forty years ago, I started studying this phenomenon with probability surveys of White voters in four key cities that had victorious African American mayoralty candidates (Pettigrew 1972, 1976). This was an important time for Black politics. Richard Hatcher won his mayoralty race in Gary, Indiana in 1967; in the same year, Carl Stokes won his race in Cleveland, Ohio and then won re-election in 1969; in 1968, Thomas Bradley won in Los Angeles, California; and in 1971, Kenneth Gibson won in Newark, New Jersey. Both in Gary and Cleveland, our surveys showed quite racially prejudiced Whites voting for the Black candidate after he achieved concrete changes that were important to them. For example, voters in two working-class White precincts in Cleveland provided only minimal support for Stokes in 1967; but they became strongly pro-Stokes after he opened a much desired playground in the area. In short, many of these White voters valued a new local playground for their children more than their racism. But this does not mean that they had overcome their racism as Tierney assumes.

With his inclusive approach—"no red states, no blue states, just the United States"—Obama effectively tapped into this process with an essentially deracialized campaign. He was able to accomplish this because his strong African American support—ultimately 95% on election day—did not require special effort and positions that might upset many Whites.[2] So, he rarely focused on race alone—save in his famous Philadelphia campaign speech when circumstances, brought on by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, required it. This apparent inattention to race angered some of his followers. But, in my judgment, this tact was absolutely necessary to win given the racial views of many White Americans.

In particular, Obama's easy style, his light skin color, and his unique life history eased the racial fears of many Whites. His strong endorsement from the popular Black Republican, General Colin Powell, furthered this non-threatening image. Bigots could even rationalize his talents as a function of his having a White mother from Kansas—ignoring the fact that his African father was a Harvard University product of considerable accomplishments. In almost all respects, Obama violates the anti-Black stereotype. Obviously, he is highly intelligent, charming, hard-working, and well-educated. Indeed, he is so anti-stereotypical that Hillary Clinton followed by McCain sought to portray him as an elitist despite the fact that, unlike themselves, he came from a one-parent home that had used food stamps. McCain's campaign went even further. Responding to his charisma, eloquence, and huge crowds, it tried to deride him as just another mindless celebrity by incongruously putting Britney Spears and Paris Hilton at the start of a television attack advertisement against Obama.

It is not possible with currently available data to estimate precisely how many White bigots actually voted for Obama. But in such industrial states as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan their numbers recorded by exit polls are apparently substantial. Obama's own campaign surveys traced this phenomenon in detail. Pre-election data measured the racial attitudes of a White sample and found, as expected, considerable prejudice. For example, many Whites felt that ". . . African Americans aren't as proud and patriotic about this country as I am" (Ambinder 2009). But

post-election data revealed that a substantial minority of those Whites who agreed with such statements had actually supported Obama. Thus, prejudiced attitudes predicted the choices of White voters to some extent, but there were many exceptions to the trend. Hillary Clinton, in the heat of the Pennsylvania primary, had bluntly maintained that working-class Whites in particular would not vote for Obama. The results of the final election proved her wrong.

TWO LOGICAL FALLACIES

The post-racism thesis suffers from two logical and interrelated fallacies: *the ecological fallacy* and *the constant turnout composition fallacy*. The *ecological fallacy* draws conclusions about individuals from macro-level data alone (Pettigrew 1996). It is a fallacy because macro-units are too broad to determine individual data, and individuals have unique properties that cannot be directly inferred from just macro data. This mistake is often seen in statements made about individual voters from aggregate voting results alone. For example, television's talking heads often are confused by the fact that rich states tend to support Democrats while poor states tend to support Republicans—yet rich individual voters tend to vote Republican while the poor overwhelmingly vote Democratic (Gelman et al., 2008). We just discussed an example of the ecological fallacy in Tierney's assumption from voting data alone that those individuals who voted for Obama must have been free of racial prejudice.

The *constant turnout composition fallacy* involves the assumption that the presidential electorate in 2008 was essentially the same as it was in 2004—thus, easy comparisons can be made between the two elections without allowing for these changes. But, as we will discuss later, the 2008 electorate was markedly different. In 2004, both political parties achieved historically large turnouts. Four years later, the Republican turnout fell with many on the extreme right of the party failing to vote. But the skillful Obama campaign orchestrated a record number of Democrats coming to the polls—especially among the young, minorities, political independents and the most liberal wing of the Party. So, rather than simply representing a massive change in the nation's racial attitudes, the 2008 vote for Obama reflected, at least in part, a shift in the electorate from generally prejudiced right-wingers to generally less prejudiced moderates and left-wingers.

This fallacy is clearly illustrated when Tierney supports his post-racist argument by citing the fact that Obama received a slightly larger fraction of the total White vote than John Kerry had received in 2004—43% as opposed to 41%. Given that there was a shift of at least 13% in the composition of voters between the two presidential elections,[3] this two percentage point difference offers negligible support for his post-racism contention.

RACIST ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN

One might think from reading the post-racism advocates that the 2008 presidential campaign unfolded with scant signs of the nation's traditional racism. This impression is far from the truth. Expressions of racist sentiments in many forms, from violence and campaign tactics to verbal slips, were ever present.

Racial violence escalated and erupted in the North as well as the South (Cohen 2008). Cross-burnings, threats, intimidation, and racist graffiti proliferated across the nation but typically did not receive nationwide publicity. In New York, a Black teenager was assaulted by bat-wielding White men shouting, "Obama." School chil-

dren on a bus in Idaho chanted "assassinate Obama"; and, on election night, a Black church in Massachusetts was burned in a suspicious fire. The Secret Service reported that there had been more threats on Obama's life than for any previous president-elect. Ironically, some leaders of violent White supremacist groups actually advocated voting for Obama. They reasoned that a Black president would ignite their movements, swell their ranks, and lead to more violence against African Americans (Beirich and Potok, 2008).

One can always shrug off these horrific occurrences as the work of a mere lunatic fringe. But unadulterated racism also arose in elite circles in the campaign. Even Clinton's primary campaign had surrogates repeatedly play the so-called "race card" (Dunn 2008). Two highly-ranked staff members accused Obama of having been a drug dealer in Chicago in an attempt to arouse White fears of the ghetto criminal. Her staff leaked a photograph of Obama in Somalian garb to further the fiction that he was a Muslim. Her husband, the former President, implied that Obama was only a marginal Black candidate like Jesse Jackson—who is perceived by many White Southerners as a threatening Black leader.

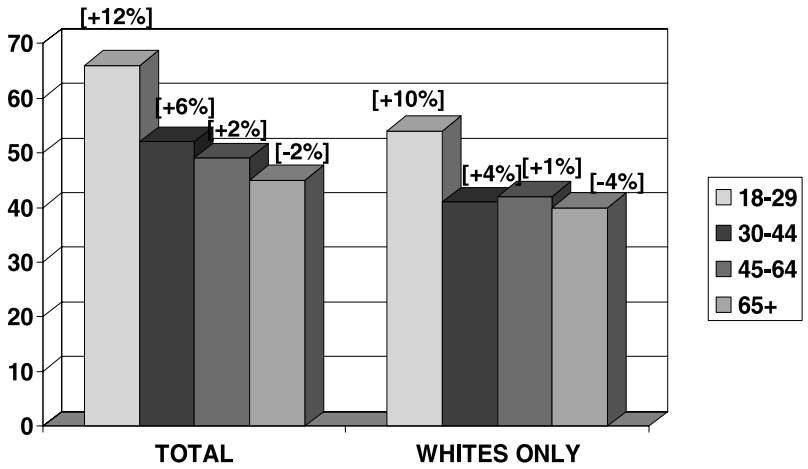
Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1984, restated an often heard anti-affirmation action statement: "If Obama was [*sic*] a White man," she charged, "he would not be in this position." Hillary Clinton professed to see nothing objectionable about the comment, and Ferraro refused to apologize. The crescendo of these efforts came with the revelations about the fiery minister of Obama's Chicago church, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Hillary Clinton held Obama to be directly associated with Wright's wild rhetoric. But she omitted mentioning the fact that she and her husband had personally invited Rev. Wright in 1998 to a "prayer breakfast" at the White House, which they both attended. Hence, by the same illogic, she was also associated with Wright's rhetoric.

Clinton's primary attacks made it easy for the McCain campaign to adopt similar tactics. It repeated and expanded on the elite charge—a thinly-veiled return to the old racist accusation against "uppity" Blacks who do not know their place and have the audacity to think they are better than White people. In general, the McCain campaign, led by Steve Schmidt—an associate of Karl Rove—substituted descriptions of Obama as the strange "other" with the weird background and funny name rather than overtly racial appeals (Kristof 2008). So it remained for Governor Palin to forego all subtlety. In a Florida speech on October 6, 2008, she declared that "he's not one of *us*."

Moreover, recurrent slips betrayed traditional racist thinking (Staples 2008). A Republican club in California issued false ten dollar bills with Obama's picture accompanied by a watermelon, ribs and a bucket of fried chicken. The McCain campaign ran an attack advertisement claiming that Obama had been "*disrespectful*" to Governor Palin—the old Southern phrase calling up sanctions against Black men interacting with White women. A Georgian Republican, Representative Lynn Westmoreland, described both Obama and his wife as "*uppity*." And a Kentucky Republican, Representative Geoff Davis, remarked about the forty-seven-year-old Obama, "That *boy's* finger does not need to be on the [nuclear] button." The Obama campaign wisely refused to comment on any of these lapses back into "the good old days" of racial segregation when African Americans "knew their place."

ELDERLY AND SOUTHERN WHITES RESISTED

Elderly and Southern Whites demonstrated that racism is alive and well in these sizeable segments of the American population. Largely overlooked because they do



These data are drawn from the exit-poll results of the Pew Research Center (2008a).

Fig. 4. Obama's Voting Percentages by Age: Change from 2004 Presidential Election in Brackets

not fit with the optimistic post-racism view, many of these Americans revealed in exit-polls that they had voted against Obama largely on racial grounds. As Figure 4 shows, Whites older than sixty-four years were the only age group to vote more Republican than in 2004 (Pew Research Center 2008a). And these data emerge despite the fact that four years had passed with many highly prejudiced elderly Whites having died and many of the elderly now facing economic problems.

In four Southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—Whites voted less for Obama than they had in 2004 for the regionally unpopular John Kerry (Bositis 2008). In Alabama, for example, Obama received only 10% of the White votes compared with almost twice that for Kerry (Cohen 2008). As Cornell Belcher, an Obama pollster, succinctly stated: "You can't look at that swath of hard-red states that actually grew even redder and say that we are post-racial" (Ambinder 2009, p. 65).

To hail the end of racism when these large population groups still strongly resist racial change is obviously premature. But change is evident. The oldest cohort of White Americans is dying off, and more tolerant cohorts are replacing them. Likewise, two processes are changing the South. New residents, Hispanics as well as Northerners, have come into the South; and the region's modest desegregation has produced a more liberal young cohort of White Southerners. Obama surprised many observers by winning in Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia—and these three states reflect these processes. All three are among the seven states that have received the largest percentages of newcomers in recent years, and they have witnessed somewhat more racial desegregation than most other Southern states.

FOUR CRITICAL GROUPS: BLACKS, YOUTH, LATINOS, AND INDEPENDENTS

Diverging from previous Democratic Party presidential races, the Obama campaign adopted a bold, fifty-state strategy. It focused on so-called red states as well as blue states, with particular attention to Colorado, Indiana, Florida, New Mexico, North

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Carolina, and Virginia—all of which Obama won even though they had cast their electoral votes for Bush in previous elections. This strategy required special attention to increasing both the registration and turnout of African Americans, voters younger than thirty, Latinos, and political independents. All these efforts succeeded.

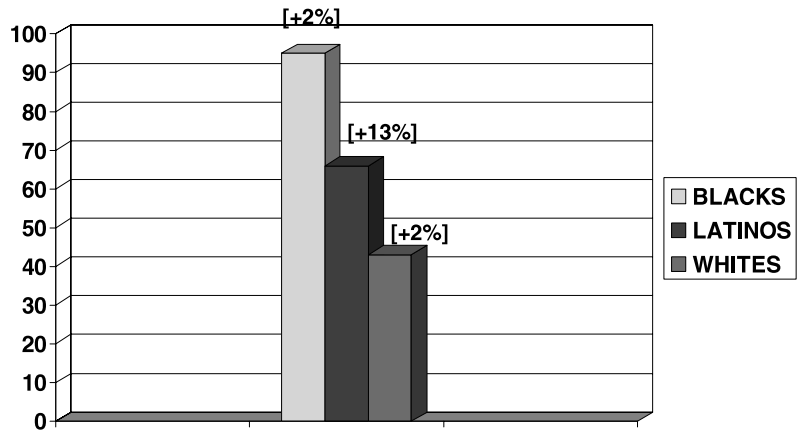
We have noted the success of the turnout efforts. Young, minority, and independent voters all increased their registrations and turnout while Republicans suffered a decline in turnout. Young voters have been historically difficult to register and vote; had they voted in their true proportion of the population, both Al Gore and Kerry would have easily defeated Bush. Yet the Obama campaign achieved record registration and turnout for White as well as Black youth. Figure 4 shows 66% of those below thirty years of age supported Obama in exit-polls. This represented a remarkable 12% total and 10% White increase from Kerry's performance four years earlier. But this did not require a massive change of racial sentiments among the young. Rather it largely reflects the enormous swelling of new voters—previous non-voters as well as those who were too young to vote in 2004. Not only did young Americans register and vote in record numbers, they also massively volunteered to do the unglamorous grassroots campaigning that characterized Obama's effort. It was these phenomena that revealed most clearly the importance of Obama's charisma for the young. Fueled in large part by Obama's opposition to the Iraq War—a key issue for many young voters—such charisma had not been seen since John Kennedy's campaign.

Record minority registration and turnout were also key ingredients of Obama's triumph. Record total turnouts occurred in thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia in spite of lower Republican turnout (Tumulty 2008). African Americans increased their proportion of the total electorate from 11% in 2004 to 13% in 2008, Latinos from 6% to 8%, while the White percentage declined from 80% to 74%—the lowest ever (Bositis 2008). One in every six New York State voters and one in ten California voters was Black in 2008. In six Southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, and South Carolina), the African American vote rose to a fourth or more of the electorate.

Latinos joined Blacks in these trends. In Colorado, Florida, and New Mexico, sharp increases in Latino registrations, turnout, and support were critical for Obama's surprising wins in these previously Republican states. Nationally, Figure 5's exit-poll data indicate that 66% of Latinos cast their ballots for Obama—a record-setting rise of 13% from their 2004 backing of Kerry (Pew Research Center 2008a). Of special interest is the fact that many young Cuban Americans in Florida broke from their group's long attachment to the Republican Party.

Finally, as we saw in Figure 3, 52% of political independents and 60% of moderates told exit pollsters they had just voted for Obama (Pew Research Center 2008a). This represented a 3% shift of independents and 6% shift of moderates from their voting four years earlier and was not generally predicted. While far-right voters did not favor McCain in the Republican primaries, it was widely believed that the once-maverick Senator from Arizona had special appeal for independents and moderates. Their surprising support was important for Obama's success, because these middle-of-the-roaders have become an increasingly larger component of the total electorate and disproportionately reside in key "battleground" states where their votes are of strategic importance.

Obama's special appeal for new, young, and Latino voters will have long-term benefits for the Democratic Party. Karl Mannheim held that the political events of early life decisively shape each age cohort's political orientation: ". . . the older generation cling[s] to the re-orientation that had been the drama of their youth" (1952, p. 301).



These data are drawn from the exit-poll results of the Pew Research Center (2008a).

Fig. 5. Obama's Voting Percentages by Ethnicity: Change from 2004 Presidential Election in Brackets

Consider the voters who entered the electorate during the 1930s. Their gratitude for President Roosevelt's efforts during the Great Depression led them to be unusually loyal to the Democratic Party throughout their lives. Similar, if less dramatic, illustrations of Mannheim's contention occurred for President Kennedy in the 1960s and President Reagan in the 1980s. A comparable phenomenon may now be taking place around charismatic Obama. His success could shape a cohort of Americans who will favor the Democratic Party for years to come.

Similarly, the major shift of Latino votes bodes well for future Democratic Party prospects. Sixty-two percent of projected growth in the American population from 2000 to 2050 is likely to be Latino compared with just 11% for Blacks and 5% for Whites (Newsweek 2009).

WHAT CAN WE NOW EXPECT IN AMERICAN RACE RELATIONS?

Although Obama's presidential election does not mean the end of American racism, it obviously signifies a significant transformation in American race relations.

It is difficult for White Americans to appreciate how much it means for African Americans and other racial minorities as well. Even Black Europeans rejoiced (Erlanger 2008; Kimmelman 2008). African Americans have been in North America for four centuries. And they have been loyal to the United States throughout its history—building the nation and dying in its wars despite constant discrimination and second-class citizenship. Obama's victory, made possible by significant White support, belatedly rewards the faith Black America has somehow managed to maintain in their nation.

There are many other positive consequences of the 2008 election. Racial prejudice, especially among the young, is likely to recede—not precipitously but steadily. Americans are going to see almost everyday in their media for the next four to eight years an able, likable African American in charge of their nation. We know from research that such vicarious contact with high-status figures, even from television viewing, can erode prejudice and ease the anxiety that often accompanies interracial contact (e.g., Fujioka 1999; Gómez and Huici, 2008; Graves 1999; Herek and Capitanio, 1997; Kershaw 2009).

To answer Tierney's provocative question—"where have all the bigots gone?"—we can definitively say they have not disappeared. Some have modified their racial views, but most bigots are still in full view. We can anticipate that anti-Black stereotypes will slowly dissipate—especially the lazy, intellectually-slow component. And the two Obamas' persistent modeling of a racially-integrated America will be especially beneficial.

This positive attitude trend is helpful, of course. It makes later positive change more possible, but it does not directly address the core of African American distress today. The basic problems are structural—rampant housing segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993), poverty, job discrimination, poor education, massive imprisonment—and the list goes on (Pettigrew 2007). Most of these structural barriers are direct legacies of two centuries of slavery and another century of legal segregation. Thus, these barriers are deeply embedded in American society and have proven extremely difficult to correct.

The American presidency is powerful, but it has its definite limits. For the most part, at least early in his term, Obama will only be able to work on the margins of these issues. For example, he can weed out of government those who are adamant opponents of racial change appointed by the previous administration—even some members of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. But he will be severely restricted by the economic crisis that overshadows everything, by a reactionary majority on the U.S. Supreme Court that has overturned *Brown v. The Board of Education* and other important High Court racial decisions without saying so directly (Pettigrew 2004), and by increasingly southern-based Republican minorities in both houses of Congress.

In short, there will undoubtedly be a new and positive tone to the Federal Government's treatment of minorities. But the needed fundamental structural remedies in American race relations will largely have to await a likely Obama second-term. And that, too, depends on Obama becoming a transformative president in the mold of Lincoln and Roosevelt (Kuttner 2008).

A FINAL WORD

Obama's decisive victory marks a momentous milestone in the history of America's most persistent domestic problem. I do not wish to diminish that fact in any way. Nevertheless, we cannot yet unfurl the "mission accomplished" banner. The post-racism era in American society has yet to arrive—even if we have taken a giant step forward. We are no longer "two nations," but neither are we a one, non-racialized nation.

Frank Rich sums it up best: "Obama doesn't transcend race. He isn't post-race. He is the latest chapter in the ever-unfurling American racial saga. It is an astonishing chapter. . . . But we are a people as practical as we are dreamy. We'll soon remember that the country is in a deep ditch, and we turned to the [B]lack guy not only because we hoped he could lift us up but because he looked like the strongest leader to dig us out" (2008).

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NOTES

1. This paper was written for and delivered at the Still Two Nations? Conference hosted by The Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Social Sciences at Duke

University in March 2009. The conference was held in honor of the late historian, John Hope Franklin.

2. This is not to imply that Obama paid no attention whatsoever to his Black support. In addition to his campaign's herculean efforts to increase Black registration and turnout, he appeared more than fifteen times on Tom Joyner's radio show that reaches millions of Black listeners but is largely out of White purview (Ambinder 2009).
3. This rough estimate of 13% was calculated as follows. [1] There was a 10.3 million increase in voter turnout from 2004 to 2008 (in comparison to only a six-million increase in the potential electorate). [2] Several data sources estimate that some 13 or more million new voters participated in the 2008 election. [3] This suggests that at least 2.7 (13 − 10.3) million voters in 2004 did not participate in the 2008 election. [4] Combining these two figures (13 + 2.7), we get a shift of 15.7 million from the 2004 election of 122.3 million voters—thus, a change in the composition of the two electorates of at least 12.8%. Undoubtedly, this crude estimate represents an *underestimate* of the true shift between the 2004 and 2008 electorates. One might wonder why this sharp shift in the electorate did not lead to a larger boost in the White vote for Obama. The explanation, as we shall note, is that there was a substantial shift away from voting for Obama in the deep South that attenuated the White gains elsewhere.

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