

Challenging History: Barack Obama & American Racial Politics

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When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences devoted two issues of its journal *Dædalus* to the topic of “The Negro American” in 1965 and 1966, the United States had reached the triumphant end of the second of three eras of racial politics that characterize the American national experience thus far. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 raised hopes that the end of the third era was near, after which racial inequalities and conflicts would no longer be central to national life. Although the demographics of the 2008 electorate signaled the impact of historic racial transformations and the possibility of even greater changes, the campaign offered at best a glimpse of how the central issues of the third racial era in U.S. history might be resolved. As long as the debate over managing race-based discrimination and inequities persists, the current era cannot be said to have ended.

We view the three eras of American racial politics in terms of rival *racial policy alliances*: that is, durable coalitions of political actors, activist groups, and governing institutions united by their stances on the central racial policy issues in the eras of American politics their conflicts help define.¹ In the *slavery era* of 1790 to 1865, pro-slavery and anti-slavery alliances fought over whether slavery should be maintained and extended. Next, after a period of transition, the *Jim Crow era* emerged in the mid-1890s and endured (for practical purposes) until

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the mid-1960s, while pro-segregation and anti-segregation alliances contested the maintenance and extension of de jure racial segregation and effective black disenfranchisement. After another period of transition lasting from roughly 1965 to 1978, the modern *era of race-conscious controversies* has witnessed struggles between opposed “color-blind” and “race-conscious” alliances over race-targeted policies and programs.

The central racial issues of the slavery and Jim Crow eras resolved only when extraordinary forces combined to enable one alliance to win decisively over the other. In each case, change came under the pressure of major wars (the Civil War in the former and World War II, combined with the ensuing Cold War, in the latter) that compelled U.S. leaders to rely on the economic and military contributions of African Americans and to justify the nation’s cause in terms of inclusive democratic principles. In turn, domestic political forces impelled the United States to live up to those principles more fully.² Nonetheless, despite those successes, deep racial inequalities and sharp disagreements over how to address them remained, even among the members of the triumphant anti-slavery, then anti-segregation, alliances. The persistence of material race inequities and conflicts explains why, after periods of transition, new racial alliances emerge on opposite sides of new racial issues.

In all three eras, racial alliances have sought political power either to resist or to advance the measures promoting greater material racial equality that they have deemed the most consequential, even if those measures have fallen short of addressing all racial concerns. The alliances have also sought to influence the positions of major political parties. During much of the first two eras, the opposed racial coalitions had allies in

both of the major parties of their day, albeit in unequal proportions, creating pressures and possibilities for racial compromises. Today, partisan divisions and racial alliance divisions are almost co-extensive: the Republicans regularly endorse color-blind policies, while Democrats support race-conscious ones. Even though the issues that define our current racial era seem more amenable to reasonable compromises than those that defined previous eras, this structural reinforcement of racial/partisan positions has contributed decisively to a polarized politics in which resolving racial issues is a mammoth task.

Few scholars have appreciated the distinctiveness and significance of this partisan structure of modern racial politics. During most of the slavery era, there were pro-slavery and anti-slavery components to both major parties: first among the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists, and later the Jacksonian Democrats and the Whigs, although the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians tended to lean more strongly toward the pro-slavery side. This cross-cutting – rather than reinforcing – structure of racial and party positions explains why leaders of the two parties repeatedly, and especially in 1820 and 1850, managed to forge compromises that left the future of slavery unclear. But as Abraham Lincoln argued, slavery was not an issue that could be compromised on forever. The nation could not endure half-slave and half-free. In the 1850s, when the evenly divided Whigs broke apart over the slavery issue, a new partisan alignment arose that overlapped more closely with the era’s racial alliances. It pitted thoroughly pro-slavery Democrats against Republicans drawn from former Whigs and Free Soil Democrats who uniformly opposed the extension of slavery. The new Republican Party’s moderate but firm anti-slav-

ery position was made still more threatening to the South by the presence of a small but influential abolitionist movement. As a result, Southern Democrats viewed further compromises on slavery as suicidal and refused to accept the rise of the Republican Party to national power. The Civil War erupted soon after.

In the wake of the Union's Civil War victory, the anti-slavery alliance embedded into the Constitution the position on which they all agreed. As affirmed in the Thirteenth Amendment, there would be no involuntary servitude in the United States. But slavery's opponents, who ranged from former Democrat Andrew Johnson to Radical Republican Charles Sumner, disagreed passionately about the extent to which the United States should pursue racial equality beyond the end of slavery. Thus, the nation entered a transition period, during which Southern Democrats rebuilt their strength by persuading most Northern Democrats and many white Republicans that national harmony could be restored through the establishment of a new form of white supremacy: the putatively equal Jim Crow system of local, state, and national segregation policies.

By the late 1890s, most – though not all – Republicans had ceased to oppose measures to enforce African American disenfranchisement and segregation. Throughout the ensuing Jim Crow era, there were critics as well as supporters of segregation in both the Democratic and Republican parties; the Democrats, however, were the primary architects of segregation, while most Republicans simply acquiesced. Over time, in the face of international pressures including World War II and the Cold War struggles with Communism, segregation practices became political, economic, and military liabilities. These problems combined with domestic pressures, particularly the rise of

the modern civil rights movement and the migration of African Americans to Northern cities where they formed a pivotal potential voting bloc, to make change possible. Domestic and international developments enhanced the power of policy-makers who opposed segregation, especially in the northern Democratic Party after 1932. Along with more mobilized African Americans, increasing numbers of white citizens and leaders, particularly outside the South, came to regard segregation as lacking any persuasive moral or even political justifications. Jim Crow segregation, too, was no longer viewed as a matter for compromise. Eventually, the Democratic Party became predominantly anti-segregationist. Thus, after 1960, when Democrats gained control of all three branches of the federal government and added crucial anti-segregation support from Republicans, they enacted major new civil rights laws and won favorable constitutional rulings that toppled the Jim Crow system of de jure segregation and disenfranchisement.

Again, however, those victories left in place entrenched forms of racial inequality and considerable white resistance to further egalitarian change. In this regard, President Lyndon Johnson, the former Southern segregationist who led the legislative triumphs of the mid-1960s, is said to have remarked when he signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act that the Democratic Party had “lost the south for a generation.” He meant, of course, that Democrats had lost the white South, along with many other white voters, and therefore many elections. He was more right than he knew. According to exit polls, no Democratic presidential candidate has won more white votes than the Republican candidate in any national election since 1964, not even Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, both Southern

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Democrats who nonetheless won the White House.³

Yet if it is true that the civil rights laws of the 1960s set the stage for an era of Republican predominance in national elections, it is also true, as political scientists Philip Klinkner and Thomas Schaller argue, that Great Society laws transformed the American electorate over time in ways that, by 2008, made Barack Obama's victory possible. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and, particularly, the 1965 Voting Rights Act spurred enfranchisement and expanded political opportunities for millions of African American and, eventually, Latino voters. Without these measures, the Obama campaign would have been inconceivable. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, ending the race-based national origins quota system and leading to expanded Latino and Asian immigration over the several decades following enactment, also transformed the American electorate: in 1964, more than 90 percent of voters were non-Hispanic whites; in 2008, that number had fallen to under 75 percent. The 1965 Higher Education Act, providing funding for low- and middle-income students, increased the number of voters with college degrees from 13 percent in 1964 to 46 percent in 2008. Notably, Obama's popularity with college-educated voters was an asset in his primary campaign against Hillary Clinton and in the general election.⁴

Even so, exit polls indicate that in November 2008, Obama lost among white voters by 55 to 43 percent. He won 95 percent of the black vote, 67 percent of the Latino vote, and 62 percent of the Asian American vote – supermajorities that, combined with increased turnout among these groups, secured his victory.⁵ A number of analysts have concluded that although Obama did slightly better

nationally among white voters than John Kerry did in 2004, he fared worse among Southern whites and whites with high racial-resentment scores than a white Democrat likely would have done under the circumstances of the 2008 election.⁶ Although Obama's race was a plus for some liberal white as well as many non-white voters, most of those voters probably would have voted Democratic anyway. In contrast, racial resentment appears to have cost Obama votes that a white Democrat would have won if the voting had been based primarily on economic views – enough to diminish his net national vote by about 5 percentage points, according to political scientists Michael Lewis-Beck, Charles Tien, and Richard Nadeau.⁷

It seems clear, then, that the legislative and judicial triumphs of anti-segregation forces in the 1950s and 1960s transformed the American electorate – and therefore American politics – in racially inclusive directions. Nevertheless, these forces failed to eliminate the political consequences stemming from white racial resentment.⁸

The victories of the civil rights era had a further impact on the national political landscape. Taking one set of racial issues off the table transformed the nation's policy debates over how to respond to the reality of continuing racial inequalities and tensions. New alliances formed around new issues that emerged as pivotal. Proponents of greater material racial equality were faced with the fact that even though non-whites now had voting rights and formally equal economic rights, they continued to trail whites significantly in every area of American life, including employment, income, wealth, education, housing, health and mortality, incarceration, and political representation. Veterans of the civil rights

struggles, such as Julian Bond and Jesse Jackson, came to believe that further progress could not be achieved without direct, race-targeted measures such as affirmative action programs in education admissions and employment; race-conscious pupil assignment policies in the public schools; housing and job programs aimed at areas with high percentages of poor, non-white residents; race-conscious lending and fellowship programs; and majority-minority districts.⁹ But to many Americans, even many who, like Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer, had opposed segregation laws, these measures seemed unjust – even a form of reverse racism.¹⁰ By the mid-1970s, the modern structure of American racial politics had formed, with a coalition of political actors and institutions promoting race-conscious policies and a rival coalition insisting that public measures and institutions should be “color-blind.”

With the emergence of each new structure of rival racial alliances, members of *both* alliances have professed allegiance to the resolution of the previous era’s disputes. Not even the proponents of Jim Crow sought to restore chattel slavery, which they conceded to be inefficient and immoral. Today no one calls for a return to the Jim Crow system. Instead, both advocates of color-blind policies and proponents of race-conscious policies present themselves as the true heirs to the anti-segregation civil rights movement. Both criticize their opponents for betraying its aims. For members of the color-blind alliance, the civil rights movement centered on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s hope that persons would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. They believe that race-conscious measures violate that aspiration and

perpetuate racial discord. By contrast, members of the race-conscious alliance believe that the central aim of the civil rights movement was to reduce embedded material racial inequalities. They see the color-blind alliance’s rejection of race-targeted policies as operating to perpetuate and even exacerbate pervasive inherited white advantages, whether or not that outcome is intended.

The two modern alliances emerged on either side of the debate over affirmative action in employment, but they can be found largely intact in legislative and judicial struggles over a remarkably wide range of other issues. Their basic structure is laid out in Table 1.

Some members of the color-blind alliance, such as white supremacists, support color-blind policies tactically, as a potent means to preserve white advantages. Others do so sincerely. The problem of disentangling racial aversions, perceptions of racial threats, and ideological commitments to race-neutral policies is intractable. Though there is evidence that at least some members of the color-blind alliance seek to preserve existing white advantages over non-whites, we presume that most proponents of color-blind policies believe these measures are best for racial progress and justice.

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 support them. The most distinctive feature of the structure of modern racial politics is, again, their division along major political party lines. Since at least the end of the Nixon administration, Republicans have favored color-blind policies, even if some do so more ardently and consistently than others; the great majority of Democrats,

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Table 1
Rival Racial Alliances, 1976 to 2008

Color-Blind Alliance

Most Republican Party officeholders and members after 1976
 President, 1980 – 1992, 2001 – 2008
 Some conservative and 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
 (e.g., Equal Employment Advisory Council)
 Some labor unions, particularly traditional union locals
 Conservative media (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Charles Krauthammer)
 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., The Lynne and Harry Bradley Foundation)

Race-Conscious Alliance

Most Democratic Party officeholders and members
 President (mixed support), 1993 – 2000
 Some liberal and pro-corporate Republicans
 Some federal and state judges
 Many civil service members of executive agencies
 Many large businesses, minority-owned businesses
 Most labor unions
 Military leadership
 Liberal media (e.g., *The New York Times*)
 Liberal advocacy groups (e.g., American Civil Liberties Union)
 Most non-white advocacy groups (e.g., National Association for
 the Advancement of Colored People, La Raza, Asian American
 Legal Defense and Education Fund)
 Liberal religious groups (e.g., National Council of Churches)
 Liberal foundations (e.g., Soros Foundation, Ford Foundation)
 Liberal blogs and Internet groups after 2004

Source: This table is documented in Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama's America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

meanwhile, have officially supported race-conscious measures, even if some do so half-heartedly. Official party platforms since 1972 have stated these distinct positions explicitly, though the Republican commitment to color blindness became more full-throated after 1980, while Democrats have less forcefully defended race-conscious measures since the “Reagan Revolution.”¹¹ Even so, in contrast to the near-universal re-

putation of white supremacist *attitudes* in national politics, this polarization on appropriate racial *policies* is consistent with, and may be an insufficiently appreciated contributor to, the modern partisan polarization documented by many political scientists.¹² Primarily because most American voters are white and most whites oppose race-conscious policies, the nearly full fusion of the modern racial alliances with the two major parties

has contributed to the GOP's predominance in national elections since the mid-1970s.

This fusion, combined with the materially inegalitarian historical legacies of the nation's two previous eras of racial politics, has had further significance. Racial politics today is shaped by passionate beliefs that what the nation found to be true in the past remains true for current racial conflicts: that policy approaches can brook no compromise. American public policies, many believe, *must* be either altogether color-blind or consistently race conscious; there can be no principled middle ground. In one sense this is logically indisputable. If the nation has any race-conscious measures at all, then it has not achieved pure color blindness (if we make the questionable assumption that pure color blindness is possible).

Yet if the basic precept common to both modern racial alliances is to make extensive opportunities available to all regardless of race, then it is almost certainly true that the public policies most conducive to that goal involve some combination of race-“neutral” and race-“conscious” measures, whatever the correct relative proportions may be. But because compromise on racial issues seems immoral to many on both sides, because some on each side suspect their opponents of racism or “reverse racism,” and because the positions of both sides have also come to be identified with the political fortunes of the rival parties, the structure of American racial politics stands in the way of policy-makers and institutions openly devising and implementing such hybrid measures without being paralyzed by controversy.¹³ Ironically, the American party system was better able to work toward compromises during eras when the issues, in the end, were not truly subject to legitimate com-

promise. Today, when the need for ultimate victory by one side or the other is far less clear, compromise seems far more unlikely.

Barack Obama's writings, his strategy as a presidential candidate, and his actions during the first year of his administration all show that he understands the chief implication of the modern structure of partisan-allied racial alliances: a Democratic president cannot hope to satisfy the substantial portion of his constituents who adhere to the race-conscious alliance if he openly repudiates all race-targeted measures, nor can he be confident in making progress toward alleviating material racial inequalities if he does so. Yet in the (still) predominantly white national electorate, most voters favor color-blind policies, and any candidate who is strongly identified with race-conscious measures is likely to lose. Aided by exceptional circumstances, Obama negotiated adroitly the electoral challenges the structure of modern racial politics posed for him in his run for the presidency. How far his strategy will permit him to govern successfully, particularly on racial issues, remains to be seen.

Indeed, both major party campaigns in the 2008 presidential election showed awareness of the constraints as well as the opportunities modern circumstances afforded them. The racial alliances framework helps clarify why neither campaign stressed race and why, as the voting patterns discussed above show, racial concerns were nonetheless at work.¹⁴ Senator John McCain, the candidate of the color-blind alliance's party, knew he could not openly comment on the race of his opponent; after all, his coalition's ideology held that race should be treated as politically irrelevant. At the same time, because Barack Obama appears black to most Americans and identifies himself

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as African American, his candidacy raised worries among many in the color-blind alliance that, as president, Obama would expand pro-black racial preferences in many ways.¹⁵ But unless Obama openly urged such policies – which he was careful not to do – the McCain campaign had to make those concerns salient to voters without explicitly speaking of race. This rhetorical dilemma may account for the McCain ads asking, “Who is the real Barack Obama?” and declaring that McCain, in contrast, was “the American President Americans have been waiting for.”¹⁶ The appeals were efforts to stir fears about Obama, and for at least some proponents of color-blind policies, those fears must have included concerns that he would champion racial preferences.¹⁷

Obama faced still greater strategic challenges in his presidential campaign: as a black American, he had to win the support of an electorate that predominantly favors color-blind policies. Press coverage based on interviews with white working-class voters suggests that it would have been enormously difficult for him to speak extensively about race and racial issues without exacerbating concerns that he would indeed support more expansive race-targeted programs – fears that could have sealed his defeat.¹⁸ At the same time, his racial identity and his background as a civil rights lawyer meant that Obama did not have to articulate a specific racial agenda for many proponents of race-conscious measures to presume that he would be far more sympathetic to their positions than his opponent. Even so, Obama would have alienated important segments of his core supporters if he had unequivocally repudiated race-conscious programs and policies. Hence, his best option was to foreground largely “race-neutral” policies in his campaign, while retaining – in the background – indications of constrained but continuing sup-

port for race-conscious measures such as affirmative action.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, his book of policy and campaign positions, Obama explained his support for this strategy. In his chapter “Race,” he offered “a word of caution” not to assume that “we have arrived at a ‘postracial’ politics” or “already live in a color-blind society,”¹⁹ citing stark statistics on persistent material racial inequalities and invoking his own experiences of racism. Obama then argued, in accord with race-conscious proponents, “Affirmative action programs, when properly structured, can open up opportunities otherwise closed to qualified minorities without diminishing opportunities for white students.” He added, “[W]here 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.”²⁰ But Obama also stressed his understanding of arguments for color-blind measures. He advocated for an “emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific programs” as not only “good policy” but also “good politics.”²¹ He concluded that “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.”²²

In making this argument, Obama sought in his book and in his campaign to build a racial alliance that joined those Americans who predominantly favored color-blind policies, but could tolerate some race-conscious measures to alleviate material racial inequities, with those who thought substantial race-conscious

measures were needed but were willing to make concessions if progress was being achieved through other means. The only alliance that viably could have opposed this “mixed-strategy” coalition would have consisted primarily of voters openly opposed to further progress toward material racial equality altogether – a group that Obama could have reasonably expected to be small in twenty-first-century America. He pursued his strategy, for the most part, simply by not talking about race and by minimizing its likely impact on the election. Thus, he presented his rhetorical emphasis on unity and change in terms congenial to proponents of color-blind and race-conscious measures alike.²³ Though he did not eliminate the impact of racial resentment, it is likely that he reduced it.

In negotiating color-blind and race-conscious policies, Obama skillfully pursued the central theme of his campaign – indeed, of his entire political career. It is a theme embodied in his own life-story: America must strive to achieve the promise of *e pluribus unum*, “that out of many, we are truly one.”²⁴ He also benefited, however, from the extraordinary pressures for change that have abetted racial progress in the past. Obama was the candidate of the “out” party at a time when the nation, drained by warfare in two countries and wracked by the most severe economic collapse since the Great Depression, was poised for a Democratic landslide, at least according to many political scientists.²⁵ The Republicans ran a strategically dubious campaign, with McCain’s choice of an undeniably inexperienced vice presidential candidate, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, undercutting his argument that Obama was not ready for the presidency. Obama’s deft presentation of his theme of shared commitments to fellow Americans (rather than of race-

consciousness), reinforced by this remarkable conjunction of favorable external circumstances, helped him overcome the factors that long precluded a black candidate’s election as president of the United States.

Obama’s campaign theme – finding common ground by emphasizing unity and mutual service, even while respecting diversity – and the attendant strategy of stressing universal measures while not rejecting all race-conscious ones raise the question: can the president govern in ways that will sustain a coalition broad and deep enough to predominate in American politics for years to come? Will his “middle way” coalition end America’s third racial era of contestation over color-blind versus race-conscious policies? As of this writing, in Winter 2010, it is too soon to tell. President Obama has reduced U.S. troop deployments in Iraq but increased them in Afghanistan, and although the economy has ceased its precipitous fall, aided by Obama’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, unemployment and economic hardships remain high, and the rising public debt is a daunting policy constraint. He has won other significant domestic and foreign policy victories, including the Affordable Health Care for America Act, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the New START Treaty, and the Food Safety Modernization Act. But his party also endured major losses in the 2010 midterm elections. These circumstances leave Obama with little financial or political capital to spend on a specifically racial reform agenda. And despite his exceptional political skills, his administration and the United States still face major additional obstacles to progress on racial issues.

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First, by stressing color-blind or race-neutral approaches without rejecting all race-conscious policies, Obama continuously walks a tightrope. His administration was buffeted by controversies over the race-conscious remarks of his first Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor, who suggested that at least in some cases, a “wise Latina” might be able to reach better decisions than a white man.²⁶ It also saw a bare majority of the Supreme Court, but probably a larger segment of the public, reject the position of its amicus brief in the *Ricci v. DeStefano* case.²⁷ Consonant with Obama’s approach to race, the Justice Department argued that in order for public employers (in this case, the Fire Department in New Haven, Connecticut) to avoid lawsuits under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it should be permissible to abandon one race-neutral test for promotion in favor of another race-neutral test that is preferable on race-conscious grounds – that is, one likely to produce a more diverse workforce and leadership.²⁸

The city maintained that it would be vulnerable to lawsuits if its fire department used its original written test for promotion. The Supreme Court, whose Republican-appointed majority has moved the institution ever more firmly into the ranks of the color-blind alliance, adopted a daunting “strong-basis-in-evidence” standard to judge the city’s legal vulnerability that the city was unable to meet.²⁹ In dissent, Justice Ruth Ginsburg criticized this novel standard and insisted that the city could use a test that produced a racially disparate pattern of promotions only if that test was a business necessity. The record presented indicated that other tests that better identified merit would also be more racially inclusive.³⁰ Both the Court’s ruling and public discussions of the case showed that even this limited degree of

openness to race-conscious public policies faced strong judicial and political opposition.

New Haven had wished to turn to observational “assessment center” tests for promotion, tests that probably would have assessed merit at least equally as well and that likely would have produced a more racially diverse workforce and department leadership. If municipalities henceforth choose to avoid litigation by adopting such tests in advance (the general strategy preferred by the Obama administration), race-neutral means chosen on race-conscious grounds might prove more acceptable. In other words, a policy adopted as a quietly routine practice may provoke less controversy than one held up to judicial and political scrutiny. Furthermore, despite her comments, Sonia Sotomayor was confirmed, though in the hearings she backed away from, rather than defended, her earlier endorsement of race-conscious judging.³¹ These experiences suggest that Obama’s approach to racial issues may sometimes embroil him and his coalition in controversies he wishes to avoid; but the strategy may nonetheless form part of his endeavors that, on balance, succeed both politically and as policy.

A more fundamental question is whether Obama’s approach to race, and his more general strategy of seeking “*e pluribus unum*” solutions, can successfully reduce the nation’s material racial inequalities, as well as alleviate economic problems more generally, in a period of severe recession and polarized politics. As Obama recognizes, the persistence of severe racial disparities in most spheres of life makes it a virtual certainty that racial divisions will be visible in American politics as well. If toward the end of Obama’s first term the nation’s economy appears to be moving in the

right direction – a prospect that is now very uncertain – he may be able to sustain and even broaden his electorate, making a second term and further change possible. But he probably will have to do so almost entirely through “universal,” “race-neutral” measures. Both history and logic indicate that such programs often fail to reduce material racial disparities substantially. Frequently, they reduce some material suffering but leave racial gaps intact. Given the depth of the nation’s current economic and racial hardships, the possibility that “universal” programs will sufficiently diminish racial inequalities to quiet calls for race-conscious measures from the Left, or to limit concerns about black favoritism from the Right, is zero.

Also questionable is whether Obama can persuade many white Americans that his “universal” policies really are race-neutral. Political scientists Michael Tesler and David O. Sears find, for example, that racial resentment scores among whites continue to correlate strongly with assessments of Obama and with policy positions on a range of issues, such as health and tax policy, more so than with previous presidents.³² Prominent conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck regularly describe Obama’s policy proposals as “reparations,” even suggesting that Obama is a “racist” with a “deep-seated hatred of white people.”³³ Those perceptions lead to the dismissal of Obama’s efforts not to stress race-conscious measures.

There are also two other, somewhat less-apparent reasons that the third era of American racial politics is unlikely to be at an end. The first is that the race-conscious politics of the modern era have generated what might be termed “the multicultural challenge.” It is a challenge that goes to the heart of Obama’s core campaign 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.” 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.”³⁴

But Americans do not agree on what constitutes their “better history” or what constitutes “bridging,” as opposed to “erasing,” their differences. Some see the spread of religious diversity and greater secularity, for example, as advances for unity-despite-diversity. Others see those developments as moral decline, a retreat from America’s calling to be a “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 responsible for the repression of valued communities and identities. Put more broadly, it may well be impossible to give any specific content to the putative unifying values of Americans, without appearing to fail to recognize and accommodate the diversity of values Americans in fact exhibit. For many more multiculturally minded Americans, that diversity of values and identities should be not only tolerated but actively assisted in group-conscious public systems of political representation, public aid programs, educational curriculum, legally recognized rights, and other measures. Even if severe racial inequalities were miraculously alleviated during an Obama administration, race-conscious controversies over policies would remain. Nor is it clear that these disputes should be resolved one-sidedly: multicultural ideals have force in part because there are good reasons to doubt the propriety of a uni-

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fied sense of American national identity and purpose in which differences in racial experiences and identities are submergled or denied. Yet the need for some forms of unity is real.

Related to this multicultural challenge is another difficulty: the “cosmopolitan” challenge. Obama presents his own identity as a preeminent example of how unity can be forged from a background encompassing a 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 of what characterizes dominant but contested forms of American identity, including Christianity over Islam or secularity, American patriotism over cosmopolitanism or foreign allegiances, and an emphasis on unity across the races over racial separatism. He has contended, “coming together, all of us” to “do the work that must be done in this country” is “the very definition of being American.”³⁵ But among the domestic coalition that is Obama’s political base, as well as among the international leaders and movements with which he seeks to forge alliances, there are many who see Obama’s stress on the primacy of national identity as retrograde, archaic in an age of globalization, a barrier to desirable multilateral and international arrangements, and a rhetoric capable of being deployed on behalf of chauvinism. In this regard, too, Obama’s vision requires him to walk a tightrope between those who see his conception of Americanism as insufficiently celebratory of national greatness and too open to surrenders of national sovereignty, and those who see his stance as a refusal to accept that the era of sovereign nation-states, much less U.S. hegemony, is and ought to be coming to an end.³⁶

In response to all these challenges, Obama has defended in principle, and to all appearances he is pursuing in practice, a path expressive of the philosophic and political pragmatism historically associated with the University of Chicago, where he taught.³⁷ In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama interpreted the U.S. Constitution as “one that sees our democracy, not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had” – a conversation that rests on “a rejection of . . . the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or ‘ism’” that might stand in the way of finding practical means to meet as many partly conflicting, partly common aspirations as possible.³⁸ Obama recognized that the politics of “democratic deliberation” he applauded “seems to champion compromise, modesty, and muddling through; to justify logrolling, deal-making, self-interest, pork barrels, paralysis, and inefficiency” – practices he would soon be accused of indulging in as president. But he insisted it involved processes of “information gathering, analysis, and argument” that allowed Americans “to make better, if not perfect, choices, not only about the means to our ends but also about the ends themselves.”³⁹

Yet Obama then went on to recognize the limits of deliberation and the need not just for “the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise,” but also the “unbinding idealist” who demands true “justice,” like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Tubman. He lamented, “I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty – for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.”⁴⁰

Obama did not, however, identify his own “absolutes” – though his writings and speeches leave little doubt that they are defined in large part by the social justice traditions of America’s black

churches.⁴¹ His failure to articulate the absolutes of this moral vision is another consequence of the structure of modern racial politics. Although the preferred policies of the two rival racial alliances are not, in fact, utterly resistant to reasonable compromises, the leaders of today's racial alliances and political parties treat them as if they are, at least rhetorically. Therefore, it is difficult for Obama or anyone else to define a moral principle or policy that indicates how those differences can be resolved. Stating an "absolute" racial principle might reinforce the prevailing sense that no common ground on racial issues can be

found. Obama must hope instead that his politics and policies of pragmatic accommodation can achieve enough of what most Americans desire with regard to education, health care, employment, energy supplies, a clean environment, greater international peace, and freedom from invidious discrimination at home, so that tensions over racial principles and practices recede into the background. But much has to go right if that indirect approach to alleviating the nation's racial inequalities is to work. If it does not, Americans will remain enmeshed in the third era of U.S. racial politics for many years to come.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ These arguments are developed chiefly in Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, "Racial Orders in American Political Development," *American Political Science Review* 99 (2005): 75–92; Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, "Strange Bedfellows? Polarized Politics? The Quest for Racial Equality in Contemporary America," *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2008): 686–703; Rogers M. Smith and Desmond S. King, "Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics," *Du Bois Review* 6 (2009): 25–35; Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama's America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011). In these and the present essay, the order of authors' names indicates merely which author initiated the project. Here, we replace our earlier term "racial orders" with the more accessible term "racial policy alliances."

² This case is elaborated in Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³ "National Exit Polls Table," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>. See also Stephen Ansola-

- behere, Nathaniel Persily, and Charles Stewart III, "Race, Region, and Vote Choice in the 2008 Elections: Implications for the Future of the Voting Rights Act," *Harvard Law Review* 123 (2009): 16; <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1462363>.
- ⁴ Philip A. Klinkner and Thomas Schaller, "LBJ's Revenge: The 2008 Election and the Rise of the Great Society Coalition," *The Forum* 6 (2009): 1, 3; <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol6/iss4/art9>.
- ⁵ "National Exit Polls Table."
- ⁶ See, for example, Ansolabehere, Persily, and Stewart, "Race, Region, and Vote Choice," 3, 22–28; Philip A. Klinkner, "Obama and the Politics of Race," paper presented at the Western Political Science Association Meeting, Vancouver, British Columbia, March 19–21, 2009; Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Charles Tien, Richard Nadeau, "Obama's Missed Landslide: A Racial Cost?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 43 (2010): 69–75; Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- ⁷ Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau, "Obama's Missed Landslide," 75. They also find racial resentment to be significantly independent, rather than a component, of political ideology more generally. Klinkner and Schaller similarly estimate the "racial cost" of Obama's 2008 vote total as 4 percent.
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- ⁹ Julian Bond, "Civil Rights: Then and Now," *Race, Poverty, and the Environment*, 2008, <http://www.urbanhabitat.org/node/2806>; Jesse L. Jackson, "Appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court to Extend Affirmative Action, Not End It," *In Motion Magazine*, April 7, 2003, <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/opin/supreme.html>.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, J. Douglas, dissenting, *DeFunis v. Odegaard*, 416 U.S. 312, 344 (1974); Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- ¹¹ King and Smith, "Strange Bedfellows? Polarized Politics?" 691.
- ¹² See, especially, Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006); Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Support: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- ¹³ Many argue persuasively that policy-makers often do so covertly. See, for example, J. David Souter, dissenting, in *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 297–298 (2003) (Court is encouraging "deliberate obfuscation" in admission policies); Daniel Sabbagh, *Equality and Transparency: A Strategic Perspective on Affirmative Action in American Law* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
- ¹⁴ For elaboration on this topic, see Smith and King, "Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics."
- ¹⁵ Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau report polls indicating that 56 percent of respondents nationally "said yes, Obama would favor blacks," and of these "only 32% said they would support Obama," in contrast to 80 percent among those who said Obama would not favor blacks; Lewis-Beck, Tien, and Nadeau, "Obama's Missed Landslide," 74.
- ¹⁶ Howard Kurtz, "McCain Spot Asks: 'Who is Barack Obama?'" <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/10/06>; Chuck Raasch, "McCain's 'American' Claim Sparks Critics," http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/raasch/2008-04-03-raasch_N.htm.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

- ¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Wallsten, "For Obama, an Uphill Climb in Appalachia," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 2008; Chris Simkins, "US Voters Offer Opinions about Barack Obama, His Race, and Its Impact on the Upcoming Election," *Voice of America News*, October 14, 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/a-13-2008-10-14-voa36-66791107.html>.
- ¹⁹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 232.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 247.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 248.
- ²³ Obama did, of course, feel compelled to discuss race by the controversy over the views of his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. For discussion of Obama's response in relation to the racial alliances framework, see Smith and King, "Barack Obama and the Future of American Racial Politics," 30–31.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Lewis-Beck, Tien, Nadeau, "Obama's Missed Landslide."
- ²⁶ Dana Bash and Emily Sherman, "Sotomayor's 'Wise Latina' Comment a Staple of Her Speeches," <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/06/05/sotomayor.speeches/#cnnSTCTest>.
- ²⁷ *Ricci v. DeStefano*, 129 S. Ct. 2658 (2009).
- ²⁸ "*Ricci v. DeStefano*, Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae Supporting Vacatur and Remand," 2009, 22–32, http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/07-08/08-328_VacaturandRemandAmCuUSA.pdf.
- ²⁹ J. Kennedy, opinion of the Court, *Ricci v. DeStefano* at 2681.
- ³⁰ J. Ginsburg, dissenting, *Ricci v. DeStefano* at 2700–2707.
- ³¹ Amy Goldstein, Robert Barnes, and Paul Kane, "Sotomayor Emphasizes Objectivity: Nominee Explains 'Wise Latina' Remark," *The Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/14/AR2009071400992_pf.html.
- ³² Tesler and Sears, *Obama's Race*, 149–158.
- ³³ "Limbaugh Agrees with Sessions: Obama's 'objective is unemployment,'" ThinkProgress.org, May 11, 2009, <http://thinkprogress.org/2009/05/11/sessions-limbaugh-unemployment>; "Fox Host Glenn Beck, Obama is a 'racist,'" The Huffington Post, July 28, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/28/fox-host-glenn-beck-obama_n_246310.html.
- ³⁴ "Obama Closing Statement," <http://www.clipsandcomment.com/2008/10/27>.
- ³⁵ "Obama's Electrifying Lincoln 200th Birthday Speech in Springfield, Illinois," <http://www.buzzflash.com/articles/node/7708>.
- ³⁶ Several likely 2012 GOP presidential candidates have criticized Obama for not endorsing the idea that America is "exceptional" and superior to other nations; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/28/AR2010112804139.html>.
- ³⁷ For overviews of Obama's pragmatism, see James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hopes, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 56–80.
- ³⁸ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 92–93.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 207–208.

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