

Somewhere Over the Rainbow? Post-Racial & Pan-Racial Politics in the Age of Obama

Taeku Lee

TAEKU LEE is Professor and Chair of Political Science and Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley. His publications include *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (2002), *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Civic and Political Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States* (with S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Ricardo Ramírez, 2006), and *Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate* (with Zoltan Hajnal, 2011).

In his acceptance speech on Tuesday, November 4, 2008, President-elect Barack Obama took note that “tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment, change has come to America.” On the same night, Obama’s Republican challenger, Senator John McCain, responded similarly: “This is a historic election, and I recognize the significance it has for African-Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight. We both realize that we have come a long way from the injustices that once stained our nation’s reputation.” The next day, in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, scholar and critic Michael Eric Dyson declared: “The distance from King’s assassination to Obama’s inauguration is a quantum leap of racial progress whose timeline neither cynics nor boosters could predict. Today is a benchmark that helps to fulfill – and rescue – America’s democratic reputation.”¹

Looking back through history, few would argue against the view that Obama’s election to the presidency represented a rupture from centuries of white privilege as a presumption and a reality. Since the election, a greater diversity of opinion has emerged on what the presence of an individual of African American descent in the White House means for the future of race relations and racial politics in America. One particular view, however, has had a curiously forceful hold on public discourse. Beside Dyson’s op-ed, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Shelby Steele wondered aloud, “Does

[Obama's] victory mean that America is now officially beyond racism? ... Doesn't a black in the Oval Office put the lie to both black inferiority and white racism? Doesn't it imply a 'post-racial' America?"² Then, in the news coverage following President Obama's first State of the Union address, MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews infamously remarked: "I was trying to think about who he was tonight. And, it's interesting he is post-racial, by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour."

In this essay, I examine the continuing (if evolving) racial undertones of politics as a touchstone for three main points. First, I challenge the emergent understanding that an electoral key to Obama's post-racialism is the debt he owes to white independents, who presumably set aside decades of racially polarized voting and came to his side. Second, rather than affirming post-racial aspirations, I stress the need to redouble our efforts to understand how processes of racialization and "other-ing" are constituted and how they are shifting in the dynamic political moment we now occupy. Third, I propose using the concept of *pan-racialism* to think about how individuals of a shared demographic come to engage, politically, as a group. Careful consideration of how "group-ness" is constituted is essential to conceiving of a *pan-racial* politics across the diversity of racially and ethnically defined groups in the United States today.

I should preface my discussion of the current discourse on Obama and post-racial politics with two reminders. First, an abundance of proof suggests that rumors of the demise of race are, to summon Mark Twain, greatly exaggerated. Even during the election campaign and in spite of Obama's best efforts to convey a "post-racial" narrative, public dis-

course in 2008 was replete with signs of racial schism. It is difficult to reflect on Obama's candidacy and presidency thus far without conjuring memories of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright's controversial remarks and Obama's subsequent "A More Perfect Union" speech; the McCain-Palin campaign's thinly veiled allusions to race and patriotism in their "America First" sloganeering; the subsequent and ongoing mobilization of "Birthers" and "Tea Party Patriots"; the cries of "Foul!" to then-Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor's support for a "wise Latina" standpoint on the bench; the "beer summit" between Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cambridge police officer James Crowley; and many other instances of racial tension. Post-racialism, if the prefix *post-* means "coda," "transcendence," "abnegation," or "invisibility," is clearly more an aspiration (for some) than a materially achieved fact.

Why, then, in the face of all the vitriol and viperine attacks, do assertions of Obama's post-racialism persist? My second reminder is that much of the current discourse prevails because it is explicitly framed as non-racial or color-blind, or it is contrived in terms of patriotism, constitutionalism, cronyism, or some other allegedly race-neutral guise. That is, much like the deployment of stereotypes of black male hypersexuality and criminality through images of the furloughed felon William Horton in 1988,³ the racial character of Obama's presidency survives through framed messages, implicit associations, and the semblance of plausible deniability.

Not everyone will agree that race persists and that it survives behind a veil of color blindness and post-racialism. Nevertheless, in this essay, I consider these premises to be widely acknowledged in order to focus my discussion on a gener-

ally hidden transcript in the current dialectic of post-racialism. Political media coverage in the first years of the Obama presidency has been saturated with at least two controlling messages: first, that Obama's policy agenda and governing legitimacy are under siege; and second, that there is a groundswell of partisan disaffection – large enough to forecast an electoral tsunami in the off-year elections – punctuated by the ascendancy of Tea Party activists and other populist uprisings against both the Democratic and Republican parties.

There is a third, related media message that captures a key dimension of the current dialectic of post-racialism. That is, nonpartisan (read: white) voters are a critical segment of the electorate to whom Obama owes his 2008 victory, and those voters will bear decisively on his reelection prospects in 2012. During the 2008 campaign and after, the primacy of electoral place given to independent voters in mass media coverage could not have been more pronounced. As early as January 2008, an article in *The New York Times* carried the headline, "In This Race, Independents Are the Prize."⁴ In April, *Real Clear Politics* ran the article "Obama's Independent Edge" with this punchy subheading: "It's electability, stupid."⁵

By May 2009, four months after Obama entered the White House, the Pew Research Center published the in-depth report *Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era*.⁶ As disproportionately white segments of nonpartisans began to mobilize protest against Obama, the framing of that message shifted, starting with *The Wall Street Journal's* November 2009 pronouncement, "Obama is Losing Independent Voters."⁷ Following Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown's dark horse Senate victory and the passage of health care reform in April 2010, *The*

Washington Times ran the story "Independent Voters Turn Angry."⁸ A more recent contribution to this common narrative summarizes it thus: Barack Obama was "elected largely by independents and moderates who were furious at Republicans [and] at the status quo and the deeply divisive politics practiced by the two main parties"; and the seemingly ephemeral currency of Tea Party activists belies "a much more profound second wave of disaffected, independent voters."⁹

What is instructive in these journalistic diagnostics on independents and the Obama presidency is the near-total absence of any consideration of race. Yet when an explicit consideration of race is absent, an implicit presumption of whiteness (and its attendant privileges) often fills the space. As I will argue, the current discourse on independents is no different. In some accounts, the independents to whom Obama owes his place in American political history are represented by political scientists as ignorant, fickle, and ideologically centrist. In other popular accounts, they are mutinous, intensely anti-government voters typified by self-identified Birthers and Tea Party activists. In both cases, the presumption is that these voters are white. To challenge that presumption, Tea Party activists often create media spectacles to demonstrate that there are persons of color in their midst.

Obama's electoral debt to white independents rests on a loosely bundled associative logic, beginning with the postulate that the independent vote helped usher Obama into the White House. Attached to this hypothesis are two other suppositions: that independent voters are white, and that these white voters transcended their own racial identity and self-interest because Obama represented a post-racial politics. From these

assumptions, it stands to reason that Obama's future electoral prospects hinge on satisfying white independents and maintaining a resolutely post-racial political stance.

This trim and tidy logic falters in the face of some background facts about race, nonpartisanship, and voting behavior. Here I borrow arguments from my forthcoming book with Zoltan Hajnal to underscore three key points.¹⁰ First, the dynamics of partisanship have been shifting rapidly, and whites are no longer a disproportionate share of nonpartisan constituents in America. Second, an argument can credibly be made that Obama owes a greater electoral debt to non-white voters (partisan and nonpartisan) than he does to white independents. Third, these first two points can sustain an opposite inference about electoral debts and post-racial politics: namely, that there is a rare opportunity (which is still not lost, even after the Republican Party's gains in the 2010 midterm elections) for the age of Obama to be a defining moment not for the celebration of a post-racial politics, but rather for a collective struggle to build a *pan-racial* politics.

On the first point, in the earliest academic and media polls, independents were a relatively minor and (for the most part) ignored segment of the American electorate. The first Gallup polls in the 1940s show a range of 15 to 20 percent of Americans identifying as independents, and in the early 1950s, according to the initial American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys, about 20 to 25 percent identified as such. Studies of independents in this period were few and far between,¹¹ and political scientists generally took a dim view of these voters. Philip Converse, for instance, proposed the idea of a "normal vote," maintaining that partisan attachments are linked to voting behavior.¹² V. O. Key more explic-

itly described independents as "an ignorant and uninformed sector of the electorate highly susceptible to influence by factors irrelevant to the solemn performance of its civic duties."¹³

In these early surveys, presuming that independents were whites raised few eyebrows. The most visible sea change with respect to patterns of partisanship for non-whites was the realignment of African Americans from belonging to the "party of Lincoln" to strong attachments to the Democratic Party. Furthermore, non-whites were almost nowhere to be found in surveys of partisanship. From 1952 to 1972, more than 90 percent of all self-identified independents responding to the ANES survey were self-identified whites. The authors of some of the most commonly cited studies of independents simply excluded all non-whites from the analysis. They believed that any "increase in Independents was confined to the white population" and that including African Americans would only cloud the analysis; in other words, the study held that "because blacks are the most disaffected of any major population group, omitting them also avoids complications if one examines relationships between alienation and independence."¹⁴

What has changed about partisanship since the 1940s and 1950s? For one, the growing trend of identifying as an independent is unmistakable. By the 1970s, upwards of a third of Americans (and in some years, upwards of 40 percent) self-identified as independents, reacting to the root question, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" This figure is striking not just by comparison to earlier figures, but also because it is no longer uncommon for self-identified independents to constitute a plurality of the electorate.

This shift toward nonpartisanship, more likely than not, relates to factors such as declining levels of political trust, the tendency toward candidate-centered elections and nonpartisan local elections, and the putative rise in party polarization.¹⁵ It is also co-terminous with the rising backlash against the civil rights movement and urban uprisings in the 1960s on the one hand, and with the surge of migration to the United States after passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 on the other. Thus, the dynamics of race and immigration redound to the rise in nonpartisanship in three ways: whites are shifting their partisanship from Democrat to independent as a result of ideological ambivalence between their racial conservatism and liberal views on other political dimensions; African Americans in growing numbers are moving to nonpartisanship as they see their political interests marginalized and their votes taken for granted; and immigrants and second-generation Latinos and Asian Americans in surging numbers are remaining un beholden to parties they know little about and that do little to reach out to them.¹⁶

The growing number of Latino and Asian American non-identifiers in the electorate is part of a broader transformation in the American voting public. Some fifty years ago, white voters made up 95 percent of the active electorate. By 2008, whites were less than three-quarters of the voting population. This contrast over time is even sharper with independents. I noted earlier that through the early 1970s, whites made up more than 90 percent of self-identified independents. According to the 2008 ANES survey, less than 60 percent of all self-identified independents were white. Thus, as a general feature of nonpartisanship, it is simply mistaken to assume that independents are a “white” electorate.

What, then, about the specific postulate that a groundswell of white independents ushered Obama into the White House? Here, it is instructive to disaggregate the claim into two lines of inquiry. First, we can look more closely at the much-vaunted new voters of 2008. According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement, roughly five million new voters were mobilized in 2008. Of these, the CPS estimates that about two million were African American, two million Latino, and six hundred thousand Asian American. The CPS also finds no statistically significant new mobilization of whites in 2008. If one simply carries this data through the National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll estimates of vote share by race – specifically, that 95 percent of African Americans, 67 percent of Latinos, 62 percent of Asian Americans, and 43 percent of whites voted for Obama – one could reasonably extrapolate that Obama enjoyed the support of almost 80 percent of these new non-white voters.

Second, to examine the impact of the independent vote itself, we can compare the partisan breakdown of vote patterns in the 2004 presidential election, when Democratic candidate John Kerry lost, to those of 2008. The NEP exit poll data here show some basis for the claim that Obama owes his victory to (white) independents. The two-way split favoring the Democratic candidate remained unchanged between 2004 and 2008: 89 percent of self-identified Democrats voted for the Democratic candidate in both years. By contrast, a slightly higher proportion of self-identified independents reported voting for Obama (52 percent) than reported voting for Kerry (49 percent).

To this contrast in vote patterns, three additional facts should be added. First, Obama also saw an equivalent increase

(in percentage terms) in support among self-identified Republicans, garnering 9 percent of the Republican vote, while Kerry won only 6 percent of the crossover vote in 2004. A second key point is that the 3 percent uptick in independents' support for the Democratic candidate in 2008, as compared to 2004, is relatively slender compared to the changes when voters are differentiated by race rather than by partisanship. Support for Obama in 2008 exceeded support for Kerry in 2004 by 7 percent among African Americans, 9 percent among Latinos, and 6 percent among Asian Americans. Finally, while a majority of all independents reported voting for Obama, that central tendency shifts when independents are differentiated by race: according to the NEP data, only 47 percent of white independents voted for Obama, compared to roughly 70 percent of non-white independents.

These various points on race and independent voter trends invite caution in drawing conclusions about contemporary racial politics and the view that Obama and the Democrats are particularly beholden to white independents. Specifically, the evidence calls for a closer, more careful examination of the way that racial meanings are either sewn into or excised from the facts on the ground of the 2008 election (and, for that matter, of the 2010 midterm elections). Perhaps even more fundamental, the breakdown of voting patterns reveals a dynamic aspect in the evolution of democratic politics in America. The basic ingredients in the electoral stewpot – that is, who voters are and for whom they are voting – are being cooked anew, with an unmistakable racial and ethnic flavor to the fusion.

For many, the 2008 election was a long-anticipated watershed moment.

According to this view, the changing demographic and racial landscape that we have observed and experienced in America since the 1960s led to success on the national political stage. And that success was engendered by a *pan-racial* coalition of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and racially sympathetic whites. To others, Republican gains in the 2010 midterm elections – and the attendant rejection of Obama's agenda – represent a troubling counterpoint to Obama's 2008 victory as well as a reprise of the racial backlash that followed the legislative triumphs of the mid-1960s. As we look forward, a regnant concern of scholars and political observers alike will be whether the future is more likely to look like the election of 2008 or the election of 2010. In other words, is the multiracial coalition that was mobilized in 2008 a harbinger of future election dynamics, or will the ideal of a racially progressive coalition fracture under the weight of economic crises, partisan polarization, political distrust, and counter-mobilizing moral and racial panics?

The aspirations we can realistically glean from the 2008 election depend crucially on the meaning we attach to Obama's win. Much of this essay has been devoted to a critical stance toward one interpretation: that Obama's election signifies the triumph of post-racialism. Proposing an alternative meaning, of course, requires more than rejecting post-racialism. While a full consideration and defense of pan-racialism are beyond the scope of this essay, such a discussion would start by breaking away from the prevailing dialectic between a *racial* and a *post-racial* politics. The antipodes of this dialectic are a deeply particularistic (in some renditions, primordial) notion of zero-sum group loyalties counterposed against a radically disembodied and ahistorical conception of

willful color blindness. Pan-racialism proposes to overcome this bind through a relational and historically embedded standpoint of mutual recognition, collective inclusion, and moral partiality between all racial and ethnic groups that constitute a society.

The dialectic between a racial and post-racial politics is analogous to the opposition in ethics between the standpoint of a subjective and narrowly material form of ethical egoism and that of an impartial “ideal observer” (à la Kant, Rawls, or some version of agent-neutral consequentialism). Breaking free from the dialectic in ethics requires a defense of moral partiality, whether it is steeped in the tradition of analytic philosophy¹⁷ or in a relational “ethic of care.”¹⁸ The parallel between race and ethics underscores why post-racialism is so attractive in some quarters: there is a reigning fear that a *racial* politics behind the 2008 election implies a president and a presidency bound by particularism and drawn into modes of political clientelism. The analogy also suggests that pan-racialism might be a normatively desirable and defensible alternative to racial and post-racial politics.

To return to the question of what the future of electoral politics will bring, the extent to which race is central is especially pressing given current and future patterns of demographic change. A remix of electoral dynamics – who votes, whether their choices will be aligned to political parties, and whether parties will drum up the organizational resources and cultural competency to mobilize new voters – most likely will continue. Most prominent among the reasons for this prediction are the enduringly high rates of immigration from Latin America, Asia, and, to lesser degrees, the Caribbean and Africa. Moreover, increasing rates of racial exogamy and mixed race identification are accompanying the expansion of

immigrant-based ethnic communities of color. What is unclear is whether emerging groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans will evolve into significant players on the electoral stage as *Latinos and Asian Americans* and, if so, what impact they will have. However, the impulse to deploy conventional categories and modes of thinking hampers our ability to understand dynamic changes in our conceptual tools for studying both politics in general and racial politics more narrowly.

Politically, our thinking is anchored by our conventions about partisanship and its central place in American politics. Social scientists Donald Kinder and David Sears, for instance, note that “party identification remains the single most important determinant of individual voting decisions.”¹⁹ Yet as already noted above in this essay and elsewhere, non-partisanship (and not just Tea Party activists) is a growing force.²⁰ Moreover, this groundswell of nonpartisan discontent is transpiring together with (and perhaps in response to) a full-blown political polarization at the level of partisan elites.²¹

Among emerging groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans, nonpartisanship is especially widespread, and independents are not the only nonpartisan group of relevance. The relationship of Latinos and Asian Americans to the predominant two-party system in the United States underscores a pivotal point: the party identification scale that most political scientists continue to use (ranging from strong Democrats on one end to strong Republicans on the other, with independents at the midpoint) appears increasingly irrelevant to many Americans. It turns out that modal Latino or Asian American survey respondents simply do not know how to place themselves on such a scale. “Non-identifiers” (those

who respond to survey measures of party identification with “I don’t know,” “no preference,” “none of the above,” or “I just don’t think in terms of parties”) are more than one out of every three Latinos or Asian Americans. When self-identified independents are added to this group, nonpartisans comprise more than half of all respondents in the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS) and the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS).²² Thus, we limit our ability to accurately study and fully understand the electoral changes afoot by adhering to well-worn ways of categorizing and conceptualizing politics.

The same can be said of well-worn ways of categorizing and conceptualizing race. In the domain of racial politics, a further anchor that moors our thinking is the continued predominance of what Juan Perea termed a “Black/White binary paradigm.” Here, the accuracy of the term *paradigm* – at least in the Kuhnian sense – is debatable, and Perea’s definition of it as “the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White,” already feels dated.²³ Yet “black” and “white” continue to stand in as metonyms for two distinct models of politics. “Black” represents an archetype for a distinctive group politics based in racial self-definition and solidarity.²⁴ “White” represents a duality: of simultaneously being nowhere and everywhere, defined in direct opposition to the experience of African Americans and accepted without interrogation as the “null” hypothesis or “normal” state of affairs.²⁵

To consider the role of Latinos and Asian Americans in the future of racial politics, we might begin with a question posed by historian Gary Okihiro: “Is Yellow [or Brown] Black or White?”²⁶ Much of the extant political science

research on partisanship presumes a binary outcome variable whereby Latinos and Asians will either identify predominantly with the Democratic Party on the basis of group attachments, as African Americans have since the civil rights era, or split more evenly between parties on the basis of nonracial interests and ideologies, as whites are presumed to do. Similarly, scholars of political participation often imagine that Latinos and Asians will either be spurred into action by their racial group consciousness – a dynamic found among African Americans – or brought into politics through their socioeconomic position, civic skills, or the mobilizing force of organizations – as is found to be the case for whites. This binary logic further extends to debates over coalition politics, with scholars seeking to discover whether Latinos and Asians will form multiracial coalitions with African Americans or pan-ethnic coalitions across constituent ethnic groups, or whether racial and ethnic markers will recede in significance and cede to ideological, issue-specific, or context-specific determinants of intergroup conflict and cooperation.

In conceiving of the future of racial politics in these familiar, if problematic, dialectical terms, scholars and political observers presume that demographic labels such as “Latino” and “Asian American” imply a *prima facie* basis for group politics.²⁷ This premise, which I refer to as the “identity-to-politics link,” has a solid empirical foundation for African Americans but is decidedly less certain for other racially and (pan)ethnically defined groups. We cannot assume that Latinos and Asian Americans are functionally isomorphic either to African Americans (for whom a strong racial group identity and corresponding politics are expected) or to whites (for whom the absence of such identity-based politics,

or the presence of undifferentiated processes of assimilation into “whiteness,” is expected).

Discerning whether we are headed for a racial, post-racial, or pan-racial electoral future will require better theoretical frameworks for race and racial politics. I propose, as one point of departure toward such improved frameworks, an examination of several specific and conceptually separable processes that are often bundled together when identity categories are linked to group politics. These processes include racial classification, category identification, and group consciousness, as well as two aspects of collective action: venue selection and coordinating choice.

In what follows, I describe each of these processes and illustrate their potential utility by examining their specificity to one emerging group: Asian Americans. For most informed observers, the idea of a politics of Asian Americans *as* Asian Americans may seem like a nonstarter. While Asians in America may commonly be defined under a single, “pan-ethnic” rubric, beneath that thin fascia of social convention lies a remarkable “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” that defies simple categorization.²⁸ Furthermore, while the sheer growth in numbers of Asian Americans is dramatic and unlikely to plateau, a disproportionately low number (slightly more than one in three Asian adults in the United States) are active voters. As mentioned above, nonpartisanship is pervasive among Asian Americans as well.

Yet precisely because the idea of a group-based politics for Asian Americans *qua* Asian Americans seems inchoate, and perhaps even untenable, Asian Americans represent an especially important test case for theories of racial group identity. For one, periods of rapid

change and growing complexity – including the present times – often represent critical junctures for redefining existing group boundaries and intergroup relations. Furthermore, Asian Americans represent a *prima facie* “most different” case to African Americans. While both groups share the joint experience of externally perceived homogeneity, internally lived heterogeneity, and a resulting history of marginalization and struggle, their racial positions are distinct. The “relative valorization” of Asian Americans as “model minorities” is a relational standpoint vis-à-vis African Americans: in the public imaginary, Asians are praised for exhibiting putatively model behavior relative to other racial minorities, who are supposedly less norm-conforming and virtuous in their behavior.

Classification. To determine whether a coherent and politically significant conception of pan-ethnic “group-ness” exists for Asians in the United States, we must first more fully understand how a society defines, categorizes, and counts its population by identity categories. Our current pentachromatic classification system – per the 1977 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) “Directive 15” and, before that, the 1965 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) “EEO-1” form – is generally adopted and replicated in surveys and other modes of data collection without much question or consternation. Yet even a cursory glance over time reveals the often contested and radically unstable nature of the identity categories we use to define a population in racial and ethnic terms. In short, those categories are not foreordained but wrought through a combination of social, economic, legal, and political processes.²⁹

Americans of Asian origin never fit comfortably into the country’s initial racial categorization of Caucasian/white, Negro/black, and American Indian.

Consequently, the racial classifications assigned to them are variable and often arbitrary. Here, two pivotal legal decisions are instructive. In the 1922 case *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a person could not be deemed white by virtue of light complexion because individuals of Japanese origin belonged to an “unassimilable race.” Three months later, in an apparent reversal of its decision, the Court ruled in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that, despite the anthropological consensus of the day, persons from the Indian subcontinent were to be classified as Caucasian; a person of Asian-Indian origin, however, could not be deemed white because such a classification violated “the understanding of the common man.”

Our present system of racial classification is no less mired in contradictions. The most recent decennial census forms, for instance, imply that some populations defined by national or territorial origin – Asian-Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese – are separate races (categorically equivalent to “white” and “black, African American or Negro”), while others – Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban, for example – share a single “ethnicity.” Moreover, in 1997, the OMB revised its Directive 15, drawing the boundaries of Asia (for the purposes of racial classification) between the Asian subcontinent and the Middle East; accordingly, individuals with “origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” are defined as white. As former director of the U.S. Census Bureau Kenneth Prewitt laments, “[T]he racial measurement system is now vastly more complicated and multidimensional than anything preceding it, and there is currently no prospect of returning to something simpler.” He adds that this system is “less well

grounded in science than any other population characteristic measured by the nation’s statistical agencies.”³⁰

Category Identification. The second process that links demographic identity categories to a group-based politics is the degree to which individuals identify with the racial classifications assigned to them. The mere contrivance of racial categories is no guarantee that the individuals to whom the categories are meant to apply will accept them. The intrinsic distinction between how individuals think of themselves (identification) and how those individuals might be defined by others (ascription) may seem like a mere theoretical possibility, but that possibility is likely to be quite palpable for certain groups, such as new immigrants who come with no priors on the grammar of race in the United States.

The non-automaticity of category identification is visible in the responses that Asian Americans give in opinion surveys. Consider the category “Asian American,” the pan-ethnic rubric that is commonly ascribed to U.S. residents of Asian origin. Respondents to the 2008 NAAS were given the prompt, “[P]eople of Asian descent in the U.S. use different terms to describe themselves,” and then asked how they thought of themselves.³¹ Only about one in eight respondents self-identified primarily as “Asian American,” with roughly 70 percent preferring their ethnic/national origin group (for example, either “Filipino” or “Filipino-American”). By contrast, in the 2006 LNS, the proportion of respondents who self-identified as “Hispanic” and “Latino” was roughly equal to self-identification with national origin descriptors (at just below 40 percent).³²

Group Consciousness. A third key component of a racial group-based politics is a shared sense of commonality and collective interests. This process potential-

ly is decisive because not all individuals and groups who accept an identity label ascribed to them will agree about what that label means to their subjective sense of self. These categories may, on the one hand, represent nothing more than analytic truths or linguistic conventions. Yet on the other hand, they may embody an intimate connectivity among individuals. Here again, it is instructive to consider immigrants and their offspring as newcomers to American society. An immigrant from El Salvador may choose to self-identify as “Latino” as a learned response, taking cues from his or her relatives, friends, coworkers, or neighbors. Yet it hardly follows that the individual would feel a sense of solidarity or common destiny with others who have also learned to self-identify as Latino.

We have seen that few Asian Americans identify primarily with the prevailing pan-ethnic descriptor. But do they share a greater sense of common purpose or collective consciousness, notwithstanding their attachment to labels? NAAS respondents were asked about their sense of “linked fate” or, more specifically, whether “what happens generally to other groups of Asians in this country affects what happens in [their] life.”³³ In this sense of “groupness,” the picture is mixed: while close to 40 percent of respondents agreed that their personal lot was at least somewhat connected to the fate of other Asians, only 9 percent reported a strong connection. By contrast, nearly three out of every four African Americans surveyed in the 1996 National Black Election Study reported at least a “somewhat strong” sense of linked fate; close to 37 percent felt a “strong” connection. At the same time, Asian Americans who feel a strong sense of collective consciousness are politically distinct from those who do not: they are more likely to be partisans

and ideologues, to be politically active, and to perceive political commonalities with Latinos, African Americans, and other non-whites.

Group-Based Coordination. A final precondition to group politics is coordinating collective action itself. The road from affinity to action is often winding and bumpy, if connected at all. Collective action does not materialize spontaneously, even in the presence of agreement about the applicability of group labels and solidarity among those to whom the labels are attached. Moreover, there are multiple aspects of choice that require coordination. Ab initio, those who intend to act together in the best interests of the group must first decide (or at least accept as a premise) that politics is a meaningful venue for the pursuit of the group’s interests. Despite clear and strong civic norms of participation and the historical memory of empowerment through collective movements, it is still far from obvious that racialized groups – especially when social stigma and material privation factor into that racialization – are inclined to pursue recognition and remedy through politics rather than the collective pursuit of economic advancement, cultural maintenance, bonding social capital, community self-determination, or some other mode of group-based engagement. For immigrant-based groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans, the question of where to direct collective efforts is likely to be especially pressing.

For Asian Americans, survey data suggest that the pursuit of common in-group interests does not necessarily take place in the political arena. Respondents to the 2008 NAAS were asked, “what, if anything, do Asians in the United States share with one another?” Of four possible bases for commonality given – “a common race,” “a common culture,” “common economic interests,” and

“common political interests” – the highest proportion of respondents believed that Asian Americans shared a common culture (almost two-thirds) while the lowest proportion (under 40 percent) believed that politics was a unifying dimension of the Asian American experience. At the same time, respondents with a strong linked-fate orientation were also significantly more likely to believe that Asians shared all four foundations: more than half of Asian Americans with a strong linked-fate orientation were likely to view Asians as sharing collective political interests, while only one in three who rejected the linked-fate hypothesis viewed Asian Americans as having common political interests.

Beyond the choice of politics as the proper venue for collective pursuits, group-based coordination requires agreement over what to do. That is, a given group of individuals originating from various countries in Asia may be given the common label “Asian American,” may self-identify with that descriptor, may feel a sense of solidarity with their sisters and brothers in that identity category, and may even agree that politics is the proper place for their racial projects. Nonetheless, there are many aspects of collective choice, such as whether to focus one’s politics at the federal, state and local, or transnational level; whether to form a partisan bloc vote or a less partisan swing vote; or whether to influence policy agendas by engaging in the electoral arena, gaining access through campaign contributions, or building a strong “civil society” of community-based organizations, voluntary associations, and advocacy groups. These key steps in collective choice are often presumed to materialize in the case of African American politics, where the modes and levels of political participation are multiple and where, for a

given election, 80 to 90 percent of individuals within this demographic identify with the Democratic Party and vote, often in lockstep, with the party’s political candidates.

For Asian Americans, by contrast, there are several interrelated and unfolding narratives of choice. One recurring theme is the relatively high proportion who are unattached to either of the two major parties that define U.S. politics; yet there is a discernible trend toward forming partisan ties the longer one is in the United States. Further, there has been a trend over the last several presidential elections toward Asian American voters crystallizing as a strongly Democratic segment of the electorate. A second theme is the still relatively low proportions that vote; however, the 2008 election shows (as with Latinos and African Americans) the capacity for a sizable and decisive mobilization. A third, related theme is the continuing reluctance (for the most part) of the majority of candidates and party elites to view Asian Americans as a segment of the electorate that can be mobilized; nevertheless, those Asian Americans who report being contacted by a party or candidate are significantly more likely to be voters. On the last point, the 2008 NAAS data show that respondents who were mobilized by a party or candidate were more than twice as apt to be a “likely voter” than those who were not. Moreover, the campaign effort to contact potential voters had a clear substitution effect: it increased support for Obama and decreased the proportion of undecided voters.

This essay is somewhat of a two-step with two left feet. One foot is tapping out the rhythm of the commonly held view that the 2008 election heralded the inception of a post-racial era of electoral

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politics and that Obama owes a primary political debt to white independent voters who abandoned their racial loyalties to make history. Against this narrative, I have suggested that Obama's electoral success is also the result of the mobilization of partisan and nonpartisan voters of color. Moreover, the current political moment might just as well be the harbinger to a more pan-racial, not post-racial, era of politics. Along the way, I have also highlighted several ways in which nonpartisanship is increasingly multiracial, multifaceted, and politically consequential.

Meanwhile, the other foot is tapping to the rhythm of an important background question: that is, will demographically defined populations come to do politics together – and if so, when and how? Here, one must be careful of a disruptive counter tempo: the tendency to look at emerging, immigrant-based groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans through the lens of African American or white politics. A group basis to politics is contingent, not on other groups' political narratives, but on the convergence of multiple processes: namely, the contestation and construction of racial and ethnic descriptors that align with how a population thinks of itself; a shared sense of common destiny and collective solidarity within a given population, defined in ethnic and racial terms; and coordination on the fitting venue for the

pursuit of common goals as well as on the collective choice itself (to be swing voters, bloc voters, or non-voters; to engage in elections, community activism, or some other mode of engagement; and so on). To animate these steps, I have sampled some beats from the politics of Asian Americans to see how they jive (or fail to jive) with this identity-to-politics link. In doing so, I hope not only to have illuminated why the politics of a group such as Asian Americans remains distinct from that of both African Americans and whites, but also to have uncovered the processes that must be activated to solidify a more (or less) group-based politics.

Ultimately, both feet in this polyrhythmic dance come together on two simple yet crucial points. First, prevailing beliefs about post-racialism, nonpartisanship, and their defining effects on the political moment are aspirations and assumptions as often as they are established facts. To accept them is to permit tacitly an act of collective obscurantism. Second, what many have called the "age of Obama" is neither a predestined outcome nor a material fact. It is a public construction whose form will depend on how we interpret ongoing events and determine which future (racial, post-racial, or pan-racial) we struggle for. Barack Obama, irrespective of his preferences on the matter, stands as a metonym for race relations in the twenty-first century.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁶ Hajnal and Lee, *Why Americans Don't Join the Party*.
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- ³¹ For this and in remaining sections, the survey data are from the 2008 NAAS, the first nationally representative sample survey of the political behavior and attitudes of Asian Americans. It includes 5,159 interviews conducted between August 18, 2008, and October 29, 2008. The primary sample consisted of the six largest Asian national-origin groups (Asian-Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese), and respondents were interviewed in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Japanese, and Hindi. See Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, and Junn, "Race-Based Considerations."
- ³² Some of this difference is due to the relative proportion in the two samples of foreign-born respondents; 88 percent of the weighted sample of the NAAS is foreign-born, compared to 67 percent of the LNS.
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