ABSTRACT  Political science began in the late nineteenth century as an explicitly racist discipline. Although this changed in the twentieth century, mainstream scholars then neglected racial politics and issues in America for too long. NCOBPS originated in 1969 as part of efforts of scholars of color to address these deficiencies. Throughout its history, it has done so. NCOBPS has fostered more insightful scholarship on a wide range of topics, including their racial dimensions. It has helped to develop leadership skills that have benefited the discipline as a whole. And it has nurtured an activist-scholar ethos that has helped the discipline do a better job of listening to, and benefiting, the populations it studies. The NCOBPS-APSA partnership has grown much stronger over the last half-century; it will need to be cultivated further if the discipline is to confront constructively the intellectual and political challenges it faces in the twenty-first century.  

KEYWORDS  NCOBPS, APSA, racial politics, political science, activist-scholar

Because I have the honor to be president of the American Political Science Association during the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, it falls to me to respond to two questions posed by NCOBPS’s leaders: First, why is NCOBPS important to political science in the twenty-first century? And second, what should its relationship to APSA be today? My answers are, first, NCOBPS is important because the political science discipline’s predominantly white mainstream has never adequately addressed the politics of race, especially the politics of race in America. We have made progress, partly due to NCOBPS, but the election of 2016 provided fresh evidence that we are still not doing as well as we should. And second, these facts mean that going forward, NCOBPS and APSA must be partners, building on collaborative initiatives that have grown over the years, and finding further ways the associations can assist and strengthen each other.

To understand the answer to the first question, we must begin by remembering that American political science began in the late nineteenth century as an explicitly racist discipline. The first two departments to become leading producers of political science PhDs, the Johns Hopkins program led by Herbert Baxter Adams that trained Woodrow Wilson and the Columbia program led by John Burgess that trained Theodore Roosevelt, both taught politics and history as stories of the evolutionary triumphs of the white Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic races, allegedly the only races proven capable of liberty and self-governance.1 Their students, particularly Wilson, went on to become architects of Jim Crow systems of disfranchisement and segregation. What we now know as the subfield of international relations similarly began with a focus on problems of imperial governance,
understood chiefly in terms of racial differences. Its leading publication was the *Journal of Race Development*, later renamed *Foreign Affairs*.²

It is true that by the 1920s, many political scientists were abandoning theories of Anglo-Saxon or white supremacy, a shift that accelerated as the rise of the Nazis and then World War II led more and more white Americans to define themselves as opposed to racism. But the mainstream discipline’s former emphasis on white racial superiority did not give way in these decades to a new focus on egalitarian racial progress. Instead, with a few exceptions like Chicago’s Harold Gosnell, most mainstream white scholars neglected issues of race.³ As African Americans slowly began to be admitted to PhD programs in political science, their research on racial topics attracted very little attention in the discipline. Gosnell relied in part on the early work of Ralph Bunche, the first African American PhD in political science and later the first African American president of the American Political Science Association. But Bunche once remarked that he had focused his career on international relations because there wasn’t “a very cordial reception” in political science for his papers dealing with domestic racial issues.⁴

This neglect of the role of race, particularly in American politics, damaged scholarship and teaching in political science. It meant that the pluralists who came to dominate the profession in the 1950s and 1960s as part of its behavioral revolution largely failed to predict or to analyze the rise of the civil rights movement, and then the character of its achievements and limitations. The book that probably did most to found the pluralist paradigm, David Truman’s *The Governmental Process*, referred to racial exclusions only obliquely in its closing pages.⁵ The book that was perhaps the pluralists’ leading empirical achievement, Robert Dahl’s *Who Governs?*, treated racial and ethnic concerns as matters that gradually gave way over time to clashes of interests rooted solely in economics and aspirations to power.⁶ When the pluralists did discuss civil rights, they generally treated them strictly as efforts to eliminate formal barriers to the integration of African Americans into the nation’s polling booths and job markets. They did not analyze very deeply the complex intertwining of race and class interests and identities that had generated systematic political and economic exclusions and subordinations in the first place. Most white political scientists were also blind to the ways that calls for integration could amount to compulsory assimilation into the practices of white middle-class American society, in ways that for many African Americans involved losses of identity and continuing barriers to their distinctive economic and political aspirations. African American political scientists, frustrated with these deficiencies in the discipline’s mainstream and with the limited opportunities that APSA offered them, created what became NCOBPS in 1969 as an autonomous vehicle to address these concerns.⁷ NCOBPS has since strengthened the discipline of political science in three distinct and vital ways.

First, NCOBPS has helped to advance the intellectual careers of scholars of color, and it has therefore helped the discipline as a whole to achieve more nuanced understandings of issues of race, ones more richly informed by black experiences, analyses, and insights.

Second, NCOBPS has helped scholars of color to push back against continuing discrimination in the profession, and it has served as a vital training ground for leaders
of the entire discipline. Three past presidents of NCOBPS have gone on to become presidents of the American Political Science Association (Lucius Barker, Dianne Pinder-hughes, and my successor, Paula McClain). I have personally benefited from the fact that two scholars long active in NCOBPS—Tyson King-Meadows, another former NCOBPS president, and former section chair Valeria Sinclair-Chapman—have been invaluable members of my APSA Presidential Task Force on New Partnerships.

Third is a contribution that, even more than the first two, has been insufficiently understood and appreciated by many mainstream political scientists. As Joseph McCormick stressed in his article on the early development of NCOBPS, the organization has always welcomed and fostered an activist-scholar ethos. Many of its members have seen their academic work as part of broader endeavors, generally struggles, to achieve progress in the larger world, by pursuing the full liberation of black people in ways that will ultimately expand opportunities for all people. Far too many times, when the work of political scientists has revealed that they care passionately about politics, mainstream political scientists have seen this passion as almost discreditable. We have too often pursued our work without much focused attention on whether it has any real prospects of discovering and helping to fulfill the most deeply felt aspirations of the people whose political lives we study. NCOBPS has always provided a home for scholars who strive to work with the communities they study, in ways that can both advance knowledge and benefit those communities.

Today, although the discipline has progressed in many ways in part through the contributions of NCOBPS, we still have further improvements to make. Just as mainstream political scientists failed to pay sufficient attention to the rise of the civil rights movement, we also largely failed to anticipate the rise of Donald Trump and the role of racial resentments, along with other grievances, in that rise. In the two decades preceding the election of 2016, the dominant message in the discipline was that racial concerns were receding in importance with the overwhelming discrediting of explicit racism, though “dog whistle” racial appeals still had power. In 2005, Desmond King and I argued that this limited attention to the racial dimensions of modern American politics was insufficient, that race-related conflicts were so pervasive and impactful that “the question of what role race may be playing should always be part of political science inquiries.” This argument hardly stemmed from professional or personal self-interest. Both King and I work extensively on other topics (and there aren’t many people who are whiter than King and Smith, at least as whiteness is conventionally understood). Our contention stemmed from evidence and analysis—but it was nonetheless attacked as “ideological,” “unscientific,” even “anti-science.”

After Trump’s triumph, some political scientists have swung, if anything, too much the other way, contending that racism alone explains Trump’s appeal, in ways that neglect how policies of economic globalization and elite cultural disdain for more traditionalist Americans have also fueled his voters’ discontents. As a discipline, we are still not succeeding in coming to grips with the complex entanglements of racial and economic systems of inequality that have been so central for so long to American political life. Scholars in comparative politics have often done better in dealing with issues of racial and
ethnic as well as economic conflict. But even so, many failed to anticipate the rise of conservative nationalist figures like Orban in Hungary, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, and many others. The intellectual contributions of the American and international scholars associated with NCOBPS are and will be, if anything, more important than ever in understanding politics in the United States and around the world in the twenty-first century.

That fact shapes my briefer response to the second question raised at the outset of this essay: What should the relationship of NCOBPS and APSA be? It should be, it must be, a strong partnership. Although it has become much more so in the last couple of decades, there is still more that we can do. APSA’s core mission is to strengthen the discipline. We are fortunate that the association has resources that put us in a position to pursue that goal in a variety of ways. Working closely with NCOBPS is a key means for doing so.

It has now become customary for the APSA executive director or president, or both, to attend every NCOBPS conference. The APSA Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession, which embarrassingly failed to attend the NCOBPS founding meeting, now also regularly convenes at each NCOBPS conference. And under the leadership of APSA Senior Director for Diversity and Inclusion Dr. Kim Mealy, APSA has for some years been sponsoring or co-sponsoring NCOBPS events and activities, such as a graduate student professional networking reception, a reception for the NCOBPS president, a Cambridge University Press exhibit table, and more. Recently APSA’s Special Projects Fund has aided several endeavors by scholars active in NCOBPS, here and abroad. My Task Force on New Partnerships, under the guidance of Tyson and Valeria and others, including its chair, Robert Lieberman, has persuaded the council to approve a new APSA Award for Distinguished Civically Engaged Research, and an APSA Summer Institute for Civically Engaged Research. These initiatives seek to foster in the profession as a whole the kind of ethos of active civic engagement that NCOBPS has long nurtured.

In a similar spirit, we have also launched the first of what we hope will be a series of “Research Partnerships on Critical Issues” that will bring together experts from inside and outside the academy to find common ground and clarify differences on major issues of our time. Our first such “RPCI,” addressing the dysfunctional state of the US Congress, includes several scholars active in NCOBPS. We have also created a Public Scholars program to translate technical political science papers into forms accessible to the general public and useful for teaching. We are beginning with *American Political Science Review* articles, but we hope to extend the program to articles in other journals, including the *National Review of Black Politics*. And we have initiatives to assist political science teaching in various ways that are being led by scholars at teaching-intensive institutions, a category that includes many historically black and historically Latino colleges and universities.

In all these endeavors and many more, APSA will benefit from working closely both with NCOBPS-affiliated scholars and with NCOBPS as an institution. The more APSA and NCOBPS can partner effectively, the greater the chance that our discipline’s scholarship and teaching will do a better job in the future of grasping major political
developments involving issues of race. I even dare to hope that we will do a better job of helping to overcome many of the inequalities that our discipline once helped to build, and helping to achieve the inclusive human betterment that should always have been, and always must be, our ultimate goal.

NOTES
10. Similar charges were leveled against my 1993 insistence on “the possibility that new intellectual systems and political forces defending racial and gender inequalities may yet gain increased power in our own time”; “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” American Political Science Review 87, no. 3 (1993): 563.