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# Race and Politics in the Age of Obama

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## Abstract

Race has rarely mattered more in US politics than it does now. The election of President Obama has laid bare the racial divisions that continue to fracture the United States. In this review, I explore the emerging scholarship that assesses Obama's impact on social and political life in the United States. I first examine the symbolic meaning of Obama's election to black and white citizens. Second, I analyze how racism has influenced whites' political behavior and policy preferences. Next, I examine how President Obama has influenced public policy. Then, I suggest that the toxic political climate surrounding Obama is just another installment of a saga in which rapid social change is met with anxiety and anger by some whites who perceive their way of life as being under threat. Finally, I illustrate how the "Obama effect" combines with the perceived "Latino threat" to affect whites' political behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

“The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” [Du Bois 1903 (2003), p. xli]. It is no mystery how W.E.B. Du Bois arrived at this conclusion. When he wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, Jim Crow, a legal system of racial segregation that would continue for approximately 60 years, was barely 20 years old. Of course, conditions for blacks beyond the South were not much better (e.g., Chen 2009, Hosang 2010, Sugrue 1996). With the possible exception of the ways in which Muslims were racialized in the wake of 9/11 (e.g., Stubbs 2003/2004), the traditional racial divisions in the United States reappeared on the US political radar in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Since its reemergence, race has remained a force with which to reckon in the United States, mainly as a source of inequality. Indeed, well into the twenty-first century, race continues to account for sundry disparities in several domains, including education, income, wealth, housing, health outcomes, and incarceration (e.g., Dawson 2011, chapter 1).

Many hoped that the election of the first black president of the United States would signal the end to what may rightfully be called the continuing significance of race. Indeed, as I write, we should be into our seventh year of postracialism in the United States, but we are clearly not (Tesler 2016). The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the murders of blacks by whites underscores the continuing significance of race in the age of Obama. The racial strife on college campuses, including Ivy League institutions, is also indicative of the continuing significance of race in America. Although the significance of race continues, we lack a clear understanding of how, if at all, the presence of Obama as a political figure affects how race operates in the context of social and political life in the United States.

In this review, I explore the ways in which the emergence of Barack Obama on the political scene has affected how race shapes, and is shaped by, politics in the United States. The scholarship on Obama is voluminous relative to the short time during which he has been on the American political landscape. For the sake of brevity, I will confine this essay to four substantive areas, all of which include Obama’s connection to race, racism, and politics.

I begin with an exploration of how Obama’s rise as nominee and time as president affected the conversation on race relations and racial progress. Next, I examine how the nomination and eventual election of the 44th president affected US politics, in particular the two major political parties and the dynamics in Congress. Further, I dive into the ways in which his campaigns have affected political behavior, and then I shift gears to assess how President Obama influenced the direction of public policy. In the final section, I examine what ultimately drives the reaction to a black president: Is it, as many have surmised, all about race? Or are there alternative explanations for how Americans received President Obama?

## THE MEANING OF OBAMA

In many quarters, the nomination and election of Obama was taken as a sign that the United States was, perhaps, finally moving beyond race—that the significance of race was, at last, in decline. This belief can assume a number of guises. For instance, moving beyond race (e.g., becoming postracial) includes the perception that race relations have improved and an interracial comity has emerged. In reality, however, the perception of race relations is typically a one-way street: the perception of blacks by whites (e.g., Bobo & Kluegel 1997). For reasons discussed below, the emergence of Obama on the political scene also held the potential to affect the ways in which blacks perceived a decrease in discrimination and, therefore, an increase in the number of opportunities available to them. Collectively, these outcomes have come to be known as the Obama effect.

For blacks, the so-called Obama effect is manifold, beginning with the belief that the election of a black man must signal improving conditions for blacks as a whole. After centuries of enduring race-based domination, blacks had been systematically stripped of any hopes that they would witness racial equality in their lifetime, much less soon (Dawson 2011, chapter 1). The election of Obama to the most powerful office in the world, however, was seen as proof that the American Dream was within the grasp of blacks. Indeed, Obama's initial victory in 2008 made blacks feel better about their life chances even though their objective economic conditions declined more dramatically than those of whites during that year (Stout & Le 2012). Moving beyond the symbolic nature of the Obama effect among blacks, others have analyzed how Obama's victory might inform the ways that blacks perceive concrete opportunities. As Hunt & Wilson (2009) make plain, blacks tend to see the emergence of Obama as a sign that they will more easily advance in their chosen professions and will have more political opportunities at the national level.

There is another way in which Obama's candidacy and subsequent victory shaped black perceptions, beyond race relations, racial progress, and life chances. Some contend that the Obama effect extends to the ways in which blacks see themselves by serving as a reminder of what is possible. This is important because, as the seminal research by Steele & Aronson (1995) indicates, blacks tend to internalize the negative stereotypes often attributed to them, and those stereotypes often impede their ability to achieve. In the present case, the achievements of Obama as a role model for blacks might mitigate, if not completely undermine, the internalization of negative stereotypes. As promising as this sounds, the jury remains out on this. Whereas one group of scholars have confirmed the proposition that the Obama effect extends to the weakening of existing stereotypes (by reducing the role race plays in test performance; see Marx et al. 2009), another study, using an experimental design, has called into question the existence of such an effect, because invoking Obama failed to increase test-based performance (Aronson et al. 2009).

Of course, the real impetus for exploring the existence of the Obama effect is the way in which the candidacy and election of the first black president stood to affect the racial attitudes of whites (Welch & Sigelman 2011). Beyond the fact that whites who tended to feel comfortable with black candidates were more likely to vote for Senator Obama than those who were not (Block 2011), the rough consensus is that his success has undermined stereotypes of blacks as lazy, unintelligent, violent, and unpatriotic (e.g., Bobo & Kluegel 1997); in short, a salient and positive example of blackness has been shown to improve racial attitudes toward blacks (Bodenhausen et al. 1995, Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001).

There is evidence to support such claims. Let us begin with explicit racial attitudes, which include prejudices and possibilities for racial progress. Drawing on a longitudinal design analyzing the effects of media exposure to Obama's presidential campaign, Goldman & Mutz (2014) show that prejudice, operationalized by the degree to which whites agree with negative stereotypes of blacks, decreased among whites in proportion to their exposure to the Obama campaign. Whites also became more optimistic about the state of race relations compared to those who were exposed to the campaign in smaller doses.<sup>1</sup> Although these results are important, they are too limited to draw general conclusions.

These results, however, are not indicative of a consensus. For example, Bernstein et al. (2010) find that racial prejudice among whites remained unchanged after the election of Obama compared

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<sup>1</sup> Digging deeper into the data, they also found that the Obama campaign had the largest impact on conservatives. If this seems shocking, consider the following: Conservatives harbor far more negative stereotypes about blacks than progressives. As such, the counter-stereotypical example Obama represents undermines preexisting negative stereotypes more among conservatives than among progressives.

to when he was a candidate. More damning, however, is the study conducted by Lybarger & Monteith (2010), which shows that priming the president as a positive exemplar actually increases racial antipathy measured as symbolic racism. It seems that “ordinary” blacks are failing to live up to the standard set by Obama, with the implication being that if most blacks worked as hard as Obama has, they too would be successful. For whites who subscribe to this belief, racism is a thing of the past.

Similar patterns emerge when it comes to implicit prejudice, a form of race-based antipathy associated with beliefs that lay beyond conscious awareness (Greenwald et al. 1998). The key theoretical distinction between implicit and explicit bias is that, whereas the latter is subject to social desirability effects, the former, due to its automaticity, is not. As a result, implicit attitudes are believed to be more authentic than explicit ones. One set of studies suggests that exposure to Obama does nothing to change implicit racism. For example, in perhaps the most far-reaching field study to date, Schmidt & Nosek (2010) discover that levels of implicit racism failed to change in any appreciable way between September 2006 and May 2009. This quasi-experimental study contradicted results from Plant et al. (2009) that showed a decrease in implicit racism among college students upon exposure to Obama.

In like fashion, drawing on a longitudinal design and using a convenience sample, Bernstein and colleagues (2010) found evidence that implicit prejudice toward blacks declined after the election. Similar results were obtained using an experimental design. Reasoning that exposure to Obama was already high at the time of the study, Columb & Plant (2010) employed a creative design to tease out the Obama effect. After exposing two experimental groups to negative images of blacks, the investigators further exposed one of the groups to images of the president. Subjects in the control group were only primed with neutral images, i.e., neither negative nor positive depictions of blacks. All subjects were then administered the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The group in receipt of the Obama prime scored markedly lower on the IAT than did subjects in the other conditions.

Perceptions of racism among whites during Obama’s presidency are also conditioned by factors not directly tied to race or racism, *per se*. For instance, political orientations color perceptions of race relations and racism. Goldman & Mutz (2014) find that conservatives believed the Obama effect had a more positive effect on race relations than did progressives. This may strike some as counterintuitive, but as Goldman & Mutz explain, it is simply the case that the views on race relations held by conservatives enjoyed more room for improvement than did those of progressives.

Of course, a more cynical perspective also explains such results: Conservatives always believed that claims of bad relations between the races were overblown. Obama’s election simply proved their case: If a black man could be elected president, how bad could race relations be? Indeed, Valentino & Brader (2011) arrive at a similar conclusion when they assess the impact of Obama’s election on whites’ perceptions of continuing discrimination. They find that conservatives are more likely to see Obama’s ascendance as proof that antiblack discrimination is a thing of the past.

From affirming positive black identity, to its impact on racism, by and large, the Obama effect appears to be real. For blacks, it has the potential to liberate them from seeing themselves in the same unflattering light in which many whites see them. Among whites, the meaning of Obama is a bit more complicated. When it comes to explicit prejudice, the results are mixed: There is evidence that prejudice declines with exposure to Obama as well as signs that as a positive example, the president perpetuated racism. These differences may be attributed to differences in the way in which racism is indexed across studies—i.e., stereotypes versus symbolic racism. Whereas stereotypes are rooted in shared in-group beliefs about the perceived behavior of out-groups (Allport 1954), symbolic racism is a mixture of negative affect toward blacks and the belief that they violate cherished American values (Sears & Henry 2003). What cannot be gainsaid, however, are

the results as they relate to implicit racism. Studies featuring more rigorous designs indicate that the emergence of Obama coincides with the mitigation of implicit racism, an important finding because implicit attitudes may be considered more authentic than their explicit counterparts.

## POLITICS

The impact of the first black chief executive of the United States on American politics is not totally clear. Of course, there were likely to be at least some in the electorate that supported the president because of his race, just as there were people who voted against him for the same reason: His race cost Obama 10% among whites but gained him 2% among blacks (Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012).<sup>2</sup> Further, as Redlawsk and colleagues (2010) find, one-third of all whites, regardless of partisanship, were “troubled” by the fact that Obama would be the first black president. Still, are there other factors beyond race and racism that informed political choice? Finally, how, if at all, does Obama’s presence inform parties, partisanship, and policy?

### Primary Season

We begin with race, racism, and political choice during the 2008 primaries. This is an important distinction to make because the primary electorate looks different from the general electorate in at least one important way: It tends to be more ideologically extreme (e.g., Brady et al. 2007). Indeed, at least among the Democrat primary electorate, ideology almost always plays a more significant role than race in determining the eventual nominee. But since Obama has been on the ticket, race has always outperformed ideology, especially in the ways in which it has influenced choice between him and Clinton (Tesler & Sears 2010).

Support for Obama during the primary season, however, was also driven by other considerations not directly related to race. For instance, Parker et al. (2009) discovered that class and patriotism played important roles among whites. On the eve of the general election, upper-class whites who considered themselves patriotic threw their support behind Obama, whereas their lower-class counterparts roundly rejected the Democrat nominee. Interpreted through an attitudinal-functional lens (according to which attitudes serve specific functions), it is likely that upper-class whites view patriotism as a value-expressive attitude, one that brings normative criteria, e.g., the values on which America was founded, to the evaluation of social groups and public policies (Katz 1960). Lower-class whites, on the other hand, are likely to interpret patriotism through an ego-defensive lens in which patriotism is operationalized as a means of preserving the social status of whites (Sidanius & Pratto 1999). Support for Obama among whites during the primary season cannot be confined to racial and class-based explanations: Religious messages were also important. Indeed, as McKenzie (2011) shows, Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s comments on race dampened support for the eventual president in the primaries.

### The General Elections

In the general elections, race should be even more salient than in the primaries. With Republicans becoming ever more hostile on racial issues since the Goldwater campaign in 1964 (e.g., Carmines

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<sup>2</sup>In 2008, Obama won about 53% of the popular vote—the first Democrat since Jimmy Carter to win the outright majority. However, he lost among white voters. National exit polls indicate that he won 43% of the white vote. This share is higher than the percentages obtained by all but two democratic candidates since 1964, when Lyndon Johnson won the majority of the white vote: Carter, who won 48%, and Clinton, who won 44% (both of them are southern Democrats). In 2012, Obama did not do so well among whites. He gained 39% of the white vote (a decrease of 4%). What really carried Obama to victory is a high share of African American and Latino votes: Among African Americans he got 93%, and among Latinos he got 71%.

& Stimson 1989), the parties have become more polarized along racial lines, among other things (e.g., Noel 2013, Valentino & Sears 2005). With a black man as the standard-bearer for Democrats, and older white men representing the GOP in 2008 and 2012, how could race not play an important role in the most recent presidential elections?

This is precisely what we find. Enthusiasm ran high in the black electorate—at all-time high in 2008. For instance, turnout among blacks hit 67%, up from 59% in 1964, the prior record. In the end, the junior senator from Illinois received 95% of the black vote. Indeed, compared to the 2004 election cycle, in 2008 blacks were 15% more likely to vote than whites (Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012). What are some of the factors that motivated blacks to vote for Obama? For starters, group-based factors such as racial solidarity and the black Church successfully mobilized the black community, as did outreach from Democratic Party officials (Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012, Philpot et al. 2009).

What motivated whites to vote for (or against) Obama? Racism, of course, is one factor. Perhaps the most common way in which scholars in political science capture (explicit) racism is through the use of racial resentment or symbolic racism (e.g., Henry & Sears 2002, Kinder & Sanders 1996). In this guise, racism has shifted from an old-fashioned model in which antipathy toward blacks was framed in terms of innate inferiority to a model in which blacks are perceived as violating core American values, such as the work ethic. When paired with antipathy for blacks, this formulation of racism has proven able to inform the attitudes and behavior of whites across various policy and behavioral domains (e.g., Kinder & Sanders 1996).<sup>3</sup> It seems that resentment toward blacks in general affected whites' willingness to support the Democrats in 2008 and 2012 (Hutchings 2009, Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012, Tesler 2016), something that suggests that no matter his accomplishments, Obama failed to outrun his race. Negative feelings toward blacks, in other words, were transferred first to the candidate and subsequently to the president. This resulted in the tendency for whites to vote for the Republican candidate in 2008 (McCain) and 2012 (Romney) (Pasek et al. 2014, Tesler & Sears 2010).

Racial resentment is not the only race-based antipathy Obama failed to outrun. In some cases, scholars have shown that stereotypes about blacks affected whether or not whites would vote for the soon-to-be president (Hutchings 2009, Piston 2010). Other scholars have drawn on another concept, social dominance orientation, to assess the ways in which racism informs political choice. It seems as though whites who believe that blacks are subordinate to whites cast their vote for the black candidate. Knowles and colleagues (2009) interpret this counterintuitive finding by suggesting that at least some of those who were highly inegalitarian voted for Obama because his candidacy perpetuates the myth that racism is over. Other research shows that it does not take racism *per se* to affect presidential political choice. Using a question format designed to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias, Schaffner (2011), for instance, shows that the mere salience of race was enough to move people to vote for or against Obama.

By now, it should be clear that to avoid the ways in which social desirability taints responses to various questions, perhaps the best tool is implicit assessment. However, whereas the relationship between explicit racism and political choice is fairly consistent, the same cannot be said of implicit racism. For instance, Greenwald and associates (2009) demonstrated that whites who scored high (i.e., who appeared more racist) on the IAT were less like to vote for Obama. This work is important insofar as the findings remain robust even after accounting for explicit racism, e.g., racial resentment and symbolic racism.

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<sup>3</sup>This perspective is not without its critics. See, for example, Schuman (2000), and Wilson & Davis (2011).

Still, this is not always the case. Other scholars have shown that when explicit racism is included in the model, the effects of implicit racism disappear (Kalmoe & Piston 2013, Pasek et al. 2014). Perhaps differences in the ways in which implicit attitudes are operationalized account for such different outcomes. For instance, the study conducted by Greenwald and colleagues draws on the familiar IAT, a method that depends upon the measurement response latency (Greenwald et al. 1998). Even so, the study led by Pasek et al. (2014) as well as the paper by Piston & Kalmoe rely upon the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP), an approach ultimately rooted in affect (Payne et al. 2005).<sup>4</sup> Because one way of extracting implicit attitudes appears more related to cognition (the IAT) and the other draws upon affect (the AMP), we should not be alarmed when differences between the two studies emerge: One relies more upon thinking, the other indexes feeling.

One way to get beyond this impasse on the effect of implicit racial attitudes on support for Obama is to continue avoiding explicit racial animus and attitude reports that may be tainted by social desirability effects, while downplaying both the IAT and AMP. This can be accomplished through the use of Google searches. As Stephens-Davidowitz (2014) suggests, Google searches are ideal as proxies for the assessment of sensitive preferences because they are generally conducted alone and online. Using Google searches for the “N-word” as a rough proxy for prejudice during the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns, Stephens-Davidowitz estimates that Obama’s race cost him 9.1% in 2008 and 9.5% in 2012 among whites who would have otherwise voted for a white Democrat.

## Public Policy

If race and racism affected support for Obama, does his election necessarily affect support for race-based public policies? Preliminary results suggest that his presence in the White House has done precisely that. To begin, 20% of whites believe that Obama’s policies will benefit blacks (Redlawsk et al. 2010). Further, using a longitudinal design, Kaiser and colleagues (2009) conclude that support for policies engineered to address increasing racial inequality declined after the election of Obama. They conclude that it is likely that with Obama’s election, these respondents felt that the time for policies aimed at achieving social justice had passed. Of course, this is not entirely unrelated to the belief that Obama’s policies would benefit blacks at the expense of whites.

Using a different approach, one that has the advantage of sampling the general population (as opposed to students), but the relative disadvantage of basing the study on cross-sectional data, Hutchings (2009) finds no real tangible differences in white support for racial policies designed to mitigate the effects of race-based inequality over a 20-year period (1988–2008). The impact of race on public policy extends to issues that at first sight are not racial. Tesler (2016) finds this to be the case when it comes to health care. His study reveals that when health care is identified with President Obama, racism has a much larger impact on policy preferences than it does when health care is associated with other Democrats who have run for president in the past.

We have seen the ways in which the public has reacted to Obama. We know how black and white people perceive him. We have also witnessed how his presence affects perceptions of discrimination and the racial climate. However, the business of politics is ultimately about whether or not citizens believe their needs are met by way of policy outputs (Easton 1975). Of course, policy outputs are a function of legislative behavior. Therefore, I will now turn to examine how Obama’s tenure in the Oval Office has affected his ability to move public policy through Congress.

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<sup>4</sup>In brief, the AMP exposes subjects to visual primes, after which they are exposed to a neutral image. Subjects are then asked to evaluate how much they liked the latter image. Scholars who use this method argue that the evaluation of the neutral image is influenced by the prime, not by the image itself.



Democratic theory demands that elected officials respond to the preferences of their constituents, something repeatedly observed empirically insofar as such desires are made tangible by way of policy (e.g., Bartels 2008, Gilens 2013, Hutchings 2003, Page & Shapiro 1983). Evidence suggests that Obama's presence in the White House has served as an impediment to the policy-making process in Congress. Consider the ways in which Congress has become more polarized since Obama won in 2008. Bonica (2014), for instance, demonstrates that Obama's tenure coincides with the most rapid pace of congressional polarization in more than 30 years. At the root of this polarization is the ways in which race affected Congressional elections, especially for the House of Representatives, after 2008. As Tesler (2016) points out, racially conservative districts became more Republican during the 2010 midterm elections. As such, it should come as no surprise that the most racially conservative districts failed to cooperate with the president's legislative agenda. Indeed, driven mainly by the GOP's refusal to compromise, the last two Congresses have been the least productive in almost 70 years (Knowles 2014).

## Party Politics

Why has the Republican Party become so difficult to work with? Perhaps the most important contributing factor in the GOP's increasing bellicosity—especially toward the president—is the rise of the Tea Party. McAdam & Kloos (2014) convincingly demonstrate that, like other social movements before it, the Tea Party has successfully influenced a major party. Similar to the ways in which the Democratic Party was driven to the left by the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, the GOP is currently being driven to the right by the Tea Party. Further, race is the driving force in both cases. In the case of the Democrats, the pursuit of racial justice consistent with the goals of the civil rights movement, driven by electoral considerations, forced the party to the left. Likewise, McAdam and Kloos argue that the GOP, concerned with recapturing Congress and hopefully the White House, shifted to the right, in a move driven by racism associated with the Tea Party (e.g., Parker & Barreto 2014).

Of course, this impasse between the executive and legislative branches of the government ultimately resulted in multiple episodes of gridlock, some of which threatened the nation's social and economic stability. Consider the inability of the president to strike a deal on comprehensive immigration reform. The bill, which was supported by dozens of committed conservatives (including Grover Norquist, Karl Rove, and the *Wall Street Journal*), was ratified in the senate, where it received the approval of some conservatives, but ultimately failed among House Republicans. House Republicans also shut down the government on one occasion, an event that resulted in a hit to the US economy estimated at approximately \$4 billion, and which cost as many as 120,000 jobs (OMB 2013).

The Obama effect, however, was not confined to the Republican Party. With Obama leading the way, the Democratic Party suffered. When President Obama assumed office, the Democrats enjoyed a sizeable advantage over Republicans in terms of public perception. In fact, when Obama was elected, Democrats were trending upward and Republicans downward. However, after Obama was elected, Democrats took a hit, so much so that the public's perception of Democrats and Republicans converged during Obama's first term in office (Jacobson 2011). Research suggests that this is because Obama is more tied to his party than any other president on record, even more so than President Bush (Jacobson 2011). Ironically, Obama's attempt at bipartisanship, and his failure to attribute much in the way of blame to his predecessor, muddled his message. This made it difficult for the public to recognize his policy achievements (Edwards 2012). Even so, his economic policies—especially the stimulus and the auto bailout—were, on balance, successful



(Weatherford 2012). Nonetheless, the conservative opposition, with an assist from the Tea Party, made it difficult for Obama to take credit for these policy developments.

## **EXPLAINING THE OBAMA EFFECT ON POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY**

By now, it is fairly clear that race affected the outcome of the two latest presidential campaigns and that it continues to affect public policy preferences as well as legislative behavior. However, we remain without an explanation of how Obama animates the relationship between race and politics. One set of explanations revolves around the ways in which whites' feelings toward blacks are transferred to the president and the policies he supports (e.g., Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012, Tesler 2016), something I have already discussed. Another set takes this point quite a bit further, arguing that limiting the Obama effect on politics to race is a mistake.

Accounts in which the Obama effect is attributed to race often suggest two ways in which this might work. One, to which I have already alluded, is the racial spillover effect, whereby the negative affect associated with blacks is transferred to Obama. Another effect is connected to the racialized fear that Obama may exact racial retribution by pushing policies favorable to blacks at the expense of whites (Haney-Lopez 2014). These approaches, in which Obama's effect on politics is channeled through racism, remain incomplete: They tell us how the election of Obama affects US politics and public policy, but not why it does so. This requires us to move beyond both approaches and to develop a theory capable of explaining what is ontologically prior to the garden-variety racism applied to Obama.

Parker & Barreto (2014) furnish such a theoretical framework. In their work, they show that the Obama effect is far more than just racism. To fully understand what is happening in the current moment, they contend, one must place the Obama era into a broader context, one that includes the perception of rapid social change. Periods of social change induce a reaction from many in the cultural majority, a group that tends to be populated by white, male, older, middle-class, native-born Protestants. This demographic, the one most often associated with American identity (e.g., Devos & Banaji 2005, Smith 1997), is concerned that its social and cultural hegemony in the United States is in decline. Generally, this has given rise to a reactionary impulse, rooted in anxiety and anger, during several periods in US history. Whether it was due to immigration in the 1850s, the return of the "New Negro" and concerns with Catholic immigrants during the 1920s, or the civil rights movement and the perceived Communist threat during the early 1960s, the reactionary impulse sought to arrest the change sweeping America (Anbinder 1992, Hofstadter 1964, Maclean 1995).

Much of the current political climate is driven by the Tea Party's reaction to the election of president Obama (McAdam & Kloos 2014, Parker & Barreto 2014). Much like its forebears, the Tea Party believes America to be in decline—a decline associated with the rising status of marginalized groups such as women, people of color, immigrants, and homosexuals. Similar to the Know Nothings of the 1850s, the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, and the John Birch Society, the Tea Party is a reaction to social change; now, the change is represented by Obama's election. The symbolic import of his election cannot be overestimated. The presidency is central to US political identity insofar as Americans are socialized to know the identity of the president from the time they are children (e.g., Easton & Dennis 1969), and the president is perceived to be the leader of the country, especially during times of national crisis (Edelman 1965). Further, the president is both the head of government and the head of state. In short, the president is America personified.

For these reasons, the election of the first nonwhite to the presidency is alarming to 20% of adults in the United States, 90% of whom are white (Parker & Barreto 2014). Like reactionaries

of the past, these people feel that their way of life is under threat; perhaps this is why they often invoke the “take our country back” meme (Parker & Barreto 2014). The Tea Party is involved with pushing anti-immigrant measures, is on the front line in the war on women, and remains steadfast against gay rights (Arceneaux & Nicholson 2013, Parker 2014, Parker & Barreto 2014, Skocpol & Williamson 2011). Democracy requires compromise (Gutman & Thompson 2012), but these reactionaries refuse to do so. The Manichaeon view of the world they tend to hold stipulates that to compromise is to capitulate to the darker forces animating society (Hofstadter 1964, Lipset & Raab 1978).

Clearly, if we wish to gain more purchase on the way(s) in which Obama’s presence conditions US politics—especially race—we must look beyond the proximate cause(s) and effects associated with him (i.e., the *how*) and consider the ultimate cause (i.e., the *why*). Doing so permits us to place the current political climate in broader historical context, among other things. This is not the first time that blacks’ and whites’ opinions on race and politics have been so conflicting. In the 1960s, another time during which social change accelerated, blacks and whites held sharply divergent views on race, racism, and public policy (Sears & McConahay 1973, Walker & Aberbach 1973). Reactionary forces within the GOP, back then as now, resisted social change (Lowndes 2008, Perlestein 2001). This resistance was based upon the perceived existential threat posed by the civil rights movement and the nascent women’s movement (Parker & Barreto 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This review sought to make plain the way(s) in which the election of the first black president has affected politics and public policy in the United States. Indeed, the Obama effect has proven pervasive, even dominant. Much of the work on the meaning of Obama entertains black and white perspectives. From the black perspective, the Obama effect, on balance, is positive. Obama’s election has, for the most part, offered blacks hope and a positive self-image. Further, with Obama on the ballot, blacks were more motivated than ever to turn out to vote, at least in part because of the extent to which they identified with him.<sup>5</sup>

For whites, the picture is considerably more complex. I think it is fair to declare that the jury is still out on Obama and on whether or not his presence mitigates or intensifies racism. The results for explicit racism are at best inconclusive, and the use of the IAT to capture implicit racism remains controversial (e.g., Arkes & Tetlock 2004). But the ambiguity ends as we shift from the meaning of Obama among whites and how his election affects race and racism to an analysis of political behavior and political preferences. In these domains, the Obama effect is more clear-cut: Racism—both explicit and implicit—informed political choice, as racist whites tended to vote for the GOP standard-bearer in 2008 and 2012. Likewise, racism affected public policy more during Obama’s tenure than during other Democrats’ administrations. It also encouraged whites to think that discrimination is a thing of the past, or, if one is a white conservative, that it was overblown in the first place.

Quite apart from the typical black/white divide in which this review is couched, the Obama effect also encompasses Latinos and their impact on whites’ political behavior. It is well documented that by 2050 the United States will become a majority-minority country, and Latinos are currently leading the charge insofar as they represent the single largest nonwhite population (Frey 2014).

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<sup>5</sup>The Obama effect is not entirely about black/white relations and perception. There is some scholarship on this (e.g., Ramakrishnan et al. 2009, Wallace 2011). Still, the bulk of the discourse, for historical reasons, revolves around the more familiar black/white racial categories.

For some time, political scientists have shown that whites feel threatened by Latino immigrants (e.g., Brader et al. 2008, Perez 2010). The work of Abrajano & Hajnal (2015) explores the ways in which such anxiety affects the political behavior of whites. They show that whites who are anxious about the undocumented are more likely to vote for the Republicans and to identify with the GOP. In short, with Obama as president, Latinos are perceived as the principal beneficiaries, and whites' political preferences have combined to thwart efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

Perhaps the most arresting research reveals that what we now term the Obama effect is likely a part of a longer trend in US politics. What is now termed the Obama effect may have been termed the "civil rights effect" in the 1960s, or the "American effect" in the 1920s. During each era, a reactionary faction of the political right sought to arrest social change by any means necessary. Acting out of anxiety and anger, this reactionary faction was (and is) largely responsible for the toxic political climate that typically ensues. The current iteration begins with the anxiety and fear that characterizes the Tea Party and its adherents and that spills over, pushing the GOP further to the right. Thus, the Obama effect is the chief reason the last two Congressional sessions have been the least productive in the last 30 years (Ornstein & Mann 2012).

In sum, what we have witnessed in the Obama era, when it comes to race and politics, is not something new. It only appears new because we have never before had a black president. If it is true that the Obama effect is specific to the moment but is also part of a long-running narrative, we will likely see the reactionary right once again rise up and produce a political environment in which compromise and comity remain in short supply.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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