"Yes We Can" or "Yes We Did"?

Prospective and Retrospective Change in the Obama Presidency

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The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president speaks to the progress made in fulfilling the promise of one nation for all people. Obama’s success reflects retrospective changes, such as the advent of viral technology, the mobilization of Black voters, and the shift toward tolerance in White racial attitudes, all of which allowed a strategic Obama campaign to make landmark gains. But are these changes permanent? Moreover, will these retrospective changes benefit future African American candidates seeking political office? On the other hand, following an extremely unpopular Bush administration, the Obama victory could reflect the prospective changes that many voters believed would follow, including the restoration of American credibility abroad, economic recovery, and the move toward a postracial state. Have Obama’s first 100 days fulfilled these prospective visions? And if so, will Obama’s actions in these areas prove advantageous to minority candidates who follow in his historic footsteps?

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The election of Barack Hussein Obama to the office of the president of the United States has been considered a milestone for a nation that has been weakened internally by racial divisiveness since its inception and has, at times, utilized capitalism and warfare to exploit nations with majority
populations of persons of color. Barak Obama’s election, not just to a national office, which is rare enough, but to the highest office in the land offers unknown consequences for society. To the American people, the president is seen as the one individual who represents the interest of a unified country (Barber, 1992). Considering the scope of this power, the Obama election has the potential to change the relationship between the African American community and the institutions of government. Will his administration empower future African American candidates?

Scholars have considered the possibilities of Black leadership and debated how Black politicians maneuver to attract White voters while maintaining a sense of connection to the Black community and Black voters. This debate directly reflects the retrospective changes that culminated in 2008. Viral technology—consisting of videos, images, and text that can be reproduced at a rapid pace to Internet users—could have played a major role in any of the 2008 campaigns but was utilized fully by only Obama’s strategy, to reach new voters and to offer an unfiltered message to the American people. Such technology offered new outlets for organization and voter mobilization, many of which were free and available to grassroots activists. Such mobilization efforts helped to unify and activate African American participation, which has long been a model for this type of organizing. Furthermore, by taking advantage of a politically correct atmosphere that no longer tolerates the blatant race-baiting characterized by the Southern Dixiecrats or the Republican Southern strategy campaigns of the 20th century, Obama built a coalition of White voters, comprising Democrats, Independents, and some crossover Republicans. By running a race-neutral campaign, Obama maximized his appeal to White voters, although he had to balance carefully the advantage offered by this retrospective change in White racial attitudes with the retrospective change of increased Black participation. And once he was elected, the question became, how do Obama and African American politicians lead racially diverse communities and address the racial inequalities that their much-needed Black constituents expect?

Furthermore, in addition to preserving this fragile coalition, Obama had to maintain expectations of what his victory could mean to the American electorate. The backdrop to the campaign included images of an America that had lost its way diplomatically and economically. The Democratic nominee, contrasted to the past 8 years of Republican rule, was expected to elicit the respect of the world and stabilize the rapidly deteriorating economy; the country had to repair itself. The hopeful and historic nature of Obama’s campaign—and his race-neutral campaign also contributed to
the prospective vision that his victory would usher in a new era of postracistm, wherein a biracial candidate who identifies as Black reaches the Oval Office, signaling the end of racial division in America. But will Obama’s election cloud the structural inequalities that contribute to racism and Black exclusion? As Obama stands on the world stage, we argue that his ascent was based on prospective expectations of what his presidency would mean and that it was affected by the retrospective context of the changing social, economic, and political global economy. Further, by analyzing what contributed to his victory, we can speculate what impact his administration will have on African American candidates planning for their own ascension.

Retrospective Changes

The Mobilization of African American Voters

Obama’s successful presidential campaign provides insight into the current status of Black political behavior and offers a roadmap for future Black candidates as they seek positions that have often eluded them. As the number of Black elected officials, in relation to all other elected officials, has remained static, the implication of Obama’s success is critical (Dominello, 2009). His use of a race-neutral campaign allowed for him to develop a diverse coalition of Americans championing “change.” Paradoxically, he also relied on African Americans’ sense of group consciousness to mobilize voters. Obama is not the first Black candidate to utilize this strategy, but he is one of a growing number of “new” crossover Black candidates who have been able to access networks of privilege and fund-raising that were historically closed to Black candidates.

Following the civil rights movement, African Americans moved from protest to politics, thus increasing the number of Black elected officials and increasing Black political influence (Tate, 1993). Although Blacks would become the most cohesive and loyal constituents of the Democratic Party, for many Black candidates to be victorious, they organized outside of traditional party networks by developing independent organizations to ensure success (Preston, Henderson, & Puryear, 1987). The Democratic Party’s efforts to integrate Blacks into the party structure were often questioned. These limited efforts were critical tenants for the presidential campaigns of Shirley Chisholm and Jesse Jackson, who attempted to increase party inclusion (Atwater, 2007).

Although there are some similarities among Obama, Chisholm, and Jackson, Obama’s candidacy provides the first opportunity to examine the
impact of an African American presidential nominee on mobilization and coalition building. Charles Hamilton (1977) first proposed a race-neutral political strategy in 1973 that would form coalitions that included other racial and ethnic groups besides Blacks. He also believed that for the Democratic Party to be successful and to thwart attempts by Republicans to use race as a divisive issue, it was necessary for Democrats to have an agenda that took the emphasis off race. Later scholars utilized the race-neutral concept to explain the surge in “attempts to defuse the divisive effects of race by avoiding references to ethnic or racially construed issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that appeal to a wide community” (Jeffries, 1998, p. 167). As Black candidates sought victories among racially diverse constituents, they would develop campaigns that delicately balanced their crossover approach while at the same time utilizing race as an asset. In short, they attempted to appeal to Blacks without alienating Whites.

Obama, in the tradition of Black political insurgency, ran as an outsider utilizing strong grassroots organizing to develop networks that would contribute to his success, particularly in caucus states. Obama developed a fund-raising juggernaut that utilized technology to access potential donors who historically did not support candidates financially or who could only give small donations. Obama also garnered support of college students, but the depth and breadth of his outreach beyond the Black community were unparalleled. Although Obama’s campaign in many ways resembled Jackson’s as an outsider of the Democratic Party infrastructure, his campaign’s connection to the Black community was primarily his dependence on the Black vote. Obama’s organization was one that consisted of veteran Democratic Party insiders as well as a political and financial network that consisted of wealthy White liberals.

For Obama to have a serious chance at the Democratic nomination, let alone the presidency, the mobilization of Black voters was critical. Obama would utilize what Walters (1988, 2005) refers to as a “balance of power” strategy within the Democratic Party. However, for this strategy to be effective, it is imperative that the candidate have the ability to increase Black registration, voting, and mobilization. The combination of all three of these efforts galvanized the Obama campaign and landed him significant victories in South Carolina and other Southern states with large African American populations. Understanding the need for continued mobilization of African Americans, Obama announced, as part of his 50-state strategy for the general election, that he planned to increase Black voter registration by 30%.
The mobilization of Black voters can be attributed to a growing sense of group consciousness and empowerment rather than to any specific grand overture made by Obama. In fact, Obama gained Black voters and their financial support without making direct concessions to the Black community or addressing issues that were deemed of importance to African American constituents. Sinclair-Chapman and Price (2008) state that “Obama has not tried to make Black struggle a fundamentally American struggle. Instead, he gives equal weight to Black demands for the full privileges of citizenship and White resentment toward those very demands” (p. 740). But, as the first Black presidential nominee from a major party, Obama had to strike a precarious balance in simultaneously garnering both White and Black support. Sinclair-Chapman and Price caution that promoting the idea that we are all Americans ignores “structural inequalities that maintain Black exclusion and subordination”; they continue to warn that the “danger lies in subsuming Black demands in the category of ‘American’ without addressing the substantive benefits of membership, the recognition of difference, of power or of suffering” (p. 740).

Those very structural inequalities contribute to African American political behavior that emphasizes the advancement of the group (Dawson, 1994; Pinderhughes, 1987). As race still figures prominently in the social, economic, and political and daily lives of African Americans and although Obama developed a campaign structure outside the Black community, his candidacy for many Blacks underscored the racial divide and offered a means to progress. According to the 2008 poll “Blacks, Politics, and Society,” conducted by ABC News, USA Today, and Columbia University (Langer, 2008), political engagement among Blacks increased sharply, and Obama’s candidacy fostered pride and involvement. Blacks were reported to have followed the election more intensely than other Americans (at a level unseen in the last three presidential elections) and to have contributed money or time to a political campaign at unprecedented levels. Additionally, voter registration by African Americans was higher than in any preelection polls since 1984.

Although Obama’s campaign may be reminiscent of traditional Black political behavior—working from outside the Democratic party infrastructure, increasing and depending on the Black vote, and developing new fund-raising networks—Obama did not develop a campaign with a strong connection to the Black community (Sinclair-Chapman & Price, 2008, p. 740). The complex difficulty facing candidates such as Obama, who run as race-neutral candidates, is that they operate outside of the traditional Black civil rights agenda or the Black community itself. Obama’s biography satisfies the conditions of a
race-neutral campaign for his life, including his Ivy League pedigree, which creates a certain distance between him and the Black voter. Nonetheless, Obama has successfully tapped into a retrospective change in Black mobilization while maintaining his crossover message. This technique, honed by candidates before him, contributed to his victory. Moreover, the historic nature of Obama’s campaign and his unique ability to balance this coalition catalyzed African American participation in and enthusiasm for his victorious election. This support has remained constant throughout Obama’s first 8 months in office—months that have been plagued by a stagnant economy, unprecedented levels of unemployment, and a contentious debate over health care reform. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2009) reported that in April, 62% of the public approved of Obama’s overall performance and 26% disapproved. Just 4 months later in August, 52% approved of Obama’s performance while 37% disapproved. Moreover, there is a distinctive racial divide among Obama’s supporters. In April, 53% of White respondents gave Obama a favorable job review while 14% disapproved. In August, the percentage of Whites who approved of Obama’s performance declined to 42%, with 46% disapproving. In April, an overwhelming percentage of Blacks (95%) supported Obama, with just only 3% disapproving. In August, this strong level of support remained consistent, with a 92% approval rating and with 4% disapproving.

Obama’s election will inspire a new generation of Black politicians seeking offices that have often eluded Black candidates. His success offers these candidates a new template for electoral victory. As a result of changing demographics in which Black districts and communities are increasingly becoming populated with Latino and Asian voters, Black candidates will have to broaden their appeal to other persons of color to win while appealing to and mobilizing Black voters. However, voters may become conflicted by a candidate’s need to attract mainstream voters while still empowering the Black community. It is difficult for crossover candidates to de-emphasize race and champion the needs of Black constituents, but this approach seems to reflect a retrospective change that can, if done effectively, mobilize Black voters. The strategic balance struck by Obama in appealing to a multiracial constituency may represent a permanent strategic change, but the response of Black voters remains to be seen.

The Change in White Attitudes Toward African American Leadership

In 2009 race still matters in the American political arena, though the nature of its presence has changed. Although there still appears to be resistance to
Black leadership, the idea of blatant displays of racism that was once used to intimidate Black voters, activists, and politicians is no longer acceptable. Dehumanizing bigotry that defined America during the Jim Crow era has been discredited. This form of political correctness has often played out in the media by providing a verbal backlash and media frenzy against politicians, media personalities, and corporations that exhibited racism through racially inflammatory and insensitive statements, racial imagery such as nooses and confederate flags, and policies that contribute to a hostile work environment. This progress in race relations provides conflicting messages that Obama and future Black candidates will address. The idea that blatant racism is not culturally or publically accepted corresponds with the developing idea that society is now color-blind and race is no longer an issue of relevance. This idea of a color-blind society had considerable impact on other Black candidates who, like Obama, emphasize their Americaness first and attempt to promote the idea of oneness. Although blatant racial slurs and imagery during the campaign were vigorously assailed, Obama’s campaign gingerly addressed questions that attempted to conjure ideas of the stereotypes of Black leadership. The media and the opposing party questioned his willingness to fight and his capacity for anger, which would have potentially stereotyped him as an angry Black man. The intolerance displayed in a number of racial attacks contributed to White voters’ willingness to learn more about Obama and brought the issue of race into the open and with it the idea of an African American being a viable candidate for president.

However, scholars and media have documented that Whites have expressed a fear of Black leadership and empowerment through the utilization of intense mobilization of White voters against Black candidates. White resistance to Black leadership has also been expressed through the perpetuation of stereotypes such that Black leadership will have negative consequences for their communities by the redistribution of wealth, encouraging integration, and forwarding resources to the Black community (Hajnal, 2007). Despite the fact that blatant racist language and race-baiting are no longer acceptable in the national political arena, this retrospective change may not be permanent. Obama’s success as the first African American president may contribute to the resurgence of racially motivated organizations. In conjunction with his historic administration, coupled with the current significant economic downturn, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2009) released a report to state and local governments warning that rising unemployment and home foreclosures could result in increased memberships in hate groups in the United States. While data in the report may offer bad news for the Obama administration if it is an indicator of the nation’s overall approval rating of
the new president, its predictions and interpretations are consistent with national history. For example, the recession of the 1980s, which spanned most of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, was marked by a rise in Ku Klux Klan memberships as well as the growth of a host of other White hate groups.

The cycle of adhering to the ideology of White superiority during hard economic times, followed by reformation when the economy improves, is not necessarily as complicated as it might appear. On the most concrete level, it can be described as amounting to little more than the conscious making of artificial claims to rights and resources. Psychologists have detected additional functions of racial hatred, such as scapegoating in response to personal fears about survival and dwindling self-esteem. Though White voters who supported Obama may not be likely to join racial hate groups in response to economic competition, a more racist social environment could result from Americans who are dissatisfied with Obama’s administration for policy or personal reasons. Surely, Obama’s coalition of voters does bode well for future Black candidates, as his historic candidacy has broken, at the very least, symbolic barriers. However, this historic administration does indeed carry the burden that its success or failure could be attached by some voters—though unfairly—to the Black community. And this could help or hinder future Black candidates seeking to model Obama’s rise to power.

**The Advance of Viral Technology**

One of the primary factors that contributed to Obama’s victory in the 2008 presidential contest was his campaign’s skilled and effective use of technology. The innovations that form what is called the Web 2.0 include blogging, microblogging (most notably, Twitter), video broadcasting sites, online document storage, public file sharing, and social networking sites (including Facebook and MySpace). They are characterized by their open access to all Internet users and their status as viral technology, possessing the ability to spread news, video, or images to networks of millions of users and viewers. The Obama team, recognizing that the second generation of Web technology was a permanent change, was the first national campaign to embrace the Web’s fullest potential for communication, fund-raising, and voter mobilization. Obama’s victory and the role that the Internet played in that victory suggest that his success was the result of the retrospective change in technology that has occurred in the 21st century. Moreover, this innovation proves beneficial to future Black leaders who run grassroots campaigns.
Though the use of these technological innovations for political purposes was surely inevitable, Obama benefited from a distinct set of advantages. First and foremost, Obama benefited from what Stephen Skowronek dubbed “political time,” particularly in terms of technology. According to David Talbot (2009) of the Boston Globe, “by 2007, everything came together for a national Web-centric political campaign—the technology, its acceptance by more Americans, and, of course, the BlackBerry wearing Barack.” This sense of political time was also one of the extreme disadvantages—and, thus, an Obama advantage—faced by the Republicans, whose candidate had not adjusted to viral technology. In fact, only 2 days after the election, an organization entitled RebuildTheParty.com announced that its “number one priority” would be “winning the technology war.” It confessed, “We can’t keep fighting a 21st century war with 20th century weapons” (Dale, 2008).

James Norman, who covered the Obama campaign from Europe, noted that the Democratic nominee’s use of viral technology painted a stark contrast to “the fear and paranoia” of technology (wiretapping, etc.) that former president George W. Bush encouraged during the war on terror (“Technology Starts Out,” 2009). Moreover, when Republican nominee John McCain did make strides to incorporate technology into his campaign, his efforts failed in comparison. McCain himself confessed during the Republican primary campaign to being somewhat computer illiterate. In an interview with Dan Shomon (2008; one-time Obama campaign director), National Public Radio journalist David Kestenbaum aired a tape of McCain saying, “I am learning to get online myself, and I will have that done fairly soon—getting on myself. I don’t expect to be a great communicator.” McCain’s low self-expectations gave Obama a distinct advantage if he could position himself as the technology president.

Obama’s team recognized that Howard Dean’s failed 2004 campaign had been driven primarily by his use of social networking (in its infancy) and Internet fund-raising. Obama even hired Jascha Franklin-Hodge, one of “a core group of geeks” who constructed Dean’s online campaign (Talbot, 2009). What Obama’s strategists obviously knew was that modern campaigns “increasingly rely on database management and web-based tools to identify, monitor, and communicate with voters” (Panagopoulos, 2007, p. 423). The database and micro-targeting politics so effectively used by Karl Rove now collided with the Web 2.0. Pew Research Survey noted that at least one third of the American electorate watched political advertisements on the Internet (Chawla, 2008). The most popular site for watching these ads proved to be YouTube. And Obama’s team uploaded nearly
1,800 videos on YouTube during the course of the campaign (Chawla, 2008). Facebook, the other major Web development to break in the last half decade, was an effective way to reach young voters in the 2006 midterm elections, according to a 2007 survey by the Harvard Institute of Politics. By May 1, 2008, before even clinching his party nomination, Obama had over 800,000 Facebook friends, as compared to 120,000 for John McCain and 150,000 for Hillary Clinton (Sansón, 2008). By the end of his campaign, through all these social networking and video-sharing cites, Obama had an e-mail list of 13 million supporters.

Recognizing that the 21st century was home to a mobile society, Obama’s team used cell phone text messaging as a major part of their communication and voter mobilization efforts. According to the New York Times, a September 2007 study of 4,000 people out of the University of Michigan concluded that those who were reminded via text message, 1 day before an election, to vote were 4.2% more likely to do so (Stelter, 2008). Nielsen Mobile (part of the Nielsen Company) estimated that Obama’s announcement of his vice presidential running mate reached 2.9 million subscribers (Quinton, 2008). In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Scott Goodstein, who organized the mobile communications aspect of Obama’s campaign, claimed that “it’s a must for campaign to be using mobile technology. . . . It obviously skews younger. But 262 million Americans are using mobile phones. That’s roughly 84% of the total population” (Linthicum, 2009). And Obama did not just use text messaging; he branded himself in connection to it by offering a ringtone collage of Obama’s speeches (Stirland, 2008).

If voters chose Obama because of their retrospective vision that the world had changed technologically and that this candidate was more connected to the modern world that faces everyday Americans, then their choice suggests that Obama’s victory resulted from what has already occurred (the Internet revolution), as opposed to the campaign promises of the future. But is Obama continuing to champion 21st-century technology as he moves from campaigning to governing? The new president has named Anesh Chopra as the new chief technology officer, a first-time position under any presidential administration. And his White House Web site has been completely restructured and now includes blogs written by several of his closest associates and frequent YouTube videos. These renovations follow his well-known transition Web site (http://www.change.gov), which included lists of available jobs in the new administration. The new stimulus package, notes the New York Times, “is essentially a technology industry
wish list,” (Savage & Kirkpatrick, 2009), all of which is being chronicled by the president’s site (http://www.recovery.gov).

But will Obama’s victory, if it can be partially credited to this permanent retrospective technological change, open the door to other African American or minority candidates? According to Aaron Smith’s April 2009 report for the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 66% of Black male Internet users accessed political information via the Web during the election season. This number is only slightly higher than percentages for Hispanic users and only 10 points lower than usage by White males (Smith, 2009). More important, African American Internet users proved more politically active in their information gathering. Twenty-five percent of Black Internet users subscribed to online political updates and 23% signed up to receive political news alerts via e-mail. According to Pew, persons of color were significantly more likely to engage in this type of Internet use than White Americans (Smith, 2009). Additionally, African Americans were just as likely as Whites to create their own political content online (Smith, 2009). In the future, the candidates who best utilize Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, for example, should have an advantage in engaging this new generation of African American political Internet users.

And the wireless service corporations will surely see to it that text messaging and mobile technology stay at the forefront of political communication—especially since Verizon Communication made $2.1 million off of the Obama campaign from January and July 2008 alone (Salazar, 2008). In addition to activating the African American community, this technological revolution targeted the millennials—the generation born between 1978 and 1996 and called “the most tech-savvy, diverse, educated and interconnected generation in American history”—who voted overwhelmingly for Obama (Sansón, 2008, p. 163). Democratic strategist James Carville argued that Obama’s success in garnering these votes through the use of technology would result in a “lost generation” for Republicans (Bellantoni, 2009). But Republicans are quickly catching up. As of April 2009, 88 Republican members were twittering, as compared to only 43 Democratic members, with Senator McCain having over 450,000 subscribers (as of April 18), 200,000 of which have decided to follow him in the last 30 days.

Technology has changed something more fundamental. Joe Trippi, Dean’s former campaign manager, has concluded that “the Obama victory ensures that future elections will be won not because the candidate was anointed by a power party, but because he or she was best at using a Web and new media strategy to rally the masses” (“Flickering Here,” 2008). Without having to climb the party hierarchy, future Black candidates may face a more level
playing field. Moreover, viral video technology allows candidates such as Obama to disseminate an unfiltered message. His speech on race in America, for example, could be watched in its entirety without distortion by political opponents. The Internet, argues Trippi, “flattens the process and creates a bottom-up approach to participation” (Greengard, 2009, p. 16).

This method more closely mirrors historical efforts at Black participation, including community organizing. “The internet favors the outsider,” notes BBC journalist Steve Schifferes (2008). And now, due to the retrospective technological changes, that outsider is inside the White House.

**Prospective Changes**

**The Promise of Economic Recovery**

In addition to the momentum and rhetorical enthusiasm that characterized the Obama campaign and in addition to the strategic exploitation of viral technology, a growing Black consciousness and mobilization, and a shift in White attitudes toward potential Black leadership, Obama benefited from another distinct and historic advantage. The unparalleled disapproval ratings of outgoing Republican president Bush made any Democratic Party nominee popular by comparison. Obama tapped into the public’s frustration with his opposition party and rallied support on a promise of change. Specifically, Obama benefited from the prospective vision that his administration would stop the economic downslide and restore American credibility to the global community. Moreover, an Obama presidency was envisioned by many supporters as the first step toward a postracial America. Perhaps none of these prospective visions changed the course of the campaign, as did the belief that Obama’s economic policies would usher in a new era of American prosperity.

By September 15, 2008, the course of the presidential campaign and America’s economic and psychological perspective changed forever. The rise of home foreclosures, the escalation of gasoline prices (approaching $5 a gallon), and 8 consecutive months of job losses culminated in an economic meltdown that destroyed the Wall Street powerhouses of Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and AIG. The revelation that American capitalism embodied by Wall Street was failing signaled the depths of the slowing American and international economy and could no longer be ignored by the government or characterized as solely being caused by individuals who purchased homes they could not afford.
The Obama campaign would take advantage of the financial crisis to illustrate a need for greater regulation and increased oversight of the financial markets. Obama successfully used the nation’s economic crisis to draw sharp contrasts to the prospective policies of Senator McCain and the failed policies of President Bush. Before September 15, Obama was trailing in many polls and having difficulty connecting with White working-class voters (Steinhauser, 2008). The question of whether Obama could attract the support of White working-class voters had developed during the Democratic primary season in which states with large populations of White blue-collar voters supported Hillary Clinton (Cohen & Agiesta, 2008b). But Obama’s attack on the Republican role in the failing economy was followed by a sharp rise in the polls in his favor (Von Drehle, 2008).

Fearing a growing Obama coalition, Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin attempted to exploit the racial stereotype that Whites were more virtuous and hardworking than other ethnic groups. These distinguishing characteristics contribute to the idea that Whites are entitled to better jobs and a higher social status (Roediger, 1991). Palin (2008a) first introduced herself to America by saying,

A writer observed: “We grow good people in our small towns, with honesty, sincerity, and dignity.” I know just the kind of people that writer had in mind. . . . I grew up with those people. They are the ones who do some of the hardest work in America. . . . They love their country . . . always proud of America. I had the privilege of living most of my life in a small town. . . . And since our opponents in this presidential election seem to look down on that experience, let me explain to them what the job involves.

Palin’s stump speeches injected a certain level of class warfare by implying that Obama’s economic plans had a socialist slant. “Senator Obama said he wants to quote ‘spread the wealth.’ What that means is he wants government to take your money and dole it out however a politician sees fit,” Palin said, drawing boos from the crowd of several thousand. “But Joe the Plumber and Ed the Dairy Man, I believe that they think that it sounds more like socialism,” she continued (Palin, 2008b). Her efforts did rally a number of conservative voters, though she simultaneously alienated many others. This attempt to polarize voters seemingly failed as Americans began to understand the complexities of the financial crisis, all the while maintaining households and personally navigating the growing recession (Cohen & Agiesta, 2008a; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008).
This prospective change in economic policy that became a key component of Obama’s campaign was carried into his administration. His inaugural address outlined the realities of the American economy and the potential political and cultural impact on the world. “Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility,” he proclaimed; equally as problematic is “the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet” (Obama, 2009). Immediately upon taking office, Obama quickly moved to pass a stimulus bill. With much partisanship, media courting, and grassroots campaigning, the $789 billion stimulus package was passed within the first 25 days. Along with the stimulus plan, Obama implemented new policies to intervene in the housing and credit market, a market plan to purchase toxic assets from banks, a plan to bail out the automobile industry, and new regulatory oversight for Wall Street.

The impact of much of these policies is currently unknown, but the perception that Obama is a participatory president who is actively attempting to steer the economy contributed early to his high approval ratings that averaged near 60%. Obama’s ability to persuade potential voters of his ability to adequately address the economy will help to diminish stereotypes about the ineffectiveness of Black politicians to provide sound management. The outcomes of Obama’s bold offensive against the economic crisis remain to be seen, particularly the impact that it will have on lower-income and working-class Americans. The stimulus package continues the policy of targeting benefits through the tax structure and not through programs providing direct aid to impoverished citizens but rather in-kind actions such as increased benefits health care and access to education. Future Black candidates will benefit from Obama’s potential success in handling the economy. However, if the economic stimulus does not trickle down and adequately address economic and quality-of-life disparities for their Black constituents, it will be difficult for future Black candidates to develop and maintain the diverse coalition of voters that ensured Obama’s electoral victory.

A Vision of a Postracial America

When Barack Obama became the first African American president, some attempted to argue that race no longer played a meaningful role in the distribution of services, wealth, employment, or equity in the quality of life for citizens. Conservative pundits argued during the campaign that the success and media acceptance of Obama warranted that Blacks could no longer argue race as an excuse to explain hindrances in their progress in America. During CNN’s election night coverage, Anderson Cooper raised the question of the
impact of an Obama victory on race relations. Former secretary of education William Bennett responded “You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says ‘the deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that.' There are always problems in a big society” (CNN, 2008).

The danger in championing the victory of Obama and future African American politicians is the subsequent neglect of structural racism and racial disparities that still permeate society. Unfortunately Obama’s victory did not change the fact that Black children disproportionately attend high-poverty, low-performing schools or that Blacks have been more severely affected by the economic crisis, with the joblessness rate for Blacks reaching 13.4% in March of 2009, nearly twice as high for Whites, with a 7.3% unemployment rate. In the spring of 2009, the National Urban League (Morial, 2009) published its annual study on the progress of African Americans in achieving economic parity with other Americans. Titled “The State of Black America 2009: Message to the President,” the league’s report contained sobering news. Its Equality Index, an analytical tool for statistically comparing the conditions of African American families and individuals with those of White families and individuals, found that the status of African Americans was 71.1% of the status of Whites, on average. The score is nearly identical to the index from 2008 (71.5%). According to the executive summary of the report, “even as an African American man holds the highest office [in] the country, African Americans remain twice as likely to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty and six times more likely to be incarcerated.”

With their “eyes on the prize,” scholars of African American history have studied Obama intently in an attempt to read his sometimes simultaneous messages. Will this prospective vision of a postracial administration help or hinder future Black politicians? And what role do Obama’s decisions play in shaping his legacy for the Black community? On one hand, the president has demonstrated a thorough embrace of the civil rights movement as a national achievement, and yet, on the other, he distanced his campaign and now his administration from open engagement in discussions about lingering disparities today.

Even in a race-neutral or postracial administration, Obama must deal with certain issues in order to have credibility within the African American community and to make future Black candidates more viable for state and national offices. The failings of race-neutral politics have been that Black candidates struggle to de-emphasize race while attempting to advocate for the Black community and address structural racism. For example, one issue that African American scholars anxiously wait to see if Obama will address
involves the criminal justice system and sentencing disparities. Differential sentencing for crack and powder cocaine serves as a metaphor for a two-track judicial system, one for Blacks and another for Whites. Advocates for equality within the criminal justice system note that African American males are incarcerated in the United States at a rate of one out of four or, at best, one out of five (Robinson, 2001). A recent study of the sentencing disparities discovered that moving $500 worth of crack results in the same 5-year prison sentence as $75,000 dollars worth of powder cocaine (Drug Enforcement Agency, 2009). Watch groups have repeatedly asked that non-violent drug offenses be reconsidered by the U.S. Sentencing Commission and that the severity of the punishments be reduced. While the current White House seems to favor such a change, some members of Congress resist. This is just one example of the kinds of disparities that must be honestly addressed by the new administration.

Yet another structural disparity that Obama must address if he hopes to maintain a coalition of support that includes African Americans is the inequality in access to health care. A recent report published in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health stated that nearly 70% of the difference in death rates between Blacks and Whites occurred as a result of preventable or treatable health conditions. Using data from 1980 to 2005, Dr. John Macinko, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, reported that over half the deaths of Americans under the age of 65 were caused by preventable or treatable conditions, such as hypertension, colon cancer, stroke, and diabetes. The analysis reported that Black women had 42% higher risk of death than White women of the same age, whereas Black men had a 30% higher chance of death than their White counterparts. Much of that increased risk was due to preventable and treatable ailments. “As the nation turns its attention to health-care reform, we now know that much can be done to reduce racial and ethnic health-care disparities and to improve the health care for all Americans,” Macinko said (Preidt, 2009).

In the end, Obama’s administration may be judged by where his allegiance lies in the struggle between privilege and equality and the effectiveness of his presidency in “closing the gap” between Blacks and Whites. Scholars are already questioning whether Obama’s avoidance of the traditional trajectory to political power for African Americans—through the nation’s top historically Black colleges and universities and other historic African American social and political networks—has long-reaching implications for existing Black power networks. They note that while Obama courted and overwhelmingly won the African American vote, in some ways
his color signified an alliance that allowed him to be elected with no specific promises to keep to African Americans. The vision of a postracial state could prove damaging to aspiring African American candidates if the best model for transcending race in the political arena belies the structural inequalities that still need to be addressed. Without awareness of the inequities that remain, the need for a next generation of Black leaders to tackle these challenges could be dismissed by the American public.

**Restoration of American Credibility Throughout the World**

Since September 11, 2001, Americans have struggled to understand the rationale behind the unpopular Iraq war, the images of torture at Abu Ghraib, and the increased anti-American sentiment in Muslim and Arab nations. These events, along with the role that American corporations played in the international economic crisis, contributed to the decline in American credibility throughout the world. In an effort to address critics who argue that Obama lacked foreign policy experience, Obama’s campaign portrayed him as someone who took seriously the perceived lack of respect for America’s role as a world leader and someone who could fix this image problem. In July 2008, Obama traveled to Europe and the Middle East to assess those nations and their relationships with the United States.

The prospective vision of new leadership in America was cemented by images of Obama speaking to record international crowds, such as the 200,000 persons who gathered to hear him in Berlin. During his speeches in Europe, Obama reiterated themes of cooperation, restoration of American leadership, and respect for international partnerships to address issues of terrorism. The possibility that Obama could regain the respect of America as a world leader sensitive to the struggles of developing nations and their populations, along with his youthful image, biracial parentage, and experiences abroad as a child, encouraged voters—particularly youth and first-time voters—that he would be a visionary who could transform America’s image abroad (Grinberg, 2008).

Obama’s election has in many ways restored American credibility to the global community, or it has at least triggered interest in America’s new first family. Obama’s diplomatic actions are constantly under scrutiny; the world awaited his decision on the prosecution of former Bush employees who violated statues against torture, for example. Obama’s diplomatic actions also have a direct effect on his relationship with the African American community and thus could affect future up-and-coming Black politicians. In April 2009, to the “dismay” of the congressional Black
caucus, the Obama administration announced that it would boycott the United Nations World Conference Against Racism. The conference, dubbed the Durban Review Conference, was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in the same month. According to the State Department, a document defining the purpose of the conference “singles out” Israel—the United States’ stalwart ally—for criticism.

For Obama to follow the Bush administration’s policy on this particular foreign policy issue, when so much of the former administration’s foreign affairs program has been criticized by the new administration, is problematic to many. Bush’s ambassadors joined Israeli diplomats in a walkout protest of the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, after the conference participants declared that “Zionism,” advocacy of maintaining the borders of the modern State of Israel within what historically was Palestine, was “racist.” Pamela Reed laments that while Americans differ over which side of the Palestine–Israeli conflict the nation should support, the failure of the first African American president to use this pristine and unprecedented opportunity to address racism on a world stage has been lost in a game of political maneuvering (Reed, 2009). Other commentators use stronger language. Marlene Nadle (2009), an associate of the TransRegional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School University in New York, said that “people in those countries, like many Americans, hoped he would head up the fight for racial justice, not become one of the obstacles to it.” Obama’s record on foreign policy will not be limited to this position only; however, his status as the first African American president will make his choices—particularly those that affect the African continent or racially oppressed persons—all the more significant. And his leadership will either benefit or hinder the Black leaders who seek to follow in his footsteps.

Conclusion

The historic administration of Barack Obama faces unprecedented challenges, many of which are touted nightly on the evening news. Americans who based their support for Obama on prospective changes to the economy and diplomacy have high expectations for the new president. Moreover, many believed that Obama had transcended race, when really he had succeeded in balancing a campaign that was only loosely connected to the Black community but was dependent on race-conscious behavior to mobilize Black voters. This mobilization of the African American community
and the rise of a 21st-century Black consciousness was a retrospective change that developed as a result of those Black candidates who ran, albeit often unsuccessfully, before Obama. Additionally, the shift in White racial attitudes—specifically, the discrediting of blatant race-baiting and a move toward tolerance and diversity—gave Obama the small opening he needed to reach White voters with his powerful message of change. The mass dissemination of this unfiltered message was made possible by the advent of viral technology, which allowed Obama to connect with new voters—both young voters and new African American voters.

At the center of this perfect storm of retrospective and prospective change were very sophisticated campaign strategists who recognized that a race-neutral, Web-based message of change could build an unbeatable coalition of voters. However, maintaining this coalition, especially maintaining his support in the Black community, will require Obama to make the kinds of decisions that will benefit the generation that seeks power in his wake. With regard to the retrospective changes that facilitated his election, Obama must continue making his administration accessible through social networking, insist upon racial tolerance, and maintain his relationship with the Black electorate. And for the prospective change that was part of the vision of his candidacy, Obama must deliver on key promises, such as improved foreign relations and economic oversight. Finally, while his election speaks to racial progress, Obama must be careful not to discount or ignore the defining issues of structural racism that still plague America, such as disparities in incarceration rates and in access to health care.

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