The End of Race

Obama, 2008, and Racial Politics in America

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This wasn’t supposed to be a book. Several years ago, one of us (Kinder) was about to finish a book. That’s what he kept telling himself and others: Almost finished. Nearly done. The subject of that book was the role of prejudice in contemporary American politics. It was organized around Gunnar Myrdal’s famous prediction, spelled out in his masterwork of social science, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). According to Myrdal, white Americans were caught in a dilemma, suspended between their commitment to democratic principles, on the one side, and their belief in the superiority of the white race, on the other. Myrdal was certain that democratic principles would prevail. Prejudice and discrimination were about to disappear.

Kinder referred to the book he was about to finish, with apologies to Spalding Gray, as the “Monster in a Box.” As Gray did with his incomplete novel, Kinder carried his book with him wherever he went, adding what seemed to him to be indispensable insights, scratching vital notes in the margins, imagining additional crucial analyses, never quite coming to the end. The box was large—but the book (Kinder kept saying) was nearly done.

Then, out of the blue appeared Barack Hussein Obama. Kinder first learned of him from reading his name on a T-shirt worn by his son Jacob, then age twelve. At the time, Obama was an Illinois state senator; Jacob thought Obama should be president. Kinder began to read about him; soon enough, we all did.

Obama posed a problem for the book in the box, which argued that Myrdal was wrong. Obama’s remarkable rise to prominence and his historic victory in 2008 did not, by itself, prove Myrdal right. But Kinder clearly had some explaining to do.

With this in mind, we began in the winter of 2009 to collaborate on what we assumed would be a chapter for the book in the box. We started out by comparing the role of race in the 2008 presidential election to the role played by religion in the Kennedy-Nixon contest of 1960. The resulting paper was long and illuminating (to us at least), but it only told part of the story we needed to tell if we were to get at the real meaning of 2008 for racial politics in America. At some point, we came to the
realization that we were writing a book. And so we wrote it.

We have many people to thank. Portions of the argument and evidence were presented in Chicago at the annual meeting of the Mid-West Political Science Association and in seminars at Michigan, MIT, and Vanderbilt. On those occasions, we received hard questions, good advice, and welcome encouragement. We especially want to thank Adam Berinsky, Marc Hetherington, Cindy Kam, Tim Ryan, and David Sears. On technical matters concerning the Voting Rights Act and racial polarized voting, we asked for and received fine and speedy counsel from Bernie Grofman, Richard Pildes, David Lublin, and Richard Engstrom. Matt Riddle provided patient and excellent advice on statistical matters. Our understanding of gender and politics owes much to a happy, long-running, and continuing collaboration with Nancy Burns. We thank Reviewer A and Reviewer B for their tremendously helpful reports. Yale University Press has withheld their identities, but we came to know them well, as we grappled with their challenging questions and argued with their alternative interpretations. In the process, we materially modified the manuscript; we would have been foolish not to. We are also grateful to Cindy Kam, Hanes Walton, and Janet Weiss, who plowed through the entire manuscript and presented us with a bushel full of excellent suggestions. In ways large and small, this book is much the better for their efforts. Kinder’s good friend Lance Sandelands read not a word—nevertheless, he bears some responsibility for what follows. Sandelands is not just a close friend but also a perceptive, sympathetic, and wise critic; he seemed happy to talk, again and again, about our project. In the end, have we succeeded in persuading Sandelands? Not for us to say. But we can say that the book is much clearer and stronger than it would have been without all those conversations. Finally, Samuel Weiss is a fine writer and a splendid editor. We know this because, having read all of our sentences, he proceeded to eliminate quite a few, fix others, and convert awkward constructions into felicitous phrases—and he did all of this cheerfully and diplomatically, despite the Oedipal temptation. Thanks to one and all.
INTRODUCTION: ELECTIONS AS REVELATIONS

Each election year is a revelation—in the way the electorate is consulted, wooed, or baffled; in the way issues are chosen, presented, or evaded; in the demands and promises made, compromises struck, strains felt tacitly or voiced. The nation at once celebrates and mourns itself.
—Garry Wills

On a bitterly cold, sun-splashed Tuesday in Washington, before an enormous and delighted crowd, Barack Obama is about to be sworn in as the forty-fourth president of the United States. Among the guests of honor on the inaugural platform sits John Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement and longtime congressman from Georgia. Some forty years before, on a quiet Sunday afternoon, Lewis led a dignified, double-file procession of some six hundred American citizens from Brown’s Chapel up onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The march was headed to Montgomery; its purpose was to convince Governor Wallace (and the nation) of the moral necessity of extending the vote to black Americans—as a legal right and a practical reality. For their impertinence, the marchers were sprayed with tear gas, knocked to the pavement, and savagely beaten. Lewis slumped to the ground, his skull split open by a trooper’s truncheon.1

As Obama makes his way to the front of the inaugural stand, he glances to his right, notices Lewis, moves down an aisle, and bends to embrace him. On a remarkable day, it is a remarkable moment. In Lewis’s time, African Americans were denied the vote, shut out of politics, and scorned and dishonored by their government. In 2008, African Americans had the vote, and they voted in overwhelming numbers for a black man for president. More astonishing still, millions of white Americans did the same. The country had changed.2

In his inaugural address, the new president did not dwell on this transformation, but he acknowledged it. Toward the end of his speech, Obama invoked the majesty of democratic ideals. Commitment to the American Creed, he said, is “why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this
magnificent mall. And why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.” The words were fine, but it was enough to marvel at the sight itself: silhouetted against a background of gleaming white marble, a tall, thin, black man, the president of the United States.

Following Garry Wills’s lead, we treat the 2008 election as a revelation—in particular, as a revelation about the place of race in national politics, now and into the future. On the face of it, Obama’s victory seemed to announce that the United States had overcome its past; that at long last, “the most painful of all American struggles” had come to an end.3 Interpreted this way, the 2008 election confirms Gunnar Myrdal’s famous prediction. In 1937, Myrdal, a brilliant young economist and an influential adviser to the Swedish government, was invited by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to undertake a comprehensive study of the “Negro problem” in the United States. Myrdal accepted Carnegie’s offer, moved his family to the United States, threw himself into the project, and eventually produced a masterwork of social science. In An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Myrdal (1944) put forward a conceptual framework and presented a mountain of evidence that would influence intellectuals, courts, activists, and policy makers for more than a generation.

The dilemma that Myrdal claimed to find at the core of American race relations arose out of the glaring contradiction between democratic ideals and racial discrimination. According to Myrdal, white Americans were caught in a dilemma, suspended between their commitment to noble democratic principles—what Myrdal called the American Creed—on the one side, and their belief in the superiority of their race, on the other. In the struggle between democratic principles and race prejudice, Myrdal was certain that the former was stronger, that the Creed would prevail. Taught in school, preached in church, written into the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the American Creed constituted, in Myrdal’s judgment, the “the glory of the nation” (p. lxix). Supported by mere tradition or interest, prejudice and discrimination would be swept away. This prediction was the centerpiece of Myrdal’s influential book. Myrdal concluded that the American Creed’s advance was inexorable and that prejudice’s days were numbered.

Indeed, in Myrdal’s view, by the middle of the twentieth century, prejudice was already in full retreat. The theory that blacks were inferior to whites in intelligence and character, and that such inferiorities were inherent and permanent, was now rejected by many educated whites. Such ideas were harder to find in books, journals, and public speeches, and white supremacy was not so regularly nourished by society’s leaders. As a respectable theory, racism was in decline, a casualty of advances in education and transformations in science.

In his final chapter, Myrdal wrote that the “gradual destruction of the popular theory behind race prejudice is the most important of all social trends in the field of interracial relations” (p. 1003). To be sure, stray cases of prejudice remained. But according to Myrdal, prejudice based on race had been driven underground and to the
margins of society, consigned to “a surreptitious life.” Racism was an American aberration, and it was being stamped out. The nation’s democratic heritage was about to be redeemed. Had he lived to see it, Myrdal no doubt would have interpreted Obama’s victory as a resounding and uplifting display of principle over prejudice.

Myrdal would not have been alone in doing so. Indeed, well before Obama’s victory, a gathering tide of scholarship on racial politics in the United States had been accentuating the positive, emphasizing postwar improvements in American race relations, and expressing skepticism about the present-day political power of racism. An excellent and influential example is supplied by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom. In America in Black and White (1997), the Thernstroms offer an analysis that, like Myrdal’s, is optimistic on American race relations. Progress is the most important lesson of the last fifty years, they say, and “revolutionary” changes in whites’ racial attitudes have transformed American politics. “In the years before the civil rights revolution, hard-core white racism was ubiquitous; in the 1990s, it is largely a thing of the past” (p. 499). Racists can still be found occasionally, but according to the Thernstroms, they have “become a tiny remnant with no influence in any important sphere on American life.” As a result, “disagreements over affirmative action, fair housing, and other racial questions are primarily political” (p. 500).

If Myrdal and the Thernstroms are right, then Obama’s victory is simply an outsized and dramatic example of American redemption, the decisive and final triumph of democratic principles over racial discord. Perhaps this is right, but we don’t think so.

As we show here, race was deeply implicated in the 2008 contest. Obama’s candidacy provoked a huge racial divide in the vote. Obama’s support among black Americans was driven significantly by racial group solidarity. Opposition to Obama among white Americans was driven significantly by resentments rooted in race. All things considered, Barack Obama became president in spite of his race. Under conditions less debilitating to the Republicans—John McCain was handed the task of defending an unpopular war and either papering over or explaining away a looming economic catastrophe—Obama would not have been elected at all.

A Look Ahead

Does Obama’s victory in 2008 mean the end of race? The short answer is “No.” Saying so is, of course, one thing; establishing the claim is quite another. The latter requires evidence and argument. Supplying both is the object of our book.

As for evidence, we go right to the source: to American voters from all walks of life. We analyze high-quality national surveys, relying principally on the National Election Studies (NES), but also the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), the 2007–2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), the Gallup Poll, and surveys undertaken jointly by CBS News and the New York Times. We have more to say about all these studies later on, as needed.

We are interested first and foremost in the role of race in American politics today,
but we begin with a more general framework, set out in chapter 1, one that will allow us to make comparisons to social cleavages other than race, and to times and settings other than the immediate present. We introduce and develop two essential concepts: racial solidarity among African Americans and racial resentment among white Americans.\(^5\)

Chapter 2 takes up the extraordinary 2008 Democratic nomination contest. Heading into the race, Senator Clinton was the clear favorite. She enjoyed the backing of her party, endorsements from prominent African Americans, money to burn, and what appeared to be a commanding lead over her rivals. But as we know, in a tight and fiercely contested race, Obama eventually secured the nomination. The object of chapter 2 is to scrutinize Obama’s surprising nomination victory, and as we do so, to supply a comparison between race and gender as principles of political organization and allegiance.

Chapter 3 turns to the general election and the grand prize of American politics. Here we compare the role of race in 2008 to the role of religion in 1960. Like Barack Obama, John Kennedy was young, relatively inexperienced, charismatic, and facing long odds. Neither ran as representatives of their “tribes,” but each became entangled by tribal associations—Kennedy by religion, Obama by race. In the end, both prevailed. What lessons can we find in Kennedy’s struggle with religion for Obama’s attempt to manage race in 2008?

Over these two chapters, we find race still to be a powerful force in presidential politics. Race matters, but it does so in offsetting ways. Obama’s racial identity generally helped his cause among African Americans and hurt him among white Americans. Determining the net effect of race for the electorate as a whole is the business of chapter 4. There we conclude that Obama should have won the 2008 election in a landslide. He did not. The gap between the vote he received and the vote that we calculate he should have received is due substantially to race.

In chapter 5, we consider both the progress the nation has made on race and the obstacles that still stand in the way. We wrestle with the question of progress through a close comparison of Barack Obama’s experience in the spring of 2008 with the experience of Jesse Jackson twenty years before. A generation apart, Obama and Jackson campaigned for the same purpose: to win the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. Obama prevailed, Jackson did not—but (we sometimes forget) Jackson mounted a strong campaign and became the principal challenger to Governor Dukakis, the eventual nominee. Comparing Obama to Jackson opens a window onto how much has changed over the last twenty years in U.S. racial politics.

In the second half of chapter 5, we turn to the possibility of color blindness. We do so through an analysis of the public’s reaction to General Colin Powell, back when Powell was thinking about jumping into the Republican presidential race and when serious people believed he could win. Powell, it was said at the time, transcended race. Did he—and did his remarkable popularity with Americans, black and white—anticipate Obama’s rise to prominence and power?

Chapter 6 provides a first look at Obama as president, starting with his inauguration in January 2009 and ending with the national midterm elections in November 2010. During this period, the new president was busy. Among other things large and small, Obama appointed Hillary Clinton secretary of state, signed an $800
billion stimulus package, bailed out Chrysler and General Motors, went to Cairo to address the Muslim world, placed Sonia Sotomayor onto the Supreme Court, and engineered a major reform of the U.S. health-care system. In the avalanche of news spilling out of Washington, did Americans begin to forget that their new president was black?

In the concluding chapter, we summarize our findings and grapple with their implications. On matters of race and politics, we try to determine how far we have come as a society; to locate where we are now; and to suggest how far we have yet to go. In this respect, we follow in Myrdal’s footsteps. Like Myrdal in An American Dilemma (1944), we take what ordinary Americans think and do about race to be a cardinal test of democracy, a pointed way to gauge the extent to which the United States lives up to its democratic aspirations. If we depart from Myrdal’s optimistic conclusion—that prejudice was about to be forever swept aside—we certainly share his view on the importance of the test. It is from this perspective that we offer our analysis of Obama’s victory. Properly decoded, the 2008 election can serve as a revelation about race, democracy, and the promise of America.

Wills’s quote from Nixon Agonistes (1969, p. 46).
SOCIAL GROUPS AND THE VOTE

A man with a ballot in his hand is the master of the situation. He defines all his other rights. What is not already given him, he takes. The ballot is opportunity, education, fair play, right to office, and elbow room.
—Wendell Phillips, abolitionist

We are primarily interested in understanding one thing in particular: the role of race in the 2008 American presidential election. But we start by putting forward a general framework that enables us to make instructive comparisons to social cleavages other than race and to times and places other than the contemporary United States.

We begin by defining two basic terms: politics and groups. Next, we argue that groups become relevant to politics insofar as they are sites of persistent inequality, and we document the fact that race in the United States fulfills this condition all too well. With these points established, we turn in the heart of the chapter to a theory of voter choice. The theory advances two principal claims: First, social groups enter the voter’s decision either through identification with the in-group (for example, solidarity among African Americans) or through attitude toward out-groups (for example, racial resentment among white Americans). Second, the aspects of group identity and group attitude that become important in voters’ choices—which aspects are activated—depend on political circumstances.

Politics

Politics, according to Charles Lindblom, is a process whereby “people who want authority struggle to get it while others try to control those who hold it.” It is authority, Lindblom says, that provides the “bedrock on which government is erected.”

Over the long sweep of human history, the struggle over authority has often been chaotic and bloody, won more frequently by force than by reason. The constitutional
movement in the West was an attempt, in Lindblom’s estimation, to convert the deadly struggle for authority into more peaceful and orderly procedures. New forms of participation in politics were invented. Grain seizures, collective invasions of forbidden fields and forests, attacks on machines, sacking of private houses, and turnouts were once the established forms of contention. With the development of capitalism and the rise of the nation-state, however, “the interests and organizations of ordinary people shifted away from local affairs and powerful patrons to national affairs and major concentrations of power and capital” (Tilly 1986, p. 395). A new repertoire of collective action began to take shape. No longer so parochial in scope, forms of contention were now addressed to national authorities. No longer so dependent on patrons, collective action was now autonomous and versatile. In place of the grain seizure and the sacking of private homes came the demonstration, the strike, the social movement, and most notably the election campaign. In modern liberal democratic societies like the United States, authority is won primarily through elections.2

Indeed, in the United States, elections are widely regarded as the democratic moment: elections as the linchpin of the democratic machine and voting as “the central act of democracy” (Riker 1982, p. 5). In theory at least, elections are the “critical technique,” as Robert Dahl once put it, for motivating leaders to be responsive to the aspirations and interests of the voters.

Do American elections actually work this way? By and large, they do. The two major parties differ on important matters, and when one party wins, it generally pursues policies broadly consistent with the interests and preferences of its core constituents: on taxes, unemployment, inflation, foreign affairs, the size and scope of government in general, and not least, race.3

Of course, American elections have their share of problems. For one thing, they are blunt instruments of influence: insofar as elections shape policy, they do so partially and often retrospectively, sometimes well after the damage has been done. Moreover, voters are to some degree captive of the campaigns they are presented, which rarely meet the standards set by those who place sober deliberation and thoughtful discussion at the center of democratic politics. Nevertheless, elections do perform an instrumental function, if imperfectly. By taking part in elections, American voters can register their pleasure or displeasure with the governing party and return or replace leaders accordingly, thereby setting in motion alterations in government policy.

Policy is at stake in elections, but so too are pride and recognition. This is one clear lesson to be taken from the African Americans’ long struggle for the vote. White Americans resisted extending the franchise to blacks so fiercely and blacks demanded the vote so steadfastly not just because the vote would give blacks the power to protect their interests and have some say on matters of policy, but also because the right to vote was understood on both sides of the color line to convey symbolic authority, a special kind of democratic recognition.

To whites, the exclusive right to vote was a public and prominent sign of superiority, not to be easily relinquished. According to Gunnar Myrdal (1944):

Already in the ante-bellum elections, political campaigning and voting had acquired a ceremonial significance as marking off a distinct sphere of power
and responsibility for the free citizen. From Reconstruction on, voting remained to the white Southerner more than a mere action: it was, and still is, a symbol of superiority. Partly because it is a public activity and does not lend itself to privacy or segregation, it becomes so hard for the white Southerner to admit the Negro to full participation in it.

To African Americans, the symbolic weight attached to being denied the vote was no less. Frederick Douglass argued that emancipation was not real, that slavery was not abolished, until African Americans had the ballot: “Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation. By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form intelligent judgments respecting public measures” (Foner 1955, pp. 159–160).

When individuals are denied the vote, they feel scorned and dishonored; with it, they are invested with democratic responsibility and dignity. From this perspective, participation in elections is “an affirmation of belonging.”

Much more could be said about voters and elections. Some of it we say in subsequent chapters, as our analysis requires. For now, we are satisfied if we have established two basic points: First, politics is a struggle for authority, and in democratic systems, that struggle is carried out importantly through elections. Second, elections can deliver or withhold two kinds of prizes: the instrumental prize of policy and the expressive prize of recognition.

Social Group

Any aggregation of individuals can be a group, if the aggregation is experienced as such. Women, college professors, the neighborhood bridge club: all “are groups in so far as they are social categories or regions in an individual’s social outlook—objects of opinions, attitudes, affect, and striving.” Groups do not require institutional sponsors, formal membership, or face-to-face interaction—though they might have all three. Any collection of people that constitutes a psychological entity for any individual becomes, thereby, a group.

Defined this way, groups can be enormous (women) or tiny (the neighborhood bridge club). Because of our preoccupation with politics on a national scale, we are naturally drawn much more to the former than the latter. (We attach the modifier “social” to “group” to convey our special interest in groups of substantial size.) When the national government and the resources it commands become the objects of politics, then group attachments and oppositions based in particularistic features, like kin or local community, are subordinated to attachments rooted in broader groupings, such as race, gender, and religion (Posner 2004).

This may seem straightforward, but from one perspective at least, it is quite puzzling. Broad social groups—blacks and whites, men and women—are invisible. That is, such groups are, as Solomon Asch once put it, “too large to be perceived at
once” (1952, p. 227). Yet we experience them as familiar, real, and whole, and the puzzle is why.

Donald Campbell’s (1958) ingenious analysis of perceiving aggregates of individuals as social entities provides a solution. Conceding that social groups are not as solid as material objects and their boundaries are less clear, Campbell argues that we nevertheless see them in the same way we see material objects. Perceptual principles “are equally applicable to stones and social groups” (Campbell 1958, p. 18).

Campbell offers four principles from research on human perception that govern when discrete elements (individuals) are perceived as parts of a whole organization (group), and Robert Abelson has more recently added a fifth:

1. **Similarity**: Similar elements are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization. Similarity—grouping by common features—is a necessary condition for group perception.
2. **Proximity**: Elements close together are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization.
3. **Common Fate**: Elements that move together in the same direction and otherwise share a “common fate” are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization. Insofar as outcomes and opportunities are shared across many occasions, to that degree, individuals will tend to be seen as constituting a single group.
4. **Good Figure (Pregnance)**: Elements forming a part of a spatial pattern tend to be perceived as part of the same unit. This principle is relevant to the specification of boundaries. Good figures “resist” intrusion; they are “opaque” to probing and their boundaries are relatively impermeable.
5. **Coordinated Action**: Abelson points out that often in political discussions, “ethnic groups and nations are treated as if they are active organisms with hopes, plans, intentions, grievances, moods, and the like: The Palestinians yearn for a homeland, the Serbs have a deep-seated animus against the Muslims, the Christian fundamentalists are expanding their power base in the Republican Party, and so forth” (Abelson et al. 1998, p. 248). Aggregates of individuals are more likely to be taken as a group when they are seen to carry out coordinated action to achieve common objectives.

In sum, we are prone to see aggregation of individuals as members of groups when they display the perceptual properties of similarity, proximity, common fate, good figure, and coordinated action.

Notice that racial groups fulfill these criteria well. Members of racial groups share some conspicuous features: the “physical insignia” of skin color, hair texture, facial features, accent and cadence of speech, and so forth. Thanks in part to the stubborn persistence of segregation, they often find themselves isolated, in close proximity only to one another. They share a common fate: to some degree, they are treated alike, suffering injury and insult or opportunity and honor not because of who they are as individuals, but because of the racial group they happen to represent. They display
boundary maintenance, as expressed in strong (if slowly declining) preferences for within-group marriage. And finally, members of racial groups also display signs of coordinated action; to this degree, they are seen not only as social entities but also as political ones, with collective aspirations and common interests.

Categorical Inequality

In the United States, as in other advanced industrial societies, individuals vary tremendously in wealth, power, and status. Inequality is generated in part by individual differences in talent and enterprise; by luck, good and bad; and, most relevant to our purpose here, by recurrent social processes whereby different social groups are subject to systematically different treatment.

Some form of inequality accompanies virtually all social interactions. Most of the time, such inequality is fleeting. Durable inequality generated by recurrent social processes is a different matter. In Charles Tilly’s (1998) analysis, differences in advantage that pivot on categorical opposites—black versus white, Muslim versus Jew, male versus female, citizen versus foreigner—are especially likely to endure. According to Tilly, “paired and unequal categories do crucial organizational work, producing marked, durable differences in access to valued resources. Durable inequality depends heavily on the institutionalization of categorical pairs” (1998, p. 8).

In Tilly’s scheme, systems of enduring categorical inequality are established by two general processes. The first of these is exploitation, whereby members of a categorically bounded network command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns, accomplished by coordinating the efforts of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by their effort. Over all of recorded history, “both mighty emperors and petty tyrants have organized exploitation around categorical distinctions” (1998, p. 88).

Complementing exploitation is a second mechanism, opportunity hoarding, whereby members of a categorically bounded network gain control over a valued resource from which outsiders are excluded. Depending on time and place, hoarding might refer to territory, education, financial capital, instruments of coercion, employment, or any other valued resource.

Once established, categorical inequality is generalized by a process of emulation, whereby existing inequalities are transplanted from one setting to another. This can take place when exterior categorical differences are matched to internal categorical differences—as in labor markets, when a firm assigns high-paying jobs that promise advancement to one group (say, whites) and low-paying, dead-end jobs to another group (say, blacks). Other firms follow suit. Eventually, the practice generates pools of workers with different experiences and capabilities defined along group lines. Firms hire and promote accordingly. The result is categorical inequality entrenched within an entire industry.

According to Tilly, inequality is locked into place through adaptation, whereby daily routines are organized around categorical distinctions. One variety is the
invention of norms governing day-to-day interaction between members of categorically unequal groups, as in the extensive and intricate system of deference that grew up in the Jim Crow South. Racial “etiquette” guided every detail of every encounter—forms of address, topics of conversation, appropriate demeanor, and more—thereby providing blacks and whites a regular reminder of the unbridgeable gulf that separated them.10

As categorical inequality spreads, members of advantaged groups begin to create what Elizabeth Anderson calls “stigmatizing stories.” Their purpose is to explain and rationalize inequality. Glaring differences between groups in wealth, power, and status reflect corresponding differences between groups in talent or virtue or culture.

By and large, such stories do not cause inequality. Recurrent social processes do. Exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation are the engines of inequality. Stories are important, however, because they justify and fortify inequality organized around categorical opposites.11

Race as Categorical Inequality

A grotesque example of categorical inequality is supplied by slavery. Beginning in the early part of the seventeenth century, West Africans were taken forcibly from their homelands, put in chains, and shipped under nightmarish conditions across the ocean to the American South, there to provide cheap labor for the burgeoning plantation economy. By the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790, African Americans—nearly all slaves—made up roughly 20 percent of the national population and more than one-third of the population of the South. Slavery, imposed and maintained by violence, was at the center of the new American economic order.12

Today, of course, slavery is gone; the Jim Crow regime of racial oppression that followed emancipation has been dismantled, and discrimination on account of race is now illegal. All of this is true, and all of it is important. As far as race is concerned, the United States is a far more egalitarian society than it once was. Does this mean that race and disadvantage are no longer connected? No. Evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

African Americans have made significant inroads into the middle class over the last sixty years, sharing in the economic prosperity that came to all of American society following World War II. However, racial differences remain and they are imposing. One-third of the black children in the United States live in poverty, more than three times the rate of white children, and black children are much more likely to experience continuous and persistent poverty. Among adults, blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed; they are substantially overrepresented among “discouraged workers,” those who have given up looking for work and therefore do not appear in official unemployment figures; and when blacks are employed, they earn less. These differences are large, but they are nothing compared to racial differences in wealth. According to recent figures, the average white household commands more than ten times the financial assets of the average black household.13
Racial differences in fundamental aspects of health have proven stubborn as well. Infant mortality provides a disturbing case in point. While black women who bear children today are much less likely to lose an infant than were their parents and grandparents before them, the mortality rate remains more than twice as high for blacks than for whites. Black children who survive their first year can expect poorer health, more illness—asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer—and, on average, a shorter life.14

Discrimination by race has been illegal since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and surely it is neither as flagrant nor as pervasive today as it once was. But it is not gone. Scores of careful studies make clear that African Americans still face discrimination in labor markets. Black people looking to purchase homes are still steered away from white neighborhoods and are still subject to racial bias in mortgage lending. African Americans continue to endure racist epithets on the streets; harassment by police officers in public spaces; rudeness, excessive surveillance, and higher prices while they shop; coolness from their teachers and bosses; and racist jokes from their coworkers. While whites tend to believe that discrimination is a problem of the past, many blacks see it as pervasive in society and a demoralizing presence in their own lives.15

What about inequality in politics? In the early years of the twentieth century, white-dominated legislatures and constitutional conventions throughout the South enacted an assortment of devices designed to banish blacks from political life. These included the poll tax, literacy and property tests, the understanding clause, the good character clause, and not least, the white primary. Blacks initiated legal action, held meetings, organized election campaigns, petitioned constitutional conventions bent on rescinding their suffrage, and where permitted, voted against the new suffrage restrictions. But their efforts were unavailing. Disfranchisement proceeded apace. Blacks disappeared from politics.16

All these formal obstacles to black participation are gone now, swept away by scores of local struggles, Supreme Court decisions, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the threat of federal intervention. Black participation in political life towers over what it was a generation or two ago. As a consequence, many blacks now hold positions of political authority.17

Progress on this front has been dramatic. In 1965, the year of the Voting Rights Act, just four of the 435 elected officials serving in the U.S. House of Representatives were black. Not a single African American served in the Senate; only three were mayors of American cities. In the entire country, fewer than three hundred blacks held elected office, most as members of school boards or city councils. Within a decade, the number of blacks holding elective office across the nation increased more than tenfold. The upward trend continued through the 1970s, but now is leveling off—and leveling off well below strict proportionality. While African Americans make up roughly 13 percent of the voting-age population in the United States, they comprise less than 2 percent of elected officials. Blacks have made impressive gains in politics—illustrated in a most dramatic way by Barack Obama’s historic victory in the 2008 presidential election—but they remain, as a general rule, substantially underrepresented in the corridors of power.18
Taken all around, the quality of life experienced by black Americans has improved notably since World War II. However, over the same period, racial differences in the quality of life have persisted. Some differences between blacks and whites have diminished, others have increased, and still others have changed not one iota. All in all, race in the United States continues to provide a compelling case of enduring inequality.

**Voting and the Social Group**

Our purpose here is to offer a general framework for analyzing and understanding how social difference shapes politics—what might be called “A Theory of Voting with Social Groups in Mind.” (The language is extravagant, but it does convey what we are up to.) The theory is intended to apply to the case of race and Obama in 2008, of course, but it should prove useful in understanding social groups other than race and political moments other than 2008.

*First Premise: Politics Is a Sideshow*

In a series of influential essays written in the aftermath of World War I, Walter Lippmann, perhaps the most prominent public intellectual of the day, argued that the typical citizen—parochial in interest, modest in intellect, and most of all preoccupied with private affairs—lacks the wherewithal to grasp political matters in any deep way. People are busy; politics is complicated. To expect ordinary people to become absorbed in the affairs of government would be to demand of them an appetite for political knowledge quite peculiar, if not actually pathological.

Lippmann was right. Family, work, and health are central preoccupations. In the meantime, for nearly all of us almost all the time, the events of political life remain peripheral curiosities. In modern societies like the United States, “politics is a sideshow in the great circus of life.”

If this is so, citizens may well wonder why they should take the trouble to become informed about public affairs. Indeed, many do not. On matters of politics, Americans are often astonishingly ignorant. This fact places a premium, from the voter’s point of view, on cues that are readily at hand and rich in information. Cues like these: Barack Obama is black, John Kennedy is Catholic, Hillary Clinton is a woman.

*Second Premise: Social Motivation*

On those occasions when voters do turn their attention to politics, they are motivated in part by social concerns. In “Rational Fools,” presented as a rebuke to his fellow economists, Amartya Sen argued that a person propelled entirely by calculations of self-interest would be “close to a social moron” (1977, p. 336). With Sen, we assume that people are not social morons, that they are motivated by more