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## After Obama

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**Abstract:** Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president, is approaching the end of his second and final term. Obama's impending departure raises questions about his legacy. Here we explore what the consequences of the Obama Presidency might be for the future of racial politics in America: for prejudice itself; for the racialization of policy; for the mobilization of the Black vote; and for the racial polarization of the party system.

## Introduction

Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president, is approaching the end of his second and final term. Obama's impending departure raises questions about his legacy. Here we explore the consequences of the Obama Presidency for racial politics in particular. Our essay is necessarily an exercise in speculation – Obama is still president – but speculation disciplined by evidence and informed by theory. We take up four aspects of racial politics in America: prejudice itself; the racialization of policy; the mobilization of the Black vote; and the racial polarization of the party system. In each instance, we will be looking for interruptions or discontinuities in politics associated with the Obama Presidency, relying primarily on data from the American National Election Study (ANES), and the General Social Survey (GSS). In the final section of the essay, in place of a conventional conclusion, we suggest what our findings imply for the American future.

## Prejudice

Prejudice takes race for granted: that is, prejudice is built upon the presumption that human populations can be partitioned into distinct types on the basis of their concrete, physical differences. Indeed, racial categories make no sense without prejudice. In the absence of prejudice, physical features that distinguish

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one group from one another would hold no significance (Van den Berghe 1967). To the prejudiced person, outward expressions of difference like the color of skin or the texture of hair are taken as signs of underlying differences in ability, temperament, and character.

Prejudice is a durable predisposition. It is not easily altered. Theories of prejudice emphasize its tenacity. As Gordon Allport once put it, “If a person is capable of rectifying his erroneous judgments in light of new evidence, he is not prejudiced. Pre-judgments become prejudice only when they are not reversible when exposed to new information” (Allport 1954/1979, p. 9). From this point of view, the Obama Presidency seems unlikely to have had much effect on White Americans’ racial attitudes.

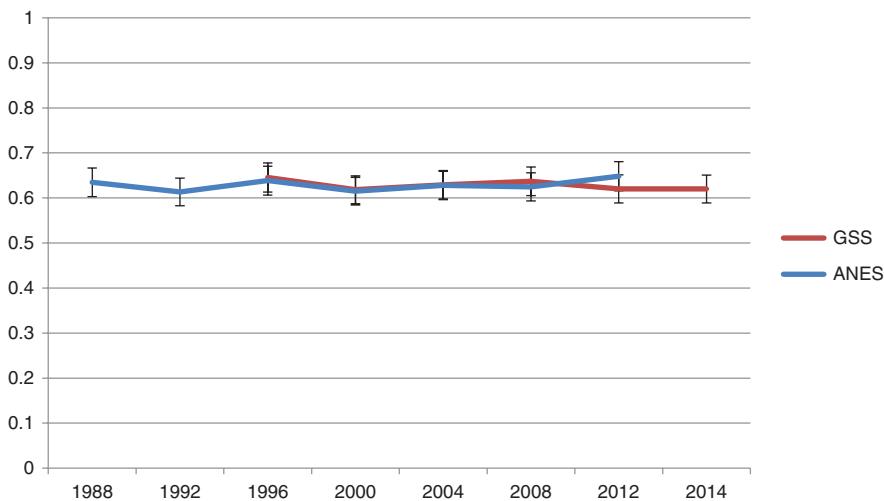
Moreover, Obama is very far from a typical representative of his racial class. His mother is White, he was educated at Columbia and Harvard, he speaks like a professor, he never gets angry, many of his friends and advisers are White. When prejudiced people encounter cases that violate their stereotyped expectations, they often set the case aside, treating it as an exception that proves the rule (Kunda and Oleson 1995, 1997). Perhaps that is how prejudiced Americans treated President Obama.

Against this is Herbert Blumer’s (1958) theory of prejudice, which emphasizes the importance of threat. A given race may be all right “in its place,” but when it begins to challenge the dominant group’s position and prerogatives, the dominant group pushes back, citing superiority, intrinsic difference, and entitlement as justification. Insofar as Whites took Obama’s election as a threat to their entitled status, we should observe, by Blumer’s account, a rise in prejudice.

And so, with plausible arguments on both sides, did prejudice increase, or did it not, after Obama became president?

Answering this question is complicated by the fact that prejudice comes in more than a single variety (Kinder 2013). Or, it could be complicated, but in this case, such variety actually both simplifies and strengthens our conclusion. When it comes to prejudice, however conceived and however measured, the Obama Presidency seems to have had no impact at all.

Consider Figure 1, which depicts the movement over time of a measure of racial resentment. Racial resentment is one member of a family of related concepts representing the “new racism” (Fredrickson 2002), a form of prejudice that emphasizes cultural as against biological differences. The emergence of a new racism is a reflection, in part, of dramatic transformations in American society: the passing of slavery and end of the plantation economy; the great migration of African Americans out of the rural South; and especially the success of the modern civil rights movement in securing basic rights of citizenship and dismantling the legal foundations underpinning discrimination (Kinder and Sanders



**Figure 1:** Racial Resentment Among Whites 1988–2014.

Source: American National Election Study Cumulative File; General Social Survey File.

1996; Bobo and Smith 1998; Sears and Henry 2005). Racial resentment distinguishes between those Whites who are generally sympathetic towards Blacks and the discrimination they face from those who are generally unsympathetic, who resent the failure of Blacks, as they see it, to display the virtues of self-reliance and hard work that they take to be central to the moral ordering of their society.

Figure 1 reveals that racial resentment is essentially stationary over the last quarter century, as measured by the ANES or by the GSS. We detect no sign here that White Americans' racial resentments hardened during the Obama Presidency.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The standard racial resentment scale present on ANES since 1988 is composed of four questions which ask respondents to indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or strongly disagree with the following 4 statements: (1) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites. (2) Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. (3) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower classes (Reverse coded). (4) Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve (Reverse coded). The four questions used for the GSS analyses of racial resentment are: (1) Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with the following statement? Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same with-

What is true for racial resentment – seemingly undisturbed by the Obama Presidency – is true as well for other forms of prejudice. We looked to see whether traditional racial stereotypes diminished after Obama's election; they did not. We examined movement in the feelings Whites expressed toward Blacks following Obama's victory; there was none. We tested whether Obama's Presidency accelerated the decline of biological racism; it did not. Taking all these results into account, what comes through is the tenacity of prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

## Racialization of Policy

We assume that when Americans are asked for their opinions on complex political questions such as affirmative action or health care, they do not undertake a comprehensive review of everything they know. Instead, their opinions depend on a sampling of what they know, those bits and pieces of memory that are called to mind (Kahneman 2003). In turn, what is called to mind depends importantly on circumstance. When political circumstances change, news stories and elite rhetoric shift. The more attention media pay to a particular aspect of political life – the more frequently that aspect is *primed* – the more people will incorporate what they know about it and what they feel about it into their opinions. Defined this way, priming has received strong and consistent support, in experimental and observational studies alike (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002; Lenz 2012).

Priming is relevant here because in politics, no one receives more coverage than the president. And every time President Obama's face appears on the evening

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out special favors. (2) On the average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are...mainly due to discrimination? [Yes/No] (Reverse-coded). (3) On the average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are...because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves out of poverty? [Yes/No] (4) I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the characteristics of people in a group can be rated. A score of 1 means that you think almost all people in that group are "hard-working." A score of 7 means that you think almost all of the people in the group are "lazy." A score of 4 means you think that the group is not towards one end or another, and of course you may choose any number in between that comes closest to where you think people in this group stand. Where would you rate Blacks in general on this scale? ... Where would you rate Whites in general on this scale? Our measure here (4) is the *difference* between the two ratings.

<sup>2</sup> For similar results and conclusions, see Tesler (2016); and on no change in implicit prejudice in particular, see Pasek et al. (2014).

news or on the front page of newspapers or on various social media outlets, Americans are reminded that he is Black. This constant reminder is enough to ensure that, during Obama's run in the White House, Americans will have race more prominently in mind than they otherwise would. And this, in turn, means that one consequence of the Obama Presidency will be an increase in the potency of prejudice: policies that appear on their face to be racially neutral will be understood and evaluated in racial terms. That, at least, is our expectation.

To test it, we turned to the 2006–2008–2010 General Social Survey Panel Study (GSS Panel, for short). The GSS Panel is well-suited to our purpose: it begins in 2006 with Obama as a first-term Senator just beginning to imagine running for president, includes a second observation in the spring of 2008 while Obama and Hillary Clinton are fighting for the Democratic nomination, and draws to completion in 2010, with Obama well into his first term. And on each interview, the GSS includes the same measure of prejudice (racial resentment) and the same set of policy questions.

Following the method developed by Gabriel Lenz (2012), we estimated the association between prejudice and change in policy preference twice: once before Obama comes onto the national stage and once again after Obama arrives. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

For each of eight policies – from affirmative action in the top row of the table to reducing income inequality in the bottom row – Table 1 presents three values. In the left-hand column is the estimated impact of prejudice on change

**Table 1:** Racial Priming? The Effect of Prejudice on White Opinion Before and After Obama Becomes President.

| OLS Coefficients (Standard Errors)        | Before         | After          | Difference |
|---|----------------|----------------|------------|
| <b>Racial Policies</b>                    |                |                |            |
| Affirmative Action                        | 0.15*** (0.05) | 0.17*** (0.05) | 0.02       |
| Government Aid to Blacks                  | 0.26*** (0.07) | 0.20*** (0.07) | -0.06      |
| <b>Policies Exempt from Racialization</b> |                |                |            |
| Education                                 | 0.08 (0.06)    | -0.09 (0.07)   | -0.17      |
| Abortion                                  | 0.05 (0.09)    | 0.01 (0.10)    | -0.04      |
| Environment                               | 0.15*** (0.07) | 0.08 (0.07)    | -0.07      |
| <b>Policies Subject to Racialization</b>  |                |                |            |
| Improving Health Care                     | 0.10*** (0.06) | 0.31*** (0.08) | 0.21*      |
| Assistance to the Poor                    | 0.05 (0.08)    | 0.19*** (0.08) | 0.14*      |
| Reduce Income Inequality                  | 0.12** (0.07)  | 0.23*** (0.08) | 0.11*      |

Source: 2006–2008–2010 General Social Survey Panel Study.

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001.

in opinion on policy between 2006 and 2008, *before* Obama comes fully onto the national stage. (For ease of interpretation, we code each opinion to range from 0 to 1.0, where 0=the most liberal option and 1.0=the most conservative option.) In the middle column is the estimated impact of prejudice on change in opinion on policy between 2008 and 2010, *after* Obama becomes president. And in the right-hand column is the difference between the two estimates. A significant difference – more precisely, a significant increase – indicates support for priming.

The table groups policies into three sets. The first set consists of a pair of policies that deal explicitly with race. One has to do with affirmative action in employment; the other with whether the government should increase spending to improve the condition of Black Americans. As shown in Table 1, we uncover no evidence of priming on these matters. In each instance, prejudice was important after Obama, but also and equally important before Obama. Evidently, and not surprisingly, White Americans were already thinking about these policies in racial terms.

The second set is comprised of policies that make no reference to race, either explicitly or in code: federal spending on education, access to abortion, and governmental efforts to clean up the environment. On these policies, prejudice has a small or negligible effect on opinion, both before and after Obama becomes president.

Finally, the third set of policies – reforming health care, increasing assistance to the poor, and reducing income inequality – would seem to represent good candidates for priming. While none refers explicitly to race, each might be understood having racial implications. Health care reform – “Obamacare” as it came to be known – might be understood as giving health care to Black people who failed to provide for themselves. Increasing assistance to the poor might be understood as showering benefits on undeserving Black people. Reducing income inequality might be understood as redistributing resources from White “makers” to Black “takers.”

As Table 1 shows, we do indeed see evidence of racial priming here, and on all three policies: health care reform; assistance to the poor; and reducing inequality. In each case, the effect of prejudice on policy preferences increased substantially after Obama was elected president. One could say that in Obama’s America, health care, assistance to the poor, and reducing inequality became racial issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On all three policies, public opinion moved significantly to the right between 2006 and 2010, most decisively on health care. In an independent analysis, Tesler (2012, 2016) shows convincingly that racialization of health care policy happens after, not before, Obama becomes president.

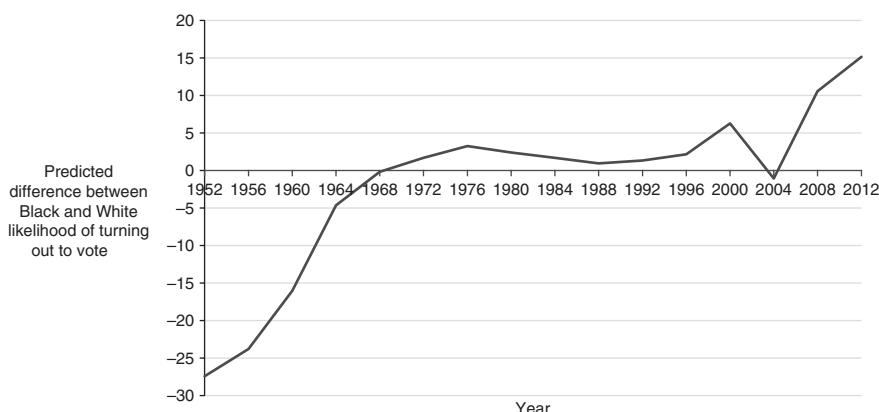
## Mobilization of the African-American Vote

In 2008, for the first time in American presidential election history, Blacks turned out to vote at a higher rate than Whites. According to the Voter and Registration Supplement to the Census Bureau's 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS), 60.8% of African Americans voted for president in 2008, compared to 59.6% of Whites. From the Obama campaign's point of view, the 2008 election was a story, in part, about the extraordinary mobilization of the Black vote (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012).

Four years later, Obama ran for re-election, amid some grumbling from Black elites that the President had done too little for Black people, and some worrying by advisers that the President would not be able to do what he did in 2008: namely, bring record numbers of Black voters to the polls.

As it happened, Black turnout actually *increased* in 2012. According once again to the Current Population Survey, 62.0% of African Americans went to the polls in 2012, up from 60.8% in 2008. Meanwhile, turnout declined among White voters, from 59.6% to 57.6%.

We suggest that virtually all of the increase in Black turnout in the elections of 2008 and 2012 should be attributed to the Obama campaign. Figure 2 summarizes the effect of race on turnout, holding constant the effect due to standard factors (education, family income, age, and gender), for each presidential election from 1952 to 2012. As shown there, early in the series Whites were much more likely to vote than Blacks (net of other factors). This race difference, which is most pronounced in the Eisenhower elections but visible also in the Kennedy-Nixon



**Figure 2:** The Effect of Race on Turnout in Presidential Elections 1952–2012.

Source: American National Election Study Cumulative File.

contest, reflects the ongoing effort, mostly Southern, to exclude African Americans from the polls through discriminatory registration procedures, intimidation, and violence. The rapid disappearance of a race effect thereafter reflects the success of voter registration drives, passage of the Voting Rights Act, and the threat of federal interference (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). By 1964, the effect of race on turnout is zero, and it remains zero for 40 years. Once differences in education and income and such are taken into account, for a long stretch of history, African-Americans are neither less likely nor more likely to vote than Whites.<sup>4</sup>

Then comes Obama. And what we see in Figure 2 is a large and statistically significant positive effect of race on turnout in 2008, and a large and statistically significant positive effect of race once again in 2012, during Obama's run for re-election. These positive effects of race are not as large as the negative effects associated with Jim Crow oppression in the 1950s, but they are substantial. In 2008 and 2012 but in no other presidential election for half a century, African Americans were more likely to turn out to vote than Whites (holding other factors constant).<sup>5</sup>

## Racial Polarization of the Party System

Long before Obama began to think about running for president, the political parties were deeply divided by race (Key 1949; Weiss 1983). The relevant question here is whether the American electorate became still more racially polarized after Obama became president.

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<sup>4</sup> Our model of turnout draws on Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), Verba and Nie (1972), Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995); and Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980). Formally:

$$\text{Turnout}_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Race}_t + \beta_2 \text{Education}_t + \beta_3 \text{Income}_t + \beta_4 \text{Age}_t + \beta_5 [\text{Age}_t > 65] + \beta_6 \text{Sex}_t + \varepsilon$$

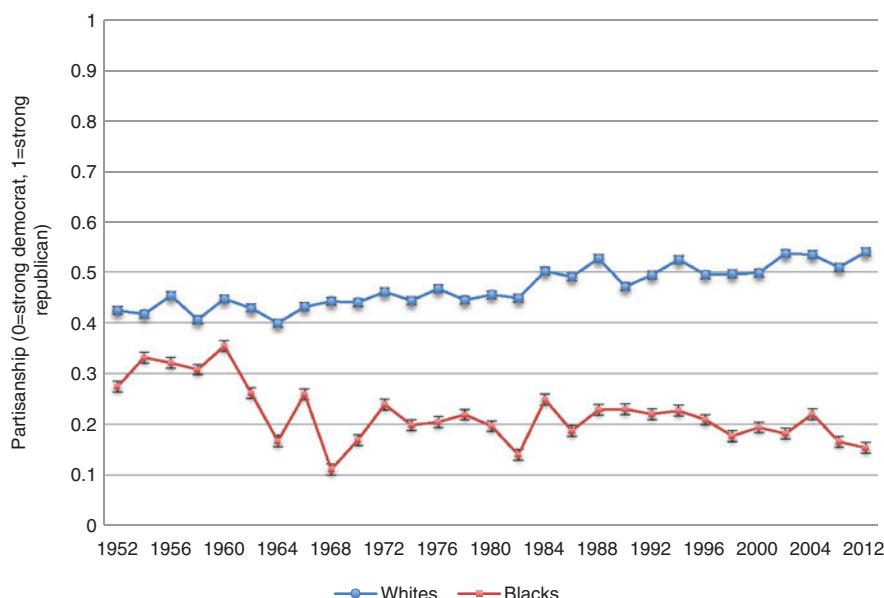
The equation was estimated with logistic regression on ANES data, separately for each election, from 1952 to 2012.

Figure 2 gives the expected difference in turnout between Blacks and Whites for each presidential election year. For each election year taken separately, the logit regression results are used to predict the turnout probability for an average American who happens to be White (White, male, and average in age, education and income). This calculation is then repeated, this time to predict the turnout rate for an average American who happens to be Black (Black, male, and average in age, education and income). The "average" turnout for Whites is then subtracted from the "average" turnout for Blacks, and it is this difference that appears in Figure 2.

<sup>5</sup> We find roughly the same thing for other forms of political participation: attending a rally, wearing a button or displaying a yard sign, trying to persuade others, giving time to a campaign. Blacks were consistently more likely to participate in the 2008 and 2012 campaign than Whites were (net of other factors), and the positive effect of race was larger in 2008 and in 2012 than in any other election in the ANES series.

There is at least one good reason to think it might. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) propose that partisanship should be thought of as a social identity, and that Americans come to identify as Democrats or as Republicans insofar as they see themselves fitting in with the social groups who make up one party or the other. They interpret the racial realignment of the parties in the 1960s in these terms. After passage of the Voting Rights Act, massive numbers of African Americans enlisted in the Democratic Party. In turn, Southern Whites began to leave, motivated by the sense that the Democratic Party was no longer home. From this perspective, Obama in the White House sends a clear and strong signal about race and party.

Figure 3 summarizes party identification among the American people from 1952 to 2012, separately for Blacks and Whites, as registered on ANES surveys. At the beginning of the series we see modest racial differences. Through the 1950s, Blacks were somewhat more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than Whites. The racial difference increased sharply during the racial crisis of the 1960s, due primarily to Blacks moving in large numbers into the Democratic Party. Since then, the racial difference has increased gradually and significantly, a consequence of the Republican Party gaining strength among Whites (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Green, Palmquist and



**Figure 3:** Party Identification over Time by Race 1952–2012.

Source: American National Election Study Cumulative File.

Schickler 2002; Valentino and Sears 2005; Schickler, Pearson and Feinstein 2010).

And what happens towards the end of the series, as Obama steps out onto the national stage? The racial difference in partisanship increases slightly in 2008 and sharply and significantly in 2012.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the racial divide in partisanship in 2012 is the greatest recorded in the 60-year history of the ANES series. White identification with the Republican Party is at an all-time (ANES) high in 2012, and Black identification with the Democratic Party in 2012 is exceeded only once in the entire series, in 1968, at the peak of America's 20th century racial crisis, shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the midst of scores of urban riots, and as Governor Wallace of Alabama was harvesting a rich bounty of votes in the Deep South. The political parties were deeply divided by race before Obama; they became even more deeply divided by race during the Obama Presidency.

## What Happens Next?<sup>7</sup>

In speculating about the future, it is best first of all to get clear about the past – at least that is the approach we have taken here. The evidence we've presented is mixed on this score (mixed from a point of view that hopes for diminished racial division in our politics). On the positive side, we found no evidence of an increase in prejudice during the Obama Presidency. On the contrary, what stands out is prejudice's durability. For the first time in American history, a Black man became president; leader of the country; the nation's representative to the world. Did White Americans' racial attitudes change as a consequence? Not as far as we can

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**6** The statistical test entails combining ANES presidential election studies from 1952 to 2012 (N=25,189). Our model allows the racial difference in partisanship to vary across presidential years. The model includes measures of income, gender, education, age, and region, and fixed effects for presidential year. 2004 is the omitted reference. Here are the key results:

Ordered Probit Coefficients (robust standard errors).

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|           |                 |
|-----------|-----------------|
| Race      | -1.03*** (0.09) |
| Race×2012 | -0.34*** (0.12) |
| Race×2008 | -0.05 (0.11)    |

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**7** Obama will not be on the ballot in November 2016, but he will be present nevertheless in the campaign. Democratic candidates will (generally) defend Obama's record; Republican candidates will (generally) attack it. Either way, Obama will not have left the national stage. When we ask what happens next, we mean what happens after the dust settles on the 2016 election.

tell. And if that is so, we see no reason why Obama's departure from the national stage will have any consequence, either.

Prejudice did not increase after Obama became president, but it did become more important. Policies that were previously unassociated with race became so once Obama entered the White House. Thoroughly racialized issues, like affirmative action, and issues immune to racialization (at least under current conditions) like environmental policy, showed no evidence of priming. Priming occurred only for issues, like health care reform, that were not obviously about race, but could be framed and understood to have racial connotations when backed by the nation's first Black president.

We expect racialization of health care to continue. Conflict over the government's role in health is ongoing, in the courts and in Congress. Republican presidential candidates promise to repeal the President's policy should they reach the White House. Everyone refers to current policy as "Obamacare." Tesler (2015) argues that the extensive coverage of Obama's signature legislative policy may be building durable connections between racial attitudes and opinion on health care, as we have seen during earlier periods in the case of welfare (Gilens 1999) and Social Security (Winter 2006, 2008). If media and partisan elites continue to associate Obama with the ACA, opinion on health care seems likely to be racialized "into the foreseeable future" (Tesler 2015, p. 114).

Obama became president in 2008, and then kept his job in 2012, in part because of his success in mobilizing the Black vote. Absent the nomination of an African American, it is hard to imagine that Obama's successors will be able to duplicate his feat. We expect a return to normalcy: that the "race effect" on turnout occasioned by the nation's first Black president will disappear.

Finally, we discovered that the Obama Presidency coincided with an increase in the racial polarization of the American party system. We wish it were otherwise. Polarization threatens social cohesion; impairs communication; may increase enmity; and can turn ordinary disagreements into implacable conflicts (Coser 1956; Kinder and Sanders 1996). With Obama no longer the face of the Democratic Party, we expect racial polarization of partisanship to diminish – but to remain at very high levels.

Differences between Blacks and Whites in partisanship are of course just one aspect of a persistent racial divide in American society. The Obama Presidency proves that race – blackness – is no longer categorically disqualifying for the highest office in the land. This seems to us to represent a real achievement, if a long delayed one. But as we have shown here, race remains entrenched in our politics. Calls to make America great again, to take back our country, are contemporary reminders that the forces of racial reaction are far from spent.

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