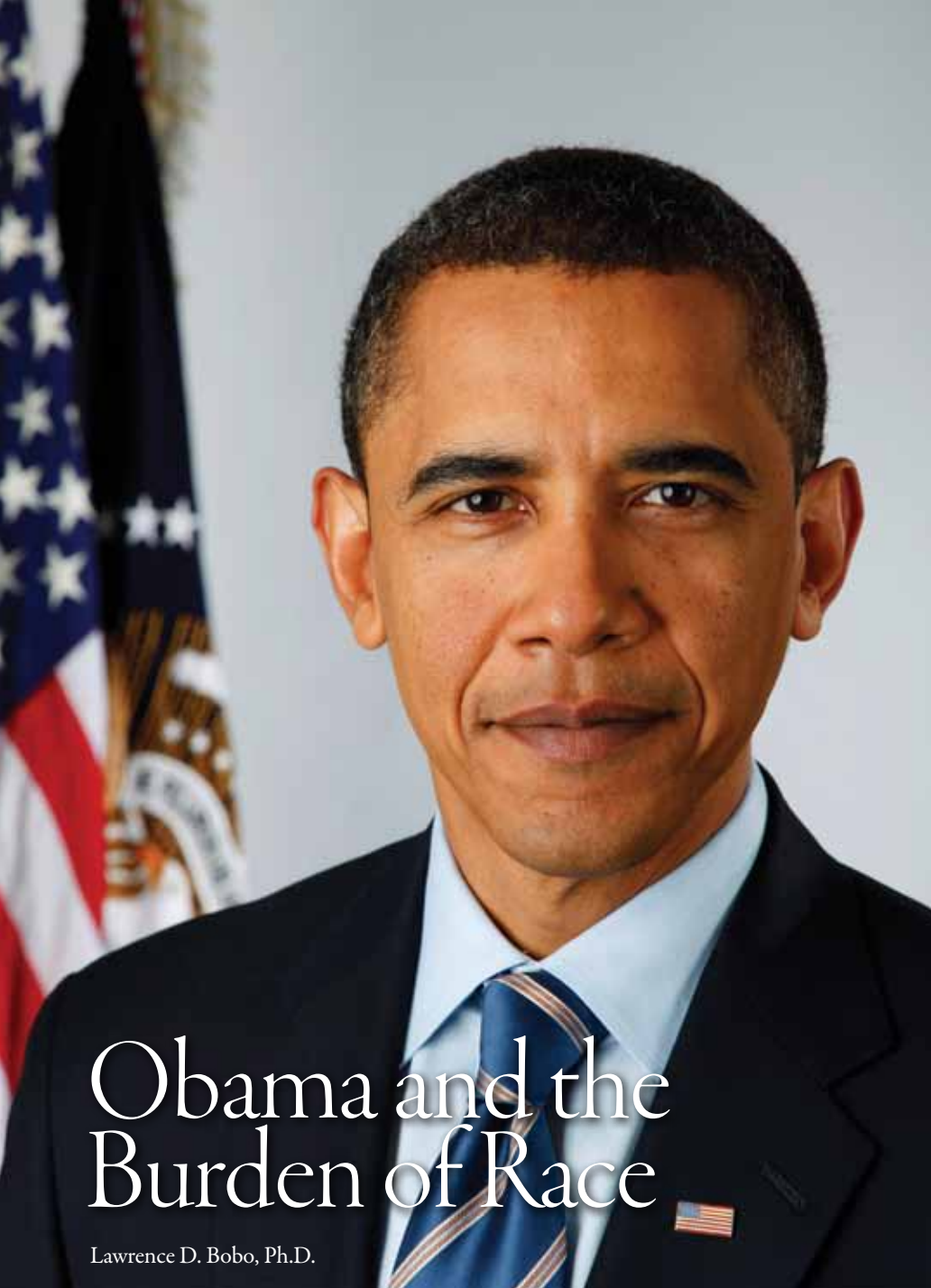




Obama and the Burden of Race

Lawrence D. Bobo, Ph.D.

In the United States and around the world, the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States was a landmark achievement. Obama's success can be traced in part to his own exceptional qualities as a candidate, as well a tide of anti-Republican sentiment in the waning days of the Bush administration burdened with the War in Iraq and a failing economy. But what was it about the 2008 presidential election that made it historic?

While Obama's success was indeed due to a multitude of factors, this election's landmark status was due to Obama's race. Obama's

candidacy, and his ultimate success, was premised on an enormous transformation in racial attitudes among citizens of the United States. The single most consistent trend from more than six decades of national studies of racial attitudes in the United States is a repudiation of the Jim Crow racism of an earlier era and the emergence of new norms calling for racial equality, nondiscrimination and integration.

A clear illustration of this point has been the unabated decline in the number of white Americans who say they would not support an African American candidate nominated

for president by their own party. In 1958, a Gallup poll found that nearly three in five white Americans said they would not vote for a "qualified" African Americans candidate for president. That proportion fell to below one in five by 1980 and to below one in ten by the 1990s.

Obama's election thus validated both the general trend of racial liberalism in America and the specific pattern of widespread readiness to seriously consider an African American presidential nominee from one of the major political parties.

Yet, Obama's electoral success is as much an achievement defined and still constrained by race, as it is an achievement that signals a potential for finally laying down the burdens of race. Obama received 53 percent of the vote. Yet, national exit poll data reveal that Obama received only a minority (43 percent) of the white vote. His winning multiracial coalition supplemented this substantial white minority with supermajorities of the Asian (62 percent) and the Hispanic (67 percent) vote, as well as a significant majority of the African American vote (95 percent). It is impossible to read these results as signaling the irrelevance of race.

The talk of a "post-racial" politics is premature, as is evident in the racially sensitive environment both candidate and President Obama did and will continue to navigate. Research shows that while negative stereotypes of African Americans are ever-present in today's world, they are expressed with a greater measure of subtlety and qualification than would have been true in the past. As recently as 1990, the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (NORC's GSS) found that 64 percent of whites rated themselves as more hardworking than African Americans and 56 percent rated whites as more intelligent than African Americans. By 2008, those percentages had declined to 42 percent and 24 percent, respectively, yet they both remain at noteworthy levels. Thus, both in his campaign and his presidency, Obama faced the challenge of escaping these and other negative stereotypes.

A number of prominent research perspectives from political psychology suggest that new types of racial grievances of high political relevance have crystallized in the United States. These ideas, or more precisely collective racial resentments, involve judgments about current conditions of group life and appropriate relations between black and white America. A key assumption about the conditions of group life reflected in these sentiments among white Americans is a belief that discrimination plays a diminishing role in constraining the life chances of African Americans (a view shared to a lesser but growing extent among African Americans, as well). The sentiment at the core of these resentments among many whites, addressed directly by Obama in his Philadelphia speech on race and highlighted some time ago by journalists Thomas and Mary Edsall in their important book *Chain Reaction*, involves an insistence that African Americans have no real grounds to make special claims or demands on white society.

One example of a political survey question on this topic asks people to agree or disagree with the assertion that “Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.” Roughly three-fourths of white Americans endorse this sentiment and have done so for more than a decade. Fifty-five percent of African Americans endorse this view, as well. For African Americans, however, this sentiment tends to a) be coupled with a far greater likelihood of believing that racial discrimination is still a significant impediment in life; b) lack the intensity of emotion often attached to it among whites; and c) have less immediate relevance to other political factors such as one’s party identification or vote.

A close corollary to the persistence of negative stereotyping, deepening skepticism about racial barriers to opportunity, and the development of new racial resentments is a rejection of a strong activist role for government in reducing race-linked inequality. To be sure, public opinion on affirmative action is complex, with levels of support contingent on exactly how one

words the question. Polling questions that speak of increasing opportunities for skill enhancement and of rewarding hard work appear to strike a more resonant cord among American voters. Questions that speak of preferential treatment and fixed outcomes or results, particularly with regard to jobs or employment (i.e. quotas), tend to be significantly unpopular.

From the early days of affirmative action NORC’s GSS has asked national samples of Americans the following question: “Some people think that blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to blacks.” Respondents are asked to place themselves on a one to five scale running from agreement to disagreement. In 1975, just one in five white Americans endorsed such a sense of government obligation, a number that falls to just one in 10 by 2008. In 1975, a full 52 percentage points separated black and white Americans on this question. African Americans also show a downward trend in their endorsement of the notion of a special government obligation to equality, falling from 71 percent in 1975 to just 42 percent by 2008, reducing the white-black gap by almost half (to just 31 percentage points).

African Americans bring a set of racialized outlooks to politics, as well. No doubt, Obama’s governing strategy must bear in mind the agenda of this important segment of his constituency. To wit, there remains a strong tendency for African Americans to view politics through a lens of shared or common fate identity. Based on a 2009 national survey conducted by the Polimetrix firm, more than one third of African Americans see “a lot” of connection between one’s fate as an individual and that of the group as a whole. Moreover, substantial fractions of the African American population see white Americans as economically better off than blacks. Further, whites are three and one-half times more likely than blacks to say that the United States has already achieved racial equality (61.3 versus 17.4 percent). African Americans are about three times as

likely as whites to declare that the United States will never achieve racial equality (12.9 versus 4.4 percent).

Obama’s path to the Presidency as well as the road that he travels now is full of racial challenges. Nothing illustrates the potency of these challenges more than the explosive and sharply divisive reactions to President Obama’s remarks on the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But even without this incident, many events have indicated the presence of a continuing racial wound in our national body politic. These events include Rush Limbaugh’s immediate post-election insistence that “I want him to fail,” the chimp-shooting cartoon, Glenn Beck’s denunciation of President Obama as a racist, anti-health insurance reform activists depicting Obama with a Hitler-style mustache and most recently, the unprecedented epithet “You lie!” hurled at the President by South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson (R-SC) during an address to a Joint Session of Congress.

These might all be grounds for disabling cynicism save for a fortunate confluence of circumstances. Enormous positive changes in racial attitudes and relations have occurred in the United States, and these appear to be deeply rooted, not superficial transformations. Obama assembled a winning multiracial political coalition that is now part of American history. There are ample grounds, particularly in light of his intelligence, skill and character, to expect that Obama will prove able to sustain a high level of support from these voters. Despite the evidence that we still have a long way to go to heal the real racial divisions and tensions that persist in the United States, it is fair to say that this nation remains pointed in the direction of laying the burdens of race to rest. 🌐

Lawrence D. Bobo, Ph.D. is the W.E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University.