



Politics, Opinion and Reality in Black and White: Conceptualizing Postracialism at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Lisa Veroni-Paccher



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rcca/482>

ISSN: 2101-048X

Publisher

David Diallo

Electronic reference

Lisa Veroni-Paccher, « Politics, Opinion and Reality in Black and White: Conceptualizing Postracialism at the Beginning of the 21st Century », *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine* [Online], 3 | 2012, Online since 05 March 2012, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rcca/482>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.

© Tous droits réservés

Politics, Opinion and Reality in Black and White: Conceptualizing Postracialism at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Lisa Veroni-Paccher

- 1 Have Americans disentangled themselves from the web of prejudice? It seemed that race and racism disintegrated on November 4, 2008. Race no longer mattered and the election of America's first black president proved it. On election night, Americans and people all around the world rejoiced in the streets. Early on, at least since Obama's victory in the Iowa primary, commentators and pundits were quick to announce that the country had entered an era that opened a realm of possibilities exempt from racial boundaries: a postracial era. African American children could now overtly claim: "When I grow up, I want to be President of the United States" and believe it could happen. It was the realization of Martin Luther King's dream that people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; it was the American Dream come true. Or was it?
- 2 Let's rewind. It is July 27, 2004. Illinois Senator Barack Obama is the Democratic Party's rising star. For this reason, he was chosen to deliver the keynote speech for the Party's National Convention, in Boston. In his now famous speech, the fifth African American Senator ever to hold office¹ used themes he would use again and again on the campaign trail. He expressed subtle pride in his biracial heritage and humble socioeconomic background. He then described his position, as an African American serving in Congress and nationally representing the Democratic Party as "pretty unlikely," but also pictured America as the "magical place" where everything was possible, even for a penniless Kenyan immigrant, a single mother or himself. His racially transcendent message was one of values cherished and shared by all Americans, of dreams becoming true, and most of all of hope, audacious hope.² Despite this, when we move away from political discourse, we realize that options are still limited for a great number of African Americans at the

beginning of the 21st century. Today, no one can honestly declare that Obama's election or even his first years in the White House, changed this. Of course, there is some room for optimism. The 2008 election is the reflection of an era when the social construct of race is ever more shifting. Recent public opinion data shows that race is certainly understood as a slightly less rigid concept. Racism is seen as less pervasive and racial equality is perceived to be a reality across generations. America might not have become postracial, but it is less blatantly racialized than it used to be.

- 3 This article argues that postracialism can be understood and used as an effective electoral strategy aiming at downplaying the individual and collective roles race and racism play in structuring group hierarchy and interaction, so that black or other nonwhite candidates can appeal to white voters. For black candidates to reach broader constituencies, deracialized strategies have in effect become a necessity. However, when used as a social construct, postracialism raises several issues and proves to be a dangerous fallacy. It does not reflect public opinion, and especially black public opinion, in its perception of the endurance of racism. Nor does it reflect black public opinion on the potentiality of accomplishing racial equality now or in the future, near or far. By doing away with America's racist past, postracialism erases the distance that exists between early 21st century America and a utopia that has moved beyond race. It negates the existence of the persistent racial divide and prevents the nation from actively looking for remedy. By reconstructing "moving beyond race" as something that has been achieved instead of something to be wished for, postracialism blurs the difference between politics, opinion, and reality.

I. Postracial Politics: Deracialized Electoral Strategies as Necessity

- 4 Obama was not the first black presidential candidate in American history. Others had paved the way for him in the post-civil rights era. They include Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman ever to hold office in Congress, in 1972, Reverend Jesse Jackson, in 1984 and 1988, and Reverend Al Sharpton, in 2004.³ However, the three former contenders' prospects for winning were more than bleak. They actually never thought they could win and they didn't even mean to win, aiming rather at acting as political forces that would influence the course of events, so that black interests would be taken into account in the national agenda. Before the 2008 historic election, black presidential candidates saw their prerogatives as particularly limited. And indeed they were.
- 5 Was 2008 the right time for a black candidate to become president? What is striking about Obama is that he never seemed to have doubted his destiny. Shirley Chisholm did not even manage to win the approval of the Congressional Black Caucus, nor the overwhelming support of black voters, when she launched her 1972 nationwide campaign. Al Sharpton, in the confrontational style of traditional black leadership, ignored the white electorate altogether - and the white voters ignored him as well - in 2004. Clearly, no one believed that America was ready for a black president then. Jesse Jackson, the most serious contender before Obama, was much more conciliatory than the two former candidates, but was still perceived to be a civil rights leader entrenched in the tradition of black leadership. As such, he was seen as someone who would only defend black interests. For this reason, in his first bid in 1984, he attracted black voters,

obtaining between 60 and 89% of their vote in different states, but did not attract white voters, obtaining only between 1 and 7% of their vote (NBC Poll, April 17, 1984, in BARKER & WILLIAMS 1989, 136). Jackson's Rainbow Coalition candidacy, despite its initial lack of success among white voters, was a historical moment in the making:

[...] the Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum politics practiced by both Democrats and Republicans has ceased to furnish the answers to the real problems of jobs, justice and peace that afflict so many citizens [...]. The momentum that is building behind the idea [of a black presidential candidacy] is no freak occurrence or accident. There are good reasons for this remarkable achievement that have a history behind them - a growing voter registration drive among minority citizens, black and Hispanic; the emergence of an alternative political platform within the Democratic party and growing alienation with mainstream politics, whether practiced by Democrats or Republicans, that of late has become politicized and credible (CONYERS 1983 in BARKER & WALTERS 1989, p.13).

- 6 However, because of this lack of white support, and because his candidacy was brought about by a rejection of the two-party system, there were also expressed fears that a black candidate for the Democratic Party would split the black vote, scare away the white Democratic one and altogether weaken the Democratic Party so as to involuntarily ensure Republican victory. A black candidacy was considered as exceptional as it was deemed damaging to one of the major parties. For the post-civil rights conservative era of the 1980s, Jackson's candidacy, with its racial solidarity strategy, was as indeed exceptional as Obama's more than twenty years later, and fears voiced then were also expressed early in the 2008 campaign. Since the black vote was taken for granted by the Democrats, Jackson's aim was to build a new relationship between the black electorate - and to some extent, the nonwhite electorate - and the major party:

The message to white Democrats is that the black voters can no longer be taken for granted because they have 'nowhere to go'. We had to break the dependency syndrome. We moved from a relationship born of paternalism to one born of power (in WALTERS 1988, p.179).

- 7 Today, black voters remain captive of the Democratic Party and still have nowhere else to go. However, Jackson learned from his first experience that he needed the white vote in order to gain influence. Therefore, he launched a 1988 campaign which was more organized and better financed, but above all more in line with the traditional Democratic strategy, with a less racialized message. As a consequence he garnered 92% (up 15 percentage points) of the black vote and 12% the white vote (7 percentage points), a clear improvement which made him the party's number two man, but clearly not enough to truly influence the Democratic agenda. If one only looks at Chisholm's, Jackson's and Obama's candidacies, one can see a progression from a willingness to present oneself as an outsider (TATE 1993, 148), with an emphasis on specific interests, starting with Chisholm⁴, to being both an outsider and an insider, on the part of Jackson, to being an insider, in the case of Obama. If one focuses on Jackson, one can notice that in the four years that separated his two candidacies, he indeed moved from a racialized strategy to a more dual approach, seeking both the black and the progressive white vote, and making headway. By 1988, he was playing by the rules of the two-party system and had started deracializing his political discourse so as to appeal to the broadest base⁵. Walking a fine line, he showed that the least overtly racialized his discourse was, the easier it was for him to attract the progressive white vote. However, his former position as a civil rights activist and his ties to the black leadership did not allow him to be deracialized to the extent that it would attract a significant amount of white voters. In 1988, America was not

ready for a black president. When he ran in 2004, Al Sharpton clearly used the outsider approach, and surely did not believe that the nation was ready still. Four years later, when Barack Obama ran, there were still a lot of skeptics.

- 8 Obama ran a political campaign that was more deracialized than Jackson's, and as a consequence obtained a larger proportion of white votes (43%) than any previous non-incumbent Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter. He won a majority of the popular vote, but not of the white vote, which was enough to guarantee success and both a Democratic and a racial breakthrough. He and his team were well aware that white realignment with the Republican Party has made it very difficult for the Democrats to win presidential elections since 1964. Obama also built on the experience of former black presidential candidates and presented himself as deracialized. He appeared not as another black presidential candidate for the Democratic Party nomination to launch a nationwide campaign, but as a candidate for the party nomination who happened to be black. Early in the campaign, he distanced himself from the most confrontational black leaders from the CBC, from civil rights organizations and their leaders (NAACP, NUL) and from other racialized political figures such as Farrakhan⁶ or Sharpton, or even Jackson⁷. He also distanced himself from Reverend Wright and traditional black churches later in the campaign because he was aware that religious denominations also divide groups along racial lines⁸. He avoided attending events such as the grassroots organized protest against the Jena Six prosecutions (September 2007) and the annual State of the Union gathering (February 2008) so as not to make himself explicitly part of the black leadership (CHO 2009, p.1597). Furthermore, he understood that the Democratic candidate could take the black vote for granted and consequently adopted a conciliatory style. By refusing to close ranks with the traditional black leadership and its network of organizations and omitting to put the emphasis or even negating the very existence of specific black interests, at least in discourse, Obama was making perfect use of the most effective strategy. His avoidance of racialized issues - unless forced to deal with them⁹ - transformed him into the accomplished candidate of a so-called postracial era.
- 9 The postracial electoral strategy crafted by Obama's team of advisers and experts is thus neither unique nor unprecedented. Moreover, it bears great resemblance with electoral strategies used by the current generation of black politicians, including Newark Mayor Cory Booker, former Tennessee Democratic Rep. Harold Ford Jr. or Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. Today's postracial electoral strategies are inherited from the earlier deracialized ones. Coined in the early 1970s during a National Urban League meeting of black politicians, activists and scholars, "deracialization" was meant to be the political universalization of specific black issues as the strategy adopted by black candidates, so that they would gain enough white support to win the race in districts where the percentage of black constituents could not guarantee success¹⁰. One of the most vocal National Urban League trustees at the time, Charles Hamilton, the author, with Stokeley Carmichael, of *Black Power* (1968), first used the concept of deracialization in association with the universal issue of "full employment":
- [Full employment] applies to the *total* society, not only to blacks and other traditionally stigmatized minorities, who are seen as wanting only hand-outs. It would, in other words, recognize the critical factor of race and racism, but it offers a "deracialized solution" (HAMILTON 1973, p.91).
- 10 He then articulated "deracialization" in more details in a 1977 short essay entitled "Deracialization: Examination of a Political Strategy", in which he encouraged blacks

seeking office to engage in pragmatic politics while addressing a wide range of universal interests:

[F]ull employment, a meaningful national health insurance law, and a sound income maintenance program [that] would (or at least ought to) appeal to broad segments of the electorate across racial lines (HAMILTON 1977, p.3-5).

- 11 Deemphasizing race is indeed a natural consequence of the transformation of black politics, from protest to institutionalization. Since the Movement had waned, black political candidates did not have to limit themselves to all-black districts in order to insure electoral success anymore. Because the black vote was, and today still is, totally captive of the Democratic Party, a deracialized strategy was to be the only strategy that would allow black politicians to gain political leverage in districts where the combination of black votes and white votes played a decisive role.
- 12 In the wake of Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign and because of Douglas Wilder's 1989 gubernatorial victory in Virginia as well as the wave of black electoral victories in majority white districts that accompanied it, there was renewed scholarly interest in the concept of deracialization. McCormick and Jones defined it as such:

Conducting a campaign in a stylistic fashion that defuses the polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit references to race-specific issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent, thus mobilizing a broad segment of the electorate for purposes of capturing or maintaining public office (MCCORMICK AND JONES 1989, p.76).
- 13 This definition perfectly matches Obama's electoral strategy twenty years later as well as strategies implemented by black politicians such as Douglas Wilder then, or Harold Ford Jr., Deval Patrick or Cory Booker at the beginning of the 21st century. The more black elected officials gain institutional power, the easier it is for them to have access to high office, and the more necessary it is for them to move away from politics emphasizing racial interests so that they leave open the realm of electoral possibilities. In fact, most black elected officials today embrace some form of deracialized strategy at some point during their campaign, when it is deemed necessary. When asked, most also tend to declare themselves either as racially moderate or racially neutral (BOSITIS 2001, D'ANDRA OREY AND RICKS 2007). Harold Ford Jr., as the five times Tennessee Representative from Memphis, was the keynote speaker for the DLC in 2000, the party's rising star before Obama replaced him. Ford is more conservative than most black Democrats, a member of the CBC but also of two Democratic conservative coalitions (the Democratic Leadership Council and Blue Dog Coalition) from 1997 to 2007. When he ran a deracialized campaign for the Tennessee Senate seat against incumbent Republican Bob Corker, he downplayed the role of race and racism in maintaining social inequities and made sure that he appealed to white voters while being careful to not antagonize black voters. With this strategy, he won 95% of the black vote and 40% of the white vote, losing by only 3 percentage points. Deval Patrick was more successful in 2006 when he ran for the gubernatorial race in the very liberal state of Massachusetts and was elected thanks to 56% of the overall vote in a state which is 78.9% white, including, 91% of the black vote and 67% of the white vote. In 2010, he was reelected, winning 48% of the vote to 42% for Republican Charlie Baker. Patrick's credentials are quite similar to those of Obama, both having attended Harvard College and Harvard Law School. The similarities do not stop there, as in 2004, Barack Obama was elected with 70% of the overall vote with exit polls showing that he received 92% of blacks and 66% of whites. Deval and Obama have adopted the same strategy¹¹:

It taps into an optimism, real or manufactured, that we are all in this together, full of possibility; and it avoid the negative and what detractors call victimhood. Patrick's 2006 campaign slogan in Massachusetts was, "Together We Can", and it is no coincidence that Patrick had the same political consultants as Obama, whose 2004 senate-campaign slogan was "Yes, We Can" (SAMUEL 2007).

- 14 At the local level, Cory Booker, who actively supported Obama's candidacy from the start, became the third black mayor of Newark, New Jersey, in 2006. He stands also as a perfect example of the effectiveness of deracialized strategies. Because of this, he was criticized by both Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton for being a "wolf in sheep's clothing" during the 2002 campaign, which he lost (IFILL 2009, p.148). Indeed, it takes some political experience to use deracialized strategies effectively¹².
- 15 These cases of deracialized strategies should not, by themselves, lead us to conclude that they are the only ones used by black candidates. Still, more systematically, David Bositis' 2001 survey and general current research conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, clearly suggest that most black elected officials of the 21st century are willing to adopt a pragmatic approach of electoral politics, adapting themselves to their constituencies and making good use of deracialized strategies so as to attract broader base of voters. It is also easier for them not to make explicit references to specific racial interests because of the absence of strong ties with civil rights organizations. Indeed, black politicians of the 1960s and 1970s came directly from the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1980s and 1990s the ties were still strong, but less than they used to be, as shows the attitude of black candidates at the end of the 1980s. The latter did not claim the civil rights heritage as vocally as their elders, because their political experience was somewhat removed from it. One would be mistaken, though, to read continuous progression away from racialized politics. Indeed, most black politicians do not deracialize their discourse at all times. When necessary, they are also able to make racial appeals, as they remain careful not to antagonize black voters. When interviewed by Gwen Ifill, Cory Booker makes sure that we understand the subtle difference between electoral strategy and reality:
- If you ignore race, do it at your own peril [...] I mean how can you ignore [that] racial realities exist in the US of America? How could you ignore that I live in a state with 14 percent African Americans, but the prison population is over 60 percent black? How can you say that's not - that race has nothing to do with it? Let's not talk of it?" (IFILL 2009, p.150).
- 16 Barack Obama is also very careful to deal with the meaning of blackness in America while walking a fine line between racialized and deracialized discourse:
- I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles (OBAMA 2004, p.XVI).
- 17 Black politicians are thus not naïve enough as to actually think that race does not matter anymore, but are pragmatic enough to make good use of postracialism politics when necessary. Since Obama's election triggered the debate on the possibility that America had crossed the racial line to become truly and distinctively postracial, the second step of our analysis is to look at public opinion data in order to try to understand the meaning of postracialism as a social construct in the 21st century.

II. Race, Racism, Racial Equality and Public Opinion: Postracial America as Desire

- 18 The November 4, 2008 election night saw Jesse Jackson, standing with more than 200,000 Obama supporters in Chicago's Grant Park, shed tears of joy and sorrow:

And if I had one wish: if Medgar [Evers], or if Dr. King could have just been there for a second in time, would have made my heart rejoice. And so it was kind of duo-fold - his ascension into leadership and the price that was paid to get him there (JACKSON in SILVA, 2008).

- 19 However, this reaction is not really representative of the one of Obama's supporters. The wave of euphoria that swept the country on election night led commentators and pundits to only turn to the future and claim that racial progress had been achieved to the point that America had become deracialized. The election of the first black president was proof of it. That is what they meant by the advent of a postracial America. A year after the election, the euphoria might have subsided, but blacks and whites were more optimistic than ever in their understanding of the significance of race, or so it was perceived to be according to a Pew Research Center survey published in January 2010.¹³ The latter showed blacks were more numerous to declare themselves in a better position in 2009 than five years earlier (39%); to believe that there was less difference in living standards along racial lines (56%); to be optimistic about what the future held for them (53%).

Blacks More Upbeat on Many Fronts			
% of blacks who say...			
	2007	2009	Change
	%	%	
Blacks are better off than five years ago	20	39	+19
Black-white standard of living gap is smaller than 10 years ago	41	56	+14
The future for blacks will be better	44	53	+9
They are "very satisfied" with local community	36	44	+8
Blacks and whites get along "very well" or "pretty well"	69	76	+7

Note: Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Q20, Q21F1, Q54, Q1a & Q17c.

- 20 A slight majority of blacks (54%) were also willing to claim that Obama's election had helped improve race relations in America, only 7% holding the opposite view (PEW 2010). More than ¾ believed that blacks and whites were getting along "very well" or "pretty well" (compared to 69% in 2007).
- 21 It is indeed difficult to assess to what extent the election alone made blacks more optimistic about America's racial present and future, but what is surprising is that they

remained more positive than before despite the ongoing economic recession, which affected them more harshly as a group than others. This data raises several issues. First, this optimism should be nuanced by the fact that there are still great differences in how whites and blacks perceive the persistence of discrimination against blacks: while 43% of blacks believed it is still very present, only 13% of whites shared that opinion¹⁴ (PEW 2010). This indicates that black optimism is relative, and it says nothing about intragroup differences. Furthermore, this sense of racial progress is not affected by reality, which is that the socioeconomic gap between whites and blacks is still wide and not narrowing, with the black household income being only 61.8 percent of the white one in 2008¹⁵ (PEW 2010). Moreover, one can wonder whether blacks and whites actually share an understanding of what race and racism mean, and of what racial equality actually stands for. Does postracialism mean that race as a social construct has become meaningless? Is racism all about an overt and individual social practice or is it a more collective, subtle one? Does achieving racial equality then mean that individual and/or intentional racist practices have waned or almost waned? Or that racism in its collective, structural form is not anymore? From the answers to the former questions, can it be deducted that the socioeconomic divide between blacks and whites has nothing to do with race?

- 22 Most Americans, when asked the question as to the meaning of race, racism and racial equality, are at loss or struggle to provide a clear and detailed answer. Does the same hold true for young Americans, the so-called millennial generation, labeled postracial because of its unprecedentedly racial diversity, its tremendous support for Obama in 2008¹⁶ and its great tolerance for group interaction embodied in practices such as interracial dating and interracial marriage (PEW 2010)? Does the young generation believe that postracialism is a social reality? The answer is provided by Dominique Apollon, in his “Don’t call them post-racial! The millennial generation speaks about race” study conducted by the Applied Research Center between October 2010 and February 2011.¹⁷ Most young (born post-1980) Americans interviewed, be they white, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander or black to use the four categories of the study, first hesitated and then used other generic words such as “discrimination based upon race or color” or “stereotypes” to define racism. Young whites focused on individual interaction to define racism whereas blacks focused on the impact of racism at the collective level. Meanwhile, defying the label, most agreed with the statement that race continued to matter:

When asked in the abstract if race is still a significant factor, a minority of millennials initially say that they don’t believe race still matters – and some people clearly believe that money or class matter more than race. But when asked to discuss the impact, or lack thereof, that race and racism have within various systems, a large majority assert that race continues to matter (APOLLON 2011).

- 23 Most discussion participants also agreed with the idea that racism remains a significant problem in the areas of criminal justice and employment. However, their understanding of the significance of racism in the fields of education and housing differed according to whether they were white or Asian/Pacific Islander (not believing that the educational system was racist), or black or Latino (not believing that the housing system is racist). None of the groups (white, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islanders, black) believed that racism remained a significant problem in the healthcare system. It was difficult for those young Americans to assess the existence of structural racism. What the study confirms, and this conclusion concurs with the ones of Pew, is that differences of opinion on the significance of race and racism are still articulated along racial lines. Whites are more inclined to see racial equality as a reality than blacks, and to equate overt, segregationist practices with

actual racism¹⁸ (ARC June 2011, 27). They have difficulty acknowledging the potential harmfulness of structural racism. Whites are also much more inclined than blacks to believe in the American Dream (ARC June 2011, 7). Thus race, racism and racial equality might not have the same meaning nor the same perceived impact according to one's racial background. Consequently, this survey underlines the persistence of racial divisions in public opinion, even across generations, whites being generally more optimistic than blacks with having to deal with issues of race and racism. Most participants indeed seem to agree with the idea that postracial America, a place where race no longer matters and everyone has the same opportunities, is something to be wished for. Still, blacks expressed the most skepticism at the potentiality of it happening in the future. This black "racial pessimism", to use an expression coined by Michael C. Dawson, is more systematically studied in *The Election 2008 and Beyond Survey* by the MCPCE, the *Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project*¹⁹, that he instigated with Cathy J. Cohen.²⁰ An aggregated panel of the three waves of study indicates that, for 70 % of blacks but only 32% of whites, racism²¹ remains a major problem (as well as for 51% of Latinos and 32% of Asians). The statistics are almost inverted when they deal with racism not being a major problem anymore. Whites are 61% to believe that racism exists but is no longer a central feature of American society, compared to 27% of blacks (and 58 % of Asians as well as 39 % of Latinos).

ELECTION 2008 & BEYOND			
TABLE 1.			
Some people would say that the nomination of Barack Obama for president of the United States suggests that racism no longer exists in American society and politics.			
Would you say that ...			
	WHITES		BLACKS
Racism remains a major problem in our society	32		70
Racism exists today but is not a major problem	61		27
Racism once existed but no longer exists in our society	6		2
Racism has never been a major problem in our society	1		1

- 24 Again, when asked whether they thought blacks had achieved racial equality²², the racial divide is flagrant in the respondents' answers. Half of whites but only 12% of blacks believed it to be so, whereas just about 17% of whites and one third of blacks believed that racial equality will not be achieved in their lifetime. The opinion of blacks and whites tend to converge slightly when dealing with the possibility that racial equality be achieved in their lifetime, with an 11-point margin nevertheless, whites being as always, the more optimistic of the two racial groups.²³

ELECTION 2008 AND BEYOND			
TABLE 2.			
Please tell us what you think about racial inequality in the US. Do you think Blacks ...			
	WHITES		BLACKS
have achieved racial equality	50		12
will soon achieve racial equality	29		40
will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime	17		34
will never achieve racial equality	4		14

- 25 As we expected, not only do most Americans across generations believe in the permanence of racism, but they also fundamentally disagree on the extent to which it can be considered a major problem. Furthermore, this persistent racial divide in public opinion is also reflective of the difference in belief over the possibility of achieving racial equality in one's lifetime. Despite the relative optimism of blacks apparent in the Pew Research Center study, the data from the APC, the MCPCE and the Racial Cues Surveys²⁴ show that, in absolute terms, when dealing with issues of race, racism and racial equality, blacks are much more willing than whites to acknowledge the existence of persistent racism. They are also better inclined to dismiss the potential reality of racial equality in

the present or in the future. Maybe the fact that whites and blacks do not define race and racism the same way, as seems to be the case for the young cohort of the APC survey, explains why there is such a stark divide in public opinion. Whites tend to understand racism as mostly intentional (overt, blatant) and individual, whereas it is easier for blacks to perceive the subtleties of both institutional, and collective racism. This difference can also be, more realistically, reflective of the actual durability of discriminatory practices that affect blacks and other nonwhite minorities. Consequently, even though, in relative terms, racism is less pervasive than it used to be, and racial equality is potentially more achievable today, in absolute terms racism continues to be a barrier to social progress for too many black and nonwhite Americans. This needs to be taken into account in the political and social arenas so that action is taken to remedy it.

- 26 Even so, shall we conclude that the 21st century has not brought about any transformation in the meaning of race? That America should still be apprehended in its inherent racial duality? Obama's election is definitely not the tip of the iceberg of a postracial present. However, there is no denying that race as a social construct has become less rigid, and racism less of a barrier to some African Americans. In this last step of our analysis, the focus of attention will be on the growing multifaceted diversity of the African American and of the American population at large and the consequences of such an evolution on the salience of the black/white dichotomy.

III. Postracialism Real or Dreamed? Beyond the black/white dichotomy

- 27 The prominence of and increased media attention on deracialized politicians as a consequence of Obama's campaign, as well as the relative optimism of black public opinion as related by the recent Pew study, have not lured us into believing that the country has moved beyond the black/white dichotomy. Still, recognizing the permanence of the divide is not denying the fact that there are signs that the meaning of being black in America has shifted in the past years. The new recognition of the validity of deracialized strategies as well as the growing diversity of inter- and intra-group opinion within and outside the black population today allow us to see various shades of gray. Before we conclude on the meaning of postracialism, we shall note that there are other signs that being black in America is being redefined, namely the rise of biracial and multiracial Americans, and the rise of African immigrants, which will be dealt with briefly here.
- 28 First, the 2000 modification of the Census and the rising prominence of mixed race politicians among other things, have helped shed the light on an ever more numerous group of individuals who reject the black/white dichotomy. They are the ones who define themselves as biracial or multiracial Americans. The 2000 Census made it possible for them to check as many boxes as they wanted to in order to define themselves in racial terms:

6. What is this person's race? Mark one or more boxes.

White
 Black, African Am., or Negro
 American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↘
 Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian
 Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro
 Filipino Vietnamese Samoan
 Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↘
 Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↘
 Some other race — *Print race.* ↘

29 In fact, as racial identity is subjective, and as one is as much defined by him/herself that he/she is defined by others, racial identity varies according to whom you ask. For example, as blacks are 55% to say Obama is black like them, about a third say he is mixed race. Among whites the pattern is reversed, most (53%) say he is mixed race, while just a quarter (24%) say he is black. Obama himself chose to define himself as black in the 2010 census, which was a bitter disappointment to the Americans who expected him to make his deeds match his mainstream discourse and officially acknowledge his biracial identity. With the increase in proportion – and tolerance of – of interracial marriages, which saw a rise from 3.2% in 1980 to 8.1% in 2008 according to the US Census Bureau, there is true hope that race may become a less rigid construct, and the new census makes this possible. The reality is closer to the apparently ambiguous behavior of the President. Depending on the context, and taking into account the fact that whites will become a numerical minority in the US in a few decades, Americans will continue to define themselves in different racial terms, but it does not preclude that others will use the same definitions that they ascribed to themselves. Race and racial identity have indeed become more porous concepts.

30 The second category of people that became more visible with the ascension of Barack Obama is African immigrants, just as Caribbean immigrants were made more visible with Colin Powell and rumors of his potential run for the presidency accompanying him, in the mid-90s. Because of the growth of the immigration population coming from Nigeria, Ghana and Ethiopia, to name but the first three countries with the most important immigration patterns, there has been increasing difficulty on the part of blacks to assign to themselves a unique category. As a consequence, there has been a growing difference between what it means to be “black” and to be “African American” on US soil:

‘Black’ refers to everybody who’s black. African American refers specifically to blacks in the United States and sometimes to a specific culture. Black encompasses a lot of cultures, and African American is one of those cultures (WOMACK 2010, p.51).

- 31 As a matter of fact, the population of immigrants coming from Africa has been rapidly growing since the 1990s, with about 50,000 Africans coming to the US annually as well as other blacks from the Caribbean and other continents. Those foreign-born blacks are culturally distinctive from native-born African Americans in the sense that they do not share the cultural heritage coming from the Civil Rights Movement, which makes it all the more easier to sustain a distinctive cultural and social identity. Foreign-born African immigrants are furthermore better educated and of a higher socioeconomic status than many African Americans, and consequently their political interests are slightly different (CHUDE-SOKEI, 2008). Increasing socioeconomic diversity is a sure sign of progress toward racial equality, but here again, the notion is associated with an intragroup analysis and not used comparatively with the white population, which makes racial equality more relative, or to put it simply, it does not alter the fact that as a group blacks are still poorer than whites.
- 32 It is also too early to assess the impact of these increased intragroup distinctions. Increased diversity, be it social, cultural or economic should be a sign of progress toward racial equality, but as long as those changes do not affect the socially dominant group and do not help redefine what it means to be white in America, there can be no such equality:
- First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint”, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others and at society. Third, whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (FRANKENBERG 1993, p.1).
- 33 As the Civil Rights Movement becomes History and one generation after another moves away from that heritage to write its own history, there might be a time when Obama and his postracial dream will stand not as the exception to the rule, but as the new reality:
- Exceptional black people have always kind of been rewarded. Martin Luther King’s dream coming true is for mediocre black people to live and succeed in this world the same way that mediocre white people do (ROCK in VAN PEEBLES, 2010).
- 34 Still, there are reasons today to see a bleak future for the most disadvantaged African Americans²⁵, as the nation is slowly but surely shifting to the right of the political spectrum, where the government is said to be too big and to do too much, and where, Nixon and Reagan, and the subtle coded messages that go with them, are not even considered as social conservatives anymore.²⁶

Conclusion

- 35 In the same way that in the political arena emphasizing and deemphasizing race are not exclusive, in the social arena, the reality of group interaction is still built around a mixture of racist and non-racist practices. Americans, and especially blacks, are not as credulous as to think that the 21st century marks an era when race has disappeared from the scene. Why shouldn’t it be the same in the policy-making arena? Proposing and implementing federally supported race-neutral programs should not mean that the need to pass race-specific legislation, to create race-specific programs or, in other words, to take action in order to remedy structural racism should be negated. Otherwise, America runs the danger of taking postracialism for a reality, and as a consequence of confusing the increasing fluidity of the social construct of race with an evaporation of racist practices, thus becoming blind to the rigidity of structural racism.

- 36 Blackness might have a broader meaning today than before, but as it does not redefine whiteness, it destabilizes but does not break the racial divide. The 21st century confirms the end of hyperracialism, brought about by the Civil Rights Movement's and the Federal government's putting an end of institutional segregation; it does not say that America has moved beyond race. Believing in postracialism is not preposterous, but in order to make postracialism happen, one must be very careful never to transform it into hysteron proteron, or as the English proverb goes, not "put the cart before the horse".²⁷

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- APOLLON Dominique. "Don't Call them Post-Racial! The Millennial Generation Speaks about Race", the Applied Research Center (APC), October 2010 and February 2011.
- BARKER, Lucius and WALTERS, Ronald. 1989. *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press).
- BOBO, Lawrence. "Somewhere between Jim Crow and Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today" in *Daedalus*, Vol. 140, issue 2, Spring 2011, 11-31.
- CHO, Sumi. "Post-Racialism", in the *Iowa Law Review*, 94-5, 2009, pp1589-1649.
- CHUDE-SOKEI, Louis. "Redefining Black". *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 2007.
- COHEN, Cathy, J. and DAWSON, Michael C. 2008. "Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement Project Survey" Chicago, IL: *Mobilization, Change and Political and Civic Engagement Project*. Data set accessed on August 3, 2011 at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com/>
- D'ANDRA OREY, Byron and Boris RICKS. "Systematic Analysis of the Deracialization Concept" in Georgia Persons (ed.) in *The National Political Science Review: The Expanding Boundaries of Black Politics* (New York: Transaction Publishers), 2007, pp325-334.
- FRANKENBERG, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge).
- GILLEPSIE, Andra (ed.). 2010. *Whose Black Politics? Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership* (New York: Routledge).
- GORDON-MELTON John. 2007. *Nelson's Guide to Denominations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson).
- HAMILTON, Charles. "Deracialization: Examination of a Political Strategy" in *First World, An International Journal of Black Thought*. March/April 1977, pp3-5.
- HAMILTON, Charles. "Full employment as a viable issue" in *When the Marching Stopped: an analysis of black issues in the 70s*, 1973 (New York: The National Urban League), pp87-91.
- IFILL, Gwen. "Nothing Unique About It. The New Generation of African American Politicians". *Time Magazine*. August 21, 2008.
- IFILL, Gwen. 2000. *The Breakthrough. Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*. (New York: Anchor Books).

- MCCORMICK Joseph and Charles E. JONES. 2007. "The conceptualization of deracialization: thinking through the dilemma". In *Dilemmas of Black Politics*. Georgia Persons (ed), (New York: Harper and Collins). pp.66-84.
- MERLANTES, Linda. "America's Big Shift Right. Why the Country's Conservative Drift, on a Wide Range of Issues, Has Accelerated". *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 2011.
- OBAMA, Barack H. 2004. *Dreams from My Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Broadway Books).
- PERSONS, Georgia (ed.). 2007. *The National Political Science Review: The Expanding Boundaries of Black Politics*. New York: Transaction Publishers.
- PEW RESEARCH CENTER. "Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress, Prospects. A Year After Obama's election". By Pew Social Trends Staff. January 2, 2010.
- RACHLINSKI, Jeffrey J. and Gregory S. PARKS, "Implicit Bias, Election'08 and the Myth of a Post-Racial America". August 17, 2009. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1456509>.
- SAMUEL, Terrence, "Young, Black and Post-civil rights", *The American Prospect*, September 4, 2007.
- SILVA, Mark. "Jesse Jackson: Obama, "so Majestic"", in *Swamp Politics, Tribune Washington's Bureau*. November 5, 2008.
- VAN PEEBLES, Mario. 2010. *Fair Game* (Chris Rock's interview. Documentary. Twentieth Century Fox Foundation).
- VERONI, Lisa. 2005. *L'émergence du conservatisme noir contemporain. Idéologies et élite politique afro-américaine : de l'unité à la diversité ? (1972-2002)*. Thèse de doctorat sous la direction de Bernadette Rigal-Cellard. Université de Bordeaux 3).
- VERONI-PACCHER, Lisa. "Barack Obama's Political and Racial Identity and Action and Interaction". Paper presented at the Université de Toulouse Conference on *American Identities in Action and Interaction*, May 2010.
- WALTERS, Ronald W. 1988. *Black Presidential Politics in America. A Strategic Approach* (New York: SUNY Press).
- WOMACK, Ytasha L. 2010. *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books).

NOTES

1. After Hiram Revels (1870-1871), Blanche K. Bruce (1875-1881), Edward Brooke (1967-1979), and Carol Moseley-Braun (1993-1999), the sixth being Roland W. Burris, who replaced Obama and served in the 111th Congress from January 15, 2009 to November 29, 2010.
2. In reference to one of Obama's book titles, *The Audacity of Hope* (6th edition, 2006).
3. Douglas Wilder and Carol Moseley-Braun ran for the Democratic nomination in 1992 in 2004 respectively but withdrew before the Iowa Caucuses. Here have been included black candidates who failed to win the Democratic Party nomination. Are not included black candidates from the Republican Party (Alan Keyes, Isabel Masters, third party candidates such as Eldrige Cleaver (Peace and Freedom Party) or Lenora Fulani (New Alliance Party), or even third party vice-presidential candidates such as Angela Davis (Communist Party), Ezola B. Foster (Reform Party), who had even less chance to even get close to the American political power structure.

4. Shirley Chisholm in 1972 was the “odd one out”, a trailblazer in both her defense of black and women’s rights and who, despite her claims to the contrary, ran a woman- and black-oriented campaign, and was criticized by black leaders, among them members of the CBC, for paying too much attention to women issues and not enough to black issues. See the documentary: *Unbought and Unbossed, Chisholm '72*: Ronald Dellums said about her: “What made Shirley Chisholm frightening to you? her womanness? Her blackness? Her blackwomanness? Her progressive thoughts? Did she have the audacity to take the historical moment that you were too slow to take? What was the problem?”

Shirley Chisholm about herself, Shola Lunch, February 2005: “When I die, I want to be remembered as a woman who lived in the twentieth century and who dared to be a catalyst for change. I don't want to be remembered as the first black woman who went to Congress, and I don't even want to be remembered as the first woman who happens to be black to make a bid for the presidency. I want to be remembered as a woman who fought for change in the twentieth century. That's what I want”.

5. while still putting the emphasis on racial interests such as demands for reparations for slavery.

6. “SEN. OBAMA: You know, I have been very clear in my denunciation of Minister Farrakhan's anti-Semitic comments. I think that they are unacceptable and reprehensible. I did not solicit this support. He expressed pride in an African-American who seems to be bringing the country together. I obviously can't censor him, but it is not support that I sought. And we're not doing anything, I assure you, formally or informally with Minister Farrakhan [...] This is not something new. This is something that -- I live in Chicago. He lives in Chicago. I've been very clear, in terms of me believing that what he has said is reprehensible and inappropriate. And I have consistently distanced myself from him”. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/26/us/politics/26text-debate.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

7. Jesse Jackson early in the campaign chose not to support Obama (and later changed his mind), or at least to show that he was not comfortable with a candidate he considered too young and inexperienced, too removed from the black political scene. His son, on the contrary, supported Obama early on and even publicly chastised his father for not publicly supporting the potential first black president. The difference of viewpoints between the two Jacksons is a symbol of the generation gap that exists within today’s black leadership. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/us/politics/10jackson.html>

8. The black/white dichotomy is still very much present in the church: “Through the twentieth century, the ecumenical movement assumed a significant role in healing many of the disruptions of the nineteenth century, especially those caused by sectionalism. The primary remaining task before all segments of American Christianity is the continued destruction of the remaining structures erected by slavery, segregation, and racism. As we will see below, racism remains a significant force dividing Christians into denominations populated by African Americans who do not feel welcome in predominantly white settings and denominations created by whites wanting to exist apart from any integrated fellowships (GORDON MELTON 2007, 7).

9. One remembers that during the presidential race, Obama had to publicly condemn his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, for having made claims that were deemed offensive to whites. See <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/13/the-wright-controversy/>

10. Of course any US presidential contender would build his or her campaign on the message that s/he represents the interests of all Americans, devoid of racial, gender, class, regional or even ideological and partisan categorizations. However, since the end of the 1960s, the Republican has built on its white base, and has realized that it does not need the black vote, thus it can completely ignore it, and even use coded words with racist undertones that would garner the interests of some categories of white voters. Indeed, Nixon’s 1968 campaign is deemed the first blueprint for a modern political campaigning in America. Nixon’s “use of racial messages ...

quietly harnessed the racial mood among White voters. The campaign promised “law and order”, which many saw as a code for cracking down black militants. The campaign solicited supporters to show up at Nixon rallies to shout racial epithets, so candidate Nixon could disparage the explicit expression of race. This tactic had a double message for White votes. To those who disdained explicit racism, Nixon could be seen as espousing a reasonably progressive message that racism was morally wrong. To those who harbored racist sentiment, the presence of a supporter at the campaign was evidence that like-minded voters supported Nixon”. See Rachlinski, Jeffrey J. and Gregory S. Parks, “Implicit Bias, Election’08 and the Myth of a Post-Racial America”

11. There is indeed great similarity between speeches made by Deval and Obama. See <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2008/02/obama-echoes-de/>

12. One can also include Adrian Fenty of Washington D.C, and San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris. See Ifill. I also deliberately chose not to deal with black Republican candidates here as it would create another issue to be dealt with entirely, which is not possible because of the constraints of this article. For an analysis of the contemporary relationship between blacks and the Republican Party, see chapter VII of VERONI, Lisa. *L'émergence du conservatisme noir contemporain. Idéologies et élite politique afro-américaine: de l'unité à la diversité?* (1972-2002). Thèse de doctorat sous la direction de Bernadette Rigal-Cellard. Université de Bordeaux 3, 2005.

13. The nationwide survey was conducted from Oct 28 to Nov 30, 2009 among a nationally representative sample of 2,884 adults, including 812 blacks.

14. “Blacks and Discrimination: No Longer the Biggest Target? Blacks and whites continue to have very different views about the pervasiveness of discrimination against African Americans. Some 43% of blacks now say there is a lot of anti-black discrimination, about the same as in 2001. Among whites, just 13% see a lot of anti-black bias now, down from 20% in 2001” (Pew Research Center January 2010).

15.

Black Household Income as a Percentage of White Household Income

Year	(%)
2008	61.8
2000	64.8
1989	61.5
1979	61.2
1969	56.7

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the Current Population Survey

16. 66% of Americans aged 18-30 voted for him and voted in unprecedented numbers.

17. which consisted in discussion sessions with 16 focus groups (divided in 4: black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and white so as to provide the safest space to sincerely express their opinion in the Los Angeles area made of young people aged 18-25 between October 2010 and February 2011.

18. for example, in the ARC study, white students claimed that since schools had been desegregated, everyone had the same educational opportunities.
19. The first wave was conducted from October 18, 2008 to November 3, 2008; the second from May 30, 2009 to July 24, 2009 and the final wave one year after the election from November 24, 2009 to January 19, 2010.
20. I would like to thank both professors for letting me have access to their data, and especially Professor Dawson, whose March 2011 presentation at Sciences Po Paris, *Racial Pessimism in the Early Obama Era*, inspired this article.
21. Here it would have been interesting to know whether the term “racism” has the same connotation among the various racial groups. The collected data does not provide the answer here, but, a more detailed analysis of the data provided by the MCPCE Project in the near future might help us work in new directions.
22. One might wonder whether “racial equality” has a different meaning for the various racial groups. This requires further investigation.
23. This is relatively consistent with Lawrence Bobo and Alicia Simmons’s findings in their *Race Cues, Attitudes and Punitiveness Survey* of July 2009 (Department of Sociology, Harvard University). They found blacks were 17% and whites 61% to believe that racial equality had been achieved, whereas they were respectively 34% and 13% to believe that it will be not be achieved in their lifetime.
24. See note 24.
25. To read more about socioeconomic inequalities based on race, read Douglas Massey’s *Categorically Unequal. The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2007), especially Chapter 3, and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow. Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press.2010).
26. See Liz Merlantes’ “America’s Big Shift Right”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 2011: “In some recent polls, conservatives have actually begun to outpace moderates. According to Gallup, 40 percent of Americans identified themselves as conservative in 2010, compared with 35 percent as moderate and 21 percent as liberal. Perhaps most striking, last February Gallup released state-by-state results that showed self-identified conservatives outnumbering self-identified liberals in every state in the nation – including Vermont, Massachusetts and New York ... it seems very unlikely that America will return to a New Deal-type liberalism. If anything, what may be emerging may look more and more like a modified form of libertarianism – in which voters don't want government involved in business or moral issues.
27. Thus going against George Puttenham’s *The arte of English poesie*, 1589: "We call it in English prouerbe, the cart before the horse, the Greeks call it Histeron proteron, we name it the Preposterous."

ABSTRACTS

With the election of the first black president, commentators and pundits said that Americans could now believe that African Americans had achieved racial equality, or at least that they would achieve it in their lifetimes. As Barack Obama used a universalist message and adopted a racially transcendent strategy which might seem at odds with his self-definition as an African American, he came to be defined as a *postracial* candidate, in a *postracial* America. The promise of

an electoral victory indeed called for a strategy that would avoid race-specific issues, while at the same time reassured voters that their interests would be best served. This article argues that postracialism can thus be understood and used as an effective electoral strategy aiming at downplaying the individual and collective roles race and racism play in structuring group hierarchy and interaction, so that black or other nonwhite candidates can appeal to white voters. Using recent public opinion data, this paper will then attempt to understand how the contemporary political environment transforms the use of race as a political and/or social construction and whether it matches the evolution of black public opinion as it relates to understandings of race and racism.

INDEX

Keywords: postracialism, racialized/deracialized strategies, race, racism, public opinion, data, “Election 2008 and Beyond”, racial equality

AUTHOR

LISA VERONI-PACCHER

Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3