

Introduction

Obama as Most-Racial

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.

- President Obama, July 19, 2013¹

Barack Obama stunned the presidential press corps when he unexpectedly entered the White House Briefing Room on July 19, 2013.² It had been nearly a week since George Zimmerman was found not guilty of murdering Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager who Zimmerman claimed to shoot and kill in self-defense, and racial tensions in America were running high. With African-Americans more than 50 percentage points more likely to disapprove of the verdict than whites,³ the jury's decision was yet another profound reminder of the enduring racial divisions in American society. As angry protests of the verdict mounted, so too did the pressure on Barack Obama to address the case's racial dynamics as the country's first African-American president.⁴ So, days after his initial written response to the verdict made no mention of race, President Obama decided that it was time to speak candidly to the nation about why the acquittal of George Zimmerman had caused such pain in the black community.⁵

The media was understandably surprised to see him deliver the speech. With a few notable exceptions, Barack Obama refused to engage in racial controversies during his political career. In fact, President Obama's reluctance to speak about race-specific issues is a theme of this book. The president's usual inclination towards racial silence was nowhere to be found on that afternoon, though. Instead, he spoke extemporaneously for roughly twenty minutes about

race and crime in America. Barack Obama, as the epigraph that introduced this chapter indicated, explained how the African-American community was looking at the Trayvon Martin incident “through a set of experiences and a history that doesn’t go away.” Experiences, he detailed, which included racial disparities in the application of criminal laws and black America’s regular encounters with racial profiling. Experiences, the president added, that he also frequently confronted before being elected to the United States Senate.

Many applauded the speech for doing what Dan Balz wrote in his *Washington Post* column “no other American president could have done — giving voice, in calm and measured terms, to what it means still to be black in America.”⁶ Some commentators, however, condemned the president for emphasizing the importance of past and present encounters with white prejudice as a root cause of African-Americans’ emotional reactions to the Trayvon Martin incident. Rush Limbaugh used the speech to “corroborate” his 2008 claim that Barack Obama was no different than controversial civil rights leaders, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.⁷ Bill O’Reilly carried on for several episodes of his top-rated cable news show about “Obama and the Race Problem,” where he angrily called upon “the African-American leadership, including President Obama, to stop the nonsense. Walk away from the world of victimization and grievance and lead the way out of the mess [in the black community].”⁸ A few prominent conservatives even branded President Obama as a “race baiter” for his comments.⁹

The differing reactions to President Obama’s comments corresponded to the large partisan and racial divisions in public opinion about the George Zimmerman case. Ever since the earliest polling on the Trayvon Martin incident in March 2012, Democrats and African-Americans had been much more likely than Republicans and white Americans to think Zimmerman should have been arrested for murder.¹⁰ The large racial divide in public opinion

about the case should have surprised nobody. Black and white Americans have long had “separate realities” about the criminal justice system (Peffley and Hurwitz 2010), and perceptions of O.J. Simpson’s innocence were similarly split along racial lines during his mid-1990s murder trial.¹¹ The partisan divide in white Americans’ responses to the Zimmerman Trial was more peculiar, though. Figure I.1 shows that while white Democrats and white Republicans responded almost identically to the O.J. Simpson verdict in October 1995, there was a 40-percentage point gulf between white partisans in their dissatisfaction with the Zimmerman Case’s outcome.¹²

To be sure, there are several good reasons why those two race-infused murder trials generated such different levels of partisan polarization. A large piece of the puzzle, though, can surely be explained by the central claim of this book: *Mass politics had become more polarized by racial attitudes since Barack Obama’s rise to prominence. That is, the election of President Obama helped usher in a most-racial political era where racially liberal and racially conservative Americans were more divided over a whole host of political positions than they had been in modern times.* A natural upshot of that growing racialization of American politics is that Democrats and Republicans increasingly viewed racial controversies like the Trayvon Martin incident through very different lenses.

How could the ascendancy of Barack Obama—a presidential candidate who once embodied the country’s great hope of moving beyond age-old racial divisions—help usher in a most-racial political era? His election, as David Sears and I put it in the subtitle our 2010 book, *Obama’s Race*, carried with it *The Dream of a Post-racial America*. That Election Night dream,

many will recall, was forever immortalized in Senator John McCain's 2008 presidential concession speech when he stated:

I've always believed that America offers opportunities to all who have the industry and will to seize it. Senator Obama believes that, too. But we both recognize that though we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained our nation's reputation and denied some Americans the full blessings of American citizenship, the memory of them still had the power to wound. A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to visit — to dine at the White House — was taken as an outrage in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African-American to the presidency of the United States. Let there be no reason now for any American to fail to cherish their citizenship in this, the greatest nation on Earth.

The American people generally shared in Senator McCain's hope for a post-racial America as well. Public opinion polls taken shortly before and after the 2008 election showed that citizens of all races were optimistic about the effect of Barack Obama's presidency on American race-relations (see Figure I.2). Black and white citizens alike were also more upbeat about racial progress in America after Barack Obama's election than they had been in recent years (Pew Research Center 2010a; Pew Research Center 2013).¹³

But those high hopes rapidly receded. Figure I.2, for instance, shows a large disconnect between the percentage of Americans who thought Barack Obama's presidency would improve race relations in 2008 and early 2009 and the percentage who thought his presidency actually had made them better in 2010 and 2011. In fact, national surveys commissioned by *Fox News*, *CBS/New York Times*, the *Economist* and *NBC News* during Barack Obama's first term in the White House all found that Americans were more likely to think race relations had gotten worse than better since Barack Obama took office.¹⁴ This belief that Obama's presidency helped make race relations worse intensified over time. Public opinion polls conducted by *Rasmussen*, *YouGov/Economist*, and *CBS/New York Times* in 2013 and 2014 all suggested that Americans were about *four-times more likely* to think that race-relations had deteriorated since President

Obama's first inaugural than they were to say they had improved.¹⁵ The above-referenced spike in the percentage of blacks and whites who thought that conditions for ordinary African-Americans had improved also quickly returned to their pre-2008 levels (Pew Research Center 2010/2013).

It was clear to most astute observers, then, that the first term of Barack Obama's presidency had not marked a post-racial moment in American politics. Moreover, any lingering doubts were all but eradicated by the 2012 election results: Barack Obama won a second term in the White House with only 39% of the white vote—a slightly lower share of white support than Michael Dukakis received when he lost the 1988 presidential election to George H.W. Bush in a landslide.¹⁶ With the racial and ethnic breakdown of 2012 voting factoring heavily into political commentators' post-election analyses, the 2008 Election Night hopes of racial unity had given way four years later to growing fears of racial polarization in American politics.¹⁷

Summary of the Book's Key Findings

Mass politics was indeed more polarized *by and over race* during Barack Obama's presidency than it was before his 2008 presidential campaign. In fact, this book tells the story of how and why Americans' political opinions became more heavily influenced by both racial attitudes and race in the Obama era than they had been shortly before his rise to prominence. The process documented throughout the following chapters, whereby racial considerations are brought more heavily to bear on political evaluations, is often described as racialization. Attitudes towards affirmative action and welfare, for example, are considered to be racialized because they are determined in large part by racial attitudes (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears et al. 1997; Gilens 1999; Winter 2008; DeSante 2013). The central argument of the book,

therefore, is that Barack Obama's presidency further racialized American politics in spite of his administration's best efforts to neutralize the political impact of race.

The roots of that racialization, as Chapter 1 explains, were in place before Barack Obama's first inauguration. That chapter documents dozens of prior academic studies, which found race-related attitudes to be significant determinants of 2008 voting behavior. Many of those studies also showed that racial and ethnocentric attitudes were stronger predictors of 2008 preferences than they had been in recent presidential elections, and more powerful causes of Americans' vote choices than they would have been if John McCain had faced Hillary Clinton instead of Barack Obama in the 2008 election. The more interesting and politically important question for our purposes, though, is how the presence of a black president who evoked racial predispositions so powerfully affected the broader American political landscape?

The second chapter attempts to answer this question by drawing on extant social science research to put forth theoretical expectations about how, when and why Obama's presence in the White House influenced American politics. Those theoretical expectations suggest that the unusual impact of racial considerations on mass evaluations of President Obama should have often spilled over into the broader political landscape—a phenomenon described throughout the book as *the spillover of racialization*. The spillover of racialization hypothesis, as formalized in this chapter, argues that a wide array of Americans' opinions—including their evaluations of Barack Obama's political rivals (e.g. Mitt Romney) and allies (e.g. Joe Biden), their public policy preferences (e.g. health care), their subjective evaluations of objective economic conditions (e.g. the unemployment rate), their vote choices for congress, their partisan attachments, and even their impressions of Portuguese Water Dogs (the breed of the Obamas' dogs, Bo and Sunny)—should have all become more polarized by racial attitudes and race during

the Obama presidency. That growing influence of racial attitudes on mass politics, chapter 2 argues, should have also been especially polarizing.

At the same time, though, the spillover of racialization into mass politics would have only occurred if Americans continued to view Barack Obama through a racial prism. If the importance of Obama's race on public opinion about his presidency faded over time, which prior research on black mayors suggests it might have (Hajnal 2007), then the spillover of racialization should have also disappeared in kind. Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, examine the effects of racial and ethnocentric attitudes on public support for Barack Obama during his presidency. After detailing several reasons why racial animosity and racial sympathy should have remained powerful determinants of opposition to, and support for, Barack Obama's 2012 presidential candidacy, those two chapters present a number of findings to support that conclusion. In particular, racial attitudes remained an important determinant of 2012 voting behavior. Feelings toward African-Americans were not the only out-group attitude that remained an unusually strong predictor of 2012 voter choice, either. With Barack Obama persistently painted as the "other" during his presidency (e.g. Muslim/and or foreign born), attitudes towards Muslims were an even stronger predictor of support for the president's reelection bid than they had been four years earlier.

Chapter 4 goes on to show that the strong effects of racial attitudes on public evaluations of the president were mostly unchanged by both the 2012 campaign and by various experimental treatments—experiments that have a proven track record in the social science literature of either enhancing or deactivating the effects of racial attitudes on political evaluations. Those results are consistent with earlier scholarly contentions that Barack Obama's omnipresent position as a historic racial figure, and his *embodiment of race* as the first African-American president, make

racial attitudes a chronically accessible consideration in mass assessments of his presidency that is difficult to either neutralize or enhance (Tesler and Sears 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Valentino et al. 2013).

The spillover of racialization hypothesis also suggests that those strong and enduring effects of racial attitudes on public support for President Obama spilled over into a variety of Obama-era political opinions. Chapters 3 and 4 provide some early support for that argument by showing how evaluations that were strongly connected (e.g. perceptions of the 2012 unemployment rate and evaluations of Vice President Biden) or contrasted (e.g. Mitt Romney's favorability ratings) with President Obama's 2012 candidacy became more heavily influenced by racial attitudes than they were beforehand.

The spillover of racialization from Barack Obama into American politics extended much further than those evaluations, too. Public opinion about health care was one issue in particular that was especially ripe for racialization. After all, the intense media coverage of the 2009-2010 health care reform debate persistently linked the president to the legislation that would ultimately take his name, "Obamacare." Chapter 5 marshals several surveys to show that anti-black attitudes did, in fact, become a significantly stronger predictor of opposition to governmental health care after Obama became the face of the policy. Moreover, the experiments embedded in an original survey found health care opinions were significantly more racialized when attributed to President Obama than they were when these same proposals were framed as President Clinton's 1993 reform efforts. The chapter also draws on recent research showing that racial attitudes are emotionally charged in ways that non-racial ideological orientations are not (Banks and Valentino 2012; Banks 2014), to argue that Obama's race helped make the 2009-2010 health care debate so vitriolic. Consistent with that expectation, I show that anger—the emotion most

closely linked with racial resentment—was five times more prevalent in 2009-2010 broadcast news stories about health care than it was during the 1993-1994 health care debate. I also show that significantly fewer Americans were angered by President Obama's 2009 health care reform proposals when they were told that these policies were a part of Bill Clinton's 1993 initiative.

The growing racialization of American politics was not just limited to assessments of Barack Obama or to public opinion about his policies. Chapter 6 reveals that racial attitudes spilled over into electoral outcomes even when President Obama was not on the ballot. Results from multiple surveys indicate that white Americans' voting behavior in the 2010 and 2012 congressional elections was more racialized than it was in the pre-Obama period. I also use aggregate election returns to show that racially conservative congressional districts became significantly more Republican in 2010 than they had been in previous midterm elections. Like public opinion about health care, Obama's ascendancy once again appears to have been the catalyst for this growing racialization of American politics. Evaluations of the president mediated (e.g. transmitted) the greater influence of racial attitudes on white Americans' Obama-era votes for congress, and the spillover of racialization into 2010 voting for congress was most pronounced in congressional districts where members of the House of Representatives voted for Obamacare. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the heightened emotions that come with the enhanced racialization of congressional election outcomes may have made it especially difficult to find common ground on legislative matters in the Obama Era—a conclusion supported by new empirical evidence presented at the end of this chapter, which shows that Republican members of congress who represented the most racially conservative districts were the most likely to avoid cooperating with the president on important legislative initiatives.

Even white Americans' typically stable partisan attachments were not immune from the spillover of racialization. Chapter 7 shows that party identification was more polarized by racial attitudes in the Obama era than it was shortly prior to his ascendancy. That growing racialization of Obama-era partisanship was found in several different surveys, and was found using multiple measures of racial prejudice. As expected from prior social science research, the spillover of racialization into white Americans' partisan attachments was most pronounced among low-information Americans who had not consistently connected their racial predispositions to their partisan attachments in the pre-Obama period. The chapter's concluding remarks go on to detail why these party identification findings are probably the most important in the entire book. For, not only is party identification the most influential of all political attitudes, it is also probably the most enduring political predisposition as well.

Chapter 8 transitions from the role of racial attitudes in public opinion to the growing Obama-Era divide in the political outlooks of white and non-white Americans. Like white racial liberals and white racial conservatives, black and white Americans were more divided in their assessments of Barack Obama than their evaluations of other recent presidents. Moreover, and like the spillover of racial attitudes into white Americans' political preferences, Obama's presence in the White House helped enhance the already substantial black-white racial divide in a number of political opinions. The racial divide in support for Barack Obama's health care plan, for example, was 20 percentage points greater in 2009–10 than the black-white divide in support for Bill Clinton's 1993–94 health care initiative. Party identification also became significantly more divided by race in the Obama-era, with especially large divisions opening up between whites who harbored anti-black attitudes and racially conscious African-Americans who rated their own group most favorably.

Chapter 8 goes on to show that the growing divide in Obama-Era party identification between Latinos and Whites was even greater than this expanding black-white divide in partisanship. Unlike black Americans, however, the spike in Latinos' affiliation with the Democratic Party was most heavily concentrated among Hispanics who felt colder towards whites—a likely upshot of polling data showing that this group increasingly viewed Republicans as a party of and for white Americans. With the Republican Party increasingly viewed as *The Party of White People* in the Obama Era, attitudes about whites also seemed to be strong predictors of Asian and Native Americans' 2012 partisan attachments. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these results for a lasting non-white Democratic coalition in the Post-Obama Era.

The concluding chapter offers a number of qualifications and some potential implications for both American politics and those who research it. The qualification sections present new results on the limitations of the spillover of racialization—most notably, results highlighting the resistance of some issues to President Obama's racializing influence (e.g. gun control) and the fleeting nature of the spillover of racialization into others (e.g. same-sex marriage). Nevertheless, the final chapter argues that many of the book's findings may leave a lasting mark on American politics. I also present new evidence suggesting that social background characteristics of prominent political leaders aside from race (e.g. religion, ethnicity, and gender) can activate group-based considerations in mass opinion formation. This conclusion that group-based spillover effects are not simply unique to our first African-American president should be increasingly important as the demographic composition of elected officials inevitably changes in the decades ahead.

Regardless of what the future holds, though, the findings presented throughout the book show that President Obama presided over a most-racial political era—one where Americans' political orientations were more divided by and over race than they had been in modern times. That polarization of the electorate almost certainly contributed to the vitriolic political atmosphere during Barack Obama's presidency, too. It is impossible to understand American politics in the Obama era, then, without understanding the political impact of Obama's race.

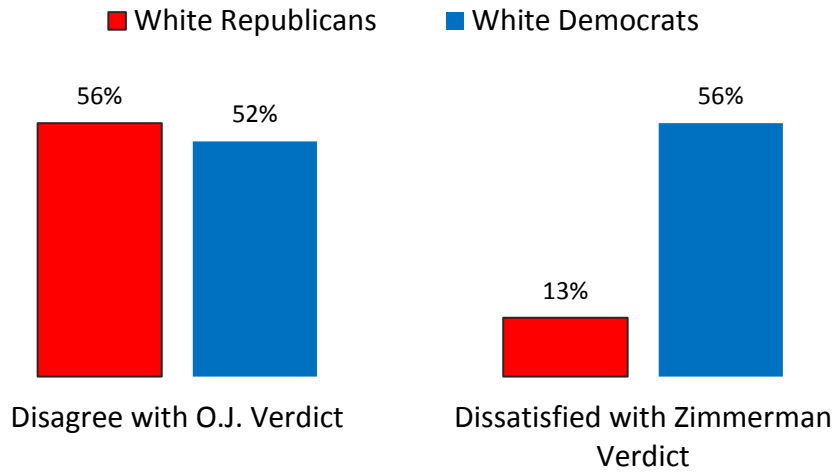


Figure I.1: White Partisans' Reactions to the O.J. Simpson and George Zimmerman Verdicts. Source: Gallup/CNN/USA Today, October 5-7, 1995 (accessed from the Roper Center's Data Archive); Pew Poll, July 17-21, 2013 (Results reported by the Pew Research Center (2013b)).

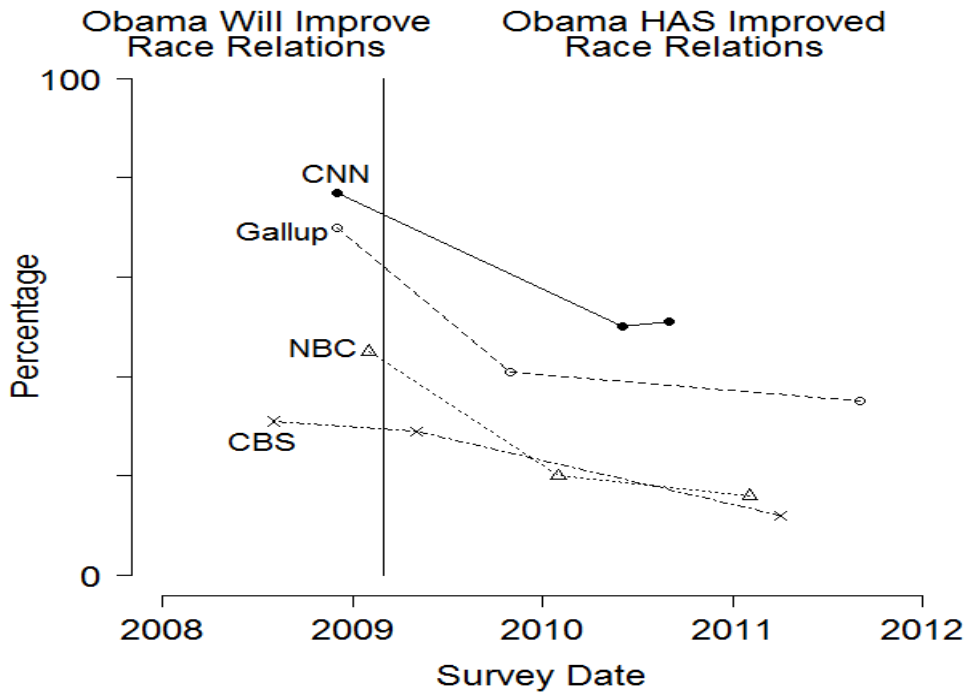


Figure I.2: Perceptions of Barack Obama's Impact on Race-Relations, 2008-2011. Source: ipoll databank search for "race relations" and Obama.

¹ For a complete transcript of Obama's comments about the Trayvon Martin incident and the George Zimmerman verdict, see: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>

² For more on the White House Press Corps' surprised reaction to the statement: See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/19/press-obama-trayvon-martin-remarks_n_3624957.html?utm_hp_ref=media

³ For more on the racial divide in reactions to the Zimmerman verdict, see: <http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/22/big-racial-divide-over-zimmerman-verdict/> ; and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/07/22/zimmerman-verdict-86-percent-of-african-americans-disapprove/> .

⁴ For more on this mounting pressure on Obama to make a statement about race and the Trayvon Martin Incident, see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/21/tavis-smiley-obama-trayvon-martin-pushed-podium_n_3631739.html

⁵ Obama said at the beginning of his speech said that he thought it might be useful to expand on his initial thoughts about the ruling after watching the debate about race and the Trayvon Martin Incident play out over the course of the last week.

⁶ Quoted in: http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-from-rev-wright-to-trayvon-martin/2013/07/20/709ad8b8-f151-11e2-9008-61e94a7ea20d_story.html

⁷ http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/07/22/obamas_trayvon_speech_shows_hes_no_different_than_jesse_jackson_or_al_sharpton

⁸ Quoted in: <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/oreilly/2013/07/23/bill-oreilly-president-obama-and-race-problem>

⁹ See, for example, <http://www.breitbart.com/InstaBlog/2013/07/19/Obama-s-race-baiting> ; <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/353970/obama-administrations-race-baiting-campaign-andrew-c-mccarthy> ; and <https://www.teaparty.org/obama-race-baits-the-trayvon-martin-case-26589/>

¹⁰ According to a March 24-27, 2012 YouGov/Economist Poll, blacks were 43 percentage points more likely to think George Zimmerman should definitely be arrested than whites, while Democrats were 30 percentage points more likely than Republican to say he should definitely be arrested (<http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus/uploads/document/5ntutkvq0d/econTabReport.pdf>)

¹¹ For more on the huge racial divide in responses to the O.J. Simpson case, see: <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/02/us/trial-leaves-public-split-on-racial-lines.html>

¹² There was also little difference in how white Democrats and white Republicans responded to a racially charged 1984 New York City subway shooting, where Bernhard Goetz shot four African-American youths who he claimed were about to mug him. According to a February 28-

March 1, 1985 Gallup/Newsweek Poll (accessed from the Roper Center's data archive), 63.6% of white Republicans "approved" of the shooting compared to 57.2% of white Democrats.

¹³ See also Figures I.1, I.2 and I.3 of the online appendix to view the sharp increase in both black and white Americans' post-Obama perceptions of black progress across several different polling firms' surveys.

¹⁴ According to a July 27-28, 2010 Fox News Poll, 37% of registered voters said relations between the races have gotten worse since Barack Obama became president, compared to 30% who said they had gotten better. A March 2-7, 2011 CBS/NYT poll reported that 26% of respondents said race relations have gotten worse since Barack Obama became president compared to just 12% who thought they had gotten better. And 19% of respondents in a November 2-5, 2011 NBC News survey thought that race relations had gotten worse since Obama has been president, compared to 16% who said they had gotten better. All results accessed from ipoll. In an August 2011 YouGov/Economist poll, 30% said race relations had gotten worse since Obama has been president, compared to 11% who said they had gotten better. Results reported in: <http://today.yougov.com/news/2013/07/16/race-relations-obama-era-low/>

¹⁵ According to an August 2013 Rasmussen Poll, 43% of Americans thought that race-relations had gotten worse since Barack Obama became president compared to just 10% who thought they had gotten better. An August 2014 CBS/NYT poll similarly showed that 35 % of Americans thought that race-relations were worse since Obama became president compared to 10% who thought they had improved (accessed from ipoll). And a July 2013 YouGov Economist poll found that 43% of Americans thought that race-relations had gotten worse compared to 9% who thought they had gotten better. <http://today.yougov.com/news/2013/07/16/race-relations-obama-era-low/>

¹⁶ George H.W. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis by a popular vote margin of 53.4% to 45.7% and an Electoral College vote margin of 426 to 111.

¹⁷ Bill O'Reilly even famously proclaimed on Election Night 2012 that "the white establishment is now the minority"—a claim discussed more in later chapters. For more media analyses of racial polarization in the 2012 Election, see: <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/01/news/la-pn-race-polarized-electorate-20121031> ; <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/race-polarizes-2012-electorate> ; and ; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/11/07/a-rationally-polarized-election-augurs-ill-for-barack-obama-s-second-term.html>