

Racial Pessimism in the Early Obama Era

Michael C. Dawson

Julie Lee Merseth

University of Chicago

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1 Introduction

In the late twentieth century, Jesse Jackson, the Chicago minister and major civil rights leader, formed the Rainbow Coalition, a grassroots organization that aided his bid for the Democratic party's presidential nomination first in 1984 and then in 1988. Jackson's aim was to unite a coalition of blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, union members, gays and lesbians, and family farmers into a progressive force to power his campaign. Conceptually, the Rainbow Coalition was a mildly leftist, multi-cultural version of a pluralist vision of American civil society that, while not a melting pot, could be united through civic action and politics. In the early twenty-first century, the 2008 election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, was realized amidst impassioned political support not only across groups of color but also among whites. Many conservatives celebrated this historic election as signifying the creation of a unified post-racial civil society—that is, a society devoid of deep racial differences and conflict—that remains populated by only a few remaining racial and leftist malcontents.

The public opinion data that will be presented in this paper, however, undermines our faith in the existence of either a reformist, leftist, multicultural, or pluralistic society or a conservative post-racial America. We argue that there exists within the United States a racial order that continues to structure American cultural practices, society, economy, and politics. For example, the Katrina Disaster is a contemporary event that vividly highlighted the continued existence of a racialized social structure in the U.S., underscoring its persistently negative effect on the life chances of African Americans, particularly the life chances of poor blacks. The racial order also disadvantages Latinos and Asian Americans in significant, group-specific ways. Discrimination based on perceptions of “perpetual foreignness,” political efforts to sanction the use of languages other than English, economic

marginalization among many Latino and certain Asian ethnic groups, as well as claims, however muted, of racial inferiority, are key components of how these groups have been incorporated into a highly racialized social structure. Along with a number of other authors, we term this racialized social structure the *American racial order*.

This project began several years ago as an investigation of black racial pessimism. Black pessimism about the prospects for racial equality in the U.S. rose throughout the 1990s and 2000s. By 2005, 80 percent of African Americans expressed slim to no hope that racial equality would be achieved in the near future, while increasingly large majorities of white respondents reported that blacks either had achieved or would soon achieve racial equality. As we will show, public opinion data collected just prior to the 2008 presidential election reveal distinct breaks in both of these long-range patterns, with African Americans, in particular, showing dramatically more optimism about the prospects for achieving black racial equality.¹ In earlier work, this rise in black pessimism was contrasted to a similar rise in beliefs among a very large majority of whites that blacks had either achieved or would soon achieve racial equality (Dawson, 2011).

Furthermore, the twenty-first century racial terrain is more complicated than any analysis of black/white differences alone can reveal. The increased immigration from Asia and Latin America since 1965, following the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act which eliminated national origin quotas, has created a racial and ethnic milieu that is even more diverse than that which existed in the early twentieth century. In this contemporary context, when blacks and whites remain segregated socially and estranged politically, how are the rapidly growing Asian American and Latino populations being incorporated not only into the U.S. political system but also, more specifically, into the American racial order? Some such as Lee and Bean (2010) argue that the black/white color line is now better understood as a

¹See Appendix A for a description of the data described in this paragraph.

black/non-black color line, with similarly insidious consequences for blacks in this new arrangement. Others such as Kim (2000) argue that not only is the black/white color line an anachronistic concept, the new racial terrain is multidimensional and, from this perspective, unmistakably more complex than any binary paradigm can represent.

In this paper, we examine contemporary changes in the racial terrain with a focus on the volatility of public opinion on race that has marked the early years of the Obama presidency. New panel data from the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey, collected in three waves between 2008-2010, show extreme volatility in attitudes across racial groups toward the prospects of blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans achieving racial equality in the U.S.² We use these data to model the forces that shape racial pessimism across groups as well as individual-level change in beliefs about the likelihood that non-white groups will achieve racial equality. To demonstrate varying patterns of volatility in racial pessimism, we concentrate on attitudes toward the prospects for black, Latino, and Asian American racial equality and toward the persistence of racism as a problem in the U.S. We find that attitudes across non-white groups not only vary but also vary differently, while white attitudes have remained stable. Ultimately, we show how the models are consistent with the complicated racial politics of the early Obama era and, at the same time, starkly challenge the notion that the U.S. has become a post-racial society. These findings are consistent with the continued existence of a racialized social structure, the American racial order, that affects every aspect of life in America.

²These data are nationally representative and feature oversamples of black, Asian, and Latino respondents. See Appendix A for a fuller description of the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey.

1.1 The American Racial Order and Public Opinion

Many scholars have argued that the American racial order evolves in response to long-term changes in society, the economy, and political institutions and movements, thereby producing a dynamic racial terrain (Holt, 2000; Kim, 2000). This, in turn, structures civil society within the U.S. Many scholars have argued that the racialization of civil society and the public sphere in the U.S. serves to reinforce racial subordination and disadvantage. From this perspective, racial groups, as differentiated from ethnic groups in the contemporary U.S.,³ are associated with a social structure in which race is the hierarchical principle that organizes the distribution of material and psychological resources and provides a schema according to which social assignments of roles, scripts, behaviors, expectations, stereotypes, and normative evaluations are made.⁴ One key aspect of the racial structure in the U.S., we argue, is that it contains a racial hierarchy that orders not only status and honor but also the distribution of life chances. Michael Dawson discusses how the racial order continues to prevent this public from functioning democratically (?). Thus, in the early Obama era, the American racial order remains a brutally central feature of the social, economic, and political landscape, and continues to produce systematic and sometimes deadly disadvantage, especially for the poor.

It is our contention that the racial order also produces racialized publics, and undermines its democratic potential, which many civil society theorists have claimed is one of its central attributes. The public sphere does not, and has never, functioned like the idealized theoretical public sphere of liberal societies described by Habermas and other theorists of

³Ethnicity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century also was hierarchical in the U.S., but as many historians have noted, white ethnicity came to lose its hierarchical aspects in the twentieth century.

⁴As William H. Sewell Jr. argues that structures have both an instrumental and an ideational component (Sewell, 1996, 1992). The latter incorporates, among other things, phenomena such as schema, norms, and “identities.” ? has applied his definition of “structure” to the idea of a racial order in the U.S.

the public sphere—a sphere that provides a space for democratic deliberation, attitudinal formation, and critique of the state to which all citizens have access without regard to their "status." For example, Jean Cohen develops this concept of a "public of publics," arguing that this aggregates the multiple publics found in a pluralist society in such a manner that democratic discourse and policy formation is preserved (Cohen, 1999). Instead of being the site of democratic debate and reproduction of liberal values for all citizens, the dominant public sphere, or the "public of publics," is the site of exclusion and demonization of disadvantaged populations. Thus, political discourse is organized through "racial publics," and the basis for these publics remains largely racially segregated set of formal and informal institutions ranging from places of worship to networks of families and friends.⁵

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 provides a preliminary look at the degree to which American public opinion reflects a racial order in the U.S. The contours of a racially fragmented civil society, including racialized publics, are reflected in this observed racial chasm in American public opinion. The Lee and Bean hypothesis that the color line within the U.S. is being redrawn along a black/non-black divide is not supported by these data. Rather, while opinion is racially ordered and blacks and whites still anchor opposite tails of the distribution, the picture is far more complicated than a simple characterization of Latino and Asian American opinion as closer to blacks or to whites.

Regardless of the precise contours of the new racial terrain, we argue that it produces racialized politics in the U.S. that not only causes political polarization on specific and often sharply racialized issues (such as Katrina, immigration, reparations, and affirmative action) thus undermining support for policies that could reduce racial inequality, but also,

⁵See ? for measures of the racial segregation of various spheres within civil society in the U.S.

as ? demonstrates, creates further divisions on other fundamental questions in American politics (such as support for military intervention, whether anti-war protest constitutes traitorous behavior toward the state versus freedom of speech, the role and size of the state, and redistributive justice). In what follows, we investigate how the American racial order is reflected in public opinion and explore what that reflection tells us about that racial order. We believe that if such an order exists, it should be reflected in public opinion data on racial attitudes.

1.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

We begin our study of racialized public opinion with an analysis of how citizens and residents of the U.S. view the likelihood that blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans have achieved or will achieve racial equality. This is a reasonable place to start for several reasons. First, it is quite likely that if race does structure public opinion, those who are members of racial groups that are viewed as disadvantaged are more likely to be pessimistic than those who are not. Second, this is a question that we would expect to be contested, perhaps especially among blacks, given the debate about the state of race and racial equality in the light of Obama's rise to the presidency. Indeed, we would not only expect that members of different racial groups have on average different views on the prospects of racial equality based on each group's place in a racial hierarchy, but we would also expect that different considerations are brought to bear by members of different racial groups in the formation of their opinions about the prospects for racial equality. If this is the case, then different models of the determinants of racial attitudes are necessary for each racial group. We explore the degree to which respondents remain pessimistic about racial equality in the U.S. by focusing on two questions: first, the prospects for each of the largest

and fastest growing non-white racial groups achieving racial equality; and second, whether racism is perceived to be a major problem.

The following research questions guide this examination of racial pessimism: *What explains differences across groups in perceptions of the prospect for racial equality and the persistence of racism? What drives the rapid change in perceptions of racial equality between 2008 and 2010? What explains cross-racial group differences in these changes?*

These research questions in turn generate the following hypotheses:

1. Those who believe racism remains a major problem are more pessimistic about the prospects for racial equality.
2. For non-white respondents, more group-based resources are associated with more racial pessimism.
3. Non-white respondents more embedded within racialized civil societies are more likely to be pessimistic.
4. Economically disadvantaged respondents are more likely to be pessimistic about race in the U.S.
5. More educated citizens are likely to be more optimistic, arguing that education tracks status.
6. Following some of the literature on the gender gap, women are posited to be more liberal than men.
7. Young people are posited to be more optimistic about race in the U.S.
8. The effect of citizenship status is expected to vary across racial groups.
9. We expect to find specific regional effects that vary across racial groups.
10. Democrats are more likely to be pessimistic about race in the U.S.
11. Warmth toward Obama is associated with a greater likelihood of optimism.

We test these hypotheses in the next sections, presenting initial patterns and multivariate analyses of racial pessimism attitudes among blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and whites across the early years of the Obama administration.

2 Analysis

2.1 Patterns of Racial Pessimism

As stated above, this paper evolved out of a series of studies of black public opinion and political ideologies. As these studies continued into the early years of the twenty-first century, it became clear that blacks were becoming steadily more pessimistic about the prospects for achieving racial equality, and this continued until the advent of Barack Obama's election as the first African American president. In particular, there was an extraordinarily rapid and massive shift toward optimism among blacks between 2005 and 2008. Perhaps even more notable, however, was the very quick reversal in these racial attitudes between 2009 and 2010, as shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

The Election 2008 and Beyond Survey allows, for the first time, a comparative study of the dynamics of racial pessimism between 2008 and 2010 across blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and whites.⁶ Although unable to generate the longer timeline that is possible for blacks, we are able to track changes from the end of 2008 through early 2010 for all four groups with respect to their perceptions about the prospects for each non-white group achieving racial equality. These cross-racial group differences in levels of pessimism are shown in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

⁶This includes reliable data for whites for all years except 1993 showing that increasingly large majorities of white Americans become convinced that the prospects for black racial equality are excellent. Whites were as optimistic as blacks were pessimistic.

Several patterns stand out from a preliminary examination of the data. The one unflinching trend is that white Americans are, without exception, the most optimistic about the prospects for achieving racial equality compared with any other group, regardless of the year or the specific group in question.⁷ Second, there is substantial fluidity across both time and racial groups. In general, blacks are the most pessimistic about the prospect of non-whites achieving racial equality, usually being either the most or second most pessimistic group. Third, beyond the fact that whites are always the most optimistic, there is not enough structure in the patterns to support any hypothesis about a systematic remaking of the color line in the domain of public opinion. Although not reported here, this is true across a much larger array of items. Whites are at one end of the distribution; usually, though not always, blacks are at the other end; Asian Americans and Latinos shift by item both with respect to each other as well as to blacks and whites. Furthermore, the changes in opinion about the prospects for racial equality not surprisingly mirror changes, during the same years, in the perception that racism is (or is not) a major problem in the U.S. These data are shown in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

2.2 Determinants of Racial Pessimism

The main equation that will be estimated for this paper is a probit model as displayed in Equation (1).⁸

$$\Pr(\text{RacialEqualityPessimism}_i = 1) = \Phi \vec{X}_i \vec{B} \quad (1)$$

⁷This consistency is taken advantage of in the multivariate analysis as whites become the reference group to which other reference groups are compared when estimating the effects of racial group identification.

⁸The included variables can be found in Appendix B.

Where Φ is the cumulative distribution function of the normal distribution, \vec{X}_i is each respondent's score on a vector of variables, and \vec{B} is a vector of probit coefficients. The variables in \vec{X} are those that are drawn from our previously stated hypotheses. This model is then estimated separately for each of three dependent variables: pessimism about the prospects for racial equality in the U.S. for blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans.⁹

As we will discuss below, a key predictor of pessimism about the prospects for black, Latino, and Asian American equality is the perception of whether racism remains a major problem within the U.S. Consequently, a second equation was estimated to determine the predictors of beliefs about racism. As this dependent variable is also binary, a probit model similar to that found in equation (1) is estimated with the same set of \vec{X}_i , except for perceptions of racism which is now on the left hand side of the equation.

To begin, Table 5 presents results suggesting that there are different mechanisms at work shaping beliefs about the prospects for black, Latino, and Asian American racial equality. There are still unobserved factors correlated with being black, Latino, and Asian American that affect beliefs about racial equality in the U.S. even after controlling for the variables listed above.¹⁰ This is the case even while controlling for the powerful belief of whether racism still exists—the one variable that might be thought to be most correlated with membership in a non-white racial group.

⁹These three variables are each coded as a binary dependent variable with 1 = very pessimistic about the prospects for racial equality and 0 = relatively optimistic. The original response categories to the question “Have [blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans] achieved racial equality?” were: 1 = Have achieved, 2 = Will soon achieve, 3 = Not in my lifetime, and 4 = Never. “Have achieved” and “Will soon achieve” were coded as optimistic. The “Never” and “Not in my lifetime” responses were coded as pessimistic.

¹⁰The reference category for the dummy variables “black,” “Latino,” and “Asian American” is the category “white.” The percentages in each cell can be interpreted as the increased likelihood that one is pessimistic as compared to a white respondent after controlling for the other factors in the equation. Thus, blacks are 20 percent more likely than whites, all other things being equal, to be pessimistic about the prospects for black racial equality. Similarly, those who believe that racism remains a major problem are nearly 50 percent more likely to be pessimistic about black equality than the respondents most skeptical about the proposition that racism plays a role in the U.S.

[Table 5 about here]

It is interesting to note that neither the socioeconomic status variables (income and education) nor how warmly one feels toward the President influences racial pessimism with respect to blacks. Instead, respondent's race, beliefs about racism, and residing in one of the former Confederate states are the key predictors of pessimism about achieving black racial equality. Partisanship and class play a significant role in predicting beliefs about the prospects for both Asian American and Latino racial equality. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to be pessimistic about the prospects of these two groups achieving racial equality. On the other hand, the more affluent and educated tend to be optimistic, unlike with blacks where neither the class nor the partisanship variables had a significant effect on beliefs about the prospects for black equality. That said, the effect of being black has a greatly attenuated effect on predicting prospects for achieving Asian American equality, with the effect disappearing completely for Latino prospects. Being Asian American, on the other hand, remains a modest forces for predicting pessimism for all groups while being Latino only predicts prospects for black racial equality. One possible explanation for the attenuated effect of being black or Latino in some of the estimations might be that race indirectly influences evaluations of prospects for racial equality by working through a mechanism such as beliefs about racism.

Importantly, across all three equations, by far the most powerful factor is whether one believes that racism remains a major problem in the U.S. Thus, to better understand the sources of racial pessimism, it is necessary to examine more closely the sources of these beliefs about contemporary racism.

[Table 6 about here]

Table 6 displays these results. All three non-white groups are more likely than whites to believe that racism is a major problem. Latinos, however, are three times more likely than Asian Americans to think this, while blacks are twice as likely as Latinos to hold this belief. Thus being black comes back into the picture for understanding perceptions of both Asian American and Latino equality, given that the critical predictor in both cases is beliefs about racism. In light of the findings displayed in Table 6, we see even more sharply the effects of racial factors directly and indirectly on beliefs about the prospects for racial equality. Whites view the racial environment much differently than blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans.¹¹

2.3 Group-Specific Differences and Individual-Level Change in Racial Pessimism

This concluding section of results addresses two questions. First, what are the differences in models of racial pessimism when we disaggregate by racial group? Second, what is driving changes in racial pessimism between 2008 and 2010? Equation (1) is re-estimated separately for blacks, Latinos, Asians, and whites. The major change in the estimation for the first set of equations is that the estimations were run using matched data in an effort to reduce model dependence.¹² Other changes are designed to tailor the models to the political dynamics within each racial group to the degree possible given the data available.

¹¹The use of the normal survey question on “ideology” is not advisable in an across-group analysis as it has been shown that it works differently for the members of the different racial groups. Similarly, the use of racial attitude variables such as whether one believes their fate is linked to other members of their racial groups should not be used as it too has been shown to have different meanings for different racial groups. These and other variables will come back into play in the next section as we begin *within* racial groups analysis of the predictors of racial pessimism and perceptions of racism. We will then estimate different equations for each group and have much greater flexibility in our modeling choices.

¹²The program MatchIt was used within the R statistical program. For a description of both the program and the underlying statistical logic of matching, see Ho, Imai, King and Stuart (2011). For a theoretical discussion of matching, see Ho, Imai, King and Stuart (2007).

For non-white groups, the following racial group-specific variables were added to the estimations:

For blacks:

- Linked Fate: Do you believe your fate is tied to that of other blacks?
- Organizations: Do you belong to an organization that works on behalf of blacks?
- Media: a scale that measures the respondent's exposure to race-based media sources

For Latinos:¹³

- Linked Fate: Do you believe your fate is tied to that of other Hispanics/Latinos?
- Common Culture: Do people of Hispanic/Latino descent share a common culture?
- Organizations: Do you belong to an organization that works on behalf of Hispanics/Latinos?
- Media: a scale that measures the respondent's exposure to race-based media sources

For Asian Americans:

- Linked Fate: Do you believe your fate is tied to that of other Asian Americans?
- Common Culture: Do people of Asian descent share a common culture?
- Organizations: Do you belong to an organization that works on behalf of Asian Americans?
- Media: a scale that measures the respondent's exposure to race-based media sources

For whites, the citizenship status variable is no longer included, as a very small percentage of white respondents in the sample reported being non-citizens (this was also the case for black respondents).¹⁴

¹³Several variables attempting to measure generation of immigration, such as years in U.S., were also added to the Latino estimation (they were not available for Asian respondents) but proved highly collinear and unreliable in the estimation and were thus removed.

¹⁴Unfortunately for our analysis we could not fully explore the dimensions of racialized politics for whites as this data does not include the social dominance or racial resentment variables necessary for such an analysis.

Below we report the results from the estimations of Asian, Latino, and black respondents' views about the prospects for racial equality for their own groups. For all four groups, we also estimated the group-specific determinants of whether respondents feel pessimistic about race and racial equality in the contemporary U.S. Given the historical importance of black-white racial conflict, and the previously presented evidence that shows blacks and whites anchor opposite ends of the spectrum on many questions of race, we selected whites' views about the prospects for black equality for comparison. The results of these estimations are presented in Table 7.

[Table 7 about here]

There are four major patterns in these results. First, and as expected, the perception of whether racism is a major problem drives beliefs about the prospects for racial equality for each group. The more one believes racism is still a major problem, the more pessimistic one is about the prospects for racial equality. This is the one result that is powerfully consistent across all four racial groups. Second, there are clear differences in the pattern of determinants across racial groups. For blacks and Latinos, the two groups with the most well-developed independent media, exposure to racially-based media had a significant effect on how racially pessimistic respondents were, if not always in the anticipated direction. For Asian Americans, belonging to an organization working on behalf of Asian Americans is associated with significant increases in racial pessimism. This leads to the third major conclusion that across all three non-white groups, exposure to both the organizational and public sphere components of civil society is almost always linked with more pessimistic about race in the U.S. Our fourth observation is that the most economically marginal groups, blacks and Latinos, experienced the greatest increases in pessimism. For example, the multivariate estimation of pessimism increases among blacks show that unemployed, less educated black youth were much more likely to have become more pessimistic between

2008 and 2010. It is also striking that the different components of civil society identified by Iris Marion Young, those roughly delineated by the public sphere and association life, differentially affect degrees of racial pessimism among people of color (Young, 2000). In particular, Asian respondents who belong to organizations working on behalf of Asian Americans and Latino respondents who are more exposed to Latino-specific media are more pessimistic about race and racial equality in the U.S.¹⁵

In addition, contrary perhaps to the expectations of some, there is not a strong Obama effect found across these equations. At times, Obama supporters are more pessimistic but not consistently so. Among Asian Americans, Latinos, and blacks, the effects of civil society and socioeconomic status are both stronger and more consistent predictors of racial pessimism. Among whites, both pessimism about the prospects for racial (black) equality and the belief that race remains a major problem are tied to partisanship—that is, white Democrats are considerably more pessimistic than their Republican counterparts.

3 Discussion

Survey research is quite incapable of fully detailing the contours and sources of racialized worldviews and ideologies as they vary across racial and ethnic groups. Survey research can be useful for providing evidence that such worldviews and ideologies exist. Race is a stronger force in shaping the racial attitudes considered in this paper than either class or political factors. This is not to say that one group is “right” about “facts” such as the status of racism in contemporary society. It does strongly suggest why racial debates often

¹⁵The effects of black media on black levels of pessimism is inconsistent across the racial equality and racism equations. Preliminary, but for now inconclusive, bivariate probit analysis allows us to estimate the effects of black media when both equations are simultaneously estimated and suggests that, consistent with Latinos, black media has an overall effect of making blacks more pessimistic.

rapidly become extremely rancorous. Unproductive and sometimes bitter conflict is nearly inevitable if each side believes that the other side must be acting out of ill will because the opposing view is nearly incomprehensible—consider, for example, how mutually hostile would be blacks who believe racial equality will never be achieved in their lifetimes and white citizens who believe that blacks have already achieved this equality. What is strongly suggested by this analysis is that the “unshakable rock of background assumptions” necessary for a shared “consensus” in the U.S. does not yet exist, particularly in the continuing chasm between black and white racial attitudes (Habermas, 1992).

Another aspect of the racial gap in public opinion is that, for the majority of whites, not only are their views about the prospects for racial equality more optimistic than most respondents of color, their opinions are also more stable than that of, for example, Asian respondents.¹⁶ White racial attitudes between 2008 and 2010, at the individual and aggregate levels, are impervious to the combined effects of a disastrous economy, increased attacks on immigrant populations, and intensified racist discourse that appear to be driving, in particular, the volatility in Latino and black opinion. The stable optimism of whites is not only another marker of racial difference in public opinion but also is itself another potential source of racial conflict within the polity. While many whites may grow impatient with what might be viewed as unreasonable pessimism or the fickleness of racial attitudes among blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans, many people of color may view white public opinion as ignorant at best and more likely self-serving or callous.

These racial and ethnic differences in the perceived prospects for achieving racial equality are not only a useful barometer for judging how racial dynamics are shaping American

¹⁶The reason that we do not always use the label “Asian American” is that many of the foreign-born Asian respondents in the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey are not naturalized citizens. On the other hand, the label “Latino/a” is neutral with respect to the question of immigration and citizenship status. In this sample there are very few black immigrants. Consequently, both the labels “black” and “African American” are accurate in this case.

democracy but also have practical policy implications. For example, the need for a wide range of private sector and state intervention would seem to be required if most African Americans believe, as they did until three years ago, that racial equality will not be achieved in the near future. If, on the other hand, policymakers follow the political attitudes reported by the majority of white citizens, legislators and government bureaucrats would be justifiably reluctant to forge and implement policies designed to address a non-existent racial gap. Further, it would be vital for concerned officials in both the NGO and state sectors to understand what lay beneath the radically different perceptions of the prospects for racial equality across racial groups. It is hard to create democratic discourse if citizens cannot even agree on the basic facts. High levels of racial pessimism within any group should raise red flags in and of itself. For example, pessimism can lead to demobilization which, as in the German Weimar Republic of the 1920s, can lead to extreme political forces gaining power. Further, as ? has shown, the opinion gap between racial groups, especially the black/white gap, can lead to the demonization of the subordinate group's opinion.

Complicating, and perhaps in time undermining, matters are the shifting positions from which Asians and Latinos stand in relation to blacks and whites. The importance of Asian American and Latino opinion is increasingly complicating a racial terrain once more defined by the black/white divide. Latino and Asian American public opinion is not located at fixed distances from black and white opinion or each other's opinion. Sometimes one or both groups are positioned closer to blacks, sometimes to whites, or sometimes there is so much variation within these groups that there does not appear to be much of a fixed position at all. While we argue that a racial order is reflected in these public opinion data, it is not a static one. Rather, it is a racial order that shifts across issues and contexts. Over time, perhaps, the monumental gaps between blacks and whites will become

insignificant for shaping American public opinion.

4 Conclusion

Our analysis provides no evidence for the evolution of a post-racial society within the U.S. However, if there is no evidence for the existence of a post-racial society in these data, there is plenty of evidence for the continued existence of a racial order. This paper presents evidence in support of the hypothesis that Americans view both the present and future of race relations in the U.S. very differently, with blacks generally the most pessimistic and whites by far the most optimistic. The findings also suggest that many whites believe that we live in a post-racial society, yet this view is rejected out of hand by large majorities of blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Further, measures related to race, in particular perceptions of racism, shape beliefs in this domain. Deep racial divisions that are, we argue, starkly inconsistent with conceptualizations of a post-racial society continue to structure American public opinion in the early twenty-first century. Neither did we find evidence that the evolving contemporary racial order is being remade along either black/non-black or non-white/white lines, as some researchers have claimed—at least in the political sphere. Racial divisions in American politics are not conforming to a remaking of the color line along a new binary axis, although it may indeed be the case that in some social domains, such as residential housing or interracial marriage patterns, there exists some evidence for a black/non-black divide.¹⁷

Further, different factors are brought to the fore when explaining beliefs about the

¹⁷However, there is evidence in the domain of education indicating that patterns of socioeconomic exclusion are also *not* being made along such a binary. As with African Americans, Mexican American educational attainment unfortunately remains extremely problematic Telles and Ortiz (2008).

prospects for racial equality across different racial groups. Class and political variables come into play more frequently when respondents consider prospects for Latino and Asian American equality than when considering prospects for black equality. Conversely, race played a greater role in shaping views about equality for blacks compared with equality for Latinos and Asian Americans. By estimating group-specific models separately, we have highlighted the different processes at work within each racial group.

The findings from this paper point the way toward how a broader research agenda can and should develop. First, future research should pursue a more solid grasp of the relative importance of contextual versus individual factors in understanding the dynamics of changes in racial attitudes. Are changes in optimism and pessimism more driven by individual attributes of respondents or changes in the social or economic characteristics of their neighborhoods? For example, are changes in one's employment status more important for explaining change in one's level of pessimism than a rise in neighborhood unemployment during a worldwide economic crisis? Does disaggregating by ethnic/national origin as well as immigrant generation allow us to further understand the relationship between ethnic/national origin and beliefs about race and racial equality in the U.S., especially among immigrants? Similarly, comparisons between the less affluent across racial and ethnic groups would allow a more precise understanding of the interplay between race and class in shaping racial attitudes. In addition, qualitative and interpretive work might explore other avenues of inquiry suggested by our findings. What do different populations of respondents *mean*, and mean differently, when they conceptualize "racial equality?" To what degree are material versus ideational worldviews driving, for example, the rapid recent increase in Latino pessimism? Finally, another extension of this research might employ public opinion data to test the dimensionality that different models of the American racial order, such as Kim (2000) and ?, have posited. For example, Dawson(2011) presents initial

evidence that a non-binary, multidimensional racial ordering structures public attitudes toward immigrant policy issues, findings consistent with Kim's argument that the racial order is structured along both superior/inferior and insider/foreign dimensions.

Illusions of a post-racial society are a dangerous fallacy for Americans to embrace, whether it is the conservative version promoted by pundits such as D'Souza (2009) or the leftist version unfortunately suggested by the late Manning Marable in his epic biography of Malcolm X (Marable, 2011). The public opinion data presented here clearly indicate that race still structures the political terrain and may remain, we argue, the most significant social cleavage found within American society. This cleavage becomes particularly dangerous as it intersects with other forms of social cleavage, such as class, nativity, gender, sexuality, and age. For example, the intersection of race and class has led to large sectors of black and Latino populations and some Asian American communities to confront multiple forms of disadvantage and disempowerment, including extremely marginalizing levels of poverty. These populations have exploded in rebellion in the past and may once again in response to the dire economic conditions that increasingly characterize the early twenty-first century. Another urgent issue for American society as a whole concerns youth of color. Just as non-whites have become the majority of the population in many regions of the country, youth of color are more tied to processes of mass incarceration and deportation than to labor markets. Thus, it is important to recognize that the high levels of racial pessimism found within some populations in the U.S. is not only a product of their perceptions of American racial dynamics but also very much a product of their lived reality in a society where inequality is rapidly growing along multiple social cleavages including and, as we have argued, especially race. We believe that for many blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans, racial pessimism is a rational response to the historical and contemporary political context in the U.S. This is a pessimism fueled by deteriorating

economic conditions, a coarsening of racial rhetoric that is openly racist and nativist, and a surge in racially motivated hate crimes.

This paper has demonstrated the varied and complicated patterns of public opinion between racial groups in the U.S., suggesting that the twenty-first century color line is far from being fixed along a single axis. One important implication of these findings is that there is much room for shifting alliances between racial groups within the realm of politics. Is racism still a major problem in the U.S.? Have we achieved racial equality? Americans, largely along lines of race, fundamentally disagree about the “facts” of race in the early Obama era. These different worldviews not only lead to racially polarized politics, including distortions of the politics of class and gender, but also to an inability to conduct rational discourse about politics among everyday people, even those most concerned with rebuilding American democracy. They also make it more difficult for policymakers to develop agendas addressing populations disadvantaged at least in part due to their racial status or for other political elites to have civil debates and help forge consensus about the way forward. As Martin Luther King argued a generation ago, race continues to be a cancer that eats at the fabric of the nation.

5 Appendix A

5.1 Data

The data used in this paper come from the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey: Waves 1-3 (2008/2009/2010)—Principal Investigator Cathy J. Cohen, Co-Principal Investigator Michael C. Dawson. Collected in three waves over the course of one year, the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks using an online panel methodology based on random digit dialing household sampling. The first wave was in the field in the weeks leading up to the 2008 election (October 17, 2008–November 3, 2008); the second wave was fielded six months after the election (May 30, 2009–July 24, 2009); and the final wave was in the field one year after the election (November 24, 2009–January 19, 2010). Comprising a rich set of topics related to race, politics, and government, these nationally representative data feature oversamples of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and young people (ages 18-35) and include substantial numbers of foreign-born respondents—approximately a quarter of the total sample. More than 40 percent of Latino respondents opted to take the survey in Spanish; all other respondents, including Asian respondents, were offered the survey in English. The Election 2008 and Beyond Survey was fielded as part of the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project (MCPCE), led by Cathy Cohen at the University of Chicago and featuring this panel study of political attitudes and behavior in the context of the Obama campaign and presidency. See www.2008andbeyond.com for more information.

6 Appendix B

6.1 Variables

- Racism. Do you think racism is a major problem in U.S.?
- Black. Is respondent black?
- Asian American. Is respondent Asian American?
- Latino. Is respondent Latino?
- Unemployment. Is respondent unemployed?
- Gender.
- Age.
- Income.
- Education.
- South. Respondent is from the Southern region.
- West. Respondent is from the Western region.
- Citizen. Is respondent a U.S. citizen?

TABLE 1. Race and Public Opinion in the U.S.

		BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN	WHITE
Warmth toward Obama	<i>100=hot 1=cold</i>	89	72	66	51
Know someone who would not vote for Obama because he is black	<i>% Yes</i>	21%	23%	21%	29%
Government should apologize for slavery	<i>% Yes</i>	74%	63%	47%	23%
Government should apologize for Japanese internment during WWII	<i>% Yes</i>	67%	67%	72%	33%
Racial profiling makes the nation safer	<i>% Disagree</i>	41%	27%	31%	21%
Felons who have served their time should be allowed to vote	<i>% Yes</i>	72%	52%	51%	46%

Data compiled from 2008 and Beyond study (Wave 1) described in Appendix A.

TABLE 2. Black Racial Pessimism, 1993–2010

	1993	2000	2003	2004	2005	2008	2009	2010
Unlikely to soon achieve black racial equality	65%	73%	71%	82%	82%	47%	44%	52%

Data compiled from datasets described in Appendix A by authors. The percentages in the cells represent the combination of those respondents who answered “not in my lifetime” and those who answered that black racial equality would “never” happen in the U.S.

TABLE 3. Racial Pessimism Attitudes, 2008–2010

	PESSIMISM ABOUT BLACK EQUALITY			PESSIMISM ABOUT LATINO EQUALITY			PESSIMISM ABOUT ASIAN AMERICAN EQUALITY		
	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Blacks	47%	44%	52%	36%	33%	42%	26%	27%	33%
Latinos	24%	29%	46%	24%	30%	46%	23%	30%	46%
Asians	31%	32%	34%	39%	34%	35%	27%	31%	29%
Whites	22%	20%	22%	29%	27%	28%	16%	18%	16%

TABLE 4. Racism Beliefs, 2008–2010

	2008	2009	2010
Blacks	40%	29%	31%
Latinos	46%	45%	49%
Asians	77%	68%	69%
Whites	69%	67%	71%

TABLE 5. Determinants of Racial Pessimism in the U.S.

	BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN	WHITE
Racism	27%	28%	32%	34%
Racial group linked fate	15%			
Racial group common culture		18%		
Racial group media	-11%	17%		
Racial group orgs			15%	
Education (8th → Coll. Deg.)		-23%		
Income (\$10k → \$100k)	-13%		-40%	10%
Female			-10%	
West		11%	-8%	
Party ID (S. Rep. → S. Dem)				16%
Obama (50 → 85)			-6%	

Cell entries represent percentages derived from probit model simulations of the first differences for the listed variables after matching. Only variables that were significant for at least one of the equations are displayed.

TABLE 6. Determinants of Racism Beliefs in the U.S.

	BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN	WHITE
Racial group linked fate	15%	20%	14%	
Racial group common culture		15%	25%	
Racial group media	22%			
Racial group orgs	14%			
Education (8th → Coll. Deg.)	16%			
Income (\$10k → \$100k)				-11%
Age (18 → 65)	20%			
South	-9%	-10%		9%
West		-14%		
Party ID (S. Rep. → S. Dem)		22%	21%	25%
Obama (50 → 85)		5%	14%	

Cell entries represent percentages derived from probit model simulations of the first differences for the listed variables after matching. Only variables that were significant for at least one of the equations are displayed.

TABLE 7. Determinants of Increases in Racial Pessimism

	BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN
Racism		9%	
Racial group common culture		15%	
Racial group media		18%	
Racial group orgs			17%
Education (8th → Coll. Deg.)	-24%	-16%	
Income (\$10k → \$100k)			-28%
Unemployment	5%		
Age (18 → 65)	-15%	10%	-10%
Citizenship status			6%
West	10%		
Party ID (S. Rep. → S. Dem)		-10%	
Obama (50 → 85)		6%	

Cell entries represent percentages derived from probit model simulations of the first differences for the listed variables after matching. Only variables that were significant for at least one of the equations are displayed

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