Introduction

Obama as Post-Racial?

He is interesting for not fitting into old racial conventions. Not only does he stand in stark contrast to a black leadership with which Americans of all races have grown exhausted—the likes of Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and Julian Bond—he embodies something that no other presidential candidate possibly can: the idealism that race is but a negligible human difference. Here is the radicalism, innate to his pedigree, that automatically casts him as the perfect antidote to America's corrosive racial politics.

SHELBY STEELE, A Bound Man

From the moment Barack Obama entered the national spotlight he has indeed been cast “as the perfect antidote to America's corrosive racial politics.” The Illinois legislator, who was campaigning at the time to become the lone African American in the U.S. Senate, burst upon the American political landscape as the keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. His was an almost universally acclaimed speech that immediately catapulted him from a little-known state politician to America's newest hope for a post-racial political future. Obama famously proclaimed in the address, “There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America.” The speech also prominently affirmed his hope in the country's ideals—“The hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. The audacity of hope!” Such powerful appeals to racial unity and hope had some political commentators believing that we were potentially witnessing the first black president.¹

Obama remained faithful to these unifying campaign messages throughout his first two years in the U.S. Senate. His self-imposed role as a racial bridge builder was clearly on display in the racially charged aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.² A large majority of African Americans believed that the federal response to the Katrina-induced suffering in New Orleans would have been faster if most of the victims had been white.³ Similar charges were made by high-profile black political figures like Jesse Jackson and Al
Sharpton. Obama’s critique of the federal response, however, was couched in race-neutral language. He described the Bush administration’s “incompetence” as “color-blind” but believed it revealed a lack of empathy for poor inner-city residents who happen to be disproportionately African American (Mendell 2007, 317). Senator Obama struck a similar class-based tone in another September 2005 interview, stating, “It is way too simplistic to just say this administration doesn’t care about black people. I think it is entirely accurate to say that this administration’s policies don’t take into account the plight of poor communities and this is a tragic reflection of that indifference” (quoted in Zeleny 2005, i). That universalistic race-neutral criticism was classic Obama. Notably conservative commentators compared his measured assessment of the tragedy favorably with Jesse Jackson’s more racially charged remarks. Yet he still recognized the role of race in helping to create the economic conditions that underlay the Bush administration’s apparent apathy toward the victims in New Orleans.

Aside from his Katrina comments, Barack Obama remained relatively quiet during his first year in the U.S. Senate. Much of that time was spent writing his second book, The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream, which was published in the fall of 2006. The memoir’s chapter titled “Race” reiterated his 2004 convention speech’s hope in “a vision of America finally freed from the past of Jim Crow and slavery, Japanese internment camps and Mexican braceros, workplace tensions and cultural conflict” (Obama 2006, 231). The Audacity of Hope, however, also cautioned those who interpreted his keynote address as the watershed to a post-racial America not to lose sight of the country’s glaring racial inequities. He similarly defended the limited use of affirmative action for African Americans, while emphasizing universal, as opposed to race-specific, governmental programs because they are both “good policy” and “good politics” (247). Race is an unparalleled minefield in American politics. Barack Obama’s convention speech, his critiques of the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina, and his chapter on race relations in Audacity all navigated this rough terrain, though in an adroit manner that was not particularly alienating to any one side of the country’s most polarizing issue.

On the heels of The Audacity of Hope’s popularity, Senator Obama hit the campaign trail to stump for Democrats running in the 2006 midterm congressional elections. Enormous crowds of all races and ethnicities attended these events to witness the growing phenomenon that was Barack Obama. His widespread appeal had political pundits abuzz with speculation about a potential presidential run less than two years into his first senato-

rial term. Obama’s picture even graced the cover of Time magazine in October 2006 with the caption, “Why Barack Obama Could be the Next President.” The cover story detailed how his transcendence of racial stereotypes had captured the American public’s imagination and how his consensus-building nature had him well positioned for a potential 2008 presidential bid (Klein 2006). Similar accounts began to spread like wildfire in the national media.

These stories often contrasted Obama’s 2008 prospects with Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 campaigns for the Democratic nomination. Despite Jackson’s remarkable support among African American voters in the party’s 1984 and 1988 primaries (74 percent and 92 percent, respectively), his overall vote share topped out at only 29 percent in 1988. Reverend Jackson’s attempts to broaden his base of support that year had earned him a larger proportion of the white vote than he received in 1984, but his rootedness in the American civil rights struggle and his campaign’s unabashed advocacy for black rights still left the vast majority of whites staunchly opposed to his candidacy.

Unlike Jackson, though, political handicappers near the end of 2006 were giving Senator Obama a realistic (albeit small) chance of winning the Democratic nomination in 2008 because they believed his appeal transcended race. Indeed, Barack Obama had told an almost all-black audience early into his senatorial campaign, “I am not running a race-based campaign. I am rooted in the African American community, but not limited by it” (quoted in Mendell 2007, 188). There was no doubt whatsoever that if Senator Obama sought the presidency he would run a similarly race-neutral campaign. His unique ability to reach beyond race had political commentators instantly anointing him as the first truly viable black candidate for a major party’s nomination.

Senator Obama’s reluctance to make race a major issue in his presiden-
tial campaign was already on display the day he announced his intention to seek the Democratic nomination. The Senator’s pastor, Jeremiah Wright, was initially scheduled to give the invocation preceding Obama’s February 10, 2007, presidential campaign announcement at the Illinois State Capitol. Rolling Stone magazine, however, was working on a story at the time titled “Obama’s Radical Roots,” which detailed some of the controversial racial comments Reverend Wright had made before the Trinity United Church of Christ—where the Obamas were longtime members. Trinity United’s black liberation theology eventually took center stage during the campaign in March 2008. Obama staffers, though, were already well aware of the prob-
lems Wright could cause them. The campaign’s chief strategist, David Axelrod, had previously orchestrated the victories of several black candidates. In doing so, he had earned a niche reputation for making African Americans seeking elected office acceptable to white voters (Hayes 2007). Not only had Axelrod’s tactics helped Obama become the third African American popularly elected to the U.S. Senate, but he also ran Deval Patrick’s (D-MA) successful 2006 campaign to become only the second black governor in America since Reconstruction. Patrick’s racially unifying campaign was anchored with the Obama-like slogan, “together we can.” Axelrod knew that Obama’s connection to Wright’s considerably more divisive sermons threatened his candidate’s well-cultivated post-racial image. It is certainly no surprise, then, that Reverend Wright was scratched from appearing at his congressman’s first official presidential campaign event.

The Obama campaign’s concerted effort to steer clear of racial controversy seemed to be working quite well in 2007. Despite the historic nature of his candidacy, the campaign atmosphere leading up to the first primaries was relatively free of racial acrimony. Perhaps the year’s only significant controversy surrounding Obama’s race came when fellow Democratic hopeful Joe Biden said the following about his future running mate: “I mean, you got the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.” Biden’s remarks drew criticism for implying that other African Americans did not possess these qualities. His insensitive comments, however, further emphasized the differences between Obama and the more stereotypically black candidates who had previously sought the Democratic nomination, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. Moreover, Obama once again used a potentially racially divisive moment to showcase his renowned reconciliatory appeal. He forcefully defended Biden during a December 2007 debate in Iowa, highlighting the Senator’s long record of support for racial equality.

If anything, the most pressing racial issue of 2007 seemed to be whether Barack Obama was actually “black enough.” Senator Obama, as the son of a white mother and a Kenyan father, lacked African American ancestry. That factor, combined with his upbringing outside of the continental United States, his generational distance from the civil rights movement, and his distinctly nonracial campaign messages had some in the black community doubting his authenticity (see Walters 2007 and Hendon 2009 for detailed discussions on this subject). Obama was also criticized by some prominent African Americans for canceling a scheduled appearance at the annual State of Black America town hall meeting in 2007. Jesse Jackson even reportedly described him as “acting white” in September of that year for not attending a march in New Orleans, Louisiana, to protest the suspect imprisonment of six black teenagers (Hill 2009, 25). Obama responded to this question with a statement that he is not “authentically black enough” in a July 2007 debate by jokingly saying, “You know, when I’m catching a cab in Manhattan—In the past, I think I’ve given my credentials.” His modest support from African Americans in 2007 was no laughing matter for the Obama campaign, though. It seems hard to believe in retrospect, but opinion polls repeatedly showed Hillary Clinton with sizable leads over Barack Obama among black voters throughout most of the year.

His strategists, nonetheless, resisted any temptation to run a more race-conscious campaign. Most of Obama’s top staffers viewed his ambiguity on matters of race as an asset; they decided, therefore, to soldier on with the racial balancing act that Obama had been engaged in since the 2004 Democratic Convention. Or, as Newsweek’s Evan Thomas (2009) wrote about the campaign’s racial strategy, “If black voters want to claim him as the black candidate, fine. If voters wanted to see him as biracial or post-racial, that was fine, too” (71).

The results of this plan of action were obviously hard to argue with. The campaign’s race-neutral approach helped Obama win the all-important (and almost all-white) Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008. He not only won the first presidential contest of the year, but he racked up resounding 8-point victories against both the formidable Democratic frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, and John Edwards—a candidate who had parlayed his strong second-place showing in Iowa four years earlier into the 2004 vice presidential nomination. That caucus night seemed to possibly signal a new post-racial political era: Barack Obama had won the lily-white Iowa caucuses with his distinctly nonracial messages of hope and change.

Summary of Key Findings

Obama’s campaign for the presidency in 2008, however, was anything but post-racial. Instead, the racial hopes and fears evoked by his potential to become the country’s first black president sharply divided racial conservatives from racial liberals. Public opinion and voting behavior, in fact, were considerably more polarized by racial attitudes than at any other time on record. This phenomenon whereby racial predispositions are brought more heavily to bear on political evaluations is often described as racialization. For example, opinions about policies like affirmative action and welfare have
been described as highly racialized because they are strongly determined by racial attitudes (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears, Van Laar, Carillo, and Kosterman 1997; Gilens 1999: Winter 2008).

Our central psychological argument is that race was more chronically accessible to voters in 2008 than it had been in any previous campaign. Accessibility refers to the associative link between a particular attitude object and a particular political evaluation. Attitudes about the Vietnam War were perhaps most accessible in voters' minds in 1968, even though the candidates differed on numerous other, lower-profile, issues. Similarly, attitudes toward the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980, and toward terrorism in 2004, were surely accessible to voters in those years. Chronic accessibility means that a particular predisposition is almost inevitably and ubiquitously activated among voters because there is an especially strong connection between that attitude and the political evaluation in question. The historic racial significance that was unmistakably associated with Barack Obama's candidacy meant that voters' racial predispositions were in most cases highly accessible to them—or at least so is our argument—allowing racial attitudes to play a major role in forming their evaluations of him. That leads us to expect that vote choice was inevitably highly racialized, despite Obama's (and to a large extent John McCain's) best efforts to minimize attention to race throughout the campaign.

Earlier research on racialization primarily focused on racially resentful opposition to policies that are both quite unpopular with white Americans and disproportionately associated with African Americans, such as affirmative action and welfare. From a logical point of view, however, racialization could just as easily be the product of support for policies that benefit African Americans or for black candidates. We describe such racially liberal support as "the other side" of the two sides of racialization because this aspect of racial attitudes' impact on political evaluations has been largely overlooked in the past. One of our principal findings, in fact, is that these two sides of racialization—that is, racially resentful opposition to and racially liberal support for Barack Obama—resulted in a considerably larger influence of racial attitudes on the presidential vote in 2008 than in any other campaign in modern history.

A number of results presented throughout the book unambiguously inform this conclusion that the 2008 campaign was more racialized from start to finish than any other recent campaigns. Beginning in chapter 2, we show that evaluations of Barack Obama by the entire electorate were highly racialized even in 2007 when he was consistently portrayed as the racially transcendent candidate. Yet, while racial attitudes had a bigger impact on evaluations of Barack Obama than they had on his Democratic rivals, much of that difference was produced by Obama's strong support from racial liberals. Obama's activation of racially liberal support, especially among white racial liberals, will be a recurrent theme throughout the book. Primary vote choice between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was similarly polarized by racial attitudes from the campaign's onset. No other factor, in fact, came close to dividing the Democratic primary electorate as powerfully as their feelings about African Americans. The impact of racial attitudes on individual vote decisions in the 2008 Democratic primary was so strong that it appears to have even outstripped the substantive impact of racial attitudes on Jesse Jackson's more racially charged campaign for the nomination in 1988.

Chapter 3 shows that racial attitudes were also a much more important determinant of general election vote choice in 2008 than they were in any of the presidential contests of the recent past, despite the absence of explicit references to race during the campaign. We also demonstrate that a matchup between Hillary Clinton and John McCain would not have evoked racial predispositions nearly as powerfully as the McCain-Obama choice did. Moreover, despite the Obama campaign's best effort to neutralize the intrusion of aversive feelings toward African Americans into presidential choices (Ambinder 2009), their effect on McCain-Obama preferences was unaltered throughout the course of the campaign. That continuity suggests racial predispositions may have been, and continue to be, chronically psychologically accessible in response to Obama, thereby making it difficult for new information and events to dampen the effects of race. Although racial attitudes mattered much more this election year in a country that tends to be rather racially conservative, we show that Obama overcame that obstacle by garnering unprecedented support from racial liberals early on and activating Democratic partisanship and performance evaluations of a deeply unpopular incumbent president in the late stages of the campaign.

Not only did Obama racialize presidential vote preferences more powerfully than any other previous candidate did, but chapter 4 shows he produced a "spillover of racialization." In other words, public responses to people and policies strongly associated with Obama, whether situated in opposition or accordace with him, were also more polarized by racial attitudes than they had been before the election year. For example, racial conservatism became an increasingly important ingredient of Democrats' favorability ratings of Hillary Clinton, Obama's main opponent during the primary season. During the fall campaign, racial attitudes similarly became increasingly impor-
tant in assessments of John McCain, as well as in opposition to tax increases after “Joe the Plumber” called attention to Obama’s position on this issue in October 2008.

After Obama’s poor showing among Latinos in the California and Texas primaries, much media speculation suggested that racial prejudices might pose a particular obstacle to Obama’s prospects in that growing minority population. However, chapter 5 shows that Obama polarized whites and Latinos alike along the lines of racial conservatisnu. That is, racial attitudes substantially influenced both groups’ voting behavior in the Democratic primaries and in the general election. But we found little evidence that race actually played a stronger role in Latinos’ primary voting compared to whites’, contrary to that earlier media speculation. Racial attitudes were also perhaps the most important determinant of African Americans’ primary vote choices. Blacks who possessed strong feelings of racial solidarity were about 50 percentage points more likely to support Obama against Hillary Clinton than were blacks with the lowest levels of group consciousness.

Chapter 6 shows that racial attitudes were such a strong determinant of vote choice in the Democratic primary that they helped produced one of the great ironies in American political history: Hillary Clinton, the longstanding poster child of the antifeminist backlash, won a significantly greater percentage of the primary vote from gender conservatives than she did from gender egalitarians. Indeed, three different surveys show that Hillary Clinton performed about 15 percentage points better against Barack Obama with strong gender traditionalists than she did with Americans possessing the most liberal beliefs about gender roles. The paradox is easily resolved when we take into account the fact that gender conservatives tend also to be conservative about racial issues and gender liberals are similarly liberal in their outlooks on race. In other words, we demonstrate that racial attitudes were so powerful that they actually made Hillary Clinton the preferred choice of modern day sexists in the Democratic primaries.

We shift our focus in chapter 7 from antiblack to anti-Muslim attitudes. These feelings had a substantial impact on opposition to Obama in both the primaries and the general election. Moreover, general election vote choice in 2008 was more heavily influenced by feelings about Muslims than either 2004 voting or preferences in McCain-Clinton trial heats. Opinions about Muslims had similarly large effects even for individuals who knew Obama was not an adherent of Islam. They also hold up after controlling for the significant relationship between anti-Muslim and antiblack attitudes. We conclude from these results that Obama is not just evaluated as an African American but as someone who exemplifies the more primitively frightening out-group status of “otherness.”

The results presented in these chapters suggest that the hopes of some for a post-racial Obama era were far from a sure thing and probably even a long shot. Rather, if anything, American partisan politics could easily become increasingly organized by racial attitudes during the Obama presidency. That implication, however, is primarily dependent on whether President Obama continues to evoke racial predispositions as strongly as Candidate Obama did in 2007 and 2008. Chapter 8, in fact, details several factors that could potentially make President Obama a less racialized figure than he was in 2008. Yet we also present substantial new evidence from the first year of his presidency showing that the American public was as divided by racial attitudes as ever in their assessments of him.

In sum, our results clearly indicate that Barack Obama’s candidacy polarized the electorate by racial attitudes more strongly than had any previous presidential candidate in recent times. Whether that polarization continues throughout his presidency remains to be seen. Rather than marking the onset of a new post-racial politics, however, the election of Barack Obama may well have been the watershed to another of America’s periodic hyperracial political eras.
public, racial resentment has become an increasingly important predictor of party identification (Valentino and Sears 2005, 2008).

In the primaries, the independent effects of racial resentment on vote choice were actually enhanced by this relationship between racial attitudes and party attachment. Strong Democratic identifiers are lower in racial resentment than are those choosing the other six standard categories of party identification, ranging from weak Democrats to strong Republicans. Barack Obama, however, consistently outperformed Hillary Clinton with weak Democrats and Independents but lost to her among strong Democrats. The independent effects of racial resentment on opposition to Obama in the primaries, therefore, became a little larger after controlling for the correlation between party identification and racial predispositions.

The deeply partisan nature of presidential general elections, on the other hand, necessarily implies that strong Democrats should overwhelmingly support their party’s candidate irrespective of their racial attitudes. It is quite possible, then, that the well-known importance of partisanship in voting for president might have relegated racial attitudes’ independent impact on the 2008 general election to a much more limited role than it had played in the primary season.

The second reason that racial resentment might have played a more limited role in the general election concerns other short-term factors in the political world. Every presidential election is to some extent a referendum on the previous administration’s performance (Fiorina 1981; Miller and Shanks 1996). In 2008, President Bush’s job approval evaluations from the general public were nearing record lows. The unpopular Iraq War was dragging on, seemingly inconclusively. Upcoming was the financial collapse in the fall and then the rapidly deteriorating national (and international) economy. Economic conditions threatened to overwhelm everything else that might be said or done during the campaign.

This, after all, is a standard feature of presidential elections. Short-term perceptions of national economic conditions have consistently been shown to be sizable determinants of individual-level voting behavior in national elections (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 1981; Fiorina 1981; Kiewiet 1983). The logic here is quite simple—the party that controls the White House benefits when voters think that the economy is strong and its candidates are punished during economic downturns. True, there is some evidence indicating that the incumbent party’s candidate is not held quite as responsible for national economic conditions during open-seat presidential contests like 2008 (Hobbrook 2008; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; though see Abramowitz 2008),

A Reduced Role for Race in the General Election?

There are two major reasons for expecting that the general election might not be so racialized. First, presidential vote choices in general elections are profoundly affected by partisan attachments, which are largely neutralized in intraparty primary elections (Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960). These party affiliations have themselves become unmistakably influenced by racial attitudes in recent decades. Racial issues are among the factors that have sharply polarized the two political parties at the elite level since the 1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Laymen and Carsey 2002). In the mass


Our central contention is that the 2008 campaign was more racialized from start to finish than any other presidential campaign in modern history. We already saw the large effects of racial resentment in the Democratic primaries. They clearly raised the specter of a greater role than usual for racial resentment in the 2008 general election. So did exit polls taken from Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia in April and May 2008, indicating that upward of half of Hillary Clinton’s supporters were hesitant about voting for Barack Obama over John McCain in November. Many media analysts immediately came to the conclusion that their hesitancy was based in race—that those Democrats who voted for Clinton in the primary but were reluctant to support Barack Obama in the general election simply did not want to vote for a black presidential candidate (Thomas 2008; Sullivan 2008). But that did not guarantee a greater role for attitudes about African Americans in 2008 than in past presidential contests. So our main questions in this chapter are: Did the general election vote show the same racialized pattern as the primaries? If so, how did Obama win the election in the face of that formidable obstacle?
but John McCain was still undoubtedly disadvantaged by running as a Republican in 2008. In fact, no previous ANES survey had ever come close to recording economic evaluations as dreadful as those in 2008. For example, a large majority of respondents said that the national economy had gotten "much worse" over the past year (65.9 percent) and virtually no individuals surveyed thought things were either "better" or "much better" (2.2 percent combined). This "much worse" percentage was more than 20 points greater than the proportion recorded in any prior ANES survey.1

When the media and/or the campaigns make the state of the national economy even more salient, its importance in voting for president has been shown to increase still further (Hetherington 1996; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Vavreck 2009). In 2008, economic conditions clearly dominated both the campaigns’ and the press’s coverage of them. Stories about the economy for instance, comprised upward of 50 percent of campaign news in the weeks immediately after Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy and the stock market began its freefall in mid-September.2 McCain even suspended his campaign in response to the seriousness of these circumstances. Likewise, the September 26, 2008, presidential debate’s scheduled focus on foreign policy was altered to include questions about the economy. Such dire national economic conditions in 2008, combined with the tremendous amount of press attention given to them, naturally raised the question of whether Americans were still relying heavily on racial predispositions in formulating their general election vote decisions. With so much focus on economic issues, evaluations of the economy were likely to be particularly influential.

In short, both partisanship and economic evaluations could have consigned racial resentment to a much lesser role in the general election than the central part it had played during the primary season, as seen in the previous chapter.

**Race in the General Election Campaign**

Aside from the potential for party affiliation and economic conditions to reduce racial resentment’s influence on presidential vote choice, both John McCain and Barack Obama were extremely reluctant to make race an issue. Senator McCain had himself been the victim of malicious race-based attacks during his 2000 run for the GOP's nomination. In the weeks before that year’s make-or-break Republican primary contest in South Carolina, anonymous leaflets were circulated throughout the state suggesting that McCain had fathered his adopted daughter with a black prostitute. Some suspected

that experience motivated his refusal to gain any popular advantage over Obama via similarly styled appeals to racial anxiety (Thomas 2009). The McCain campaign was also genuinely afraid that accusations of racism against them would be electorally damaging. Such fear likely prompted McCain’s express admonition to his surrogates not to discuss the racially explosive Reverend Wright issue.3

To be sure, their campaign was not entirely free of racial content. In late July 2008, Obama had publicly warned his supporters that the opposition would attempt to scare voters by pointing out “he doesn’t look like all those other presidents on those dollar bills.”4 Shortly thereafter, McCain’s campaign manager, Rick Davis, issued a press release declaring, “Barack Obama has played the race card, and played it from the bottom of the deck.” This gambit offered the potential to inject race into the campaign without fear of public condemnation for racial insensitivity. Moreover, the McCain campaign in general, and Sarah Palin in particular, seemed quite comfortable fueling the flames that Obama was the “other”—meaning his background was not like “the real Americans,” as Palin called them.5 Chapter 7 addresses such efforts to portray Obama as the “other”—that is, as not being like the small-town, patriotic white Americans that many thought Palin was referring to when she referenced “the real America.”

Moreover, some Republican political groups working without the McCain campaign’s imprimatur were far less hesitant to make race-based appeals against Obama. The National Republican Trust Political Action Committee, for instance, ran ads the final week of the campaign repeating excerpts from Wright’s most sensational sermons. The spot concluded with both the written and spoken message, “Barack Obama. Too radical. Too risky,” a likely appeal to prevailing stereotypes about black political radicalism (Hajnal 2007; Sigelman et al. 1995). Other independent groups similarly featured Wright in anti-Obama advertisements. Despite these few examples, though, McCain’s reluctance to make race a factor meant that the informational atmosphere throughout most of the fall campaign was relatively race neutral. Given Republicans’ long history of employing racial appeals for electoral advantage (Mendelberg 2001), their limited use of such messages against Obama was remarkably restrained.

As for the Democrats, Barack Obama not only tried to avoid the race issue but he also actively pursued strategies to deactivate the impact of racial conservatism on vote choice. The campaign’s top pollster, Cornell Belcher, consistently gauged white Americans’ levels of “racial aversion” using questions about African Americans similar to those in the racial resentment
battery we have borrowed from Kinder and Sanders (1996; on the Obama polling, see Ambinder 2009). Obama's strategists, therefore, knew that the high degree of racial aversion among the American public—reflecting the majority of the country who are racially resentful—necessitated neutralizing the effect such predispositions would have on voting behavior. Belcher, in fact, told Gwen Ifill (2009, 54) after the election, "The thing is, a black man can't be president of America, given the racial aversion and history that's still out there... However, an extraordinary, gifted, and talented young man who happens to be black can be president" (original emphasis). So the campaign flooded white working-class areas of key swing states with its moderate, race-neutral, economic message in an effort to deactivate racial aversion and hopefully get votes cast on the basis of factors that were more favorable to Obama (Ambinder 2009).

On the rare occasion when Barack Obama did directly address race during the general election campaign, as he did at the NAACP's annual conference in July 2008, he used language that actually should have been positively received by the racially resentful. A core tenet of symbolic racism is that racial inequality stems from blacks' lack of work ethic and personal responsibility. The following comments from Obama should therefore have been appreciated by Americans harboring such opinions: "Now, I know there's some who've been saying I've been too tough talking about responsibility. But here at the NAACP, I'm here to report I'm not going to stop talking about it. Because... no matter how many 10-point plans we propose, or how many government programs we launch—none of it will make any difference if we don't seize more responsibility in our own lives."

These remarks were certainly not well received by the longstanding poster child of the racially conservative backlash, Jesse Jackson. After similar comments by Obama about African American responsibility earlier in the year, Jackson was caught on tape describing how he wanted to castrate (in more colorful language) the Democratic nominee for "talking down to black people." The controversy received considerable media attention—it was the most reported-on campaign story of the week and figured prominently in the following week's campaign coverage too (Hitlin et al. 2008a, 2008b). As a result of that publicity, nearly half of the respondents surveyed by Pew in mid-July reported hearing "a lot" about Jackson's "crude comment."

From the standpoint of deactivating racial resentment, the widespread media interest in Jackson's criticism could have been good for Obama. Black leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton have long been especially likely to evoke racial resentment because their forceful advocacy for African Americans mis-

rors the manifest content of symbolic racism and racial resentment, as in their denunciation of continuing racial discrimination and proposals for pro-black public policies (Sears 1993; Sears, Van Laar, Carillo, and Kosterman 1997). We might expect, then, that both Obama's message of black responsibility, and the criticism of him sparked by the highly racialized Jackson, could have made him more popular among the racially resentful. If his support among racial conservatives increased as a result of Jackson's criticism, the upshot should have been a diminished impact of racial resentment on vote choice.

Taken together, the large potential impacts of partisanship and short-term forces unfavorable to the Republicans, such as Bush's low approval ratings and economic evaluations, as well as the McCain campaign's unwillingness to make race an issue and Obama's concerted effort to deactivate racial attitudes, raised the possibility that race would have a role in the biracial 2008 election no greater than it had had in previous contests featuring only white candidates.

A Predictable Outcome

We start our analysis of the general election with the aggregate vote division before moving on to the dynamics of individual vote choices. A substantial body of research in political science shows that the popular vote in presidential elections can usually be forecast within a few percentage points with models based upon economic and political indicators assessed months before the election. These variables are referred to as the "fundamentals." They include such nonracial factors as gross domestic product growth, presidential approval ratings, consumer satisfaction, jobs creation, terms in office, and economic expectations (see Campbell 2008a for an overview). Forecast models are based entirely upon the relationships these fundamental variables have had with presidential vote share in previous elections.

Those earlier elections, of course, had only offered white candidates, so they provided no precedents for the effect of having a black nominee. Widespread reluctance to vote for a black candidate might well have resulted in Obama performing worse than he should have based on the standard nonracial "fundamentals." Some forecasters naturally worried that Obama's race would cause his actual vote share to fall significantly below the level of support forecast from past elections. One forecast, in fact, subtracted 6.5 percentage points from Obama's expected vote share from the model to account for the detrimental effect they expected that his race would have for him (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008).
However, Obama's share of the two-party vote in the 2008 general election was actually predicted quite accurately by most of the forecasting models that were published before the election. Five forecasts published in October 2008 produced an average predicted two-party vote share for Obama of 54.6 percent, with a median prediction of 54.3, both very close to the 53.4 percent of the two-party vote share that he eventually received (Campbell 2008a). At least from these aggregate vote models it appears that Obama was not too disadvantaged by his race relative to past white Democratic candidates.

Unfortunately these predictions, which were all calculated at least two months prior to the election, could not take into account the financial meltdown that occurred in mid-September 2008. Nor could they possibly factor in Obama's big advantage in campaign resources—a factor shown to help amass votes (Shaw 2007). The financial meltdown and Obama's fund-raising should have led to his doing much better than these forecasts predicted. On the other hand, one could just as easily argue that some fundamentals unfavorable to McCain, such as economic growth and presidential approval, were not as closely linked to him as they were to past nominees. Any under-performance from what the fundamentals predicted for Obama, therefore, could also be attributed to McCain's lack of direct association with the Bush administration and to his reputation for political independence. In other words, there was good reason to think that McCain could have been judged less on retrospective evaluations than previous nominees from the incumbent party had been, and so outperform his forecasted vote share.

If we assume that the favorable campaign circumstances for Obama not accounted for by the forecasting models were mostly offset by McCain's distance from the unpopular administration in control of the White House, the 2008 general election results comport well with predictions based upon the election year's objective economic and political indicators. Perhaps the aggregate vote division turned out to be quite predictable because "the fundamentals" reduced the impact of racial resentment. If so, racial attitudes might not have had a much greater impact on voting behavior in this election than they had in the all-white contests of the past.

**Racial Resentment in 2008 Compared to Previous All-White Elections**

Next we test whether racial resentment did, in fact, have larger effects on individual voters' preferences in the general election than in prior all-white elections. Table 3.1 displays the logistic regression coefficients for racial resentment and the other variables in our standard model of GOP vote intention for five of the last six presidential election years. We use the ANES's pre-election measure of vote intention here instead of reported postelection vote choice to foster comparison between these results and the two trial heats pitting John McCain against Hillary Clinton and against Barack Obama in the March 2008 CCAP. The differences in racial resentment's respective impacts on vote choice and vote intention are statistically negligible in every year except 2004. A detailed analysis of four other national surveys with measures of both racial resentment and 2004 vote choice, however, indicates that the increased resentment effect on vote choice in the 2004 ANES was anomalous. Other surveys did not show that enhanced impact. We are quite confident, then, that our use of the 2004 ANES's measure of vote intention is an accurate reflection of racial resentment's impact on that election.

That being said, the coefficients in table 3.1 suggest that racial resentment in the McCain-Obama matchups had at least twice as strong an effect on vote intention in both the March 2008 CCAP and the fall 2008 ANES than it had in any all-white contest from 1988 to 2004, or in the all-white McCain-Clinton matchup. To aid in the interpretation of these coefficients, figure 3.1 graphs out the resentment effects, while holding the other variables in the model constant. As the display illustrates, racial resentment
The Two Sides of Racialization in the 2008 General Election

As was the case in the primaries, understanding these large effects of racial resentment on vote preference in the general election requires a separate examination of the racially liberal side of the spectrum. It was suggested in the previous chapter that a major reason why Obama did so well among racial liberals in the primary was the lack of major substantive differences between himself and Senator Clinton in terms of broader ideology or non-racial issues. That presumably allowed the least racially resentful to vote their affective sympathies for African Americans without any adverse policy consequences—a cost-free racially liberal statement, if you will.

There were obviously much more meaningful policy differences between Obama and Senator McCain. Still, these differences should have made it even more enticing for racial liberals to vote for Obama than if they were casting a vote that merely expressed their positive affect for African Americans, as in the primary. As the fundamentals in the election forecasting models indicated, Barack Obama had the great benefit of running for president as a Democrat in an election year in which the Republican brand name was severely damaged. With less than 30 percent of the country approving of the incumbent Republican president and over four out of five Americans saying the nation was on the wrong track throughout the fall of 2008, the circumstances greatly favored any Democratic candidate. A vote for Obama thus provided the perfect political scenario for racial liberals: They could simultaneously express their support for a black candidate and vote with the prevailing partisan proclivities of the moment.

We should expect, therefore, that even with our base-model variables controlled for, Obama would capture the great majority of votes from the most racially liberal Americans. Figure 3.1 shows that this is precisely what happened. Although racial resentment was a much bigger factor in 2008 than in previous elections, much of this difference was produced by Obama’s stout support from racial liberals. Indeed, with the familiar demographic and partisan control variables set to their means, our vote model predicts...
that over 90 percent of the most racially liberal respondents (and over 80 percent of racially liberal whites, as will be shown in chapter 5) supported Obama.

All the fundamentals that were so favorable to the Democrats, however, did not comparably expand the Democratic vote share among racial conservatives. This opposition to Obama among the racially resentful, and under performance among them relative to the pro-Democratic fundamentals, is to be expected from much prior research showing the detrimental effects of symbolic racism on white support for otherwise well-positioned black candidates. Indeed, the concept of symbolic racism was originally born out of a need to explain widespread white opposition to black candidates and race-targeted policies in the post–civil rights era. Most of the action, therefore, has usually occurred on the racially resentful side of the spectrum.

So racial resentment was more important in 2008 than in previous years. That unusual salience should have worked against Obama, since most Americans score on the conservative side of the resentment spectrum. Yet Obama’s powerful performance among racial liberals offset much of that disadvantage. Race has historically created opposition to black candidates among whites, but he activated unprecedented support on the liberal side of the resentment spectrum—a phenomenon much less expected from prior research.

The Impact of Racial Resentment throughout the Campaign

There is still much to be explained about the dynamics of racial resentment through the campaign, though. For starters, figure 3.1 offers little insights into how racial resentment’s impact on general election vote intention changed throughout the course of the campaign. Racial resentment had a stronger effect on support for McCain against Obama in the March CCAP than in the Fall ANES, seemingly indicating that its power dwindled with time. But two differences between the surveys prevent us from knowing exactly what caused that decline. The ANES was carried out over the two month time span from the beginning of September to Election Day, thereby making it impossible to detect changes in the effects of racial resentment over the course of the full election year. Moreover, differences in sampling methodology make the ANES and CCAP results not entirely comparable.

However, the CCAP’s panel design does have desirable features for tracking differences in the impact of racial resentment over the course of the 2008 general election campaign. Over time, voters may change the standards they use to make their decisions. Campaign content and media coverage may influence such changes as a result of what social psychologists refer to as “priming,” as indicated in chapter 2 (see Bartels 2006b and Kinder 2003 for reviews). For example, introducing the race-infused Willie Horton case into the 1988 campaign yielded a natural experiment on racial priming. Researchers partitioned the 1988 ANES into different time intervals in order to demonstrate how the Horton issue primed racial resentment, thereby increasing its influence on both candidate evaluations (Mendelberg 2001) and presidential vote choice (Kinder and Sanders 1996).

However, such priming studies based on cross-sectional data run the risk of blurring reciprocal causality (Lenz 2009). On the one hand, priming race could increase the dependence of vote preference on the voter’s level of racial resentment, as the priming hypothesis proposes. On the other hand, the new information could cause a shift in underlying racial attitudes to rationalize one’s preexisting vote decision. If so, the enhanced relationship between racial predispositions and voting behavior might have nothing to do with the priming mechanism.

The robust individual-level stability of symbolic racism makes the racial priming results from these two Willie Horton studies (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001) much less vulnerable to this rationalization explanation. It is unlikely that voters changed their rather stable levels of racial resentment to rationalize their 1988 vote choices. Even so, the researchers were limited by having to compare pre-Horton with post-Horton respondents, and the two groups could have differed in other ways. In contrast, the 2008 CCAP’s panel design allows us to test the effects of racial resentment, as measured in March, on the same panel respondents’ vote choices in March, September, October, and November. Since their March responses to the racial resentment questions were especially unlikely to serve as rationalizations for their general election vote preferences in the fall, the panel design offers a big advantage in mitigating concerns about reverse causality.

The timing of the CCAP interviews also turned out to be fortuitous for examining whether any changes in the impact of racial resentment through the campaign affected Obama’s prospects for victory. According to Pollster.com’s compilation of daily national polling averages through the entire campaign, McCain led Obama only from late March to early April, holding a 45.5 to 44 percent lead during that time period. This time frame perfectly parallels the CCAP’s March interviews, which showed an analogous McCain lead among the full sample of 45 to 43.7 percent. These national polls, of course, showed significant movement toward Obama during the fall of
2008. Similarly, Obama headed into Election Day leading among the same CCAP panelists among whom he trailed McCain back in March 2008.

The fact that Obama trailed McCain in late March 2008 in both the national polls and the CCAP is interesting. We showed in figure 3.1, for instance, that all other things being equal, Obama was predicted to receive about 90 percent of the most racially liberal vote in his March trial heat against McCain. Nevertheless, Obama was still trailing McCain among all respondents in this survey because he was losing about three-quarters of the vote from those with high resentment scores. The overall skew toward high levels of racial conservatism made it difficult to offset a poor performance among the most racially resentful. Because of the stability of voters’ levels of racial resentment, that skew was unlikely to change. Obama, therefore, needed somehow to change the relationship between racial resentment and support for McCain in March in order to win.

There were three plausible ways the Obama campaign could change that crippling relationship between racial resentment and support for McCain. First, it could deactivate the impact of racial resentment among racial conservatives. As previously mentioned, the Obama campaign seemed to be actively pursuing that deactivation strategy by speaking about black responsibility and saturating white working-class areas with its messages of economic moderation. Moreover, the interviews for the March CCAP took place soon after the Reverend Wright story broke. Racial resentment, therefore, may have been at the high point of its influence during this time period. With Reverend Wright largely vanishing from the headlines by the fall of 2008, though, the racially resentful could have grown more supportive of Obama over time.

A second possibility was that Obama might actually increase his aggregate level of support by enhancing the impact of racial predispositions on vote preference. This strategy could work if he gained votes among racial liberals without suffering corresponding losses from racial conservatives. Recall from the previous chapter that stimulating Obama’s support on this “second side” of symbolic racism led to the racialized momentum that won him the nomination. However, a similar trend of targeted activation was much less likely to benefit him in the fall campaign because Obama was already close to maximizing his support among racial liberals in March 2008.

Third, Obama might increase his aggregate level of support without altering the effect of racial resentment over the course of the campaign. That would occur if he managed to enhance his vote share among individuals of all resentment levels. Favorable campaign conditions such as his superior resources, strong debate performances, and the crashing economy could have produced this pattern of increased support for Obama from March to October among those at all levels of racial resentment.

To determine how the effect of racial resentment on vote intentions changed throughout the campaign, figure 3.2 graphs its impact in March, September, and late October for CCAP panelists interviewed in all three waves. The display’s first panel shows that the effect of racial resentment, as measured in March, had actually risen slightly among CCAP panelists by September. Obama nevertheless increased his overall vote share because he performed about 5 points better in September among racial liberals. Interestingly, Obama hardly increased his predicted vote share at all among racial conservatives despite the fact that all of the September interviews took place after both Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy and the stock market began imploding. The upshot was that Obama increased his aggregate vote share during this time period among CCAP panelists, despite the rise in the impact of racial resentment, because racial liberals’ support for him was activated.

How did the effects of resentment on the McCain-Obama matchup close to Election Day compare with those on the hypothetical matchup in the spring? The effects of racial resentment in October were almost entirely unchanged from March, as shown in the second panel of figure 3.2. Obama gained support, across the board, by about 6 to 8 percentage points at all
levels of racial resentment. He even appreciably outperformed his March numbers among the most racially conservative respondents. That increased support over the course of the campaign, irrespective of racial resentment, explains how Obama’s deficit among CCAP panelists in March turned into a lead in late October. Of the three possible avenues open to Obama for coping with the obstacle of racial resentment going into the fall campaign, then, the third proved successful. Obama increased his predicted vote share at every level of racial resentment.

The uniformity in the effects of racial resentment over time revealed in figure 3.2 is rather remarkable. Despite nearly one billion dollars in campaign spending, the economy crashing, and the diminished salience of race in the campaign from the high of Reverend Wright in March, the effects of racial resentment on support for McCain against Obama were almost identical across time. This continuity strongly supports our prior contention that the hopes and fears generated by Obama’s role as the first black presidential nominee from a major political party *ipso facto* made racial predispositions readily accessible in the general election vote choice. Given the broad and deep natural accessibility of race, it appears that neither the campaigns nor the media could do much to alter its impact.

**Short-Term Political Dynamics in Voting Behavior**

If the impact of racial resentment was unchanged throughout the campaign year, then how did Obama manage to increase his vote share among Americans from March to October? Studies of voting behavior have long shown that the major functions of a campaign are to prime symbolic predispositions and/or short-term political factors like the election year fundamentals (going back to Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Miller and Shanks, 1996; more recently, see Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Bartels, 2006b; Vavreck 2009). For example, Gelman and King (1993) suggest that the answer to their aptly titled article “Why Are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls so Variable when Votes Are so Predictable?” is that presidential campaigns prime the election year fundamentals from which the forecasting models make predictions. We might expect, then, that the growth in Obama’s vote share after March resulted from short-term political factors rather than racial resentment becoming more important as the campaign passed from the primary to the general election phase.

To test this expectation, we added three short-term factors widely dis-
our expanded model, but we did not expect it to explain Obama’s increased vote share over time from March to October.

Changes through the campaign in the effects of both long-term political predispositions and short-term political factors on 2008 vote preferences are shown in figure 3.3. Most important for our purposes is that the effects of racial resentment shown previously in figure 3.2 are not substantially altered by adding presidential approval, economic evaluations, and opinions about Iraq to our base model, all else being equal. Indeed, the first panel of figure 3.3 again shows that Obama increased his support from March to October across the entire spectrum of racial resentment.

With these stable resentment effects once again established, we can now turn our attention to the short-term political factors in the three panels in the second column of figure 3.3. As just mentioned, Bush’s extraordinary unpopularity had the Obama campaign hard at work to make him a more important factor in people’s voting behavior. From our results, their efforts appear to have been extremely successful. Presidential approval produces the biggest priming effects during the campaign of any of the short-term forces tested. The difference between those “strongly disapproving” and those “strongly approving” of Bush’s job performance was a 30-point advantage for Obama over McCain in March 2008, with all other factors held constant. That significant effect of Bush disapproval on vote preference back in March increased even further through the later campaign. By October, the same difference in assessments of Bush (i.e., in Bush’s March disapproval ratings) had almost twice as much impact, increasing Obama’s vote share by 50 points, as shown in the second panel of figure 3.3.

This effort to link McCain to Bush was particularly targeted toward, and fortunately for Obama, especially effective among Democrats who strongly disapproved of Bush’s job performance. All else being equal, Obama increased his vote share from March to October by 13 points with those who most disapproved of Bush. In other words, the Obama campaign succeeded in linking McCain even more tightly to the electorate’s already negative views of the Bush’s presidency. The result of targeting Democrats and Bush unenthusiasts throughout the campaign was that the effects of partisanship and presidential approval shown in the second and third panels of figure 3.3 significantly increased from March to October. This targeted activation, in fact, appears to be the key difference between Obama trailing McCain in March and leading him on the eve of the election.

Much less expected, however, is that perceptions of how the economy had been performing over the previous year had only modest effects on vote intentions throughout 2008, as shown in the fourth panel in figure 3.3. Part of the apparent unimportance of the economy in the fall could be due to our using retrospective economic evaluations assessed in the March CCAP. That measure, of course, does not take into account the financial meltdown that occurred in the fall. However, the poor economy had already been
highly salient in the spring. Economic assessments in March were already dismal, and the economy at that time had become by far the most important national problem identified in surveys.²¹

Moreover, these assessments of the economy from March did significantly influence votes. They became much more important throughout the course of the campaign, too, influencing votes more heavily in October than March. But the impact of the economy on vote intentions was indirect, mediated by its more direct effect on presidential approval. The logic is this: Bush’s job approval ratings were strongly related to economic evaluations—how poorly the economy was perceived as functioning. The correlation between the two variables among our CCAP panelists was .58. As a result, including both economic evaluations and presidential approval in the same model masks the indirect effect of the poor economy through its effects on Bush’s reputation. Removing presidential approval from the vote intention model, therefore, substantially increased the impact of economic evaluations in March, and especially in October.²² Indeed, the difference in national economic evaluations from “much better” to “much worse” in national economic evaluations now heavily reduced McCain’s October predicted vote share, decreasing it by roughly 40 percentage points—an effect twice as big as its effect on March vote intention.

Finally for our short-term political factors, the final panel of figure 3.3 shows that Iraq was a minor player in the Obama surge that won him the presidency. Obama increased his predicted vote share from March to October by similar margins among CCAP panelists who thought we should withdraw from Iraq and with those who believed we should stay in Iraq “as long as it takes.” That uniformly increased support for Obama from March to October, regardless of respondents’ attitudes about Iraq, indicates that Iraq, like racial resentment, was not responsible for his growing popularity through the spring and fall.

**Partisan Activation: The Hillary Clinton Primary Voters Return to the Fold**

“The function of the campaign,” according to Gelman and King (1993: 433–434), “is to inform voters about the fundamental variables and their appropriate weights.” Conventional wisdom has long posited that partisan differences are one of the fundamental variables that are activated by presidential elections. This thinking dates back to Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954, 292) classic finding that Roosevelt voters in 1944, who were initially hesitant to support Harry Truman four years later, came home to the Democratic Party at the end of the 1948 campaign because of “the reactivation of a previous tendency.” Yet Gelman and King’s (1993) analysis of the 1988 campaign showed that partisanship was the one fundamental variable whose impact did not change much throughout the election year. Bartels’s (2006b, 93) analysis of priming effects in presidential elections from 1980 to 2000 similarly revealed “remarkably little evidence of partisan activation in recent general election campaigns.”

The third panel in figure 3.3, however, shows substantial evidence of partisan activation, with especially concentrated gains for Obama among Democrats. As can be seen in the display, Obama increased his vote share among Democrats by about 12 points from March to October, with all other factors held constant. Aside from presidential approval ratings, partisanship shows the biggest priming effects of any variable in our model. To repeat our earlier contention, Obama’s targeted activation of Democrats and anti-Bush voters in the fall campaign appears to be the main reason why McCain’s lead among CCAP panelists in the spring turned into a deficit right before the election.

So why was partisan activation so much stronger in 2008 than in recent elections? These large priming effects stem from the fact that the anti-Bush Democrats activated by the campaign were primarily Hillary Clinton supporters, who had been hesitant to back Obama in March because of his race, returning to their partisan home. Most of Obama’s increased vote share among CCAP panelists from March to October was, in fact, produced by a net gain of roughly 30 points from Clinton’s primary voters.²³ Not surprisingly, Clinton’s support in the primaries came overwhelmingly from Democrats. Strong Democrats accounted for 57 percent of her voters, with weak Democrats making up another 21 percent. An astounding 88 percent of CCAP panelists who supported Clinton in March also strongly disapproved of Bush’s job performance. So when Clinton voters transitioned in great numbers to Obama from March to October, it naturally increased his predicted support both among Democrats and among those who were strongly opposed to the incumbent president.

Perhaps the reluctance of Clinton voters to support Obama in March really had little to do with race, though. A priori, one could argue that this hesitancy stemmed more from the contentious nominating contest than from Obama’s racial background. Yet the results presented in figure 3.4 clearly
have been eager to vote for a Democrat because of both their partisanship and their evaluations of the incumbent Republican administration were not doing so because of Obama’s race. The campaign’s activation of those factors, however, brought many Democratic-disposed voters back. As a result of their coming back to the fold from March to October, his margin of victory fell back into the zone expected on the basis of election year fundamentals.

Concluding Remarks

We began by showing that despite the absence of racial appeals during the general election campaign, Obama-McCain vote preferences were more polarized by racial resentment than was the case in any other presidential elections since the Reagan era. The general election was also far more racialized than the trial heat between Clinton and McCain had been in the spring. Just having a black candidate seems to have produced a larger impact of racial predispositions. With more Americans scoring high than low in racial resentment, these greater racialized voting patterns in 2008 could have easily prevented Obama from winning, as many expected.

Yet Obama won. Our analysis of long-term symbolic predispositions and short-term political dynamics points to two central explanations for how Barack Obama won the White House despite the unusually large individual-level impact of racial resentment. The first is that he activated much greater support among racial liberals than had any other recent Democratic presidential candidate. A vote for Obama by racial liberals allowed them both to express their symbolic support for an African American and to evict the unpopular Republican Party from the White House. This strong performance on the “other side” of the symbolic racism dimension helps explain how he won even when the impact of racial resentment was at historic highs in a country where the majority falls safely on the racially conservative side of the resentment spectrum.

Powerfully activating support from the least racially resentful by itself was not enough to win, though. Obama would have lost if the election had been held among CCAP respondents in March 2008 despite his overwhelming support from racial liberals in that survey. The second key factor, then, was that he succeeded in activating Democratic partisanship and primed the election-year fundamental of presidential assessment, which in this case meant the broad and deep disapproval of the Bush administration.

Obama’s relatively poor performance among racial conservatives was, therefore, seemingly offset by a combination of racial moderates who were
inclined to vote with the prevailing short-term forces of the election year and racial liberals who were eager both to support a black candidate and to vote a damaged Republican Party out of power. The upshot is that racial resentment had a much larger effect on presidential voting at the individual level in 2008, but Obama’s aggregate vote share still remained in line with predictions based upon election year fundamentals.