Millennials & the Myth of the Post-Racial Society: Black Youth, Intra-generational Divisions & the Continuing Racial Divide in American Politics

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Since the election of Barack Obama, much has been made of the generational divide in the populace. Some have suggested that once the so-called millennials come to dominate the political domain, many of the thorny social issues that have caused great debate and consternation among the American public will be resolved. This line of reasoning implies that young people who embrace and personify a more inclusive society will eventually take over policy-making and thought leadership, moving both areas in a more liberal direction. Commentators point to the significant differences in opinion registered among various generations on topics such as same-sex marriage and abortion as evidence of the more inclusive worldview held by the majority of young people. According to a 2009 CNN.com story, "Fifty-four percent of people questioned in a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll released Monday said marriages between gay or lesbian couples should not be recognized as valid with 44 percent suggesting they should be considered legal. But among those 18 to 34 years old, 58 percent said same-sex marriages should be considered legal." The article closes with a quote from CNN political analyst Bill Schneider that underscores the potential of young Americans to change the trajectory of equal rights in the country: "Young voters strongly favor marriage equality. They're the future of American politics."[1] A *USA Today* story makes a similar argument, proclaiming that "younger Americans, more eclectic in their views

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on social issues and more likely to have friends or family members who are openly gay, are more tolerant of same-sex couples than their parents or grandparents and appear to be more interested in compromise."[2]

The promised harmony around social issues that is presumably evident among younger Americans extends beyond the confines of sexually infused social policy to the prominent and always simmering issue of race. An article published in *The New York Times* suggests that much of the problem of race and racism found in the Tea Party and the NAACP has to do with the fact that they both are largely comprised of older members who grew up as the targets or beneficiaries of Jim Crow. Columnist Matt Bai writes, "The Tea Party and the N.A.A.C.P. represent disproportionately older memberships. And herein lies a problem with so much of our discussion about race and politics in the Obama era: we tend not to recognize the generational divide that underlies it."[3] As evidence of this substantial generational divide, Bai cites pre-midterm data from the Pew Research Center indicating that "there is nearly a 20 point spread between Mr. Obama's approval ratings among voters younger than 30 and those older than 65." Perhaps Bai's most important observation is one that he seems to add almost as a throwaway: his comment that "These numbers probably do reflect some profound racial differences among the generations." I would contend that, in fact, the significant and profound differences in how young whites, blacks, and Latinos think about such topics as racism, citizenship, and gay and lesbian issues are a defining and often ignored feature of American politics as practiced by the young today, even in the age of Obama.

Far from the generation of millennials signaling the end of race or even the be-

ginning of a post-racial society, data from the Black Youth Project (BYP)[4] and the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project (MCPCE)[5] suggest that deep divides still exist among young people, with black youth particularly skeptical about the idea of a post-racial anything. When we first administered the BYP in 2005, we asked respondents – who were then ages 15 to 25 – a series of questions regarding the impact of race in the lives of young black Americans. Repeatedly, we discovered a significant gap in how young whites and young blacks thought about such issues, with young Latinos often landing somewhere in the middle. For example, 61 percent of black youth agreed with the statement, "It is hard for young black people to get ahead because they face so much discrimination," compared to 43 percent of white youth and 45 percent of Latino respondents. Similarly, 54 percent of black youth agreed with the statement, "On average, black youth receive a poorer education than white youth," compared to 31 percent of white youth and 40 percent of Latino youth. When asked if they agreed with the statement, "In the health care system, Blacks are treated less fairly than Whites," the majority of black (59 percent) and Latino (52 percent) youth indicated their agreement, while only 32 percent of young whites agreed. On the specific topic of AIDS, when asked if they agreed that "if more white people had AIDS, the government would do more to find a cure," over two-thirds of black respondents (68 percent) agreed, compared to only 34 percent of white youth and 50 percent of Latino youth.

When we turned our questions to the treatment of blacks by the government, compared to its treatment of other groups, we continued to see marked disagreement. For example, when black youth

were asked if the government treats immigrants better than most blacks, nearly a majority of black youth agreed (48 percent), compared to the expected much smaller percentage of Latinos (18 percent) and 29 percent of white youth. Interestingly, the one area in this battery of questions where we can identify relative agreement across racial and ethnic groups is on the topic of how the police treat black youth. Specifically, when asked if "the police discriminate much more against black youth than they do against white youth," 79 percent of black youth, 73 percent of white youth, and 63 percent of Latino youth agreed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when asked whether racism would be eliminated in their lifetime, respondents were pessimistic, with about only one-third in each racial/ethnic category believing the elimination of racism in their lifetime was very or somewhat likely. Interestingly, black respondents, who were most negative when asked about the specific experiences of black youth, were slightly more likely to believe racism would be eliminated in their lifetime, with 33 percent of blacks, 25 percent of whites, and 31 percent of Latino youth stating that it was very or somewhat likely that racism would be eliminated in their lifetime.

Finally, there are two positive notes that should be highlighted as we seek to represent the complexity of political thinking by young people today. First, black and Latino youth registered lower levels of encounters with discrimination than might be imagined. When asked how often they experienced racism because of their race, young blacks most often chose the category "every now and then," with 32 percent of black respondents marking this answer. Among whites, an equal percent declared they had rarely (41 percent) or never (41 percent) been discriminated against be-

cause of their race. Latino respondents demonstrated a pattern similar to whites, with most respondents choosing the answer "rarely" (32 percent) or "never" (36 percent). (The choice of "rarely" or "never" among Latinos may have to do with the fact that we asked about discrimination based on race and not on ethnicity.) Second, a majority of respondents from all racial and ethnic groups agreed that they felt like full and equal citizens with all the rights and protections that other people have, with 60 percent of blacks, 82 percent of whites, and 70 percent of Latino youth agreeing. Of course, we should note the 22-percentage point gap between those black and white youth who feel like full and equal citizens.

The reality of such a monumental racial divide, between whites and blacks in particular, has long been documented in the research of scholars such as Michael Dawson, Lawrence Bobo, Donald Kinder, and Lynn Sanders.[6] These scholars and others have painted a detailed picture of the differences in public opinion among black and white Americans on topics ranging from the role of the state, support for redistributive policies and programs, social issues, and the belief that racism plays a major role in American society. Again and again, the data across studies reveal that black Americans, while generally socially conservative, believe in a more activist state; register higher support for redistributive programs such as welfare and food stamps; and are more likely to indicate that they believe that racism continues to play a major role in limiting the opportunities available to blacks and Latinos.

Given this line of research, it may not seem surprising that young black Americans continue to believe that racism is still a major problem in the country. Moreover, the continuing reality of race and

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racism in structuring the opportunities presented to young people, especially black youth, seems to scream out from the many statistics offered up to highlight the lived experience of marginal youth of color. For example, by now most people know that black youth suffer disproportionately from social crises such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, childhood obesity, incarceration, and unemployment, among other problems. More recently, black youth and their families have also been hit especially hard by the recession. As others have noted, the combination of lost manufacturing jobs, predatory lending practices, unparalleled foreclosures, a shocking drop in property values, and the continued use of discriminatory hiring practices in a jobless recovery has meant that black youth and their families face, not a recession, but "a silent depression" and the loss of any generational progress for young blacks.[7] Thus, given these lived realities, it is hard to imagine that there would not be significant racial and ethnic differences in how young people think about race and their lives more broadly.

However, for many Americans, especially white Americans, the election of Barack Obama marked what they believed to be a major shift in the racial consciousness of the country, with a color-blind framework predicted as rightfully coming to dominate the racial landscape.[8] In the wake of the election, commentators and politicians felt empowered to tell black people, and black youth in particular, that it was now time to stop the "whining" because they had no more excuses. The running dominant narrative – that the country has arrived at a place, in part through the victories of the civil rights movement, where color blindness is the fair way to make decisions, create policy, and distribute resources – helps produce such disparities

in the political thinking of young people today. For while many whites see President Obama's election as the best example of how color blindness works, many black youth, who enthusiastically supported Obama, believe that his election reflects the desperate yearning for change in the midst of political and economic crisis. It was this desire that led whites to vote for change rather than using their votes to preserve the racial order.

In 2008, the country witnessed the largest outpouring of black youth voting during any presidential election. Contrary to the myth that black youth are apolitical, it seems that when presented with a candidate they care deeply about, they will go to the polls. For many journalists and commentators, the large turnout of young people was yet another sign that more political agreement and tolerance existed among our younger voters than we can ever hope to see among older voters. While it is true that young people joined together in force to vote for a new direction as represented by Barack Obama (and against the old path as laid out by the Bush administration), it seems that the meaning of and agenda attached to those votes were different for various racial and ethnic groups of young people. Seven months after the 2008 election, we asked respondents to the MCPCE study, including a significant number of those eighteen to thirty-five years old, if they believed racism was still a major problem. The divide between black and white young people (ages eighteen to thirty-five) was stark: 68 percent of black youth stated that racism remains a major problem, compared to 33 percent of white respondents and 58 percent of Latino respondents (see Table 1). A similar split was evident when we asked if blacks had achieved racial equality. A near majority of whites (48 percent) thought blacks

Table 1
Perspectives on Racism since the Election of President Obama

Respondents by Race/Ethnicity	Racism Remains a Major Problem	Racism Exists but Not a Major Problem	Racism No Longer Exists in Our Society	Racism Never a Major Problem in Society
Black Youth *n*=310	68%	29%	1%	2%
White Youth *n*=226	33%	63%	3%	1%
Latino Youth *n*=440	58%	32%	8%	2%

Source: 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (Wave 2).

had achieved equality, compared to 15 percent of blacks and 39 percent of Latinos (see Table 2).

As we know, the racial landscape is far more expansive than one that accounts for just blacks and whites. When asked if Latinos had achieved racial equality, support for this assertion dropped among whites. In fact, only 29 percent of whites, 16 percent of blacks, and 20 percent of Latinos believed that Latinos had achieved racial equality (see Table 3).

Finally, on the question of whether our respondents felt like full and equal citizens, we found that, in 2008, there remained a substantial split in the level of inclusion black and white young people feel, with 55 percent of young blacks agreeing with the statement that they felt like full and equal citizens, compared to 69 percent of young whites (see Figure 1). This 14-percentage point difference is less than the 23-percentage point gap registered between blacks and whites in the BYP data, but we should remember that respondents to the BYP data were younger (ages fifteen to twen-

ty-five) than the eighteen to thirty-five year olds who participated in the MCPCE study. Furthermore, while a gap continues to exist between young blacks and whites, the most sizable difference in feelings of inclusion was registered among young Latinos and whites, with only 39 percent of young Latinos believing themselves to be full and equal citizens. Undoubtedly, the word *citizen* has a significant bearing on their feeling of not being included in the larger political community. However, their responses are not simply a reflection of their actual legal status as citizens; they also represent the myriad ways in which Latino citizens are perceived as "illegal," resulting in their exclusion from fully lived citizenship.

Like many young people, blacks, whites, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other citizens who turned out to vote on November 4, 2008, the young black people at the heart of this data were generally exuberant over the election of the nation's first African American president. In a February 2009 focus group discussion with

Table 2

Perspectives on Whether Blacks Have Achieved Racial Equality

Respondents by Race/Ethnicity	Have Achieved Racial Equality	Will Soon Achieve Racial Equality	Will Not Achieve Racial Equality in Your Lifetime	Will Never Achieve Racial Equality
Black Youth *n*=303	15%	47%	23%	14%
White Youth *n*=225	48%	30%	16%	6%
Latino Youth *n*=432	39%	34%	22%	6%

Source : 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (Wave 2).

Table 3

Perspectives on Whether Latinos Have Achieved Racial Equality

Respondents by Race/Ethnicity	Have Achieved Racial Equality	Will Soon Achieve Racial Equality	Will Not Achieve Racial Equality in Your Lifetime	Will Never Achieve Racial Equality
Black Youth *n*=295	16%	51%	25%	9%
White Youth *n*=226	29%	41%	24%	6%
Latino Youth *n*=432	20%	51%	22%	7%

Source : 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (Wave 2).

young blacks ages eighteen to twenty-four living in Chicago, participants expressed their pride in the country having just elected Barack Obama. At the same time that they expressed great pride and hope in Obama, they also made it clear that no one politician – not even the president – would be able to change drastically the lives of young black Americans. They stated that for their lives to improve, a number of entities would have to change : the government, employers, teachers, parents, and young people themselves. Interestingly, in both our survey
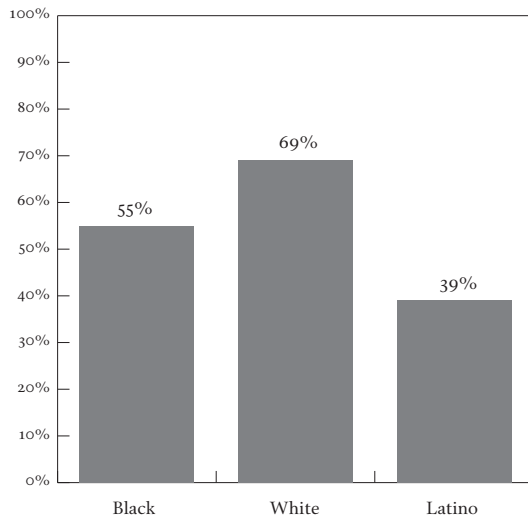
Black respondents: *n*=304; white respondents: *n*=231; Latino respondents: *n*=451.
Source: 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (Wave 2).

data and our focus group responses, black youth conveyed their belief that change, in general, and in the racial landscape, in particular, is possible, but not directed by one person. Even given their very realistic assessment of the impact of the 2008 election on their lives and the need for change among many entities, seven months after the election, young blacks were more likely than young whites to believe that there had been "big change" or "some change" in the country since President Obama took office (see Table 4).

Although young black Americans believe in the change promoted by President Obama, they also seem to subscribe to a vision of American politics in which collectives of concerned individuals and groups produce change. During a focus group with young people in Chicago, one young woman stated that the election of President Obama "told us American people that the power is in our hands and however you want this country ran we

pretty much can decide that. I think everyone realized that and saw it for themselves this time around." Another young person in the same focus group went on to explain, "It's not good enough if one guy makes it. That's not good for everybody in general, so everyone, if all of us can come out of it, then we can say we've done something to make change happen. But for one man to come out of it, that's not good enough. In fact, that's not doing anything at all."

In the many articles written about the generational shift in attitudes on social issues, such as gay marriage or even race, few, if any, take the time to disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity to determine whether there might be divergent trends among the many groups comprising "youth." When researchers disaggregate their data (that is, if they have sampled enough people of color to pursue statistical analysis of different racial and

Table 4
Change since President Obama Took Office

Respondents by Race/Ethnicity	Big Change	Some Change	Very Little Change	No Change
Black Youth *n*=297	18%	64%	15%	4%
White Youth *n*=229	12%	45%	34%	10%
Latino Youth *n*=429	15%	52%	29%	4%

Source: 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (Wave 2).

ethnic groups) they often find that there are significant differences in how young people from the various racial and ethnic groups that make up the American populace think about not only same-sex marriage and abortion, but also race. If opinion leaders continue to make policy and write articles with data assuming that the ideas of white youth represent the attitudes of all young people, they are in for a rude awakening.

As the demographics of the country continue to move from one dominated – in population and power – by whites to one increasingly populated by individuals of color, our analyses must start paying attention to the ideas, attitudes, and actions of young people of color. In the case of sensitive social issues such as abortion, sex, and homosexuality, black youth signal, at best, a position of limited tolerance. In the realm of race, the experience of black youth and, at times, Latino youth is that race still figures prominently in their lives, shaping where they can live, if and where they work, and how state authorities, such as the police, treat them. For these young people, racism still blocks their access to full citizenship, in particular the psychological aspects of believing that one belongs to and is valued in the larger political community.

Far from signaling a significant change in racial politics that can be sustained in some sectors of the country, Obama's election has unleashed an unbridled racism that has not been witnessed in such regularity for some time. Whites who have been affected by layoffs and the failing economy, the escalating cost of health care, the bottoming out of the housing market, and the decline in our public schools have been motivated by radio and talk show hosts to rebel and once again to blame black people, immigrants, and, of course, our first black president for their declining predicament. In response, they have held Tea Party and 9-12 rallies where President Obama has been demeaned and depicted as "other," an unspeakable evil on par with Hitler.

As many traditional journalists and pundits have claimed, vilification of a

sitting president is part of the vitriol we call American politics. But others, such as former President Carter, have suggested that what we are witnessing in the backlash against President Obama is the continuing racist attitudes and behaviors of some whites. These individuals instinctively focus on racial explanations for their difficulties instead of pointing to capitalist greed and neoliberal policies that have dismantled many of the protections middle- and working-class people depend on. In the midst of such a backlash, both structurally and symbolically, it is not surprising that many black youth continue to believe and assert that racism remains a major problem for the country and in their lives. What I hope this essay has made clear is that waiting for the generational shift will not be enough to change the diverging experiences and perceptions of young people. We must pay attention to existing racial and ethnic differences that are evident among the millennial generation today.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Paul Steinhauser, "CNN Poll: Generations Disagree on Same-sex Marriage," CNN.com, May 4, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/05/04/samesex.marriage.poll/index.html?iref=mpstoryview.

[2] Chuck Raash, "Generations Reshape Gay Marriage Debate," *USA Today*, May 21, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/raasch/2009-05-21-new-politics_N.htm.

[3] Matt Bai, "Beneath Divides Seemingly about Race Are Generational Fault Lines," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/us/politics/18bai.html.

[4] Data from the BYP were collected from July 2005 to November 2005. There were 1,590 total respondents to the survey, ages fifteen to twenty-five, including an oversample of blacks. The BYP research team developed and tested the questionnaire. The survey was administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago under the title of "Youth Culture Survey." For more information on the survey and methodology or to download the data, see http://www.blackyouthproject.com.

[5] Panel data from the MCPCE project are drawn from a random sample of the population of households in the United States. The survey sample for this study is a nationally representative panel survey that includes oversamples of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and young people ages eighteen to thirty-five. One-third of the Latino respondents came from Spanish language–dominant homes who received the questionnaire in Spanish. The questionnaire was administered through Knowledge Networks. For more information on the survey and methodology or to download the data, see http://www.2008andbeyond.com.

[6] Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 1994; Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1996; Lawrence Bobo, "Whites' Opposition to Busing: Symbolic Racism or Realistic Group Conflict?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45 (1983): 1196–1210.

[7] Kathy Bergen, "African-Americans Hit Inordinately Hard by Recession: Staggering High Unemployment among Black Middle Class Wipes Out a Generation of Wealth," *Chicago Tribune*, November 6, 2009, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-11-06/news/0911050858_1_african-americans-recession-unemployment.

[8] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).