

## Social Changes That Affected the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: A Sociological Analysis

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Enthralled by Barack Obama's charisma and eloquence and acutely aware this was an election of historic proportions, hundreds of millions of people worldwide watched the election returns on November 8, 2008, to learn if the first serious nonwhite presidential candidate in U.S. history would succeed. Groups gathered at thousands of college campuses, political campaign sites, and other public places—as well as tens of millions of individuals in their homes, and also many other millions throughout the world—followed the sequential stream of announcements.

As the hours passed and polling places closed in each of the nation's four time zones, the staggered results and projected winner for each state elicited shouts and cheers at these many sites. Finally, when Obama achieved the necessary 270 electoral votes to be declared officially as the winner, the scene among the crowds was the same all over. People cheered, screamed, and hugged whoever was nearby. Many cried, standing in disbelief that their dream had been achieved and a new era was dawning. Chants of the campaign slogan, "Yes we can," erupted, often followed by the singing of the national anthem. On Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, and in the streets of Washington, DC and elsewhere, people sang, danced, blew horns, and celebrated. That same night, when President-Elect Obama addressed nearly 200,000 supporters in Chicago's Grant Park, television cameras captured the jubilation of the crowd as well as its diversity—Asian, black, Hispanic and white, young and old—as he articulated the importance of this election:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen, by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different, that their voices could be that difference.

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled—Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states.

We are, and always will be, the United States of America.

It's the answer that led those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve, to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment, change has come to America.<sup>1</sup>

Next morning newspapers all over the world devoted their front pages to the news. "Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory" shouted *The New York Times*.<sup>2</sup> "In Our Lifetime: Obama Sweeps to Victory, Makes History as First Black President," declared *The Anniston Star*, a home-owned newspaper in Alabama (a state Obama did not win and a part of the Deep South

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<sup>1</sup> "Remarks of President-Elect Barack Obama" (2008), [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/11/04/remarks\\_of\\_presidenelect\\_bara.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/11/04/remarks_of_presidenelect_bara.php), read on the WWW on August 9, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Nagourney, Adam (2008), "Obama: Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory," *The New York Times*, November 5, p. A1.

where desegregation and civil rights protection began only 50 years ago).<sup>3</sup> England's *The Sun* reported:

Obama mania swept the world yesterday—with millions dancing in the streets. From Shanghai to Madrid, Lagos to Bogota, crowds chanted the next U.S. President's name. Bushmen in Africa's Kalahari prepared cattle for slaughter in his honour. Fireworks lit up the sky in Singapore. As leaders around the globe sent messages of congratulations, one reveler in Germany wept, "In my lifetime the world's people have never felt closer."<sup>4</sup>

Those words no doubt help explain the euphoria that engulfed so many about the symbolic significance of Obama's victory. In an unprecedented action, the people of a white-majority nation had elected a nonwhite as their national leader. That this happened in a country where most African Americans had been enslaved 150 years earlier, and where most rural black Southerners were not even allowed to vote as late as the 1960s, made the results even more profound. Some optimistically (and incorrectly) spoke of a "post-racial America," one in which race relations had been transformed. Although that view quickly proved wishful thinking only, the fact remained that many white Americans had turned their backs on centuries of widespread racial prejudice and discrimination to elect a black man. Without question, a combination of factors contributed to Obama's election, not least of which were the economic crisis and voter disenchantment with the domestic and foreign policies of the incumbent Bush administration.

Preceding those contemporary elements, however, were a set of socio-cultural changes. Long before a volcano erupts and dazzles onlookers with its awe-inspiring, fiery display, a set of pre-existing conditions beneath the surface must first come together for that event to occur. In a similar vein, when a tsunami strikes, it often does so far from the epicenter of an earthquake that unleashed its powerful force. In both instances many people see and understand only the event itself, not the elements that allowed it to happen. Similarly, the election of President Barack Obama required the right set of social conditions to enable that historic event to occur. Charles Dickens once wrote, "Change begets change."<sup>5</sup> To understand fully the results of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, then, we must examine those social forces that affected attitudes, perceptions, and receptivity to different others.

### **Social Changes since the 1960s**

The evolution of the United States from a racially stratified society in which most blacks were disenfranchised from the political process into a country where a black man became president is a long, complex story that could easily fill a book. In this essay, we will highlight seven important categories of actions, decisions, events, and programs that individually and collectively enhanced race relations by creating more equal opportunities that improved both the quality of life for minorities and allowed many to enter the societal mainstream. These seven areas are affirmative action, civil rights legislation, Supreme Court decisions, a lowered voting age, the rise of online politics, multicultural education, and changing demographics.

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<sup>3</sup> "In Our Lifetime: Obama Sweeps to Victory, Makes History as First Black President" (2010), *The Aniston Star*, November 5, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Wheeler, Virginia, Lynsey Haywood, and Andy Crick (2008), "Planet Obama," *The Sun* (England), November 5, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (New York: General Books LLC, 2010), p. 291. Originally published in 1844.

## **Affirmative Action**

Initiated through presidential directives (Executive Order 10925 by John F. Kennedy in 1961 and Executive Order 11246 by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965), affirmative action has had a controversial and tumultuous history. Policies subsequently enacted, at both the state and federal levels, primarily focused on education and jobs, requiring schools and employers to take active measures to ensure that blacks and other minorities enjoyed the same opportunities as whites in college admissions, in financial aid and scholarships, and in hiring, promotions, and salary increases in the workplace.

From the outset, affirmative action was envisioned as a temporary remedy that would end once there was a "level playing field" for all Americans. A half-century later, it is still in effect at the federal level and in most states. Three of the four largest states (California, Florida, and Texas), however, have rescinded affirmative action for the purpose of achieving racial and ethnic equality, and a few recent Supreme Court rulings, while still preserving this policy, have nonetheless curtailed the extent of race-conscious remedies.<sup>6</sup>

Research on the impact of affirmative-action programs offers compelling evidence that they do increase employment, college enrollments, and minority contracts, with opportunities for white males decreasing only slightly. Women appear to have benefited the most, although many minority males have also experienced upward mobility, and no significant negative effect of productivity or performance occurred in organizations where such programs existed.<sup>7</sup>

## **Civil Rights Legislation**

After years of struggle—marked by boycotts, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, freedom rides, and other forms of protest—activists saw their goals achieved with passage of civil rights legislation. It may have taken years for their ripple effects to be fully realized, but the federal laws passed in 1964, 1965, and 1968 dramatically changed the quality of life for African Americans, as well as other minority groups.

The landmark 1964 legislation outlawed racial segregation by prohibiting discrimination in the government, public facilities (including schools), and the workplace. To ensure compliance of the latter, it established a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, providing the federal government with powers to enforce desegregation. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited the denial or restriction of the right to vote and forbid discriminatory voting practices nationwide. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing.

These laws—designed to create a more inclusive society by outlawing discrimination in all public institutions and places, in education, in hiring and promotions, in housing and in voting—made it possible for a new generation of nonwhites to experience more life choices than their parents. Not all minority group members benefited from the new openness, but a significant number did, reaching higher educational attainment levels and thus entry into the middle class. As measured by various socio-economic indicators to be detailed later in this paper, the fortunes of many, but not all, African Americans, definitely improved since the 1960s.

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<sup>6</sup> See Anderson, Terry H. (2005), *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>7</sup> Kellough, J. Edward (2006), *Understanding Affirmative Action: Politics, Discrimination, and the Search for Justice* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press), pp. 132-138.

Obama's election was the culmination of the goals sought in the civil rights movement for equal treatment and the right to vote. The sacrifices and struggles of so many civil rights activists, many who risked their lives and some who lost theirs, were the legacy that Obama inherited. To understand fully those spontaneous and unrestrained expressions of joy and tears over the election results is to recognize the powerful symbolism of that transformative event.

## Supreme Court Decisions

From the mid-twentieth-century onward, the U.S. Supreme Court has generally endorsed affirmative action programs and civil rights laws. Its landmark ruling in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, declared unconstitutional the "separate but equal" doctrine, beginning the reversal of racial segregation in schools. In *Heart of Atlanta Motel, Inc. v. United States* (1964), it upheld the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It struck another blow for equal rights in its *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) by ruling that the prohibition of interracial marriage was unconstitutional. The *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) upheld affirmative action but not if it were unfairly applied and led to reverse discrimination.

More recent decisions, however, reflect a more conservative Court unwilling to endorse race-conscious actions. In 2006, it ruled (5-4) as unconstitutional the programs in Seattle and Louisville, Kentucky, that used race in assigning students to schools to maintain diversity. In 2009, another 5-4 decision declared as unconstitutional the discarding by the city of New Haven of lieutenant and captain exams because only a few minority firefighters qualified.

The Supreme Court justices have been divided in their opinions in most affirmative action cases, with almost all determined by a 5-4 vote (the 1964 ruling was unanimous). The split votes partly reflect opposing political ideologies but also result from the complexities surrounding this issue. Consequently, the Court usually focused on narrow aspects of policy rather than issuing broader rulings. Despite a few rulings limiting the scope of affirmative action, a half-century of court decisions upholding policies and laws designed to provide equal opportunity for all U.S. citizens helped to expand the societal mainstream for previously excluded minority Americans.

## Voting Age

The Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1971 lowered the minimum voting age then existing in most states from 21 to 18. One year later, young Americans (defined as ages 18 to 29), turned out in record numbers, energized by the anti-Vietnam War campaign of George McGovern (who lost to Richard Nixon by the widest margin in any U.S. presidential election—nearly 18 million votes). Their 55 percent turnout was a high-water mark, as a steady decline continued thereafter until the 1992 election of President William Clinton, when an estimated 50 percent voted. A drop to 35 percent in Clinton's re-election of 1996, an increase to 40 percent in the hotly-contested 2000 campaign, and a 49 percent youth turnout in 2004 preceded the historic 2008 election.<sup>8</sup> However, in the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential elections, voters in the youngest cohort, those ages 18 to 20, were the least likely to show up at the polls, followed by the 21 to 24 age bracket.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Barr, Kathleen (2008), "Is This Really the Year of the Youth Vote?", *Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 10, p. 23; Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, "Youth Voter Turnout 1992 to 2004: Estimates from Exit Polls" (2005), [www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_Exit\\_Polls.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Exit_Polls.pdf), read on the WWW on July 30, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Edmonds, Tom (2008), "Time to Rock the Vote Myth", *Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 10, p. 27.

Such limited participation by youth in the electoral process is not confined to the United States. Throughout Western Europe, for example, electoral participation among young adults has been constantly decreasing.<sup>10</sup> Further, more than in any other age group, greater instability exists between the intention of voting and actual voting behavior.<sup>11</sup> Skepticism of the way the political system operates, rather than apathy, appears to be a key explanation, as revealed in a study of the registered young people in England, where only 37 percent of young people voted in the 2005 British General Election.<sup>12</sup>

Despite past patterns of limited young adult involvement in politics, pundits predicted that the 2008 U.S. youth vote would have an historic impact. The primaries offered supporting evidence. In the primaries and caucuses in early 2008, the youth turnout doubled, tripled and even quadrupled (depending on the state) compared to other primaries. Obama owed his primary victory in Iowa, one of the first states to vote, to the youth vote which gave his campaign momentum. Turnout among young adults went up in nearly every single primary or caucus, and increased overall by 103 percent compared to turnout in the 2000 and 2004 primary seasons.<sup>13</sup>

In the 2008 general election, the trend continued, with the second largest youth voter turnout in U.S. history. As many as 24 million young Americans voted, nearly matching the 55 percent record turnout in 1972. Significantly, 68 percent of them voted for Barack Obama, the highest-ever proportion for a presidential candidate in this age group. Analysts believe the youth vote turned states that Obama would have lost or barely won into more comfortable margins of victory. Importantly, it was not just voter turnout but also the passionate involvement of many young people throughout the entire campaign that played a role in an Obama triumph.<sup>14</sup>

## Online Politics

Occurring in the first decade of the 21st century was the rapid expansion of the online information environment that brought a new dimension to the political scene. This was significant because, with younger citizens in the vanguard of new developments on the web and typically the most devoted users of communication and information technologies, they emerged as a significant proportion of Internet users seeking political information online. However, access to political websites does not in itself necessarily translate into political participation. Researchers have found some association between the two in such diverse locales as Belgium, Germany, Quebec, and the United States, but not a causal relationship. Taking political action is more heavily dependent on the influences of family, school, social networking among friends, socio-structural and socio-economic conditions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kestila-Kekkonen, Elina (2009), "Anti-Party Sentiment among Young Adults," *Young*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 145-165.

<sup>11</sup> Hooghe, Marc, and Britt Wilkenfeld (2008), "The Stability of Political Attitudes and Behaviors across Adolescence and Early Adulthood: A Comparison of Survey Data on Adolescents and Young Adults in Eight Countries," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 155-167.

<sup>12</sup> Henn, Matt, Mark Weinstein, and Sarah Hodgkinson (2007), "Social Capital and Political Participation: Understanding the Dynamics of Young People's Political Disengagement in Contemporary Britain," *Social Policy and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 467-479.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Dahl, Melissa (2008), "Youth Vote May Have Been Key in Obama's Win", [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27525497/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27525497/), read on the WWW on July 30, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Quintelier, Ellen, and Sara Vissers (2008), "The Effect of Internet Use on Political Participation: An Analysis of Survey Results for 16-Year-Olds in Belgium," *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 411-427; Pfaff, Nicolle (2009), "Youth Culture as a Context of Political Learning," *Young*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 167-189; Dostie-

One website, Rock the Vote, began in 1992, and used pop music stars to entice young people to get involved in the political process. In its peak year, 2004, the organization had more than 1.2 million downloads in its online voter registration drive.<sup>16</sup> As a result of their efforts and those of other social networking, in that year's presidential election, 4.3 million more 18- to 29-year-olds voted than in 2000, an increase nearly three times as much as for adults of all ages.<sup>17</sup>

Surprisingly, a content and hyperlink analysis of the 2002 and 2004 U.S. elections revealed that many mainstream politicians were reluctant to use the Internet to speak directly to young people. There was also an underdevelopment of links between youth political websites and the wider web of political information.<sup>18</sup> That would not be the case in 2008, partly because Rock the Vote political director Hans Riemer left that organization to become the youth director for Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign in what became "the first Internet election."

A study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism examined the extensive use of the Web made by both Senators John McCain and Barack Obama for organizing, fund-raising, networking, and announcing news. Obama's Website, [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com), made it much easier for supporters to take action. They could receive up-to-the-minute campaign news, pick up talking points, download campaign posters and flyers, make computer-assisted phone calls to undecided voters in swing states, and map out door-to-door canvassing operations in their area. Aside from any differences in design and functionality, the Obama website attracted many more users than McCain's site. According to Hitwise, an Internet usage research company, the Obama website averaged a 72 percent share of visits to the two presidential websites compared to 28 percent for McCain's. Even after enhancements in the McCain website, Obama had more MySpace friends by a nearly 6-to-1 margin, more Facebook supporters by more than a 5-to-1 margin, twice as many videos posted to his official YouTube channel, and more YouTube channel subscribers, by an 11-to-1 margin.<sup>19</sup>

## Multicultural Education

Another factor was the role played by multicultural education, the seeds of which were first planted during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In response to pressure from African American and women activists, curricular reform in K-12 schools, universities and other educational institutions took place to address their concerns and those of other historically marginalized groups. By the late twentieth century, reform efforts expanded to create a more inclusive school environment by developing new approaches and models of learning, as well as addressing shortcomings in the educational system in terms of diverse hiring, equitable funding, classroom climate, and other inequities. The long-range goals included lowering the dropout rate

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Goulet, Eugenie (2009), "Social Networks and the Development of Political Interest," *Journal of Youth Studies* Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 405-421; Baumgartner, Jody C., and Jonathan S. Morris (2010), "MyFaceTube Politics: Social Networking Web Sites and Political Engagement of Young Adults," *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 24-44.

<sup>16</sup> "History of Rock the Vote" (2010), <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/>, read on the WWW on July 30, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Barr, Kathleen, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Xenos, Michael, and W. Lance Bennett (2007), "The Disconnection in Online Politics: The Youth Political Web Sphere and US Election Sites, 2002-2004," *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 443-464.

<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, "McCain vs. Obama on the Web," [www.journalism.org/node/12772](http://www.journalism.org/node/12772), read on the WWW on July 31, 2010.

and enabling more minority students to graduate to increase their likelihood of entering the societal mainstream.<sup>20</sup>

Soon, sufficient progress was made to enable more minority students to achieve higher educational attainment than before, as we will detail shortly. This improvement in turn led to greater numbers of white and nonwhites interacting with one another in colleges and in higher-status jobs. These increased interaction patterns resulted in a reduced social distance between racially different others, which we will also detail shortly. Perhaps as a consequence of such exposure, more of the voting public in 2008 was receptive to people of color than ever before.

## Changing Demographics

Each successive presidential election has found U.S. society more culturally, ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse than its predecessor, driven primarily by high immigration (more than 66 million newcomers have arrived since 1980).<sup>21</sup> In that year, 39 percent of the nation's foreign-born population was from Europe, compared to 52 percent from Asia or Latin America.<sup>22</sup> By 2007, only 13 percent of the foreign-born population was born in Europe, while 54 percent were born in Latin America and 27 percent were born in Asia. As a consequence, and spurred further by a higher birth rate among the foreign-born than among the native-born, the proportion of the total population that was non-Hispanic white dropped from 83 percent in 1970 to 66 percent in 2007.<sup>23</sup>

U.S. citizenship laws allow immigrants to become citizens after a five-year residency (three years for the spouse of a U.S. citizen). Not all immigrants choose to become citizens (and thus eligible to vote) and many have not yet reached voting age or fulfilled the residency requirement. It is impressive, though, that about 12.5 million did become naturalized citizens between 1980 and 2008.<sup>24</sup> Of course, not everyone who becomes a citizen registers to vote and not everyone who registers actually votes. Among this foreign-born cohort, voter participation generally increases with greater length of residence, and education level and social class are important variables.<sup>25</sup> When targeted voter mobilization drives occur, and even more so in a politically-charged environment when individuals feel strongly about the political issues at hand (both of which were the case in 2008), then Latinos and other naturalized citizens are more likely to vote.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Banks, James A. (2010), *Multicultural Education* (New York: Routledge); Gollnick, Donna M., Phillip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall).

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 2.

<sup>22</sup> Perez, Anthony Daniel, and Charles Hirschman. (2009), "The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the U.S. Population: Emerging American Identities," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 35, No.1, p.51.

<sup>23</sup> Grieco, Elizabeth M. (2010), "Race and Hispanic Origin of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2007," *American Community Survey Reports*, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS-11, pp. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2009), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2008* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), Table 20.

<sup>25</sup> LaFountain, Courtney, and Noel Johnson (2009), "How Hot Is the Melting Pot? Foreign-Born Participation in U.S. Elections," [www.allacademic.com/meta/p362641\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p362641_index.html), read on August 14, 2010; Bass, Loretta E., and Lynne M. Casper (2001), "Differences in Registering and Voting between Native-born and Naturalized Americans," *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp. 483-511.

<sup>26</sup> Barreto, Matt A. (2005), "Latino Immigrants at the Polls: Foreign-born Turnout in the 2002 Election," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 79-86; Pantoja, Adrian D., Ricardo Ramirez, and Gary M. Sigura (2001), "Citizens by Choice, Voters by Necessity: Patterns in Political Mobilization by Naturalized Latinos," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 729-750.

## Changing Socio-economic Indicators

The innovations, policy implementations, and other developments discussed in the previous section resulted in numerous changes in the quality of life for U.S. minorities that, in 2008, would influence both minority voter turnout and mainstream acceptance of a nontraditional presidential candidate. By comparing socio-economic data on educational attainment, occupational distribution, poverty levels, and political office holding over a two-generational time span, we can determine what progress occurred in those areas.

### Education

Historically, black educational attainment has lagged seriously behind white Americans. As recently as 1980, more than 1 in 4 black males and 1 in 5 black females did not graduate from high school, proportions significantly greater than for their white counterparts. By 2008, though, dramatic declines in the high school dropout rate brought both improvement and near-parity, when controlled for race and gender. Among college graduates, approximately 1 in 12 black males and females graduated from college in 1980; by 2008, about 1 in 5 became college graduates. This more than doubling advance, though, still left a significant gap between the numbers of black and white college graduates (see Table 1). Even so, this increase enabled more blacks to enter better-paying jobs and improve their quality of life.

**Table 1: Educational Attainment by Race and Gender, 1980 and 2008, by Percent<sup>27</sup>**

	<b>Black Males</b>	<b>White Males</b>	<b>Black Females</b>	<b>White Females</b>
H.S. Dropouts in 1980	26.0	15.7	21.5	13.2
H.S. Dropouts in 2008	10.0	11.7	10.3	8.3
College Graduates in 1980	8.4	21.3	8.3	13.3
College Graduates in 2008	18.7	30.5	20.4	29.1

### Occupation

As educational attainment rose following the civil rights struggle, a new black middle class came of age through its ability to secure better-status and better-paying jobs.<sup>28</sup> By 2008, more than 40 percent of black males and nearly two-thirds of black females were in middle-class jobs (see Table 2). Although a significant disparity remained between blacks and whites in middle-class occupations, this distribution constituted blacks' best-ever representation.

**Table 2: Occupational Distribution in 2008 by Percent<sup>29</sup>**

<b>Occupational Field</b>	<b>Black Males</b>	<b>White Males</b>	<b>Black Females</b>	<b>White Females</b>
Management and Professions	21.9	37.6	31.3	43.3
Sales and Office Occupations	18.4	17.6	32.1	34.1
Service Occupations	20.8	11.1	27.2	17.0
Construction, Extraction, Repair, Maintenance	12.5	16.1	0.6	0.6
Production, Transportation, Moving	25.9	16.8	7.7	4.7
Farming, Fishing, Forestry	0.5	0.8	0.1	0.2

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census of the Population 1980*, Summary File 3, and *Current Population Survey, Educational Attainment in the United States: 2008*, Table 1.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Davis, Theodore F., Jr. (2010), *Black Politics Today: The Era of Socio-economic Transition* (New York: Routledge).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Table 9.

## Poverty

Comparative statistics on poverty levels certainly are criteria of the economic well being of a minority group. Table 3 shows how improved educational attainment and jobs helped to facilitate some decline in poverty among blacks. Although obvious disparity remains, with far too many black families mired in poverty (partly the result of the impact of the 2008 recession on jobs and income), some improvement nevertheless occurred.

**Table 3: Families in Poverty by Percent**<sup>30</sup>

Families	1990	2008
Black	31.0	22.0
White	7.0	6.2

Social class status matters when it comes to voter participation. The lower one's social class, the less likely one is to vote.<sup>31</sup> Such a reality is not confined to the United States. For example, Caínzos and Voces (2010), using data from the European Social Survey on 20 European countries, found a significant and substantively meaningful association between class and political action in most European countries.<sup>32</sup> As the 2008 U.S. election neared, the lower black poverty level among blacks increased the likelihood of their registering and voting. A black may have been running for president, but many black poor would not be voting. However, their better-off racial counterparts would cast their ballots in far greater proportions.

## Black Elected Officials

President Obama may be the first person of color to win a U.S. national election, but his achievement stands atop the steadily growing numbers of African Americans who have been elected to local, regional, and state positions in recent decades. Once limited to winning elected office only within mostly black voting districts, African Americans have increasingly run successful campaigns in other venues as well. Table 4 displays their steady rise in holding elective office. The 1980 and 2001 data are official statistics and the 2008 statistics are the author's extrapolations from the annually changing data between 1980 and 2001. As such, they should not be viewed as exact numbers, but only as possible ones.

**Table 4: Black Elected Officials, in Millions**<sup>33</sup>

Office	1980	2001	2008 Est.
Education	1.2	1.9	2.1
Law Enforcement	0.5	1.0	1.2
City/County	2.8	5.5	6.4
U.S. and State Legislators	0.3	0.6	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>10.5</b>

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, 2008, Table 13.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, King, Marvin (2010), "The Misrepresentation of the Black Poor," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 835-850.

<sup>32</sup> Caínzos, Miguel, and Carmen Voces (2010), "Class Inequalities in Political Participation and the 'Death of Class' Debate," *International Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 383-418.

<sup>33</sup> Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, *Black Elected Officials: A Statistical Summary*, [www.jointcenter.org/publications\\_recent\\_publications/black\\_elected\\_officials](http://www.jointcenter.org/publications_recent_publications/black_elected_officials), read on the WWW on August 5, 2010.

Education officials are those elected to local boards of education, college boards, and state education agencies. Law enforcement officials are voter-elected judges, magistrates, constables, marshals, and sheriffs. The third category consists of county councilmen and commissioners, regional officials, municipal mayors, deputy mayors, and councilmen. The fourth category refers to the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, state legislatures, and governors.

The greater representation of African Americans in all levels of elective office over the years depicts more than just their growing political power. It also suggests the possibility that this more widespread black political leadership in the years preceding the 2008 presidential election made it possible for many whites to accept and feel comfortable about having black political leaders. Although such a mindset was not universally shared nor did it necessarily translate to a nationwide inclination, like all of the socio-economic indicators discussed in this section, it offers a partial glimpse into changing American attitudes.

### **Changing Attitudes**

Although it is certainly true that Obama's charisma, public desire for change due to disenchantment with the Bush administration, and more effective use of Internet campaigning by the Obama team were all highly important factors in the election outcome, it is also true that the aforementioned social forces caused a ripple effect of cultural changes that influenced attitudes, perceptions, and receptivity to different others. As the following paragraphs detail further, conditions were right for a non-white male to get elected to the nation's highest office.

### **Reduced Social Distance**

The social distance scale—created by U.S. sociologist Emory Bogardus to measure the degree of closeness or remoteness that individuals prefer in their interactions with members of other groups—has been used frequently ever since by other social scientists. Those research findings provide a social distance ranking of 30 racial and ethnic groups, so that the six national studies conducted between 1926 and 2001 comprise longitudinal data for a comparison of changing attitudes. In particular, the two most recent ones (1977 and 2001) are particularly helpful in comparing the views of the last two generations of Americans who lived through the aforementioned social changes.<sup>34</sup>

Despite some differences in the list of groups included, the two studies remained reasonably similar to allow for some comparisons. In the 2001 study, the mean score of the social distance between African Americans and the rest of society impressively declined, reflecting a greater willingness of respondents to accept their marriage into one's own family, or as close friends, or as neighbors. Data analysis showed part of that improvement in social acceptance came from the responses of Hispanics, who can be of any race and who constituted a higher proportion in the 2001 study (8.6 percent) than the one in 1977 (0 percent reported). However, an increased proportion of non-Hispanic white Americans also showed a higher level of social acceptance for black Americans.<sup>35</sup> This reduction in social distance between blacks and whites no doubt augmented the election viability of Obama's candidacy.

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<sup>34</sup> Owen, Carolyn A., Howard A. Eisner, and Thomas R. McFaul (1981), "A Half-Century of Social Distance Research: National Replication of the Bogardus Studies," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 66, pp. 80-98; Parrillo, Vincent N., and Christopher Donoghue (2005), "Updating the Bogardus Social Distance Studies: A New National Survey," *The Social Science Journal*, Vol. 42, pp. 257-271.

<sup>35</sup> Parrillo and Donoghue, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-266.

## Public Opinion Polls

In October 2007—10 months before the Democratic National Convention would nominate Obama as its presidential candidate—two-thirds of whites believed that race relations would get better (see Table 5). That optimistic hope, perhaps, was a hint at whites’ later receptivity to a nonwhite presidential candidate. Not coincidentally, nearly one year into the Obama presidency in December 2009, whites’ positive views increased another six percent.

**Table 5: “Do you think race relations in this country will ever get better than they are, or don’t you think so?”<sup>36</sup>**

	Will Get Better	Don’t Think So	Unsure
<b>October 2007</b>			
Whites	66%	33%	1%
Blacks	49%	51%	-
Total	62%	36%	2%
<b>December 2009</b>			
Whites	72%	27%	1%
Blacks	75%	24%	1%
Total	71%	28%	1%

In contrast, blacks were nearly evenly divided in 2007 as to whether or not race relations would improve. By the end of 2009, however, a dramatic change in attitudes occurred, as 3 of 4 blacks expressed a positive opinion about race relations improving. This would be the first time that blacks were more optimistic than whites on this subject.

In the month that President Obama took office, more than half (56 percent) of blacks and three-fourths of whites (76 percent) thought that blacks had achieved or would soon achieve racial equality. Unfortunately, Obama began his term in the midst of a serious economic crisis and no president can perform miracles. The euphoria and unrealistic expectations at the beginning of an Obama presidency gave way to such harsh realities as continuing high unemployment one year later. White optimism remained strong (40 percent believed racial equality existed), but black optimism plummeted, going from 20 to 11 percent of those believing racial equality existed. Their pessimism also increased, with the belief that racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetime jumping from 23 percent to 32 percent (see Table 6).

**Table 6: “Do you think blacks have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime, or will never achieve racial equality?”<sup>37</sup>**

	Have Achieved	Will Soon Achieve	Won’t Achieve in Lifetime	Will Never Achieve	Unsure
<b>January 2009</b>					
Blacks	20%	36%	23%	18%	3%
Whites	38%	38%	17%	5%	3%
Total	35%	38%	17%	6%	3%
<b>January 2010</b>					
Blacks	11%	38%	32%	17%	3%
Whites	40%	31%	19%	7%	4%
Total	37%	31%	19%	8%	4%

<sup>36</sup> CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Polls, [www.pollingreport.com/race.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm), read on the WWW on August 15, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> ABC News/Washington Post Polls, *loc. cit.*

Looking at the current socio-economic data, it is easy to understand this change of heart. One-fourth of all blacks still live in poverty. Moreover, blacks constitute a disproportionate number of all workers who lacked formal education and job skills, and so they were among the workers hardest hit by widespread layoffs during the deepening recession on Obama's watch. Revenue declines in charitable donations forced drastic cuts in food pantries and homeless shelters. Decreased income- and property-tax revenues caused states and municipalities to slash spending for public education, housing, and transportation. Many Americans, including blacks, found themselves worse off than before Obama became president.

### Conclusion

Most historians agree this election was precedent-setting, inspiring, and one that rebuffed cynics who deemed it impossible for racial prejudices to be overcome on such a grand scale. We are years away, however, from knowing if the election of the first black U.S. president was a defining moment in the evolution of race relations in America or just a symbolic footnote. The election of an African American to the presidency does not mean it could happen again in the near future. After all, John F. Kennedy was the first Catholic to win election to the presidency in 1960, and many at the time considered his election symbolic of the end to religious prejudice. Yet, 50 years later he remains the only Catholic U.S. president so far.

In retrospect, Kennedy's Catholicism was a secondary story line that was overshadowed by his youth, charisma, and the idealistic hope he engendered in the majority of Americans. Similarly, we may learn that Obama's race was incidental in comparison to the political and economic crises. Perhaps those conditions—combined with his charisma and the effectiveness of enthusiastic supporters using modern technology to network, raise funds, and get out the vote—channeled voter discontent so successfully. Ironically, just as public dissatisfaction in 2008 may have influenced the outcome in 2008, so too may it affect the election results in 2012. Obama's re-election is by no means assured. At this writing, his approval rating is low (27 percent strongly approved and 44 percent strongly disapproved on August 27, 2010).<sup>38</sup>

And yet, whether or not Obama gets re-elected is less important than the fact that, in 2008, he *was* elected. Analysts may argue whether or not "race" had anything to do with that election but even the fact that such a discussion occurs is significant in itself. Had it not been for all the social changes in the past five decades, not only would he not have been elected, but even his candidacy would not have been possible. Whatever the final judgment will be on the merits of the Obama presidency itself, its very existence once could not even be imagined, and the election that produced it could never have been so inspiring an event worldwide. Dickens was right; change does beget change.

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<sup>38</sup> Rasmussen Reports, "Daily Presidential Tracking Poll," [www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/obama\\_administration/daily\\_presidential\\_tracking\\_poll](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/obama_administration/daily_presidential_tracking_poll), read on the WWW on August 28, 2010.