

How Racist Are We? Ask Google

By [SETH STEPHENS-DAVIDOWITZ](#)

Barack Obama won 52.9 percent of the popular vote in 2008 and 365 electoral votes, 95 more than he needed. Many naturally [concluded](#) that prejudice was not a major factor against a black presidential candidate in modern America. My research, a comparison of Americans' Google searches and their voting patterns, found otherwise. If my results are correct, racial animus cost Mr. Obama many more votes than we may have realized.



Doug Mills/The New York Times

Quantifying the effects of racial prejudice on voting is notoriously problematic. [Few](#) people admit bias [in surveys](#). So I used a new [tool](#), Google Insights, which tells researchers how often words are searched in different parts of the United States.

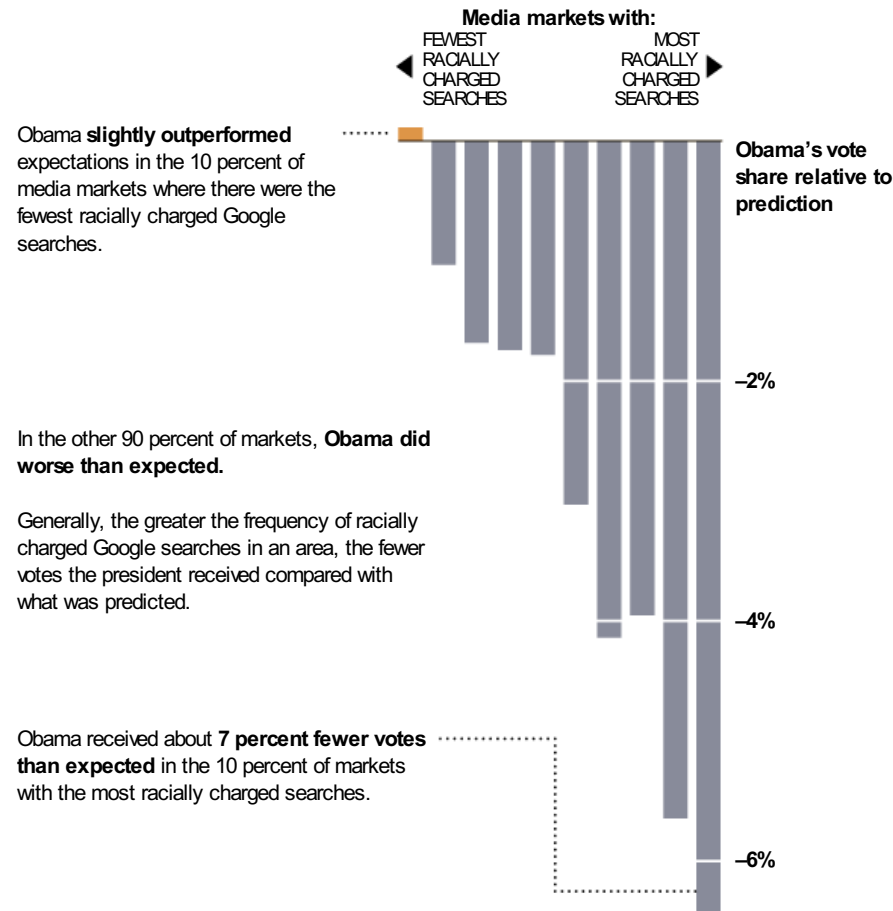
Can we really quantify racial prejudice in different parts of the country based solely on how often certain words are used on Google? Not perfectly, but remarkably well. Google, aggregating information from billions of searches, has an uncanny ability to reveal meaningful social patterns. “God” is Googled more often in the Bible Belt, “Lakers” in Los Angeles.

The conditions under which people use Google — online, most likely alone, not participating in an official survey — are ideal for capturing what they are really thinking and feeling. You may have typed things into Google that you would hesitate to admit in polite company. I certainly have. The majority of Americans have as well: we Google the word “porn” more often than the word “weather.”

And many Americans use Google to find racially charged material. I performed the somewhat unpleasant task of ranking states and media markets in the United States based on the proportion of their Google searches that included the word “nigger(s).” This word was included in roughly the same number of Google searches as terms like “Lakers,” “Daily Show,” “migraine” and “economist.”

Racially Charged Web Searches and Voting

In 2008, Barack Obama performed much worse than expected in areas with the greatest frequency of racially charged Google searches. The analysis looked at Web searches in 200 United States media markets.



MOST POPULAR - SUNDAY REVIEW

E-MAILED BLOGGED VIEWED

1. Risky Rise of the Good-Grade Pill
2. Exhibition Review: Successes in Rhetoric: Language in the Life of Churchill
3. Media Decoder: Hosts of 'Car Talk' to Retire After 35 Years of Automotive Banter
4. Well: It's Smoothie Time!
5. Op-Ed Contributor: Uncle Ray's Dystopia
6. Have Elite Fliers Been Downgraded?
7. Tale of 3 Inmates Who Vanished From Alcatraz Maintains Intrigue 50 Years Later
8. Nurturing a Baby and a Start-Up Business
9. Maureen Dowd: Poppy Chic
10. Your Money: Planning a Financial Tuneup

[Go to Complete List »](#)

A huge proportion of the searches I looked at were for jokes about African-Americans. (I did not include searches that included the word “nigga” because these searches were mostly for rap lyrics.) I used data from 2004 to 2007 because I wanted a measure not directly influenced by feelings toward Mr. Obama. From 2008 onward, “Obama” is a prevalent term in racially charged searches.

The state with the highest racially charged search rate in the country was West Virginia. Other areas with high percentages included western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, upstate New York and southern Mississippi.

Once I figured out which parts of the country had the highest racially charged search rates, I could test whether Mr. Obama underperformed in these areas. I predicted how many votes Mr. Obama should have received based on how many votes John Kerry received in 2004 plus the average gain achieved by [other](#) 2008 Democratic Congressional candidates. The results were striking: The higher the racially charged search rate in an area, the worse Mr. Obama did.

Consider two media markets, Denver and Wheeling (which is a market evenly split between Ohio and West Virginia). Mr. Kerry received roughly 50 percent of the votes in both markets. Based on the large gains for Democrats in 2008, Mr. Obama should have received about 57 percent of votes in both Denver and Wheeling. Denver and Wheeling, though, exhibit different racial attitudes. Denver had the fourth lowest racially charged search rate in the country. Mr. Obama won 57 percent of the vote there, just as predicted. Wheeling had the seventh highest racially charged search rate in the country. Mr. Obama won less than 48 percent of the Wheeling vote.

Add up the totals throughout the country, and racial animus cost Mr. Obama three to five percentage points of the popular vote. In other words, racial prejudice gave John McCain the equivalent of a home-state advantage nationally.

Yes, Mr. Obama also gained some votes because of his race. But in the general election this effect was comparatively minor. The vast majority of voters for whom Mr. Obama’s race was a positive were liberal, habitual voters who would have voted for any Democratic presidential candidate. Increased support and turnout from African-Americans added only about one percentage point to Mr. Obama’s totals.

If my findings are correct, race could very well prove decisive against Mr. Obama in 2012. Most modern presidential elections are close. Losing even two percentage points lowers the probability of a candidate’s winning the popular vote by a third. And prejudice could cost Mr. Obama crucial states like Ohio, Florida and even Pennsylvania.

There is the possibility, of course, that racial prejudice will play a smaller role in 2012 than it did in 2008, now that the country is familiar with a black president. Some recent events, though, suggest otherwise. I mentioned earlier that the rate of racially charged searches in West Virginia was No. 1 in the country and that the state showed a strong aversion to Mr. Obama in 2008. It recently held its Democratic presidential primary, in which Mr. Obama was challenged by a convicted felon. The felon, who is white, [won](#) 41 percent of the vote.

In 2008, Mr. Obama rode an unusually strong [tail wind](#). The economy was [collapsing](#). The Iraq war was unpopular. [Republicans](#) took most of the blame. He was able to overcome the major obstacle of continuing racial prejudice in the United States. In 2012, the tail wind is gone; the obstacle likely remains.

Seth Stephens-Davidowitz is a doctoral candidate in economics at Harvard University. The most up-to-date version of the research paper on which this article draws [is available here](#).

For President, a Complex Calculus of Race and Politics

By JODI KANTOR

Published: **The New York Times**, October 20, 2012

Mr. Obama and Ruby Bridges Hall, the first black child to integrate an elementary school in the South, admiring the Norman Rockwell painting of her marching into school, which he hung outside the Oval Office.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you,” he said to Ruby Bridges Hall, who was the first black child to integrate an elementary school in the South. The president repeated the message to a group of Tuskegee airmen, the first black aviators in the United States military; the Memphis sanitation workers the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed in his final speech; and others who came to pay tribute to Mr. Obama and found him saluting them instead.

The line is gracious, but brief and guarded. Mr. Obama rarely dwells on race with his visitors or nearly anyone else. In interviews with dozens of black advisers, friends, donors and allies, few said they had ever heard Mr. Obama muse on the experience of being the first black president of the United States, a role in which every day he renders what was once extraordinary almost ordinary.

But his seeming ease belies the anxiety and emotion that advisers say he brings to his historic position: pride in what he has accomplished, determination to acquit himself well and intense frustration. Mr. Obama is balancing two deeply held impulses: a belief in universal politics not based on race and an embrace of black life and its challenges.

Vigilant about not creating racial flash points, the president is private and wary on the subject, and his aides carefully orchestrate White House appearances by black luminaries and displays of black culture. Those close to Mr. Obama say he grows irritated at being misunderstood — not just by opponents who insinuate that he caters to African-Americans, but also by black lawmakers and intellectuals who fault him for not making his presidency an all-out assault on racial disparity.

“Tragically, it seems the president feels boxed in by his blackness,” the radio and television host Tavis Smiley wrote in an e-mail. “It has, at times, been painful to watch this particular president’s calibrated, cautious and sometimes callous treatment of his most loyal constituency,” he continued, adding that “African-Americans will have lost ground in the Obama era.”

Such criticism leaves the president feeling resentful and betrayed, aides said, by those he believes should be his allies. The accusations are “an assault on his being,” said David Axelrod, his chief strategist — not to mention a discomfiting twist in a re-election fight in which the

turnout of black voters, who express overwhelming loyalty to the president but also some disappointment, could sway the result.

But like an actor originating a role on Broadway, Mr. Obama has been performing a part that no one else has ever played, and close observers say they can see him becoming as assured on race in public as he is in private conversation. In 2009, the new president's statement on the arrest of a black Harvard professor by a white police officer set off days of negative headlines; in 2012, he gave a commanding but tender lament over the killing of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, by a white man.

"As he's gotten more comfortable being president, he's gotten more comfortable being him," said Brian Mathis, an Obama fund-raiser.

Asked when they could sense that shift, several advisers and friends mentioned the waning hours of Mr. Obama's birthday party in the summer of 2011. As the hour grew late, many of the white guests left, and the music grew "blacker and blacker," as the comedian Chris Rock later told an audience. Watching African-American entertainers and sports stars do the Dougie to celebrate a black president in a house built by slaves, Mr. Rock said, "I felt like I died and went to black heaven."

The president, guests recalled, seemed free of calibration or inhibition. He danced with relative abandon, other guests ribbing him about his moves, everyone swaying to Stevie Wonder under a portrait of George Washington.

Trying to Avoid a Wedge

In the White House, Mr. Obama has relied on a long-term strategy on race and politics that he has been refining throughout his career.

As far back as 1995, former colleagues at the University of Chicago remember him talking about moving away from the old politics of grievance and using common economic interests to bind diverse coalitions. "He argued that if political action and political speeches are tailored solely to white audiences, minorities will withdraw, just as whites often recoil when political action and speeches are targeted to racial minority audiences," recalled William Julius Wilson, now a sociologist at Harvard.

Mr. Wilson had turned the world of social policy on its head by arguing that class was becoming more determinative than race in America and pointing out that race-specific remedies were less politically feasible than economic policies that benefited a broad range of people. The young politician absorbed Mr. Wilson's ideas, which matched his own experience as a community organizer and a person whose own life did not fit neat racial categories.

Mr. Obama now presides over a White House that constantly projects cross-racial unity. When discussing in interviews what image the Obamas want to project, aides use one word more than any other: “inclusive.” Concerts of Motown and civil-rights-era songs have been stocked with musicians of many races, and in introducing them, the president emphasizes how the melodies brought disparate Americans together. Though the Memphis sanitation workers were involved in a shattering moment of the civil rights struggle — Dr. King was assassinated after going to support their strike — they were invited to the White House for a labor event, not a race-oriented one.

Many of the president’s most critical domestic policy decisions have disproportionately benefited African-Americans: stimulus money that kept public sector workers employed, education grants to help underperforming schools and a health care overhaul that will cover tens of millions of uninsured Americans. But he invariably frames those as policies intended to help Americans of all backgrounds.

“If you really want to get something done, you can’t put it in a way that will kill it before it gets going,” Mr. Obama said in one meeting, according to the Rev. Al Sharpton. “We have to deal with the specific problems of different groups — blacks, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants — in a way that doesn’t allow people to put these wedges in,” Mr. Sharpton recalled the president saying in another.

That approach, along with the memories of the toxic campaign battles over Mr. Obama’s former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., has resulted in a White House that often appears to tiptoe around race.

Debra Lee, the chairman and chief executive of Black Entertainment Television, requested interviews with the Obamas in 2009, but press aides told her that they did not want the first couple on BET in the first six months of the administration, she said in an interview. (They appeared later.)

“There was all this caution and concern because we were in the midst of a great American experiment,” one former aide said. Another aide remembered palpable nervousness about the artwork the Obamas chose for their private quarters in the White House, including some with race-specific messages.

In private, White House aides frequently dissect the racial dynamics of the presidency, asking whether Representative Joe Wilson, Republican of South Carolina, would have yelled “You lie!” at a white president during an address to Congress or what Tea Party posters saying “Take Back Our Country” really mean. Michelle Obama, often called the glue in her husband’s relationship with black voters, sometimes remarks publicly or privately about the pressures of being the first black first lady.

Her husband is more circumspect, particularly on the question of whether some of his opposition is fueled by race. Aides say the president is well aware that some voters say they will never be comfortable with him, as well as the occasional flashes of racism on the campaign trail, such as the “Put the White Back in the White House” T-shirt spotted at a recent Mitt Romney rally. But they also say he is disciplined about not reacting because doing so could easily backfire.

“The president knows that some people may choose to be divided by differences — race, gender, religion — but his focus is on bringing people together,” Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser, wrote in an e-mail.

Even when Newt Gingrich called him a “food stamp president” during the Republican primaries, the most the president did was shoot confidants a meaningful look — “the way he will cock his head, an exaggerated smile, like ‘I’m not saying but I’m saying.’” one campaign adviser said.

To blacks who accuse him of not being aggressive on race, Mr. Obama has a reply: “I’m not the president of black America,” he has said. “I’m the president of the United States of America.”

That statement “makes me want to vomit,” Cornel West, an activist and Union Theological Seminary professor, said in an interview. “Did you say that to the business round table?” he asked rhetorically. “Do you say that to Aipac?” he said, referring to a pro-Israel lobbying group.

Members of the Congressional Black Caucus, with whom the president has a contentious relationship, have echoed the charges that Mr. Obama is insufficiently attentive to African-Americans, even threatening at times to sandbag his agenda.

Even some of Mr. Obama’s black supporters privately express the same anxiety, in more muted form. At the first meeting of his top campaign donors last year, some black donors were dismayed when officials handed out cards with talking points on the administration’s achievements for various groups — women, Jews, gays and lesbians — and there was no card for African-Americans.

The accusation that Mr. Obama does not care about black suffering appears to carry little weight with the African-American public, and yet it tears at the president, say aides, friends and supporters.

After a 2010 speech at the National Urban League, he approached Mr. West. “He just came at me tooth and nail,” Mr. West said. “Are you saying I’m not a progressive?” Mr. West recalled the president asking.

Melody Hobson, an Obama fund-raiser, explained why the accusation was painful.

“You expect your family to give you the benefit of the doubt,” she said.

Out to Change Stereotypes

Shortly before his 2009 inauguration, Barack Obama took his family to see the Lincoln Memorial. “First African-American president, better be good,” a 10-year-old Malia Obama told her father, who repeated the story later, a rare acknowledgment of the symbolic shadow he casts.

For all of Mr. Obama’s caution, he is on a mission: to change stereotypes of African-Americans, aides and friends say. Six years ago, he told his wife and a roomful of aides that he wanted to run for the White House to change children’s perceptions of what was possible. He had other ambitions for the presidency, of course, but he was also embarking on an experiment in which the Obamas would put themselves and their children on the line to help erase centuries of negative views.

While Mr. Obama resists being the president of black America, he does want to change black America, aides say — to break apart long-held beliefs about what African-Americans can and cannot do. The president, who appointed Lisa P. Jackson and Charles F. Bolden Jr. as the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency and NASA, wants to encourage black achievement in science and engineering, even urging black ministers to preach about the need to study those subjects.

Mr. Obama knows that the next presidential candidate of color may be judged by his own performance, added Charles J. Ogletree, a Harvard law professor. And Mr. Obama’s desire to win re-election in part because he is the first black president is “so implicit it’s just like breathing,” one White House adviser said.

On rare occasions, Mr. Obama allows others a glimpse of the history, expectations and hope he carries with him. At the funeral of the civil rights leader Dorothy Height in 2010, he wept openly. Again and again, those close to him say, Mr. Obama is moved by the grace with which other blacks who broke the color barrier behaved under pressure.

When Ruby Bridges Hall went to see the famous Norman Rockwell portrait of her marching into school, which Mr. Obama had hung just outside the Oval Office, the president opened up a bit. The painting shows a 6-year-old Ms. Hall in an immaculate white dress walking calmly into school, a hurled tomato and a racial slur on the wall behind her.

The president asked Ms. Hall, now 58, how she summoned up such courage at that age and said he sometimes found his daughters staring at the portrait. “I really think they see themselves in this little girl,” he said, according to an interview with Ms. Hall.

“Doing the work we do, it gets really lonely,” Ms. Hall said. “I felt like we understood each other because we belong to the same club.”

A version of this article appeared in print on October 21, 2012, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: For President, a Complex Calculus of Race and Politics.

For Obama, Nuance on Race Invites Questions

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

Published: *The New York Times*, February 8, 2010

WASHINGTON — The civil rights movement will come alive in song at the White House on Wednesday night, when President Obama plans to celebrate Black History Month with a star-studded concert.

Representative Elijah E. Cummings said of Mr. Obama, “I think he could do more.”

And it came alive in quiet conversation on Martin Luther King’s Birthday, when Mr. Obama installed a rare signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation in the Oval Office and invited a small group of African-American elders and young people in for a private viewing.

The two events — a televised extravaganza with celebrities like Morgan Freeman and Queen Latifah, and an intimate discussion with people like Dorothy Height, the 97-year-old chairwoman of the National Council of Negro Women — reflect the nuances in Mr. Obama’s handling of the often incendiary issue of race in America. He is using his platform to advance racial consciousness, even as he has steered clear of putting race front and center in his administration.

It is a balancing act that has frustrated some black leaders and scholars, who are starting to challenge Mr. Obama’s language and policies.

On Capitol Hill, members of the Congressional Black Caucus have expressed irritation that Mr. Obama has not created programs tailored specifically to African-Americans, who are suffering disproportionately in the recession. In December, some of them threatened to oppose new financial rules for banks until the White House promised to address the needs of minorities.

“I don’t think we expected anything to change overnight because we had an African-American in the White House, but the fact still remains that we’ve got a constituency that is suffering,” said Representative Elijah E. Cummings, Democrat of Maryland. “I think he could do more, and he will do more.”

Some black scholars say Mr. Obama has failed to lead on the race issue. The Kirwan Institute, which studies race and ethnicity, is convening a conference on Thursday to offer policy prescriptions. After analyzing the State of the Union address, the institute’s scholars warned that “continued failure to engage race would be devastating.”

Michael Eric Dyson, a Georgetown University sociologist and longtime supporter of Mr. Obama, is exasperated. “All these teachable moments,” he said, “but the professor refuses to come to the class.”

In an interview in late December with American Urban Radio Networks, a group of black-owned stations, Mr. Obama conceded that there was “grumbling” among African-Americans, especially about his jobs policies. But he rejected the idea that he should pay special attention to them — an argument that Earl Ofari Hutchinson, a black author and political analyst, called “disingenuous at best, and an insult at worst.”

Mr. Obama framed it this way: “I can’t pass laws that say I’m just helping black folks. I’m the president of the United States. What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need. That in turn is going to help lift up the African-American community.”

Until now, black leaders have tended to tread lightly in criticizing Mr. Obama, and some find it painful. Black Americans remain overwhelmingly supportive of Mr. Obama; a recent ABC News poll found that 96 percent approve of his job performance.

But Elinor Tatum, the editor and publisher of the black-owned Amsterdam News, says that if blacks were asked “Is he doing a good job for African-Americans?” his numbers would be lower.

“Every time someone brings up an issue that affects blacks, he says that’s an issue that affects all of America,” Ms. Tatum said. “But at the same time, if he were of a different race or ethnicity, he would be playing to the black community. So there’s a double standard there. Should we be the victims in that?”

The conventional wisdom about Mr. Obama is that he tries to duck the issue of race, but close advisers say he is acutely aware of his role as the first African-American president and is trying to heighten racial sensitivity in constructive ways.

Many black leaders view this as wise. The Rev. Al Sharpton, who is working with Mr. Obama to close the achievement gap in education, says the president is smart not to ballyhoo “a black agenda.”

Instead, Mr. Obama has been trying to shine a spotlight on the history that laid the foundation for his presidency, with events like Wednesday’s concert and the celebration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, which offer a peek into his style.

Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to the president, said the King event was intended as “an intergenerational conversation” in which guests could share their experiences in a “safe and

private moment.” Before the Oval Office tour, they gathered in the Roosevelt Room and Mr. Obama invited each to speak.

Dr. Height began with the story of her first encounter with the young Martin Luther King Jr., then 15 and trying, she said, to “analyze his own thoughts as he was trying to determine whether he wanted to enter the ministry, education or law.”

A local pastor, John Pinkard, recounted his dinner with Dr. King. Participants said the session seemed as much for the president’s benefit as their own.

“My impression was that it was deliberately something for him and for Michelle, and that it was kind of like medicine, it was healing for them,” said the historian Taylor Branch, who also attended. “It seemed to answer something personal for them.”

Race, of course, can be an incendiary issue in American politics: as a candidate, the biracial Mr. Obama was criticized as either too black or not black enough. He addressed the topic memorably in a speech in Philadelphia after the controversy involving his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.

Ms. Jarrett said, “He has communicated quite clearly his thoughts on the subject.”

As president, Mr. Obama learned the pitfalls of talking bluntly about race. His comment that police officers in Cambridge, Mass., “acted stupidly” when they arrested a black Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates Jr., caused an uproar, and the ensuing “beer summit” at the White House proved a distraction.

Charles Ogletree, a Harvard law professor who represented Mr. Gates and is close to Mr. Obama, said the president had never hesitated to talk about race but is more scripted now. “I think there is a carefulness — not a reluctance — but a carefulness about what should be said going forward,” he said.

Professor Ogletree said he “finds puzzling the idea that a president who happens to be black has to focus on black issues.”

Dr. Height agreed. Having counseled every president since Franklin D. Roosevelt on matters of race, she made a plea in a recent interview for Mr. Obama to be left alone.

“We have never sat down and said to the 43 other presidents: ‘How does it feel to be a Caucasian? How do you feel as a white president? Tell me what that means to you,’ ” Dr. Height said. “I am not one to think that he should do more for his people than for other people. I want him to be free to be himself.”

A version of this article appeared in print on February 9, 2010, on page A14 of the New York edition.

OPINION

The Price of a Black President



Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

Young men joined the march from the Selma to Montgomery, Ala., organized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in March 1965.

By FREDRICK C. HARRIS

Published: *The New York Times*, October 27, 2012

WHEN African-Americans go to the polls next week, they are likely to support Barack Obama at a level approaching the 95 percent share of the black vote he received in 2008. As well they should, given the symbolic exceptionalism of his presidency and the modern Republican Party's utter disregard for economic justice, civil rights and the social safety net.

But for those who had seen in President Obama's election the culmination of four centuries of black hopes and aspirations and the realization of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a "beloved community," the last four years must be reckoned a disappointment. Whether it ends in 2013 or 2017, the Obama presidency has already marked the decline, rather than the pinnacle, of a political vision centered on challenging racial inequality. The tragedy is that black elites — from intellectuals and civil rights leaders to politicians and clergy members — have acquiesced to this

decline, seeing it as the necessary price for the pride and satisfaction of having a black family in the White House.

These are not easy words to write. Mr. Obama's expansion of health insurance coverage was the most significant social legislation since the Great Society, his stimulus package blunted much of the devastation of the Great Recession, and the Dodd-Frank financial overhaul added major new protections for consumers. His politics would seem to vindicate the position of civil rights-era leaders like [Bayard Rustin](#), who argued that blacks should form coalitions with other Democratic constituencies in support of universal, race-neutral policies — in opposition to activists like [Malcolm X](#), who distrusted party politics and believed that blacks would be better positioned to advance their interests as an independent voting bloc, beholden to neither party.

But the triumph of “post-racial” Democratic politics has not been a triumph for African-Americans in the aggregate. It has failed to arrest the growing chasm of income and wealth inequality; to improve prospects for social and economic mobility; to halt the re-segregation of public schools and narrow the black-white achievement gap; and to prevent the Supreme Court from eroding the last vestiges of affirmative action. The once unimaginable successes of black diplomats like [Colin L. Powell](#), [Condoleezza Rice](#) and [Susan E. Rice](#) and of black chief executives like [Ursula M. Burns](#), [Kenneth I. Chenault](#) and [Roger W. Ferguson Jr.](#) cannot distract us from facts like these: 28 percent of African-Americans, and 37 percent of black children, are poor (compared with 10 percent of whites and 13 percent of white children); 13 percent of blacks are unemployed (compared with 7 percent of whites); more than 900,000 black men are in prison; blacks experienced a sharper drop in income since 2007 than any other racial group; black household wealth, which had been disproportionately concentrated in housing, has hit its lowest level in decades; blacks accounted, in 2009, for 44 percent of new H.I.V. infections.

Mr. Obama cannot, of course, be blamed for any of these facts. It's no secret that Republican obstruction has limited his options at every turn. But it's disturbing that so few black elites have aggressively advocated for those whom the legal scholar [Derrick A. Bell](#) called the “faces at the bottom of the well.”

The prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power, regardless of political winds or social pressures, has a long history. [Ida B. Wells](#) risked her life to publicize the atrocity of lynching; [W. E. B. Du Bois](#) linked the struggle against racial injustice to anticolonial movements around the world; [Cornel West](#) continues to warn of the “giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism” that King identified a year before his [death](#).

But that prophetic tradition is on the wane. Changes in black religious practice have played a role. Great preachers of social justice and liberation theology, like [Gardner C. Taylor](#), [Samuel DeWitt Proctor](#), [John Hurst Adams](#), [Wyatt Tee Walker](#) and [Joseph E. Lowery](#), have retired or passed away.

Taking their place are megachurch preachers of a “gospel of prosperity” — like [Creflo A. Dollar Jr.](#), [T. D. Jakes](#), [Eddie L. Long](#) and [Frederick K. C. Price](#) — who emphasize individual enrichment rather than collective uplift. “There’s more facing us than social justice,” Bishop Jakes has said. “There’s personal responsibility.”

Mr. Obama hasn’t embraced this new gospel, but as a candidate he did invoke the politics of respectability once associated with [Booker T. Washington](#). He urged blacks to exhibit the “discipline and fortitude” of their forebears. He lamented that “too many fathers are M.I.A.” He chided some parents for “feeding our children junk all day long, giving them no exercise.” He distanced himself from his former pastor, the Rev. [Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.](#), whose incendiary remarks about racism’s legacy caused a maelstrom.

But as president, Mr. Obama has had little to say on concerns specific to blacks. His State of the Union address in 2011 was the first by any president since 1948 to not mention poverty or the poor. The political scientist Daniel Q. Gillion found that Mr. Obama, in his first two years in office, talked about race less than any Democratic president had since 1961. From racial profiling to mass incarceration to affirmative action, his comments have been sparse and halting.

Early in his presidency, Mr. Obama weighed in after the prominent black Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested at his home in Cambridge, Mass. The president said the police had “acted stupidly,” was criticized for rushing to judgment, and was mocked when he invited Dr. Gates and the arresting officer to chat over beers at the White House. It wasn’t until earlier this year that Mr. Obama spoke as forcefully on a civil rights matter — the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Florida — saying, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.”

INSTEAD of urging Mr. Obama to be more outspoken on black issues, black elites parrot campaign talking points. They dutifully praise important but minor accomplishments — the settlement of a longstanding class-action lawsuit by black farmers; increased funds for black colleges; the reduction (but not elimination) of the disparities in sentences for possession of crack and powder cocaine — while setting aside their critical acumen.

For some, criticism of Mr. Obama is disloyal. “Stick together, black people,” the radio host Tom Joyner has warned. (Another talk show host, Tavis Smiley, joined Dr. West on a [“poverty tour”](#) last year, but has been less critical of the president than Dr. West has.)

It wasn’t always so. Though Bill Clinton was wildly popular among blacks, black intellectuals fiercely debated affirmative action, mass incarceration, welfare reform and racial reconciliation during his presidency. In 2001, the Harvard law professor [Charles J. Ogletree](#) called the surge in the inmate population “shocking and regrettable” and found it “shameful” that Mr. Clinton “didn’t come out and take a more positive and symbolic approach to the issue of reparations for slavery.” But Mr.

Ogletree, a mentor of Mr. Obama's, now finds "puzzling the idea that a president who happens to be black has to focus on black issues."

[Melissa V. Harris-Perry](#), a political scientist at Tulane who hosts a talk show for MSNBC, warned in 2005 that African-Americans "who felt most warmly toward Clinton and most trusting of his party's commitment to African-Americans" were in danger of underestimating "the continued economic inequality of African-Americans relative to whites." But she has become all but an apologist for Mr. Obama. "No matter what policies he pursues, the president's racialized embodiment stands as a symbol of triumphant black achievement," she wrote in *The Nation* this month.

Black politicians, too, have held their fire. "With 14 percent unemployment if we had a white president we'd be marching around the White House," Representative [Emanuel Cleaver II](#) of Missouri, the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, told *The Root* last month. "The president knows we are going to act in deference to him in a way we wouldn't to someone white."

Some of the reticence stems from fear. "If we go after the president too hard, you're going after us," Representative [Maxine Waters](#), a California Democrat, told a largely black audience in Detroit last year.

But caution explains only so much. Representative [John Lewis](#) of Georgia, one of King's last living disciples, has not used his moral stature to criticize the president's silence about the poor. Neither have leaders of the biggest civil rights organizations, like [Benjamin Todd Jealous](#) of the N.A.A.C.P., [Marc H. Morial](#) of the National Urban League or [Wade Henderson](#) of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, whether because of emotional allegiance or pragmatic accommodation.

The two black governors elected since Reconstruction — [L. Douglas Wilder](#) of Virginia and [Deval L. Patrick](#) of Massachusetts — have also de-emphasized race. So, too, have the new cadre of black politicians who serve largely black constituencies, like Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#) of Newark, Mayor [Michael A. Nutter](#) of Philadelphia and Representative [Terri Sewell](#) of Alabama — all of whom, like Mr. Obama, have Ivy League degrees and rarely discuss the impact of racism on contemporary black life.

Some argue that de-emphasizing race — and moving to a "colorblind" politics — is an inevitable and beneficial byproduct of societal change. But this ideal is a myth, even if it's nice to hear.

As [Frederick Douglass](#) observed, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." The political scientist E. E. Schattschneider noted that conflict was essential to agenda-setting. Other interest groups — Tea Party activists, environmentalists, advocates for gay and lesbian rights, supporters of Israel and, most of all, rich and large corporations — grasp this insight. Have African-Americans forgotten it?

IN making this case, I have avoided speculation about Mr. Obama's psychology and background — his biracial heritage, his transnational childhood, his community organizing, his aversion to being seen as “angry,” his canny ability to navigate multiple worlds, his talent at engaging with politics while appearing detached from it. As a social scientist I keep returning to the question: What is the best strategy for black communities to pursue their political interests as a whole?

Were [Harold Cruse](#), the author of the unsparing 1967 book “[The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual](#),” still alive, he would despair at the state of black intellectual life. [Eddie S. Glaude Jr.](#), a professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton, told me: “Too many black intellectuals have given up the hard work of thinking carefully in public about the crisis facing black America. We have either become cheerleaders for President Obama or self-serving pundits.”

There are exceptions. Writing in the journal *Daedalus* last year, the Harvard philosopher Tommie Shelby called Mr. Obama's approach “a pragmatic strategy for navigating hazardous racial waters” that might improve lives for poor minorities. But he added: “Judged alongside King's transformative vision of racial equality and integration, Obama's philosophy is morally deficient and uninspiring.”

Mr. Obama deserves the electoral support — but not the uncritical adulation — of African-Americans. If re-elected he might surprise us by explicitly emphasizing economic and racial justice and advocating “targeted universalism” — job-training and housing programs that are open to all, but are concentrated in low-income, minority communities. He would have to do this in the face of fiscal crisis and poisonous partisanship.

Amid such rancor, African-Americans might come to realize that the idea of having *any* politician as a role model is incompatible with accountability, the central tenet of representative democracy. By definition, role models are placed on pedestals and emulated, not criticized or held accountable.

To place policy above rhetoric is not to ask what the first black president is doing for blacks; rather, it is to ask what a Democratic president is doing for the most loyal Democratic constituency — who happen to be African-Americans, and who happen to be in dire need of help. Sadly, when it comes to the Obama presidency and black America, symbols and substance have too often been assumed to be one and the same.

A Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, and the author of “The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics.”

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on October 28, 2012, on page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Price Of a Black President.

OPINION

Political Racism in the Age of Obama

By STEVEN HAHN

Published: ~~The New York Times~~ National Edition, November 10, 2012, SR6

Philadelphia



Bruce Newman/Oxford Eagle, via Associated Press

A crowd participated in a candlelit vigil, “We Are One Mississippi,” at the University of Mississippi in Oxford on Wednesday. It was in response to a protest on campus after President Obama was re-elected.

THE white students at Ole Miss who greeted President Obama’s decisive re-election with [racial slurs and nasty disruptions](#) on Tuesday night show that the long shadows of race still hang eerily over us. Four years ago, when Mr. Obama became our first African-American president by putting together an impressive coalition of white, black and Latino voters, it might have appeared otherwise. Some observers even insisted that we had entered a “post-racial” era.

But while that cross-racial and ethnic coalition figured significantly in Mr. Obama’s re-election last week, it has frayed over time — and may in fact have been weaker than we imagined to begin with. For close to the surface lies a political racism that harks back 150 years to the time of Reconstruction, when African-Americans won citizenship rights. Black

men also won the right to vote and contested for power where they had previously been enslaved.

How is this so? The “birther” challenge, which galvanized so many Republican voters, expresses a deep unease with black claims to political inclusion and leadership that can be traced as far back as the 1860s. Then, white Southerners (and a fair share of white Northerners) questioned the legitimacy of black suffrage, viciously lampooned the behavior of new black officeholders and mobilized to murder and drive off local black leaders.

Much of the paramilitary work was done by the White League, the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilantes, who destroyed interracial Reconstruction governments and helped pave the road to the ferocious repression, disenfranchisement and segregation of the Jim Crow era.

D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film, “The Birth of a Nation,” which played to enthusiastic audiences, including President Woodrow Wilson, gave these sensibilities wide cultural sanction, with its depiction of Reconstruction’s democratic impulses as a violation of white decency and its celebration of the Klan for saving the South and reuniting the nation.

By the early 20th century the message was clear: black people did not belong in American political society and had no business wielding power over white people. This attitude has died hard. It is not, in fact, dead. Despite the achievements of the civil rights movement, African-Americans have seldom been elected to office from white-majority districts; only three, including Mr. Obama, have been elected to the United States Senate since Reconstruction, and they have been from either Illinois or Massachusetts.

The truth is that in the post-Civil War South few whites ever voted for black officeseekers, and the legacy of their refusal remains with us in a variety of forms. The depiction of Mr. Obama as a Kenyan, an Indonesian, an African tribal chief, a foreign Muslim — in other words, as a man fundamentally ineligible to be our president — is perhaps the most searing. Tellingly, it is a charge never brought against any of his predecessors.

But the coordinated efforts across the country to intimidate and suppress the votes of racial and ethnic minorities are far more consequential. Hostile officials regularly deploy the language of “fraud” and “corruption” to justify their efforts much as their counterparts at the end of the 19th century did to fully disenfranchise black voters.

Although our present-day tactics are state-issued IDs, state-mandated harassment of immigrants and voter-roll purges, these are not a far cry from the poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements and discretionary power of local registrars that composed the

political racism of a century ago. That's not even counting the hours-long lines many minority voters confronted.

THE repercussions of political racism are ever present, sometimes in subtle rather than explicit guises. The campaigns of both parties showed an obsessive concern with the fate of the "middle class," an artificially homogenized category mostly coded white, while resolutely refusing to address the deepening morass of poverty, marginality and limited opportunity that disproportionately engulfs African-American and Latino communities.

At the same time, the embrace of "small business" and the retreat from public-sector institutions as a formula for solving our economic and social crises — evident in the policies of both parties — threaten to further erode the prospects and living standards of racial and ethnic minorities, who are overwhelmingly wage earners and most likely to find decent pay and stability as teachers, police officers, firefighters and government employees.

Over the past three decades, the Democrats have surrendered so much intellectual ground to Republican anti-statism that they have little with which to fight back effectively. The result is that Mr. Obama, like many other Democrats, has avoided the initiatives that could really cement his coalition — public works projects, industrial and urban policy, support for homeowners, comprehensive immigration reform, tougher financial regulation, stronger protection for labor unions and national service — and yet is still branded a "socialist" and coddler of minorities. Small wonder that the election returns indicate a decline in overall popular turnout since 2008 and a drop in Mr. Obama's share of the white vote, especially the vote of white men.

But the returns also suggest intriguing possibilities for which the past may offer us meaningful lessons. There seems little doubt that Mr. Obama's bailout of the auto industry helped attract support from white working-class voters and other so-called Reagan Democrats across the Midwest and Middle Atlantic, turning the electoral tide in his favor precisely where the corrosions of race could have been very damaging.

The Republicans, on the other hand, failed to make inroads among minority voters, including Asian-Americans, and are facing a formidable generational wall. Young whites helped drive the forces of conservatism and white supremacy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but now most seem ill at ease with the policies that the Republican Party brandishes: social conservatism, anti-feminism, opposition to same-sex marriage and hostility to racial minorities. The anti-Obama riot at Ole Miss, integrated 50 years ago by James H. Meredith, was followed by a larger, interracial "We Are One Mississippi" candlelight march of protest. Mr. Obama and the Democrats have an opportunity to bridge

the racial and cultural divides that have been widening and to begin to reconfigure the country's political landscape. Although this has always been a difficult task and one fraught with peril, history — from Reconstruction to Populism to the New Deal to the struggle for civil rights — teaches us that it can happen: when different groups meet one another on more level planes, slowly get to know and trust one another, and define objectives that are mutually beneficial and achievable, they learn to think of themselves as part of something larger — and they actually become something larger.

Hard work on the ground — in neighborhoods, schools, religious institutions and workplaces — is foundational. But Mr. Obama, the biracial community organizer, might consider starting his second term by articulating a vision of a multicultural, multiracial and more equitable America with the same insight and power that he once brought to an address on the singular problem of race. If he does that, with words and then with deeds, he can strike a telling blow against the political racism that haunts our country.

Steven Hahn is a [professor](#) of history at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of “A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration.”