

A pair of glasses is shown in the foreground, with the lenses reflecting various scenes of daily life and work. The left lens shows a woman smiling while talking on a mobile phone, a man in a white shirt and tie holding papers, and two men in graduation gowns. The right lens shows a woman and a man looking at a car, with the word 'OBJECTIVE' overlaid in large, semi-transparent letters. The background is a blurred image of a person's face.

ENDURING TWO-NESS

Lawrence D. Bobo is professor of sociology and Afro-American studies, Harvard University. Michael C. Dawson is professor of political science and department chair, University of Chicago. Devon Johnson is a visiting fellow at Harvard University and a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UCLA.

By Lawrence D. Bobo

Michael C. Dawson

Devon Johnson



*Through
the
eyes
of
Black
America*

W. E. B. DuBois's voice still rings true on the black experience in America. Writing in 1903 he observed that "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." This "two-ness," although now refracted in ever more complex ways along lines of class, gender, ideology, and interest, remains fundamental to understanding how and why race is still a durable divide in the United States.

To be sure, African American men and women have directly contributed to and share in the pride and joy in all that is great about America. We benefit in important measure from all the social trends and circumstances that work to benefit any American, without regard to race. And today, African Americans enjoy an unprecedented material well-being, cultural achievement, and political prominence.

In the very same instant, however, the experience of African Americans remains importantly set apart, uniquely stigmatized, disadvantaged and, in a word, a "problem." Whether the issue is achievement test performance, college attendance, unemployment and poverty, media stereotyping, racial profiling, or voter disenfranchisement, the black experience is anything but salutary. As a result, African Americans view the nation, their fellow citizens, and many specific issues with lenses crafted while compelled to stand on the wrong side of "the veil" of race.

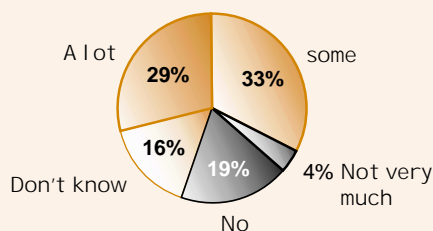
Study upon study and poll upon poll show that although much has changed for the better, a racial divide of significant dimensions is not merely American history but also an American reality today. The results of our own recent National African American Election Survey, fielded by Knowledge Networks in October and December 2000, bear out these claims.¹

At the same time that the US Census is allowing people to identify with multiple racial categories, the vast majority of African Americans continues to feel that their fate as individuals is tied to the fate of the group as a whole. That is, a decided minority of the African American population seems

Figure 1

A Sense of Common Fate

Question: Do you think what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life? [If yes] Will it affect you a lot, some, or not very much?



Note: Asked of blacks.

Source: Survey by Knowledge Networks for the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, October 18-29, 2000 and December 1-15, 2000.

convinced they actually have the option of existing as mere individuals whose racial appearance in the eyes of others is irrelevant. Sixty-five percent of African Americans nationwide said yes when asked if “what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life.” Just under 1 in 5 said no, and a roughly comparable proportion said they didn’t know. When pressed further, as Figure 1 shows, nearly a third of the black population expressed “a lot” of what black political scientists have come to call a sense of “common fate” racial identity.

At the same time, many African Americans, much like their fellow white Americans, feel good about the relative prosperity of the recently ended Clinton years. Our survey finds blacks more optimistic about their own family finances than whites, an inversion of the usual pattern. Thus, 23% of African Americans said they were much better off financially than they had been a year earlier, as compared to just 10% of whites. Blacks were even more optimistic about the national economy, with 48% saying it had gotten better, compared to 31% of whites. And fewer than 1 in 5 blacks felt the economy had gotten worse, whereas 1 in 4 whites did. These perceptions

had a solid foundation in the declines in both unemployment and poverty in African American communities recorded during the past several years.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer that black optimism about the economy means the irrelevance of race to black public opinion, even about economic matters. For example, when asked specifically how blacks as a group are getting along economically, only 8% of blacks said very well, and a comparable 7% gave the most pessimistic response of not too well at all. The solid majority said fairly well, and a substantial 30% said that blacks as a group were not doing too well economically. Moreover, blacks see themselves as a group as decidedly disadvantaged compared to whites. Forty percent said that blacks were much worse off or somewhat worse off economically relative to whites, a view shared by only 24% of whites. A plurality of both blacks and whites, 30% and 34% respectively, said blacks and whites were doing about the same economically.

Numerous studies not only show large differences in opinion between blacks and whites on issues of racial politics, but substantial differences on most matters of domestic social spending and support for the welfare state as well.

Each and every detail of these differences need not be rehearsed here. What matters for us is that it is no exaggeration to say that African Americans exhibit a strong state-centered, social justice agenda in their race-related and domestic economy policy preferences that sets the center of black opinion far apart from that of white opinion.

Thus, when asked to indicate what should be top priorities for spending anticipated federal budget surplus monies, there was only partial overlap between blacks and whites concerning the top four most frequently mentioned items. Among blacks, the top four priority areas were increased spending on public schools (80%), protecting Social Security (79%), job training programs (68%), and day care programs (60%). Among whites, the top four priority areas were protecting Social Security (82%), increased spending on public schools (64%), a large tax cut for the middle class (52%), and increased spending on military and defense (41%).

From the perspective of black America, then, the current focus of President Bush on a 1.6-trillion-dollar tax cut has much more to do with what white America cares about. To sharpen the difference further, when asked to select the single most important priority, only 8% of African Americans said a “large tax cut for the middle class,” as compared to 20% of whites.

But the “two-ness” of the black experience asserts itself most dramatically when issues of race arise directly. Indeed, many African Americans end up feeling deeply cynical about race relations. We asked all of our respondents whether blacks would ever achieve racial equality in America. As Figure 2 shows, blacks and whites hold very different views on this subject. *Fully a third of whites say that blacks have already achieved equality, whereas fewer than 1 in 10 blacks hold this view.* More importantly, 40% of blacks (versus 24% of whites) said

racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetimes, and fully 1 in 5 blacks (versus only 3% of whites) said that racial equality would never be achieved.

Perhaps the clearest case of a race problem in public policy and in public opinion involves the criminal justice system. We asked our respondents whether the American legal system treats all groups fairly or whether it is unfair to blacks. The black-white difference is enormous. Nearly three-fourths of African Americans said the legal system is unfair to blacks, as compared to only 8% of whites. Apparently, many whites are sensitive to the possibility that the criminal justice system either is uniformly unfair or believe that the system is biased against whites, since a very high 48% rejected both statements. Nonetheless, the fundamental asymmetry of how blacks and whites view the criminal justice system is clear.

Nowhere is the depth and character of this difference seen more directly than in the experience of “racial profiling” of African Americans by police. The *New*

York Times recently reported the treatment of black dentist Elmo Randolph by New Jersey state troopers. Dr. Randolph, the report says,

was stopped dozens of times in the 1980s and 1990s traveling the turnpike to work. Troopers invariably asked, do you have guns or drugs?

“My parents always told me, be careful when you’re driving on the turnpike,” said Dr. Randolph, 44. “White people don’t have that conversation.”

As a reflection of experiences like those of Dr. Randolph, and other forms of ongoing racial bias and stigmatization, most African Americans embrace a deep sense of injustice on matters of race, a feeling not appreciated by the great majority of white America. The clearest indication of this gulf in understanding is the extent of black versus white support for a formal apology and reparations for slavery. When asked, “Do you think the federal government should or should not apologize to African Americans for the slavery that once existed in this country?”

we find that 67% of African Americans say the government should apologize as compared to only 24% of white Americans. Similarly, when asked if the federal government should “pay money to African Americans whose ancestors were slaves as compensation for that slavery,” the black-white gap is even larger. Fifty-three percent of African Americans support the idea of financial reparations as compared to only 3% of whites.

It is not our aim to suggest that all is woe and misery in American race relations or to imply that the differences in opinion are permanent and insuperable. Certainly, in national politics, the present moment is full of potential for positive change. With figures like Colin Powell as Secretary of State and Condoleezza Rice as National Security Advisor, blacks have moved into new and very weighty spheres of political influence and power.

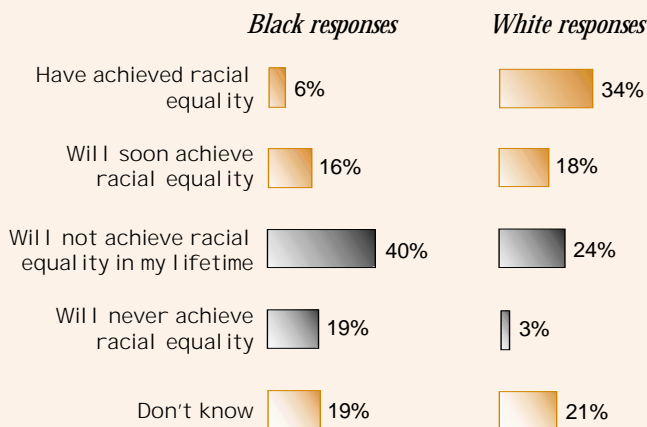
Yet only time will tell whether the efforts of the Bush administration to reach out to African Americans, say in the form of his program of “faith-based initiatives,” are just cynical manipulations or social interventions of genuine and lasting positive import. Our central message is that historical experience and the contemporary structure of black opinion in America give strong warrant for expecting that the lens of race, the two-ness of the African American, will still operate to condition and prefigure modern social and political dynamics.

Although rarely given a place in mainstream political discourse, this view of race in American politics is by no means new to us. To be sure, there are two sharply polarized schools of thought on race in American politics. From one vantage point, despite a sad history, the American experience is a tale of steadily expanding inclusion and realization of greater democracy and the promise of genuine equality. From the opposite vantage point, the Ameri-

Figure 2

Beliefs About Racial Equality

Question: Do you think that blacks have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime, or will never achieve racial equality?



Source: Survey by Knowledge Networks for the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, October 18-29, 2000 and December 1-15, 2000.

can experience is one of, at best, sporadic egalitarian impulses (such as the Civil War and Emancipation or the later civil rights movement). These impulses, the argument goes, are invariably partially rolled back and fundamentally compromised by the forces of reaction and retreat (such as the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow or, more recently, Proposition 209 in California and the Florida voter disfranchisement debacle).

“African Americans embrace a deep sense of injustice on matters of race, a feeling not appreciated by the great majority of white America.”

Both interpretations impress us as too simplistic, and fundamentally inadequate to digest the complexity of the modern African-American experience. More persuasive are views such as that of eminent political theorist Rogers Smith, who argues that American culture has always exhibited multiple political traditions, some expansive and democratic, and others regressive and deeply committed to racial division if not also white supremacy. We would go further. Even the democratic and liberal American traditions, as philosopher Charles Mills reminds us, have been tainted by a racialized political order which has all too often placed African Americans in a subordinate position to whites. It is this multiple or contradictory political traditions view that makes sense of the durable two-ness of the African-American experi-

ence: thoroughly American on the one hand, yet clearly “marked” and set off from the rest on the other.

We agree, in the end, with many other analysts who note that racism and racial inequality are not the enormous fissures in the body politic that they once were. Yet one cannot ignore the facts of extensive residential segregation by race and the role that direct discrimination and racial prejudice play in its perpetuation. Nor can one ignore the large black-white disparities in vulnerability to poverty and unemployment, with African Americans still far more likely to endure severe poverty or long-term lack of employment. The contemporary weight of generation upon generation of racial discrimination and exclusion is immediately evident in the truly gargantuan inequalities of accumulated assets and wealth that will long separate the life experiences of African Americans—even those with extensive educational credentials and middle class occupations—relative to otherwise comparable whites.

In the light of this history and these present-day circumstances, the more curious issue to us is not that African Americans are skeptical on matters of race and committed to a social justice agenda. The great curiosity is that so many otherwise thoughtful people find it so very hard to recognize and empathize with the African-American experience, though it is one of the most basic, indeed defining, features of American history, culture, institutions, and identity.

African Americans are American, plain enough, and of African descent, equally plainly so. For most black folks, race in America is a story of living injury and enduring tension, not one of old scars and rapidly healing wounds. Only those individuals staunchly indifferent to evidence of the monolithic black vote against the current president, of acutely intense

African-American concern with social justice issues, and of a profound sense of common fate and perceptions of contemporary racial injustice among blacks in America, could maintain otherwise.

There is little doubt that when the economy grows, blacks ultimately benefit. Similarly, during times of peace, few Americans return home from foreign soil in body bags, irrespective of race. And, like their fellow citizens, African Americans share a host of concerns that flow from being parents concerned about school quality, being adult children worried about medical care and prescription drugs for their aging parents, and being individuals managing their family finances and planning for the future. Likewise, large differences in class background and command of economic resources within the black community create widely divergent terms and textures of life experience.

Yet, not a one or even the full collection of these transparently important social roles and identities fundamentally wipes out the salience of race in the lives of African Americans. According to distinguished political scientists Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders in their book *Divided by Color*, “Blacks and whites are socially diverse; they are subject to various crosscutting pressures—but this is not enough, evidently, to prevent race from emerging as a ‘single profound line of cleavage.’” As felt and lived by black Americans, it is this persistent two-ness that endures. It is precisely this two-ness that continues to challenge us all to work toward a more understanding and inclusive realization of American democracy. 🗳️

Endnote

¹Knowledge Networks employs a random digit dialing telephone methodology to develop a representative sample of households for participation in its panel. Participants receive requisite hardware and free internet access. Knowledge Networks surveys are delivered by email and administered via interactive television devices.