

CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN?

Barack Obama's Framing Strategies for Bridging Racial Divisions

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Abstract

Barack Obama's election as the first Black president of the United States has stimulated much discussion about progress toward racial equality in the United States. Opinion surveys document that White Americans reliably perceive the rate of progress toward racial equality as greater than do Black Americans. We focus on two psychological factors that contribute to these diverging perceptions: (1) the tendency of White Americans and Black Americans to adopt different reference points to assess racial progress, and (2) the general tendency to frame social change as a zero-sum game in which Black Americans' gains entail losses for White Americans. We review research examining how these two factors contribute to racial polarization on the topic of progress toward equality. We also draw on excerpts from Barack Obama's speeches and writings to demonstrate that he often frames issues in ways that, our research suggests, has the potential to substantially bridge these racial divisions.

Keywords: Racial Equality, Obama, Social Judgment, White and Black Americans

INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 2008, the forty-fifth anniversary of the day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech, Barack Obama formally accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency of the United States. No one could miss the symbolic significance of his becoming the first Black presidential nominee on the anniversary of the speech that, more than any other, articulated an inspiring vision of racial equality in the United States.

Much of the commentary on this event depicted Obama's nomination as an important step toward realizing King's dream. Obama himself often situates his political accomplishments within a progressive narrative that presents U.S. history as

a series of incremental steps toward the goal of full racial equality, from the emancipation of slaves to the achievements of the civil rights movement to the election of the United States' first Black president. Obama's remarkable political success has, perhaps not surprisingly, stimulated much interest in the question of how much progress we have made toward achieving racial equality in the United States. However, answers to this question often differ depending on the race of the person who is asked. Specifically, the country seems to have made greater progress toward racial equality from the perspective of White Americans than it seems to have from the perspective of Black Americans (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach and Ehrlinger, 2006; Eibach and Keegan, 2006; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Sigelman and Welch, 1991).

Nationally representative opinion surveys that ask about racial progress have reliably reported more favorable impressions from White respondents than from Black respondents. For example, the 2000 General Social Survey (Davis et al., 2000) asked, "In the past few years do you think conditions for Black people have improved, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?" Among White respondents, 68% judged that conditions had improved, compared with 53% of Black respondents; 28% judged that conditions had stayed the same, compared with 39% of Black respondents; and 4% judged that conditions had gotten worse, compared with 8% of Black respondents.

The difference between Whites' and Blacks' assessments of racial equality emerged even when the question specified more precisely the time period and index of change. For example, the 1998/1999 Multi-investigator Study (Sniderman et al., 1998–1999) asked, "Would you say that the gap in wages between Blacks and Whites is now a lot greater than it was 10 years ago, somewhat greater, somewhat less, a lot less, or about the same as it was 10 years ago?" Among White respondents, 69% judged that the wage gap had decreased somewhat or a lot, compared with 38% of Black respondents; 17% judged that the wage gap had remained the same, compared with 18% of Black respondents; and 15% judged that the wage gap had increased somewhat or a lot, compared with 44% of Black respondents.

President Obama's political success does not yet seem to have altered this picture. After Obama secured the votes necessary to achieve the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency, a July 2008 *New York Times*/CBS poll asked a nationally representative sample of Americans whether there had been any real progress getting rid of racial discrimination since the 1960s. While 79% of White Americans said that there had been real progress, only 59% of Black Americans agreed with this assessment. These percentages were virtually unchanged from the 78% of White Americans and 58% of Black Americans who said that there had been real progress when asked this same question in June 2000. In a September 2008 ABC News/*USA Today*/Columbia University poll, after Obama officially accepted the Democratic Party's nomination, 75% of White Americans, compared with only 52% of Black Americans, judged that Blacks had achieved or would soon achieve racial equality; while 44% of Black Americans, compared with just 20% of White Americans, judged that racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetime or would never be achieved. Even after Obama was elected president, these differences in perceptions were virtually unchanged. In a January 2009 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 76% of White Americans, compared with only 56% of Black Americans, judged that Blacks had achieved or would soon achieve racial equality, while 41% of Black Americans, compared with just 22% of White Americans, judged that racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetime or would never be achieved.

These data demonstrate that the question of progress toward racial equality reliably produces polarized responses from White and Black Americans. Further-

more, the question of racial progress is an important one because people's judgments of how far we have come toward realizing the goal of racial equality often determine their commitment to policies that seek to further that goal (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach and Keegan, 2006). Given the consistency of these poll results, it is tempting to conclude that White Americans' and Black Americans' different perspectives on racial equality are somehow irreconcilable, that they reflect divisions of interest and experience that are too deep to overcome in the foreseeable future. However, we will review findings from a series of research studies that suggest this would be an overly pessimistic interpretation of the situation. Our research shows that both White and Black Americans' perceptions of racial progress are amenable to simple framing manipulations that can substantially bridge the gap between their perspectives. Furthermore, we show that in his speeches and writings, Obama often frames issues in ways that, our research suggests, should be effective at bridging racial divisions.

We first review research testing the hypothesis that assessments of racial progress often differ because White Americans and Black Americans each use different reference points to assess racial progress. Specifically, White Americans tend to judge racial progress with respect to how things were in the past (e.g., "Look how far we have come"), whereas Black Americans tend to judge progress with respect to how things should ideally be (e.g., "Look how far we have left to go") (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach and Ehrlinger, 2006). When both White and Black Americans are encouraged to focus on the same reference point, their perspectives on racial progress substantially converge.

Next, we review a second series of studies showing that the tendency to interpret race relations as zero-sum—believing that the gains of racial minorities necessarily entail losses for White Americans—increases the differences in White Americans' and Black Americans' judgments of racial progress (Eibach and Keegan, 2006). We review evidence that common-interest frames, which promote the idea that people of all racial groups have something to gain from increasing equality, are a particularly effective means of guiding White Americans to share Black Americans' perspectives on racial equality.

Finally, we review another program of research showing that Black Americans are often suspicious of common-interest frames because they can be construed in either an identity-threatening way (i.e., turning a blind eye toward racial inequalities) or an identity-affirming way (i.e., acknowledging that all citizens have equal claim to U.S. identity, regardless of their ethnicity) (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2009). Our research shows that Black Americans use situational cues, including the racial identity of the message communicator, to disambiguate the meaning of common-interest frames. We conclude by considering how the themes Obama emphasizes in his speeches and writings and his identity as the first Black president have the potential to reduce racial polarization on the issue of progress toward equality.

REFERENCE POINTS FOR JUDGING RACIAL PROGRESS

A complete assessment of progress toward any goal requires a person to compare current conditions to two critical reference points: what conditions were like when the goal was initially set (i.e., how far we have come) and what conditions would need to be like to conclude that the goal had been reached (i.e., how far we have left to go). Regarding progress toward the goal of racial equality, Obama (2006) emphasizes the need to take into account both how far we have come and how far we have left to go:

To think clearly about race, then, requires us to see the world on a split screen—to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair. I have witnessed a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature. When I hear some in the Black community deny those changes, I think it not only dishonors those who struggled on our behalf but also robs us of our agency to complete the work they began. But as much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn't good enough (p. 233).

Judging progress by considering only how far we have come or only how far we have left to go is likely to lead to a distorted view of racial progress because, as political scientist Alan Wolfe (1998) writes, “Compared to where we were there is progress. Compared to where we should be that progress is insufficient” (p. 223). Civil rights activist Bayard Rustin (1971) also highlighted the problem of narrowly focusing on the past as a reference point for assessing progress:

My intention is not to demean the importance of the progress that was made during the last decade. But neither will I use superlatives . . . in describing what amounted to a first step in attacking the overwhelming and complex social problems of the nation. To point out improvements where they have been made, but not to couple this with an urgent call for more action is to provide an excuse for complacency and criminal inaction (p. 310).

Although a full assessment of progress toward racial equality requires people to take into account both distance from the past reference point and distance from the end goal, they are probably not able to simultaneously assess distance from both of these critical reference points. More likely, people begin by focusing on the distance from one of the two reference points, form a preliminary impression of racial progress based on that comparison, and then adjust their impression to take into account distance from the other reference point. However, research in cognitive and social psychology demonstrates that adjustments to initial impressions are often insufficient because these adjustments are easily disrupted if the person's attention is distracted or if the person is not motivated to question their initial impression (Epley and Gilovich, 2006; Gilbert 1989; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). This means that if White Americans and Black Americans differ in the initial reference point that they spontaneously select to compare with the present, then they will likely differ in the conclusions they reach about the magnitude of progress. Specifically, if White Americans focus on how far we have come, while Black Americans focus on how far we have left to go, this can explain why White Americans' judgments of racial progress tend to be more favorable than those of Black Americans.

As an initial test of this hypothesis, we elicited judgments of the magnitude of progress toward racial equality from White and non-White university students, and then we asked them to describe the considerations that came to mind as they formed these judgments (Eibach and Ehrlinger, 2006, study 1). These descriptions were coded for the degree to which they focused on the past versus the future ideal of full racial equality as a reference point for judging progress. The question about the magnitude of racial progress replicated the typical pattern we described at the opening of this article: White participants judged that there had been significantly greater progress than did non-White participants. Consistent with our hypothesis, White

participants also were significantly more likely than non-White participants to use the past as a reference point for judging racial progress. Moreover, in a mediational analysis, this difference in reference points fully accounted for the group differences in judgments of the magnitude of racial progress.

In order to experimentally test whether the use of different reference points for judging racial progress is the source of the gap between White and non-White Americans' judgments of progress, we manipulated the framing of the question about racial progress (Eibach and Ehrlinger, 2006, study 3). In the unframed condition, participants were asked to evaluate progress toward racial equality without specifying a reference point for comparison (e.g., "How much progress would you say there has been toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities in the United States?"). In the past-frame condition, the questions clearly specified that participants should judge progress by comparing present conditions to those of the past (e.g., "Compared to what racial conditions were like in the past, how much progress would you say there has been toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities in the United States?"). By contrast, in the ideal-frame condition, the questions specified that participants should judge progress by comparing current conditions to ideal standards of racial equality (e.g., "Compared to what conditions should be like, how much progress would you say there has been toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities in the United States?").

Consistent with the hypothesis that the use of different reference points is the source of the divergence in White and non-White judgments of racial progress, we obtained a significant difference in White and non-White judgments in the unframed condition, which did not specify a reference point, but not in the past- or ideal-frame conditions, which did specify a reference point. Moreover the pattern of judgments of racial progress for White and non-White participants across the three framing conditions matched our expectations based on the hypothesis that, in the absence of a pre-defined reference frame, White Americans tend to judge progress by comparing the present to the past, while non-White Americans tend to compare the present to the ideal of full racial equality. Specifically, White participants' judgments of racial progress in the unframed condition were most similar to their judgments of racial progress in the past-frame condition, and their judgments of progress in these two conditions were significantly greater than their judgments of racial progress in the ideal-frame condition. By contrast, non-White participants' judgments of racial progress in the unframed condition were most similar to their judgments of racial progress in the ideal-frame condition, and their judgments of racial progress in these two conditions were marginally significantly lower than their judgments of racial progress in the past-frame condition.

We conceptually replicated the results of this framing experiment in a study in which we experimentally primed either the past or the ideal as a reference point in a less direct way by having participants write an essay on an assigned topic before judging progress toward racial equality (Eibach and Ehrlinger, 2006, study 2). In one condition we primed the past reference point by instructing participants to write an essay describing what conditions in the United States were like for racial minorities prior to the civil rights movement. In another condition, we primed the ideal reference point by instructing participants to write an essay describing the vision of racial equality articulated in King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech. In the control condition, participants did not write an essay prior to answering the question about progress toward racial equality.

Once again we found that the gap between White and non-White judgments of racial progress was significant only in the control condition that did not prime a

reference point. When the past or ideal reference point was primed, White and non-White participants' judgments of progress converged. Again, the pattern of racial progress judgments of White and non-White participants across the three conditions matched our hypotheses about the reference points White and non-White Americans spontaneously use to judge racial progress. Specifically, White participants' judgments of progress in the control condition were nearly identical to their judgments in the condition that primed the past reference point, and their judgments of progress in these two conditions were significantly greater than their judgments of progress in the condition that primed the ideal reference point. By contrast, non-White participants' judgments of racial progress in the control condition were nearly identical to their judgments in the condition that primed the ideal reference point, and their progress judgments in both of these conditions were significantly lower than their judgments of progress in the condition that primed the past reference point.

In his speech responding to the controversy over the Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons, Obama articulated this idea, that racial polarization results when White Americans focus only on the progress that we have made without acknowledging the need for further progress and Black Americans focus only on how we have fallen short of full racial equality without acknowledging the progress that we have made. To foster common ground he encouraged Black Americans to acknowledge that although racial equality has not yet been achieved, the United States has made important progress. He then encouraged White Americans to acknowledge that while there has been progress, there is still important work left to be done. Focusing on the Black community, Obama (2008b) said:

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society is static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of its own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity of hope—for what we must achieve tomorrow (p. 265).

Focusing on the White community, Obama (2008b) said:

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds (p. 265).

The research we have summarized thus far suggests that by encouraging White Americans and Black Americans to consider both how far we have come and how far we have left to go to achieve racial equality, Obama can help bridge the gap between Whites' and Blacks' perspectives on racial equality. However, there are also potential political risks for leaders who try to voice the perspectives of each side in a conflict such as this one. Communicators who try to represent the perspectives of opposing sides in highly polarized conflicts are typically perceived as biased by members of both sides (Vallone et al., 1985). Each side perceives the inclusion of its own per-

spective as reasonable but perceives the inclusion of their opponent's perspective as unreasonable and biased. This effect emerges when opposing parties are unable to see the situation from their opponent's viewpoint. However, the research we reviewed shows that most White Americans can recognize the need for greater progress, and most Black Americans can recognize the gains we have made toward equality. White and Black Americans just differ in how spontaneously they think about each of these things when they evaluate racial progress. Accordingly, when the issue involves judging progress toward racial equality, leaders such as Obama, who voice the perspectives of both the White and the Black communities may seem reasonable to each community.

We tested this hypothesis by crafting three essays about progress toward racial equality: the first essay focused only on the progress we have made relative to the past; the second essay focused only on the progress that we have not yet made; and the third essay referred to both the progress we have made and the progress that remains (Eibach and Purdie-Vaughns, 2009). White and non-White participants were assigned to read one of these three essays and evaluate the reasoning of the author. As we predicted, White and non-White participants both assigned relatively favorable ratings to the author who mentioned both reference points. However, White and non-White participants disagreed in their ratings of the other two: White participants judged the author of the past reference point essay more favorably than did non-White participants, and non-White participants judged the author of the ideal reference point essay more favorably than did White participants. These results suggest that although they differ in the reference points they spontaneously adopt when assessing progress toward equality, both White and Black Americans are equally receptive to the message that while substantial progress toward racial equality has been made, more progress is still needed.

ZERO-SUM FRAMING AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOSING SOCIAL DOMINANCE

In addition to their use of different reference points to judge progress, White Americans and Black Americans also differ in how they value social changes that promote greater racial equality. While most non-White Americans see increases in racial equality as unequivocal gains, White Americans sometimes view increases in racial equality as losses rather than gains (Eibach and Keegan, 2006). White Americans' tendency to view improvements in conditions for racial minorities through a loss frame is reflected in their references to "reverse discrimination" and commonly heard complaints that racial minorities "take away" jobs and admissions to selective universities from qualified White applicants.

This emphasis on loss is particularly explicit in the discourse of extremist groups such as those Raphael Ezekiel (1995) studied in his interviews with members of racist social movements. For example, commenting on changes in race relations in the United States, a member of the Aryan Nation said, "We've been losing for seventy-five or eighty years or more. My race has been losing, we've been losing, no question about it" (p. 141). In another interview, the founder of the Southern White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan told Ezekiel, "It's just a shame and disgrace that White people are struggling who founded this country and built this country and now we're second-class citizens in our own country" (p. 98). Expressing a similar view, the founder of a Detroit White supremacist group observed, "Soon whites won't even be the majority. . . . The whites are on a downslide." Finally, in an interview with

Kathleen Blee (2002) a White skinhead said, “A lot of white males, regardless of whether or not they are racist [sic], are upset about how much is being taken away from them” (p. 98). Fortunately, most White Americans do not have such explicit racist beliefs. However, these racist groups may be expressing a particularly virulent version of a loss frame that is more widespread in White American communities. As Blee (2002) puts it, “Racist groups elaborate and systematize existing everyday white beliefs that African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color harm the security and privileges of whites” (p. 80).

In the context of the 2008 presidential race, ordinary White citizens occasionally expressed the belief that gains by Black Americans threaten the interests of White Americans. For example, individuals interviewed by al-Jazeera journalist Casey Kauffman voiced this concern at a McCain/Palin rally in Ohio (cited in King 2008). One woman worried that if Obama was elected “Blacks [would] take over.” Another woman was concerned that Barack and Michelle Obama were “anti-White.” At the same rally a third woman opposed Obama because she said Obama believes White people are “trash.” In interviews covered by mainstream media sources, citizens rarely voiced such direct expressions of racially motivated concerns. However, these statements, which are similar to the statements made by extremists groups, may reflect a more widespread belief that racial minority gains somehow disadvantage White Americans.

Why might certain White Americans frame racial minority gains as losses for Whites? First, social dominance theory tells us that some White Americans actually value the power and privileges that their dominant position in the social hierarchy affords them (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Increased racial equality necessarily reduces their dominant position (Jackman 1994). Thus, White Americans who value social dominance should tend to view increased equality as a loss for their group. Second, even White Americans who do not value their race’s social dominance may sometimes view increases in equality through a loss frame because people generally assume that social resources are zero-sum, meaning that when opportunities for one social group increase, opportunities for other groups must necessarily decrease. These zero-sum assumptions are often important determinants of intergroup attitudes and conflict (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Bobo and Tuan, 2006; Eibach and Keegan, 2006; Esses et al., 2001). When increased educational and occupational opportunities for racial minorities are assumed to come at the expense of opportunities for White Americans, even White Americans who do not strongly value social dominance, per se, may be concerned that gains for racial minorities somehow disadvantage their group.

In his speech responding to the controversy about the Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermons, Obama (2008b) clearly explained how such zero-sum assumptions can fuel White Americans’ resentments about changes in race relations:

[White Americans] are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time (p. 263).

If White Americans sometimes assume that increased racial equality entails losses for themselves, this can help explain the gap between Whites’ and Blacks’ judgments of progress toward racial equality, because there is a well-documented

asymmetry in people's subjective valuations of losses and gains. According to prospect theory, people are generally loss averse, which means that the disutility of losses outweighs the utility of gains even when the gains and losses are equivalent in their objective magnitude (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; 2000). The phenomenon of loss aversion leads people to view the same social change as a larger change if they view the change as a loss instead of viewing it as a gain (Jervis 2004; Kahneman and Tversky, 2000). Thus, if White Americans sometimes view moves toward equality as losses while Black Americans view moves toward equality as gains, then prospect theory can help explain why White Americans believe there has been more movement toward equality than Black Americans believe there has been.

We conducted a framing experiment to test the hypothesis that White Americans tend to perceive greater progress toward racial equality when they apply a zero-sum frame and assume that racial minority progress entails loss of resources and opportunities for Whites (Eibach and Keegan, 2006, study 4). To induce participants to apply a zero-sum frame to the issue of racial progress, we had instructed participants in one condition to list three things that White Americans have lost because of racial minority progress before we elicited judgments of the magnitude of progress toward racial equality. In a control condition, we downplayed the zero-sum framing by instructing participants to list three things that racial minorities have gained as a result of progress toward racial equality. As predicted, the gap between White and non-White judgments of racial minority progress widened in the condition that highlighted White losses compared with the condition that highlighted minority gains. The gap between racial progress judgments widened in the White losses condition because White participants' judgments of racial progress in that condition were significantly higher than their judgments of racial progress in the minority gains condition.

We conceptually replicated these results with a less direct manipulation of zero-sum framing (Eibach and Keegan, 2006, study 3). To induce undergraduate participants to view racial progress as zero sum, we assigned them the task of drawing bars on a bar chart to represent the percentage of White and non-White students at U.S. universities in 1960 and in the present. Because they were drawing bars to represent percentages, participants were forced to depict a rise in the percentage of students who are non-White as entailing a decline in the percentage of students who are White. In a control condition, participants were instructed to draw bars representing only the percentage of students at U.S. universities who were non-White in 1960 and the present. Because the bars representing White students were left out in this condition, participants could depict gains in non-White representation without explicitly thinking about White losses. As predicted, the gap between White and non-White judgments of racial minority progress was significantly greater in the zero-sum condition than in the control condition. The racial gap was greater in the zero-sum condition because White participants' judgments of progress toward racial equality in this condition were higher than their racial progress judgments in the control condition.

White Americans' tendency to assume that progress for racial minorities entails losses for themselves is particularly pronounced in the context of attitudes toward affirmative action. Thus to manipulate zero-sum framing in a more naturalistic way, we conducted a study in which we varied the framing of an affirmative action policy. In this study participants received information about a fictional graduate science program, including photographs of the graduate class of 1990, which, based on the pictures, clearly had a White majority. Participants were told that during the 1990s, the program had instituted new policies designed to increase the ethnic

diversity of the student body. We manipulated zero-sum framing by varying the description of the policy that was implemented to increase racial minority representation. In the zero-sum condition, the policy was described as a quota policy, in which a set number of minority applicants had to be admitted before any more White applicants could be admitted. In the control condition, the policy was described as an outreach program in which more efforts would be made to inform qualified minority candidates about the program, but there was no difference in the admissions criteria for minority and White candidates. A manipulation check verified that participants believed that the quota policy was more likely to bring about a loss of opportunities for qualified White applicants compared with the outreach version.

After reading the description of the diversity policy, participants viewed photographs of students in the class of 2000 who were allegedly admitted after the new policy was implemented. Using this information, participants then assessed the magnitude of the increase in minority representation in the graduate science program from 1990 to 2000. As we predicted, the gap in Whites' and non-Whites' judgments of the increase in minority representation was greater in the zero-sum condition than in the control condition. This was because White participants judged the increase in minority representation as significantly greater in the zero-sum condition than they did in the control condition.

Given that zero-sum framing appears to have such a potent influence on White perceptions of race relations, we hypothesized that to get more White Americans to share non-White Americans' view that racial equality is an unfinished project, it would be particularly helpful to provide a common-interest frame that prompts them to consider how gains for racial minorities can also benefit Whites. We predicted that this sort of common-interest frame might be so powerful that it could even convince White Americans who have a strong psychological attachment to their ingroup's power and privileges to recognize there is a need for more progress toward equality. Specifically, we predicted that White Americans who are relatively high in social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994), and thus strongly value their ingroup's power and privileges, would come to share low-SDO Whites' perceptions of racial progress if they could be prompted to think about how racial minority progress benefits Whites. To test this hypothesis, we recruited a sample of White Americans who varied in their SDO scores, and we assigned them to one of three framing conditions (Eibach and Keegan, 2006, study 5). In the zero-sum condition, participants listed three things White Americans had lost as a consequence of racial minority progress before judging the magnitude of progress toward equality. In the common-interest condition, participants listed three ways that White Americans had benefited from racial minority progress before judging the magnitude of progress toward equality. In the control condition, participants simply judged the magnitude of progress toward equality. Overall, participants with higher SDO scores judged that there had been greater progress toward racial equality. However, high-SDO participants' judgments of progress toward equality in the common-interest condition were significantly lower than their judgments of progress in the control and zero-sum conditions. In fact, in the common-interest condition, high-SDO participants' judgments of racial minority progress lowered to the point that they matched those of low-SDO participants.

In his speeches and writings, Obama frequently emphasizes how we can reduce racial polarization by challenging the widespread tendency to frame race relations as a zero-sum game in which racial minority gains necessarily entail losses for White Americans. For instance, he writes:

[The path to a more perfect union] requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America to prosper (Obama 2008b, p. 265).

To replace zero-sum thinking, Obama promotes a common-interest frame like the one we used in our experiments. For instance, he recommends that Black Americans can gain more widespread support for the cause of racial justice by “binding our particular grievances. . . to the larger aspirations of all Americans” (Obama 2008b, p. 264). Obama most powerfully invoked this common-interest theme in his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he said,

Alongside our famous individualism, there’s another ingredient in the American saga—a belief that we are connected as one people. If there’s a child on the South Side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandmother. If there’s an Arab-American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties. It’s that fundamental belief—I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper—that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. *E pluribus unum*. Out of many one (Obama 2008a, pp. 102–103)

IS RHETORIC EMPHASIZING COMMON INTERESTS EQUALLY EFFECTIVE FOR BOTH WHITE AND BLACK AMERICANS?

As noted above, the emphasis on common interests and downplaying of racial divisions is one of Obama’s most powerful rhetorical frames to increase interracial understanding by alleviating White Americans’ concerns about social changes that promote racial equality. For White Americans, racial discourse that emphasizes common interests causes their judgments of racial progress to converge with those of Black Americans (Eibach and Keegan, 2006) and more generally increases their receptivity toward interracial interactions. Yet, a remaining question is whether racial discourse that minimizes racial divisions has similarly positive effects on Black Americans.

Common-interest frames often promote a color-blind view of society, downplaying group differences and encouraging people to focus on their shared objectives. Research we have conducted on social identity threat shows that for Black Americans, discourse that minimizes the importance of racial identity is often ambiguous with respect to whether it should be interpreted as identity threatening or identity affirming (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Consider two different possible interpretations of a famous line from Obama’s 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention: “There’s not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America. There’s a United States of America.” This statement could be interpreted as meaning that ethnic minorities can maintain their distinctive identities while still being fully American, an identity-affirming construal. However, it could also be interpreted as symbolically erasing ethnic identities and denying that the distinctive aspects of ethnic minority communities are relevant and important, an identity-threatening construal. For messages that could be interpreted as either

identity affirming or threatening, people may attend to other cues in the immediate environment—including the identity of the source of the message—to disambiguate its meaning. If Black Americans use Obama’s identity as a racial minority to interpret his common-interest rhetoric as identity affirming, then Obama may be an especially effective communicator of this type of message.

We find that when a leader promotes a color-blind frame, such as the common-interest frame Obama uses in the preceding quotes, Black audiences are more receptive to that message if the leader is Black than they are if the leader is White (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2009). For instance, when a company’s leadership endorses color blindness as a workplace policy, Black prospective employees trust the policy if the company’s leadership is racially diverse but not if the company is exclusively White. When a company has exclusively White leadership, Black prospective employees interpret color blindness to mean a policy that denies the existence of White privilege and turns a blind eye toward racial inequalities, but when the company includes non-White executives, Black prospective employees interpret color blindness to mean a policy that treats people fairly (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

While this research suggests that President Obama’s racial identity may make him an especially effective communicator of common-interest messages to Black audiences, it would be a mistake to conclude that Black Americans are receptive to common-interest messages *only* when they are promoted by a racial minority leader. Further research we have conducted suggests that minority leadership is just one among many cues in the immediate environment that Black Americans use to disambiguate the meaning of a color-blind message (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2009). Minority leadership disambiguates the meaning of color-blind messages because the presence of minority leaders conveys that one’s identity as a racial minority does not impede one’s progress in that setting. However, while minority leaders are a particularly strong cue that minority success is possible in a setting, other cues could potentially convey this same message.

We have conducted additional studies to test this reasoning. In one relevant study Black prospective employees received information about an ostensible company that had an exclusively White leadership and endorsed color blindness (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2009, study 1). Immediately prior to receiving this information, participants completed a task that was designed to activate either the concept of equality in one condition or the concept of inequality in another condition. The concept of either equality or inequality was activated outside participants’ awareness by asking participants to complete a word search puzzle that contained words related either to equality or inequality. Following this task, participants read a color-blind statement, reported their interpretations of its meaning, and completed measures of their trust in the company.

If racial equality is exclusively linked to minority leadership, then our participants should have interpreted color blindness as identity-threatening and thus have felt excluded from the company regardless of the equality/inequality priming manipulation. But if minority leadership is merely a proxy for racial equality, then activating the concept “equality” in a company with exclusively White leadership should have led Black prospective employees to continue to interpret color blindness as identity affirming. Specifically, the equality prime should have led them to construe color blindness as identity affirming to the same degree as knowing a color-blind message was endorsed by minority leadership. This was precisely what was found. Even though the company consisted of exclusively White leadership, Black prospective employees in the equality prime condition perceived the color-blind message as

identity affirming and reported more trust and feelings of inclusiveness than Black prospective employees in the inequality prime condition.

These findings are important for providing insight into when Black Americans will be receptive to color-blind rhetoric that emphasizes common interests. When such messages are associated with a Black leader such as President Obama, our research suggests that Black Americans will be more likely to interpret these messages as identity affirming or at least not as an assault on their recognition as racial minorities. Importantly, the link between race of the communicator and identity affirming construals can be broken. White leaders who can authentically convey that they respect the challenges associated with minority status can be perceived positively by Black Americans even when these leaders employ common-interest rhetoric. Furthermore, Black leaders who employ common-interest rhetoric primarily to distract attention from racial injustices, rather than using this rhetoric to build broader support for policies to remedy those injustices, will likely soon lose the trust of many within the Black community.

CONCLUSION: THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY AND RACIAL POLARIZATION

I think that there's the possibility . . . that I can't just win an election, but can also transform the country in the process, that the language and the approach I take to politics is sufficiently different that I could bring diverse parts of this country together in a way that hasn't been done in some time, and that bridging those divisions is a critical element in solving problems (Obama 2006, p. 11).

Most observers seem to agree that Obama's election to the presidency is a powerful symbol of racial progress in the United States. This symbolism was documented in a September 2008 ABC News/*USA Today*/Columbia University poll in which 71% of White respondents and 79% of Black respondents agreed that Obama's nomination represented progress for Blacks generally and not just an individual achievement. But while White and Black Americans agreed that Obama's political achievements reflect progress for Blacks generally, in the same survey they still disagreed in their judgments of how much progress there had been toward racial equality: 75% of White respondents, compared with only 52% of Black respondents, judged that Blacks had achieved or would soon achieve racial equality. Only time will tell whether the gap between Whites' and Blacks' judgments of racial progress will persist as Obama's term as president progresses. However, our research suggests that the divide in White Americans' and Black Americans' perceptions of racial progress is not unbridgeable. In fact, the evidence we reviewed suggests that relatively simple framing devices, like those Obama frequently invokes in his own rhetoric, can substantially bridge the gap in Whites' and Blacks' perceptions of racial progress.

During the 2008 campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama was often criticized by his rivals for offering little more than eloquent speeches to justify his candidacy. As Hillary Clinton put it, "You know some people may think words are change. But you and I know better. Words are cheap. I know it takes work" (quoted in Snow and Harper, 2008). By contrast, the research reviewed in this paper reinforces the point that words do matter because ideas have consequences. Our findings suggest that in his speeches and writings Obama has been promoting two important ideas—the idea that although there has been some progress toward racial equality, more progress is still needed, and the idea that Americans of all racial groups have something to gain by furthering our progress toward that goal. Our research shows

that framing the issues in precisely these ways has the potential to reduce racial polarization and create the common ground that is often necessary to promote progressive change.

However, framing effects can be short-lived. As people go about their daily lives, culturally dominant frames and habitual patterns of reasoning about race relations are likely to reassert themselves and reproduce the typical patterns of racial polarization. Overcoming racial polarization will take more than the well-chosen rhetoric of a single leader. Lasting change will require more widespread and sustained cultural activism that carries these frames into everyday life, challenging zero-sum thinking and encouraging people to avoid complacency by keeping their eyes fixed on the goal of equality. In the end, many more people will need to get involved in promoting these ideas if we are to overcome our persistent racial divisions and progress together toward a more just society. Obama himself recognized these challenges when he said:

Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own. But I have asserted a firm conviction . . . that working together we can move beyond some of our racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union (Obama, 2008b, p. 264).

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