

REALITY Check

Does the Election of President Obama Mean Race Relations Are Better?

In one word “yes,” although there is a “but.” Certainly, the election of a person of color to the presidency historically was significant and major step forward in race relations. Moreover, a higher percentage of whites voted for Obama than for John Kerry, the white Democratic candidate in 2004. Obama even did better than Kerry in nearly every possible demographic: race, religion, gender, and income level. Given the consistency of that across-the-board strong performance, it would seem that for most Americans, race is no longer a primary consideration.

Nevertheless, in addition to differing political beliefs, some people did not support Obama because of his race. Even so, his race actually helped more than it hurt him. His share among white voters was 3 percentage points higher than Kerry’s, but he significantly outperformed Kerry with every other racial group. He gained 7 percentage points among blacks, 12 percentage points among Asians, and 13 percentage points among Hispanics. The United States is now a multicultural, multiracial society, as evidenced by the voter support coalesced around a multicultural, biracial candidate.

Yet it would be mistaken to conclude that Barack Obama’s victory has lessened the scope of the problem, for it by no means ended racism. Today, many African-Americans still lack economic opportunities; many black communities are without basic services and amenities like parks and police protection that most middle-class Americans take for granted; racial profiling still exists; and unfairly harsh penalties for first-time nonviolent offenders are meted out to minorities. Obama has always defined

himself as a president who happens to be black, deliberately playing down race as a factor. Racism nonetheless finds expression in reference to President Obama, such as the poster of him dressed as an African witch doctor above the slogan “Obamacare: Coming Soon to a Clinic Near You”. It is also the underpinning of conspiracy theories questioning his place of birth and presidential eligibility.

Others are upset about the thought of a “black” man (and family) in the White House. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports an increase in hate groups and militia, partly driven by anger toward the federal government (which they see as the enemy) headed by a black man. Since 2008, the Internet has been filled with hundreds of anti-Obama racist websites (cartoons, jokes, pictures, and commentary), although many of the offending images have since been removed due to public protest.

We may have come a long way in recent generations, but the journey to interracial harmony is far from over.

Source: V. N. Parillo, “Did the Election of President Obama Mean Race Relations Are Better?” *Strangers to these Shores* (Allyn and Bacon, 2011), 262.