



Barack Obama

THE FIRST BLACK PRESIDENT HOPE AT LAST FOR AMERICA?

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Though few of us had ever predicted it would happen in our lifetimes, the United States now has an African American President—the son of a black Kenyan and a white Kansan.

While there is much joy and excitement associated with the turn of events that brought Barack Obama to the White House, there is also a need to stay grounded in the issues of historical concern to African Americans and other people of color, and particularly how the new Obama administration will address such issues. This piece explores those more difficult elements of the policy agenda that President Obama will be called upon to address.

Some may assume that President Obama, as the first chief executive from the minority community, bears the responsibility for shaping an agenda for black, Latino, Native American and Asian American interests—and that following through on it is a burden

that rests squarely on his shoulders. But this top down approach is the precise inverse of the community organizing approach that helped put President Obama in office. I would argue that this same approach—carried forward by an ongoing coalition of civil rights, racial and ethnic interest organizations and policy think tanks—is vital to designing, articulating and advancing the policies and strategies that will effectuate the change that President Obama's election represents to so many people.

A quick glance at *WhiteHouse.gov*—the official Web site of the new administration—leaves no doubt that change has come to Washington. The policy teams that had been developing the agenda for the Obama campaign and during the presidential transition have set forth a detailed action agenda for a broad range of issues of critical concern to the nation during this era of war and economic downturn.

In the closing months of the Bush administration, the global economic crisis spurred a whirlwind of activity in Washington, as both Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson worked with members of Congress on extraordinary measures aimed at arresting the economy's accelerating decline. Whatever previous lip service the outgoing administration had given to budget balancing was now completely off the table, as the emphasis turned to massive bailouts of financial institutions and, currently, an almost equally massive program of government incentives and infrastructure spending designed to shock the American economy back to life. It is clear from the first weeks of his presidency that rescuing the economy is President Obama's top priority. Additionally, he has committed to a stronger military presence in Afghanistan while

continued on next page

seeking a firm timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. Energy and environmental concerns are also central to the new administration as it seeks to address uncertainty of the country's energy sources and, at the same time, explore opportunities for a shift toward a new energy economy that achieves the dual purpose of stabilizing supplies and reducing the environmental damage caused by our fossil fuels addiction.

Indeed, the precipitous contraction of the economy in 2008, which has led to extraordinary weakness across our housing and stock markets, as well as in the financial/banking sector, has left the new administration with considerable challenges. As just one example, job losses are accelerating month by month as we continue into 2009. The Associated Press reports that the nation lost 524,000 jobs in December, bringing the total job loss for last year to 2.6 million, the largest since World War II.¹

Amid all this, a key challenge will be to help the new administration maintain its focus on the fact that many of these national problems and crises affect the African American community with considerably more intensity than they do the population as a whole. The grave instabilities in the American economy can be expected to have even more extreme impact on African Americans whose income, unemployment and wealth compares poorly with whites. The rapid increase in home foreclosures means that the most significant source of wealth for most Americans will be replaced by increased debt. The sharp drop in confidence in the economic status of banks, the auto industry and the high cost of energy (in mid 2008) have been especially important for African Americans, due to their employment concentration in the auto sector. Unemployment in Michigan has risen above 10 percent and black workers in the auto industry have been deeply affected.²

While the administration's efforts to improve the overall economy will no doubt aid African American families, we must not lose sight of the broader goals of advancing economic opportunities in communities where they have been lacking for years.

Melvin Oliver and Richard Shapiro's *Black Wealth, White Wealth* (2006), reports the evidence of important racial differences in income and wealth holdings. The ratio of black income to white is 62 percent, but the ratio of median net worth is eight percent, and mean net worth is 25 percent. The proportion of households with zero or net financial assets is 25.3 percent among whites, 60.9 percent among blacks, and 54 percent among Hispanics.³ Some improvement in

specific attention to race? The tendency, at least in the broader political environment, has been to frame policy into mutually exclusive categories. Barack Obama's election to the Presidency has brought forth a new twist on an old argument—namely, that race is now less important and needs no longer be addressed in the same way that it has been in the past. It would be more sensible to ensure that the economic interests of blacks, Latinos and other populations with already distinctive interests be included in economic policy, and that discrimination be avoided in policy development and formation.

These issues and strategies have been at the center of national partisan and policy conflict during the decades following the civil

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these figures (based on 1988 data across race and language) may have occurred between 1988 and 2009, but it is also likely that the recent economic changes and the problems in subprime mortgages will certainly have a severe negative impact on African American families, thus widening the gap between blacks and whites.

African American, Latino and other organizations representing people of color must shape both a policy agenda *and* the political strategy to incorporate their distinctive political interests into the administration's policies. But how should that be done? Should the policy strategy emphasize an end to racial discrimination, with race specific policies? Should policy focus on economic development without

rights movement, as the industrial economy declined and as African Americans pushed for increased attention to their economic standing. So policy organizations that focus on urban and racial/ethnic interests must consider both the substantive policy agenda as well as the process of constructing a strategy for implementation. Examples that should be high on the racial/ethnic politics agenda should include, for example, the protection of voting rights and more extensive attention to the economic status of African Americans.

Why should voting rights and civil rights policy receive continued attention? These are areas that have received contradictory attention in recent years. The *Voting Rights Act* was extended in 2006 for another 25 years, with the apparent support of the

1. Phillip Elliot, "Obama advisers: Plan would create up to 4.1M jobs," January 10, 2008, Associated Press, http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hEx3tiPJhZQLVqjNmHR_oP6FZMuwD95KF70G0.
2. Mary Chapman, "Black Workers Hurt by Detroit's Ills", December 29, 2008. *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/30/business/30detroit.html?_r=1.
3. Melvin Oliver and Richard Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge Press, 2006) 88-89.

United States Congress as well as the Bush administration. Yet the Supreme Court has recently agreed to consider *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District No. 1 v. Mukasey*, a case which challenges the constitutionality of the continued existence of Section 5 of the Act. Section 5, which some call the core of the VRA, creates preclearance of new voting law changes by covered jurisdictions. Linda Greenhouse, in a recent *New York Times* op-ed (January 9, 2009) speculated that Chief Justice Roberts, who clerked for the previous Chief Justice Rehnquist, would agree with his predecessor's opposition to this provision of the *Voting Rights Act*.⁴


A second element of voting rights, for which the President has direct executive branch responsibility, is the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. This division has enforcement and prosecution responsibilities over civil rights policy areas including, voting, education, disability rights, housing, and employment and immigration related employment. An investigation by the Inspector General of the Department of Justice concluded that an official who recently held the role of Deputy Assistant Attorney General and other roles with responsibility for the Civil Rights Division had "considered political and ideological affiliations when hiring and taking other personnel actions relating to career attorneys, in violation of Department policy and federal law, and his actions also constitute misconduct".⁵ Strikingly, 64 percent of this official's hires during the years he was in administrative positions in the Civil Rights Division were identified as ideologically Republican, while only two percent were ideologically Democrat. The report concluded that in his hiring decisions, this appointee "considered whether candidates were 'real Americans,' 'right thinking,' 'solid,' 'on the team' and other similar terms, which

we concluded referred to his consideration of political and ideological affiliations."⁶

Presumably like-minded attorneys remain in the Civil Rights Division and continue to have an important influence on areas of civil rights including the Voting Section. President Obama's campaign Web site takes note of the ideological hiring patterns in the Justice Department and comments on the division's legal action: "The voting section filed *no discrimination cases* on behalf of African American voters *between 2001 and 2006*. The Bush Administration has only filed three cases under Section 2 overall, and has cut staffing for voting rights cases."⁷ As this piece was being written, President Obama's nominee for Attorney General, Eric Holder, was still undergoing Senate confirmation. These areas of the Civil Rights Division staffing, policy enforcement and the administration's handling of voting rights policy will need considerable attention.

Finally, there is the question of how to generate political support for both the political status (e.g. voting rights) and the economic status of African Americans (equality in income and wealth). Should the policy strategy emphasize an end to racial discrimination with race specific policies; should there be a focus on economic development without a specific attention to race? The tendency, at least in the broader political environment, is to frame policy in these mutually exclusive categories. And, of course, Barack Obama's election to the Presidency has encouraged some to argue that race is less important, and need not be addressed in the same way that it has in the past. It would make more sense to ensure that the economic interests of blacks, Latinos and other populations with already distinctive interests be included in economic policy, and that discrimination be avoided in the

formation of policy. These issues have been at the center of national partisan and policy conflict for the last decades as the industrial economy declined and as blacks pushed for increased attention to their economic standing.

Research by Linda Faye Williams, Dona and Charles Hamilton and Ira Katznelson, has explained that the failure to incorporate African Americans into social security, retirement and the social policy framework at the time of the Great Depression suppressed African American economic standing for at least two generations afterwards. Our current period of economic instability, which gave rise to the American electorate's readiness for change and its willingness to elect a black President, has also created an opportunity for the nation to begin to construct a more inclusive social policy agenda. The task will be to determine how to shape a national agenda that also addresses a black agenda. Many will insist that the appropriate approach will be to put this task on the President himself. That will not suffice. Successful new policies will be the sum of many parts, and we each have to play ours. Generating an audacious strategy—that will work—is our challenge. 

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4. Linda Greenhouse, "The Chief Justice on The Spot," *The New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/opinion/09greenhouse.html?_r=1.

5. "An Investigation of Allegations of Politicized Hiring and Other Improper Personnel Actions in the Civil Rights Division." Office of Inspector General – Office of Professional Responsibility. July 2, 2008; Released January 13, 2009. Accessed from the Department of Justice, Inspector General's Web site: <http://www.usdoj.gov/oig/special/s0901/final.pdf> pp. 65.

6. *Ibid*.

7. Emphasis added - January 25, 2009 <http://change.gov/search/results/b69e7ab3d8b02f9d61932d252f78fe47/>.