The Political Psychology of Race

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As both everyday experience and a wealth of social-scientific data attest, race continues to play an important role in conditioning not only individuals’ life outcomes, but also their social and political attitudes (Dawson, 1994; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, & Bobo, 2000; Tate, 1993). In particular, it is clear that identifications and preferences often thought of as purely “political” have become increasingly saturated with racial meaning (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Glaser, 1996; Huckfeldt & Kohfeld, 1989; see also Gilens, 1999; Mendelberg, 2001), and that conflicts between racial groups and conflicts over racial issues have become more and more central to the main axes of political conflict in the United States and other societies.

The purpose of this symposium is to bring together the contributions of five young scholars doing important work on the psychological dimensions of the intersection between race and politics. While this nexus also has critical historical and institutional dimensions (Huckfeldt & Kohfeld, 1989; see also Mendelberg, 2001), political psychology is uniquely positioned to analyze the linkage between race and politics. Perhaps the most important contribution of political psychology in this area has to do with matters of social identity—or to be more precise, *attachments* to racial ingroups and ingroup-related social institutions, on one hand, and *resentments* toward racial outgroups, on the other (Kinder & Winter, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Simply put, a variety of research suggests that racial-group attachments and resentments are primary psychological antecedents of both White and Black Americans’ attitudes toward social policies with explicit and implicit racial content (see Sears, 1988; Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, & Bobo, 2000; see also Gilens, 1999). In turn, identity-related variables may provide an essential link between broad social and historical factors—such as the cultural values of a particular society, or the ways its institutions condition
and regulate intergroup competition for power and material resources—and the political behavior of individuals.

This psychological focus on attachment and resentment has played a particularly important role in making sense of the growing intersection between race and ostensibly nonracial identifications and preferences. For example, an important line of research has examined the growth of covert links between attitudes toward African Americans and various “race-coded” issues (Gilens, 1999; Mendelberg, 2001). This body of work suggests that White resentment toward African Americans has become a strong predictor of support for punitive social policies in the domains of social welfare and criminal justice and that these resentments may provide a crucial psychological link between biases in media coverage and elite discourse, on one hand, and White individuals’ actual political attitudes and behaviors, on the other (see esp. Gilens, 1999). Elsewhere, large-scale analyses have suggested that intergroup differences in the valence and intensity of these resentments—along with ingroup attachments—may account for a large portion of the “racial divide” in public opinion about racial and nonracial matters alike (Kinder & Winter, 2001).

Race-related social identifications also appear to play a role in various forms of political involvement and participatory behavior. One of the simplest of these involvements is party identification or a psychological attachment to a political party that transcends voting behavior (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). In studies of race and politics, an enduring theme is the role of racial identity and group-interest perceptions in the development of African Americans’ ties to the major political parties. Work in this area suggests that a strong sense of “linked fate” with other African Americans—coupled with the enduring historical role of race in conditioning access to power and resources in American society—leads Blacks from a variety of class backgrounds to form party attachments on the basis of how well different parties pursue shared Black interests (e.g., Dawson, 1994). The operation of this principle can be seen in the long-standing attachment of African Americans to the Democratic Party. While African Americans initially gravitated toward the Democratic Party for economic reasons during the New Deal era (Weiss, 1983), the migration of Black voters from the South to the North created the necessity for the Democratic Party to adopt race-based platforms in order to win elections in Northern urban areas (Carmines & Stimson, 1989). Subsequently, the Democrats’ commitment to and successful passage of critical civil-rights legislation solidified a pattern of Black support of the Democratic party which continues to this day.

At the same time, social ties and identifications associated with the Black church continue to be an important force in Black political socialization and participation. In addition to imparting community values and bonds, the church helps distribute political information, teaches political skills, and encourages norms of political activity (Calhoun-Brown, 1996; Tate, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In particular, as a political organization the church is uniquely
able to mobilize by creating “selective social incentives” for those who participate in the political activities that it encourages (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Thus, political psychology has made a variety of important contributions to our understanding of the linkage between race and politics. Moreover, in doing so, it has not merely supplemented other approaches: Rather, it has made the examination of psychological processes and constructs a central part of inquiry in this area without ignoring broader historical and institutional aspects of the race-and-politics interface. The five contributions which make up this symposium—all offered by young scholars currently at the forefront of work in this area—exemplify this mode of analysis. Three of the contributions focus primarily on the effects of racial attitudes, cues, and identifications on political attitudes among Whites, while the other two focus on the connection between race-related social attachments and various forms of political mobilization (e.g., party identification, political activism, etc.) among African Americans.

The first contribution is offered by Christine Reyna, Amanda Tucker, William Korfmacher, and P. J. Henry, who examine the differing beliefs of supporters and opponents of affirmative action. Taking their cue from earlier work on the different frames used in elite discussions of affirmative-action policy, Reyna and her colleagues argue that supporters of affirmative action may think of the policy in terms of its “merit-upholding” applications (e.g., making special efforts to recruit members of underrepresented groups), while opponents may think of it in terms of “merit-violating” applications (e.g., quotas). Using data from two Chicago-area samples, they find a strong pattern of support for this hypothesis. However, they also find that both supporters and opponents of affirmative action show more support for merit-upholding than merit-violating applications of the policy. Additional analyses indicate that a similar pattern can be found among respondents with different attitudes toward African Americans. As the authors note, these findings suggest that supporters and opponents of this highly controversial policy may actually share more common ground than is often admitted.

From a very different perspective, Christopher Federico addresses another policy-related topic: the relationship between negative perceptions of African Americans and attitudes toward welfare. As a number of studies have suggested, negative perceptions of African Americans are strongly related to hostility toward welfare among Whites, particularly in the presence of racial cues (e.g., Gilens, 1999). Nevertheless, a long line of research on the liberalizing effects of education suggests that these effects might be weaker among college-educated Whites. Taking issue with this interpretation, Federico argues that the role of education may be more complex. While education should lead to an increased awareness of tolerant norms, reducing the overall prevalence of negative racial perceptions, it should also lead to higher levels of cognitive ability, thereby strengthening the relationship between these perceptions and policy attitudes. Consistent with this argument, Federico shows that racial cues are more—rather than less—likely to strengthen the relationship between negative racial perceptions and evaluative
responses to welfare among college-educated Whites. This strongly suggests a need to reconsider the assumption that education inevitably weakens the influence of intolerant attitudes and racially tinged environmental cues.

Rather than focusing specifically on attitudes toward racial groups and race-related policy issues, Cara Wong and Grace E. Cho take a step back and examine a potentially important antecedent of these attitudes: White racial identification. In contrast to approaches which have downplayed the role and even the existence of White racial identity, their analyses of data from eight different National Election Studies conclude that about half of American Whites do feel some sense of racial identification. Validating the significance of this identification pattern, Wong and Cho find that White identification relates to racial attitudes among Whites in much the same way as Black identification does among African Americans: White identification leads to more positive feelings about Whites and slightly more negative feelings about African Americans among Whites, while Black identification leads to more positive feelings about African Americans and an inconsistent pattern of feelings about Whites among African Americans. However, despite the apparent reality of White racial identification, they find that closeness to the White ingroup is only weakly related to Whites’ actual policy attitudes. Thus, Wong and Cho’s work suggests that social identity may be relevant not just to the attitudes of minority groups, but also to the attitudes of majority groups often assumed to have no real sense of attachment to the ingroup.

As noted above, the other two contributors examine the connection between race-related social attachments and political identification and engagement among African Americans. Harwood McClerking and Eric McDaniel explore the continuing importance of the church in mobilizing political participation among African Americans. In this effort, they go beyond traditional studies of the role of black churches that focus on their ability to educate, impart political skills, and develop norms for political behavior. Instead, they focus on the specific activities within churches that encourage participation. More importantly, their model acknowledges heterogeneity among political churches; some churches engage in activities that are more likely to promote participation than others do. In particular, the authors assert that churches with activities that underwrite the costs of participation and churches or that create obligations to participate are more successful in mobilizing their members. To test this theory, they analyze the effects of a number of types of church activities on both political and nonpolitical participation. Interestingly, and corresponding with their hypothesis about the power of creating obligations, communication between congregation members appears to have as great an effect on participation as direction from clergy members does.

Finally, Samantha Luks and Laurel Elms address a related issue in race and politics: the dynamics of black party identification. As it has been well documented, the overwhelming majority of blacks have supported Democratic candidates (Tate, 1993; Miller & Shanks, 1996). However, they note that in the years since the Civil Rights movement, African Americans have become less likely to
identify as Democrats and more likely to call themselves independents or say they identify with no political party at all. They argue that one force behind the changing partisan composition of blacks is generational replacement. As the portion of the black population who did not directly experience the Civil Rights movement grows larger, African Americans as a group have become less strongly Democratic. To isolate the effects of generational replacement, the authors estimate an age-period-cohort model on a series of over 200 public opinion surveys ranging from 1973 to 1994. Additionally, they examine variables that can be considered sources of partisan differences caused by age, period, and cohort effects and examine the forces of regional and economic trends on the partisan composition of African Americans.

In sum, the papers gathered here represent the cutting edge of contemporary work on the psychological dimensions of the interface between race and politics. In addition to appreciating the psychological constructs relevant to this interface as important variables in their own right, the perspectives which follow also take care to link these constructs to the broader social, historical, and institutional contexts in which intergroup relations are actually enacted. In doing so, they provide an excellent and more general example of how the uniquely interdisciplinary approach associated with political psychology can enrich our understanding of problems in a particular domain.

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