

Still Divided by Color

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It is always hard to say when books begin, but I believe that *Divided by Color* got its start in the fall of 1969, as I was entering graduate school in social psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. As best I can recollect, I was drawn to social psychology—social psychology in the tradition of Allport, Asch, and Newcomb—because it seemed to offer the conceptual and methodological tools required to analyze persistent and seemingly intractable social problems. At UCLA, I had the immediate good fortune to run into David Sears, who invited me to work on an analysis he was about to undertake of the rancorous campaign for the mayor's office of Los Angeles that had taken place the previous spring. The contest had matched Tom Bradley, a city councilman, against Sam Yorty, then the incumbent mayor. Bradley was black, Yorty white, and Los Angeles, despite its sunny affluence and pleasant climate, was a frightening crucible of mounting racial tensions and animosities. Trying to understand this single episode, I fell into the study of race relations and American politics, from which I have still not recovered. It is a subject "difficult to settle," as Gunnar Myrdal (1944) put it in the introduction to *An American Dilemma*, "and equally difficult to leave alone" (p. lxvii).

In *Divided by Color*, Lynn Sanders and I attempt to illuminate the current terrain of American racial politics and to do so through a detailed analysis of what white and black Americans think about affirmative action, school desegregation, federal aid to cities, welfare reform, and more. Our evidence comes primarily from recent national surveys carried out by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, located at the University of Michigan, as part of the Center's ongoing series

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of National Election Studies. Aware (though no doubt insufficiently) of the limitations that attend the statistical analysis of sample surveys, we try to place our findings in a broader context, one informed by historical descriptions of American race relations, by accounts of racial conflicts in particular American communities, and by philosophical treatments of the ideas of equality, liberty, and democracy that current debates over race engage.

Divided by Color begins by demonstrating that black and white Americans are indeed deeply divided in their views on politics and society. On the government's obligation to ensure equal opportunity to all citizens regardless of color, on federal programs that assist blacks, and on affirmative action in employment and schooling, a huge racial rift opens up. Blacks and whites also disagree sharply over policy questions that are racial in implication, where references to race in public debate are covert or implicit, as in discussions of welfare reform or crime and punishment. Imposing racial differences also show up on a whole array of social policies, with black Americans much more likely to support expansive and generous programs.

In the annals of public opinion research, differences of this scope and magnitude are simply without peer: Differences by education or income or gender or religion or any other social characteristic pale by comparison. The racial divide in opinion widens when whites talk with white interviewers and blacks talk with black interviewers, itself a sign of the difference race makes to our social and political lives. It is as apparent among ordinary citizens as it is among elites. It is not a mask for class differences: It is rooted in race, in those differences of history and circumstance that define the black and white experience in the United States. And if differences by race are nothing new to American politics, they are at least as prominent now as they were a generation ago, a sign of a deep and perhaps deepening racial estrangement.

Of course, not all blacks take the same position on affirmative action, just as all whites do not express the same view on welfare, and it is the main purpose of *Divided by Color* to explain these variations. Why do Americans believe what they do about school desegregation or affirmative action or food stamps? One possible and plausible explanation is provided by self-interest. The simple idea here is that in their role as citizens, Americans are single-minded seekers of advantage. According to this view, high-minded reference to the public interest or the good society is just so much idle talk; underneath all the uplifting words is the relentless press for personal (or familial) advantage. But self-interest, defined this way, turns out in our analysis to be largely irrelevant to public opinion on matters of race. When faced with proposals on school desegregation or affirmative action, whites and blacks come to their views without calculating what's in it for them. Self-interest cannot explain the racial divide.

Self-interest cannot, according to our results, but *group* interest can, at least partially. Many white Americans believe that affirmative action policies threaten their collective interests, and this sense of group threat is systematically related to their views on matters of race. Likewise, black Americans are more likely to support remedial policies insofar as they believe that such policies will help blacks in general (quite apart from what the policy will do for them personally) and insofar as they believe that blacks as a group continue to face discrimination (regardless of the discrimination they themselves encounter). So interests do have a role to play in public

opinion: interests that are collective rather than personal, group-centered rather than self-centered. In matters of opinion, citizens seem to be asking themselves not so much "What's in it for me?" as they are asking "What's in it for my group?"

The apparent unimportance of self-interest for public opinion is not necessarily cause for celebration. Citizens are as apt to sink below self-interest as they are to rise above it. A disheartening case in point is provided by our next major finding: the importance of racial prejudice as an explanation for white public opinion.

Racial prejudice is not now what it once was. In our own century alone, it has undergone two important alterations, one reflected in the decline of the doctrine of biological racism, the other provoked by the sweeping changes and turbulent events that comprised the racial crisis of the 1960s. As a consequence of these developments, animosity toward blacks is expressed today less in the language of inherent and permanent difference and more in the language of American individualism. Under this view, the virtues of diligence, hard work, and determination are conspicuous by their absence from black life; blacks are unwilling to try to make it on their own and all too willing to take what they have not earned. Expressed in such terms, racial resentment is thriving. On equal opportunity in employment, school desegregation, federal assistance, affirmative action at work, and quotas in college admissions, racially resentful whites line up on one side of the issue, and racially sympathetic whites line up on the other. Racial resentment is not the only thing that matters for race policy, but by a fair margin it is the most important thing.

Such results would be enough to establish the political significance of racial resentment, but we turned up more. Indeed, perhaps our most striking result is the intrusion of racial resentment on opinions that are ostensibly not about race at all. Racial resentment is naturally most important in accounting for white opinion on such policies as affirmative action and fair employment, but it also shows up on welfare, capital punishment, family leave, sexual harassment, gay rights, immigration, spending on defense, and more. In this way, our results recall those reported by Adorno and his colleagues in *The Authoritarian Personality*, the famous and monumental study of anti-Semitism carried out in the United States in the 1940s (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Its purpose was to explain the nature and origins of anti-Semitism and to understand the implications of anti-Semitism for democratic society, tasks made urgent by the emergence of fascism in Europe. I take the major discovery of *The Authoritarian Personality* to be that anti-Semitism was just one aspect of a person's broader outlook on society and politics. Fear and contempt for Jews, it turned out, was often accompanied by fear and contempt directed at blacks, criminals, Japanese Americans, conscientious objectors, immigrants, and "foreign ideas."

When *The Authoritarian Personality* was published, it was greeted with widespread acclaim and, then, in the space of a few years, was buried under an avalanche of criticism. The critics were right to point out the study's defects, and they were persuasive. But it is important to keep in mind that the powerful critical literature provoked by *The Authoritarian Personality* established only that the study failed to prove its conclusions, not that its conclusions were incorrect. This is an important distinction, one that seems to have been missed in the methodological battering the study received. And though it has come in a trickle, research over the past four decades

generally sustains Adorno and company's insistence that there is an underlying coherence to the variety of ideas that make up an individual's outlook on society, economics, and politics. This is just what we find as well.

The parallel is worth pointing out, but it should not be pressed too far. To reduce ethnocentrism (or prejudice) entirely to personality ignores the role played by elites and institutions in the creation and promotion of ethnocentric ideologies. It is oblivious to the economic, social, and political conditions that give rise to ethnocentrism. And it is blind to the part that leaders and parties play in the mobilization of ethnocentrism for political purposes.

Public opinion in the affairs of race is not only a matter of group interests and racial prejudice; it is also, in part, a matter of principle. This is the third and final explanation that we consider. Perhaps white and black Americans derive their opinions on specific topics from broad principles. We take up three principles that might do this work: equal opportunity, economic individualism, and limited government. We investigate these three because each has received detailed attention in studies of the American political tradition; each has played a prominent role in national debates on issues of race; and each is neither so general as to be vacuous, nor so specific as to be of no use in guiding the variety of views that make up a person's outlook on politics. And finally, each of the three provokes genuine disagreement. Not all Americans are swept away by the call of equality; not everyone takes hard work and individual initiative to be virtues; not all Americans think of the national government as encroaching on their rights. Differences on these general matters of principle may therefore translate into corresponding differences on specific matters of policy.

And they do, though the effects of principles are generally modest. Of the three we examined, equal opportunity turned out to be the most important. Even here, contingent effects were the rule. Equality was enormously important when it came to school desegregation and fair employment, two issues at the vanguard of the struggle for equal rights and opportunities carried forward by the civil rights movement, but quite unimportant on the more contemporary issue of affirmative action, where, it would seem, both opponents and supporters could enlist equality as justification for their views. That is, opponents can reject affirmative action in the name of equality by arguing that affirmative action violates equal treatment. Meanwhile, supporters can embrace affirmative action in the name of equality by arguing that affirmative action brings the formal idea of equal opportunity to life. In short, like other political principles, equality is complicated and elastic; it can be stretched to more than one use, thereby furnishing adversaries with equally satisfying terms of moral reference.

So principles are part of our story about public opinion on race, but only a part, and sometimes a rather modest part at that. As such, our results do not square all that well with Myrdal's (1944) portrayal of American principles as comprising an unstoppable, triumphant creed. On the other hand, if the modesty and contingency of our results disappoint those who yearn for a politics of ideas, others may be surprised that ideas count at all.

Next, *Divided by Color* turns from ordinary citizens to political elites. Here, we argue that opinion depends not only on individuals' convictions—their group interests, social animosities, and political principles—but also on the nature of the ongoing

debate among political elites. Elites are constantly bombarding citizens with suggestions about how issues should be understood or, as we say, about how issues should be *framed*. In a series of experiments embedded in national surveys, we show that frames do in fact alter how citizens understand issues and influence what their opinions turn out to be.

Perhaps most important, we find that frames affect the prominence of racial resentment in public opinion. Under certain frames—those that remind whites that the issue in question is really a matter of whether blacks deserve help—the issue essentially gets converted into a referendum on black character. Then racial resentment becomes the dominant ingredient in public opinion; other considerations are shunted to one side. Under alternative frames, however—those that suggest that race policies should be thought of as conflicts of interest or as assistance to minorities in general or as help to the poor—the power of racial resentment is diminished, while principles, interests, and the claims of other groups all come more visibly into play. Under these frames, the interior debate that goes on within the minds of individual citizens appears richer, more complex, and perhaps healthier, for democratic society and public opinion alike.

The importance of elite frames carries us finally to the question of how racial issues have become insinuated into the American party system and into recent presidential campaigns in particular. Our argument here is that beginning with the Goldwater-Johnson race of 1964, Democratic and Republican presidential candidates have found themselves in an electoral predicament that revolves around race. The strategic problem for Democratic candidates is to maintain the loyalty and enthusiasm of black voters without alienating conservative whites: For Democratic presidential campaigns, the temptation on matters of race is silence and evasion. The strategic problem of Republican candidates is to draw the support of white conservatives without appearing to make racist appeals: The Republican temptation is racial code words. We illustrate this general argument with an intensive investigation of the 1988 presidential campaign, an excellent and dispiriting case in point.

It may have been difficult to see at the time, but race was in fact central to the 1988 contest: in the coded appeals to whites' racial resentments offered by the Republicans, in the studied avoidance of appeals to the core constituency of blacks by the Democrats, and finally and ultimately, in the decisions of white and black voters on election day. Presented with a campaign that featured carefully crafted racism on the Republican side and silence and evasion on the Democratic, many white Americans marched to the polls with racial resentments prominently in mind, while many black Americans sat the election out.

These last results imply that racial resentment is not an automatic part of American political discourse or public opinion. Its prominence is contingent, not fixed. Racial tensions are likely to be with us for a long time to come, but whether they are central to our politics or quite peripheral is up for grabs. That depends enormously on choices made by campaigns and officials on whether to exploit racial fears and resentments or leave them alone. And this, in turn, depends in part on what we allow campaigns and officials to get away with.

Slavery, Jim Crow, even Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement, now belong to the history books. But our racial troubles persist. American cities are

now more segregated by race than they were at the turn of the century. Blacks still face discrimination on the job, are still steered away from white neighborhoods when looking to purchase homes, and still must endure racist epithets on the streets, harassment by police officers as they make their way through public spaces, rudeness and excessive surveillance while they shop, coolness from their teachers and bosses, and racist jokes from their coworkers. Despite recent political gains, black citizens remain substantially underrepresented in government. Finally, although black Americans have made significant inroads into the middle class over the past 40 years, imposing racial differences in employment, health, income, and wealth remain.

All this is discouraging and seems increasingly hard to talk about. We offered *Divided by Color* in the hope that it might contribute to a keener understanding of the nature of racial politics and American democracy at the end of the 20th century and with the wish that it might help us find our way to a better future.

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