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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rca/464>

ISSN: 2101-048X

Publisher

David Diallo

Electronic reference

Olivier Richomme, « The post-racial illusion: racial politics and inequality in the age of Obama », *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine* [Online], 3 | 2012, Online since 04 March 2012, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rca/464>

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The post-racial illusion: racial politics and inequality in the age of Obama

Olivier Richomme

- 1 As Americans celebrated the much anticipated inauguration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial in Washington D.C. a few months ago, one could not help but raise questions about the state of race relations in the United States. How much did race matter 45 years after this great civil rights leader gave his most famous speech in the capital? Many commentators wondered if the election of Barack Obama and the overall evolution of the country indicated that the United States might be entering a new era in which race inequalities had been reduced to the point that they might no longer be such a spurious issue (Taeku Lee 2001). In other words, the election of first non-white president and the inauguration of the statue of the first African-American on the National Mall could be the symbols of a new era of post-racialism in America.
- 2 It cannot be denied that a sentiment of post-racial achievement spread throughout the United States during the 2008 presidential election and lasted until the inauguration. For many Americans, casting their ballots for this atypical candidate was proof that the United States had moved beyond race and overcome its racist past. Obama's message of hope meant the hope of a less racialized future. Such promise added a historical dimension to every ballot. However intoxicating this feeling was, it was short lived. Some time after the inauguration, political behaviors went back to normal, culminating in the 2010 mid-term elections that were as violent and as racially loaded as ever¹. Racial politics did not change overnight. In that regard Obama's election was an exception, an anomaly. America voted for a very special candidate under a very particular set of circumstances. We may not see the stars aligned in this way for a long time as we will attempt to show in this article.
- 3 We believe that, in spite of Obama's historical election, in the United States race is, to use Bob Blauner's expression (2001), "still the big news". Every socio-economic indicator, every demographic study, every political study shows that wealth, poverty, education,

spatial segregation, rates of incarceration, voting patterns are correlated to race. America is still the ideological battlefield of two institutional racial orders competing for power (King and Smith, 2005)². The claims of post-racialism developed by the conservatives in order to dismantle race-conscious public policies such as busing, affirmative action or even redistricting cannot sustain the avalanche of data and studies showing how racial disparities and racial material inequality still plague American society. Furthermore, it seems that anti-discrimination policies are the only form of government intervention that the American public is not ready to do away with. This is because the American people know that, in spite of some improvement and some encouraging signs, their daily lives are still marked by racial divides. Communities and identities are still defined by these racial fault lines.

1. The 2008 election as an exception

- 4 Far from disputing that the 2008 presidential election was not a historical election, this article argues that this election was, for many reasons, an exception and cannot be used as a yard-stick of how much race relations have evolved in the United-States.

a-The circumstances

- 5 Before the 2008 presidential election many scholars were wondering if the United States was ready and willing to elect a black man president. The stakes of the election were sometimes limited to this question. However, this perspective was a bit too simplistic to analyze the complexity of this historic election which raised many questions about identity politics and “blackness” in particular. For instance, instead of using the election of a black man to the White House as proof of the beginning of a post-racial era, one could argue, provokingly, that Barack Obama is not Black. Or to put it differently he is much more than that. He is the son of African immigrant that was raised by this white mother and white grand-parents in Hawaii and in Indonesia. Therefore, Barack Obama was not a traditional Black candidate. He was not a minister and had no affiliation to the Civil Rights movement. A fact that put his candidacy in jeopardy early on and which explains why Hillary Clinton, during the first months of the democratic primaries, was doing so well among the African-American leadership that had worked with her husband for decades. Obama had not paid his dues to this generation of Black leaders, the “Moses generation” as he called them in a brilliant speech in Selma (Remnick 2008). In many ways, his popularity among the African-American community was the result of a grassroots movement that the old African-American vanguard had no choice but to acknowledge. And even though the tone of his speeches can be sermonic, he is not a cleric as opposed to most black presidential candidates before him such as Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson. His foreign-sounding name makes him an oddity in American politics. His Muslim roots in the post-9-11 America would normally disqualify him for any state wide office, let alone the presidency. His middle-name is even the same as a former archenemy of the United-States. Voting for Barack Hussein Obama is not the same thing as voting for Jesse Jackson. Paradoxically the United States elected president is a candidate far more atypical than the classic African-American candidates voters were used to (Guillesspie 2009)³. For instance, Obama, himself the son of an immigrant, was very astute at using that part of his biography to help Latinos related to his life story and make his promise of

immigration reform sound sincere and compassionate. In the same manner, he was able to campaign convincingly in the Midwest, admittedly because people there reminded him of his grandparents, in a way that is generally impossible for traditional black candidates. So Obama was a terrific campaigner in part because of his ability to adapt to his audience thanks to a complex sense of identity that he brightly describes in his autobiography. Nevertheless, the election of the first non-white candidate goes beyond identity politics. It can be best explained if one takes into consideration the particular set of circumstances surrounding his candidacy. One of the most important aspects of the 2008 election is the unpopularity of George W. Bush. The fact that the country was willing to consider such a long-shot candidate rather than another republican is proof of the dissatisfaction the nation felt toward the previous administration. And the only reason why Obama had any room to operate during the democratic primaries is because he was not only the only elected official not to have voted for the invasion of Irak⁴ but he had actually been vocal about his opposition to it. That, in itself, gave him enough credit among the left when they were asking for troops withdrawal. We also need to mention that a few weeks before the election, while Barack Obama and John McCain were tied in the polls, the American economy plunged into the greatest recession since the 1930's. When it appeared that the republican deregulation approach of the past decade had resulted in a financial meltdown and a housing bubble, the GOP's reputation was fairly damaged. In addition to these extreme circumstances, Obama proved to be a great campaigner, an eloquent speaker and an amazing fundraiser. And a big part of his appeal was that he was different from anything we had ever seen before in American politics. Obama was elected because he was different. Because he was the opposite of George W. Bush. Because he was the opposite of what a traditional politician looked like. People did not vote for a black candidate, they voted for much more than that. If the United States had entered into a post-racial era, theoretically another black candidate could be elected president. However, it is almost impossible to come up with the name of another non-white candidate who, today, could have a viable candidacy. That is because the mix of circumstances that led to Obama's election cannot be duplicated. And Obama's appeal among white voters is by far an exception. Non-white candidates have a hard time being elected in large districts in which the white minority usually votes against them. This is especially true for statewide offices or federal seats. In 2011, the Senate was one hundred percent white. Most of the black caucus in Congress is still the result of minority-majority districts or highly democratic states. That is because racial polarization is still extremely high in the electorate (Ansolabehere, Persily and Charles)⁵. The race of the candidate and the race of the voting population is still one of the strongest determining factors in American politics. This makes Obama's election even more salient. But it remains an anomaly and can, by no means, be mistaken for a new norm.

b-A post-racial election?

- 6 Conservatives opposed to race conscious policies have argued for some time that the U.S. has moved beyond its racial divisions. They argue that racial slavery was abolished, Jim Crow segregation was ended by the Civil rights movement and administrative and political institutions were successfully reformed. Unpopular policies such as busing or affirmative action at elite universities or in the workplace are no longer necessary. Conservatives believe these measures were not meant to stay in place indefinitely and that now the time has come to do away with them. And they saw in the election of Barack

Obama the opportunity to vindicate their claim that the U.S. is now on the path of becoming a post-racial nation. This post-racial argument rests on the premise that race was absent from the 2008 election debates in spite of the presence of a black candidate. If race was not discussed by the two major party candidates it must be because race has become politically irrelevant or a second-tier topic. However, as Desmond King and Rogers Smith have argued, it seems that the absence of racial politics during the 2008 presidential election is more the result of concurring strategies on the part of the two candidates (King and Smith 2006). On the one hand, John McCain could not risk attacking Obama openly about his racial identity, it could backfire he was perceived as being prejudiced. His attack had to be limited to questioning Obama's authenticity as an American. By contrast McCain was "the American president Americans have been waiting for". Besides, McCain had little incentive to bring about racial issues since he was the representative of the conservative party which has championed a color-blind ideology. As far as the GOP is concerned race should be treated as being politically irrelevant. On the other hand, Obama was trying to appeal to a mostly white electorate and he was very careful not to be labeled as "the black candidate". He used at times his biracial heritage, at times his cosmopolitan upbringing, at times his immigrant family to reach out to particular segments of the electorate. Far from being the black candidate, he was the chameleon candidate, using the complexity of his identity to his advantage. But he could not talk about race or racial issues without running the risk of triggering fear among white voters that he would support race conscious policies. Such fears would have doomed his candidacy. At the same time, because of his racial identity and his background as civil rights lawyer, proponents of affirmative action measure assumed he would be more inclined to hear their concern than his conservative opponent. Obama could not demonstrate support toward race conscious measures if he did not want to alienate independents and he could not repudiate these same measures if he did not want to lose his democratic base. In other words, from a strategic standpoint, he had no other choice but to run on a « race-neutral » agenda while subtly indicating that he was not opposed to affirmative action policies. Obama in essence tried to build a new coalition composed of « racial-moderates », that is to say those Americans favoring a color-blind approach but willing to tolerate a few race conscious measures in the name of racial equality and proponents of racially-targeted policies who are willing to substitute them with other types of measures as long as they reduce racial inequalities. He achieved this by not talking about race and even minimizing the impact of race on the election. His rhetoric of unity and change was crafted in ways that both color blind and race-conscious advocates could accept. Even Obama's famous speech on race was adroitly titled "a more perfect Union". In it he urges "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 prosper" (Obama 2008).

2. The state of the racial divide

- 7 In his campaign book "The Audacity of Hope", Barack Obama warns the reader about the danger of believing the US has entered a post-racial era: "To suggest that our racial attitudes play no part in these disparities is to turn a blind eye to both our history and

our experience – and to relive ourselves of the responsibility to make things right” (Obama 2006). Here are some statistics illustrating the disparities in question:

a-Economic well-being

- 8 In 2008, before the economic crisis really took hold of the American economy, racial disparities were already sharp between families living below the poverty line: the respective rates were 8.6% for Non-Hispanic Whites while reaching 24.7% for African-Americans and 23.2% for Hispanic (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith 2010, p. 23). The rates of children living below poverty line was even higher and displaying the same disparity: Non-Hispanic Whites 15.3%, African-Americans 34.4%, Hispanics 30.3% (U.S. Census 2011). The greatest disparity seems to strike the poorest of the poor since the rate of black people living under 50% of the poverty line is almost three times the rate of non-Hispanic Whites, 4.1% to 11.4% (DeNavas-Walt and al. 2010, p. 26). Until the census releases more recent figures one can only speculate but it is very likely that the Great Recession has widened the gap⁶, especially after so many states decided to reduce social benefits rather than raise taxes when facing budget difficulties. However, inequalities continue for people living above the poverty line: In 2009, the median income for African-American households represented 62% of the median income of non-Hispanic White households (DeNavas-Walt and al. 2010, p. 14). Besides, evidence shows that black family members need to work longer hours and more weeks per year to attain their incomes: Thomas M. Shapiro considers that middle-income African-American families, in 2000, needed to work the equivalent of 12 more weeks per year than White families to accumulate the same amount of money (Shapiro 2004, p7). Furthermore, Shapiro and Oliver have argued disparities widen when we move from income to wealth, which is not surprising considering wealth is often takes generations to amass (Oliver and Shapiro 2006).

b-Health

- 9 For political reasons Obama needed to present his health care reform as cost effective on the long run because that way universal coverage did not appear as a measure benefiting mostly the poor or the minorities. It could be presented as lowering the financial impact of health coverage for all Americans. But it is evident that this reform would help reduce racial disparities in health coverage that have become staggering. In 2009, the census bureau estimated that African American were twice as likely as Whites, and Latinos three times as likely as Whites, to live without health insurance: 12%, 21%, 32.4 % (DeNavas-Walt and al. 2010, p.31)⁷. Infant mortality is notoriously high in the US but Black infant mortality is more than twice as high that of Whites (13.7 for 1,000 birth compared to 5.7). And life expectancy is much lower for black males and black females compared to their white counterparts (U.S. Department for Health and Human Services 2007). The list is long of medical conditions affecting minorities and especially Blacks at higher rates than Whites: heart conditions, cardiovascular accidents, chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, but also diseases such as tuberculosis, AIDS and other STDs. These troublesome statistics are related to socio-economic factors such as unemployment rates and living conditions.

c-Housing

- 10 A very large gap persists in rates of house ownership between Blacks and Whites (43% versus 75% in 2003). Besides studies show that this gap widened between 1999 and 2003 (Katz, Stern and Fader 2005). However the most alarming might be the 2010 analysis of the foreclosure crisis by Center for responsible lending which concludes that “the majority (an estimated 56%) of families who lost homes were non-Hispanic and white, but African-American and Latino families were disproportionately affected relative to their share of mortgage originations. Among recent borrowers, we estimate that nearly 8% of both African Americans and Latinos have lost their homes to foreclosures, compared to 4.5% of whites. The racial and ethnic disparities in these estimated foreclosure rates hold even after controlling for differences in income patterns between demographic groups” Gruenstein Bocian, Li and Ernst 2010). This discrepancy is the direct result of the exposition to subprime lending that persists for minorities at different income levels (Fernandez 2007).

d-Education

- 11 The racial gap in educational attainment remains one of the most important reasons why African-Americans and Hispanics are more likely to be excluded from the labor market. In 2003, 89% of the white population older than 25 had graduated from high school. This figure was 80% for African-Americans and only 57% for Latinos (Stoops 2004). But a high school diploma in today economy doesn't amount to much. A college degree is now necessary to enter the labor market. In 2003, 30% of the white population older than 25 years old had received a bachelor degree, while only 17.3% of Blacks and a meager 11.4% of Hispanics had received one too (Stoops 2004). Minorities (except Asians) are less likely to enroll but also less likely to graduate. According to the most recent statistics dating to 2000, the nationwide college graduation rate for African-American students stands at an awfully low rate of 42% while white students' graduation rate reaches 62% nationwide. The graduation rate for black male is a dismal 35%⁸. These differences are enormously consequential. But maybe the most dangerous trend for America's future is that of school segregation. Studies have shown that the percentage of black students attending majority non-white schools has increased in all regions of the country between 1991 and 2004, from 66% to 73% (Orfield and Chungmei, 2006, p.9). If one combines it with the fact that schools are financed locally, that the phenomenon of White-flight is not rescinding, that policies such as busing are very unpopular and that the Supreme Court conservative majority does not seem to find constitutional violations in patterns of school segregation, it is hard to see how this trend can be reversed.

e-Incarceration

- 12 Finally, there is one last trend that not only is going in the wrong direction but just as school segregation has the potential to create a situation of racial exclusion that is akin to the apartheid of the past. In her book, the new Jim Crow, Michele Alexander, is quite convincing when she describes the expansion of the American incarceration policy a system of social control that legally denies the ability to obtain employment, housing and public benefits. Once released, ex-felons are quite frequently denied the right to vote and

are excluded from juries and are “through a web of laws, regulations and informal rules... relegated to a racially segregated and subordinate existence” (Alexander, 2010, p.4). The incarceration rate in the United States has been multiplied by 5 over the last 30 years (from 350,000 in 1972 to 2.2 million in 2009) and drug convictions account for the majority of the increase. The incarceration rate of the United States is now almost 8 times that of France (743 per 100,000 against 96). These figures are a tragedy for the African-American community because it represented, in 2009, 40% of the U.S. prison population (West 2010). Black non-Hispanic males are incarcerated at the rate of 4,749 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents of the same race and gender. Hispanic males were incarcerated at the rate of 1,822 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents. White males were incarcerated at the rate of 708 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents (West 2010). However these tremendous racial disparities cannot be explained by rates of drug crime. Studies show that people of every racial group use and sell illegal drugs at the same rate (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2010). It is difficult to deny that this system of social control has become racialized. Nowadays, one in three young African American men is currently under the control of the criminal justice system, either in prison, in jail, in probation or on parole (Alexander 2010, p. 9). In many urban cities these rates are higher (Barman 2004, p.3)⁹. The impact on the African-American community is devastating and does not bode well for its future. What is currently perceived as a criminal justice issue should be perceived as a civil rights crisis.

3. Racial politics today

a-The persistence and evolution of the color-line

- 13 In light of this data any discourse about post-racialism seems misguided. Race still structures America's social fabric. As a consequence, Whites and Blacks view the world with drastically different lenses. A survey taken in 2009 by Lawrence D. Bobo and Alicja Simmons can shed some light on the state of the different attitudes among Whites and Blacks toward race relation in the U.S. after the election of Barack Obama. The question was: “Do you think that blacks have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve racial equality in your lifetime, or will never achieve racial equality?”. 61.3% of white Americans responded that Blacks have achieved racial equality. Another 21.5 percent of whites believed that “blacks will soon achieve racial equality”. So, 83.8% of white Americans seem to think that the post-racial moment is effectively here. On the other hand, 17.4% of Blacks endorsed the idea that they have already achieved racial equality. A more significant portion, 36.2%, believes that they will soon achieve racial equality. So, 46.6% of respondents think that equality is within reach. However, 53.6% responded Blacks would “never achieve equality” or “not in respondents' life” (Bobo 2011, p. 29-30). These results indicate why any discussion of race becomes so polarized along the Black/White color-line. And the author of the study to conclude:

“The central tendencies of public opinion on these issues, despite real increasing overlap, remain enormously far apart between black and white Americans. When such differences in perception and belief are grounded in, or at least reinforced by, wide economic inequality, persistent residential segregation, largely racially homogeneous family units and close friendship networks, and a popular culture still suffused with negative ideas and images about African Americans, then there should be little surprise that we still find it enormously difficult to have sustained

civil discussions about race and racial matters. Despite growing much closer together in recent decades, the gaps in perspective between blacks and whites are still sizable” (Bobo 2011, p. 11).

- 14 In what seems to be a reference to this study, in his new book entitled “Not in our life time” Michael Dawson (2011), forcefully argues that in spite of the debate about a possible new post-racial America, the realities of American racial politics and the obstacles faced by black politics have fundamentally remained the same. Nevertheless, the new era launched by the 2008 election seems to be more complex from racial standpoint. The new institutional racial order is not static. Some divisions have the potential to shift over time as issues evolve. It would be a mistake to believe that the color-line is as fixed as it used to be. The widening class gap among African Americans is leading to tensions inside the community. And the white population is much more polarized along partisan lines than the African-American population. The explosive issue of immigration can potentially create division among conservatives and liberals. Latinos are far from being a homogenous political block. These tensions make it more complicated for politicians to have a debate about race and create a consensus to forge a strong coalition. Designing policies to address material inequalities between racial groups has become much harder. Successful social reform movements will have to reach across the racial line as they have done in the past but in a way that still needs to be defined. The democratic coalition has *de facto* become a pan-racial coalition but only time will tell if it can be sustained around a progressive agenda as opposed to being the only alternative to the conservatives. So what does this mean in political terms?

b-The future of identity politics

- 15 We believe King and Smith are right about their empirical claim that America’s racial politics has been historically structured as “evolving systems of opposed racial policy alliances” (King and Smith 2011). Furthermore, we agree with their analysis that the modern era is defined by the alignment of proponents of colorblindness, pro-market economists and the Republican Party versus the alignment of proponents of race-conscious policies, national regulatory and redistributive programs and the Democratic Party (King and Smith 2011). This diagnosis entails two consequences.
- 16 First, the Republican Party believes it has a strategic interest in alienating and stereotyping minorities. The “Southern strategy” has paid great dividends in terms of electoral success thanks to partisan realignment of the South. However, conservatives have deliberately lost the African-American vote and are running the risk of losing the youngest and fastest growing community in the country: Latinos. The fact that Blacks, during the 2008 election, voted for the democratic candidate at rate of almost 90% and Latinos at a rate of 67% led conservative operatives to the wrong conclusion. In a greatly polarized country where elections are usually close, the American two-party system gives as much incentives to demobilize voters as to mobilize them. Instead of trying to court minorities, conservatives opted for solidifying their White base through, sometimes not so subtle, race codes and reduce democrat turnout via vote suppression (Samuelson 2011). Because they vote democrat at such high rates marginalized groups (essentially poor minorities) have become the targets of legal manipulation of electoral rules: misinformation campaigns, exceedingly long lines at the polls, inaccurate registration record, the abuse of felon disenfranchisement laws, new voter ID rules preventing eligible voters from casting their ballot, party-run voter challenge campaigns, or the use of

provisional ballots that are then not counted (Foxx Piven, Minnite and Groarke 2009). The notorious 2000 election in Florida became the poster-child of black vote suppression but the situation in Ohio in 2004 was also well documented (Fitrakis, Rosenfeld and Wasserman 2006). There is a long history of vote suppression in the US that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 were supposed to fix (Kousser 1974)¹⁰. However, the structure of the electoral system is such that in tight races party operatives and campaign managers have no incentives for coalition-building. The short-term solution of mobilizing the base through wedge-issues and identity politics while limiting competition turnout is fast, less expensive and efficient. The electoral system is not designed to encourage crossing the color line. Majority-minority districts are good example of how spatial segregation and racial polarization is used to help minorities be elected. Minorities do get elected but without encouraging any crossover (Lublin 1999). So long as the electoral system does not provide incentives for increasing turnout and long-term coalition-building, electoral competition will lead to identity politics.

- 17 Second, the country is so polarized along these two racial policy alliances that one side is unlikely to win decisively in the near future. As a consequence, any successful political consensus will not come from one camp or the other but a combination of policies from each side. Sometimes, colorblindness and race-consciousness are supported purely for strategic reasons. The prorogation of the Voting rights Act in 2006 for another 25 years showed us how these ideological alliances are also the product of intricate partisan calculations (Persily 2007). The Republicans believe the Section 5 (Fuentes-Rohwerand and Charles) of the VRA is a violation of state sovereignty and represents an excess of power on the part of the federal branch. The Democrats believe that majority-minority districts put them at a disadvantage in other districts and leads to polarization of Congress (Cannon 1999). But Democrats could not vote against the prorogation of the VRA without infuriating their African-American and Latino allies. And Republicans are more than happy to tolerate the violation of state rights that represents preclearance if it leads a large number of very safe seats in the South. This shows the complexity of the alliances but also that ideological opposition between colorblind proponents and race-conscious proponents is dictated by considerations of partisan gain. Which suggests that there might room for negotiation and compromise.
- 18 Besides color-blind policies and race-conscious policies can coexist in the same political system and serve different needs at different times. Even proponents of a color-blind approach know that the situation in American prisons is so racially tense that segregation of inmates is the only practical solution that the prison industry has found to limit somewhat the level of violence¹¹. On this issue, for instance, political leaders must offer policies that help reduce crime but also take into consideration the negative impact the justice system has on Blacks and Hispanics. One without the other would be counterproductive. Reforming the justice system should be perceived by conservatives and liberals as a long-term *investment* for the entire nation's future even in a time of economic hardship. But for any of these policies to be successful they have to be part of a larger debate about the role of race in shaping the United States political order. For that, the country needs to admit that any discussion of a post-racial America is premature.

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NOTES

1. The most striking examples were related to illegal immigration as in Arizona for instance.
2. According to King and Smith the two institutional orders competing today are the color-blind coalition and the race-conscious coalition.
3. For a discussion of the new generation of black politicians such as Artur Davis, Deval Patrick, Harold Ford Jr. and Adrain Fenty.
4. He had not been elected to the U.S. Senate yet.
5. In this analysis of voting racial polarization in 2008 the authors conclude that "the 2008 election did not represent a fundamental shift in national patterns of race and vote choice".
6. The estimate increase from 2008 to 2009 were 0.8%, 1.1% and 2.1%.
7. The high rates for Hispanics seem to be correlated to being foreign born and not citizens, too aggravating factors.
8. "Black Student College Graduation Rates Remain Low, But Modest Progress Begins to Show". *The journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, http://www.jbhe.com/features/50_blackstudent_gradrates.html, accessed September 12 2011.
9. The author cites the Washington D.C. Department of Correction data for 2000 in which it is estimated that in Washington D.C., three out of four Young black men (nearly all those in the poorest neighborhood) can expect to serve time in prison.
10. The Democrats also used these tactics abundantly.
11. "Supreme Court debates use of segregation in prisons", USA Today, 2 November 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2004-11-02-prison-racial-segregation_x.htm, accessed September 12 2011.

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Keywords: African-Americans, Blacks, inequalities, Obama, politics, post-racial, race, statistics

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