

*Obama's Racial Politics in Context*

**Neither Black Nationalism nor Deracialization:  
*Barack Obama's Racial Politics in Context*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Many commentators have described Barack Obama as a ‘deracialized’ politician. In contrast to ‘racialized’ Black candidates, deracialized politicians are said to deemphasise their Black racial identity, downplay the racial legacies of American inequality, and favour race-neutral over racially targeted policies. Puzzlingly, this narrative of Obama’s racial politics sits incongruously with his political *curriculum vitae*, spent largely in contexts which are difficult to describe as deracialized. This article holds that commentators have misjudged Barack Obama’s racial politics by conflating a contingent electoral strategy with a deeper expression of Obama’s racial philosophical commitments. In explaining these commitments, the article finds the deracialized/racialized framing inadequate. Instead, it favours the typology of racial policy alliances situating Obama within the ‘race-conscious’ policy alliance rather than the ‘color-blind’ alliance. By returning to the site of Obama’s political development, Hyde Park in Chicago, the paper uncovers a tradition of racial politics in which Blacks formed coalitions with progressive Whites but also embraced Black racial identity, acknowledged the enduring legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, and supported targeted policies to overturn these racial legacies. The article argues that Obama was an inheritor of this tradition.

**Key words:** Black nationalism, deracialization, racial policy alliances, Barack Obama, racial coalitions, racialization, racial identity

## INTRODUCTION

Many commentators heralded the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama as the triumph of a post-racial politics pursued by a deracialized African American politician (Ifill, 2009; Clayton, 2010; Caesar et al., 2011; Carter &Dowe, 2015). Puzzlingly, this narrative of Obama's 'deracialized' politics sits incongruously with his political *curriculum vitae*. Barack Obama's pre-presidential political career was spent largely in contexts which are difficult to describe as deracialized. For his first political job, Obama turned down the offer of a clerkship at the prestigious District of Columbia Circuit Court to become the state director of an organisation which registered African Americans to vote. In the same decade, Obama was a lecturer in race and the law at the University of Chicago, a partner at a prominent civil rights law firm, and an author about a memoir on 'race and inheritance'. He represented a majority-Black seat in the Illinois state senate and ran for Congress in the longest-standing historically Black district in the United States. When he ran for the US Senate, Obama cited his achievement as the first Black president of the *Harvard Law Review* in television advertisements, and he spoke openly about race and civil rights in interviews. How does this political pedigree fit with descriptions of Barack Obama as a 'deracialized' politician?

This article seeks to answer the puzzle of Barack Obama's racial politics. Rather than see Obama as either a 'deracialized' or 'racialized' politician, the paper argues that Obama is more accurately described as a 'race-conscious' politician (King and Smith, 2005, 2011, 2014). Using the typology developed by Desmond King and Rogers Smith, this piece contends that Obama's sense of his own racial identity and his understanding of race in American society align much more closely with the 'race-conscious' coalition of political actors than with the 'color-blind' alliance (King & Smith 2011). This article calls on scholars to distinguish between a politician's racial campaign strategy (which may vary from one election setting to the next) from one's racial philosophy or racial politics (which typically does not vary).

The key to understanding Obama's position within the racial policy alliances typology is to understand the context of his political development. The paper highlights a particular approach to racial politics which was typical of White and Black progressives in the Hyde Park community of Chicago where Obama began his political career. Obama's pre-presidential political career was defined not by 'color-blind' or 'deracialized' issues but by a set of race-conscious policies designed to tackle racism beyond *de jure* racial discrimination. While this article does not test systematically at which points in his political career he may have strategically deemphasised these racial philosophical commitments, this study is nonetheless valuable for understanding the tradition of racial politics from which Obama emerged.

## I – THEORIZING BARACK OBAMA'S RACIAL POLITICS

The first section of this article offers a reassessment of the theoretical framing of Barack Obama's racial politics. Scholars have wrongly understood the racial dimensions of Obama's politics due to an overemphasis on election strategy. In order to draw generalisations about the candidate's wider racial philosophy, statements over time, biography, and racial context need to be taken more seriously. Rather than depend on the dominant framework of 'racialized' or 'deracialized' campaigns, Desmond King and Rogers Smith's conceptualisation of race-conscious and color-blind policy alliances can describe more accurately a person's racial politics.

Most scholarship on Black electoral politics has been limited to two models of Black candidacy: the 'racialized' campaign model, which is said to be typical in majority-Black constituencies and the 'deracialized' campaign model found in majority-White constituencies.<sup>2</sup> Huey Perry (1996, p. xii)

described these two models as the ‘twin pillars’ of Black electoral politics. Many commentators argue that the ‘racialized’ model involves adopting a ‘militant’ political style, appealing only to Black voters, and supporting policies of racial redistribution and reparation (Jeffries & Jones, 2006, p. 247). Christopher Karpowitz and colleagues (2014, p. 9) define it as ‘an aggressive style of political advocacy, a predisposition toward domestic interventionist policies, and a reflexive opposition to dispositional explanations of persistent racial inequality’. Associated with the Black nationalist or Black power approach to politics, Abigail Thernstrom and Stephen Thernstrom (1997, p. 483) assert that the racialized strategy is most effective in majority-Black districts, whose racial homogeneity has ‘invited the sort of militancy that became the model for the Black legislative candidate’.

In contrast, the deracialized model’s central hypothesis is that White voters will not support a Black candidate who overtly identifies with his or her Black racial identity. If Black candidates can avoid associations with their Black racial identity, then they can minimise the salience of race in the campaign and attract support on a non-racial basis. According to this view, the only way in which Black politicians win election in majority-White jurisdictions is by purging racial content from their campaigns. Joseph McCormick and Charles Jones (1993, p. 76) define deracialization as ‘[c]onducting a campaign in a stylistic fashion that defuses the polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit reference to race-specific issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent, thus mobilizing a broad segment of the electorate for the purposes of capturing or maintaining public office’. They added that the strategy was ‘needed to enhance effectively the likelihood of White electoral support in predominantly White political jurisdictions’ (McCormick and Jones, 1993, p. 76).

A deracialized strategy consists of three elements. First, a Black candidate must have a ‘non-threatening’, ‘mainstream’ political style (Strickland & Whicker, 1992, p. 208; Wilson, 1993, p. 176; Sigelman et al., 1995, p. 244; Sigelman, 1997, p. 181). Second, it asserts that Black candidates avoid the subject of race in appeals to White voters and not make any direct appeals to Black voters (Strickland & Whicker, 1992, p. 209).<sup>3</sup> Third, the model contends that Black candidates will focus on non-racial issues, avoiding policy matters which contain either implicit or explicit racial content (Wilson 1990). Table 1 describes how the two strategies are usually contrasted.

[Table 1 here]

Many commentators have described Barack Obama as a ‘deracialized’ politician. Niambi Carter and Pearl Ford Dowe (2015, p. 106) describe Obama as having a ‘deracialized’ message ‘void of a pursuit of racial group interests’. Melanye Price (2016, p. 159) contends that Obama followed ‘old techniques African American candidates used in efforts to deracialize’. Christopher Stout (2015, p. 77) argues that Barack Obama adopted a ‘nonracial campaign strategy’ and that he had a ‘race-neutral’ policy agenda. Similarly, Denis Nordin (2012, p. ix) describes Obama as pursuing a ‘race-free strategy’. Dewey Clayton (2010, p. 3) writes that Obama provides ‘a new paradigm for candidates of color to transcend race’.

While these assessments may have merit in the particular contexts of the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, commentators should be careful about using the deracialized strategy to draw wider conclusions about Barack Obama’s deeper racial philosophical commitments. Racial campaign strategies are temporary and reflexive to perceived hostility in a campaign setting. In contrast, racial philosophy or racial politics refers to a person’s enduring stances on racial matters, especially how they understand the nature of racial inequality and the appropriate set of policy remedies to address it. Deracialization has wrongly become conflated with a particular racial worldview, one which denies the enduring relevance of race in analysing American inequality and democracy. Such a worldview could

be described as a ‘post-racial’ politics, a philosophy often attributed to Barack Obama, but which this article holds has been misapplied.

A distinction between racial philosophy and racial strategy is faithful to the original depiction of deracialization in Charles Hamilton’s 1976 strategy document for the Democratic National Committee. Hamilton emphasised that deracialization referred to a temporary and pragmatic stance rather than a coherent set of racial beliefs. He explained that ‘the de-racialization document was addressed to a strategy applicable to electoral politics in the presidential contest in 1976. It was not a strategy to be pursued at all times in all places’ (Hamilton, 1977, p. 4-5). As the co-author of *Black Power* (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967), Hamilton’s guiding concern was using the political system to maximise meaningful, material gains for African Americans.

The presentation of deracialization as a *necessary* strategy in all majority-White elections is dangerous because it effectively kills off any possibility for Black elected officials to challenge racial inequality outside of areas where African Americans are already a majority. This is far from the spirit of Charles Hamilton’s foundational article on the topic which emphasised deracialization’s pragmatic, temporary, and limited application. The deracialization strategy was not intended as a permanent embrace of insipid, symbolic identity politics at the expense of the Black poor. It is a perverse irony that Hamilton’s concept has become a byword for austerity politics and an implicit embrace of the American racial order.

Instead of using the racialized/deracialized typology to analyse Barack Obama’s racial politics, scholars should look to the work of Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2011, 14) on racial policy alliances. They define racial policy alliances as ‘durable coalitions of political actors, activist groups, and governing institutions united by their stances on the central racial policy issues in the eras of American politics their conflicts help define’ (Smith et al., 2011). King and Smith’s typology is valuable because it reorients focus to politicians’ philosophical commitments rather than predominantly on their presentational differences.

In the current era, the ‘color-blind’ coalition holds that the racial policies of the 1960s civil rights period have served their purpose and that the continued use of racially-targeted policies only serves to sow divisions between people on the basis of race. ‘Color-blind’ advocates are willing to remove legal barriers to discrimination but oppose racially targeted policies and tend to discount the enduring role of race in shaping life outcomes. Indeed, color-blind advocates consider any race-based public policy to be inherently discriminatory and racist, even if such policies are targeted at historically marginalised racial minorities.

In contrast, the race-conscious policy coalition holds that centuries of slavery and racial apartheid in American have an enduring social and political legacy, even in an era of formal, legal equality. They argue policies should be made with the explicit concern for reducing America’s severe racial inequalities because the mere removal of *de jure* racial discrimination is insufficient to addressing the effects of centuries of racism in America. They are critical of color-blind policy because they believe it ‘disguises (sometimes deliberately) or normalizes (sometimes unwittingly) relationships of power and subordination’ (Guinier and Torres, 2002, p. 42). Both coalitions claim some allegiance to the civil rights movement and hold the other side’s position to be racist. Table 2 contrasts the two perspectives.

[Table 2 here]

In an October 2007 interview, presidential candidate Barack Obama made it clear that his analysis of racial inequality in America involved a rejection of the color-blind approach:

I don't believe it is possible to transcend race in this country... The notion that if we just ignore race somehow our own racial problems are solved is the kind of unfortunate thinking the Supreme Court recently engaged in on the Seattle schools case. Race is a factor in this society. The legacy of Jim Crow and slavery has not gone away. It is not an accident that African-Americans experience high crime rates, are poor, and have less wealth. It is a direct result of our racial history. We have never fully come to grips with that history (Obama quoted in Ifill, 2007).

'The Seattle schools case' refers to the Supreme Court's decision that year in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v Seattle School District*. The case challenged the constitutionality of Seattle School District's racial integration programme, which used a student's race as part of the sorting criteria for determining which secondary school they would be allocated. The Court ruled that using a student's race for the purpose of achieving a racial balance across a school district was unconstitutional. In the court's plurality opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts famously articulated the classic position of the color-blind coalition: 'The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race'.<sup>4</sup> By rejecting this 'unfortunate thinking', Obama demonstrates that his own racial philosophy sits apart from that of the color-blind coalition.

## II – OBAMA'S RACIAL POLITICS IN CONTEXT

The empirical contribution of this manuscript is to shed light on how Obama first engaged with race and politics at the site of his earliest political development. In this section, I argue that Obama's theory of racial politics can be explained in part by the context of his early political career in Chicago's South Side Hyde Park community in the 1990s and 2000s. Both progressive Whites and Blacks in Hyde Park followed a tradition of racial politics which rejected color-blindness but also did not follow the same traditional 'racialized' modes of politics associated with Black nationalists on the far South Side. I conclude that attempts to present Obama as a 'deracialized' politician have wrongly overlooked his political development in this race-conscious tradition.

### **Barack Obama's Personal Racial Identity**

Before interrogating his political approach to race, it is first important to clarify Barack Obama's personal racial identity. Where possible, self-identification is the preferred mechanism to classify a person's race. While not denying the reality of heritage or physical differences, Lawrence Bobo and Cybelle Fox are careful to clarify that such differences are not enough objectively to constitute a racial category. Bobo and Fox hold that neither 'physical or biological markers...give ethnoracial categories their *social significance*' (Fox and Bobo, 2003, p. 319).

Born to a White mother and a Black, Kenyan father, Barack Obama's racial background does not fit neatly within the conventional African American narrative of descent from southern Black chattel slavery which is the common tie among the vast majority of Black people in America (Dawson, 1995; Walters, 2007). Carter and Ford Dowe (2015) propose that because Obama's mother was White there is 'a great deal of ambiguity' about how people view Obama's racial identity.

For Obama, however, this ambiguity is not present. He has argued that he should not be regarded as a 'tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds' and has repeatedly and unambiguously identified himself as an African American (Obama, 1995, p. xv). In an interview, Obama explained, 'I self-identify as African American. That's how I'm treated, and that's how I'm viewed. I'm proud of it' (Obama, quoted in Bacon, 2007). According to Newton Minow, who hired Obama as an assistant in his law firm Sidley Austin in 1989, 'I just think he took the view, I'm Black -- period'.<sup>5</sup> Consistent with this viewpoint, in

the 2010 US Census, Obama ticked (only) the box ‘Black, African Am, or Negro’ in spite of there being an option for ‘two or more races’ (King and Smith, 2011, Ch. 7).

### **Hyde Park and the South Side**

Obama spent most of his adult life in Chicago, described as the ‘epicentre’ of Black politics in America and which Obama himself called the ‘capital of the African American community in the country’ (Harris, 2012, p. 36). The South Side, its ‘citadel’, has continuously elected African Americans to office longer than nearly any other jurisdiction in the United States, sending the first post-Reconstruction Black politician to Congress in 1928. The South Side’s First Congressional District was represented by Harold Washington before he won election as Chicago’s first Black mayor in 1983. In addition, the South Side has produced some important Black politicians who have sought office beyond Chicago, winning in predominantly White election contexts. These include Jesse Jackson, who was the first African American to win a state in a presidential primary; Carol Moseley Braun, the first Black woman and first Black Democratic US senator; and Deval Patrick, the second Black governor elected in US history.

Obama first lived on the South Side in the mid-1980s as a community organiser for the Developing Communities Project, which was a faith-based programme of about twenty-five (predominantly Black) churches on the far South Side. The project aimed to provide new options for residents after many of the South Side’s manufacturing industries shut down. Director Jerry Kellman hired Obama because he believed a Black community organiser would be more likely to win the trust of local residents in the South Side communities such as Roseland, West Pullman, and Calumet Park than he could as a White person. Kellman recalled that at their first meeting, Obama made it clear, ‘he wanted to work with the poor, with people who have faced racial discrimination. His heroes were the civil rights movement, but that was over. This was as close as he could get. And he needed to live in a Black community’ (Remnick, 2010, p. 135). This experience was later politically significant. For example, in the Black weekly magazine *N’Digo* the journalist Paul Davis (2003) wrote in an early profile that Obama ‘earned his spurs by toiling in the hood’.

During these years, Harold Washington was mayor of Chicago. According to Obama’s colleagues from the Developing Communities Project, Obama saw Washington as a model for his own ambition. Mike Kruglik, who worked alongside Obama, recalls, ‘when he [Obama] thought about the path to power himself, he thought of becoming a lawyer, then a state legislator, then a congressman, then a mayor’ (Remnick, 2010, p. 161). In an interview with this author, Newton Minow posits, ‘one of the reasons I think Barack moved to Chicago, was he had seen that a Black candidate had run for mayor’.<sup>6</sup>

For many decades, Black politics in Chicago was dominated by White-led machines. From Reconstruction until the New Deal, African American Chicagoans were tied to Republican patronage, before switching their allegiance to the Irish-dominated Cook County Democratic Party machines of Edward Kelly and Richard Daley (Walton, 1972, p.105; Marable, 1985). As William Grimshaw (1992) has written, the machine made only minor concessions to African Americans but otherwise fundamentally preserved the segregation and discrimination which had stricken the Black community. African American leaders of the Black sub-machine such as William ‘Boss’ Dawson and Oscar De Priest, as Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993, p. 156) describe, were always junior partners in ‘the Organization’, the euphemism for the Cook County Democratic Party machine.

In response to the machine’s malevolence, from the 1960s, reformist Black leaders emerged and stood as candidates independent from ‘the Organization’, often winning election. The first (unsuccessful) attempt was the League of Negro Voters’ independent bid for city clerk in 1959. This attempt was

followed by more successful campaigns for city, state, and national office by Black independents such as Charlie Chew, Richard Newhouse, Eugene Sawyer, Carol Moseley Braun, and (latterly) Harold Washington. Al Raby, Harold Washington's campaign manager who later introduced Obama to key Hyde Park liberals like Jacky Grimshaw, wrote in 1969 that 'the future of the South Side – and of the city as a whole – depends largely on the quality of the independent Black leadership it develops'.<sup>7</sup>

For many years, operating in parallel to the Black reformists, progressive Whites in the South Side's Hyde Park area had been agitating for good governance reform, also in opposition to the Cook County Democratic Party machine. The Hyde Park independents sought an end to patronage politics and promoted electoral reform, government accountability, anti-discrimination policies, and the representation of minorities in government.<sup>8</sup> Electorally, the Hyde Park independents were organised into a group known as the Independent Voters of Illinois (IVI). Jacky Grimshaw, a longtime Hyde Park resident and the Obama family's next-door neighbour, explains to this author that 'when you got the IVI support, you were pretty much assured a victory in Hyde Park'.<sup>9</sup>

Hyde Park, is the South Side's liberal, multiracial enclave near the University of Chicago.<sup>10</sup> The area has long consisted of a mix of University of Chicago intelligentsia, working-class ethnic Whites, and poor and middle-class African Americans.<sup>11</sup> In 1949, the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference was formed on the 'basis that the well-being of Hyde Park could be served only by affirmatively urging and inviting Black residents to live in Hyde Park so that the community might establish a stable interracial community of high standards'.<sup>12</sup> Fifth Ward Alderman Leon Despres, a Hyde Park independent of the Democratic machine, described the area as 'the closest we have in Chicago to a large, stable interracial community'.<sup>13</sup> In an interview with this author, Carol Moseley Braun, who represented Hyde Park for five terms in the state legislature (1979-1988), jokingly referred to Despres, who was White, as 'the best Black alderman ever because he was one of the few who would stand up to Daley on behalf of issues touching the Black community'.<sup>14</sup> Echoing this assessment made to this author by Braun in 2015, a 1966 article from the *Negro Digest* held in the Chicago History Museum also called Despres 'the lone "negro" spokesman in Chicago's city council' (*Negro Digest*, 1966). Hyde Park resident Jacky Grimshaw explains to this author that Despres was the most important independent politician in the city: 'he would not appreciate being called the "godfather" but, you know, he was kind of the independent leader'.<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the South Side's Black civil rights advocates and good government White progressives found common ground. Dick Newhouse, an African American, was elected to represent Hyde Park in the Illinois state Senate, a seat which would later be represented by Barack Obama. Newhouse brought support both from the Black civil rights leadership of the city as well as the Hyde Park White progressives. Although he was supported by Whites, Newhouse was not a 'deracialized' politician. He worked for Black advancement in the state legislature and served as a delegate to the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana in 1972.

### **Obama's Political Development**

To understand Barack Obama's political approach to race, therefore, commentators must understand the unusual interracial politics of Hyde Park. Steve Cobble, who ran Jesse Jackson's political action committee from a converted synagogue in the neighbourhood, described it as, 'One of the only seriously integrated places of Chicago... It's the place where you go if you made it professionally as a Black, but you're also living around Whites because of the University of Chicago'.<sup>16</sup>

In 1991 Obama returned to Chicago after graduating from Harvard Law School. At Harvard, Obama had been an executive of the Black Law Students Association and attracted national attention for being



elected the first Black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Unsurprisingly, as a result of this attention, Obama was offered a clerkship on the powerful District of Columbia Circuit Court by Chief Judge Abner Mikva. Mikva had coincidentally represented Hyde Park and the North Shore as an ‘independent’ in the state legislature and US Congress before being appointed to the DC Circuit by Jimmy Carter. Mikva stepped down in 1994 and was replaced by Merrick Garland.

Rather than accept this prestigious offer, Obama chose to return to Chicago and assumed the directorship of the Illinois affiliate of Project Vote, a non-profit organisation which was aimed at registering hundreds of thousands of African Americans to vote. Project Vote had been active in the previous midterm elections, working in North Carolina to register African Americans to vote for Harvey Gantt, the first Black Democrat ever nominated for the US Senate (Morrill, 1990). In the 1992 cycle, Carol Moseley Braun had won the Democratic nomination in Illinois, unseating the incumbent White, male Democratic US senator Alan Dixon, after Dixon had voted for the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. The Black vote would be crucial in this election. A Braun campaign internal strategy document from the spring of 1992 predicted, ‘we need a record African-American turnout to win... our goal must be to match Harold Washington’s levels in African-American precincts in Chicago, while establishing new record levels in all African-American precincts around the state’.<sup>17</sup> Obama’s job was, in part, to meet this target.

At the same time as he began his work with Project Vote, Obama was given a two-year visiting fellowship at the University of Chicago Law School to write his first book, a memoir about race. Obama would stay at the University of Chicago Law School for thirteen years, serving as a lecturer from 1992 to 1996 and a senior lecturer from 1996 until 2004. One of his courses was called ‘Current Issues in Racism and the Law’. In the syllabus from Spring Term 1994, Obama taught about afrocentric schools, interracial adoption, racial gerrymandering, racially discriminatory criminal sentencing, criminal profiling, hate crimes, racial bias in the media, welfare policy, reparations, and affirmative action. Obama’s key theoretical readings included George Fredrickson (1988)’s *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* and Anthony Kwame Appiah (1990)’s essay ‘Racisms’.

During this time, starting with *Shaw v Reno*, the Supreme Court began to move in the direction of establishing the idea of the ‘color-blind’ constitution. In an interview with this author five months before his death, Abner Mikva recalled discussing this jurisprudential shift with Obama at their breakfast meetings at the university. Mikva explained, ‘I think that was our first recognition that we had an awful lot of ideas in common... we were aware that this movement towards a so-called color-blind constitution was going to pull out some of the supports of the civil rights progress that we had made. [We talked about] how a color-blind constitution is inconsistent with affirmative action or some of the other minority support programmes that people had in this country.’<sup>18</sup>

After the 1992 election, Obama started working for Davis, Miner, Barnhill, & Galland, a civil rights and economic development law firm. David Axelrod (2015, Ch. 8) points out that the firm was ‘well known around town for its support of progressive causes’. Mikva described the firm’s principal partner Judson Miner as ‘one of these great progressives who was involved in the civil rights struggle and understood all of its aspects’. According to Mikva, Miner ‘would take on cases that would push for empowerment for the Black community’.<sup>19</sup> Fittingly, Obama pursued a classic issue on which race-conscious politics and good governance progressivism met: electoral reform. Obama was part of a legal team which pursued fair minority representation in city council wards and state legislative districts after boundaries were redrawn (Harris, 2012, Ch. 2). Obama’s choice of employment (a progressive law firm and the University of Chicago), as well as his decision to settle in Hyde Park, was evidence to David

Axelrod, later Obama's US Senate and presidential campaign strategist, that Obama 'was shrewdly and methodically preparing himself for a career in public life'. It was, as Axelrod (2015, p. 120) puts, 'the perfect base for a brainy, reform-minded Black man contemplating a run for public office'.

In 1996, Obama was encouraged by Hyde Park progressives to run for the state senate in the following year's election. Obama's campaign manager Alan Dobry had been a stalwart of independent politics in Hyde Park, having worked for Leon Despres. In a letter to his half-brother Malik Obama in July 1995, Barack Obama explained his reasons for running: 'some colleagues of mine here have talked me into running for the Illinois State Senate...I have agreed, since I have an interest in politics to deal with some of the serious issues Blacks face here' (quoted in *Niaje*, 2015). Obama was elected to represent Hyde Park, replacing Dick Newhouse's successor Alice Palmer, a respected Black intellectual who had been disqualified from the ballot on a technicality (Hendon, 2009, p. 10; Remnick, 2010, p. 278). Although they would soon fall out, Palmer initially gushed, 'Barack Obama carries on the tradition of independence in this district, a tradition that continued with me and most recently with Senator Newhouse' (*Hyde Park Herald*, 1995).

Obama, as a successor to Newhouse's senate district, followed much the same imperative in his work as a state senator. Hermene Hartman, the editor of the Black magazine *N'DIGO* and a Hyde Park resident, recalls, 'Obama was the perfect gentleman to represent Hyde Park's intellectual, urban-mixed university community' (Hartman, 2009, p. xii). Hartman's magazine was the first publication in which Obama appeared on the front page and was given a full political interview (Figure 1). The 2003 article reports,

According to Obama, the economic growth of the 1990s disguised some disturbing trends in this country. Chief among them, [Obama] says, is the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, an ongoing disparity in the mortality rates between African Americans, Hispanics, and their White counterparts, a decline in the quality of public school education, and an enormous rise in the rate of incarceration of African American youth who are trapped in a drug economy (Davis, 2003).

[Figure 1 here]

Carol Moseley Braun, who herself was elected as an anti-machine independent, confirms in an interview with this author that the Black independent movement 'came out of the civil rights imperative'.<sup>20</sup> Braun's path from Hyde Park lawyer to state legislator to US senator is instructive because it diminishes the extent to which Obama's path can be regarded as a unique product of his mixed-race heritage, a common explanation given for his political success (Carter & Dowe, 2015; Price, 2016).

Braun graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1972 and settled in Hyde Park near the university. After working in the US attorney's office, in 1978 she was encouraged by the IVI to run for the Illinois House of Representatives. She succeeded the White, liberal independent Robert Mann. As a state legislator, Braun also filed and won an important reapportionment legal action which affirmed the 'one person, one vote' principle in the Illinois state legislature. Barack Obama worked on a similar case relating to Chicago council wards while he served in the state senate the following decade. While a state legislator, Braun worked for the firm Miner, Barnhill, and Galland, the same civil rights law firm at which Barack Obama worked while he also represented Hyde Park in the state senate (Gutgold, 2006, Ch. 5). In 1992, Braun was elected the first Black Democrat to the United States Senate but narrowly lost re-election in 1998. Barack Obama won the same seat back from the Republicans in 2004. Carol

Moseley Braun was the first Black Democrat ever elected to the US Senate. Barack Obama was the second.

Braun and Obama's Hyde Park coalition now represents the core of the national Democratic vote: university-educated White liberals and working-class minorities, especially African Americans. In the 1990s, it was more exceptional. Highly educated Whites in other parts of country regularly voted for Republican candidates. During this decade, as Alan Abramowitz shows, the typical affluent White voter with socially liberal views was a Republican (Abramowitz, 1995).

### **Neither Black nationalist politics nor deracialized politics**

Some commentators have described Barack Obama as a 'deracialized' politician, in part, because he does not appear to fit with the 'racialized' tradition of what some might call a Black nationalist or Black power approach (Harris, 2012). Associated in Chicago with South Side figures such as Bobby Rush, Gus Savage, and Lu Palmer, the Black nationalists believed that White liberals exercised excessive influence on the Black empowerment agenda. William Grimshaw (1992, p. 173) writes that they were suspicious of the 'racially inclusive goals of "fairness" and "equity",' touchstones of the Hyde Park progressive tradition. The Black nationalists, as Abner Mikva explains, 'believed that integration wouldn't work. What you had to do was give Blacks power but not power as part of an integrated community'.<sup>21</sup>

It is true that in electoral politics, Barack Obama found difficulty venturing beyond Hyde Park further south on the South Side where the Black power tradition was dominant. Obama's political and physical home in Chicago had always been in Hyde Park. Even when Obama worked for the Developing Communities Project in the mid-1980s, he chose to live in Hyde Park in spite of his work being located on the far South Side (Remnick, 2010, Ch. 4).

In late 1999, Obama decided to challenge Bobby Rush, a founding member of the Illinois Black Panther Party, who was the incumbent US Congressman representing the historically Black First District seat. Rush had fared poorly in his mayoral election against Richard Daley the previous year and Obama made the (mistaken) assessment that because Daley had outperformed Rush in some of Rush's congressional district, Rush was himself vulnerable. David Axelrod (2015, p. 122) describes this as a 'very bad calculation'. Obama faced difficulties in establishing himself in this challenge. Axelrod (2015, p. 122) describes Rush's approach as to portray Obama an 'effete candidate of outsiders'. During the election, state senator Donne Trotter commented, 'You have to look at his supporters. Who pushed him to get where he is so fast? It's these individuals in Hyde Park' (Trotter, quoted in *Chicago Reader*, 2000). Rebecca Janowitz (2010, p. 221) writes that Rush argued that 'Obama was too close to "them" to be one of "us".' Importantly, Janowitz clarifies that the them-us distinction was not a simple Black-White divide. She writes, 'Them, of course, referred to Hyde Parkers, Black and White alike'.

While it, therefore, is not appropriate to align Obama with the tradition of 'racialized' Black power politics associated with other South Side politicians, it would also be inaccurate to describe Obama as emerging from a 'deracialized' or 'color-blind' context. Both traditions, I argue, were 'race-conscious' in that they sought targeted solutions for racial disparities and believed, as Obama (quoted in Ifill, 2007) put it, 'The legacy of slavery and Jim Crow has not gone away'.

They differed in that the Hyde Park independent tradition was fundamentally coalitional whereas the Black nationalist approach was not. When asked whether politicians from Hyde Park were expected to take on Black empowerment causes, Jacky Grimshaw replied affirmatively: 'Yeah, I think the White people knew they were kind of on an island [laughs] and it was important if you were going to represent

the district' to pursue such causes.<sup>22</sup> Ricky Hendon, who represented the West Side of Chicago in the Illinois Senate alongside Obama, explained that neither the Black nationalist tradition nor the 'deracialized' tradition describes Obama's approach. Hendon (2009, p. 1) writes that Whites should know 'Obama is no militant and Black Americans know he is no sell out'.

### III – DISCUSSION: RACE-CONSCIOUS POLITICS AFTER CHICAGO

Some commentators have argued that even though Obama may have had a race-conscious approach to politics while he represented Hyde Park, he abandoned this tradition later in his political career. This article suggests that while Obama may have adopted a strategy which appeared deracialized when he ran for president, the evidence that Obama revised his racial philosophical commitments as president is less convincing.

As president, Obama repeatedly rejected the triumphalism of the color-blind narrative which asserted that since the civil rights era racial differences have faded as relevant categories for public policy. Obama's rejection of the color-blind narrative is all the more significant given that his own election has often been cited by members of the color-blind coalition as evidence of the validity of their theory of American racial history. In the *NAMUDNO v Holder* decision, made five months after the President Obama's first inauguration, Justice Clarence Thomas declared that the Voting Rights Act has 'already served its purpose'.<sup>23</sup> In the Court's decision in *Shelby County v Holder*, John Roberts argued that the 'South had changed', citing Obama's election as evidence of the obsolescence of key sections of the Voting Rights Act.

It is unquestionably the case that Obama, throughout his political career, engaged in varying degrees of style shifting. 'Style shifting' is a practice which refers to a speaker's change in vocabulary, syntax, and even pronunciation depending on his or her listener. In a non-racial context, Richard Fenno (1978, Ch. 5) observed that members of Congress from districts with a mix of rural, suburban, and urban voters adopted different presentational styles depending on where in the district they were.

'Style shifting' also occurs when politicians speak to audiences with different racial compositions. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman (2012, p. 5) have highlighted that the political rhetoric of Barack Obama changes depending on the race of his audience. Obama himself admitted to 'being able to speak different dialects,' in an interview in 2004. He added, 'That's not unique to me. Any Black person in America who's successful has to be able to speak different forms of the same language...It's not unlike a person shifting between Spanish and English' (Obama, quoted in Barkley, 2006, p. 25). Ronald C Rice, a former councilman in Newark, New Jersey, explained this phenomenon to this author in an interview, when asked to reflect on the question of whether Obama had abandoned his race-conscious politics:

'We all have Black talk. That's just the way it is in America if you want to be in the greater society. Black people...are more integrated into the world of Whites...than Whites will ever be integrated into our community. It's just a fact of life. And so [when it comes to] your behaviour, how you act, how you are perceived, we are very aware of how White people feel about us, all the time... It's not like it's a hard thing. I've been used to it all my life. But when you run for office, that's times ten, you know?'.<sup>24</sup>

Commentators would be wrong to use stylistic shifts as evidence of a fundamental departure in Obama's commitment to race-conscious politics. According to those who have known Obama since the 1990s, consistency is more apparent than deviation. In an interview with this author, Abner Mikva insisted that Obama had remained a consistent critic of color-blind politics but adjusted his rhetoric for political

purposes when he became president. ‘I don’t think he ever cut or trimmed on that issue’. Mikva believed Whites often ‘thought he was saying what they wanted him to say, but he was sticking very close to his basic commitments to a fair society. And, a fair society doesn’t start with three-hundred years of racism and then all of a sudden, ok, everything is fair. All kinds of things have to be done to equalise and level that playing field.’<sup>25</sup>

As president, Obama maintained the basic analysis that centuries of slavery and Jim Crow had generated enduring legacies of racial inequality, a core commitment of race-conscious political philosophy. He even framed some of the Republican resistance to his policy agenda in these terms. In a 2014 interview with David Remnick, Obama argued that ‘there is a historic connection between some of the arguments that we have politically and the history of race in our country, and sometimes it’s hard to disentangle these issues.’ While Obama accepted that people could critique federal programmes on the basis of bureaucratic inefficiency or lack of accountability, he added, ‘what’s also true, obviously, is that philosophy is wrapped up in the history of states’ rights in the context of the civil-rights movement and the Civil War and Calhoun. There’s a pretty long history there’ (Obama, quoted in Remnick, 2014).

Admittedly, Obama offered such assessments sparingly as president, but his relative racial ‘silence’ must be understood in the context of an unprecedented, intense racialization which has characterised American perceptions of public policy in the Obama era. Michael Tesler (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2016) and others (Tesler and Sears, 2010) demonstrated that, unlike his predecessors, Obama did not need to speak about race explicitly for his policies to be interpreted in racial terms.

The ‘spillover’ of racialization has been recorded in the past when racial attitudes and race are brought to bear on political preferences, such as associating welfare with undeserving Blacks and Social Security with hard-working Whites (Gilens, 1999; Winter, 2006). Usually such racialization is the consequence of priming by political actors and the media or the result of entrenched historical associations. But, for Obama, policies and people with no manifest racial content quickly become racialized. In contrast to other presidents, by the mere fact of his own identity, Barack Obama makes race inescapably accessible to White voters.

For example, reactions to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) differed sharply by race, with 91 percent of African Americans supporting the healthcare legislation, compared to only 29 percent of Whites (Pew Research Center, 2013). However, among Whites, the likelihood of approval for provisions in the ACA corresponded closely to a person’s attitudes on race. This is not merely a question of partisanship. Tesler (2012a) found that decline in support for a ‘public option’ fell almost twice as much among racially resentful Whites when told it was a policy proposed by Barack Obama compared to being told it was a policy proposed by Bill Clinton.

Even mundane associations, such as a pet dog, have been shown to be affected by the racial spillover. Racially resentful Whites were more than twice as likely to react negatively to the photo of a dog when told it was dog which belonged to Barack Obama than when told it was a dog which belonged to Ted Kennedy. Tesler (2012b) concludes that such findings ‘reaffirm the Obama presidency’s unique potential to polarize public opinion by racial attitudes’.

Daniel Gillion (2016)’s has written critically about Obama’s failure to speak as explicitly about race as some of his Democratic predecessors, but I argue that such historical comparisons are not well placed. For example, Gillion writes that Bill Clinton showed that it was possible to address racial inequality explicitly while at the same time ‘assuaging the discontent of Whites’. Gillion (2016, p. 76) adds that ‘Clinton demonstrated there are ways to wrestle with the issue of race without shattering White

Americans' trust'. Yet, the comparison spectacularly overlooks the crucial difference between Obama and Clinton: Clinton is White; Obama is African American. Bill Clinton, as a White Democrat with a Southern working-class upbringing, would have been more likely to maintain the trust of White voters when speaking on the matter of race than an African American president from a big city with an African name and parentage. In answer to Gillion's 'governing with words' thesis, the simple fact is that President Obama raised the salience of race – often without words.

Additionally, the president's independent capacity to reduce racial inequalities is highly constrained. While many accounts have focused on Obama's personal ability to accomplish racial change, most compelling social science research points to impersonal structural forces, including federalism and partisan control of Congress, as explaining presidential impact (Edwards, 2009; Jacobs & King, 2012). After losing the House of Representatives in his first mid-term elections in the biggest Democratic loss in seventy-two years (larger than the 1994 Republican Revolution), the prospects for major racial equality legislation were severely weakened.

In spite of the failure of Barack Obama to reduce material White-Black inequality, African Americans were the most supportive and approving constituency throughout his presidency. Obama's approval rating among Blacks sat between 85-90 percent, while with Whites it was typically between 30-40 percent approval. Relatedly, Christopher Stout and Danvy Le (2012) found that, in spite of their worse relative and absolute economic conditions, African Americans were more optimistic about their economic futures under the Obama years than they had been under previous presidencies. Even on racial policy, a June 2015 CNN poll found that 84 percent of Blacks approved of the job Obama was doing on race relations, compared to only 48 percent of Whites. Many African Americans approved of the president not because they thought he had done enough but because they understood he could do so little. Anthea Butler explains that particularly for older African Americans, their attitude towards the president was, 'Honestly, we just want him to get out alive' (Butler, quoted in *New York Magazine*, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The prevailing categories used to analyse Black political actors have failed to capture Barack Obama's approach to racial politics satisfactorily. While it is clear that Obama was never a partisan of the 'racialized' Black nationalist tradition, his recognition of the continued impact of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation on African Americans' life outcomes as well as his commitment to racially targeted remedies makes any attempt to categorise him as a 'deracialized' politician unsatisfactory.

This article concludes that commentators misjudged Barack Obama's racial politics by conflating a contingent electoral strategy with a deeper expression of Obama's racial philosophical commitments. In explaining these commitments, the article finds the deracialized/racialized framing inadequate. By returning to the site of Obama's political development, Hyde Park in Chicago, this paper uncovers a tradition of racial politics in which African Americans formed coalitions with progressive Whites without abandoning a commitment to a race-conscious policy agenda or analysis of American inequality. The article argues that Obama was an inheritor of this tradition. Using primary documents, inferences from Obama's biography, and interviews with Obama intimates, the article concludes that Obama sits firmly in the 'race-conscious' policy alliance, in opposition to the 'color-blind' policy alliance with which many commentators have aligned him.

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Carol Moseley Braun – Hyde Park state legislator (1979-88), US Senator for Illinois (1993-99)

Steve Cobble - director of Jesse Jackson's 'Keep Hope Alive' Political Action Committee

Jacky Grimshaw - Mayor Harold Washington's office manager and the Obama family's next door neighbour

Newton Minow - director of Sidley Austin, the first law firm in Chicago at which Obama worked and where he met Michelle Robinson

Abner Mikva - former Congressman for Hyde Park and the North Side, DC District Court Judge, and University of Chicago Law colleague of Barack Obama

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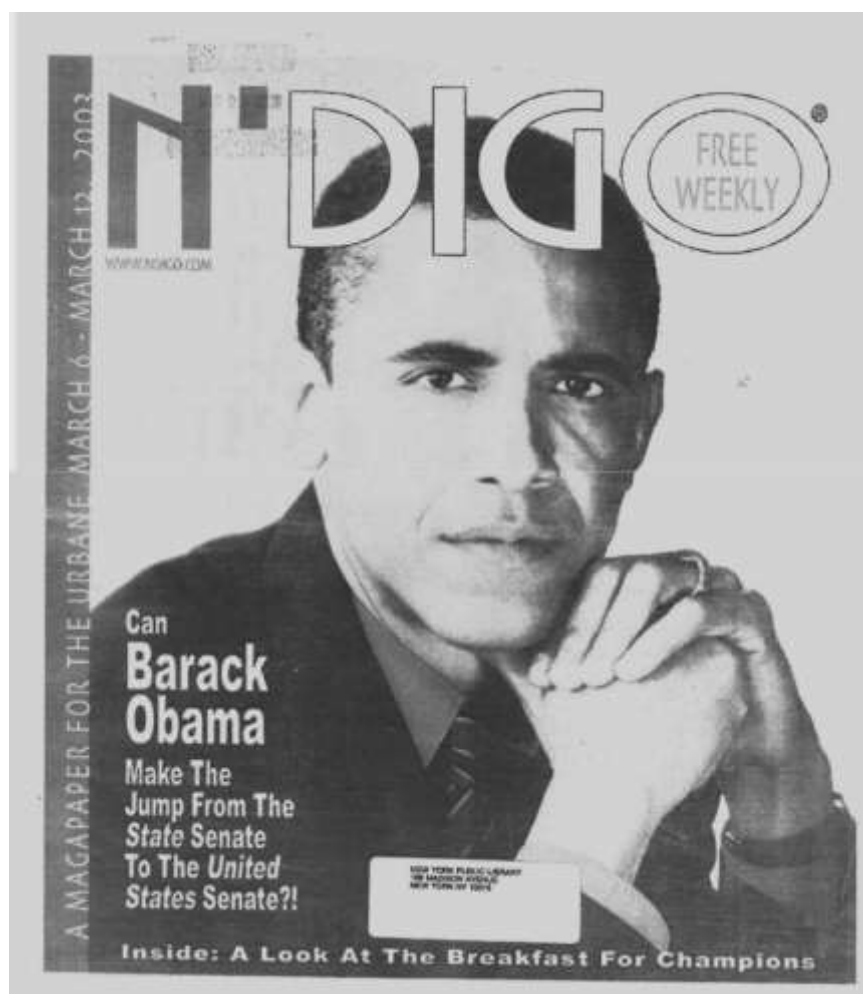
**Table 1. Contrast between the ‘deracialized’ and ‘racialized’ strategies**

	<b>Deracialized Strategy</b>	<b>Racialized Strategy</b>
<b>Mobilising Discourse</b>	Racial Silence	Racial Rhetoric
<b>Issue Agenda</b>	Race-Neutral	Race-Oriented
<b>Style</b>	Non-Confrontational	Militant

**Table 2. Contrast between race-conscious and color-blind approaches to politics**

	<b>Race-Conscious</b>	<b>Color-Blind</b>
<b>Mobilising Discourse</b>	Need to overcome racial inequality (society, institutions, individuals)	Triumph of civil rights movement
<b>Issue Agenda</b>	Racially targeted policies (alongside broader universalist policies)	No racially targeted policies (such policies would be racist)
<b>Style</b>	Pessimistic/Critical (of continued racial injustice)	Triumphalist/Dismissive (of race's enduring relevance)

**Figure 1. Barack Obama on the cover of *N'Digo*, March 2003**



<sup>1</sup> This article draws from in-depth interviews with key political actors and Obama intimates in Chicago. The author wishes to thank Senator Carol Moseley Braun, Steve Cobble, Jacky Grimshaw, Newton Minow, and the late Abner Mikva for agreeing to be interviewed. The article also uses primary documents from three archival collections held at the University of Chicago and the Chicago History Museum: the papers of the Hyde Park Historical Society, the papers of US Senator Carol Moseley Braun, and the papers of Hyde Park alderman Leon Despres. Senator Braun is thanked for granting special access to her 1992 Senate campaign's internal documents, which are otherwise embargoed until 2048. Finally, the author wishes to thank Clare Kavanagh of the Nuffield College Library for helping to obtain a copy of the interview with Barack Obama in the magazine *N'Digo*.

<sup>2</sup> For studies which employ this binary, see Pettigrew and Alston (1988), Washington (1988), Sonenshein (1990), Sigelman et al. (1995), Prysby (1996), Canon et al. (1996), Shousen and Sellers (1996), Jeffries (1999), Smith (2009), Gillespie (2010, 2012), Nordin (2012).

<sup>3</sup> The model assumes that Black voters inevitably will be supportive of an African American candidate in a biracial contest.

<sup>4</sup> *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*, 551 U. S. 701 (2007)

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Newton Minow, 15 April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Minow, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Al Raby, 'Al Raby for Con-Con', July 1969 (Folder 4, Box 83, Papers of the Hyde Park Historical Society, University of Chicago).

<sup>8</sup> Hyde Parker Michael Shakman, for example, launched the case *Shakman v Democratic Organization of Cook County* which asserted that the First Amendment rights of public employees were being violated because their employment was conditioned on support for a particular slate of candidates.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Jacky Grimshaw, 14 April 2015.

<sup>10</sup> 'Alderman looks back on his long political career', Leon Despres papers, Chicago History Museum.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Carol Moseley Braun, 22 August 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Despres, 'What's past is prologue: A view of the history of Hyde Park', speech delivered to the Hyde Park Historical Society, St Thomas the Apostle School, 12 May 1976. (Source: Papers of the Hyde Park Historical Society [Series I, Box 1], University of Chicago)

<sup>13</sup> Leon Despres, 'On the democratization of the Democratic Party', remarks to the McGovern Commission on the Democratic Party, 7 June 1969. (Source: Despres papers: Chicago History Museum)

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Carol Moseley Braun, 15 April 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Grimshaw, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Steve Cobble, 10 September 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Untitled internal strategy document, Box 878, Carol Moseley Braun Archive (Chicago History Museum).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Abner Mikva, 7 February 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mikva, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Carol Moseley Braun, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Mikva, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Grimshaw, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Clarence Thomas (Dissent), *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District v Holder* 557 U.S. 193 (2009).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Ronald C Rice, 10 July 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mikva, 2016.