

## **Embracing Race in American Politics**

**Zoltan Hajnal**  
**Professor of Political Science**  
**UC San Diego**

**Co-Author, "Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate"**

**May 2012**

**Race is one of the keys to understanding the future of American politics. On one side, the Republican Party has effectively become the Party of white America. More than 90 percent of John McCain's support in 2008 came from White voters.**

### **CHART:**

#### **Breakdown of McCain Votes 2008**

**90.5% Whites**  
**5% Latinos**  
**4 % Blacks**  
**.05 % Asians**

**On the other side, the Democratic Party has largely won over the minority vote. In the last presidential election, Barack Obama received more than 90 percent of the black vote, two-thirds of the Latino vote, and a clear majority of the Asian American vote.**

### **CHART:**

#### **Votes By Ethnic Groups 2008**

	<b>Obama</b>	<b>McCain</b>
<b>Whites</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Blacks</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Latinos</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>Asians</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>38%</b>

All of this bodes poorly for the Republican Party. Non-whites will grow from a third of the population today to the majority by 2050. Some might say that a future of Democratic domination and Republican collapse is all but inevitable.

But this overlooks THE central feature of America's racial and ethnic minority population – its ambivalence about BOTH political parties. In my research, I show that many if not most minorities are uncertain about where they fit into American politics. When we ask Latinos and Asian Americans to state their party affiliation, most say that they don't fit into either party. In fact, more than half refuse to state or identify as Independent.

Even among blacks, there are signs of growing ambivalence. Nearly thirty percent of African-Americans feel that the Democratic Party does not work hard for black interests.

What are the lessons for America's political parties? The first is that the future of the minority vote is still very much up for grabs. Both the Democrats and the Republicans ignore this segment of the American population at their peril.

The second lesson is not to dismiss this nonpartisan population as apolitical or unreachable. Many racial and ethnic minorities are now on the sidelines of American politics. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Today's minorities are no different from the minorities of yesterday in one very important sense. They are politically approachable and readily mobilized. If the parties tried harder to appeal to this population, many of these inactive minorities would engage in the political process.

The real challenge is how to motivate this large and growing segment of the population. In the past, parties have often moved to the middle of the liberal-conservative spectrum to target the median voter. But that logic no longer makes sense. America is now too diverse with too many different sets of concerns and issues. There is no single middle position in American politics.

Instead, I suggest that to reach America's increasingly mixed electorate, candidates and political parties should run a multifaceted and multi-racial campaign. Rather than ignore race or use race to lure whites into a largely exclusive white majority, the alternative that I offer is to communicate different things to different types of voters.

The strategy is complex. It requires the Democrats or the Republicans to search through the political agenda to hone in on issues of particular concern to one group that do not, at the same time, repel other groups.

For Latinos, that issue might be narrow elements of immigration reform, such as *the Dream Act...* allowing children who were brought here a path to citizenship through college or the military.

For Asian Americans, it might be access to higher education – that might come in the form of merit based student loans.

Anti-discrimination efforts might attract black support without provoking hostility from other groups.

The winnable set may be thin, but the list could go on. The key is to exploit the multi-dimensional nature of the American public by leveraging racial diversity rather than going after support from one group at the expense of others or ignoring race altogether.

The partisan and political consequences of this are too huge to ignore. More than 65 percent of the minority adult population did not vote in 2008.

These are individuals who could be mobilized, who could be attracted to a party, and who could sway electoral outcomes.

At present, one party – the Democrats – has an inside track on a racial multi-vocal strategy. But the eventual outcome of this battle for the hearts and minds of America's diverse uncommitted population is far from settled. All the Democrats or Republicans have to do is approach these groups of non-voters with a platform that considers their unique preferences and concerns. Attention like that...from either party...will bring more minorities to the polls. And that's good for America.

I'm Zoltan Hajnal.