

Race and Democratic Aspirations in America

One late afternoon in December 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Mrs. Rosa Parks left work at the Fair Department Store. She boarded a bus, found a seat, and settled in for the ride home. The bus was soon full, whites in the front, blacks in the back, in accordance with the segregation codes then in effect in Montgomery, as in much of the South. When the bus stopped to pick up an additional white passenger, the driver, J. P. Blake, told the four blacks sitting in the forwardmost row to get up and move to the rear. Mrs. Parks was among them, and while the others gathered their belongings and moved to the back of the bus, she remained, saying she was not in the white section and didn't think she ought to move. Blake threatened Parks with arrest; Parks replied, softly but firmly, that he should do what he had to do; she was not moving. Mrs. Parks didn't move, and she was of course arrested. Her arrest and incarceration are famous, for they set in motion the Montgomery bus boycott, a turning point in the black struggle for civil rights in the twentieth century. Rosa Parks had found not just a seat, but a place in American history.¹

Forty years passed, and Mrs. Parks was back in the news. This time the story was ordinary, all-too-familiar; but because of who Rosa Parks was and what she had done, it drew national attention and wide comment. In the fall of 1994 Mrs. Parks was living quietly on modest means in Detroit. A young black man from the neighborhood, reeking of alcohol, broke into her home, beat her until she gave up what money she had, and fled. "I had never been hit in that manner in my life," Mrs. Parks said later. "I was screaming and trying to ask him not to hit me. . . . we still have a long way to go, and so many of our children are going astray." Questioned after his quick arrest, Mrs. Parks's assailant said he had never heard of Rosa Parks, had no idea of the role she had played in the previous generation's fight for civil rights.²

Mrs. Parks's two stories, and the arc of history that connects them, are precisely where our analysis begins. In 1955 the country was entering a period of enormous social change, marked in the early stages by high hopes and moral certainties. Came the full flowering of the noble and heroic struggle for civil rights; historic Supreme Court decisions finding segregation unconstitutional; and landmark federal legislation declaring discrimination a crime. But came also George Wallace and his stunningly successful and racially reactionary

third-party movement; the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King; and in cities in all parts of the country, catastrophic riots, grinding poverty, and explosions of crime. The moral certainties are gone now; the high hopes have given way to cynicism and, not infrequently, despair.²

Where are we now, four decades after Rosa Parks's quiet defiance? In 1995 slavery is a dim and fading memory; segregation backed by the force of law dismantled; discrimination on account of race or color illegal. Compared with the past, American society has come a long way, surely. Race relations must be judged not only against the nightmare of slavery and Jim Crow, however, but also against reasonable constructions of what American democracy could and should be. And with democratic aspirations in mind, we are inclined to agree with Rosa Parks: "We still have a long way to go."

Consider segregation as one test. The Jim Crow statutes are gone, but segregation by race continues. American cities are now more segregated by race than they were at the turn of the century.³ In the public schools of the nation's large cities today, segregation prevails and may even be increasing.⁴ Racial segregation creates and amplifies economic inequalities, and it makes democratic projects more difficult to carry out.⁵ Genuine democracy, according to a prominent strand of contemporary American political theory, requires real deliberation: citizens joining together to discuss public issues in their neighborhoods, at city council meetings, or in some other comparable forum.⁶ But because American society is deeply segregated by race, such democratic assemblies seldom cross racial lines. Citizens who do not live in the same neighborhoods cannot easily come together, not to mention that the more citizens are drawn apart, the fewer shared concerns they have to discuss.

Like segregation, discrimination has not disappeared either. Since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, discrimination by race has been illegal, and surely it is neither as flagrant nor as pervasive today as it once was. But it continues. Blacks still face discrimination on the job. Blacks looking to purchase homes are still steered away from white neighborhoods. Blacks still endure racist epithets on the streets, harassment by police officers as they make their way through public spaces, rudeness and excessive surveillance while they shop, coolness from their teachers and bosses, and racist jokes from their co-workers. Whereas whites tend to believe that discrimination is a problem of the past, blacks see it as pervasive in society and a demoralizing presence in their own lives.⁷

What about participation in the political life of the nation, perhaps the most fundamental of democratic requirements? Progress here has been a long time coming. The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified in 1870, was designed to ensure that former black slaves, freed by the Thirteenth Amendment and made citizens by the Fourteenth, would not be denied the

right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."⁸ And for the brief moment of Reconstruction, it was true.⁹ In the South as a whole, as many as two-thirds of the eligible blacks voted in national and state elections, and scores of blacks were elected to statehouses and to Congress.¹⁰ As Reconstruction came to an end, however, blacks quickly disappeared from political life. Across the South, white-dominated legislatures implemented an assortment of ingenious contrivances to banish blacks from politics, erasing the Fifteenth Amendment's bold promise. These included literacy requirements, property tests, grandfather clauses, the poll tax, the understanding clause, and, later, the white primary: all in all, as V. O. Key Jr. once put it, "the most impressive systems of obstacles between the voter and the ballot box known to the democratic world."¹¹ As late as 1960, only about 3% of southern blacks were registered to vote. Disqualified from politics, the rest were, as Judith Shklar would say, "dishonored" and "screened by their fellow citizens."¹²

The obstacles are gone now, of course, swept away by hundreds of local struggles, by Supreme Court decisions, by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and by the threat of federal enforcement. As a consequence, black participation in elections towers over what it was a generation ago, and the number of black elected officials has risen dramatically. This is progress to be sure, but blacks still vote less faithfully than whites do, and they lag further behind on forms of democratic participation that go beyond voting.¹³ Moreover, despite recent gains, black citizens remain substantially underrepresented: all together, fewer than 2% of elected officials in the United States are black.¹⁴ This condition violates the democratic standard that the composition of elected assemblies should resemble the population as a whole, and it is likely to worsen in the future, not improve.¹⁵ Recent increases in black representation have been due in large measure to the creation of favorable districts through reapportionment or court order, since it remains today not quite impossible, but very difficult, for black candidates to succeed outside black majority districts.¹⁶ And such districts are currently under challenge in the courts, attacked as extreme and discriminatory, not at all what the 1965 Voting Rights Act was meant to do.

Democracy also depends on material conditions that go beyond matters of formal rights. Vast differences in wealth or income distort the degree to which all citizens have an equal say in politics. Viewed from this perspective, the racial record in the United States is mixed. On the one hand, over the last forty years or so, black Americans have made significant inroads into the middle class, sharing in the economic prosperity and educational opportunities that came to most of American society following World War II.¹⁷ On the other, imposing racial differences in employment, income, and wealth remain. Blacks are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed; they are substantially overrepre-

sented among "discouraged workers," those who have given up looking for work and so do not appear in official unemployment figures; and when they are employed, they earn less. These differences are large, but they are dwarfed by racial differences in wealth: according to the most recent figures, the average white household commands more than *ten times* the financial assets of the average black household. Furthermore, the growth of the black middle class needs to be placed against the collapse of the core of many large American cities, where most poor blacks live. There, epidemics of idleness, theft, violence, drugs, and welfare dependence have transformed many inner-city communities into "deadly neighborhoods."²⁰

Perhaps the most complicated aspect of race relations in America today concerns attitude. Reviewing the results of dozens of public opinion surveys spread across several decades, Smith and Skrentsley conclude, quite correctly, we think, that "a massive and wide-ranging liberalization of racial attitudes has swept America over the last forty years. . . . Whites have steadily abandoned beliefs in the desirability of segregation and the notion that blacks are and should be second-class citizens."²¹ Not so long ago white Americans defended racial segregation and supported racial discrimination as matters of principle; now, majorities say that blacks and whites should attend school together, that blacks should have an equal chance to compete for jobs, that they have a right to live wherever they wish.

If democratic politics is to succeed, citizens must believe that everyone should have a chance to participate; they must value each others' comments and contributions; they must treat each other with respect. From this perspective, the dramatic increases in white Americans' support for racially egalitarian principles are clearly welcome; they indicate a greater willingness on the part of whites to treat blacks democratically, at least in principle.

But what Americans think about racial equality as a matter of principle must be distinguished from what they think about efforts to apply racial equality. For political analysis, the difference is crucial. Douglas Rae and his colleagues put this point well:

Our fascination with equality lies . . . with the repeated moment of transition from theory into practice. The importance of this moment is obvious, since it forces an abstraction's sterile form to accommodate life. Trying to make laws or families or universities live up to the doctrine of equality is the point at which we discover egalitarianism as a living conception.²²

As it happens, white Americans express considerably more enthusiasm for the principle of racial equality than they do for policies that are designed to bring

the principle to life—for "egalitarianism as a living conception." By the late 1970s, for example, most whites endorsed the idea that black and white children should attend school together, but only one in four said that the federal government should see to it that this actually happens, and scarcely anyone favored the specific remedy of busing. The "massive and wide-ranging liberalization of racial attitudes," while real enough, applies only to principles, not to policies. White opinion on government efforts to desegregate schools or federal programs to assist blacks shows nothing like the dramatic increase in support we see for egalitarian principles. Most opinion trends on policies are flat; some policies to promote racial equality are actually less popular now than they were a decade or two ago.²³

And it is public opinion on policy that we aim to illuminate here. Our purpose is to undertake an exploration of the terrain of current American racial politics by examining public opinion toward policies on race. In light of our turbulent past, and on the eve of a new century, what do Americans think about issues of race? What are their views on affirmative action, school desegregation, federal aid to cities, and welfare reform? Our first objective is to describe the contours of public opinion across a range of issues that captures the diverse political manifestations of racial conflict today.

We do this for white and black Americans. By paying attention to both sides of the color line, we depart from what has become a standard and unwelcome practice in research on public opinion. Sometimes studies simply ignore race, on the idea that the political differences between blacks and whites are either negligible or uninteresting. Or blacks are set aside entirely, on the idea that there are differences, but ones that would confuse analysis of the public as a whole. Both procedures deprive us of any understanding of the ways that black Americans think about matters of race; they also prevent us from hearing the dialogue that takes place between white and black Americans over their common future—however intermittent and halting such a conversation might be. Our investigation insists that there are two sides to the color line: both white and black voices are represented here.

We hope to offer an accurate and detailed description of public opinion, but our main purpose is to explain the views white and black Americans hold on matters of race. Why do Americans believe what they do about school desegregation or affirmative action or Food Stamps? Perhaps public opinion on matters of race reflects the familiar politics of self-interest: then opinions would depend on whether the policy appeared to pose an economic threat or promise an economic benefit. Or perhaps public opinion on such matters as affirmative action and Food Stamps is explained by group animosities and solidarities: whites oppose such policies because they feel resentment toward blacks, while