Most-racial, not post-racial: Group voting and the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential elections.

Abstract

President Barack Obama’s victory in 2008 was lauded in some corners as a sign of the diminished importance of race in American politics and the potential dawn of a “post-racial” era. While it is well-known that social inequalities persist across groups and racialized discourse has been resilient, an underlying premise of the notion of post-racial politics—that the election of a minority-race candidate was marked by an election that had transcended racial electoral politics—is also in doubt. Using a new measure useful in comparing the extent to which electorates are organized along racial lines, this paper explores trends in racial division in voting in American politics, showing that the 2008 and 2012 elections were characterized not by post-racial voting patterns; rather, recent electoral politics in the United States have been notably divided along racial lines in both historical and cross-national comparative terms. Far from post-racial, the 2008 election in particular must be included in any list of “most-racial” elections. Complicating narratives that argue that white Southerners are responsible for this change, subnational analysis notes that only the West, with its particularly non-polarized demography, is an exception to this trend.

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1 Introduction

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was widely lauded as a milestone in race relations and racial politics in the United States: the nation’s first African American president was elected by a majority-white electorate, and the transition of power took place in an atmosphere of general optimism. Pundits speculated that an Obama victory would “at least
prove that America has finally become a fundamentally post-racial society—a place where tribal loyalties are based on ideology, not skin color,”¹ and that the victory would signify that “this nation [has] unburdened itself of the albatross of race...Race will continue to matter to some...But its importance is diminished.”² Election night images of the tear-streaked cheeks of celebrants in Chicago’s Grant Park and of spontaneous street parties in many large cities—the base of the Obama operation and the previous site in so many instances of racial conflict—provided stirring evidence for the claims of a new “post-racial” era.

These claims were used by some conservatives to bolster arguments against the maintenance of legal and policy protections established against discrimination over the past half-century, from the Voting Rights Act to affirmative action. In the *National Review*, Ken Blackwell argued that

> Everyone should celebrate that quota schemes of any variety are clearly not needed in America. The fact that an African-American has been elected commander-in-chief of this country and will be the leader of the free world shows that race is not an insurmountable obstacle to success in today's America. ³

From the other end of the political spectrum, there was a more measured reaction: this was a good development, a step in the right direction, but not a final triumph. These analyses tended to focus on persistent social division and inequality: in *Color Lines*, Dom Appolon cited “the remaining racial chasms in education, income and wealth, health care, criminal justice enforcement” and Fred McKissack argued in *The Progressive* that

> [The meritocracy] is a flawed premise. This economy has never provided enough jobs for everyone. The funding of education gives a leg up to those who grow up in wealthy districts. Lack of health insurance is a necessity for those without the means. And institutional racism persists.”⁴

These arguments focus principally on socioeconomic inequalities, educational disparities, inequalities in the criminal justice system, and other important areas—while granting the
premise that Obama’s election was a sign of racial coming-together to some degree. The underlying implication of these “social” critiques was that the remaining hard work to be done in achieving racial equality was largely in the economic and social spheres—but that American racial politics were at the very least moving in the “post-racial” direction.

Such a development—the erosion or elision of racial conflict in politics—would indeed be a significant triumph, and might be an important starting point for addressing the still pressing social divisions of which we are reminded by these critics of the “post-racial” discourse. Political scientists, however, have had been less sanguine about the racial politics of 2008 and beyond, and in the ensuing years many findings in this subfield have made it clear that we have not in fact entered an era of unambiguously post-racial politics. Racial language and imagery, coded and otherwise, remain persistent, pervasive staples of American political discourse, taking center stage in recurrent political movements and moments; for a century, there has been important and wide-ranging literature on the direct and indirect roles of race as a constitutive, organizing principle in American politics. This was true during the 2008 campaign, and has been since, as evidence in controversies over the Tea Party, the Trayvon Martin killing, and protests in Ferguson, MO. The recurrence, and inevitability, of such moments present significant challenges for Obama and other leaders who would seek to simultaneously ameliorate racial conflict and reduce social inequities based upon race.

Dealing directly with the 2008 election, Sears and Tesler (2011) and Kinder and Dale-Riddle (2011) each identify the continuing correlation between racial resentment in 2008 voting behavior. Sears and Tesler (2011) in particular finds that individuals’ views on race seem to be driving behavior more than at any other time in modern electoral history. In our present age of heightened polarization, race persists as a major cleavage—more than class or other major demographic categories. Perhaps even more basic than this discursive presence and attitudinal correlation of race in our politics, however, is the development, endurance, and crystallization of electoral partisan bases that are defined
and mobilized based upon the ascriptive characteristics of voters. “Post-racial” politics would seem to imply that these racial divisions were disappearing or less important than before. The available evidence does not support this interpretation of 2008.

In this paper, I present two findings that contribute to our understanding of how “post-racial” the elections of 2008 and 2012 really were. Each of these findings is based on following the question “How racial are contemporary American elections?” with the further question “Compared to what?” Using a new measure for group division in elections, I compare these recent U.S. elections first to the past in the U.S., and then to recent elections in other democracies. First, I find that the U.S. national electorate is generally not moving in the direction of a “post-racial” politics. Rather, group-based voting has increased in the U.S. over the past decade, after a decline in the 1990s. 2008 saw a high level of group voting. The divide is driven largely by white-black political divergence, especially in the South, but also in the Midwest and Northeast. Only in the West is there any evidence that racial voting is on the decline or less organized along group-identity lines than we might expect based on historical or comparative evidence. The potential pathologies of racial political division are not isolated to the region where the racial past is “never past.”

Second, I compare recent US electorates to other national electorates around the world, finding that politics in the U.S. is consistently more riven by group identity than most other countries, even when accounting its fairly high level of diversity. Most countries that are as divided as the U.S. face either post-colonial challenges or serious secessionist movements. Thus, when we answer the question, “How racial are recent American elections, compared to other elections?” the answer is clear, no matter the basis for comparison. Contemporary national elections in the U.S. belong near the top of any short list of elections defined by group identities.
2 Conceptions of “Post-racial” Politics

The assertion that America has defeated the persistent demons of racial divide in any realm of politics would be a signal claim. Two approaches are useful in identifying a persistent (or waning) racial divide in contemporary electoral politics; under either approach, claims of “post-race” should be accompanied by diminished association over time between racial identities or attitudes on one hand and political behavior on the other.

First, many analyses focus on the indirect role of opinions about race in shaping attitudes about politics generally, and the way elites use racial cues to influence voters (especially white voters, who make up the vast majority of the electorate). These analyses probe discourse and psychology, identify internal mechanisms through which voters reconcile group-based antimonies with cultural norms or political principles, and attempt to evaluate the biographical and social determinants of individuals’ opinions about racial and racialized phenomena.\textsuperscript{11} This field has typically focused primarily on the white persons’ attitudes or behaviors as they relate to racial issues. From this perspective, a “post-racial” electorate might be one in which views on race were not associated with vote choice, partisanship, or policy positions; though scholars employing these approaches have argued that race was indeed an important factor in the 2008 election.\textsuperscript{12}

These psychological approaches are various species of “micro” analyses. A second approach to the study of group-based politics, employed here, relies on a more “macro” approach: what are the aggregate compositions of democratic electoral coalitions, and how are they different from each other? In certain contexts, analyzing the gaps in political affiliation can be quite fruitful, and macro-approaches have long been employed in the study of diverse electorates. Scholars of urban politics in the U.S., for instance, have often, and appropriately, turned their analytic eye toward the group bases of politics: unlike the U.S. national electorate, which has always had a numerically and/or legally dominant white majority, there are other places where there is more parity in group size, and where group identity itself can transform into political identity in the democratic competition for power.
and resources. In American cities where distinctive ethnic groups (even “white” ethnic groups) are large and identifiable as blocs, electorates have often mobilized along group lines, and the election of a new leader from a minority group may not be accompanied by diminishing importance of race, but rather of heightened group mobilization. A classic example is the mayoral election of Harold Washington in Chicago in 1983, which was marked by particularly vehement and divisive racial politics in both group behavior and discourse, and not by transcendent racial comity, even though he won.\textsuperscript{13} Hajnal (2010) poses the question of “who wins?” in local elections, examining the likelihood of members of different groups being members of winning coalitions in urban politics, and finding that non-whites are likely to lose.

At the national level, the study of the group composition of coalitions has been much more limited, perhaps because voting was largely restricted to whites until the 1960s. Normative judgments aside, the fact of numerical formal white supremacy makes the study of racial coalitions at the national level less interesting for much of American history. The exclusion of African Americans in the South and elsewhere explains some of this, but similar exclusions of Latinos and Asian Americans in the Southwest and West, Native Americans in the Upper Midwest and Mountain regions, and of other potential voters through racially restrictive immigration and registration policies also shaped the electorate in important and relevant ways. Frymer (1999) is fairly exceptional in putting the racial composition of national electoral coalitions over time at the center of the analysis. Tellingly, his narrative focuses on Reconstruction and the post-Civil Rights era, and on the interaction of African American bloc-voting with generalized norms of white supremacy. Many other studies include race as one variable among many that structure voting, with the basic finding that there are “large” aggregate gaps in attitudes and behavior between racial groups (especially between African Americans and whites), but the massive white majority has often made a focus on the other potential cleavages more important for understanding American political competition broadly.
Today, the assumption of white pre-eminence in national politics is changing. The current national population is rapidly becoming less white: African Americans have always made up about one-eighth of the national population (though before the Voting Rights Act much less of the electorate) and since the 1960s Latinos and Asian Americans have increased in population and gained political strength as well. The rapid growth of these significant non-white groups in the electorate makes the study of America’s multicultural identity politics not only compelling from an intellectual standpoint, but also central to analyses of who will actually win elections and why.

Thus an account of American racial politics should explicitly account for the extent to which voters and citizens sort politically by salient groups. Such sorting is at the heart of partisanship. According to the model of partisan choice proffered by Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002); voters do not rationally calculate to pursue their self interest or evaluate performance, or pick sides narrowly based on policy differences between candidates. Rather, they identify which party is made up an “assemblage of groups” with which they would like to associate. This group-based approach to politics means that identities are central in partisan affiliation as well as vote choice—a person’s group identities may shape how they make decisions about political affiliation or participation, and the aggregate choices of these persons may in turn affect the appeals and mobilization strategies of the parties and candidates in competition for office. This interaction creates electoral “teams” composed of co-identifying masses and elites seeking to consolidate their base or make inroads into new groups.

This investigation adopts the group bases approach with this new social reality in mind. Rather than positing psychological mechanisms and analyzing how they contribute to marginal shifts in behavior, this paper takes a step back to look at the readily observable (to the analysts, vote-counters, parties, and other voters) macro-relationship between one kind of identity and political choice. This electoral teams macro approach focuses on the participants in political competition, and how they map on to categories of social group
identity. This approach to studying elections over time relies upon the notion that salient cleavages and political alignments are important, regardless of their ideological coherence or which additive features of individual identity are associated with voters choosing the team that they do. This is a “macro” approach, and while treating diverse groups of voters as members of groups may mask the variation in opinion or cross-cutting identity within groups, it may also reveal important truths about what our electoral “teams” look like, to elites—and to members of each team themselves, who may not be terribly thoughtful in decomposing the individual attributes that sum to holistic personal identities, and simply summarize the opposition as “them.” Understanding the macrodynamics of electoral politics in terms of salient group identities can also allow us to make comparisons across electorates—across the world and over time—and such an approach can also help us see at a glance what the electoral bases of elite political combat look like, and make judgments about how “racial” electoral politics in the contemporary U.S. are. When we adopt this approach, we find that for a democracy with putatively “post-racial” politics, the contemporary U.S. has electoral coalitions organized around group identity to a remarkable degree.

Employing a new electorate-level measure of group voting, I seek to answer the question: to what extent are today’s U.S. electoral coalitions organized around identity? The weakest interpretation of the post-racial politics narrative is that race “matters” less in electoral politics than it used to—and the strongest evidence for this is the election of a minority candidate by a majority-white electorate. A competing possibility, the “most racial politics” narrative, may better explain reality, however: the increasing diversity of America, and the diminution of the white majority, may have shifted the electoral math in such a way that (sometimes, at least) that it is still possible for the “minority” coalition to win, even in the context of deeply racialized politics. If Barack Obama was elected despite a racially divided electorate, this would have much different implications for American racial politics than if he was elected because race was less important. The remainder of
the paper examines group-based voting for national office in two comparative perspectives. First, are American electoral coalitions less organized around race than they used to be, and were the Obama elections a continuation of this trend? Second, how do electoral coalitions in the U.S. compare to those in democracies around the world—are our political alignments less rooted in groups than most other countries? The answer to both questions, in brief, is “no.”

3 Measuring group-based voting in America: GVF

Is the United States becoming less politically divided along racial group lines, as implied by the post-racial narrative, and what can the elections of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 tell us about the answer to this question? Answering that question requires analytical tools with which to evaluate the relevant concepts and relationships. In this section, I describe a recently developed measure of group-based voting, which I use later to make two subsequent observations about American politics: First, the extent to which voting patterns have been organized around race has steadily increased over the past half century, and American politics as it stands today is as divided along group lines as ever. Second, in comparative perspective, American electoral politics is notable among wealthy democracies for its high levels of group voting.

Measuring whether electoral politics are “driven by race” is not straightforward, and strong claims about ultimate causality are not part of this analysis. In a democracy, people may select their representatives for any number of reasons, and the attitudes that compel them to select that candidate are ultimately opaque and ephemeral, even when they are asked directly. Clearer and more legible are the ascriptive characteristics of the voters—the demographic building blocks of politics that create electoral blocs and serve as shorthand for political actors to read the electorate. This shorthand is often used by office-
seekers when they craft platforms, frame appeals, and mobilize voters—when they build their electoral teams. The politics-identity link also sends signals to other voters. When racial identities become closely tied to political identities and behavior, politics itself can become imbued with apparently irreconcilable demands of competing groups which are heightened by the strong feelings associated with group identity itself. Just as the post-racial society is an alluring ideal, deeply divided group politics are usually undesirable: they can lead to political polarization and gridlock, they can contribute to the deepening of other kinds of social polarization, they can lead to violence and oppression, they are anathema to political liberalism, and so on. In short, the politicization of ethnicity can lead to governance problems.\textsuperscript{16} As America becomes an increasingly diverse nation, and as the white majority wanes over the coming decades, the trends in our ethnoracial politics will become increasingly important to understand—are we on a path to post-ethnicity or heightened ethnoracial polarization? And how will race inform our attitudes, our coalitions, our representative institutions, and our policies?

The subsequent analyses employ a new measure, Group Voting Fractionalization (\textit{GVF}), that allows us to compare the group-voting dynamics of different electorates, focusing on the relationship between identity and vote choice.\textsuperscript{17} In essence, GVF is the summed divergence of each group from the overall electorate, weighted by group's proportion in the electorate. The basic intuition of this measure of \textit{GVF} is that as it becomes more likely that an observer could predict a voter's choice based solely on that voter's group identity, the measure increases. For instance, if every member of group \textit{A} voted for candidate \textit{C}_a, and every member of group \textit{B} voted for candidate \textit{C}_b, that electorate would have a very high GVF score. If members of each group voted for each candidate in about the same proportions, then the electorate would score very low on the measure. The measure is also weighted by the size of the groups—that is, as a group becomes larger, it makes a greater contribution to the overall group voting score of the electorate. Thus an election in which members of groups \textit{A} and \textit{B} each voted for their own candidates (\textit{C}_a and \textit{C}_b) would re-
ceive a higher score if there were equal numbers of voters in A and B than if there were far more voters in group A than group B (or vice-versa). The underlying assumption behind this group-size weighting is that electorates with more equally-sized groups are more “radicalized” than those in which one group’s preponderance makes electoral divisions across races secondary to other considerations. GVF can theoretically range from zero (no difference in aggregate candidate choice across groups) to one (each group perfectly supports its own candidate, and all groups the same size). Thus GVF can be understood as “the extent to which voting is organized around group identity.” In the language of the day, a lower score on the GVF measure would tend to indicate a more “post-racial” politics, or at least an electoral alignment less organized around group identity.

The chief advantage of this measure of group voting is its comparability across electorates and its straightforward manner of relative interpretation, a major advantage it has over alternatives such as measuring the effect of group identity on candidate choice in a standard multinomial regression, where coefficients are not easily “combinable” for multiple groups or comparable across elections. While GVF was developed for use in cross-national comparisons, as it will be here, it can also be used across time to explore changes in the American electorate, observing changes over time in the ethnoracial dynamics of our politics. This allows us to use two frames of comparison for judging the degree to which “post-racial” is an accurate descriptor of electoral politics in the U.S. and to understand changes in the measure over time based on known historical events.

Because GVF incorporates groups’ relative size as well as their electoral distinctiveness, it will increase as groups become more equal in size, even if they become no more distinctive in their voting behavior. From one perspective, this might overstate the common-sense understanding of the underlying concept of group-based voting, because diverse electorates will tend to have higher levels of group voting even if the gaps between groups are no different. On the other hand, we may still consider this to be an increase in the underlying importance of race in organizing political coalitions. After all, as groups
become larger we might expect them to become more like the electorate as a whole, or for elites to make appeals to these increasingly electorally important groups. If groups maintain political distinctiveness even as they grow, however, this is itself a non-trivial fact in understanding group politics, and this is why GVF includes these group sizes. Including group sizes is also the way to best fit the measure’s intuition of predicting votes based on identity described above.

Still, it may be useful to take diversity into account, so I also include secondary analyses that account for diversity explicitly. Given the fairly strong observed linear relationship between GVF and diversity (ELF) illustrated in Figures and , it makes sense to develop a measure that removes the effects of electorate-level diversity, and more explicitly accounts for the electoral differences between groups. I employ two measures of group voting-net-diversity related to GVF that help answer this legitimate possible critique of the measure which I describe in Section ??.

Together, these data can give us a feel for whether a given election was more or less structured by group voting than we might expect based on some baseline “typical” relationship between diversity and group-based political division. Using them to examine the group bases of U.S. elections, it is clear that by any standard 2008 did not represent a post-racial low.

4  American Group Voting, 1948-2012

To describe trends in American racial voting over time, Figure 1 plots the national group voting score over time for Presidential (solid line) and House (dotted line) elections in the US from 1948 to 2008 using data from the American National Election Study cumulative datafile. We can see that GVF has increased fairly steadily since the ANES began collecting data. Three further observations are of immediate import. First, the largest increase came in the 1960s in the aftermath of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the entrance of millions of African Americans into the electorate. The political incorporation of immigrants from
Latin America and Asia after 1965 contributed to this increase as well, but these groups are smaller and less distinctive portions of the electorate, so their contribution to the overall score is much smaller.\textsuperscript{19} Second, racial voting is generally higher in Presidential elections than in House elections, though the trendlines are basically parallel. Third, recent elections have been characterized by the highest levels of racial voting in modern history (though the 2006 House vote did have a higher GVF score than the 2008 House vote). This trend consistently undermines the claim of a post-racial politics.

(Figure[1]About Here)

From an historical perspective, American voters are more racially divided than ever—emphatically not post-racial. While the group-vote relationship is not perfect (GVF would equal 1 if that were the case), it is much higher in recent elections than it was in earlier contests. However, to gain a better picture of how to think about the increasing group division of American politics, we can dig deeper into the U.S. case by examining GVF’s components.

5 An artefact of diversity?

Group voting has been on the rise in the United States over the past several decades. Because GVF incorporates relative group size, however, some of this increase is attributable to U.S. diversity, which is high by wealthy-nation standards and has increased significantly since the 1960s (especially in the electorate), and how much to increases in groups’ electoral distinctiveness. Again, in most contexts, if we are measuring the importance of group identity in organizing voting, then if a group remains distinctive as it gets larger, then it is reasonable to argue that voting is more “group-based” in the case where the group is larger. Arguments that increases in GVF due to increased parity in group sizes are akin to saying that the size of groups should not matter in democratic politics; of course
they should.\textsuperscript{20} Still, it is worth looking into this question. To account for varying levels of diversity over time (and later around the world), we can use the “net-diversity” measures $GVFELF$ and $VD$.

The analyses below take two different approaches to taking $ELF$ into account, though both yield similar insights. First, the deductive measure Voting Disproportionality ($VD$) is based on the ingredients of $GVF$; it is the sum of the squared differences between group members and non-members for parties in the given election.\textsuperscript{21} This is essentially $GVF$ without group weights.

Second, the measure $GVFELF$ is based on the observed relationship between $GVF$ and diversity, and is an inductive attempt to measure group voting “net” diversity. Precisely, it is the residual for each observation of an OLS regression of $GVF$ on $ELF$ for a given pool of elections.\textsuperscript{22} The basic interpretation is that positive values of $GVFELF$ indicate that an electorate was more organized around group identity than we would inductively “expect” given its level of diversity. If race were becoming less meaningful, we would expect the residuals to be negative for recent elections, particularly for the “post-racial” moment of Obama’s ascendancy. In fact, the reverse is largely true.

Figure\textsuperscript{2} plots $GVF$ against $ELF$ for US elections, as measured by the ANES Cumulative datafile. Each point in the plot is an election in that year, with Presidential elections in \textit{bold}, and House elections \textit{italicized}. There are three fit lines of expectation based on regressions using different pools of elections: a dashed line reflecting the relationship for U.S. House elections only; and the solid line for U.S. Presidential elections only, and a dotted line reflecting the global relationship between $GVF$ and $ELF$ (to be clarified in a subsequent section). An election above the line means it is one of the more group-centered elections in the pool represented by the line, even when we account for the diversity of the electorate.

(Figure\textsuperscript{2} about here)
From this plot, we can see three important trends: first, as expected, the U.S. electorate's diversity has indeed increased dramatically and fairly consistently over time. We can see this because points to the right are generally for later years, and ELF is highly correlated with time. Second, GVF is more strongly correlated with ELF in the US than it is globally. This means that analyzing the residuals of the US case, as presented in Figures 2 and 3, is an analytically conservative approach: by global standards, the U.S. is always far from “post-racial;” but if the 2008 election was structured more by race, net diversity, than we would expect based only on recent U.S. history, the claim of the “post-racial” politics would be even more deeply undermined.

This is what we see clearly from Figure 3, which is a rotated version of Figure 2 that allows us to see more clearly changes in group voting, net group size, over time. Positive values indicate an election with more group voting that we would expect based on its level of diversity. 2008 is the second-highest value on this measure. Figure 4 tells a similar story, plotting VD for American presidential and congressional elections over time. Here, we see similar peaks at “more racial” Presidential elections in 1968, 1972, 1980, and 2008, and a rather halting secular increase in group voting in congressional elections.

The elections with the lowest levels on these two “net-diversity” measures include the early elections and the Clinton-Gore years. Starkly, there are a few “most racial” elections. Not surprisingly, 1968 is the most racially divided, given the presence of third-party segregationist George Wallace in that race. But 2008’s voting was roughly as group-based (and well above any “expectation” based on cross-national or historical comparison) as Reagan’s first election in 1980, and much more than any recent election. Far from being a transformative moment of racial harmony, Obama’s victory was a moment of deep ethnoracial
electoral conflict, the likes of which we have not seen for decades. Similarly, the 2006 congressional election marked a high water mark of GVFELF for congressional voting, supporting the notion that recent politics have been unusually organized around race.26

Even when we account for increasing diversity (an allowance which itself implies that it is somehow natural for groups to be distinctive in their electoral behavior) the 2008 election is in a class with 1968 and 1980 as the most group-driven presidential elections on record. Results from 2012 showed less division, but by no means an historic low. What is driving this increase in GVF over the years, and what accounts for the particularly high level of racial voting in 2008?

We can disaggregate the components of GVF to better understand which groups are driving the trend over time. The well-known solidarity of African Americans, the most distinctive voting bloc in the electorate, is an important factor, but white voters have also moved away from other groups over the past two decades. This point is illustrated in Figures 5b and 5c—white voting was more distinctive in 2008 and 2012 than in preceding election cycles. Asian American and Hispanic voters have been less distinctive and less consistent; VD was relatively high in 2008, but has fluctuated since their inclusion in the ANES, a finding probably due in part to these groups’ small size in the ANES sample and to their internal heterogeneity on multiple salient dimensions.

(Figure 5 about here)

As we can see from these figures, as the electorate has become more diverse, groups have not converged. From 5b and 5c, we can see that African Americans have maintained a high level of distinctiveness, which began to erode over the 1980-2000 period but was renewed with their extremely high level of support for Kerry and Obama; the distinctiveness of Asian American and Latino voters varies across elections, but shows no clear long-term trend; and whites have remained distinctive, recently moving away from the other groups. The post-racial narrative seems to imply that groups would converge over time—that all medians would be closer together, and some other cleavage would decide elections. The
data do not support this claim.

6 The View from Abroad

We need not rely upon only our own imperfect national experiences to evaluate American democracy, however. Too often U.S. politics are considered *sui generis*, rather than as one case among many in a global community. We have seen that U.S. politics are certainly no less structured by race than they were; perhaps comparing U.S. electoral dynamics with other democracies will provide a better understanding of our politics, by locating them within a global context of peers. This is a particular strength of *GVF*, designed as it was for use in such comparisons; it is the best available measure for comparing electorates with different configurations of groups.27 Using a dataset derived from a range of surveys to measure *GVF* around the world, we can see that levels of group voting in the U.S. are also high by global standards. Figure 6 compares the U.S. to other countries using data from recent election polls in those countries.28 For the other countries, the definition of group is based on Fearon’s (2003) dataset listing the politically relevant ethnic groups in all nations and *GVF* is calculated in the same manner as above; for the U.S., his dataset includes the four groups included in Figure 1 above, making these cross-national measures as comparable as possible. As we can see from Figure 6, the United States has, over the past decade, been characterized by globally above-average levels of group voting. This may be surprising, given the possibly greater potential for ethnic mobilization in countries with proportional representation or more regional parties.29

(Figure 6 about here)

Again, the high levels of group voting in recent U.S. are not “simply” artefacts of diversity. First, from Figure 7, we can see that *GVF* scores for the U.S. are consistently
higher than “expected” based on levels of diversity. This figure plots GVF against ELF, the measure of diversity, using data from [Huber (2012)]. The diagonal line represents the linear relationship between the two variables (i.e., the inductively “expected” level of GVF for a given level of diversity). The vertical distance to the fit line indicates how much more or less voting is structured by group identity than we would expect based on a country’s level of politically relevant diversity. As in Figure 7, the most appropriate comparison set is congressional elections, so those are the US elections used here. All are above the line, some well above it, indicating that these elections that are particularly structured around descent-based group identities. Significantly, the fact of increasing diversity in the U.S. cannot explain the high level of GVF; many electorates with more diversity are less divided by group.

(Figure 7 about here)

(Figure 8 about here)

In fact, group-based voting is higher in the U.S. than in any other high-income democracy except Belgium and Canada, countries whose electoral politics are characterized by enduring movements for ethnicity-based secession or dissolution. Almost all of the other countries above the median of GVF = .12 are from Africa and have very high levels of ethnolinguistic diversity and multi-party systems, two factors which make higher GVF scores more likely by construction. The case for the elections of 2008 and 2012 being “post-racial” is weak by international comparison.

7 A Southern Thing?

Recent U.S. elections show high levels of group division, by historical and comparative standards. The conventional wisdom of the “Red-Blue” narrative holds that contemporary
partisan-racial divisions are largely driven by the conversion of white Southern Democrats to the GOP. If this is true, then group divisions should be strongest in the South, and weak or weakening in other regions. We can examine this possibility with a regional decomposition of $GVF$, to see where politics is most structured by race. Again using the ANES cumulative data, Figure 9 illustrates that $GVF$ is indeed consistently highest in the South, and consistently higher there than we would expect based on the region’s level of diversity. High levels of $GVF$ in 2008 are not limited to the South, however: voting in other regions was also more group-based than we would expect in 2008, and overall levels of $GVF$ have continued to rise. In no region, it seems, are groups converging in their electoral choice distributions.

Figure 9 depicts the regional trends in $GVF$ and $GVFELF$ for presidential and House voting. Figure 9a demonstrates the historical trends in $GVF$, with a line for each region as categorized by the ANES; in all regions, $GVF$ rises over time. The level in the South after 1968 is above the other regions, especially for presidential voting, but there are spikes in the other regions as well, especially in congressional races. Note that group-based voting in the Northeast—the heart of “Blue America”—is also very high for much of this time. Figures 9c and 9d depict the relationship between regional $GVF$ and regional $ELF$, which is unsurprisingly similar to, if noisier than, the relationship between national measures. Though there is some variation in group voting levels among regions, from a global perspective nearly all of the regional levels are higher than we would expect given levels of diversity.

(Figure 9 about here)

Figures 9e and 9f plot $GVFELF$ for each region over time. The pattern is akin to that presented in Figure 3: again we see that 2008 was characterized by higher than expected levels of group voting, especially in the South for the Presidential race. Figure 9 also presents the interesting observation that the West is a diverse region where levels of
group-based voting are unexpectedly low by American and even “typical” by global standards, and getting lower over time (This is especially apparent in subfigures 9c, 9d, and 9f). Part of this may be driven by the fact that Western diversity is characterized less by the historically stark “white-black” polar divide than are other regions, and instead colored by a multiracial constellation of less distinctive blocs; this may be a bright spot in terms of racial politics, and potentially encouraging if U.S. demography is headed in a similar direction—or it may be simply attributable to the population heft of California in the region, and that state’s fairly distinctive leftward drift over time.

8 Discussion: Race as Class?

The results above provide a clear corrective to the idea that the 2008 election was characterized by post-racial (or even less-racial) politics, by historical or global standards. While it is true that Barack Obama was elected (and re-elected) by a majority-white electorate, and even did slightly better than his Democratic predecessors among whites, this should be attributed to very strong support among the growing non-white population and especially to extremely high levels of mobilization among African Americans—not to markedly increased support from whites. To the contrary, despite the fact that Obama did better among whites than Kerry did, white voting disproportionality was very high (that is, whites were still less like the rest of the electorate); if race didn’t “matter,” Obama should have outrun Kerry among whites and the electorate as a whole by double digits, as he did among African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. Instead, the Democratic share of the white vote increased only 2 percent in 2008, from 42 to 44, and actually fell in 2012 to 39. All groups were less like the overall electorate in 2008 than in 2004.

This differences across racial groups in the shift toward the Democratic candidate from 2004-2008 might be interpreted as racially progressive in two normatively positive
ways. First, it could be argued that the landmark significance of a nonwhite major-party nominee motivated those from all non-white groups to organize, mobilize, and choose that candidate as a sign of cross-group solidarity and support for Obama—albeit cross-group support among nonwhites only. This would be an indicator that certain kinds of political group difference (the differences between the three non-white groups) might be less important, but a more crystallized white-nonwhite divide is hardly a post-racial result. We would think of this kind of group-based similarity and exuberance more as positive solidarity than as negative “racial voting.” Given the legacies of race, African American support for an African American candidate is not conceptually equivalent, in a normative sense, to white opposition to that candidate or to white support for a white candidate. Similarly, a uniform increase across nonwhite groups points but not among whites points not to in-group solidarity among non-whites but to a hardening of a white-nonwhite dichotomy, regardless of the non-white groups. This may be seen as a “hopeful” sign for those who would promote cooperation among a putative “Rainbow” coalition, but is also reflective of the resilience of white supremacy per se even as other group identities may be less divisive politically. Second, Obama did do slightly better than his predecessor, so it may just be enough that support for the Democrat did not decrease for the first nonwhite nominee. Again, under the logic of retrospection above, however, this may be setting the bar for post-racial politics a little low, given George W. Bush’s unpopularity and the economic crisis of 2008. These two observations should lead to caution in interpreting the high level of GVF and GVFELF in 2008: while differences across groups were high, Obama-McCain was not quite Nixon-McGovern-Wallace.

Regionally, group voting division was highest in the South, but race plays more of a role in every region than ever before. Even when we account for the increased diversity of the electorate (an accounting that makes the implicit assumption that it is somehow “natural” for groups, as they grow, to maintain their initial distribution of partisan support, rather than develop to look more like the electorate as a whole), the level of group
voting is more than we would expect by any standard. Finally, an observer from abroad would almost certainly argue against the post-racial thesis in American politics. Contra the optimism of Gunnar Myrdal half a century ago, relevant social groups are more electorally divided in the U.S. than they are in most other countries, especially rich democracies. By both historical and comparative standards, the 2008 election was a moment of particularly stark racial division, not of post-racial cooperation.

Less clear than the description is the underlying driver of America’s increasingly racialized electoral coalitions. Strong conclusions about the ultimate cause of group-based voting in the U.S. are beyond the scope of any single paper, but some speculation based on previous theories is possible. One obvious candidate is class: it is well-known that minorities in the U.S., especially African Americans and Latinos, are typically less affluent than whites. If nonwhites increasingly constitute a growing, separating socioeconomic subaltern, then a large part of increasing racial voting may really just be class voting, with another identity layered on top. It has also been observed that class voting is alive and well in American politics, even in the face of alleged “culture wars”. One way to examine the class-race-voting link is to see whether group-based inequality has generally been on the rise in the past half century, along with group-based voting; if between-group income inequality has grown over the past few decades, this would provide some preliminary evidence for the class-race-voting link. This is indeed the case. Table 1 shows between-group inequality (BGI) in household income over time in the U.S., which has actually increased since the 1970s after declining slightly during the 1950s and 1960s.

The electorate has become structured by group identity as aggregate income differences across groups have grown as well, and this fairly steady secular trend since the 1970s may explain much of the growth in GVF, especially why groups have remained so distinctive in their voting patterns over time. Class differences in voting have indeed increased over
time, but with an important caveat. Figure ?? shows two series analogous to those above, but in which $GVF$ is calculated based on household income, with the population broken into thirds to define the relevant groups (thus group sizes do not change, so over-time changes are due solely to differences between groups). Among all voters, class voting has increased over time, but among white voters there is no such trend, merely spikes. The 2006 House election showed the biggest differences among white class groups in history; but by 2012 those gaps had disappeared. Among African Americans (not pictured separately here), class gaps were small to start and have steadily diminished, perhaps due to in-group solidarity and a perception of linked fate.$^{36}$

(Figure 9 about here)

However, many other factors are certainly important as well, and these may impact which elections have higher levels of racial division. In particular, the three elections with very high levels of $GVFELF$ fit well into a story about racial resentment as a causal factor among white voters. Though there are no measures of racial resentment or symbolic racism from those earlier eras, Sears and Tesler (2011) find that racial resentment played more of a role in determining vote choice in 2008 than ever before—a finding consistent with the analyses above and against the notion that 2008 was anything close to a post-racial event. We should not be surprised by this, given that Obama was the first non-white nominee by a major party; in analogous circumstances, heightened racial political conflict has been the norm, regardless of the ultimate outcome of the election.$^{37}$

9 Conclusion

What does it mean for American politics that voting in the 2008 “post-racial” moment was, even more than we would expect given the increasingly diverse electorate, organized around group identity? American racial politics has a long, divisive—and at times bloody—history, and scholars certainly agree that “race matters” in American politics. The election
of Barack Obama as our first African American president seemed a signal moment in racial progress: a cross-racial coalition of liberals elected a progressive chief executive, and his coattails helped bring in huge Democratic majorities on Capitol Hill. The triumphalism about the end of race, however, was certainly overblown. Racial undertones (and overtones, too) have characterized the emergence of the far-right tea party movement and continued polarization on racial issues. The polarized discourse of the age may reflect the heightened feelings of conservative white Americans seeking to take the country “back” in the same way that Bernie Epton once urged Chicagoans to defeat Harold Washington before it was “too late.”

Similarly, we would be too optimistic to believe that deep social and economic inequalities would immediately evaporate with the election of an African American President. Those discursive and social markers of the continuing significance of race have been identified clearly by analysts seeking to temper the excitement about the Age of Obama.

However, a more basic observation has generally been underplayed: that even the election of Obama itself was not actually an instance of post-racial politics. The conclusion that the racial politics of 2008 should be classified as either the “most racial” Presidential election or as a member of a small set of particularly racialized elections (with 1980 and 1968) should certainly give us pause in asserting platitudes about the diminishing significance of race in electoral politics. Rather, 2008 represented the continuation of a long trend toward a more racial politics, as measured by the identities of those who line up in opposing political coalitions. The precise factors that have contributed to this long trend are nuanced, multiple, and of uneven desirability from a normative perspective: the Voting Rights Act, immigration, the uneven incorporation and mobilization of nonwhite voters (mostly by Democrats), sustained and increasing between-group socioeconomic inequality, the migration of whites to the G.O.P., appeals by elites to racialized identities and attitudes, and so on.

These alignments may or may not reflect conscious racism by voters or strategic
appeals to our lesser angels by elites, but they reflect and magnify the importance of race regardless. The straightforward analyses above indicate that U.S. group voting is as high as ever, and consistently above average by international standards. As politics remains divided along group lines, the ideological polarization of recent years is likely to be exacerbated as ideology becomes increasingly intertwined with political and dearly held racial identities. The interplay between group politics and individual opinions is reciprocal. The flight to the Republicans among white Americans has so far kept pace with the growing diversity of the country as a whole; it is unclear whether this will change, or in what direction.38 This interplay of groups and parties echoes the political development of cities across America just a generation ago, as newcomers arrive and whites exit—students of racial politics may turn to these historical cases for analogues to the current transformation of American group politics.39 Obama’s 2012 re-election was marked by slightly less overall division, but hardly by intergroup comity. In some of those cities, there was a reorganization of racial politics, and a return to white-led rule. Others saw the accommodation of the new social reality and the creation of durable cross-racial coalitions capable of governing despite the challenges of race. Still others saw a virtual abandonment of the city by whites (along with their relative affluence). Exit is less of an option at the national level, of course, and the development of national politics remains to be written. At that level, however, we are not in the post-racial age—today’s politics are the most racial they have been in decades.

Notes


2“America begins its journey into a post-racial era”, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 5, 2008.


5 See, for instance, Lum (2009), for an excellent example; but hundreds of editorials in this vein were written or published in the aftermath of the election.

6 Dubois (2013), Myrdal (1944), Carmines and Stimson (1989), Katznelson (2005), Smith and King (2005). These famous studies analyzed the role race has played in constituting the state itself, or American political ideology. Many streams of evidence indicate that the American state, and conceptions of American-ness, are far from postracial. My electoral behavioral focus here is narrower, a lower bar for post-racial claimants to clear.


8 Sugrue (2011)

9 These follow on the long literature defining and characterizing the new forms and content of racial attitudes in America, including the recent Valentino and Sears (2005), which focuses on partisan change among Southern whites.

10 This can be seen from any individual-level multivariate analysis. In the author’s analyses of major election survey data (not presented here), no variable pre-political variable was a stronger predictor than race in predicting vote choice in 2008.

11 See Sears and Tesler (2011) for a recent review of relevant findings in this literature, though the magnitude and historical trend in racial attitudes and the power of racial attitudes in explaining other opinions or behavior is contested. See also Carmines and Stimson (1989), Edsall and D., (1991), Gilens (2000), Mendelberg (2001), Oliver (2010) for different approaches within this family.

12 Sears and Tesler (2011)

13 The heredity-group bases of local politics are perhaps the longest-running observa-
tion of the subfield of urban politics. See [Gosnell (1935), Dahl (1961), Browning and D. R. Marshall (2003), and Hajnal (2010)] for the recurrent and consistent finding that local political competition is frequently organized around these group identities.

14 Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002), p. 8

15 Throughout this analysis, I use the term “race” in its colloquial American sense to refer to a category of heritable group identity difference that is often referred to in the comparative politics literature as “ethnicity.” I also use the word “group” to refer to racial groups in this sense. I employ this vocabulary while cognizant of the American controversy about the difference in category-type. While the U.S. Census and many scholars (importantly) differentiate between the two kinds of difference, I employ the fairly common—defensible but not uncontroversial—convention of treating these groups as discrete instances of the same category of group-based difference in American politics. Following Chandra (2003), I employ the definition of “ethnic identity categories [as] a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by descent-based attributes,” but use the term race as the signifier. Unless otherwise specified, I use the four group identity categories identified often as most relevant to the concept of descent-based-group politics in the United States: white, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American, and in the comparative analysis I use Fearon’s (2003) ethnic categories for the other countries in his dataset. See Fearon (2003). While Chandra (2003) uses the term “ethnicity,” to refer to groups of this sort, in American politics these groups are often referred to as racial categories (see, for instance, Browning and D. R. Marshall (2003)). Given its original (and now disreputed) pretensions to science, the language of race to describe these groups may be less appropriate than the more explicitly cultural language of ethnicity, but that is part of a broader discussion beyond the scope of this paper. Using alternative definitions (eg. strict Census-bureau racial groups, which would distribute Hispanics back into the other groups or drop them from the analysis) does not change the substantive results of the analysis. These categories are admittedly imperfect for some analyses for a num-
ber of reasons—they mask intragroup diversity in all four groups, they naturalize or lend scientific respectability to constructed categories, and they treat as equivalent categories of difference that were intentionally elaborated and defined in order NOT to be seen as equivalent. For the purposes of comparability over time and space, however, these seem to be the most appropriate categories. They are also the most commonly recognized groups in the literature on ethnic and racial politics in the U.S. See Fearon (2003), Browning and D. R. Marshall (2003), Hajnal (2010). Again, the analytical results remain substantively much the same when alternative specifications of groups are employed or when marginal groups are dropped from the analysis.

\[ GVF = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\sum_{g=1}^{G} EV_g * s_g}} \]

where

\[ EV_g = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \sum_{j=1}^{P} (V^j_g - V^j)^2} \]

and where \( V \) is the share of votes from each of \( G \) groups \( g \) for each of \( P \) parties/candidates \( p \), weighted by \( s \), the proportion of each group \( g \) in the electorate.

A simple multivariate regression of each group’s contribution to the sum of \( GVF \) (ie, the groups’ vote distribution weighted by size; results not presented here) indicate that overall, \( GVF \) is unsurprisingly driven mainly by the distinctive African American bloc and large white population.

Such a sustained distinctiveness may give us important information about mobilization of groups by elites (for instance, we might expect elites to make appeals to the growing group, and the group’s electoral split thus to become closer to “normal” over time as it became more electorally important).
Several versions of $VD$ are used below. $VD_t$ is the sum of all $VD$s in an election. $VD_g$ is $VD_t$ divided by the total number of groups, in order to make cross-national comparisons. Higher values indicate greater divisions across groups. This is essentially $GVF$ without measures of group sizes, nearly equivalent to the term under the square root in the formula for $EV_g$ above.

$GVF$ and $ELF$ are strongly positively correlated. See Figure 7.

But note that the 2000 electorate, perhaps because of historically low turnout, was actually less diverse than 1996, and 2008 was less diverse than 2004, at least among respondents to the ANES.

Figure 4 depicts the sum of $VD$ for whites and blacks (vs. all groups) over time. These groups are the only ones in the entire series, and account for most of U.S. group voting.

For the early years, the electorate is artificially homogeneous because African Americans were mostly prevented from voting in the Jim Crow South and because the categories of Asian American and Hispanic were not yet measured in either the Census or the ANES; in an analysis of post-Civil Rights and post-1970 elections not presented here, the substantive results of the regression-residuals analysis and of $VD$ are much the same.

Interestingly, the 2008 congressional election saw a decrease in group-voting (both $GVF$ and $GVFELF$), perhaps because of the general unpopularity of Bush and the G.O.P. at the time. This, and the apparent difference in intercept between $GVF$ for House and Presidential elections, is an area for future analysis.

Huber (2012)

Data for other countries taken from Huber (2012), which incorporates data from Afrobarometer, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and World Values Survey (WVS) polls. These polls typically ask questions about legislative elections, so for comparability the U.S. scores included in Figure 6 are for congressional voting. Note that, from Figure U.S. $GVF$ scores for Presidential voting are generally higher than they are for Congress, even before Obama’s candidacy, so comparisons using congressional elections
are the most likely place to find evidence for “post-racial” U.S. elections.

29But note [Huber (2012)], which finds that proportional representation is, perhaps counterintuitively, associated with lower levels of GVF.

30“ Relevant” groups for this cross-national analysis are identified by [Fearon (2003)]. See [Huber (2012)] for some details on this dataset.

31[Valentino and Sears (2005)]

32State-level samples were too small for individual analysis with this data, but analysis of 2000 and 2004 Annenberg data by state (not presented here) yields similar results. Regions in the ANES match Census definitions of the Northeast, South, Central, and West. In Figure 9 regional measures are marked by the appropriate letter symbol.

33In CNN exit polls. In a post-racial world, we might expect this bump from Kerry to Obama to be largely due to negative retrospective evaluations of the outgoing Republican administration’s policies and performance, and we would expect the Democratic increase from 2004 to 2008 to be fairly even across groups.

34[McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2006), Bartels (2008), Gelman (2008)]

35Author’s calculation. BGI here is generated using individual-level sampled Census data from USA-IPUMS, and the “Ginidesc” package in Stata (Roger and Silvia 1999). The four groups included in this calculation are the same as those used in the GVF and ELF calculations above.

36[Dawson (1995)]

37[Hajnal (2007)]

38Though the relatively strong support for Obama among younger white voters may be a sign of a possible weakening of this trend.

39For instance, Hajnal’s (2007) study of first black mayors may inform our understanding of the Obama presidency.
References


URL: [http://diverseeducation.com/article/12238](http://diverseeducation.com/article/12238)


Figure 1: **GVF in the U.S.** National electoral politics have become more organized around group identity over time.


## 10 Figures and Tables

Table 1: **Between-Group Inequality in the United States, 1970-2010.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>BGI(Population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>.0485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>.0459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.0509</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>.0566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>.0709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>.0740</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: **GVF vs. ELF, U.S. 1952-2008** Each point represents the GVF score for a given election plotted against ELF, with Presidential elections in **bold** and House elections in *grey italics*. Points above a given line are more organized around ethnoracial identity than we would expect for that pool given levels of diversity. Note that almost all elections for each office are well above the global fit line, and the 2008 Presidential election is well above all three lines.

![Graph showing GVF vs. ELF over time](image)

**Figure 3: GVF/ELF over time.** Series track the residuals of a regression of GVF on ELF

![Graph showing GVF/ELF residuals over time](image)
Figure 4: *VD* over time. Series track the sum of white-black voting disproportionality.

![Graph showing VD over time](image)

Figure 5: **Voting Disproportionality by group.** Subfigure A illustrates the groups’ proportions in the electorate over time, and the overall diversity of the electorate, as measured by *ELF*. Subfigures B and C illustrate unweighted group voting disproportionality for white voters and black voters in House and Presidential elections, respectively.

![Graphs showing group proportions and disproportionality](image)

a. Group proportions and disproportionality in the electorate

b. Disproportionality (House)

c. Disproportionality (President)
Figure 6: **Group Voting in Comparative Perspective.** Points represent GVF scores for that country in that year in legislative elections. Comparative data from John Huber’s ethnic voting dataset. U.S. data from that dataset if in **simple bold** or from ANES if in **bold italics**. Note that the U.S. has had above-median levels of group-based voting in all recent elections.

Figure 7: **Group voting (GVF) and Diversity (ELF).** Group voting in the U.S. is high, given its level of diversity.
Figure 8: **VD across nations.** Even when we ignore the relative sizes of groups, politics in the U.S. are still more organized around group identity than average.
Figure 9: **Regional GVF and GVFELF, 1950-2012.** The South has higher levels of *GVF* than “expected”, but all regions except the West have seen recent increases and spikes, even accounting for growing diversity.
Figure 10: **Class Voting, 1950-2012.** Overall, income groups have diverged over time, but among whites they have not.