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E. B. DuBois's voice still rings true on the black experience in America. Writing in 1903 he observed that “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This “two-ness,” although now refracted in ever more complex ways along lines of class, gender, ideology, and interest, remains fundamental to understanding how and why race is still a durable divide in the United States.

To be sure, African American men and women have directly contributed to and share in the pride and joy in all that is great about America. We benefit in important measure from all the social trends and circumstances that work to benefit any American, without regard to race. And today, African Americans enjoy an unprecedented material well-being, cultural achievement, and political prominence.

In the very same instant, however, the experience of African Americans remains importantly set apart, uniquely stigmatized, disadvantaged and, in a word, a “problem.” Whether the issue is achievement test performance, college attendance, unemployment and poverty, media stereotyping, racial profiling, or voter disenfranchisement, the black experience is anything but salutary. As a result, African Americans view the nation, their fellow citizens, and many specific issues with lenses crafted while compelled to stand on the wrong side of “the veil” of race.

Study upon study and poll upon poll show that although much has changed for the better, a racial divide of significant dimensions is not merely American history but also an American reality today. The results of our own recent National African American Election Survey, fielded by Knowledge Networks in October and December 2000, bear out these claims.1

At the same time that the US Census is allowing people to identify with multiple racial categories, the vast majority of African Americans continues to feel that their fate as individuals is tied to the fate of the group as a whole. That is, a decided minority of the African American population seems

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1. By Lawrence D. Bobo, Michael C. Dawson, Devon Johnson.
convinced they actually have the option of existing as mere individuals whose racial appearance in the eyes of others is irrelevant. Sixty-five percent of African Americans nationwide said yes when asked if “what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life.” Just under 1 in 5 said no, and a roughly comparable proportion said they didn’t know. When pressed further, as Figure 1 shows, nearly a third of the black population characterized “a lot” of what black political scientists have come to call a sense of “common fate” racial identity.

At the same time, many African Americans, much like their fellow white Americans, feel good about the relative prosperity of the recently ended Clinton years. Our survey finds blacks more optimistic about their own family finances than whites, an inversion of the usual pattern. Thus, 23% of African Americans said they were much better off financially than they had been a year earlier, as compared to just 10% of whites. Blacks were even more optimistic about the national economy, with 48% saying it had gotten better, compared to 31% of whites. And fewer than 1 in 5 blacks felt the economy had gotten worse, whereas 1 in 4 whites did. These perceptions had a solid foundation in the declines in both unemployment and poverty in African American communities recorded during the past several years.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer that black optimism about the economy means the irrelevance of race to black public opinion, even about economic matters. For example, when asked specifically how blacks as a group are getting along economically, only 8% of blacks said very well, and a comparable 7% gave the most pessimistic response of not too well at all. The solid majority said fairly well, and a substantial 30% said that blacks as a group were not doing too well economically. Moreover, blacks see themselves as a group as decidedly disadvantaged compared to whites. Forty percent said that blacks were much worse off or somewhat worse off economically relative to whites, a view shared by only 24% of whites. A plurality of both blacks and whites, 30% and 34% respectively, said blacks and whites were doing about the same economically.

Numerous studies not only show large differences in opinion between blacks and whites on issues of racial politics, but substantial differences on matters of domestic social spending and support for the welfare state as well. Each and every detail of these differences need not be rehearsed here. What matters for us is that it is no exaggeration to say that African Americans exhibit a strong state-centered, social justice agenda in their race-related and domestic economy policy preferences that sets the center of black opinion far apart from that of white opinion.

Thus, when asked to indicate what should be top priorities for spending anticipated federal budget surpluses, there was only partial overlap between blacks and whites concerning the top four most frequently mentioned items. Among blacks, the top four priority areas were increased spending on public schools (80%), protecting Social Security (79%), job training programs (68%), and day care programs (60%). Among whites, the top four priority areas were protecting Social Security (82%), increased spending on public schools (64%), a large tax cut for the middle class (52%), and increased spending on military and defense (41%).

From the perspective of black America, then, the current focus of President Bush on a 1.6-trillion-dollar tax cut has much more to do with what white America cares about. To sharpen the difference further, when asked to select the single most important priority, only 8% of African Americans said a “large tax cut for the middle class,” as compared to 20% of whites.

But the “two-ness” of the black experience asserts itself most dramatically when issues of race arise directly. Indeed, many African Americans end up feeling deeply cynical about race relations. We asked all of our respondents whether blacks would ever achieve racial equality in America. As Figure 2 shows, blacks and whites hold very different views on this subject. Fully a third of whites say that blacks have already achieved equality, whereas fewer than 1 in 10 blacks hold this view. More importantly, 40% of blacks (versus 24% of whites) said...
racial equality would not be achieved in their lifetimes, and fully 1 in 5 blacks (versus only 3% of whites) said that racial equality would never be achieved.

Perhaps the clearest case of a race problem in public policy and in public opinion involves the criminal justice system. We asked our respondents whether the American legal system treats all groups fairly or whether it is unfair to blacks. The black-white difference is enormous. Nearly three-fourths of African Americans said the legal system is unfair to blacks, as compared to only 8% of whites. Apparently, many whites are sensitive to the possibility that the criminal justice system either is uniformly unfair or believe that the system is biased against whites, since a very high 48% rejected both statements. Nonetheless, the fundamental asymmetry of how blacks and whites view the criminal justice system is clear.

Nowhere is the depth and character of this difference seen more directly than in the experience of “racial profiling” of African Americans by police. The New York Times recently reported the treatment of black dentist Elmo Randolph by New Jersey state troopers. Dr. Randolph, the report says,

"My parents always told me, be careful when you’re driving on the turnpike,” said Dr. Randolph, 44. “White people don’t have that conversation.”

As a reflection of experiences like those of Dr. Randolph, and other forms of ongoing racial bias and stigmatization, most African Americans embrace a deep sense of injustice on matters of race, a feeling not appreciated by the great majority of white America. The clearest indication of this gulf in understanding is the extent of black versus white support for a formal apology and reparations for slavery. When asked, “Do you think the federal government should or should not apologize to African Americans for the slavery that once existed in this country?” we find that 67% of African Americans say the government should apologize as compared to only 24% of white Americans. Similarly, when asked if the federal government should “pay money to African Americans whose ancestors were slaves as compensation for that slavery,” the black-white gap is even larger. Fifty-three percent of African Americans support the idea of financial reparations as compared to only 3% of whites.

It is not our aim to suggest that all is woe and misery in American race relations or to imply that the differences in opinion are permanent and insuperable. Certainly, in national politics, the present moment is full of potential for positive change. With figures like Colin Powell as Secretary of State and Condoleezza Rice as National Security Advisor, blacks have moved into new and very weighty spheres of political influence and power.

Yet only time will tell whether the efforts of the Bush administration to reach out to African Americans, say in the form of his program of “faith-based initiatives,” are just cynical manipulations or social interventions of genuine and lasting import. Our central message is that historical experience and the contemporary structure of black opinion in America give strong warrant for expecting that the lens of race, the two-ness of the African American, will still operate to condition and prefigure modern social and political dynamics.

Although rarely given a place in mainstream political discourse, this view of race in American politics is by no means new to us. To be sure, there are two sharply polarized schools of thought on race in American politics. From one vantage point, despite a sad history, the American experience is a tale of steadily expanding inclusion and realization of greater democracy and the promise of genuine equality. From the opposite vantage point, the Ameri-
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Both interpretations impress us as too simplistic, and fundamentally inadequate to digest the complexity of the modern African-American experience. More persuasive are views such as that of eminent political theorist Rogers Smith, who argues that American culture has always exhibited multiple political traditions, some expansive and democratic, and others regressive and deeply committed to racial division if not also white supremacy. We would go further. Even the democratic and liberal American traditions, as philosopher Charles Mills reminds us, have been tainted by a racialized political order which has all too often placed African Americans in a subordinate position to whites. It is this multiplicity of contradictory political traditions view that makes sense of the durable twoness of the African-American experience: thoroughly American on the one hand, yet clearly “marked” and set off from the rest on the other.

We agree, in the end, with many other analysts who note that racism and racial inequality are not the enormous fissures in the body politic that they once were. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that persistent segregation by race and the role that direct discrimination and racial prejudice play in its perpetuation. Nor can one ignore the large black-white disparities in vulnerability to poverty and unemployment, with African Americans still far more likely to endure severe poverty or long-term lack of employment. The contemporary weight of generation upon generation of racial discrimination and exclusion is immediately evident in the truly gargantuan inequalities of accumulated assets and wealth that will long separate the life experiences of African Americans—even those with extensive educational credentials and middle class occupations—relative to otherwise comparable whites.

In the light of this history and these present-day circumstances, the more curious issue to us is not that African Americans are skeptical on matters of race and committed to a social justice agenda. The great curiosity is that so many otherwise thoughtful people find it so very hard to recognize and empathize with the African-American experience, though it is one of the most basic, indeed defining, features of American history, culture, institutions, and identity.

Yet, not a one or even the full collection of these transparently important social roles and identities fundamentally wipes out the salience of race in the lives of African Americans. According to distinguished political scientists Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders in their book Divided by Color, “Blacks and whites are socially diverse; they are subject to various crosscutting pressures—but this is not enough, evidently, to prevent race from emerging as a single profound line of cleavage.” As felt and lived by black Americans, it is this persistent two-nest that endures. It is precisely this two-nest that continues to challenge us all to work toward a more understanding and inclusive realization of American democracy.

Endnote

K Knowledge Networks employs a random digit dialing telephone methodology to develop a representative sample of households for participation in its panel. Participants receive requisite hardware and free internet access. Knowledge Networks surveys are delivered by email and administered via interactive television devices.