



## Racial Gerrymandering Is Unnecessary

By Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom

*Barack Obama's election is a dramatic demonstration of the fact that the doors of electoral opportunity in America are open to all comers, regardless of race. The temporary emergency provisions of the Voting Rights Act, which require racially driven gerrymandering, constitute an antiquated system of electoral self-segregation. They should be overturned.*

Even among the 56 million Americans who voted for Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) on Election Day, there should be—and is—some cause for celebration of Barack Obama's victory, for it has proved one thing indisputably: it is no longer possible to argue that racial identity is an insurmountable barrier to the highest office in the land. "Vestiges of discrimination continue to exist . . . [preventing] minority voters from fully participating in the electoral process," Congress declared (with almost no dissent) just two summers ago. The verdict is now in: it was utter nonsense. There are no longer any meaningful racial barriers to voting or holding office in America, even in the most elite corridors of power.

The conventional wisdom among voting rights advocates and political scientists has been that whites will not vote for black candidates in significant numbers. Hence the need for federal protection in the form of race-based districts, creating safe black constituencies in which black candidates are sure to win. But the myth of racist white voters standing at the polling place door is destroyed.

Obama ran better than the 2004 Democratic nominee among every racial and ethnic group. He

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did not win a majority of white votes—losing them 55 to 43 percent—but no Democrat since President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 has had the majority of whites behind him. The reason is simple: just as African-Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately Democrats, whites are now disproportionately Republicans. And it is not because Republicans are racists; all evidence points to an eagerness, across party lines, to put America's ugly racial past behind us.

Recall that many observers noted Obama's weak performance with working-class white voters during the primaries. Many speculated that those voters, who had pulled the lever for Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), would defect to McCain. It was not so. Obama's 43 percent share of the white vote in the general election was actually a tad larger than that of Senator John Kerry's (D-Mass.) 41 percent or Vice President Al Gore's 42 percent in 2000.

What happened to all those "racists" or "red-necks" that Representative John Murtha (D-Pa.) spoke of so recently? If there had been very many of them, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, and Florida would have gone the other way, and we would have a president-elect McCain today. Racism is the Sherlock Holmes dog that did not bark in the night.

Some analysts will scan exit polls for other signs of lingering racism—in vain. Here is more good news: just 2 percent of Americans told pollsters

that race was “the single most important factor” in casting their ballots—and within that group, Obama garnered 58 percent of the vote. Undoubtedly, many in the group were black, but if we look at Iowa, with only a minuscule African American population, the 5 percent of voters who said race was the most important factor backed Obama 54 to 45 percent. And in Minnesota and Wisconsin, also overwhelmingly white, the Democrat’s lead was 18 and 21 percent, respectively, among the 5–7 percent of voters who made race their highest priority.

Obama’s race was thus an advantage in this election, not a handicap. Not only did it motivate a significant fraction of the electorate to vote for him, it also provided protection from attacks that might otherwise have been devastating. If a white candidate for president had worshipped for twenty years at a church led by a minister with racist views, he would have been forced to withdraw from the race. McCain, however, never dared raise the issue of Obama’s close relationship with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Far from being his Achilles’ heel, race was Obama’s shield and his sword, and he used it to great advantage.

Of course, contributing to Obama’s victory was his support by nonwhites, who cast 26 percent of the ballots this year, up three points over 2004. Blacks went to the polls in droves, and 95 percent of their votes went to Obama, a rise of seven points over Kerry’s showing. In fact, although data are not yet available, it seems likely that black turnout equaled or even exceeded white turnout for the first time in history. But increased Democratic support among Hispanics and Asians was not as predictable; intergroup racial and ethnic tensions are not confined to blacks and whites, and partisan identity probably counts more than ethnic and racial solidarity for members of these minority groups. Yet Obama won 66 percent of the Latino vote—a gain of thirteen points—and captured 61 percent of the Asian vote, compared to Kerry’s 56 percent.

Do these results mean that we now live in a colorblind society, with every last vestige of racism gone? Of course not. But blacks can take their place in the American political pantheon as equals. Nearly a century and a

half after the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and forty-three years after LBJ signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act, we can now say that the doors of electoral opportunity in America are open to all comers, regardless of race.

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Why, then, the aggressive federal interference in state and local districting decisions, to which Congress signed on so enthusiastically in the summer of 2006 when it amended and strengthened the Voting Rights Act? That statute demands race-driven districting maps to protect black candidates from white competition—proportional racial representation, where possible. The act is a period piece by now; it gave federal courts and the U.S. Department of Justice what are, in effect, extraordinary war powers to combat the evil of ongoing southern black disfranchisement. Blacks are no longer disfranchised—by any definition. Obama’s election is the culmination of a process of steady racial progress that America should have long been celebrating.

Racially gerrymandered districts are an impediment to political integration at all levels of government. They herd African-Americans into “max-black” districts when, in fact, black candidates can win in multiethnic and even majority-white districts with colorblind crossover voting. These districts constitute electoral self-segregation, forcing black candidates to run in heavily gerrymandered districts. The candidates who emerge from those districts are, not surprisingly, typically not well positioned to appeal to a broader swath of the electorate.

Will President Obama want to give more aspiring black politicians greater encouragement to stand before white voters and be judged on the merits of their political appeal, not the color of their skin? Mr. President, after January 20, tear down the walls of electoral segregation. Urge the Supreme Court to say, loud and clear, they are no longer needed. American voters have turned a racial corner. The law should follow in their footsteps.