A Symposium on Power, Discrimination, and Identity

A Symposium on Power, Discrimination, and Identity: Introduction and Commentary

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On March 14, 2018, the Brookings Institute issued a short press release entitled, "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects" (Frey 2018). The story, authored by William H. Frey, a Senior Fellow at Brookings and author of the book "Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics are Remaking America," describes the dynamics of population growth in the United States and concludes that racial minorities will be "the primary demographic engine of the nation's future growth." Frey (2018) noted that in the next 30 or so years, "Minorities will be the source of all of the growth in the nation's youth and working-age population, most of the growth in its voters, and much of the growth in its consumers and tax base." The growing economic and political strength of racial minorities in the United States once again has brought race into the spotlight of American politics. Renewed attempts by politicians to stoke racist and xenophobic fears around the growing political and economic clout of Black and Brown communities, and the efforts of Black, Asian, and Latinx communities to take advantage of this moment by empowering group members and forming coalitional partners across racial minority groups, have resulted in what some might call a new American racial dilemma. This is unlike the racial dilemma described by Gunnar Myrdal (1944) in the first half of the twentieth century, in which America reckoned with a conflict between its cherished principles of equality and freedom, on the one hand, and the overt discriminatory treatment of Black Americans on the other. The modern racial dilemma represents a conflict between one of the most enshrined principles of American democracy—majority rule—and the increasing economic and political power of racial minorities resulting from their rapidly growing populations.

The threat of White Americans' imminent loss of economic and political control vis-à-vis the democratic process raises a new and intriguing set of questions for the study of race and ethnic politics in the United States. Understanding how White Americans will respond to this threat—whether they will attempt to change the rules of democratic governance to ensure White political control in perpetuity, redefine Whiteness to make it more inclusive of certain racial minorities, or simply accept the inevitable move to a multiracial democracy—poses a unique set of theoretical and methodological challenges for race and ethnic politics researchers. Departing from previous research that centered almost exclusively on a Black/White racial framework, this modern racial dilemma necessitates a broader understanding of race that is inclusive of not only traditional racial groups but also groups that may be racialized as non-White, such as Muslim Americans and White ethnics. This modern racial framework also would necessitate an understanding of racial subgroup differentiations that might consider different racialized experiences within racial groups, such as those that exist at the intersections of race and gender or race and social/economic class. Additionally, to adequately understand this new racial dilemma, a modern racial framework would necessitate greater attention to coalitional politics between racial minority groups and Whites' perceptions of threat. Each research agenda—the broadening of racial definitions, the acknowledgment of diversity in racialized experiences, the need to understand coalitional politics, and the nature and origins of White-threat perceptions—explains different dimensions of the modern racial dilemma. Together, they characterize what we see as the new directions of racial politics research.

The studies presented in this symposium broadly reflect this new direction of race and ethnic politics. Each article explores different aspects of this modern racial politics. All show how the experiences of people of color in America have shaped the American political system (i.e., public policy, political behavior, and political institutions) and how people of color have come to understand their position within this system. We briefly discuss how the studies represented in this symposium add to our understanding of the rapidly changing landscape of racial politics in America.

RACIALIZATION AND MODERN RACIAL POLITICS

Race is a social construction that differentiates people along biological characteristics, often skin color and hair texture. By ascribing essentialized meaning to these and other physical features, Europeans in the fifteenth century created the modern concept of race and used it as a tool for justifying the repression, domination, and—in some cases—genocide of

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non-European populations. This process of racialization is articulated in the work of Omi and Winant (1986). As summarized by Guess (2006, 660), "Omi and Winant use the term, racialization, in a very specific way: that with the onset of American slavery, 'a racially based understanding of society was set in motion which resulted in the shaping of a specific racial identity not only for the [enslaved] but for the European settlers as well' (1986, 64)."

Understanding how White Americans will respond to this threat—whether they will attempt to change the rules of democratic governance to ensure White political control in perpetuity, redefine Whiteness to make it more inclusive of certain racial minorities, or simply accept the inevitable move to a multiracial democracy—poses a unique set of theoretical and methodological challenges for race and ethnic politics researchers.

It was this racialization of Africans by Europeans that ultimately justified the enslavement and, later, the continued repression of people of African descent (Kendi 2016). Indeed, in an effort to further defend the privileges of Whiteness and rationalize the repression of people of African descent, American settlers created a racial caste system that would define Blackness and Whiteness as mutually exclusive racial categories. The implementation of what is commonly known as the "one-drop rule" or the "hypodescent" restricted biracial individuals of African descent from identifying as anything other than Black. Although this was done in part to justify the enslavement of biracial individuals (in many cases, the children of slave owners), the legal use of this one-drop classification persisted well beyond the end of slavery and created strict and lasting distinctions between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Moreover, these fixed barriers limiting Blacks' access to the privileges of Whiteness would not apply in the same way to other racial/ethnic minorities in the United States (e.g., Native Americans and Asians). Although racialization in the form of racial repression existed for non-Black racial minority groups, access to economic prosperity and the relative ease of interracial marrying opened doors to assimilation for these groups. The strict application of the one-drop rule and its acceptance by American institutions ultimately resulted in the widespread understanding that people of African descent were, by definition, non-White (McClain and Johnson Carew 2018).

Not only did this one-drop distinction make salient the Black/White binary in American racial politics, it also questioned the relevance of ascriptive characteristics (e.g., skin color) as the primary means of defining racial status. After all, hypodescent restrictions meant that even those individuals who might look White would be considered Black because they descended from Black ancestors. A good example of this is in the experience of Homer Plessy, the plaintiff in the 1896 *Plessy* vs. *Ferguson* case, which found that the provision of separate but equal public accommodations for Black Americans was constitutional. Plessy, who was by most accounts no more than one-eighth Black (and seven-eighths White), was found to have violated Louisiana law when he chose to sit in a train car designated for White passengers (Rifkin 2020). Given that Plessy was hardly visually distinguishable from a White person but yet was still not afforded the privileges of Whiteness suggested that race was more than what existed on the surface. In other words, beyond obvious characteristics such as skin color, race also represented a set of characteristics that imbued Blackness with more fundamental dispositional traits, such as violence, promiscuity, and lower intelligence. The promotion of these dispositional myths or stereotypes again served the ends of White Americans by justifying White supremacy and the need to control Black Americans.

These traits, however, were not applied evenly across Black Americans. For example, whereas violence came to dominate Whites' perceptions of Black men, traits such as aggressiveness and promiscuity came to define the image of Black women in the minds of White Americans (Harris-Perry 2011). In their contribution to this symposium, Danielle Lemi and Nadia Brown (2020) highlight the impact that gender and skin tone have on the psyche of Black Americans. They discuss the lasting effects of colorism—that is, discrimination based on skin tone in which those who are light-skinned are regarded more favorably than their dark-skinned counterparts (Bonilla-Silva 2015). They show that given historical connections among pejorative racial stereotypes (i.e., gender and skin color), darker-skin Black women—even today—report stronger connections to their racial in-group and a heightened sense of discrimination from other Black people.

In the twentieth century, the American race model evolved into more of a racial continuum, characterized by the bookends of black and white with shades of yellow and brown in the middle. Reflecting the nation's rapid diversification, this new racial model afforded certain groups more or less access to the privileges of Whiteness. Nura Sediqe's (2020) contribution demonstrates this process: she argues that groups such as Muslim Americans, who were mostly thought of as White before 9/11, were largely racialized out of Whiteness. Building on studies in social psychology (Devos and Banaji 2005; Pinel 1999), Sediqe argues that for Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era, the experiences of discrimination have resulted in an "othering" that distances them from White Americans. This new racial model initially emerged as an effort to define certain groups of European immigrants out of Whiteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the growth in recent decades of Latin American immigrant populations and the desires of ambitious politicians to again use immigration to their advantage have renewed concerns among White

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Americans about the future of Whiteness and its privileged place in America. With this modern racial dilemma, Whites are faced again with the choice of bringing Latinos into the fold of Whiteness—as they have done to some extent in the past—or further restricting the definition of Whiteness and forcing an even more constrained racial ordering (see Sampaio 2015). Each choice has important implications for American racial politics going forward. With the former, Whites can maintain their ruling majority and increase their numbers, but they must be willing to integrate Latino immigrants under the umbrella of Whiteness. This then raises an important question: Will American Whites be willing to accept the inevitable cultural diversification that would result from the integration of Latinos into Whiteness? Perhaps more important, will White political elites be able to resist the urge to undermine these efforts by using racist and xenophobic appeals to their advantage?

In their contribution, Emily Estrada, Kim Ebert, and Wenjie Liao (2020) provide strong evidence to suggest that with the election of Donald Trump, it would seem that "the ship has sailed" on the integration of Latinos into Whiteness. In their research on the news media's discussion of privatized immigration control, Estrada et al. show that before Trump's election, discussion of privatized immigration control rarely used explicit vilification of immigrants. However, after his election, they observed a clear shift in the tone of the debate: it became significantly more explicit, direct, and polarized.

Estrada et al.'s observation that political discourse around race and immigration has polarized in recent years is consistent with those of many other scholars (e.g., Jardina 2019; Pérez 2016). The emergence of Donald Trump, the rise of ethnonationalism in the United States, and the erosion of democratic norms suggest that both racial minorities and democracy may be the ultimate victims of an increasingly diverse America. Indeed, in this era of polarized racial politics, racial minority groups in the United States have become increasingly disillusioned with the pace of racial progress. In her article, Stacey Greene (2020) explores perceptions of racial progress among racial minority groups in the United States. She finds that Blacks and Latinos, despite meaningful economic and civil rights gains for both groups since the 1960s, remain frustrated with the pace of progress in America. Greene shows that there is a unified view among Blacks and Latinos in the relative aggrievement of and perceived lack of progress across each group since the 1960s.

These shared perceptions of aggrievement at the hands of White Americans suggest that it may be necessary for racial minority groups to revive strategies for mobilizing against racial threat. Indeed, if racial minorities are going to take advantage of their growing electoral power, they must figure out effective ways to mobilize in-group members. In their article, Vanessa Cruz Nichols and Ramon Garibaldo Valdéz (2020) offer a framework for understanding the role that racial threat messages might play in inspiring collective action among Latinos. Given that threat frames may demobilize Latinx populations (Prieto 2018), the authors argue that to mobilize Latinos effectively, collective-action frames must pair fear with hope by revealing to audiences the urgency of the present without disillusioning them. Similarly, Pearl K. Ford Dowe (2020) describes the important civic and political contributions of Black women to Black political empowerment. By emphasizing the importance of race/gendered identities, political socialization, and social networks, Dowe's article suggests that Black women play a critical role in fostering Black political empowerment by overcoming and reforming systems of marginalization.

In summary, the articles presented in this symposium are at the forefront of research that examines race and ethnic politics in the twenty-first century. This symposium is a product of the Politics of Race, Immigration, and Ethnicity Consortium held at Wake Forest University in November 2018. As the nation grapples with the growing political power of racial minority groups (i.e., the modern racial dilemma), research in race and ethnic politics has shifted and will continue to shift in important ways. What remains at the core of this research are topics surrounding power, discrimination, and identity. ■

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