

Racial politics

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Race is a major theme of American history, and it tends to bubble to the surface during presidential campaigns. Blacks are often accused of playing the race card, but more often it is white politicians who play that card. George H. W. Bush used the image of black convict Willie Horton to paint Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis as soft on crime. Bill Clinton criticized Sister Souljah for making inflammatory racial comments as a way to distance himself from black leaders like Jesse Jackson. Even Barack Obama was compelled to distance himself from black preacher Jeremiah Wright.

Shortly after his break with Wright, Obama gave a speech declaring that race “is an issue . . . this nation cannot afford to ignore.” It appeared for a brief time that as president Obama might moderate a long-overdue national conversation about race relationships. As it turned out, race is so politically volatile that Obama decided it was better to steer clear of it. Ta-Nehisi Coates notes (in an *Atlantic* article titled “Fear of a Black President”) that the first black president spoke less about race during his first two years in office than any Democratic president since 1961.

Nevertheless, race obviously has been a subtheme in the response to Obama’s presidency. It lies behind the delusionary but still widespread belief that he is a Muslim, was born outside the U.S. and is something other than a genuine American.

Race is also a subtheme in this year's presidential campaign. A number of state legislatures have imposed voter ID laws and other election rules designed to suppress minority voters. Several attack ads against Obama take up issues that have a racial subtext. Ezra Klein of the *Washington Post* points out that though the chief issues of this year's election are jobs and the economy, the Romney campaign has run many ads charging Obama with coddling welfare recipients—a tried-and-true method for evoking whites' racial resentment of minorities. (In fact, the Obama administration has not changed anything about work requirements for people on welfare.) Another ad claims that Obama has taken billions from Medicare to fund his health-care program. The claim is false, but it suggests that he is taking money from a program that benefits whites in order to fund care for blacks and Hispanics.

One thing is certain: with the rise in the Latino population, race will shape American politics in new ways in the years to come. Minorities accounted for over half of U.S. births in 2011, and it's expected that by mid-century minorities will constitute the majority. Notions of who is the "other" will have to change.