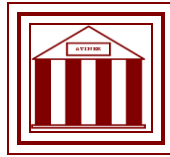


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**Racial Context and the 2008 and 2012
US Presidential Elections**

Baodong Liu

Associate Professor of Political Science

The University of Utah

USA

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
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Racial Context and the 2008 and 2012 US Presidential Elections

Baodong Liu

Associate Professor of Political Science

The University of Utah

USA

Abstract

White voter support was a key to Barack Obama's historical win of the Presidency in 2008, which begs the question of whether America had entered into an era of post-racial politics. Obama's white support, however, declined in his 2012 reelection. To account for the variation in Obama's white voter support in states, this article examines the previous contextual explanations of white voting behavior. Drawing on arguments in the recent American political development literature (King and Smith 2005, Novkov 2008), this research proposes a new racial tension theory to link Obama's white voter support to the deep-seated racial tension at the state level. In doing so, a theoretic and empirical solution is offered to solve the problem of high correlations between the major contextual variables measuring black density (Key 1949), racial diversity (Hero 1998), state political culture (Elazar 1984) and social capital (Putnam 2000). The converged findings based on multiple methods clearly show that the state-level white support for Obama in both 2008 and 2012 was directly related to the racial context of a state. Overall this study reveals the enduring, rather than vanishing, effect of race.

Keywords: Obama, Presidential elections, social capital

Corresponding Author: Baodong Liu, Associate Professor of Political Science, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Introduction

At the outset of his historical 2008 campaign to become the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama decided to adopt a strategy to maximize white votes to win the election. “African Americans will rally behind me once they see that I can win the white vote,” Obama optimistically predicted before the primary. But how to win the white vote nationwide for the highest office was one of the greatest challenges of his campaign.¹ In the end, Whites cast 74 percent of the total votes in the 2008 general election. More than 38 million of these white votes were cast for Obama, which constituted 61 percent of Obama’s total votes (Liu, 2010).

The 2008 election outcome also showed that Obama was able to win several traditional Republican states such as Indiana, Colorado, Virginia, and North Carolina where his success certainly was related to white voter support. However, compared to the two previous Democratic nominees in 2000 and 2004, Obama lost more support in states such as Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Arkansas, West Virginia, Alabama, and Louisiana. In 2012, however, Mitt Romney, Obama’s GOP opponent, won more white votes than John McCain in 2008 and George W. Bush in 2004 (Nelson, 2014). Obama’s white vote declined to 39 percent. His state-wide white support also declined across the nation, even in his home state of Illinois. This state-level variation in the election outcomes invites intriguing questions about the role of race in Obama’s two presidential elections.

To find plausible explanations for the variation in white voter support for Obama at the state level, this paper examines the competing theories of white voting behavior. In particular, four contextual theories of white voting are discussed, and testable hypotheses are developed to link Obama’s white voter support to black density, racial diversity and social capital. Drawing on arguments from the recent literature of American political development (D. S. King & Smith, 2005), this article proposes a new theory of racial tension to solve the previously intractable theoretic and empirical question concerning the high correlations between the explanatory variables used in the theories of black threat, racial diversity, political culture, and social capital.

Theories of White Voting

Many theories have been proposed to downplay the role of race. It has been argued, for example, that white voters evaluate black candidates based on their “quality”, rather than on race. Like in any other job application process, black electoral office-seekers need to have certain personal and professional qualifications in order to appeal to white voters (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1999). Some scholars discovered that the role of race can be played in a more “subtle” and “implicit” way. For example, in order to win as many white votes

¹see Nagourney, Rutenberg, & Zeleny (2008) for an inside look at Obama’s early campaign plan.

as possible a “deracialization” strategy very often is vital to black candidates’ success in elections (Liu, 2003; Wright & Middleton, 2001). Especially when facing strong white opponents, a pragmatic campaign strategy for black candidates is a deracialization strategy targeted at white liberal voters in white majority districts (Liu & Vanderleeuw, 2007; Persons, 1993). Deracialization strategies are reported to have been the key to such electoral victories as that of the first black elected governor of Virginia, L. Douglas Wilder; the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate, Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois; and the former mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin. More recently, Gillespie (2012) suggested that deracialization may already run out of its “magic” in the post-racial America.

One “side effect” of deracialization is the loss of black vote. Black candidates’ deracialized campaigns may also be “interrupted” or even “damaged” unexpectedly by both their white opponents and mass media through racially “coded words” that injected white fear (Mendelberg, 2001). Obama faced arguably the greatest crisis of his 2008 campaign because of his connection with Jeremiah Wright, his long-time pastor who was repeatedly displayed on national media for his strong accusation of “white guilt” in African-American suffering. As a result, Obama gave his critical “A More Perfect Union” speech in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, in which he called for racial reconciliation rather than racial blaming. A month later Obama denounced his pastor altogether to show that he did not agree with Wright’s publicized anti-white rhetoric.

Arguably, white voters’ reactions to the news coverage of Jeremiah Wright were not identical partly due to their different levels of fear of black threat. Overall, the success of black candidates’ strategy to win white votes may depend on the racial context in which the election takes place. The concept of context can have many meanings. It often refers to a variety of characteristics of a specified geographic area. Context can also be based on “the distribution of a population characteristic” (Huckfeldt, 1986, 14). The population characteristic that receives the most attention perhaps is the relative percentage of blacks within a certain area (i.e., black density). It has been shown repeatedly in the political science literature that there is a negative relationship between black density in an area and white racial tolerance (M. W. Giles & Buckner, 1993; Glaser, 1994; Longoria, 1999; Taylor, 1998). Donovan (2010) directly linked the white support for Obama in the 2008 presidential election to black threat. The black threat theory, which originated from the classic study of Southern politics by Key Jr (1949), explains this relationship based on Whites’ group interests and the relative threats posed by blacks in different contexts. According to black threat theory, different contexts affect white perceptions of how their group interests are threatened by blacks (M. Giles & Hertz, 1994; Taylor, 1998). A higher level of black population density may produce a higher level of white perception of black threat, and therefore a lower level of white crossover voting.

Perceptions of threat may be reduced by civic engagement and interpersonal trust, or social capital. Putnam (2001) in his seminal work,

Bowling Alone, assembled an array of empirical measures of social capital to demonstrate that individuals who interact with others in their communities possess both high levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagements. These individuals are the “social capitalists” who, based on Putnam’s state-level measure of social capital index, are happier psychologically and more successful socially and economically than those who are “hermits.” Moreover, states reveal different contexts in terms of the level of collective social capital.

Putnam emphasizes social capital as the “features of social life-networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (1995, 664-665). How did the white social capitalists react to Obama’s historical candidacy? On the one hand, Whites in rich social capital states, because of their high level of interpersonal trust and civic engagement, may be more likely to support a black candidate who represented a change (at least racially) in a nation “divided by color” for a long history, rather than seeing him as a “black threat.” On the other hand, the influential work of Putnam on the significance of social capital has always invited criticisms about its implications on race (Field, 2003). In his recent book, *Racial Diversity and Social Capital*, Hero (2007) “juxtaposed” the social capital thesis and the racial diversity thesis. Derived from his own empirical analysis of racial makeup of states which takes consideration of not only Black population but also Whites and other minorities such as Latinos and Asians, Hero insisted that the racial diversity variable is the key to understanding political, social, and economic differences across American states.

Hero (2007) positions his racial diversity argument and Putnam’s social capital thesis at two opposite ends of the spectrum in American political science. This is because, according to Hero, there are two theoretical traditions that distinctively emphasize either a pluralist society centered on a group approach (pluralism), or the unequal structural elements in American political institutions that have long suppressed minorities into a disadvantageous position. Hero argued that the social capital thesis belongs to the first approach that in the history of American political science has produced influential works from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* to *The Civic Culture* of Gabriel Almond and his associates, and Daniel Elazar’s state political culture (Elazar, 1984).

Elazar’s (1984) work on state political culture is especially important, because it is a major scholarly work on how states developed their own cultural identities throughout the U.S. history, and how these identities shaped the nature of American federalism. The states in which white voters live, according to Elazar, may influence their vote choices. There are three major types of state cultures, which Elazar called moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. The fundamental differences between these cultures are that individualistic culture views government as a market or means to respond efficiently to demand, moralistic culture views government as a commonwealth or means to achieve the good community through positive action, and finally the traditionalistic culture views government as a means of maintaining the existing order (Elazar 1984, 120). It is also important to note that there have been many

debates on Elazar's state political culture measurement (Brown and Palmer 2004). Elazar himself in his later edition of *American Federalism: A View from the States*, recognized the possibility of a synthesis of two subcultures as well as the existence of two separate sub-cultural communities with the first dominant and the second secondary in the same states (Elazar, 1984, 125).

Were white voters in the 2008 presidential election influenced by these political cultures? Based on Elazar's elaboration of political cultures, one can reasonably assume that the Whites from traditionalistic states would be most likely to oppose the change that Obama, a black candidate, was trying to bring to America. On the other hand, the moralistic states would be most likely the places where the white voters embraced positive changes that Obama was campaigning for. The Whites in the individualist states would be more skeptical of Obama than were those of moralistic states because of the lack of understanding of Obama's real ability to bring the necessary change to the political marketplace.

To summarize above discussions of four contexts at the state level, we provide the following four competing hypotheses:

1. The black threat theory, formulated originally by Key (1949), suggests that the increase in black density in an electoral unit will enhance white voters' perception of black threat to their own racial group interest, and therefore, reduce their willingness to vote for Obama (Hypothesis 1).
2. According to Putnam's social capital thesis, white voters who live in rich social capital states with a high level of interpersonal trust will vote for Obama more than white voters from low social capital states (Hypothesis 2).
3. Elazar's political culture thesis suggests that the level of white support for Obama will be higher in states with moralistic cultures than individualistic, and lower yet in states with traditionalistic cultures (Hypothesis 3).
4. Finally, Hero's diversity thesis suggests that the greater the racial diversity a state has, the smaller the likelihood that white voters may support Obama (Hypothesis 4).

Racial Tension and Political Development

As discussed above, many of the debates during the last three decades on the racial contexts of American states have involved four competing theories that examine racial and ethnic conflict from the perspectives of black threat (Key 1949), racial diversity (Hero 1998), political culture (Elazar 1984) and social capital (Putnam 2000). However, one major problem that has been reported by scholars of state contexts is that black density, racial diversity, and social capital at the state level are in fact highly correlated (see below for an empirical test). Hero (1998), for example, noticed the correlation between his diversity

measure and Elazar's political cultures (1998, 17). Putnam (2000) also reported that his social capital measures for 1980 and 1990 at the state level are highly correlated with Elazar's state culture scores (see Putnam 2000, 487). The observed correlations not only make the empirical tests of the four competing hypotheses uncertain, but also demand a strong theory to explain the correlations among the four contextual variables (G. King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, 122-123).

King and Smith (2005) argued that "racial orders" are the key components of American political development. More specifically, "American politics has historically been constituted in part by two evolving but linked racial institutional orders': a set of white supremacist' orders and a competing set of transformative egalitarian' orders" (King and Smith 2005, 75). Furthermore, King and Smith suggested that the interplay between these two racial orders have shaped how coalitions of "state institutions" and political actors are "responding to the tensions and opportunities generated by America's racial orders" (84). Thus, in order to find how different white voters responded to Obama's historical candidacy differently, it is necessary to discuss "racial tension" generated by competing racial orders in different states. In this regard, however, King and Smith (2005) did not provide any empirical measure of state-level racial tension to test the impact of race on Obama's white support. The reason for lacking an empirical measure of racial tension is understandable, as racial tension is better conceptualized as a latent variable, not just a theoretic construct. One may feel the impact of racial tension in her daily life, but it is hard to pinpoint to a particular social phenomenon as racial tension.

To fill the gap in the literature, this article proposes a new theory of racial tension to go beyond the observed black density, racial diversity, and social capital. Borrowing arguments from the recent American political development literature, this research suggests that voters make voting decisions in a context of racial tension. Racial tension reveals an overall racial relationship in a state (Novkov 2008). It shows the degree to which racial polarization may be materialized once a racially sensitive event, such as the 2008 presidential election, takes place (King and Smith 2008). The level of racial tension in a state can also be understood as the racial status of a state, which has a deep root in the history of racial orders in the state (King and Smith 2005, 2008).

The origin of racial tension itself is a story of American racial relations that reflected American experiences concerning multiple racial groups (Marx, 1971). For instance, the Deep South had a long history of racial struggle between African American slaves and their white slave owners who benefited from a slave economy (Mulcare, 2008, 675- 683). The "white supremacist racial order" that King and Smith (2005) articulated ran deep in the Deep South, and historically the Deep South has had the highest level of racial tension in the country. In comparison, the upper Midwest states saw the influx of German and Scandinavian immigrants to participate in economic and territorial expansion. The "egalitarian racial order" (King and Smith 2005) is more likely to be accepted in states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas, and racial tension is relatively speaking low there. The "Frontier

West,” on the other hand, did provide multiple racial groups with more economic opportunities, but the early racial interactions there also pitted minority groups against each other and against white ethnic groups (such as Irish workers) for employment and job benefits (Novkov, 2008, 652). Thus, the West (especially California and Southwest) did attract various racial and ethnic groups traditionally and the racial tension of the West is not as high as in the South, but not as low as in the Upper Midwest either.

These early political developments at the state level had a profound impact on the formation of long-term racial tension of the states (King and Smith 2005). It is also possible that a large-scale change in a state, such as the new birth of the automobile industry in Michigan that provided the engine for the great migration of African Americans to Michigan, can enhance the racial tension in Michigan. Nevertheless, the overall geographic distribution of state-level racial tension (e.g., a high level of racial tension in the Deep South and a low level of racial tension in the Upper Midwest) is durable in the United States as a whole.

Racial Tension and the Four Contextual Variables

How is racial tension related to black density, racial diversity, state political culture, and social capital? First, racial tension should not be measured by just one of the four contextual variables. For example, West Virginia and Minnesota had almost the same level of low black density (i.e., slightly over three percent), but arguably West Virginia has an overall higher level of racial tension than Minnesota. Second, to see the relationship between racial tension and the four contextual variables, it is important to emphasize that racial tension is the underlying factor that shapes a state’s racial makeup and community norms in the first place. The states’ racial makeup is the “visual effect” of the states indicated by their levels of black density and racial diversity. A low level of racial tension maintains white homogeneity. A higher level of racial tension, on the other hand, leads to more “white flight” and larger proportions of minorities, which then reinforces the racial tension of the state.

Moreover, a state’s racial tension also leads to the formation of specific community norms, through which members of the community interact with each other. The norms of states are exactly the subjects of Putnam (2000) and Elazer’s (1984) classic studies of social capital and political culture. For example, a moralistic culture is likely to appear and be sustained in states that have a low level of racial tension, while a traditionalistic political culture develops due to the high level of racial tension. Similarly, social capital is more likely to be accumulated in states with low levels of racial tension. In sum, it is the deep-seated racial tension that links all four contextual variables together and leads to the observed correlations among black density, racial diversity, social capital and political culture.

In sum, this paper further suggests that the higher the level of racial tension a state has, the smaller the likelihood that white voters may support Obama in his presidential elections (Hypothesis 5).

Rather than treating the theories of black density, racial diversity, and social capital and state political culture as “competing theories,” the racial tension approach of this paper suggests that racial tension is the fundamental factor (i.e., a latent variable) that shapes states’ racial makeup (black density and racial diversity) and community norms (social capital and political culture). More importantly, borrowing insights from the recent political development literature, this article suggests that it is the deep-seated racial tension that directly affected how Whites voted for Obama, our ultimate dependent variable. The following sections empirically compare this new racial tension approach with the previous competing hypothesis approach. The goal is to demonstrate why empirically all four contextual variables are simultaneously linked to the underlying factor of racial tension, and furthermore why it is necessary to take consideration of racial tension to explain Obama’s white voter support.

Findings

We test Hypotheses 1 to 4 by using the state level data. A state-level analysis is especially important because the U.S. presidential election outcome is based on the Electoral College votes that use states as the election units. The winner-takes-all electoral system forces both candidates and voters to be sensitive to the state contexts. To test the four hypotheses, the data from the exit poll are used to measure our dependent variable, Obama’s white support in states.² The social capital data are directly from Putnam’s 2000 social capital index, which is his standardized factor score based on his 14 component variables (range=-1.43 to 1.71, mean=.02, sd=.78).³ The racial diversity measure is based on the 2006 census population data concerning the population shares of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians (range=.08 to .78, mean=.39, sd=.17). The census data also include the measure of black density based on the percent non-Hispanic black in the state population in 2006 (range=.37 to 36.95, mean=10.02, sd=9.56). The state political culture measure is derived from Elazar (1984) (range=1 to 8, mean=4.14, sd=2.52).⁴

²The exit poll data were retrieved from the CNN web site at <http://www.cnn.com/Election/2008/result>. The state-level election outcome data were obtained from <http://www.uselectionatlas.org>. Diversity is derived from the population shares of Whites, Blacks, Latinos and Asians. See Hero 1998 for the use of this measure in the US elections.

³Putnam provided a detailed explanation of his state-level social capital index in his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, see Putnam, 2000, 290-295.

⁴Many approaches, nominal or ordinal levels, have been proposed to measure state-level political culture (see e.g., Hero 1998). We use the following measure based on the reasoning of Elazar (1984): 1=traditionalistic, 2=traditional individualistic, 3=traditional moralistic, 4=individualistic traditionalistic, 5=individualistic, 6=individualistic moralistic, 7=moralistic individualistic, 8=moralistic. Our empirical test results provide further evidence for why this coding is effective.

The New Racial Tension Approach and the Empirical Evidence

As stated, this research proposes a new racial tension approach, which suggests that a state’s racial tension, as a latent variable, is revealed through both the racial makeup (black density and racial diversity) and community norms (political culture and social capital) of the state. The first task empirically therefore is to show that indeed the observed high correlations among the four contextual variables are due to a deeper level of racial tension. Using principal component method, Table 1 on page 12 reveals that there is truly an underlying pattern reflected by factor one. All the four contextual variables measuring black density, social capital, state political culture and racial diversity are strongly clustered onto factor one, which explains more than 62 percent of total variance. The loadings for the four contextual variables all have much higher values (i.e., more than .804 absolute values) than the conventional minimum values of significant factor loading of .5 (Guadagnoli, Velicer, et al., 1988; MacCallum, Widaman, Preacher, & Hong, 2001; Stevens, 2002). Thus, an underlying latent variable does exist, and all four contextual variables are correlated due to their reflections on this underlying factor.

The signs of the loadings provide more clues about the nature of this underlying factor. The four variables are linked to factor one in a way revealing the racial tension of states. To see this, according to Table 1, factor one is negatively correlated with social capital and state political culture (in the order of from traditionalistic to individualistic and further to moralistic), which suggests that a higher level of racial tension (i.e., larger factor one score) will lead to less social capital (i.e., less interpersonal trust and civic engagement) and the tendency to adopt the traditionalist political culture (i.e., the existing political order). On the other hand, factor one is positively correlated with black density and racial diversity, which shows that a higher level of racial tension (i.e. factor one score) will enhance black density and racial diversity. Therefore, it is logical to interpret factor one as a state context measuring the underlying level of racial tension (see below for a further empirical test of state-level latent variables). The standardized factor one scores thus represent states’ various levels of racial tension (range=-1.39 to 2.49, mean=0, sd=1).

Table 1. *Latent Racial Tension in American States*

Observed Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2
Black Density	.837*	-.223
Diversity	.831*	.367
Political Culture	-.804*	.487
Social Capital	-.902*	.167
% Urban	.522*	.810*
Initial Eigenvalues	3.123	1.106
% total variance	62.468	22.112

* indicates that loading is greater than .5

Racial Tension and Obama's White Vote in 2008 and 2012

With Obama's white vote as the dependent variable, robust regression analysis can offer much more convincing evidence about the effect of racial tension on Obama's white support when other plausible variables are controlled for in the model. Robust regression is used here because our sample size at 50 is extremely small, which is especially sensitive to how errors are distributed. Any outliers or high-leverage observations may cause biased and inefficient estimates. Two robust regression analyses of white racial voting based on the 2008 exit poll and the 2012 estimates of white support for Obama are performed to see whether a similar conclusion can be drawn. The models and findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Robust Regression of White Support for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections: the Racial Tension Explanation*

Regressor	(1) 2008		(2) 2012	
	β	<i>se</i>	β	<i>se</i>
Latent Variable				
Racial Tension	-.065***	.01	-.044**	.016
%mass public liberal	.011**	.004	.008	.011
%mass public conservative	-.004	.003	-.008	.009
%mass public Democratic	.001	.002	-.001	.004
%Democratic state legislator	-.000	.000	.000	.001
%65 or older	.0126**	.004	.004	.019
%union	.003	.002	.000	.002
%college or higher	-.000	.002	-.000	.005
Intercept	.16		.49	
Robust Residual <i>se</i>	.04		.05	
N	50		50	

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .1$
(two-tailed test)

Table 2 controlled for college education and age distribution of states, as Obama was reportedly able to draw significant support from young and educated people at his record-breaking rallies. During the 2008 campaign the age of John McCain and his allegedly not conservative enough standings on issues also attracted much media attention. We therefore control for both states' age group and ideological distributions, in addition to the political party and union influence in the states. As shown in Table 2, the level of racial tension, derived from factor scores, is a robust explanation for Obama's white vote in 2008 and 2012. Those states with higher levels of racial tension indeed provided a lower level of white support for Obama, controlling for other variables. Each unit increase in racial tension score, as indicated by the 2008 model, will reduce Obama's white voter support by seven percent, when

other control variables are held constant. Among the controls, the senior resident ratio turned out to be a positive factor for Obama's white voter support. Model 2 of Table 2 lists the findings on Obama's 2012 reelection. The racial tension latent variable continues to be statistically significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test). Each unit increase in racial tension score, as indicated by the 2012 model, will reduce Obama's white voter support by more than four percent, when other control variables are held constant.

Conclusions and Discussions

The 2008 presidential election was historical in many ways. Obama won the election with about 52% of the total votes cast in 2008. He won the reelection with 51% of the votes cast in 2012. Based on our empirical measures of racial votes, approximately 42% of the white voters cast their votes for Obama in 2008, and this level of white support declined to 39% in 2012. The majority of the white voters in fact did not vote for him in either election. Indeed, the racial tension was not a forgotten factor. This research showed that to explain the variation in white voter support for Obama, one must examine the state context in which white voters lived. In this vein, the previous literature suggested that increasing black density in white voters' residential areas may enhance white-voter perception of black threat, thus, reduce their probability of voting for black candidates. This research, however, shows that the claim that the racial composition of a state, measured by racial diversity and black density, is more important than social capital and state political culture does not receive empirical support from the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. One major problem of previous studies is that they failed to explain why black density, racial diversity, social capital and state political culture are highly correlated in the first place. Challenging previous competing hypothesis approach, this study proposed a new theory of racial tension to link all four contextual variables to the deep-seated racial tension. Drawing on arguments in recent political development literature, this research suggests that the racial tension formed during early American political development provided an enduring effect on the high correlation among black density, racial diversity, social capital and political culture.

Through a principal component analysis it is shown that there is indeed an underlying factor, and all four contextual variables at the state level are empirically shown here to reflect that underlying factor of racial tension. Thus, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature to explain why black density, racial diversity, social capital, and political culture are highly correlated at the state level. More importantly, this research shows the continuing effect of racial tension on the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. It is racial tension that had a direct and negative effect on white willingness to vote for Obama.

It is also worth noting that our empirical analyses showed that Obama faced a continuing effect of ideology and religion. His 2008 campaign did not

receive support from the conservative white electorate. Furthermore, Mitt Romney, Obama's 2012 GOP opponent was able to continue to receive the support from this white bloc, despite his Mormon religious affiliation. Put it differently, Obama's white support was largely a support from the liberals, which prevented him from winging a substantial white vote, especially in 2012. In sum, the converged findings based on multiple methods consistently showed the direct and negative effect of deep-seated racial tension on white willingness to vote for Barack Obama. Based on the well-planned white first strategy, Obama campaigned heavily and won in the places where the level of racial tension was relatively low in the first place. In this sense, this study shows an enduring, rather than vanishing, contextual effect of race on the historical election and reelection of the nation's first African-American President.

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