

Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks. *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama.* New York and London: New York University Press, 2014, 224 pp. (\$30 cloth).

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”¹ The election of the first non-white president in 2008 led some commentators to declare that this historical event was ushering in a “colorblind” or “post-racial” era. His reelection in 2012 seems to have validated their claim. However the electoral success of Barack Obama on the national stage is only one side of the story. It can’t be denied that the United States has reformed itself tremendously in the past 50 years, but using these two rather exceptional elections to discard the primacy of the racial paradigm in the U.S. is quite a stretch. As usual, the devil is the details and a closer examination of the conservative movement and its reaction the Obama presidency over the past six years paints a fascinating picture.

Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks in their timely book *The Wrongs of the Right* analyze this period to show that race is “still the big news.”² Through a thorough examination of the rhetoric and strategies of the Right, the authors build a methodologically sound and rigorous case against any claims of “post-racialism”. The data they accumulated should put to rest the idea that this presidency takes place in a “color blind” environment. On the contrary, the Obama presidency seems to concentrate several racial paradoxes. Not only is the record of the administration on civil rights issues constantly criticized,³ but racial minorities are worse off economically today because the first non-white presidency coincided with the Great Recession⁴ and, in light of Hughey and Parks’ study, it appears that racial fears, coded language, nativism and white backlash may have been exacerbated by the upending of the status quo. Racial discourse may be more visible because of Obama’s election not in spite of it.

The emergence of the Tea Party and the birther movement illustrate an opposition to Barack Obama that goes beyond politics and highlights the continued conflation of Whiteness and an “authentic” American identity. While Hughey and Parks also remind us of the vitriolic and incessant attacks of ultra-conservative media that some Americans may tune out or brush aside for being on the fringe of the political discourse, their capacity to influence or even distort the political debate is real. Moreover, such levels of violence are often accompanied by some sort of covert expressions of white oppression and victimhood that can be channeled into more traditional political platforms. Consequently the authors also analyze how racial attitudes influence the official positions taken by the GOP and its candidates, and how “racial politics” transpires in their electoral strategies and how undertones of white supremacy are just routine political tools under this presidency.

All these different themes are brought together by Hughey and Parks to demonstrate how biases, conscious and unconscious, angst and fear of racial minorities impact the development of the Republican Party and reinforce the state of political gridlock in Washington. Social Science research seems to indicate that even policy opposition that appears to be partisan in nature, as in the case of Health Care reform, is intertwined, again consciously or unconsciously, with racial prejudice and stereotypes.⁵ This opposition, the

authors remind us, can come from the elected official's own beliefs or from pressure from his or her constituents.

There is, however, hope and change on the horizon. Change that may not come from the rhetoric of the Obama campaign but from the demographic evolution of the country since the white electorate's share in the voting age population is actually shrinking. In other words, racial politics is at a crossroads. The conservative coalition built by Ronald Reagan and maintained by George W. Bush is in shambles. And now the GOP, which has instrumentalized anti-black and anti-brown sentiments for local and regional political gains ever since the implementation the Southern Strategy, is running the risk of losing its third presidential election in a row. Mitt Romney championed the inhuman principle of "self-deportation" during the Republican primaries to rally a white base that eventually comprised 88% of its electorate in 2012. Such numbers indicate that the GOP will have to reform itself sooner or later. But in the meantime some Republican elected officials, isolated in their highly Republican districts, are "clinging" to their old partisan calculations while the national party is going through some growing pains. Hughey and Parks have build a great case to show that the US is "sill a house divided",⁶ and that to advance in the direction of racial equality and move beyond this time of political crisis the country must first acknowledge that racism, in its various forms, even in the age of Obama, is far from being a thing of the past.

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¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, New York: Random House, 1951, 92.

² Bob Blauner. *Still the Big News: Racial Oppression in America*, Temple University Press: 2001.

³ Michael Selmi, "A Lame Civil Rights Record", Politico Magazine, September 4 2014, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/obama-doj-civil-rights-110617.html?hp=pm_1#.VBFsPsJ_tAK

⁴ Annie Lowrey, "Wealth Gap Among Races Has Widened Since Recession", *New York Times*, April 28, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/business/racial-wealth-gap-widened-during-recession.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁵ Tesler, Michael. 2012. "The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care: How President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race," *American Journal Political Science*, 56: 690-704.

⁶ Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith. *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama's America*. Princeton, 2013.