



# How Democrats Lost Sight of Obama's Vision of National Identity

IAN REIFOWITZ  
CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

JULY 2025

 @ppi |  @progressivepolicyinstitute |  /progressive-policy-institute

# How Democrats Lost Sight of Obama's Vision of National Identity

IAN REIFOWITZ  
CONTRIBUTING  
AUTHOR

JULY 2025



## INTRODUCTION

**Roughly two decades ago, Barack Obama burst onto the national stage with an address at the 2004 Democratic Convention that captivated millions of Americans. He offered what became his most widely quoted line: “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”**

Obama connected the language of American unity to progressive policy goals. He described his: “belief that we are connected as one people. If there’s a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandmother.”<sup>1</sup>

The speech was not a one-off. I have carefully studied just about every word Barack Obama uttered or wrote in a public forum from the early 1990s through the end of his presidency, and most of the rest since. My book, *Obama’s America: A Transformative Vision of Our National Identity*, examined his deeply held concepts of America and Americanness. His soaring depiction of our country’s story in which we’ve committed terrible wrongs but drawn upon the founding documents to make remarkable progress resonated with enough Americans to elect and re-elect him to the presidency with commanding margins — a feat accomplished by none of the Democratic Party’s three subsequent presidential candidates.

It should be obvious that Donald Trump’s vision of America represents something like the antithesis of Obama’s. Where Obama sought to unite, Trump divides. As my coauthor and I demonstrate in a forthcoming book, Trump plays on racial stereotypes as a routine feature

of his rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> He labeled Mexican immigrants “murderers, child predators and bloodthirsty rapists and drug dealers.”<sup>3</sup> He stated: “I think Islam hates us,” impugning people of an entire religion.<sup>4</sup> He told America that Haitian migrants were eating their pets.<sup>5</sup> And his Defense Secretary ordered the removal from the curriculum of U.S. military service academies any topic focusing on “race, gender or the darker moments of American history.”<sup>6</sup> In large part, Trump rode racial divisiveness to the Republican nomination in 2016 and then to the presidency. For Obama, being divisive was one of the most shameful things a public figure could be. It was, in fact, the strongest criticism he leveled at his own left-wing former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, in his vitally important 2008 speech titled: “A More Perfect Union: Race, Politics, and Unifying Our Country.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas Trump revels in “blood and soil” nationalism, Obama champions the idea of America.

What’s less obvious but equally important is that Democratic politicians — influenced by far-left academics — have in important ways departed from how the 44th president talks about our history and our national identity in the years since he left office. In fact, I have been astonished by how much influence the views of the academic left — views that depart significantly from Obama’s — have gained even among Democratic officials.

## I. OBAMA'S VISION OF AMERICA

Going back to 1995's *Dreams From My Father*, Barack Obama has consistently declared the importance of Americans deeply feeling a shared national identity. It is clear he knows this in his bones. Obama's approach centers on the need to actively inculcate a sense of peoplehood that unifies Americans of every kind, even as it makes space for identities based on race, culture, religion, and more. In his most recent public appearance on June 17, he explained: “There is a story about America that includes everybody....It's a story about

people who don't believe that anybody is worse than them or better than them. That historically has not been a Republican or a Democratic idea. That is an American idea that everybody could tap into. If that ends up being our starting point for a common identity then I think we'll be okay, but that's not where we are right now.”<sup>8</sup>

Invoking Dr. Martin Luther King, Obama, in his final State of the Union, called on Americans to reject “voices urging us to fall back into our respective tribes, to scapegoat fellow citizens who don't look like us, or pray like us, or vote like we do, or share the same background.” He called on us instead to be “inspired by those...voices that help us see ourselves not, first and foremost, as black or white, or Asian or Latino, not as gay or straight, immigrant or native born, not as Democrat or Republican, but as Americans first, bound by a common creed.”<sup>9</sup>

For President Obama, our relative success in integrating immigrants and creating unity while still respecting diversity provides a powerful, attractive model for other societies. It is what makes America exceptional, as he emphasized in that June 17 interview, adding: “when this experiment works, it gives the world a little bit of hope, because it says it is possible for human beings who are not bound by tribe, race, or blood but are instead bound by an idea that they can somehow work together and arrive at a common good....I think we have to recover pride in that. That's what makes us special.”<sup>10</sup>

Whereas Trump tries to erase the dark chapters in America and the left too often fixates exclusively on those shameful experiences, Obama acknowledges the persistence of racism and sexism while noting “we have gotten better” on both fronts.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the 44th president was not the first Democratic president to speak about America in a balanced yet hopeful way. President Bill Clinton, for example, in his first inaugural

address, proclaimed that “there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.”<sup>12</sup> But Obama certainly took it to new heights with the depth and frequency with which he explored these themes.

## II. WHERE THE ACADEMIC LEFT’S CRITIQUE OF OBAMA MISSES THE MARK

During his presidency, Obama faced significant criticism from his left on how he spoke about racism and American history. Activist Tim Wise denigrated the account of American history Obama offered in his “A More Perfect Union” speech as “sunny and warm” but “not an accurate one” because it ignores the depth of racism.<sup>13</sup> Wise contended that Obama has “embrace[d] the dominant national narrative generally accepted by the white majority.”<sup>14</sup>

The 44th president, however, did no so such thing. His chronicle of our history has, in fact, named the crimes America has committed against African Americans, American Indians, and women, among other misdeeds and mistakes, as well as their lasting impact. The president has refused, however, to allow those crimes to be the whole story, as Wise seemed to demand, and to ignore the advances — even if they remain incomplete — the country has made toward full equality and inclusion. Some academics also criticized Obama from his left, including Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson, who famously declared, “this president runs from race like a black man runs from a cop.”<sup>15</sup>

After Obama’s presidency, and as a reaction to the extremism of Trump, the left academic vision began to gain salience. In particular, since George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the identity politics approach expressed by, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin D’Angelo, Ibram X. Kendi, and The 1619 Project has gained much greater prominence. It is worth noting that the day after Donald Trump became president in 2017, Kendi published a *New York Times* op-ed that called on Obama to

write “a different racial history from the one he proclaimed from his presidential pulpit.” Kendi not only criticized what he incorrectly characterized as Obama’s “popular history of continuous racial progress,” he also claimed that the 44th president echoed “Cold War propaganda” from the early 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

The academic left broke with Obama on three critical issues: how much commonality exists across racial lines; the trajectory of history; and whether to emphasize universal or race-specific programs. These ideas raise important questions that are vital to debate and discuss. However, they are often not only problematic on the merits, but also profoundly harmful to the Democratic brand.

### A. Embrace of Race Essentialism

First, there’s the question of whether to highlight commonality across lines of race versus stressing the differences, the latter sometimes to the point of race essentialism. Obama constantly emphasized the former in a balanced way, as he did in the “A More Perfect Union” address: “Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, here’s the 44th president on December 6, 2014, at the Obama Foundation Democracy Forum: “Pluralism does not require us to deny our unique identities or experiences, but it does require that we try to understand the identities and experiences of others and to look for common ground.”<sup>18</sup>

Obama’s approach sharply contrasts with the race essentialist mindset that underlay guidelines produced by the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of African American History and Culture that identified rational thinking, hard work, delayed gratification, being on time, and “decision-making” as elements of white American culture.<sup>19</sup> Trump criticized these guidelines, but Democrats should publicly reject them as well, even as they condemn Trump’s attempt to force the Smithsonian to promote only “American greatness.”<sup>20</sup>

Race essentialism also characterizes the views of Robin D'Angelo, author of *White Fragility*. In a statement that reflects her core beliefs, she urged white people to accept that “your race shaped every aspect of your life from the moment that you took your first breath.”<sup>21</sup> Race is certainly an important influence on any American's life, but D'Angelo's statement flattens out the wide range of the lives white Americans live. It ignores the reality that the children of Donald Trump live a life that has much more in common with the children of a black billionaire like Robert F. Smith or David Steward than with the white children born into a dirt-poor family. Rhetoric and policy based predominantly on D'Angelo-style race essentialism cannot help but fail to adequately address the real struggles of poor whites, who remain the majority of those living in poverty in our country.

### **B. The Denial of Racial Progress**

A second area of disagreement concerns the degree to which we have made progress reducing racism over the course of American history. In the “A More Perfect Union” speech, then-Senator Obama contrasted his view with that of Rev. Wright, in terms that could also apply to the academic left in more recent years. The problem was not in calling out racism, but instead speaking “as if no progress had been made; as if this country...is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know — what we have seen — is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope — the audacity to hope — for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”<sup>22</sup>

In a sharp contrast, from its very first paragraph, The 1619 Project laid out its founding principle. It contends that the idea our country was born on July 4, 1776, “is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619” — when the first enslaved Africans arrived on our shores. At that point,

“America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began.”<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, *The New York Times*, which published this collection of essays, softened this claim as well as other similarly provocative language after receiving pushback from scholars and others.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the core of the argument remains that the enslavement of Africans in what would become the United States — a truly horrific, despicable practice that has no doubt cast a long shadow and still matters today — is the single most important event in our history, more important than the act of creating the nation itself.

Leaving aside the accuracy of this highly questionable assertion, a Democratic Party seen as believing it has no chance of being entrusted with governing our country. The Brahmin Left — a term coined by economist Thomas Piketty to describe the intellectual elite that exercises tremendous power within parties once dominated by working-class interests<sup>25</sup> — however, ate it up, and The 1619 Project, about which historians have raised some serious questions, won the Pulitzer Prize. Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates, expressing sentiments that stand diametrically opposed to Obama's, asserted about black Americans: “we were never meant to be part of the American story.”<sup>26</sup> He says this without qualification. The statement is totalizing and eternal. Coates's words carry real anguish, caused by racism, that all Democratic officials should understand, but this view fails to acknowledge progress, and its complete embrace would leave the Democratic Party with a politically unpopular worldview that makes it less able to enact positive change through policy.

### **C. The Support for Racial Preferences**

A third area of at least partial disagreement centers on the question of whether to support universal programs — which disproportionately benefit Americans of color — versus those that explicitly target Americans by race. In *The Audacity*

of Hope, Obama wrote: “an emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, programs isn’t just good policy; it’s also good politics.”<sup>27</sup> He also explained: “The only thing I cannot do is...by law I can’t pass laws that say I’m just helping black folks. I’m the President of the entire United States. What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need. That in turn is going to help lift up the African American community.”<sup>28</sup>

On affirmative action, he famously said in 2007 that colleges should treat his daughters as “pretty advantaged” and that they should “take into account white kids who have been disadvantaged and have grown up in poverty.”<sup>29</sup> During his administration, Obama sometimes took a different stance, and supported the continued use of race-based admissions preferences by colleges. Nevertheless, his economic policies — including his signature initiative, Obamacare — were universal.

Compare this to what Kendi wrote in the first edition of *How to Be An Anti-Racist*, perhaps the urtext of the race essentialist academic left: “Racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist....The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”<sup>30</sup> Kendi changed these words in a subsequent edition, after facing criticism.<sup>31</sup> What he wrote provided the intellectual foundation for the push in policy for equity. It stands in direct opposition to what Obama expressed in the “A More Perfect Union” speech, when he called on Americans to: “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”<sup>32</sup>

### III. BIDEN AND HARRIS’S MOVE TO THE LEFT OF OBAMA ON RACE

Academics and public intellectuals aiming to stir the conscience of their readers have goals and methods that must differ from those of politicians running for office, who seek the political power to make change. Such provocateurs can take positions to the left of mainstream politicians because, after all, they don’t need to win more votes than their opponent. But what’s especially notable here is that Democratic elected officials shifted to the left of Obama on race, too.

The Biden administration relied on several of the universal programs Obama championed, but Biden also adopted too much of the Brahmin Left’s positioning on race. His first executive order called for a government-wide focus on “equity” that, among other things, promoted DEI trainings in federal government agencies and offices.<sup>33</sup> It’s important to note that research on the effectiveness of these trainings has delivered a verdict that is mixed at best. One study from Rutgers University that specifically looked at trainings that relied on “scholars like” D’Angelo and Kendi found that they may, in fact, “promote rather than ameliorate intergroup hostilities.”<sup>34</sup> Biden’s Education Department, likewise, advanced Brahmin Left thinking on race in its programming. In April 2021, the Biden White House promoted a program of grants for teaching civics and American history that both uncritically praised The 1619 Project and quoted directly from Kendi’s book.<sup>35</sup>

Looking at actual government funding, the American Rescue Plan passed by Congress (without a single Republican vote in either chamber) and signed into law by President Biden in March 2021 included \$4 billion of debt relief that would benefit indebted farmers of color — most of whom are African American — but excluded whites. White farmers sued on the basis of racial discrimination.<sup>36</sup> This policy further entrenched

the belief among some white Americans that a Democratic president and Congress — focused on equity of outcomes rather than equal rights — stood on the side of minorities and stood opposed to white interests. This was a far cry from Obama's position that he would not pass laws that only helped black Americans. Struggling black farmers in Alabama are not better off because the government chose not to include struggling white farmers in Iowa. But the latter are definitely worse off for not getting that help, and the reason behind the policy might well lead those white farmers to resent both people of color and the Democratic officials who made that choice.

Furthermore, such choices weaken the multiracial coalition of the economically vulnerable that true progressive change requires, something Dr. King understood. In *Why We Can't Wait*, he called for a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged that would include poor whites. Echoing Dr. King, Obama also tended to endorse universalist rather than race-specific policies.

Rhetorically, as well, neither Biden nor Harris decisively broke with the hard left, as Obama did when he forcefully distanced himself from Rev. Wright, or Bill Clinton did, when he distanced himself from Sister Souljah, a rapper who said after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, "If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?"<sup>37</sup>

#### IV. POLITICAL FALLOUT FROM THE EMBRACE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Some might have expected that Biden and Harris's more race-specific equity rhetoric would have resulted in increased support among voters of color. It did not. The Democrats' shift to the left on race under Biden ultimately failed politically. Not only did Donald Trump return to the White House, in 2024 he *increased* his support among Asian and particularly Latino voters, and more than held his ground among black voters compared to 2020.<sup>38</sup>

Between Obama's last presidential campaign and the 2024 election, Democrats gained 17 percentage points among white voters with a college degree, which sounds pretty good but during the same period Democrats lost 21 points among non-white voters, and a whopping 37 points among non-white voters without a college degree.<sup>39</sup>

The Pew Research Foundation conducted a survey of beliefs and attitudes and placed respondents into one of eight political categories. The progressive left, which aligns most with race essentialist views, represents only 6% of Americans. Of the four Democratic/left groups, it is the single one where non-Hispanic whites constitute a majority.<sup>40</sup> The reality is that the wealthy white liberals who proudly declare their devotion to the principles of D'Angelo's *White Fragility* or Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* express positions on racial issues like policing or education that stand far to the left of most African Americans. The views of the Brahmin Left — which Ruy Teixeira noted "have come to define the Democratic Party in the eyes of many working-class voters, despite the fact that many Democrats do not endorse them"<sup>41</sup> — are alienating the very Americans most likely to face racial oppression. These groups also happen to include some of the fastest growing segments of our voting population. Democratic politicians must find ways to clearly distance themselves from the more extreme, unnuanced aspects of race essentialism, as Obama repeatedly has done.

The move in favor of race-specific programs also failed in practice on legal grounds. When white farmers sued to strike down the Biden law that excluded them, they won. Eventually, after the court blocked the initial law providing debt relief with eligibility based on race, a revised provision (included in the Inflation Reduction Act) authorized payments to those farmers who had been discriminated against by the USDA (mostly black

farmers), but that second law was a universal one with non-racial criteria, aimed at redressing specific wrongs. Unfortunately, black farmers had to wait three additional years — marked, as we know, by significant levels of inflation sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic — to get the money they could have gotten in 2021 had the initial law not restricted eligibility by race, running afoul of the Constitution.<sup>42</sup> The cost of that approach was more than just political.

To be fair, President Biden on occasion employed language that echoed, at least in part, the Obama vision of America discussed here. Biden did so quite movingly in his June 2, 2020, speech after George Floyd's murder. Biden faced criticism from his left when he contended that, although racism and hate still exist and have an impact today, they do not reflect “who we are” as a country. Likewise, Vice President Kamala Harris spoke in Obamaesque terms in her acceptance speech at the 2024 Democratic National Convention, and again, more explicitly, in her Closing Argument speech delivered at the Ellipse one week before the election. She proclaimed: “E pluribus unum, out of many, one, isn't just a phrase on a dollar bill. It is a living truth about the heart of our nation....The fact that someone disagrees with us does not make them the enemy within. They are family, neighbors, classmates, coworkers. They are fellow Americans. And as Americans, we rise and fall together... America, I know the vast majority of us have so much more in common than what separates us.”<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, using this language on occasion does not have the same impact as putting it at the core of one's worldview. The shift in rhetoric, just like the Biden-Harris shift toward a tougher immigration policy, came too late to persuade enough voters to defeat Trump.

## V. A PATH FORWARD

Since Obama left office, Democrats have lost sight of the importance of his type of conception of America. He provided both an accurate picture of the country and showed an ability to win over sufficient numbers of working-class voters of every race — the overwhelming majority of whom are strongly patriotic. Democrats need to reembrace the Obama vision of America and avoid the more identity-politics-based vision of the Brahmin Left if they wish to get a fair hearing from working-class Americans on policy prescriptions they propose.

### A. Recognizing Mistakes

Change requires recognizing one's mistakes. At a February forum on “The Future of the Democratic Party,” former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg demanded that Democrats be “more serious about the actual values and not caught up in vocabularies and trying to cater to everybody only in terms of their particular slice of combinations of identities versus the shared project.” He also used humor to make a valuable point: “What do we mean when we talk about diversity? Is it caring for people's different experiences and making sure no one is mistreated because of them, which I will always fight for? Or is it making people sit through a training that looks like something out of ‘Portlandia,’ which I have also experienced.” Promoting the latter, he said, “is how Trump Republicans are made.”<sup>44</sup>

Other Democrats have noted that one reason the party has “a cultural disconnect from the working class” is that they “focus too much on America's flaws (racism, sexism, inequality) without acknowledging the country's progress and potential, making them seem pessimistic and unpatriotic.”<sup>45</sup>

## B. Embracing an Inspiring National Vision

Some intellectuals offer a path forward that differs from that proposed by Kendi, Coates, and the 1619 Project. The late philosopher Richard Rorty in *Achieving Our Country* issued a clarion call for the cultivation of a progressive version of national pride. He rightly emphasized that such a feeling is “to countries what self-respect is to individuals. A necessary condition for self-improvement.” Rorty went on to encourage left-of-center figures to take up the task: “Those who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation’s past....to which the country should remain true....Competition for political leadership is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation’s self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness.” Right-wing politicians cannot be the only people who talk about American national identity, nor can Democrats allow them to define it.

More recently, writer Heather McGhee has offered a compelling vision of how to talk about race along Obamaesque lines. In her 2021 book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, she wrote: “The zero-sum story of racial hierarchy...is an invention of the worst elements of our society: people who gained power through ruthless exploitation and kept it by sowing constant division. It has always optimally benefited only the few while limiting the potential of the rest of us, and therefore the whole.”<sup>46</sup>

McGhee argues that Republicans pit racial and other groups against each other such that if one gains, the others must lose. That story is a false one. She notes that what she called the “race left”<sup>47</sup> inadvertently contributes to this zero-sum vision by “focus[ing] on how white people benefited from systemic racism.” She argues that’s not an accurate story. Many whites suffered, rather than benefitted, under the old laws of white supremacy,

even as those laws harshly oppressed black Americans above all. For the most part, white people “lost right along with the rest of us. Racism got in the way of all of us having nice things.”<sup>48</sup> Her key illustration is that when courts ordered desegregation of public swimming pools some communities chose to fill in the pools rather than integrate them. Black people got hurt, but so did working-class whites. McGhee’s formulation is both accurate and politically persuasive to a broad audience.

Democrats need to move away from the language of equity, which implies that it would be acceptable to close the racial gaps in health or education by helping members of the disadvantaged racial groups improve while denying any help to lower-income whites. Obama understood this reality instinctively, as he made clear in his “A More Perfect Union” speech. He called on all Americans to “realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.”<sup>49</sup>

To reorient themselves, Democrats must make some choices and offer new, more inspiring alternatives than they have in recent years. Trump’s concept of Americanness centers on a toxic cocktail of fear, naked self-interest, and power — characteristics that inspire only those who desire to dominate others, such as those who agree with Elon Musk that “the fundamental weakness of Western Civilization is empathy.”<sup>50</sup> But the Brahmin Left’s concept is so pessimistic and devoid of pride that it simply cannot inspire, and instead alienates too many Americans. If the choice is between a Trumpist vision that solely bathes our history in glory and righteousness, and a Brahmin Left history that emphasizes the mirror image — only our crimes — many Americans will choose the vision that sounds more patriotic and makes them feel better.

Barack Obama brilliantly walked a middle path. He managed to acknowledge inequities and the need for more progress while also offering hope. Obama flatly rejected the faddish vision that, in the words of Teixeira, claims “America was born in slavery, marinated in racism and remains a white supremacist society, shot through with multiple, intersecting levels of injustice that make everybody either oppressed or oppressor on a daily basis.”<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps nowhere did Obama strike the balance better than in his speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March. Obama asked: “What could be more American than what happened in this place? What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than plain and humble people — the

unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many—coming together to shape their country’s course? What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this; what greater form of patriotism is there; than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?”<sup>52</sup>

To right the ship, tell a credible and also inspiring story, and win elections, a new generation of Democrats needs to recapture this spirit.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ian Reifowitz**, a contributing author at PPI, is SUNY Distinguished Professor of history at SUNY-Empire State University. He has written four books, including: *Obama’s America: A Transformative Vision of Our National Identity* and *The Tribalization of Politics: How Rush Limbaugh’s Race-Baiting Rhetoric on the Obama Presidency Paved the Way for Trump*. His forthcoming (co-authored) book is titled: *Riling up the Base: Examining Trump’s Use of Stereotypes through an Interdisciplinary Lens*, and will be published in July.

# Notes and References

- 1 Barack Obama, "Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention," July 27, 2004, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/keynote-address-the-2004-democratic-national-convention>. This article draws upon my books *Obama's America: A Transformative Vision of Our National Identity* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012); *Riling up the Base: Examining Trump's Use of Stereotypes through an Interdisciplinary Lens* (Boston: DeGruyter Brill, forthcoming in 2025, co-authored with Anastacia Kurylo), and my article "How Progressives Talk about July 4 and Our National History in the post-Trump Presidency Era" (Daily Kos, 2023).
- 2 Kurylo and Reifowitz, *Riling Up the Base*.
- 3 Michael Gold, "Trump Reposts Crude Sexual Remark About Harris on Truth Social," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/28/us/politics/trump-truth-social-posts.html>.
- 4 Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner, "I Think Islam Hates Us": A Timeline of Trump's Comments About Islam and Muslims," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>.
- 5 David Arkin and Daniel Ingram, "Trump Pushes Baseless Claim About Immigrants 'Eating The Pets,'" *NBC News*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-pushes-baseless-claim-immigrants-eating-pets-rcna170537>.
- 6 Greg Jaffe, "The Pentagon's Culture Wars Strike West Point," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2025, [https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/08/us/politics/west-point-hegseth-culture-wars.html?unlocked\\_article](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/08/us/politics/west-point-hegseth-culture-wars.html?unlocked_article).
- 7 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union: Race, Politics, and Unifying Our Country," March 18, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/03/18/88478467/transcript-barack-obamas-speech-on-race>.
- 8 Barack Obama, "Conversation at The Connecticut Forum," Medium, June 19, 2025, <https://barackobama.medium.com/conversation-at-the-connecticut-forum-e5e168e08ba8>.
- 9 Barack Obama, "State of the Union," January 13, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.
- 10 Obama, "Conversation at The Connecticut Forum."
- 11 Barack Obama, "Conversation at Hamilton College," Medium, April 4, 2025, <https://barackobama.medium.com/conversation-at-hamilton-college-0c44228ac0bd>.
- 12 Bill Clinton, "First Inaugural Address," January 20, 1993, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/clinton1.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/clinton1.asp).
- 13 Tim Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009), 142. See also 133-34.
- 14 Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place*, 89.

- 15 Randall Kennedy, "Race Talk in the Obama Era," *The American Prospect*, March 9, 2011, <https://prospect.org/special-report/race-talk-obama-era/>.
- 16 Ibram X. Kendi, "Racial Progress Is Real. But So Is Racist Progress," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/opinion/sunday/racial-progress-is-real-but-so-is-racist-progress.html>.
- 17 Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
- 18 Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Obama Foundation Democracy Forum," December 6, 2024, <https://www.obama.org/democracy-forum-2024/president-obama-remarks/>.
- 19 Marina Watts, "In Smithsonian Race Guidelines, Rational Thinking and Hard Work Are White Values," *Newsweek*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/smithsonian-race-guidelines-rational-thinking-hard-work-are-white-values-1518333>.
- 20 Donald J. Trump, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," Executive Order, March 27, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>.
- 21 Sandee LaMotte, "Robin DiAngelo: How 'White Fragility' Supports Racism and How Whites Can Stop it," *CNN*, June 7, 2020, <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2020/06/07/health/white-fragility-robin-diangelo-wellness>.
- 22 Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
- 23 "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2019, [https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full\\_issue\\_of\\_the\\_1619\\_project.pdf](https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf).
- 24 Jake Silverstein, "On Recent Criticism of The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/magazine/criticism-1619-project.html>.
- 25 Thomas Piketty, "Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of Political Conflict," *World Inequality Database*, March 22, 2018, <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf>. See also Thomas Piketty, "Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict in France, Britain, and the US, 1948–2020," in *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities: A Study of 50 Democracies, 1948–2020*, A. Gethin, C. Martínez-Toledano, and T. Piketty, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).
- 26 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Good, Racist People," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/opinion/coates-the-good-racist-people.html>.
- 27 Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 291.
- 28 Barack Obama, interview with April Ryan on American Urban Radio Networks, December 22, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-april-ryan-american-urban-radio-networks>.
- 29 Barack Obama, interview with George Stephanopoulos, *CBS News*, Transcript May 14, 2007, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-and-affirmative-action/>.
- 30 Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, (New York: One World, 2019). Excerpt from Ibram X. Kendi, "Ibram X. Kendi defines what it means to be an antiracist," Penguin, June 9, 2020, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/ibram-x-kendi-definition-of-antiracist>.

- 31 Pamela Paul, "'Antiracism' Was Never the Right Answer," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/05/opinion/ibram-x-kendi-racism.html>.
- 32 Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
- 33 Jim Tankersley and Michael D. Shear, "Biden Seeks to Define His Presidency by an Early Emphasis on Equity," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/23/business/biden-equity-racial-gender.html>.
- 34 "Instructing Animosity: How DEI Pedagogy Produces the Hostile Attribution Bias," Network Contagion Research Institute, November 25, 2024, [https://networkcontagion.us/wp-content/uploads/Instructing-Animosity\\_11.13.24.pdf](https://networkcontagion.us/wp-content/uploads/Instructing-Animosity_11.13.24.pdf).
- 35 Catie Edmonson, "McConnell Attacks Biden Rule's Antiracism Focus, Calling It 'Divisive,'" *The New York Times*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/us/politics/mitch-mcconnell-1619-project.html>.
- 36 Alan Rappeport, "Black Farmers Fear Foreclosure as Debt Relief Remains Frozen," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/us/politics/black-farmers-debt-relief.html>.
- 37 David Mills, "Sister Souljah's Call to Arms," May 12, 1992, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1992/05/13/sister-souljahs-call-to-arms/643d5634-e622-43ad-ba7d-811f8f5bfe5d/>.
- 38 David Knowles, "How Did Trump Win? He Improved His Standing with Asian, Black, Latino, Youth, Independent, and Women Voters," *Yahoo News*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/how-did-trump-win-he-improved-his-standing-with-asian-black-latino-youth-independent-and-women-voters-221013171.html>; Zachary B. Wolf, Curt Merrill, and Way Mullery, "Anatomy of three Trump elections: How Americans voted in 2024 vs. 2020 and 2016," *CNN*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2024/politics/2020-2016-exit-polls-2024-dg/>.
- 39 Nate Cohn, "How Democrats Lost Their Base and Their Message," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2024, [https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/25/upshot/democrats-trump-working-class.html?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/25/upshot/democrats-trump-working-class.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).
- 40 "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2021, [https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).
- 41 Ruy Teixeira, "What Working-Class Voters Really Want," *The Liberal Patriot*, April 24, 2025, [https://open.substack.com/pub/theliberalpatriot/p/what-working-class-voters-really?r=3os6d&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=email](https://open.substack.com/pub/theliberalpatriot/p/what-working-class-voters-really?r=3os6d&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email).
- 42 Alan Rappeport, "Biden Administration Begins Paying Farmers Who Faced Discrimination," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/31/business/biden-black-farmers-payments.html>.
- 43 Kamala Harris, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally on the Ellipse in Washington," *Roll Call*, October 29, 2024, <https://rollcall.com/factbase/harris/transcript/kamala-harris-remarks-campaign-rally-ellipse-washington-october-29-2024/>.
- 44 Alex Griffing, "Pete Buttigieg Hammers Democrats' Approach to Promoting Diversity; 'It Is How Trump Republicans Are Made,'" *Mediate*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.mediaite.com/politics/pete-buttigieg-hammers-democrats-approach-to-promoting-diversity-it-is-how-trump-republican-are-made/>.
- 45 "Third Way: Comeback Retreat," published in *Politico*, [https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000195-5511-d4a2-afbf-dd7121940000&utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000195-5511-d4a2-afbf-dd7121940000&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).
- 46 Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021), 34.

- 47 Heather McGhee, interview with Ezra Klein, "What 'Drained-Pool' Politics Cost America," *New York Times*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-heather-mcghee.html?>.
- 48 McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, 17-18.
- 49 Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
- 50 Sarah McCammon, "How Empathy Came to Be Seen as a Weakness in Conservative Circles," *Newsweek*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/22/nx-s1-5321299/how-empathy-came-to-be-seen-as-a-weakness-in-conservative-circles#:~:text=ELON%20MUSK%3A%20The%20fundamental%20weakness.Western%20political%20and%20cultural%20values.>
- 51 Ruy Teixeira, "The Democrats' Patriotism Problem," *The Liberal Patriot*, March 2, 2023, [https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/the-democrats-patriotism-problem?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/the-democrats-patriotism-problem?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).
- 52 Barack Obama, "Remarks Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches for Voting Rights in Selma, Alabama," March 7, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-commemorating-the-50th-anniversary-the-selma-montgomery-marches-for-voting-rights>.



The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

---

© 2025  
**PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**  
**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.**

---

**PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**  
1919 M Street NW,  
Suite 300,  
Washington, DC 20036

---

**Tel 202.525.3926**  
**Fax 202.525.3941**

---

**[info@ppionline.org](mailto:info@ppionline.org)**  
**[progressivepolicy.org](http://progressivepolicy.org)**

---