

# The Obamas and the new politics of race

June 5 2012

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With the 2012 US presidential election campaign in full swing, the meaning and significance of Barack Obama and his presidency are once again in the spotlight. Has the election of Barack Obama served as the watershed moment for American politics and race relations that many predicted? A number of experts in the field of critical race theory attempt to answer this question in a special issue of *Qualitative Sociology: The Obamas and the New Politics of Race*,<sup>1</sup> published by Springer and available to the general public. This series of six articles showcases the most recent critical sociological work on race, racism, and politics through the lens of Barack Obama's presidency.

One article provides a timely examination of how the concept of "family" has been used to both address and mask social inequalities generally, and racial inequalities in particular. In her article entitled "Just another American story? The first Black First Family,"<sup>2</sup> former American Sociological Association president Patricia Hill Collins shows – by highlighting their own 'family stories' during the 2008 campaign and in the post-election years – how the Obamas have been able to reintroduce race, gender, labor and equality into public policy discussions in a time when such debates are often deemed risky.

Public debate over Obama's citizenship and legitimacy as President is analyzed by Mississippi State University Professor Matthew Hughey, in his article, "Show me your papers! Obama's birth and the whiteness of belonging."<sup>3</sup> Hughey identifies 'birtherism' – the belief that by virtue of birthright, Obama is disqualified from presidential office – as a practice informed by the history of slavery. According to Hughey, much of what

is 'new' about the politics of race and racism is oriented around discussions of citizenship, belonging, authenticity and identity. Hughey concludes that while Obama may be a legal citizen, he is still viewed by some as an equivocal American, suggesting that the question of who is "the real" Obama will remain a factor in the 2012 election.

Wellesley College professor Michael Jeffries's article "Mutts like me: multiracial students' perceptions of [Barack Obama](#),"<sup>4</sup> explores how other multiracial US citizens understand Obama's racial identity, race and 'race relations.' In his interviews with multiracial students, Jeffries finds that respondents reject the concept of 'post-racial idealism' and do not view Obama's election as signaling an end to racism. Instead, Obama is viewed predominantly as black rather than multiracial, even though his multiracial origins are acknowledged. His findings suggest that racial schemas birthed by nineteenth century racial science continue to have a powerful effect in shaping popular perceptions of race today.

The election of Barack Obama – and his bid for re-election in November 2012 – allow us to consider how race and race relations have, or have not, changed; both in and outside of the electoral sphere. With a synoptic essay on the multiple meanings of Barack Obama and the Obama family in a putative post-racial age by guest editors Simone Browne and Ben Carrington of the University of Texas, Austin, the June issue of *Qualitative Sociology* demonstrates the importance of critical sociological analyses for understanding contemporary racial speculation in US politics. This issue is essential reading for anyone interested in how the wider cultural [politics](#) of race shaped the 2008 US Presidential election, the current election, and the future of [race](#) in the US.

**More information:** 1. *Qualitative Sociology*, Special issue: The Obamas and the New Politics of Race, Vol. 35, No.2. The special issue is freely available online to the general public at [www.springerlink.com/content/0162-0436/35/2/](http://www.springerlink.com/content/0162-0436/35/2/)

2. Collins PH (2012). Just another American story? The first Black First Family. *Qualitative Sociology*; [DOI 10.1007/s11133-012-9225-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9225-5)

3. Hughey MW (2012). Show me your papers! Obama's birth and the whiteness of belonging. *Qualitative Sociology*; [DOI 10.1007/s11133-012-9224-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9224-6)

4. Jeffries MP (2012). 'Mutts like me': multiracial students' perceptions of Barack Obama. *Qualitative Sociology*; [DOI 10.1007/s11133-012-9226-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9226-4)

Provided by Springer Science+Business Media

Citation: The Obamas and the new politics of race (2012, June 5) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-06-obamas-politics.html>

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