

# Most-racial, not post-racial: Group voting in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election.

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of Barack Obama's victory in 2008 was lauded as a sign of a diminished importance of race in American politics and the potential dawn of a "post-racial" era. While it is well-known that social inequalities persist across ethnoracial groups and racialized discourse has been resilient, an underlying premise of the notion of post-racial politics—that the election of a minority-race candidate was marked by an election that had transcended racial electoral politics—has not been directly considered. Using a new measure useful in comparing the extent to which electorates are organized along racial lines, this paper explores trends in racial division in voting in American politics, arguing that the 2008 election was not characterized by post-racial voting patterns, but rather that recent electoral politics in the United States have been notably divided along ethnic lines in both historical and cross-national comparative terms. Far from post-racial, the 2008 election must be included in any list of "most-racial" elections. A subsequent subnational analysis identifies drivers of and exceptions to this reality.

**Keywords:** Ethnic voting, post-racial, disproportionality

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# 1 Introduction

The election of Barack Obama in 2008, was lauded as a milestone in race relations and racial politics in the United States. In many ways, it certainly was: the nation's first African American president was elected by a majority-white electorate, and the transition of power took place in an atmosphere of general optimism. Election night images of the tear-streaked cheeks of celebrants in Chicago's Grant Park and of spontaneous street parties in many large cities—the base of the Obama operation and the previous site in so many instances of virulent racial politics—provided stirring evidence for the claims of a new post-racial era.

After the night's celebratory air had cleared, analysts across the political spectrum began to reconsider the deeper implications of Obama's victory. One argued that Obama's election would “at least prove that America has finally become a fundamentally post-racial society a place where tribal loyalties are based on ideology, not skin color.”<sup>1</sup>, while another was only slightly more cautious in declaring that “this nation unburdened itself of the albatross of race...Race will continue to matter to some...But its importance is diminished.”<sup>2</sup>These claims were used by the Right to bolster arguments against the maintenance of legal and policy protections established against discrimination over the past half-century, from the Voting Rights Act to affirmative action. In the *National Review*, Ken Blackwell argued that

Everyone should celebrate that quota schemes of any variety are clearly not needed in America. The fact that an African-American has been elected commander-in-chief of this country and will be the leader of the free world shows that race is not an insurmountable obstacle to success in today's America. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kay, Jonathan. “Will America finally expiate its original sin?” *National Post*, November 3, 2008. <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2008/11/03/205107.aspx#ixzz1SqIw7mkG>

<sup>2</sup>“America begins its journey into a post-racial era”, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 5, 2008. [http://www.cleveland.com/morris/index.ssf/2008/11/philip\\_morris\\_america\\_begins.html](http://www.cleveland.com/morris/index.ssf/2008/11/philip_morris_america_begins.html)

<sup>3</sup>Blackwell, Ken. “Post-Racial Preference America.” *National Review*, November 10, 2008. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/226288/post-ndash-racial-i-preference-i-america/ken-blackwell>

From the other end of the spectrum, there was a more measured reaction: this was a good development, a step in the right direction, but not a final triumph. These analyses tended to focus on persistent social division and inequality: in *Color Lines*, Dom Appolon cited “the remaining racial chasms in education, income and wealth, health care, criminal justice enforcement” and Fred McKissack argued in *The Progressive* that

[The meritocracy] is a flawed premise. This economy has never provided enough jobs for everyone. The funding of education gives a leg up to those who grow up in wealthy districts. Lack of health insurance is a necessity for those without the means. And institutional racism persists.”<sup>4</sup>

These analyses focus on socioeconomic inequalities, educational disparities, inequalities in the criminal justice system, and the like —granting to some degree the assertion that Obama’s election was a sign of racial coming-together.<sup>5</sup> The underlying implication of these “social” critiques was that the remaining hard work to be done in achieving racial equality was largely in the economic and social spheres—but that American racial politics were at the very least moving in the “post-racial” direction. Such a development—the erosion or elision of racial conflict in politics—would indeed be a significant triumph, and might be an important starting point for addressing the still pressing social divisions of which we are reminded by these critics of the “post-racial” discourse.

It is far from clear that we have indeed entered an era of post-racial politics, however. Racial language and imagery, coded and otherwise, remain persistent, pervasive staples of American political discourse, and a recent comprehensive account of the explanatory power of individuals’ views on race in the 2008 election finds that racial resentment seems to be driving behavior and more than at any other time in modern electoral history (Sears and Tesler 2011). Perhaps even more basic than this discursive presence of race in our politics, however, is the development, endurance, and crystallization of electoral partisan bases that are defined and mobilized based upon the ascriptive characteristics of voters. In our present age of heightened polarization, race persists as

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<sup>4</sup>Apolon, Dom. “America is Now ‘Post Racial?’ Don’t Be Ridiculous.” *ColorLines RaceWire*, November 12, 2008. McKissack, Fred. “We Still Aren’t in a Post-Racial Society.” *The Progressive*, November 5, 2008.

<sup>5</sup>Though political scientists have had fewer illusions about the racial politics of 2008 and beyond. Sears and Tesler (2011) in particular focuses on the role of racial resentment in behavior in 2008

a major cleavage—*more* than class or other major demographic categories.<sup>6</sup> “Post-racial” politics would seem to imply that these racial divisions were disappearing or less important than before. The available evidence does not support this interpretation of 2008.

In this paper, I present two simple but powerful findings in the search for the “post-racial” electorate that allegedly powered Obama’s victory in 2008. First, the national electorate is generally not moving in the direction of a “post-racial” politics. Rather, group-based voting has been increasing in the U.S. over the past decade, a trend that is driven by demographic change and by the migration of white voters to the Republican party. Second, America is consistently more riven by group than most other countries, even when accounting for the fairly high level of diversity in the U.S. After analyzing national-level division in historical and comparative perspective, I explore variation in voting patterns by group and region. The divide is driven largely by white-black political divergence, especially in the South. Only in the West, however, is there any evidence that racial voting is on the decline or less organized along group-identity lines than we might expect based on historical or comparative evidence. The potential pathologies of racial political division are not isolated to the region where the racial past is “never past.”

## 2 Conceptions of “Post-racial” Politics

There is an important and wide-ranging literature on the direct and indirect role of race in constituting and shaping American politics. Scholars throughout the 20th century, from W.E.B. Dubois to Gunnar Myrdal to Rogers Smith and Desmond King, have consistently identified race as *the* central and pervasive organizing principle of American politics.<sup>7</sup> Thus the assertion that America has defeated the persistent demons of racial divide in any realm of politics would be a signal claim. Two approaches are useful in identifying a persistent (or waning) racial divide in contemporary electoral politics; under either approach, claims of “post-race” should be accompanied by diminished association over time between the race and racial attitudes and political behavior. Most commonly, sophisticated analyses focus on the subtle or indirect role of race in shaping attitudes about politics

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<sup>6</sup>This can be seen from any individual-level multivariate analysis. In the author’s analyses of major election survey data (not presented here), no variable is a stronger than race in predicting vote choice in 2008.

<sup>7</sup>Dubois (1903), Myrdal (1945), Smith and King (2002)

generally, and the way elites use racial cues to influence voters (especially white voters, who make up the vast majority of the electorate). These analyses probe discourse and psychology, identify internal mechanisms through which voters reconcile group-based antinomies with cultural norms or political principles, and attempt to evaluate the biographical and social determinants of individuals' opinions about racial and racialized phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Scholars employing these approaches have argued that race was indeed an important factor in the 2008 election (Sears and Tesler 2011).

The significance of “race” in the studies above is often an investigation of the psychological importance of racism among the white majority. A second approach to the study of group-based politics, employed here, relies on blunter measures of behavior: what are the compositions of democratic electoral coalitions? In certain contexts, analyzing the simple gaps in political affiliation can be quite fruitful. Scholars of urban politics have often, and appropriately, turned their analytic eye toward the group bases of politics: unlike the U.S. national electorate, which has always had a dominant white majority, there are other places where there is more parity in group size, and where group identity itself can transform into political identity in the democratic competition for power and resources. In American cities where distinctive ethnic groups (even “white” ethnic groups) are large and identifiable as blocs, electorates have often mobilized along group lines, and the election of a new leader from a minority group may not be accompanied by diminishing importance of race, but rather of heightened group mobilization. A classic example is the mayoral election of Harold Washington in Chicago in 1983, which was marked by *particularly* vehement and divisive racial politics in both group behavior and discourse, and not by transcendent racial comity, even though he won.<sup>9</sup> At the national level, the study of the group composition of coalitions has been quite

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<sup>8</sup>Political psychologists model the relationships between racial attitudes and political behaviors, usually focusing on white voters and finding fairly consistently that racial conservatism is a strong predictor of partisanship, vote choice, and even of opinion on seemingly non-racial issues. See Sears and Tesler 2011 for a recent review of relevant findings in this literature, though the magnitude and historical trend in racial attitudes and the power of racial attitudes in explaining other opinions or behavior is contested. Discursive analyses identify how elites appeal to racial animus among whites for electoral gain. Carmines and Stimson (1989) identify race as an issue that has evolved into a central cleavage in American politics, driven by elite strategy. Edsall and Edsall (1992) reach similar conclusions, focusing on racialized language and appeals over the 1960s and 1970s. A growing observational and experimental literature focuses on the psychological processes through which race serves a lens by which citizens (again, especially whites) interpret media information or appeals from elites. See, for instance, Gilens (1999), Mendelberg (2001). Social context itself is examined as a causal force in shaping individuals' attitudes toward race generally and members of other groups particularly. Again, a long, unsettled literature has posited the “rival” racial threat and contact hypotheses. For a recent analysis and review of this literature, see Oliver (2010). As in the above analyses, this field has focused primarily on the relationship between diversity and *white* persons' attitudes or behaviors.

<sup>9</sup>The heredity-group bases of local politics are perhaps the longest-running observation of the subfield of urban politics. See Gosnell (1935), Dahl (1961), Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984), and Hajnal (2007 and 2010) for the recurrent and consistent finding that local political competition is frequently organized around group identities.

limited, perhaps because voting was largely restricted to whites until the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Organizing political conflict around group identity has also been less common in American national politics because of the size of the majority group, but this may be changing. The current national population is rapidly becoming less white, and as Latinos and Asian-Americans have gained political strength the study of America's multiracial politics has taken renewed importance. This investigation adopts the simple group bases approach with this new social reality in mind. Rather than positing psychological mechanisms and analyzing how they inform behavior, this paper takes a step back to look at the simple relationship between identity and political choice, finding that for a "post-racial" society, the contemporary U.S. has electoral teams organized around group identity to a remarkable degree.

This electoral teams approach focuses on the components of political competition, and how they map on to categories of social group identity. This approach to studying elections over time relies upon the notion that salient cleavages and political alignments are important, regardless of their ideological coherence or which additive features of individual identity are associated with voters choosing the team that they do. This is a "macro" approach, and while treating diverse groups of voters as members of groups may mask the variation in opinion or cross-cutting identity within groups, it may also reveal important truths about what our electoral "teams" look like, to elites and to the members of the other team. Such actors may not be terribly thoughtful in decomposing the individual attributes that sum to individual identities, and simply summarize the opposition as "them." Understanding the macrodynamics of electoral politics in terms of salient identities can allow us to make comparisons across electorates—across the world and over time—and such an approach can also help us see at a glance what the electoral bases of elite political combat look like, and make judgments about how "racial" electoral politics in the contemporary U.S. are.

Employing a new electorate-level measure of group voting, I seek to answer the question: to what extent are today's electoral coalitions organized around identity? The weakest interpreta-

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<sup>10</sup>Normative judgments aside, the numerical fact of democratic white supremacy makes the study of racial coalitions at the national level less interesting for much of American history. The exclusion of African Americans in the South is of note here, but similar exclusions of Latinos and Asians in the Southwest and West, and of other potential voters through racially restrictive immigration policies also shaped the electorate in important and relevant ways. Frymer (1999) is fairly exceptional in its direct analysis of the racial dynamics of national electoral coalitions over time. Tellingly, his analysis focuses on Reconstruction and the post-Civil Rights era, and on the interaction of African American bloc-voting with generalized norms of white supremacy. Also, the basic finding that there are large aggregate gaps in attitudes and behavior between racial groups (especially between African Americans and whites) is longstanding and well-established. Simply stating that race "matters" narrowly in this way is a truism without further historical or comparative context.

tion of the post-racial politics narrative is that race “matters” less in electoral politics than it used to—and the strongest evidence for this is the election of a minority candidate by a majority-white electorate. A competing possibility, the “most racial politics” narrative, may better explain reality, however: the increasing diversity of America, and the diminution of the white majority, may have shifted the electoral math in such a way that (sometimes, at least) racialized politics actually benefit the “minority” coalition. If Barack Obama was elected *despite* a deeply racially divided electorate, this would have much different implications for American racial politics. The remainder of the paper examines group-based voting for national office in two comparative perspectives. First, are American electoral coalitions less organized around race than they used to be? And was the 2008 election a continuation of this trend? The answers, in brief, are “no.” Second, how do electoral coalitions in the U.S. compare to those around the world—are our political alignments more or less rooted in groups than most other countries? The answer is “more.”

### **3 Measuring group-based voting in America: EV**

Is the United States becoming less politically divided along racial group lines, as implied by the post-racial narrative, and what can the election of Barack Obama tell us about the answer to this question?<sup>11</sup> America’s past has been characterized by racial conflict as much as by any other recur-

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<sup>11</sup>Throughout this analysis, I use the term “race” in its colloquial American sense to refer to a category of heritable group identity difference that is often referred to in the comparative literature as “ethnicity.” I also use the word “group” to refer to racial groups in this sense. I employ this vocabulary while cognizant of the American controversy about the difference in category-type. While the U.S. Census and many scholars (importantly) differentiate between the two kinds of difference, I employ the fairly common—though not uncontroversial—convention of treating these groups as discrete instances of the same category of group in American politics. Following Chandra (2006), I employ the definition of “ethnic identity categories [as] a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by descent-based attributes,” but use the term race to mean. Unless otherwise specified, I use the four group identity categories identified often as most relevant to the concept of descent-based-group politics in the United States : white, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian (Fearon 2003), and in the comparative analysis I use Fearon’s ethnic categories for the other countries in the dataset. While Chandra (2006) uses the term ethnicity, in American politics these groups are often referred to as racial categories (see, for instance, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (2003)). Given its original pretensions to science, the employing the language of race to describe these groups may be less appropriate than the more explicitly cultural language of ethnicity, but that is part of a broader discussion. Using alternative definitions (eg. strict Census-bureau racial groups, which would distribute Hispanics back into the other groups or drop them from the analysis) does not change the substantive results of the analysis. These categories are admittedly imperfect for some analyses for a number of reasons—they mask intragroup diversity in all four groups, they naturalize or lend scientific respectability to constructed categories, and they treat as equivalent categories of difference that were intentionally elaborated and defined in order NOT to be seen as equivalent. For the purposes of comparability over time and space, however, these seem to be the most appropriate categories. They are also the most commonly recognized groups in the literature on ethnic and racial politics in the U.S. (Fearon 2003, Browning et al 2003, Hajnal

rent theme, and by many accounts race has always been at or near the heart of competing political forces; understanding the development of racial politics requires approaching the object from many angles. Quantitatively, there are large, easily measured differences in political attitudes and behavior between groups in America, and these differences have developed in such a way that we can see at a glance the sustained import of race in American politics.

An analysis of change in the role of race in American electoral behavior requires analytical tools and measures with which to evaluate the relevant concepts and relationships. In this section, I describe a recently developed measure of group-based voting which I use later to make two subsequent observations about American politics: First, the extent to which voting patterns have been organized around race has steadily increased over the past half century, and American politics as it stands today is as divided along group lines as ever. Second, in comparative perspective, American electoral politics are notable for their high levels of group voting.

Measuring whether electoral politics are driven by race is not straightforward. There is a large literature on the causal mechanisms that connect race and racial attitudes to electoral behavior.<sup>12</sup> In a democracy, however, people may select their representatives for any number of reasons, and the attitudes that compel them to select that candidate are ultimately opaque and ephemeral. Clearer and more permanent are the ascriptive characteristics of the voters—the demographic building blocks of politics that create electoral blocs and serve as shorthand for political actors to “read” the electorate. This shorthand is often used by office-seekers when they craft platforms, frame appeals, and mobilize voters. The politics-identity link also sends signals to other voters. When racial identities become closely tied to political identities and behavior, politics itself can become imbued with apparently irreconcilable demands of competing groups which are heightened by the strong feelings associated with group identity itself. Just as the post-racial society is an alluring ideal, deeply divided group politics are usually undesirable: they can lead to political po-

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2010). Again, the analytical results remain substantively much the same when alternative specifications of groups are employed or when marginal groups are dropped from the analysis.

<sup>12</sup>Beyond the traditional concept of psychological racism (symbolic or “old-fashioned”), group interests (Kaufman 2008), racial threat (Key 1949), and exposure to leadership by other groups (Hajnal 2007) all play key roles in how our racial identities and attitudes inform our racial politics. There is also a large literature on the development of racial attitudes, and of the role of racially coded language in cuing racial attitudes, which may contribute to political and policy preferences in which race and ethnicity play a subtextual but important role (eg, Gilens 1999, Hopkins 2010). Most of these analyses focus on the connection between an attitude and a behavior, while this analysis focuses on the relationship between identity itself and behavior.



larization and gridlock, they can contribute to the deepening of other kinds of social polarization, they can lead to violence and oppression, they are anathema to political liberalism, and so on. In short, the politicization of ethnicity can lead to governance problems (Huber 2010). As America becomes an increasingly diverse nation, and as the white majority wanes over the coming decades, the trends in our ethnoracial politics will become increasingly important to understand—are we on a path to post-ethnicity or heightened ethnoracial polarization? And how will race inform our attitudes, our coalitions, our representative institutions, and our policies?

The subsequent analyses employ a new measure that compares the voting behavior of different groups to each other, focusing on the relationship between identity and vote choice.<sup>13</sup> *EV* sums the weighted disproportionality of group supports for different parties (or in this case, candidates). Formally, *EV* is calculated

$$EV = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\frac{G-1}{2G}}} \sum_{g=1}^G (EV_g * s_g)$$

where

$$EV_g = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \sum_{j=1}^P (V_g^j - V^j)^2}$$

and where  $V$  is the share of votes from each of  $G$  groups  $g$  for each of  $P$  parties/candidates  $p$ , weighted by  $s$ , the proportion of each group  $g$  in the electorate. In essence, it is the divergence of each group from the overall electorate, weighted by group's proportion in the electorate.

The basic intuition of this measure of *EV* is that as it becomes more likely that an observer could predict a voter's choice based solely on that voter's ethnicity, the measure increases. For instance, if every member of group  $A$  voted for candidate  $C_a$ , and every member of group  $B$  voted for candidate  $C_b$ , that electorate would have a very high *EV* score. If members of each group voted for each candidate with about the same frequency, then the electorate would score very low on the measure. The measure is also weighted by the size of the groups—that is, as a group becomes larger, it makes a greater contribution to the overall ethnic voting score of the electorate. Thus an election in which members of groups  $A$  and  $B$  each voted for their own candidates ( $C_a$  and  $C_b$ ) would receive a higher score if there were equal numbers of voters in  $A$  and  $B$  than if there were far more voters in group  $A$  than group  $B$  (or vice-versa). The measure ranges from zero (no

<sup>13</sup>Huber (2010) more fully explains the properties of the measure, Ethnic Voting (“*EV*”), and applies the measure directly to group voting, but it is based on an index of disproportionality created by Gallagher (1991).

difference in aggregate candidate choice across groups) to one (each group perfectly supports its own candidate, and all groups the same size). Thus *EV* can be understood as “the extent to which voting is organized around ethnicity.” In the language of the day, a lower score on the *EV* measure would tend to indicate a more “post-racial” politics, or at least an electoral alignment not organized around ethnicity.

The chief advantage of this measure of ethnic voting is its comparability across electorates and its straightforward manner of relative interpretation, a major advantage it has over quantitative alternatives such as measuring the effect of ethnic identity on candidate choice in a standard multinomial regression, where coefficients are not easily “combinable” for multiple groups or comparable across elections (Huber 2010). While *EV* was developed for use in cross-national comparisons, it can also be used across time to explore changes in the American electorate, observing changes over time in the ethnoracial dynamics of our politics. This allows us to use two comparative frames for judging the degree to which “post-racial” is an accurate descriptor of electoral coalitions in the U.S. Because the underlying math is relatively simple, the measure is also useful for time series analyses, to understand changes in the measure over time based on known historical events. While it is difficult to directly interpret individual *EV* scores in isolation, comparing *EV* scores across electorates is relatively straightforward, and can reveal the relative extent to which each electorate is structured by ethnicity.<sup>14</sup>

A possibly misleading feature of *EV* is that it incorporates groups’ relative size as well as their electoral distinctiveness. Thus *EV* will tend to increase, *ceteris paribus*, as groups become more equal in size, even if they become no more distinctive in their voting behavior. Given the increase in diversity in the American electorate over the past half-century, this is a potential problem, because even if groups maintain their original levels of distinctiveness, *EV* will rise as the groups become more equal in number. From one perspective, this might overstate the common-sense understanding of underlying concept of ethnic voting. For instance, if Group *B* doubled its size but maintained its distribution of support for the two parties, *EV* would increase in proportion with that increase (*EV* would not necessarily double, but *B*’s *contribution* to the overall *EV* score would double). However, if this were the case, we may still consider this to be an increase in the

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<sup>14</sup>For instance, an *EV* score of .25 does not really mean that “25 percent of politics is structured by group identity,” or any comparable statement. We can say with confidence, however, that group identity structures politics more in an electorate with an *EV* score of .25 than in an electorate with an *EV* score of .05.

underlying importance of race in organizing political coalitions. After all, as groups become larger we might expect them to become more like the electorate as a whole, or for elites to make appeals to these new or more electorally important groups. If groups maintain political distinctiveness, however, this is itself a non-trivial fact in understanding group politics, and this is why *EV* includes these group sizes.<sup>15</sup> Still, it is useful to take diversity into account. The analysis below will thus use two series to analyze how “racial” the 2008 election was: the raw *EV* measure, which has increased almost monotonically over time; and *EVELF*, the residuals of a bivariate regression of *EV* on ethnolinguistic fractionalization (*ELF*, a measure of diversity), that more explicitly accounts for the electoral differences between groups, giving us a feel for whether a given election was more or less structured by group voting than we might expect based on some baseline “natural” relationship between diversity and group-based political division.<sup>16</sup> This measure fluctuates more over time, but 2008 does not by any stretch of the imagination represent a post-racial low.

## 4 Getting the Story Straight: American Group Voting in Historical and Comparative Perspective

To describe trends in American ethnic voting over time, Figure 1 plots the national ethnic voting score over time for Presidential (solid line) and House (dotted line) elections in the US from 1948 to 2008 using data from the American National Election Study cumulative datafile. The basic observation is that *EV* has increased fairly steadily since the ANES began collecting data. Three further observations are of immediate import. First, the largest increase came in the 1960s in the aftermath of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the entrance of millions of African Americans into the electorate. The political incorporation of immigrants from Latin America and Asia after 1965

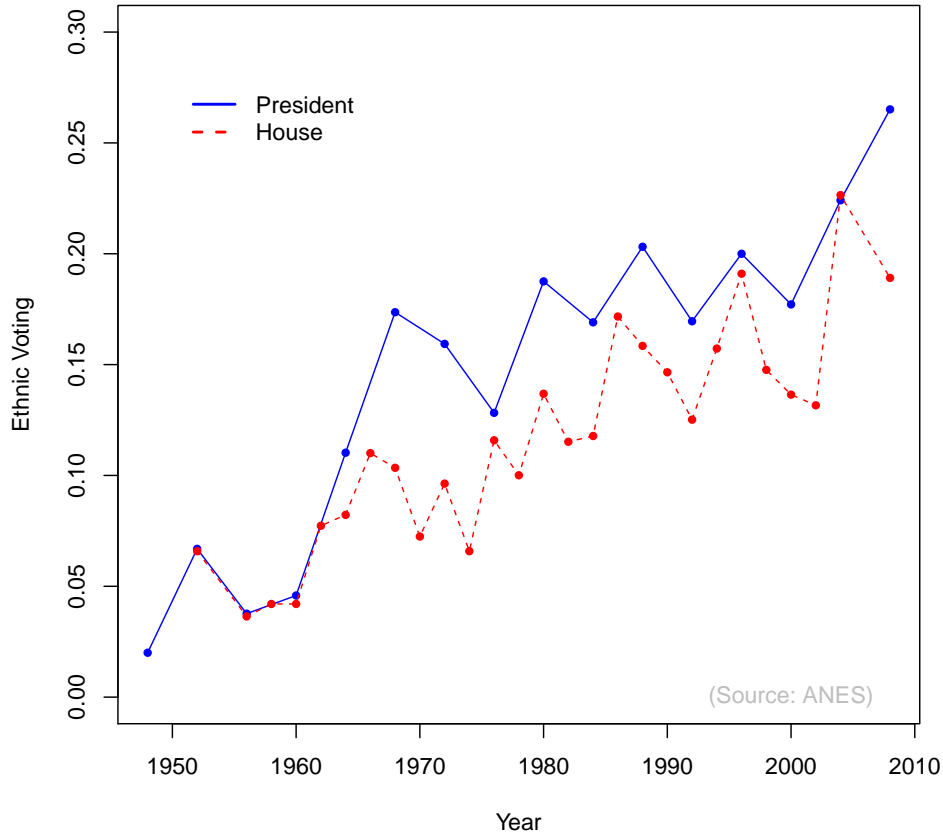
<sup>15</sup>Including group sizes is also the way to best fit the measure’s intuition of predicting votes based on identity described above.

<sup>16</sup>Ethnolinguistic fractionalization is Simpson’s Index of Diversity, a common measure of diversity that, like the weighting element of *EV*, measures the relative parity of groups in a population. It is calculated as the inverse of the sum of the squares of each group’s proportion in the electorate, or

$$ELF = \sum_{g=1}^N \frac{1}{s_g^2},$$

where  $S$  is the proportion in the population (electorate) of  $N$  groups  $g$ . This is the measure of diversity used by Fearon (2003) in his cross-national dataset of Ethnolinguistic Fractionalization (*ELF*). Using unweighted disproportionality for ethnic voting yields similar patterns.

Figure 1: *EV* in the U.S. National electoral politics have become more organized around group identity over time.



contributed to this increase as well, but these groups are smaller and less distinctive portions of the electorate, so their contribution to the overall score is much smaller.<sup>17</sup> Second, racial voting is generally higher in Presidential elections than in House elections, though the trendlines are basically parallel. Third, today’s national political alignment represents the highest levels of racial voting in modern history (though the 2006 House vote did have a higher *EV* score than the 2008 House).

This consistently strengthening association between identity and electoral choice seriously undermines the claim of a post-racial politics.

From an historical perspective, American voters are more racially divided than ever—

<sup>17</sup>A simple multivariate regression of each group’s contribution to the sum of *EV* (ie, the groups’ vote distribution weighted by size; results not presented here) indicate that overall, *EV* is unsurprisingly driven mainly by the distinctive African American bloc and large white population.

emphatically not post-racial. However, because interpretation of *EV* is clearest in comparison, it is not clear what it means for the US to go from a score of .05 in 1960 to .26 in 2008, other than to say it “increased.” To gain a better picture of how to think about the increasing ethnic division of American politics, a comparative view is helpful. Using a dataset derived from a range of survey instruments to measure *EV* around the world, we can see that levels of group voting in the U.S. are high by global standards. *EV* was designed for use in such comparisons, and its utility is in its flexibility: it is the best available measure for comparing electorates with different configurations of groups (Huber 2010). Figure 2 below compares the U.S. to other countries using data from recent election polls in those countries.<sup>18</sup> For the other countries, the definition of group is based on Fearon’s (2003) dataset listing the politically relevant ethnic groups in all nations and *EV* is calculated in the same manner as above; for the U.S., his dataset includes the four groups included in the calculation of *EV* above, making these cross-national measures as comparable as possible. As we can see from Figure 2, the United States has, over the past decade, been characterized by globally above-average levels of ethnic voting. This may be surprising, given the possibly greater potential for ethnic mobilization in countries with proportional representation or with more regional parties.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, group-based voting is higher in the U.S. than in any other high-income democracy except Belgium and Canada, countries whose politics are characterized by enduring movements for ethnicity-based secession or dissolution. Most of the other countries above the median of  $EV = .12$  are from Africa and have very high levels of diversity and multi-party systems, two factors which make higher *EV* scores more likely by construction.

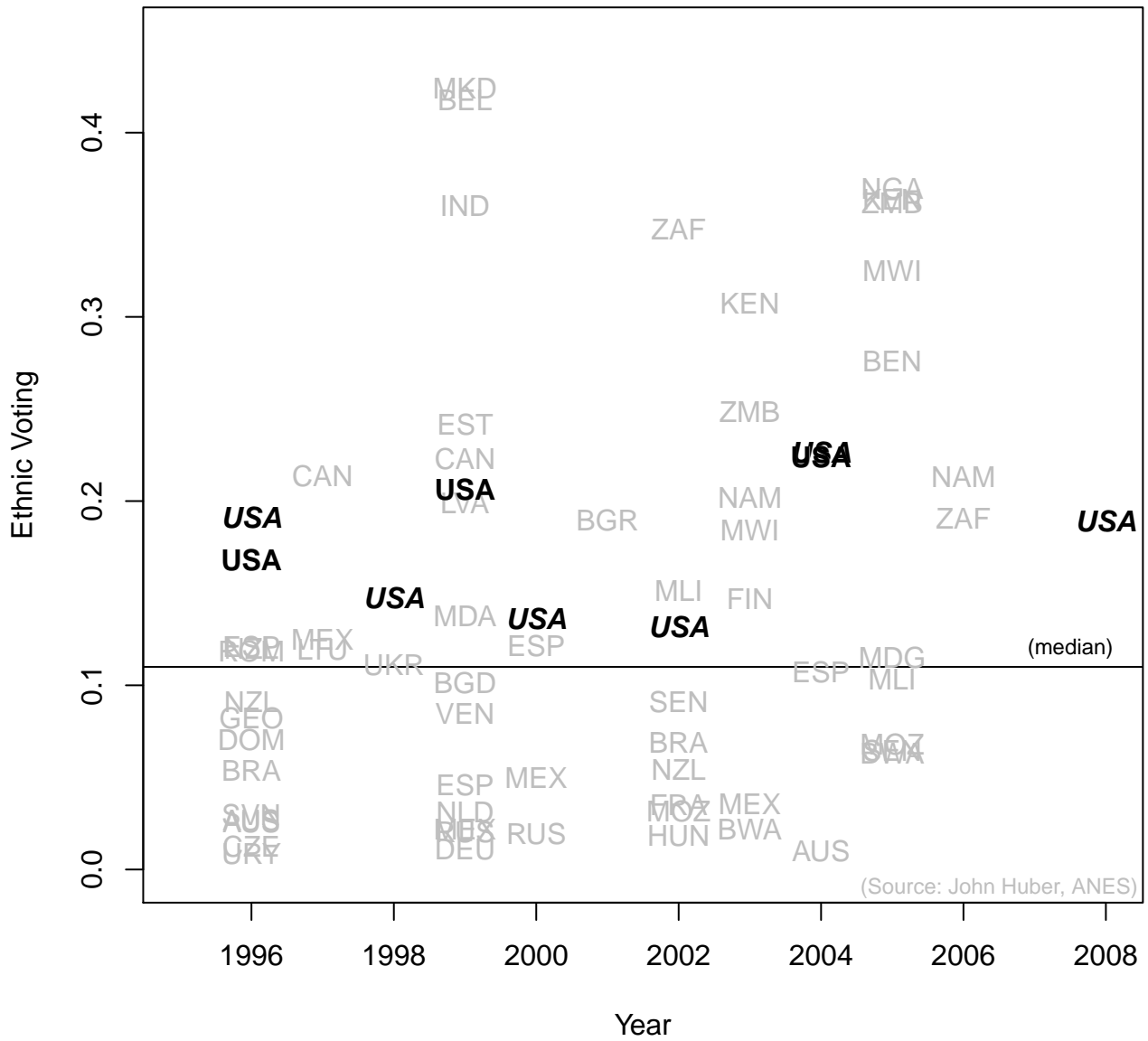
Ethnic voting has been on the rise in the United States over the past several decades, but is unclear how much of this is attributable to increases in diversity, and how much to increases in groups’ electoral distinctiveness. This caveat is important because electorates vary in their levels of diversity. Because *EV* incorporates relative group size, more diverse electorates are more likely, by

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<sup>18</sup>Data for other countries taken from Huber (2010), which incorporates data from Afrobarometer, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and World Values Survey (WVS) polls. These polls typically ask questions about legislative elections, so for comparability the U.S. scores included in Figure 2 are for congressional voting. Note that, from Figure 1, U.S. *EV* scores for Presidential voting are higher than they are for Congress. This is potentially an area for further study.

<sup>19</sup>But see Huber (2010), which finds that proportional representation is, perhaps surprisingly, associated with *lower* levels of *EV*.

Figure 2: **Group Voting in Comparative Perspective.** Points represent *EV* scores for that country in that year in legislative elections. Comparative data from John Huber's ethnic voting dataset. U.S. data from that dataset if in **simple bold** or from ANES if in **bold italics**. Note that the U.S. has had above-median levels of group-based voting in all recent elections.



construction, to have higher *EV* scores even if the groups are no more distinctive electorally. This caveat certainly applies to the United States over time; the 2008 electorate was much more diverse than the 1960 electorate, when nearly all voters were white.<sup>20</sup> To account for varying levels of diversity around the world and over time, *EV* can be regressed on *ELF* and we can evaluate which electorates are more or less structured by group identity than we would “expect,” given diversity (Huber 2010).

The figures below present the results of an analysis of *EV*, taking *ELF* into account.<sup>21</sup> First, from Figure 3, we can see that *EV* scores for the U.S. are consistently higher than “expected” based on levels of diversity. This figure plots *EV* against *ELF*, the measure of diversity, using data from Huber (2010). The diagonal line represents the linear relationship between the two variables (*ie* the expected level of *EV* for a given level of diversity). The vertical distance to the fit line indicates how much more or less voting is structured by ethnicity than we would expect based on a country’s level of politically relevant ethnolinguistic diversity.<sup>22</sup> As in Figure 3, the most appropriate comparison set is congressional elections. We can see that these are mostly on or above the line; a few early elections are below it. Presidential elections, however, are almost all well above the line, indicating that these elections that are particularly structured around descent-based group identities.

Given that the U.S. has globally high levels of group-based voting, examining how these levels have changed over time, even when accounting for the country’s increasing diversity, is the next step. If race were becoming less meaningful, we would expect the residuals to be negative for recent elections, particularly for the “post-racial” moment of Obama’s ascendancy. In fact, the reverse is largely true. Figure 4 plots *EV* against *ELF* for US elections, as measured by the ANES Cumulative datafile. Each point in the plot is an election in that year, with Presidential elections in

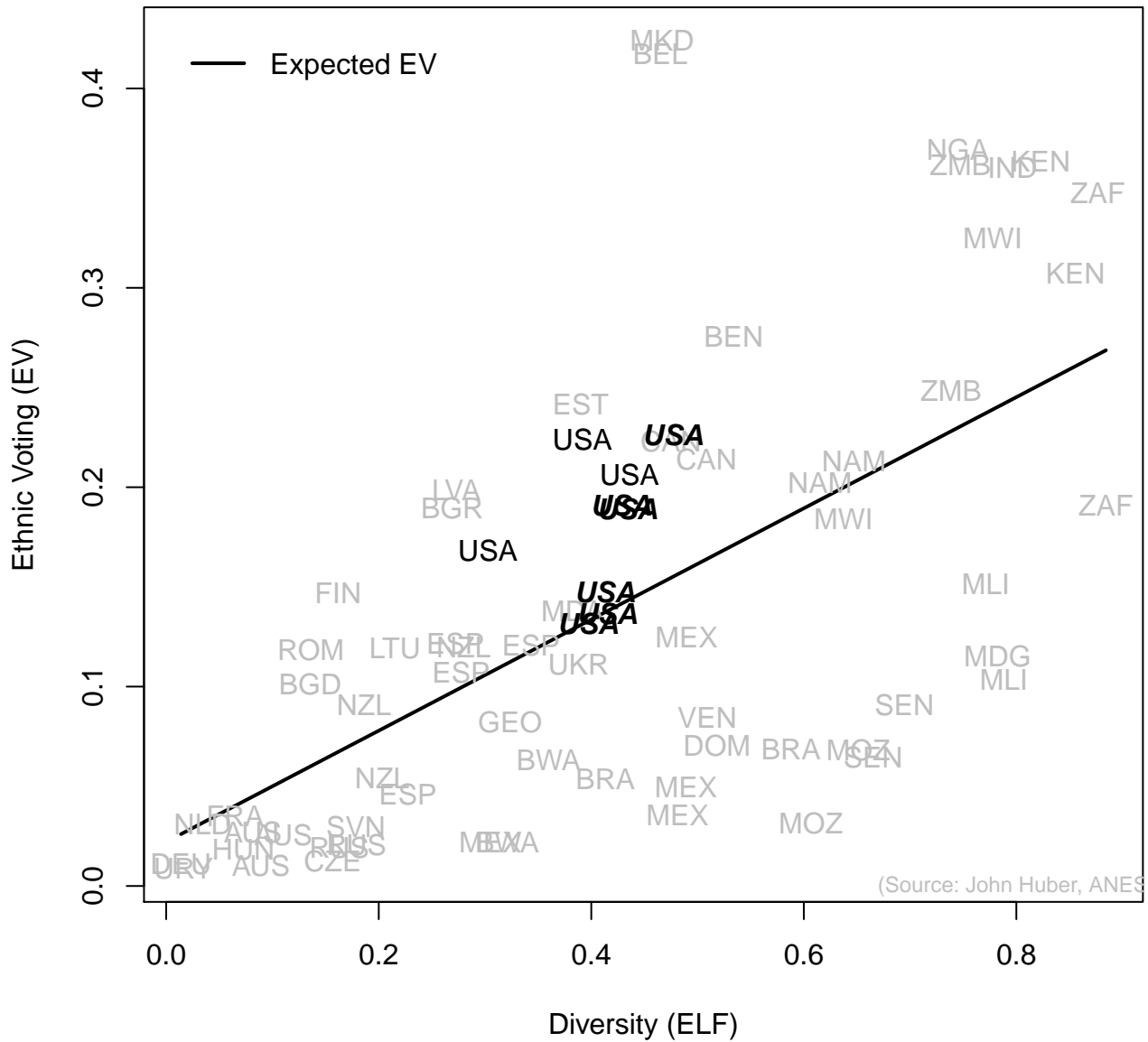
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<sup>20</sup>Again, in most contexts, this is not a problem for *EV* as understood above. Indeed, if we are measuring the importance of group identity in organizing voting, then if a group remains distinctive as it gets larger, then it is reasonable to argue that voting is more “group-based” in the case where the group is larger. Such a sustained distinctiveness may give us important information about mobilization of groups by elites (for instance, we might expect elites to make appeals to the growing group, and the group’s electoral split thus to become closer to “normal” over time as it became more electorally important).

<sup>21</sup>“*EVELF*,” the measure used in these figures, is the residual for each observation of an OLS regression of *EV* on *ELF*; *EV* and *ELF* are positively correlated at conventional levels of statistical significance ( $\pi.01$ ). Positive (negative) values of *EVELF* indicate that an electorate was more (less) organized around group ethnic identity than we would inductively “expect” given its level of diversity.

<sup>22</sup>“Relevant” groups for this cross-national analysis are identified by Fearon (2003). See Huber 2010 for details on this dataset.

Figure 3: *EV*, adjusted for *ELF*. Even when we allow for diversity, politics in the U.S. are still more organized around group identity than we would expect.





bold, and House elections italicized. There are three fit lines of expectation: a dotted line reflecting the global relationship between *EV* and *ELF*; a dashed line reflecting the relationship for U.S. House elections only; and the solid line for U.S. Presidential elections only.

From this plot, we can see three important trends: first, as expected, *ELF* has increased dramatically and fairly consistently over time.<sup>23</sup> Second, *EV* is more highly correlated with *ELF* in the US than it is globally. This means that analyzing the residuals of the US case, as presented in Figures 4 and 5, is an analytically conservative approach: by global standards, the U.S. is far from “post-racial,” but even if the 2008 election was structured more by ethnicity than we would expect based only on recent U.S. history, the claim of the “post-racial” politics would be deeply undermined.

This is what we see clearly from Figure 5, which plots *EVELF* for American presidential and congressional elections over time. Figure 5 is a rotation of the previous analysis, so values above the horizontal line at zero represent “more racial” elections, values below the line are less organized around racial groups.

The elections farthest below the line include the early elections and the Clinton-Gore years.<sup>24</sup> Starkly, there are three “most racial” elections. Not surprisingly, 1968 is the most racially divided, given the presence of third-party segregationist George Wallace in that race. But 2008’s voting was roughly as group-based (above the “expectation”) as Reagan’s first election in 1980, and much more than any other election. Far from being a transformative moment of racial harmony, Obama’s victory was a moment of deep ethnoracial electoral conflict, the likes of which we have not seen for decades. Similarly, the 2006 congressional election marked a high water mark of *EVELF* for congressional voting, supporting the notion that recent politics have been unusually organized around race.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>That is, points to the right are generally for later years, so *ELF* is highly correlated with time, but note that the 2000 electorate, perhaps because of historically low turnout, was actually less diverse than 1996, and 2008 was less diverse than 2004, at least among respondents to the ANES

<sup>24</sup>For the early years, the electorate is artificially homogeneous because African Americans were mostly prevented from voting in the Jim Crow South and because the categories of Asian American and Hispanic were not yet measured by the Census or ANES; in an analysis of post-Civil Rights and post-1970 elections not presented here, the substantive results of the regression-residuals analysis are much the same.

<sup>25</sup>Interestingly, the 2008 congressional election saw a decrease in group-voting (both *EV* and *EVELF*), perhaps because of the general unpopularity of Bush and the G.O.P. at the time. This, and the apparent difference in intercept between *EV* for House and Presidential elections, is an area for future analysis.

Figure 4: **EV vs. ELF, U.S. 1952-2008** Each point represents the *EV* score for a given election plotted against *ELF*, with Presidential elections in **bold** and House elections in *grey italics*. Points above (below) a given line are more (less) organized around ethnoracial identity than we would expect for that pool given levels of diversity. Note that almost all elections for each office are well above the global fit line, and the 2008 Presidential election is well above all three lines.

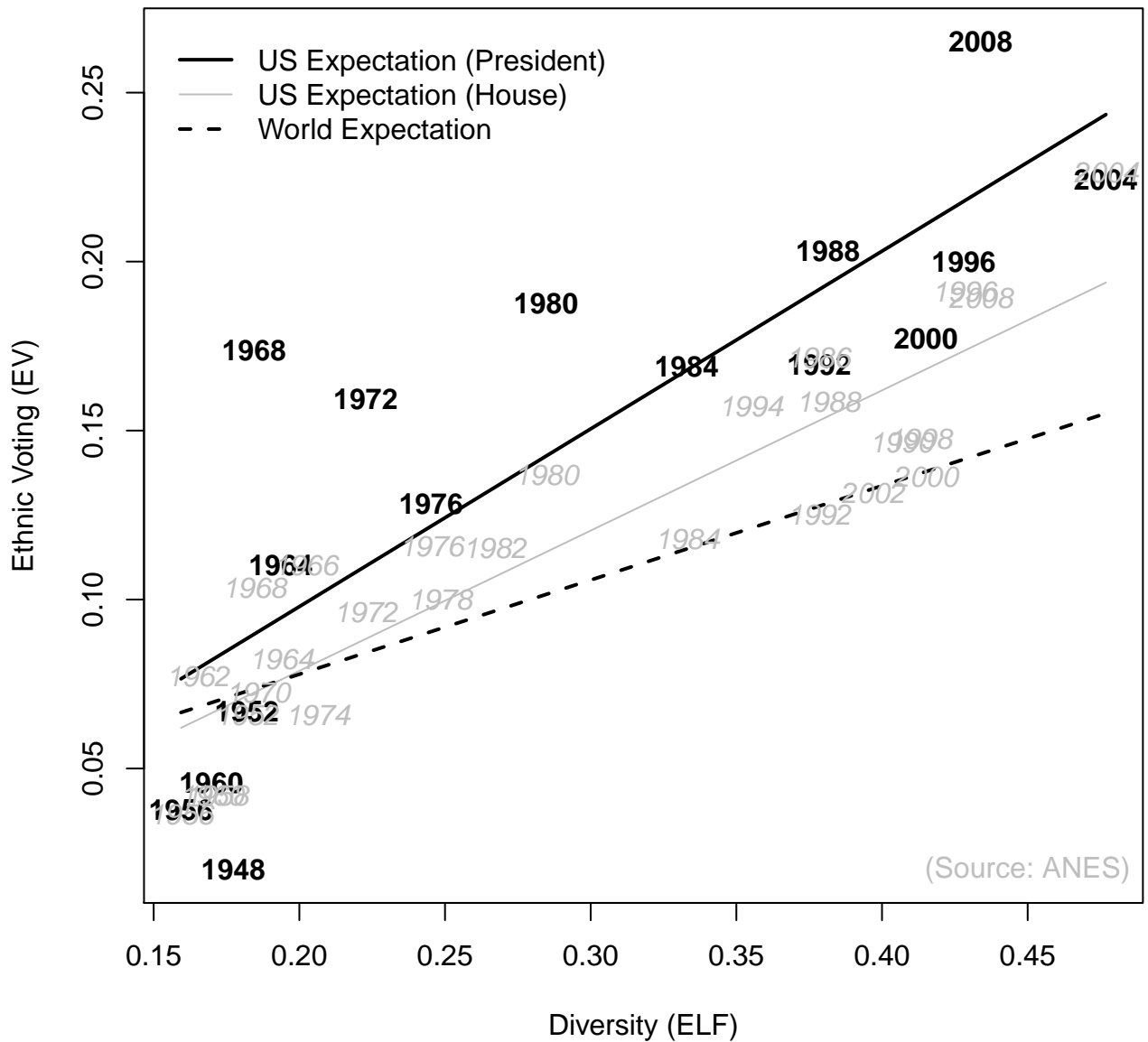
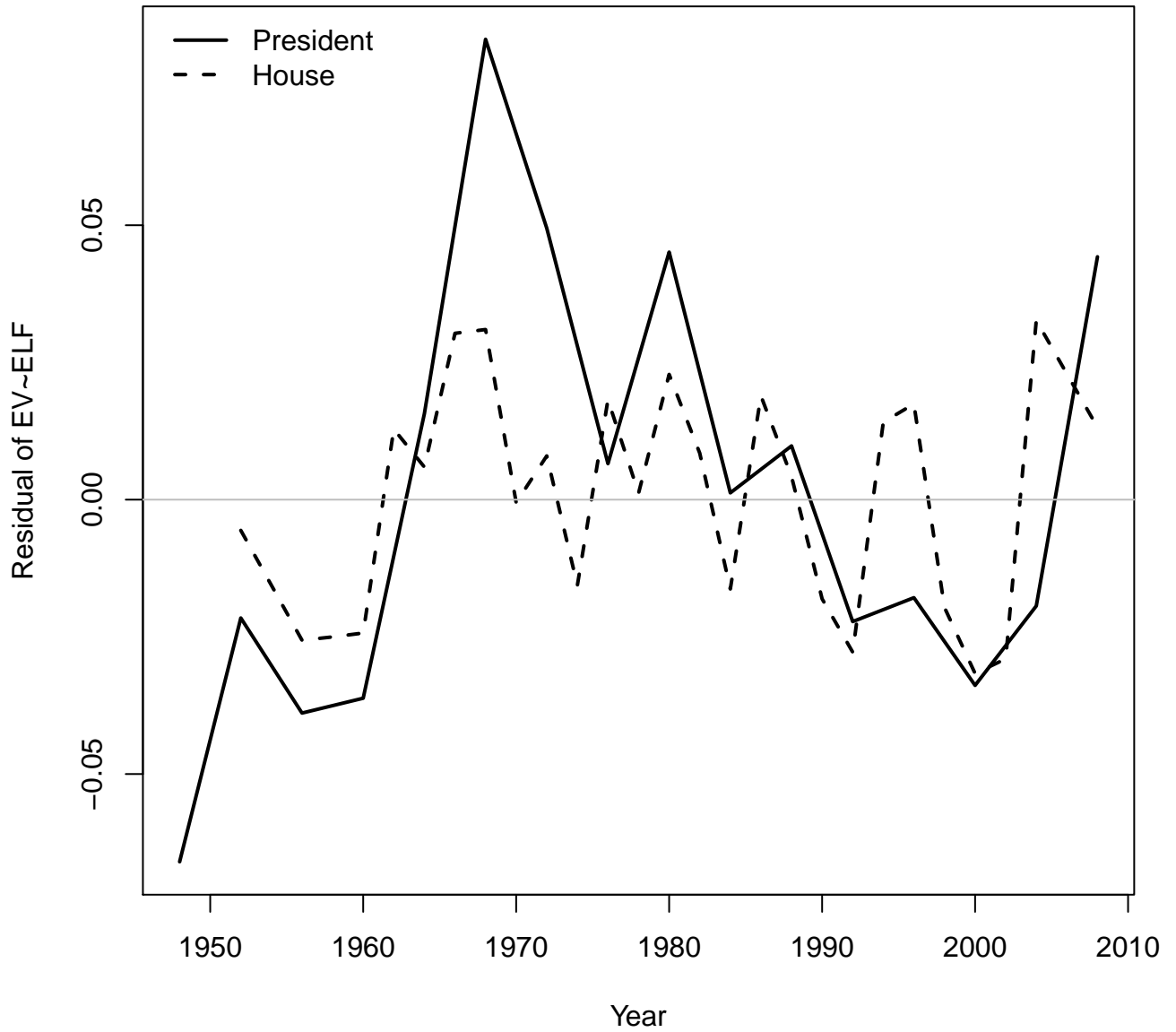


Figure 5: *EVELF* over time. Lines track the residuals of a regression of *EV* on *ELF* over time for each type of election. Positive (negative) values indicate that *EV* was higher (lower) than “expected,” based on the level of diversity of the electorate, in that election.



## 5 Inside *EV*: Diversity, Disproportionality, and Regions

From the section above, we can see two realities that undermine the post-racial narrative. First, American politics have become more organized around race over the years, and not all of this change can be accounted for by the increasingly diverse electorate. Even when we account for increasing diversity (an allowance which itself implies that it is somehow natural for groups to be distinctive in their electoral behavior) the 2008 election is in a class with 1968 and 1980 as the three most group-driven presidential elections on record. What is driving this increase in *EV* over the years, and what accounts for the particularly high level of ethnic voting in 2008?

In this section, I examine the components of *EV* to better understand the trend over time. The well-known solidarity of African Americans, the most distinctive voting bloc in the electorate, is an important factor, but white voters have also steadily moved away from the overall median. This point is illustrated in Figures 6a, 6b, and 6c, which illustrate the demographic shifts in the electorate and the extent to which each group is disproportionate—intuitively, the distance each group’s median diverges from the national median.<sup>26</sup>

(Figure 6 about here)

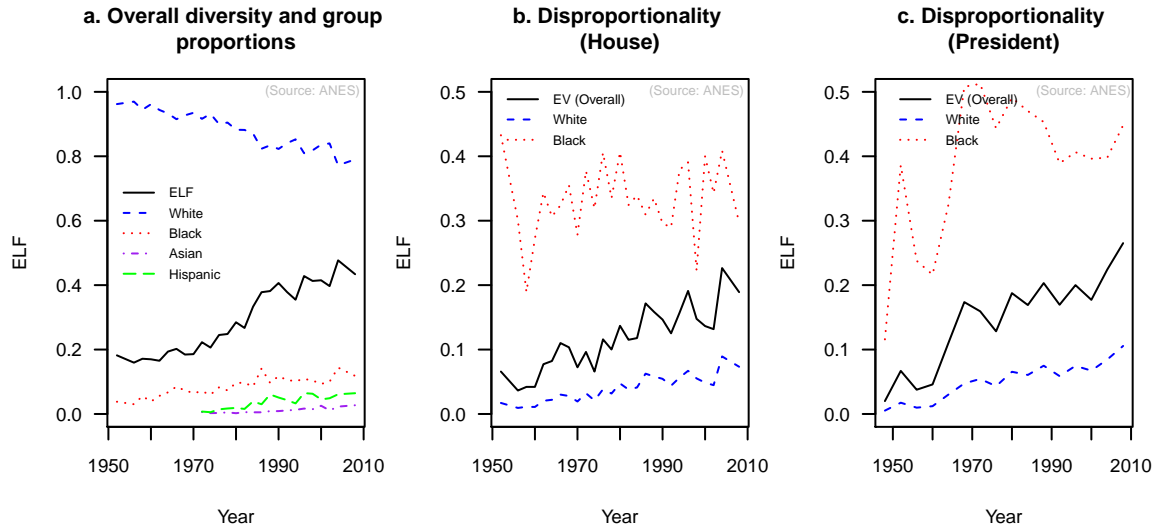
As we can see from these figures, as the electorate has become more diverse, groups have not converged on a single median. In fact, from 6b and 6c, we can see that African Americans have maintained a high level of distinctiveness, which began to erode over the 1980-2000 period but was renewed with African Americans’ extremely high level of support for Obama; the distinctiveness of Asian American and Latino voters varies across elections, but shows no trend; and the median white has moved ever further from the median American (though, because the median American is white, this group remains less distinctive overall than the others). The post-racial narrative seems to imply that groups would converge over time—that all medians would be closer together, and some other cleavage would decide elections. The data do not support this claim.

Finally, we can explore variation across regions of the U.S. to see where politics is most

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<sup>26</sup>Note that figures 6b and 6c illustrate only white and black disproportionality, for ease of visualization. Levels of disproportionality for Asian Americans and Latinos are between white and black, but fluctuate fairly wildly within that range over the time period. This is probably attributable to these groups’ small size in the ANES sample. Disproportionality levels for all groups are available in the online appendix.

Figure 6: **Voting Disproportionality by group.** Subfigure A illustrates the groups' proportions in the electorate over time, and the overall diversity of the electorate, as measured by *ELF*. Subfigures B and C illustrate unweighted group voting disproportionality for white voters and black voters in House and Presidential elections, respectively.



structured by race. There are no huge surprises here. Again using the ANES cumulative data, we can see that *EV* is consistently highest in the South, and consistently higher there than we would expect based on the region's level of diversity. High levels of *EV* in 2008 are not limited to the South, however: voting in other regions was also more group-based than we would expect in 2008, and overall levels of *EV* have continued to rise. In no region, it seems, are groups converging in their electoral choices.

Figure 7 depicts the historical regional trends in *EV* and *EVELF* (the residuals for the regression of *EV* on *ELF*, for each set of elections) for presidential and House voting. Figure 7a demonstrates the historical trends in *EV*, with a line for each region as categorized by the ANES; in all regions, *EV* rises over time.<sup>27</sup> The level in the South after 1968 is above the other regions, especially for presidential voting, but there are spikes in the other regions as well, especially in congressional races. Note that group-based voting in the Northeast—the heart of “Blue America”—is also very high for much of this time. Figures 7c and 7d depict the relationship between regional *EV* and regional *ELF*, which is unsurprisingly similar to, but noisier than, the relationship between national measures. Though there is some variation in ethnic voting levels among regions, from a

<sup>27</sup>State-level samples were too small for individual analysis. Regions in the ANES are the Northeast, South, Central, and West. In Figure 7 regional measures are marked by the appropriate letter symbol.

global perspective nearly all of the American levels are higher than we would expect, especially for Presidential voting (though perhaps this is driven by the office itself, since most of the international *EV* measures were based on parliamentary support).

(Figure 7 about here)

Figures 7e and 7f plot the residuals of the bivariate regression of *EV* on *ELF*, using the regional measures for each variable. The pattern that results is a broader version of that presented in Figure 5 above; again we see that 2008 was characterized by higher than expected levels of group voting, especially in the South for the Presidential race. Figure 7 also presents the interesting observation that the West is a diverse region where levels of group-based voting are unexpectedly low by American and even global standards, and getting lower over time (This is especially apparent in subfigures 7c, 7d, and 7f). Part of this may be driven by the fact that Western diversity is characterized less by the historically stark “white-black” polar divide than are other regions, and instead colored by a multiracial constellation of less distinctive blocs; this may be a bright spot in terms of racial politics, or it may be simply attributable to the population heft of California in the region, and that state’s leftward drift over time.

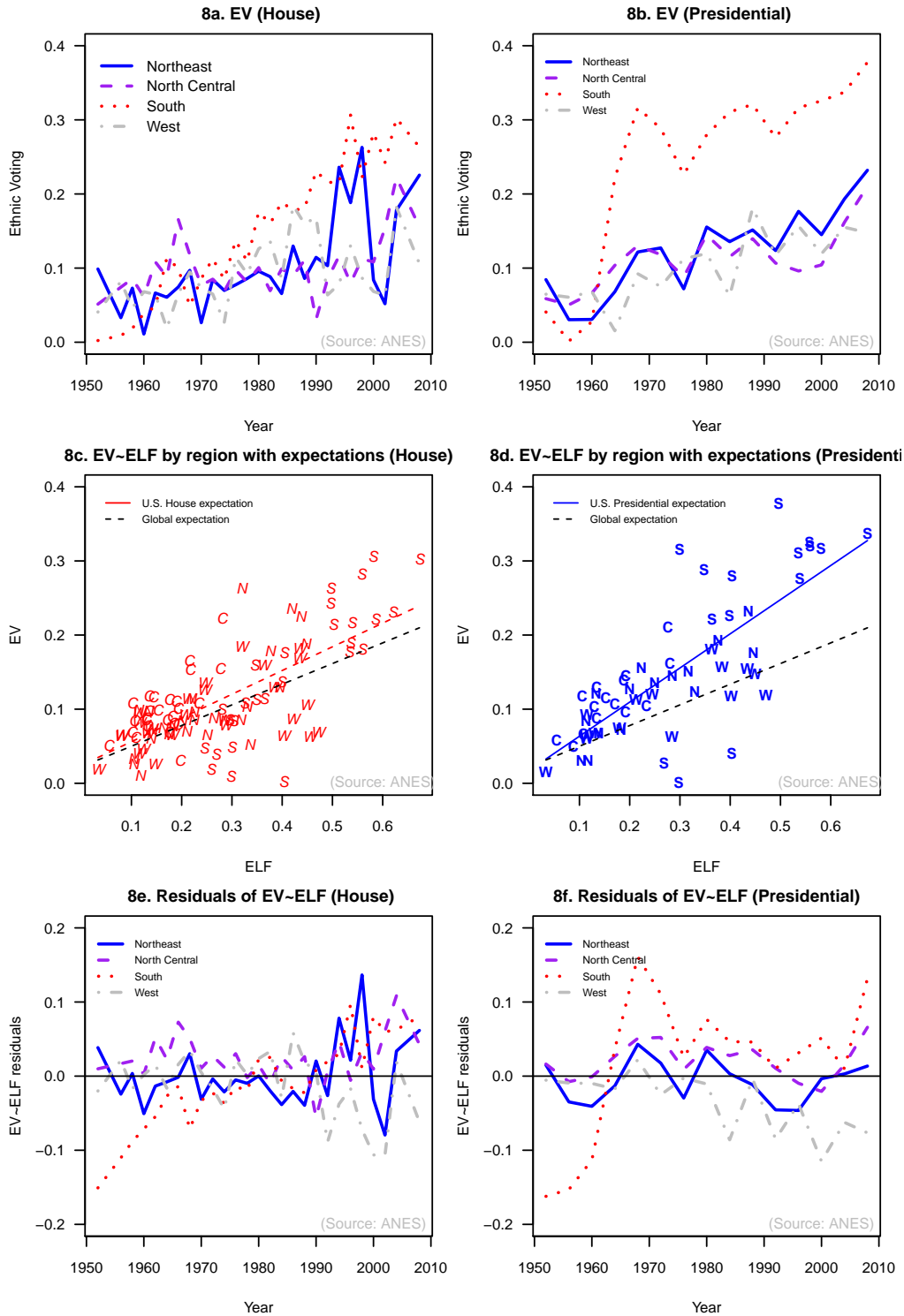
## 6 Discussion: Politics or Society?

The results above provide a clear corrective to the idea that the 2008 election was characterized by post-racial (or even less-racial) politics, by historical or global standards.

While it is true that Barack Obama was elected by a majority-white electorate, and even did slightly better than his Democratic predecessors among whites, this should be attributed to very strong support among the growing non-white population and especially to extremely high levels of mobilization among African Americans—not to markedly increased support from whites. To the contrary, despite the fact that Obama did better among whites than Kerry did, white voting *disproportionality* was higher than ever before (that is, whites were still *less* like the electorate as a whole); if race didn’t “matter,” Obama should have outrun Kerry among whites and the electorate as a whole by ten points, as he did among African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. Instead, the

Figure 7: **Regional EV and EVELF, 1950-2008.** The South has higher levels of EV than “expected”, but all regions except the West have seen recent increases and spikes in 2008, even accounting for growing diversity.

**Figure 8: Regional EV values and residuals**



Democratic share of the white vote increased only 2 percent, from 42 to 44.<sup>28</sup> All groups were less like the overall electorate in 2008 than in 2004.

This racial difference in shift toward the Democratic candidate from 2004-2008 might be interpreted as racially progressive in two normatively positive ways. First, it could be argued that the landmark significance of a nonwhite major-party nominee motivated those from all non-white groups to organize, mobilize, and choose that candidate as a sign of cross-group solidarity and support for Obama—albeit cross-group support among nonwhites only. This would be an indicator that certain kinds of political group difference (the differences between the three non-white groups) might be less important, but a more crystallized white-nonwhite divide is hardly a post-racial result. We would think of this kind of group-based similarity and exuberance more as positive solidarity than as negative “racial voting.” Given the legacies of race, African American support for an African American candidate is not conceptually equivalent, in a normative sense, to white opposition to that candidate or to white support for a white candidate. Second, Obama did do slightly better than his predecessor, so it just be a enough that support for the Democrat did not *decrease* for the first nonwhite nominee. Again, under the logic of retrospection above, however, this may be setting the bar for post-racial politics a little low. These two observations should lead to caution in interpreting the high level of *EV* and *EVELF* in 2008: while differences across groups were high, Obama-McCain was not Nixon-McGovern-Wallace.

Regionally, group voting division was highest in the South, but race plays more of a role in every region than ever before. Even when we account for the increased diversity of the electorate (an accounting that makes the implicit assumption that it is somehow “natural” for groups, as they grow, to maintain their initial distribution of partisan support, rather than develop to look more like the electorate as a whole), the level of group voting is more than we would expect by any standard. Finally, an observer from abroad would almost certainly argue against the post-racial thesis in American politics, *contra* the optimism of Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal half a century ago. Relevant social groups are more electorally divided in the U.S. than they are in most other countries, especially rich democracies. By both historical and comparative standards, the 2008 election was a moment of particularly stark racial division, not of post-racial cooperation.

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<sup>28</sup>In a post-racial world, we might expect this bump from Kerry to Obama to be largely due to negative retrospective evaluations of the outgoing Republican administration’s policies and performance, and we would expect the Democratic increase from 2004 to 2008 to be fairly even across groups.



Less clear than the description is the underlying driver of America’s increasingly racialized electoral coalitions. Strong conclusions about the ultimate cause of group-based voting in the U.S. are beyond the scope of this paper, and more fine-grained analytical tools are better suited to that task, but some speculation based on previous theories is possible. One obvious candidate is class: it is well-known that minorities in the U.S., especially African Americans and Latinos, are typically less affluent than whites. If nonwhites increasingly constitute a growing, separating socioeconomic subaltern, then a large part of increasing racial voting may really just be class voting, with another identity layered on top. It has also been observed that class voting is alive and well in American politics, even in the face of alleged “culture wars” (McCarty et al 2006, Bartels 2008, Gelman 2009). One way to examine the class-race-voting link is to see whether group-based inequality has generally been on the rise in the past half century, along with group-based voting; if between-group income inequality has grown over the past few decades, this would provide some preliminary evidence for the class-race-voting link. This is indeed the case. Table 1 shows between-group inequality (BGI) in household income over time in the U.S., which has actually increased since the 1970s after declining slightly during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

Table 1: **Between-Group Inequality in the United States, 1970-2008.**

Year	BGI(Population)
1950	.056
1960	.0485
1970	.0459
1980	.0509
1990	.0566
2000	.0709
2008	.0733

The electorate has become structured by group identity as aggregate income differences across groups have grown as well, and this fairly steady secular trend since the 1970s may explain much of the growth in EV, especially why groups have remained so distinctive in their voting patterns over time. However, it is likely that other factors are important as well, and these may impact

<sup>29</sup>Author’s calculation. BGI here is generated using individual-level sampled Census data from USA-IPUMS, and the “Ginidesc” package in Stata (Roger and Silvia 1999). The four groups included in this calculation are the same as those used in the *EV* and *ELF* calculations above.

which elections have higher levels of ethnic conflict than we would expect given levels of diversity (ie, variation in *EVELF*). In particular, the three elections with very high levels of *EVELF* fit well into a story about racial resentment as a causal factor in voters' minds: racial resentment as a concept is largely constructed to identify and measure the presence of racial political attitudes embedded within ostensibly race-neutral concepts, appeals, and language used by Nixon and Reagan to peel off Southern whites from the Democratic presidential coalition. Though there are no measures of racial resentment or symbolic racism from those earlier eras, Sears and Tesler (2011) find that racial resentment played more of a role in determining vote choice in 2008 than ever before—a finding consistent with the analyses above and against the notion that 2008 was anything close to a post-racial event. We should not be surprised by this, given that Obama was the first non-white nominee by a major party; in analogous circumstances, heightened racial political conflict has been the norm, regardless of the ultimate outcome of the election (Hajnal 2007).

## 7 Conclusion

What does it mean for American politics that voting in the 2008 “post-racial” moment was, more than ever and even more than we would expect given the increasingly diverse electorate, organized around group identity? American racial politics has a long, divisive—and at times bloody—history, and scholars certainly agree that “race matters” in American politics. The election of Barack Obama as our first African American president seems a signal moment in racial progress: a cross-racial coalition of liberals elected a progressive chief executive, and his coattails helped bring in huge Democratic majorities on Capitol Hill. The triumphalism about the end of race, however, was certainly overblown. Racial undertones (and overtones, too) have characterized the emergence of the far-right tea party movement over the past two years, and the polarized discourse of the age may reflect the heightened feelings of conservative white Americans seeking to take the country “back” in the same way that Bernie Epton once urged Chicagoans to defeat Harold Washington before it was “too late.”

Similarly, we would be too optimistic to believe that deep social and economic inequalities would immediately evaporate with the election of an African American President. Those discursive and social markers of the continuing significance of race have been identified clearly by analysts

seeking to temper the excitement about the Age of Obama.

However, a more basic observation has generally been lacking: that the election of Obama itself was not actually a triumph of post-racial politics. The conclusion that the racial politics of 2008 should be classified as either the “most racial” Presidential election or as a member of a small set of particularly racialized elections (with 1980 and 1968) should certainly give us pause in asserting platitudes about the diminishing significance of race in electoral politics. Rather, 2008 represented the continuation of a long trend toward a *more* racial politics, as measured by the identities of those who line up in opposing political coalitions. The precise factors that have contributed to this long trend are surely nuanced and multiple, and they are of uneven desirability from a normative perspective: the Voting Rights Act, immigration, the uneven incorporation and mobilization of nonwhite voters (mostly by Democrats), sustained and increasing between-group socioeconomic inequality, the migration of whites to the G.O.P., appeals by elites to racialized identities and attitudes, and so on.

These alignments may or may not reflect conscious racism by voters or strategic appeals to our lesser angels by elites, but they reflect and magnify the importance of race regardless. As politics remains divided along ethnic lines, the ideological polarization of recent years is likely to be exacerbated as ideology becomes increasingly intertwined with political and more dearly held ethnic identities. The interplay between group politics and individual opinions is reciprocal. The flight to the Republicans among white Americans has so far kept pace with the growing diversity of the country as a whole.<sup>30</sup> This interplay of groups and parties echoes the political development of cities across America just a generation ago, as newcomers arrive and whites exit. In some of those cities, there was a reorganization of racial politics, and a return to white-led rule. Others saw the accommodation of the new social reality and the creation of durable cross-racial coalitions capable of governing despite the challenges of race. Still others saw a virtual abandonment of the city by whites (along with their relative affluence). Exit is less of an option at the national level, of course, and the development of national politics remains to be written. At that level, however, we are not in the post-racial age—today’s politics are the most racial they have been in decades.

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<sup>30</sup>Though the relatively strong support for Obama among younger white voters may be a sign of a possible weakening of this trend.

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