1

SOCIAL GROUPS AND THE VOTE

> A man with a ballot in his hand is the master of the situation. He defines all his other rights. What is not already given him, he takes. The ballot is opportunity, education, fair play, right to office, and elbow room.
> —Wendell Phillips, abolitionist

We are primarily interested in understanding one thing in particular: the role of race in the 2008 American presidential election. But we start by putting forward a general framework that enables us to make instructive comparisons to social cleavages other than race and to times and places other than the contemporary United States.

We begin by defining two basic terms: politics and groups. Next, we argue that groups become relevant to politics insofar as they are sites of persistent inequality, and we document the fact that race in the United States fulfills this condition all too well. With these points established, we turn in the heart of the chapter to a theory of voter choice. The theory advances two principal claims: First, social groups enter the voter's decision either through identification with the in-group (for example, solidarity among African Americans) or through attitude toward out-groups (for example, racial resentment among white Americans). Second, the aspects of group identity and group attitude that become important in voters' choices—which aspects are *activated*—depend on political circumstances.

Phillips is quoted in Gillette (1979, p. 23).

Politics

Politics, according to Charles Lindblom, is a process whereby "people who want authority struggle to get it while others try to control those who hold it." It is authority, Lindblom says, that provides the "bedrock on which government is erected."[1]

Over the long sweep of human history, the struggle over authority has often been chaotic and bloody, won more frequently by force than by reason. The constitutional movement in the West was an attempt, in Lindblom's estimation, to convert the deadly struggle for authority into more peaceful and orderly procedures. New forms of participation in politics were invented. Grain seizures, collective invasions of forbidden fields and forests, attacks on machines, sacking of private houses, and turnouts were once the established forms of contention. With the development of capitalism and the rise of the nation-state, however, "the interests and organizations of ordinary people shifted away from local affairs and powerful patrons to national affairs and major concentrations of power and capital" (Tilly 1986, p. 395). A new repertoire of collective action began to take shape. No longer so parochial in scope, forms of contention were now addressed to national authorities. No longer so dependent on patrons, collective action was now autonomous and versatile. In place of the grain seizure and the sacking of private homes came the demonstration, the strike, the social movement, and most notably the election campaign. In modern liberal democratic societies like the United States, authority is won primarily through elections.[2]

Indeed, in the United States, elections are widely regarded as *the* democratic moment: elections as the linchpin of the democratic machine and voting as "the central act of democracy" (Riker 1982, p. 5). In theory at least, elections are the "critical technique," as Robert Dahl once put it, for motivating leaders to be responsive to the aspirations and interests of the voters.

Do American elections actually work this way? By and large, they do. The two major parties differ on important matters, and when one party wins, it generally pursues policies broadly consistent with the interests and preferences of its core constituents: on taxes, unemployment, inflation, foreign affairs, the size and scope of government in general, and not least, race.[3]

Of course, American elections have their share of problems. For one thing, they are blunt instruments of influence: insofar as elections shape policy, they do so partially and often retrospectively, sometimes well after the damage has been done. Moreover, voters are to some degree captive of the campaigns they are presented, which rarely meet the standards set by those who place sober deliberation and thoughtful discussion at the center of democratic politics. Nevertheless, elections do perform an instrumental function, if imperfectly. By taking part in elections, American voters can register their pleasure or displeasure with the governing party and return or replace leaders accordingly, thereby setting in motion alterations in government policy.

Policy is at stake in elections, but so too are pride and recognition. This is one clear lesson to be taken from the African Americans' long struggle for the vote. White Americans resisted extending the franchise to blacks so fiercely and blacks demanded the vote so steadfastly not just because the vote would give blacks the power to protect their interests and have some say on matters of policy, but also because the right to vote was understood on both sides of the color line to convey symbolic authority, a special kind of democratic recognition.

To whites, the exclusive right to vote was a public and prominent sign of superiority, not to be easily relinquished. According to Gunnar Myrdal (1944):

> Already in the ante-bellum elections, political campaigning and voting had acquired a ceremonial significance as marking off a distinct sphere of power and responsibility for the free citizen. From Reconstruction on, voting remained to the white Southerner more than a mere action: it was, and still is, a symbol of superiority. Partly because it is a public activity and does not lend itself to privacy or segregation, it becomes so hard for the white Southerner to admit the Negro to full participation in it.

To African Americans, the symbolic weight attached to being denied the vote was no less. Frederick Douglass argued that emancipation was not real, that slavery was not abolished, until African Americans had the ballot: "Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If

nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation. By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form intelligent judgments respecting public measures" (Foner 1955, pp. 159–160).

When individuals are denied the vote, they feel scorned and dishonored; with it, they are invested with democratic responsibility and dignity. From this perspective, participation in elections is "an affirmation of belonging."[4]

Much more could be said about voters and elections. Some of it we say in subsequent chapters, as our analysis requires. For now, we are satisfied if we have established two basic points: First, politics is a struggle for authority, and in democratic systems, that struggle is carried out importantly through elections. Second, elections can deliver or withhold two kinds of prizes: the instrumental prize of policy and the expressive prize of recognition.

Social Group

Any aggregation of individuals can be a group, if the aggregation is experienced as such. Women, college professors, the neighborhood bridge club: all "are groups in so far as they are social categories or regions in an individual's social outlook—objects of opinions, attitudes, affect, and striving." Groups do not require institutional sponsors, formal membership, or face-to-face interaction—though they might have all three. Any collection of people that constitutes a psychological entity for any individual becomes, thereby, a group.[5]

Defined this way, groups can be enormous (women) or tiny (the neighborhood bridge club). Because of our preoccupation with politics on a national scale, we are naturally drawn much more to the former than the latter. (We attach the modifier "social" to "group" to convey our special interest in groups of substantial size.) When the national government and the resources it commands become the objects of politics, then group attachments and oppositions based in particularistic features, like kin or local community, are subordinated to attachments rooted in broader groupings, such as race, gender, and religion (Posner 2004).

This may seem straightforward, but from one perspective at least, it is quite puzzling. Broad social groups—blacks and whites, men and

women—are invisible. That is, such groups are, as Solomon Asch once put it, "too large to be perceived at once" (1952, p. 227). Yet we experience them as familiar, real, and whole, and the puzzle is why.

Donald Campbell's (1958) ingenious analysis of perceiving aggregates of individuals as social entities provides a solution. Conceding that social groups are not as solid as material objects and their boundaries are less clear, Campbell argues that we nevertheless see them in the same way we see material objects. Perceptual principles "are equally applicable to stones and social groups" (Campbell 1958, p. 18).[6]

Campbell offers four principles from research on human perception that govern when discrete elements (individuals) are perceived as parts of a whole organization (group), and Robert Abelson has more recently added a fifth:[7]

1. *Similarity:* Similar elements are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization. Similarity—grouping by common features—is a necessary condition for group perception.
2. *Proximity:* Elements close together are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization.
3. *Common Fate:* Elements that move together in the same direction and otherwise share a "common fate" are more likely to be perceived as parts of the same organization. Insofar as outcomes and opportunities are shared across many occasions, to that degree, individuals will tend to be seen as constituting a single group.
4. *Good Figure (Pregnance):* Elements forming a part of a spatial pattern tend to be perceived as part of the same unit. This principle is relevant to the specification of boundaries. Good figures "resist" intrusion; they are "opaque" to probing and their boundaries are relatively impermeable.
5. *Coordinated Action:* Abelson points out that often in political discussions, "ethnic groups and nations are treated as if they are active organisms with hopes, plans, intentions, grievances, moods, and the like: The Palestinians yearn for a homeland, the Serbs have a deep-seated animus against the Muslims, the Christian fundamentalists are expanding their power base in the Republican Party, and so forth" (Abelson et al. 1998, p. 248). Aggregates of individuals are more likely to be taken as a group when they are seen to carry out coordinated action to achieve common objectives.

In sum, we are prone to see aggregation of individuals as members of groups when they display the perceptual properties of similarity, proximity, common fate, good figure, and coordinated action.[8]

Notice that racial groups fulfill these criteria well. Members of racial groups share some conspicuous features: the "physical insignia" of skin color, hair texture, facial features, accent and cadence of speech, and so forth. Thanks in part to the stubborn persistence of segregation, they often find themselves isolated, in close proximity only to one another. They share a common fate: to some degree, they are treated alike, suffering injury and insult or opportunity and honor not because of who they are as individuals, but because of the racial group they happen to represent. They display boundary maintenance, as expressed in strong (if slowly declining) preferences for within-group marriage. And finally, members of racial groups also display signs of coordinated action; to this degree, they are seen not only as social entities but also as political ones, with collective aspirations and common interests.

Categorical Inequality

In the United States, as in other advanced industrial societies, individuals vary tremendously in wealth, power, and status. Inequality is generated in part by individual differences in talent and enterprise; by luck, good and bad; and, most relevant to our purpose here, by recurrent social processes whereby different social groups are subject to systematically different treatment.

Some form of inequality accompanies virtually all social interactions. Most of the time, such inequality is fleeting. Durable inequality generated by recurrent social processes is a different matter. In Charles Tilly's (1998) analysis, differences in advantage that pivot on categorical opposites—black versus white, Muslim versus Jew, male versus female, citizen versus foreigner—are especially likely to endure. According to Tilly, "paired and unequal categories do crucial organizational work, producing marked, durable differences in access to valued resources. Durable inequality depends heavily on the institutionalization of categorical pairs" (1998, p. 8).

In Tilly's scheme, systems of enduring categorical inequality are established by two general processes. The first of these is *exploitation,* whereby

members of a categorically bounded network command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns, accomplished by coordinating the efforts of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by their effort. Over all of recorded history, "both mighty emperors and petty tyrants have organized exploitation around categorical distinctions" (1998, p. 88).

Complementing exploitation is a second mechanism, *opportunity hoarding,* whereby members of a categorically bounded network gain control over a valued resource from which outsiders are excluded. Depending on time and place, hoarding might refer to territory, education, financial capital, instruments of coercion, employment, or any other valued resource.

Once established, categorical inequality is generalized by a process of *emulation,* whereby existing inequalities are transplanted from one setting to another. This can take place when exterior categorical differences are matched to internal categorical differences—as in labor markets, when a firm assigns high-paying jobs that promise advancement to one group (say, whites) and low-paying, dead-end jobs to another group (say, blacks). Other firms follow suit. Eventually, the practice generates pools of workers with different experiences and capabilities defined along group lines. Firms hire and promote accordingly. The result is categorical inequality entrenched within an entire industry.[9]

According to Tilly, inequality is locked into place through *adaptation,* whereby daily routines are organized around categorical distinctions. One variety is the invention of norms governing day-to-day interaction between members of categorically unequal groups, as in the extensive and intricate system of deference that grew up in the Jim Crow South. Racial "etiquette" guided every detail of every encounter—forms of address, topics of conversation, appropriate demeanor, and more—thereby providing blacks and whites a regular reminder of the unbridgeable gulf that separated them.[10]

As categorical inequality spreads, members of advantaged groups begin to create what Elizabeth Anderson calls "stigmatizing stories." Their purpose is to explain and rationalize inequality. Glaring differences between groups in wealth, power, and status reflect corresponding differences between groups in talent or virtue or culture.

By and large, such stories do not cause inequality. Recurrent social processes do. Exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation

are the engines of inequality. Stories are important, however, because they justify and fortify inequality organized around categorical opposites.[11]

Race as Categorical Inequality

A grotesque example of categorical inequality is supplied by slavery. Beginning in the early part of the seventeenth century, West Africans were taken forcibly from their homelands, put in chains, and shipped under nightmarish conditions across the ocean to the American South, there to provide cheap labor for the burgeoning plantation economy. By the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790, African Americans—nearly all slaves—made up roughly 20 percent of the national population and more than one-third of the population of the South. Slavery, imposed and maintained by violence, was at the center of the new American economic order.[12]

Today, of course, slavery is gone; the Jim Crow regime of racial oppression that followed emancipation has been dismantled, and discrimination on account of race is now illegal. All of this is true, and all of it is important. As far as race is concerned, the United States is a far more egalitarian society than it once was. Does this mean that race and disadvantage are no longer connected? No. Evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

African Americans have made significant inroads into the middle class over the last sixty years, sharing in the economic prosperity that came to all of American society following World War II. However, racial differences remain and they are imposing. One-third of the black children in the United States live in poverty, more than three times the rate of white children, and black children are much more likely to experience continuous and persistent poverty. Among adults, blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed; they are substantially overrepresented among "discouraged workers," those who have given up looking for work and therefore do not appear in official unemployment figures; and when blacks are employed, they earn less. These differences are large, but they are nothing compared to racial differences in wealth. According to recent figures, the average white household commands more than *ten* times the financial assets of the average black household.[13]

Racial differences in fundamental aspects of health have proven stubborn as well. Infant mortality provides a disturbing case in point. While black women who bear children today are much less likely to lose an in-

fant than were their parents and grandparents before them, the mortality rate remains more than twice as high for blacks than for whites. Black children who survive their first year can expect poorer health, more illness—asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer—and, on average, a shorter life.[14]

Discrimination by race has been illegal since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and surely it is neither as flagrant nor as pervasive today as it once was. But it is not gone. Scores of careful studies make clear that African Americans still face discrimination in labor markets. Black people looking to purchase homes are still steered away from white neighborhoods and are still subject to racial bias in mortgage lending. African Americans continue to endure racist epithets on the streets; harassment by police officers in public spaces; rudeness, excessive surveillance, and higher prices while they shop; coolness from their teachers and bosses; and racist jokes from their coworkers. While whites tend to believe that discrimination is a problem of the past, many blacks see it as pervasive in society and a demoralizing presence in their own lives.[15]

What about inequality in politics? In the early years of the twentieth century, white-dominated legislatures and constitutional conventions throughout the South enacted an assortment of devices designed to banish blacks from political life. These included the poll tax, literacy and property tests, the understanding clause, the good character clause, and not least, the white primary. Blacks initiated legal action, held meetings, organized election campaigns, petitioned constitutional conventions bent on rescinding their suffrage, and where permitted, voted against the new suffrage restrictions. But their efforts were unavailing. Disfranchisement proceeded apace. Blacks disappeared from politics.[16]

All these formal obstacles to black participation are gone now, swept away by scores of local struggles, Supreme Court decisions, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the threat of federal intervention. Black participation in political life towers over what it was a generation or two ago. As a consequence, many blacks now hold positions of political authority.[17]

Progress on this front has been dramatic. In 1965, the year of the Voting Rights Act, just four of the 435 elected officials serving in the U.S. House of Representatives were black. Not a single African American served in the Senate; only three were mayors of American cities. In the entire coun-

try, fewer than three hundred blacks held elected office, most as members of school boards or city councils. Within a decade, the number of blacks holding elective office across the nation increased more than tenfold. The upward trend continued through the 1970s, but now is leveling off—and leveling off well below strict proportionality. While African Americans make up roughly 13 percent of the voting-age population in the United States, they comprise less than 2 percent of elected officials. Blacks have made impressive gains in politics—illustrated in a most dramatic way by Barack Obama's historic victory in the 2008 presidential election—but they remain, as a general rule, substantially underrepresented in the corridors of power.[18]

Taken all around, the quality of life experienced by black Americans has improved notably since World War II. However, over the same period, racial differences in the quality of life have persisted. Some differences between blacks and whites have diminished, others have increased, and still others have changed not one iota. All in all, race in the United States continues to provide a compelling case of enduring inequality.

Voting and the Social Group

Our purpose here is to offer a general framework for analyzing and understanding how social difference shapes politics—what might be called "A Theory of Voting with Social Groups in Mind." (The language is extravagant, but it does convey what we are up to.) The theory is intended to apply to the case of race and Obama in 2008, of course, but it should prove useful in understanding social groups other than race and political moments other than 2008.

First Premise: Politics Is a Sideshow

In a series of influential essays written in the aftermath of World War I, Walter Lippmann, perhaps the most prominent public intellectual of the day, argued that the typical citizen—parochial in interest, modest in intellect, and most of all preoccupied with private affairs—lacks the wherewithal to grasp political matters in any deep way. People are busy; politics is complicated. To expect ordinary people to become absorbed in the

affairs of government would be to demand of them an appetite for political knowledge quite peculiar, if not actually pathological.

Lippmann was right. Family, work, and health are central preoccupations. In the meantime, for nearly all of us almost all the time, the events of political life remain peripheral curiosities. In modern societies like the United States, "politics is a sideshow in the great circus of life."[19]

If this is so, citizens may well wonder why they should take the trouble to become informed about public affairs. Indeed, many do not. On matters of politics, Americans are often astonishingly ignorant. This fact places a premium, from the voter's point of view, on cues that are readily at hand and rich in information. Cues like these: Barack Obama is black, John Kennedy is Catholic, Hillary Clinton is a woman.[20]

Second Premise: Social Motivation

On those occasions when voters do turn their attention to politics, they are motivated in part by social concerns. In "Rational Fools," presented as a rebuke to his fellow economists, Amartya Sen argued that a person propelled entirely by calculations of self-interest would be "close to a social moron" (1977, p. 336). With Sen, we assume that people are not social morons, that they are motivated by more than sheer egoism. They act not only on their own behalf, but for and against social groups as well. Human nature includes a social aspect, and this is expressed in all domains of life, including the political.[21]

Social motivation is underpinned by ethnocentrism, a deep human predisposition to divide the social world into in-groups and out-groups. The term was introduced by William Graham Sumner, who proposed that members of human groups are sure that their way of doing things is superior to the way things are done elsewhere. As Sumner put it, "There is a right way to catch game, to win a wife, to make one's self appear, to cure disease, to honor ghosts, to treat comrades or strangers, to behave when a child is born, on the warpath, in council, and so in all cases which can arise" (Sumner 1906, p. 28).

Sumner was convinced that ethnocentrism was a universal feature of human society—and he was not far wrong. When referring to outsiders, human populations resort readily to terms of condescension, distrust, and contempt. When referring to insiders, an entirely different vocabu-

lary comes into play: respect, trust, and pride are now the terms of choice. Around the world, ethnocentrism prevails. Around the world, that is to say, there exists a human appetite for politics organized by social groupings.[22]

Third Premise: Bounded Rationality

Our third premise goes to *how* voters decide. Here we take instruction from a general theory of human judgment, the cumulative and considerable achievement of the last half century of cognitive science, a development led most notably by Herbert Simon, Daniel Kahneman, and Amos Tversky. The general theory begins with Simon's notion of bounded rationality, the assertion that "human thinking powers are very modest when compared with the complexities of the environments in which human beings live" (Simon 1979, p. 3). We presume that the decisions voters make in the polling booth, like the decisions they make in other domains of life, are governed by bounded rationality.[23]

From the extensive literature on bounded rationality, we take three important lessons for voter decision making. First, voters form judgments and make decisions based on only a small sample of what they know. They are limited in computational capacity, and they search very selectively. The "search is incomplete, often inadequate, based on uncertain information and partial ignorance, and usually terminated with the discovery of satisfactory, not optimal, courses of action" (Simon 1985, p. 295).

Second, voters form judgments and make decisions intuitively. Under intuitive thinking, considerations come quickly and spontaneously to mind, without conscious search or computation. The operations of the intuitive system are fast, automatic, and emotionally charged. Intuitive thinking can be interrupted and superseded by effortful reflection, but this happens only under special circumstances: "People are not accustomed to thinking hard, and are often content to trust a plausible judgment that quickly comes to mind." This is especially so for politics, for most of us, most of the time.[24]

Third, voters form judgments and make decisions in light of a particular way of looking at a problem—in light of a particular frame. Frames operate by altering the relative salience of different aspects of the decision, highlighting some features of the situation and masking others. Framing

is powerful because people generally passively accept the frame they are given—in politics, as in other domains of life.[25]

Social Groups as Factors in the Vote

We propose that social groups can become a factor in the voter's decision in one of two ways. The first is through identification with in-groups. The second is through attitude toward out-groups. These two paths reflect the dual role played by social groups in everyday life. In-groups provide solidarity and opportunities for coordination. Out-groups supply points of comparison and targets of resentment.

SOCIAL GROUPS AS OBJECTS OF IDENTIFICATION In *The People's Choice,* Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Helen Gaudet sought to discover "how and why people voted as they did" (1944, p. 1). In this particular instance, the people were residents of Erie County, Ohio, and the election in question was the 1940 contest between Franklin Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet were sociologists by training, and they believed that the primary function of the presidential campaign was to activate and reinforce predispositions rooted in social groups. Consistent with this hunch, they found that middle-class Protestants living in the country tended to vote for Willkie in large numbers; meanwhile, city-bound, working-class Catholics supported Roosevelt overwhelmingly. The authors concluded "A person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preferences" (1944, p. 27).

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet were on to something. However, their assertion of the primacy of social characteristics was more a manifesto than it was a theory. They had little to say about why religion or class should govern political choice.

We say it is inequality that largely underlies the relationship between social characteristics and political preferences. Social groups—some social groups—are sites of durable inequality. This means that, to take one example, blacks and whites will naturally develop different and distinct interests. Their views on family, children, schooling, work, and more will differ. The values they take to be central to the organization of society and to their own lives will differ. Accordingly, what they want, need, and hope to receive from government will differ as well.

Further, we say that the political consequences of social group membership are carried disproportionately by those who belong to the group *psychologically*. Identification presumes that Americans are social creatures and that political opinions are "badges of social membership," serving as "declarations, to others and to ourselves, of social identity" (Smith, Bruner, and White 1956). Identification implies a willingness to say "we"; it entails not just membership but also awareness and attachment—self-consciousness that one is a member of a group and value invested in the membership.[26]

Group identification comes in two main varieties: common fate and emotional interdependence. Common fate refers to the extent to which individuals believe that their life chances and outcomes are intertwined with the opportunities and experiences of their group—that what happens to their group will happen to them. Those who identify with their group on grounds of common fate will come to a political choice with their group's interests prominently in mind.[27] Group identification is grounded also in emotional interdependence, occurring when individuals feel close to their group, experiencing pride when other group members do well and anger when they are treated unfairly. Emotional interdependence reflects the expressive side of politics. To the degree that Americans derive their sense of self from their membership in social groups, political choice becomes an act of affirmation and solidarity.[28]

Group identification is *categorical* in that social groups are types or kinds. At the same time, group identification is *dimensional* in that psychological attachment to a group varies continuously. For some group members, attachment is effectively zero; for others, identification with a social group constitutes a central aspect of identity; and there exist all shades in between. Strength of identification is a sign of a person's priorities. The stronger the identification, the more powerful the political consequences of group membership will be.[29]

SOCIAL GROUPS AS OBJECTS OF ATTITUDE Membership groups are important, but as reference group theory reminds us, people "frequently orient themselves to groups other than their own" (Merton and Rossi 1968, p. 35). Such orientations—what we call "attitudes"—are occasionally sympathetic, but they are more often hostile, a reflection, in part,

of ethnocentrism, the human predisposition of turning difference into animosity.

By "attitude," we refer to a form of organized readiness, a tendency to act in favor of or in opposition to some object. Attitudes have consequences: they affect "perception, judgment, memory, learning, and thought" and "determine for each individual what he will see and hear, what he will think, and what he will do" (Allport 1935, p. 806). Attitudes toward social groups are especially relevant here because they offer an appealing (humans are social creatures) and efficient (politics is a sideshow) way to simplify the complexities of electoral choice.

In his famous essay on belief systems in mass publics, Converse (1964) demolished the idea that ordinary Americans might approach the political world equipped with broad ideological points of view. He also offered a proposal for how citizens might reason about politics if ideology was beyond their reach. Perhaps, Converse suggested, citizens organize their opinions on policy according to their attitudes toward the social groups that such policies seem to benefit or harm.

To illustrate his argument, Converse invited the reader to imagine a set of policies formulated to benefit or harm a single social group—in this case, and in the vernacular of the times, "Negroes":

Negroes should be kept out of professional athletics.
The government should see to it that Negroes get fair treatment in jobs and housing.
Even though it may hurt the position of the Negro in the South, state governments should be able to decide who can vote and who cannot.

Converse argued that in these hypothetical proposals, the key feature is not states' rights or federal authority; it is the social group. Because abstractions "take on meaning only with a good deal of political information and understanding, the attitude items given would tend to boil down for many respondents to the same single question: 'Are you sympathetic to Negroes as a group, are you indifferent to them, or do you dislike them?'" (p. 235).

Converse was using race to make a general point about the potential of attitudes toward social groups to organize political opinions—and we now know that he was right. Scores of studies show that public opinion

on matters of policy is group-centric: shaped in powerful ways by the attitudes that citizens harbor toward the social groups they see as the principal beneficiaries or victims of the policy. For example, support for tightening welfare benefits derives from hostility toward the poor (Gilens 1999); opposition to government action against AIDS turns on contempt for homosexuals (Price and Hsu 1992); resistance to immigration reflects suspicions that the new immigrants are somehow un-American (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990). Attitude toward out-groups is not the only force driving opinion in these various policy disputes, but it is always present, and of all the forces that shape opinion, it is often the most powerful.[30]

We expect the same logic to apply to voting. When a presidential candidate is seen as standing for or against a certain social group, voters will be attracted or driven away, depending on their attitude toward the group in question.

Social Groups as Short-Term Forces

In either manifestation—as an object of identification or as an object of attitude—social groups operate as short-term electoral forces. Imagine the vote cast by a population partitioned into two basic components. First is the "normal vote," the vote that would be expected from the population under normal conditions; the vote we would see in the absence of short-run disturbances. In American presidential elections, the normal vote is represented primarily by party identification. Most Americans think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans. This attachment to party is a standing commitment—a "persistent adherence," as the authors of *The American Voter* put it—that profoundly influences how citizens see the world of politics. In the United States, voting for president is first and foremost an affirmation of partisanship.[31]

The second component of the vote reflects deviation from baseline—a departure from normal conditions—due to immediate circumstances. Such short-term forces push voters toward one side or the other. Such forces are important—indeed, in particular cases, they can be crucial—but their influence is temporary. They affect the vote in one election without necessarily carrying over to the next.[32]

Unpopular wars, sharp recessions, eruptions of domestic unrest, the emergence of new and divisive issues: All these can be electoral forces

operating in the short-term. Under the right circumstances, so too can social groups.[33]

Activation

Americans belong to many social groups at once. They are simultaneously black, white, or brown; Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, or atheist; male or female; bankers or carpenters; urbanites or suburbanites; Southerners or Yankees; and so on. This means that Americans have available, in principle at least, an extensive repertoire out of which to construct a social identity. In parallel fashion, Americans possess attitudes toward social groups—toward Jews, women, bankers, and many others—any of which could be relevant to their electoral choice.

In the short run, *which* aspects of identity and attitude become important—which are activated—depend on political circumstances. Social groups will have more or less potency as short-term electoral forces depending on the election frame: on the prominence and clarity of cues signaling that the candidates differ substantially in the social groups they favor and oppose. Putting the point in extreme form, in the absence of such cues, social groups will disappear from the voter's calculus.[34]

Cues signaling a candidate's alignment with social groups can take various forms. Candidates can propose particular policies that visibly favor some groups at the expense of others: think of Al Gore's fierce defense of Social Security. They can emphasize or neglect problems that are of special concern to a particular group: consider Bill Clinton's pledge to "end welfare as we know it". They can keep certain company, spending time in the public eye with iconic representatives of one group or another: think of Richard Nixon's foray into the Deep South in 1968, accompanied by Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a hero of Southern resistance.

Perhaps the most effective signal of all is membership itself. In 1960, John Kennedy claimed to be Catholic; others said he was, too—no one denied it. Kennedy *was* Catholic, and as we see in chapter 3, this simple and well-publicized fact played a prominent and consequential part in the story of the 1960 election.

Even more effective is to *embody* membership, as Barack Obama embodied race in 2008. Obama did not need to claim to be a black American. Indeed, for the most part, he designed a campaign to evade the claim. But

Obama's effort to neutralize race could not succeed completely, for it was continually subverted by his body—the color of his skin, the features of his face, and the texture of his hair. Whatever Obama said about society and government and about problems and policies, at the end of the day, every time American voters caught a glimpse of him, he *was* black.

Summary

Politics is a struggle for authority. In democratic systems, that struggle is carried out importantly (though not exclusively) through elections. Social groups become relevant to politics insofar as they are sites of durable inequality—and in the American context, there is no better example than race. Voters are immersed in private life, motivated in part by concern for others, and boundedly rational in their decision making. They are partisans, first and foremost, but they can be influenced by social groups as well and in two ways: through identification with in-groups and through attitude toward out-groups. Which aspects of identification and attitude become important—which are activated—depend on political circumstances.

With these conceptual distinctions made and the theoretical machinery built, we are ready to begin our empirical investigation. We start with Barack Obama's remarkable victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2008 contest for the Democratic presidential nomination.