

RACIAL ATTITUDES

IN THE 2008 ELECTION AND BEYOND

Jamila Celestine-Michener



black youth project™

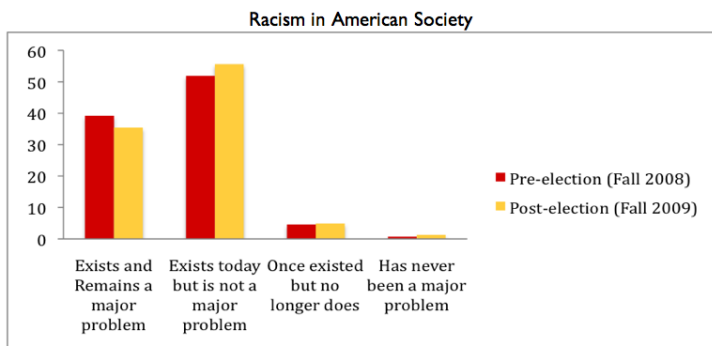
{ Racial Attitudes in the 2008 Election and Beyond

Racial attitudes have profoundly influenced the trajectory of American social, political, and economic life. Most recently, during the campaign, election, and presidency of Barack Obama, the content and significance of racial attitudes was and continues to be a subject of continual controversy. From early declarations that Obama's victory in the Iowa primary was a "post-racial triumph," to later assertions that "Obama won because of race," beliefs and evaluations about race have been acutely prominent in wake of Obama's ascendance to the nation's highest office. Amidst all the debate, a few basic questions persist: what is the nature of racial attitudes in America today? Have such attitudes changed as a result of the election of our first black president? How do racial attitudes differ on the basis of demographic characteristics such as age and racial group membership?

The Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (MCPCE) project is a nationally representative three-wave panel survey designed to answer these very questions. The MCPCE study explores the attitudes and behaviors of thousands of everyday Americans from a range of diverse backgrounds both before and after the 2008 election. MCPCE contains a range of questions that provide an opportunity to understand racial attitudes with unparalleled depth. Using such data, this memo maps the basic contours of public opinion on matters related to race. Ultimately, the analyses reveal that while some changes in racial attitudes have occurred in the aftermath of Obama's electoral victory, they have done little to alter the stark racial divides that seem to remain a fixture in the American political landscape.

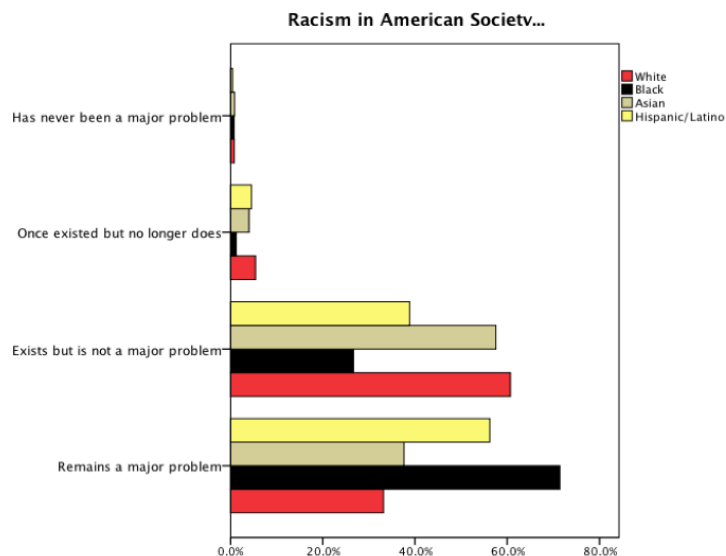
Attitudes on Racism and Inequality
The issues of racism and racial inequality are of perennial concern in the United States. The insidious and overt racial discrimination that once ruled the land has waned, but the specter of disparate racial treatment continues to loom. As a result, scholars, media, and the general public remain attentive to attitudinal patterns pertaining to racism and inequality. Of particular concern during what some call "the age of Obama" are popular perceptions of the degree of inequality in contemporary American life. The MCPCE data contain several questions that speak directly to this topic. To begin with, the survey asked respondents about the continued existence of racism in American society and politics. As illustrated in figure 1, most people believed that racism still exists, but there was substantial

Figure 1.



disagreement over whether or not it remains a major problem. Prior to the election, nearly 52 percent of respondents believed that racism existed but was not a major problem, 39 percent believed that racism was still a major problem, less than 5 percent believed it once existed but did no longer, and less than 1 percent believed that racism never existed. After the election, respondents expressed slightly more optimism about the continued existence of racism: the number of people who said it was still a major problem dropped from 39 percent to 35 percent while the number of respondents who said racism existed but was no longer a major problem increased from 52 percent to 56 percent. These numbers reflect two sides of the American public. On the one hand, perceptions of racism seem somewhat flexible, because respondents' evaluations were amenable to change based on an

Figure 2



evolving political context (even if only incrementally). On the other hand, perceptions of racism have considerable staying power, because even a remarkable and prominent political event like the election of a black president did not drastically alter the overall nature of opinions in this realm.

The broad patterns highlighted in figure 1 do not account for differences in opinion across racial subgroups. Figure 2 addresses this matter, showing attitudes on racism broken down by race.¹ The patterns highlighted in figure 2 suggest that the gap between those who believed racism is still a major problem and those who did not is largely (though not completely) fueled by a divergence in opinion between blacks and whites: black respondents were most likely to believe that racism is still a major problem while whites were least likely to hold such an

¹Except for when explicitly stated, all figures are based on preelection data from fall 2008.

Figure 3

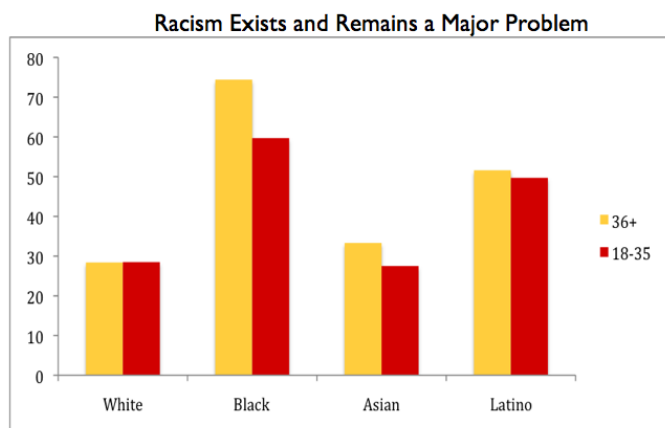
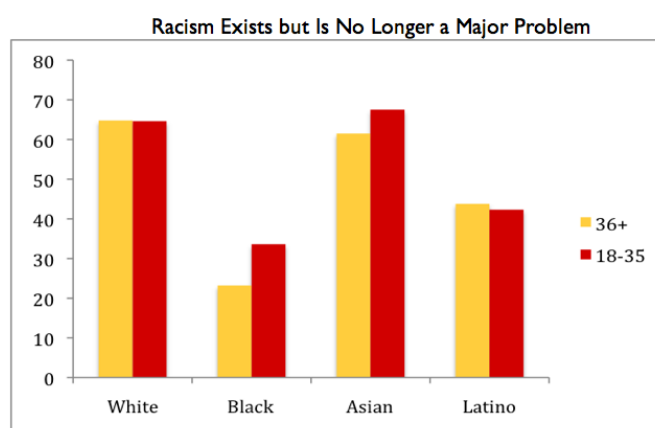


Figure 4



opinion. Asians and Latinos fell in the middle. More precisely, 71 percent of blacks said that racism remains a major problem in American society, compared to 56 percent of Latinos, 38 percent of Asians, and 33 percent of whites. On the other hand, 61 percent of whites believed that racism exists but is not a major problem, compared to 58 percent of Asians, 39 percent of Latinos, and 27 percent of blacks.

When these numbers are further broken down to account for age (figures 3 and 4, below), the gaps in belief about racism persisted; but across race, young people ages 18–35 were less likely to think racism remained a major problem and were more likely to think it exists but is no longer a major problem. The most drastic age gap in this regard exceeds among blacks: 74 percent of older respondents believed that racism is still a major problem, compared to 60 percent

of 18–35-year-olds. Alternatively, 23 percent of blacks older than 35 believed that racism is no longer a major problem, compared to 34 percent of their younger counterparts.

In addition to the previous question about racism in American society, another attitudinal factor useful for assessing public perceptions related to racial inequality was the question respondents were asked about the status of racial equality for blacks, Latinos, and Asians (respectively). Along similar lines, there were again substantial differences in opinion across racial subgroups. As figure 5 shows, whites were consistently most likely to think that a particular minority subgroup has achieved racial equality, blacks were least likely to think so, and Asians and Latinos again fell in between. The only exception to this general pattern is that Asians were slightly less likely (30 percent) than blacks to believe

Figure 5

Have Blacks, Latinos and Asians Achieved Racial Equality?

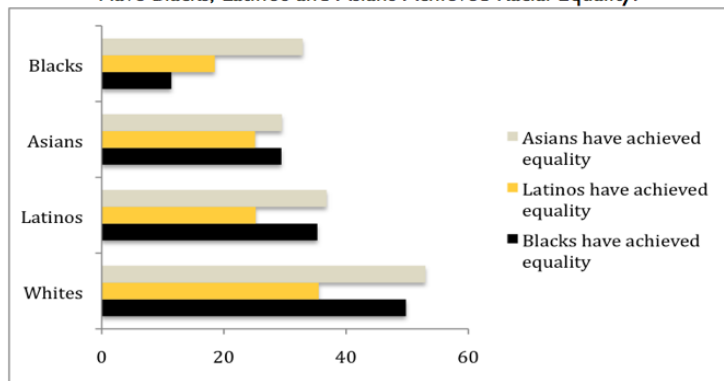
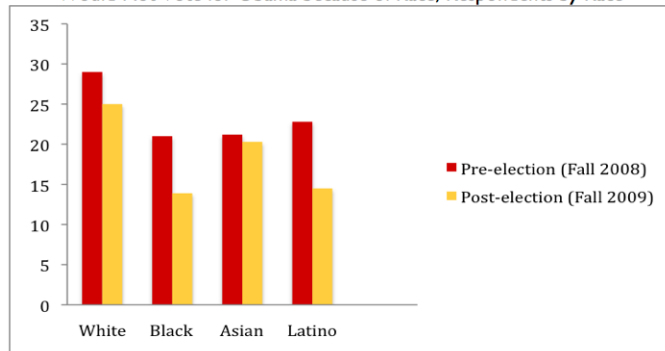


Figure 6

Would Not Vote for Obama because of Race, Respondents by Race



that Asians have achieved racial equality. The gaps between beliefs of whites and blacks were most stark. Half of whites believed that blacks have achieved racial equality, compared to only 11 percent of blacks; 36 percent of whites believed that Latinos have achieved equality, compared to 19 percent of blacks; and 53 percent of whites believed Asians have achieved racial equality, compared to 33 percent of blacks.²

Another concern that emerged during the campaign and election of Barack Obama had to do with race-based discrimination in voting behavior. MCPCE results indicate at least three things in this regard: 1) a relatively substantial number of respondents (over one-fifth) within each racial group confessed to such discrimination, but whites were most likely to do so; 2) respondents were more likely to admit voting bias before the election than they

were one year later; 3) older respondents (particularly whites over the age of 35) led the pack in terms of admitting race-based reluctance to vote for Obama (see figures 6 and 7).

ATTITUDES ON INTERRACIAL AND INTRARACIAL COHESIVENESS AND POLITICAL SOLIDARITY

Asians, blacks and Latinos accounted for unprecedented proportions of the electorate in the 2008. What’s more, sizeable majorities of all three groups voted for Barack Obama. MCPCE data may illuminate reasons for these apparently cohesive voting patterns among people of color. Specifically, the MCPCE project asked questions gauging respondents’ perceptions of connectedness within and between various racial subgroups. Opinions like these are particularly important for understanding the prospects for interracial and intraracial political solidarity and coalition building.

² These numbers do not add to 100% because they are based on responses to three separate survey questions.

Figure 7

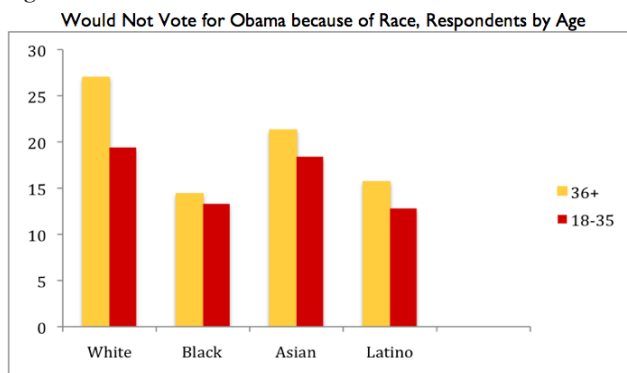
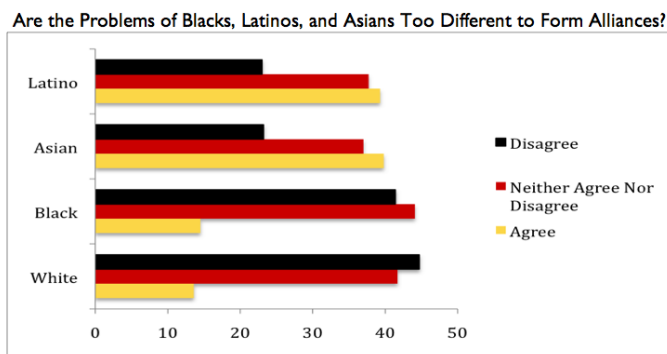


Figure 8



When asked whether the problems facing blacks, Latinos, and Asians in the United States are too different for them to be political allies or partners, blacks and whites appeared substantially more optimistic than Latinos and Asians about prospects for interracial alliances. As exhibited in figure 8, 45 percent of whites and 42 percent of blacks either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the assertion that the problems of the various racial minority groups are too different to foster alliances. Alternatively, only 23 percent of Asians and Latinos expressed such disagreement. On the other end of the spectrum, 14 percent of whites and 15 percent of blacks agreed that problems of racial minority subgroups are too different for political partnerships, while nearly 40 percent of Latinos and Asians agreed with such a proposition. These patterns do not bode exceedingly well for coalition possibilities among racial minorities, particularly for movements or organizations that aim to include substantial contingents of both Asians and Latinos. However, the

question of whether differences in the problems facing these groups undermine political partnerships is not the only relevant one. As the ensuing analyses indicate, blacks, Latinos and Asians exhibited other attitudinal patterns that give reason for optimism among those who hope to cultivate cross-racial alliances.

In addition to opinions on cross racial alliances, MCPCE also contains data on the degree to which respondents perceive a connection between their own lives and the broader status of their racial group (otherwise known as perceptions of linked fate). Figure 9 shows that both before and after the election, majorities of blacks, Latinos and Asians had a strong sense of linked fate; 62 percent of blacks, 60 percent of Asians, and 52 percent of Latinos said that what happens to their racial group has something to do with what happens in their life. Do such strong attitudes towards in-group connectedness subvert the connections between blacks, Latinos, and Asians? One way of addressing

Figure 9

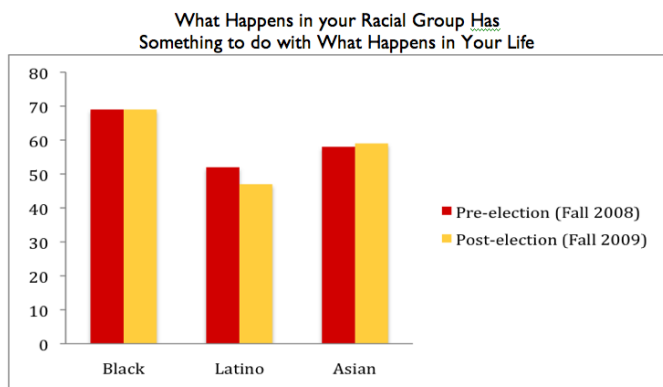
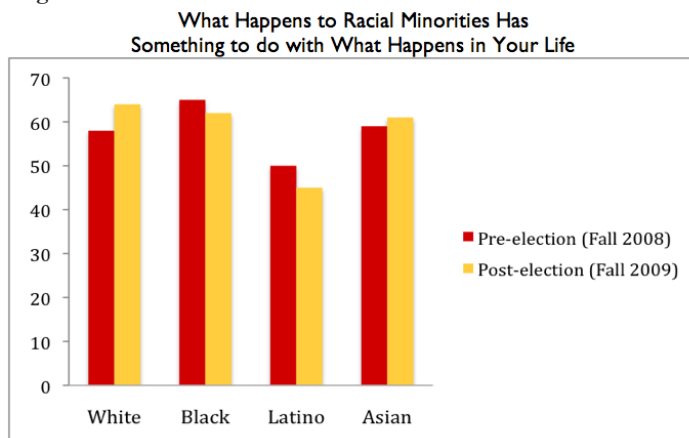


Figure 10



this inquiry is to observe whether the sense of linked fate applies across minority groups. In other words, do whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians think that what happens to racial minorities more generally (as opposed to just their particular racial group) has something to do with what happens in their life? Figure 10 shows that substantial majorities of all racial groups perceived a connection between their own lives and the fate of racial minorities. Prior to the election, almost 58 percent of whites, 65 percent of blacks, 59 percent of Asians, and 50 percent of Latinos thought that what happens to racial minorities in this country has something to do with what happens in their own life. For whites and Asians, there was a postelection increase in perceptions of connections between themselves and the fate of racial minorities by 6 percent and 2 percent, respectively. For blacks and Latinos, perceptions such a connection decreased by 2 percent and 5 percent, respectively. Overall, such opinions suggest some basis for intergroup coalition building.

HOT-BUTTON ISSUES: GROWING “MINORITY” POPULATIONS AND RACIAL PROFILING

In addition to inquiring about general attitudes on racism, equality, and racial group cohesiveness, MCPCE also asked about opinions on specific issues that are directly tied to race oriented policy agendas. Two particular matters stand out in this regard: 1) attitudes towards the growth of minority populations in the United States, and 2) levels of support for racial profiling. These topics are of practical importance, because they may help to shed light on policy preferences in the realms of immigration and racial profiling.

Much has been made of the increasing “minority” population in the United States. Declarations that the United States will soon be “majority minority” have the potential to fuel racial divisions. MCPCE provides the data necessary to explore this possibility by asking survey respondents whether they think growing minority populations strengthen, weaken, or have no effect on the country as a whole. As shown in figure 11, whites

Figure 11

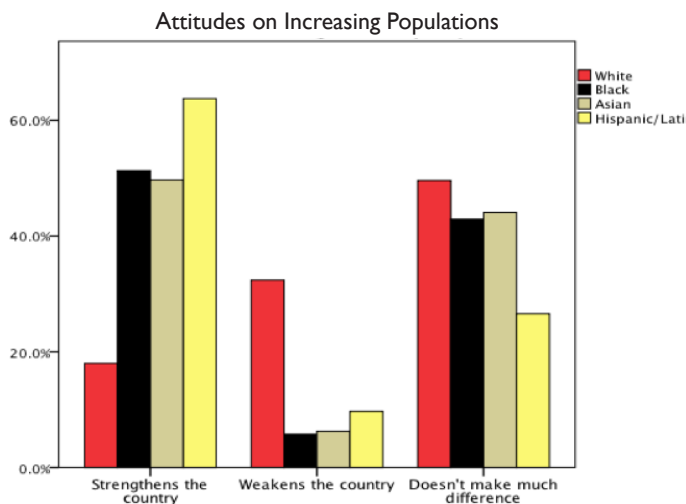
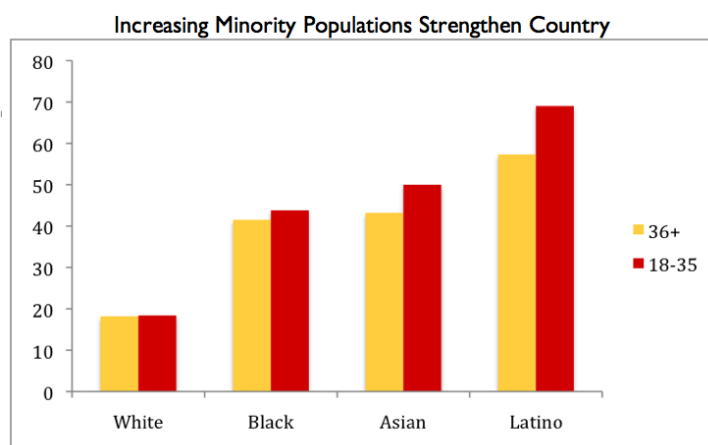


Figure 12



are disproportionately likely to think that think that the growth of minority populations either weakens or does not affect the country; 32 percent of whites thought the growth of minority populations weakens the country, compared to only 6 percent of blacks, 6 percent of Asians, and 10 percent of Latinos. Furthermore, 50 percent of whites thought the increase of minority populations doesn't make a difference, and a slim 18 percent of whites thought minority growth strengthens the country. Comparatively, 51 percent of blacks, 50 percent of Asians, and 64 percent of Latinos thought minority population growth strengthens the country.

When these numbers are further examined based on age (figures 12 and 13) the results indicate that 18–35-year-olds were generally more positive about increasing minority populations; this age effect is most pronounced among Latinos and Asians. More specifically,

across racial groups, 18–35-year-olds were more likely to believe that having more minorities will strengthen the country and less likely to think that minority increases will weaken the country. One exception is that younger black respondents are substantially more likely to believe that increasing numbers of minorities will weaken the country than their older counterparts.

Racial profiling is another issue that inspires heated debates. This topic is especially pertinent in light of recent controversy over Arizona's immigration law (SB 1070), which requires police to determine the citizenship status of people they may suspect are in the country illegally and makes it a state crime to lack immigration documents. Critics of the law argue it necessitates racial profiling. In the months since the bill was first proposed, it has become one of the most explosive issues in American politics and has brought racial

Figure 13

Increasing Minority Populations Weaken Country

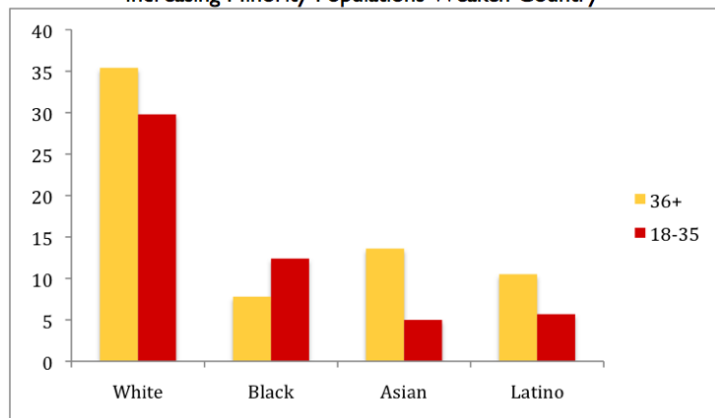


Figure 14

Support for Racial Profiling

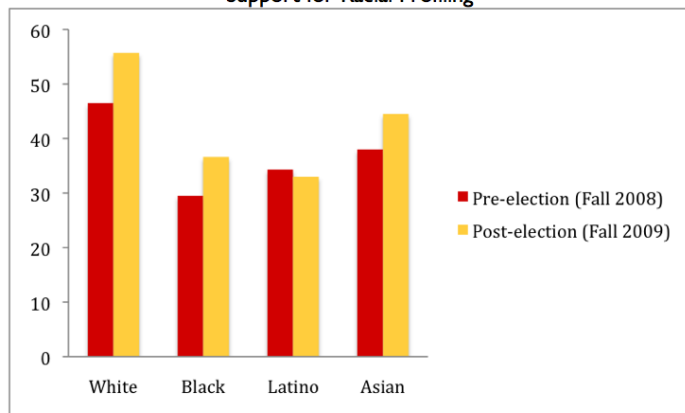
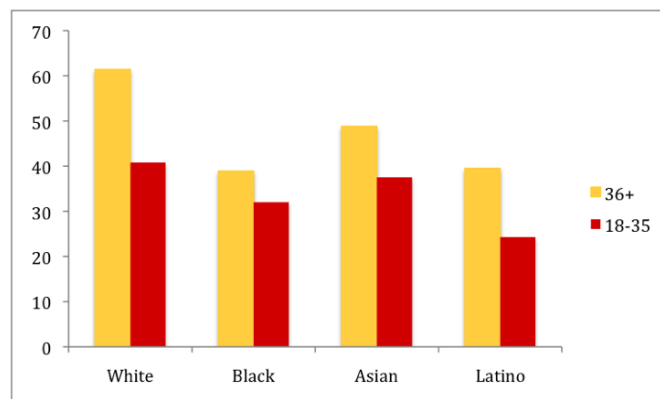


Figure 15

Support for Racial Profiling



profiling to the forefront of the domestic political agenda. When MCPCE survey respondents were asked about racial profiling, whites were most likely to either agree or strongly agree that racial profiling helps to keep our country safe from terrorists (47 percent), as were respondents over the age of 36 across all racial groups (see figures 14 and 15). Nonetheless, sizeable numbers of racial minorities of all ages also expressed such sentiment. Prior to the election, nearly 30 percent of blacks, 34 percent of Asians, and 38 percent of Latinos

expressed some degree of agreement with the notion that racial profiling helps to protect the country. What's more, by one year after the election, support for racial profiling increased by 9 percent for whites, 7 percent for Asians, and 7 percent for blacks. It thus appears that backing for racial profiling may be gaining momentum. However, given current events, it remains an open question whether tactics such as those employed by the state of Arizona will reverse such momentum by going too far.

CONCLUSION

This brief analysis of data from the MCPCE project underscores the extent to which racial attitudes will continue to play a role in American social and political life for the foreseeable future. Public opinions on subjects related to race and equality are dynamic, changing in tandem with political and demographic contexts. As such, detailed longitudinal statistics on racial attitudes is invaluable. MCPCE provides such information, and the foregoing analyses leverage it to get a glimpse into the racial psyche of the American public. Doing so reveals that even during a time when many celebrate the successful ascendance

of an African American to the presidency, racial (and often generational) attitudinal gaps endure. Furthermore, as the demographics of the country change and it is less and less possible to ignore the voices of Asians and Latinos, investigations such as these become increasingly complex and less amenable to sound bites. The terrain of racial attitudes is bumpy and the implications and causal stories that stem from the descriptive patterns outlined above are by no means clear. Nonetheless, the MCPCE data open the door for a multifaceted and comprehensive rendering of racial attitudes in the United States.