

POLITICAL ALIENATION AND GOVERNMENT TRUST IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

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black youth project

Political Alienation and Government Trust in the Age of Obama

“Obama-Inspired Black Voters Warm to Politics,” proclaimed the headline on a lead article in an issue of the *New York Times* just days before the 2008 presidential election. Based on interviews with black men and women across the country of varying ages and backgrounds, the article goes on to report that Obama’s candidacy incited a resurgence of interest in politics among citizens who ordinarily held dim views about whether their votes mattered and the extent to which candidates from the major political parties represented their views. “Across the country, black men and women . . . who have long been disaffected, apolitical, discouraged or just plain bored with politics say they have snapped to attention this year.”¹

To be sure, the Obama candidacy and his subsequent presidency produced many historical events and occasions. American voters appeared to be keenly aware of the historic nature of the 2008 election, and the presidential campaigns and other organizations poured significant amounts of resources into mobilizing black and young voters. These efforts seem to have paid off, as black voter turnout was at an all-time high for the 2008 presidential election.²

This essay considers the broader implications of increased levels of interest and participation that accompanied the 2008 election. In particular, it examines whether spikes in political activity as a consequence of the election are associated with changes in orientation toward government more broadly. For instance, how have levels of political alienation changed upon the candidacy and election of Barack Obama?

These questions are answered with data from the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Survey (MCPCES), which is uniquely well-suited to the task. The survey is a three-wave panel and the data were collected by Knowledge Networks using an online computer methodology. The specific survey sample is nationally representative and includes oversamples of Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and young people ages 18–35. One-third of the Latino respondents came from Spanish language dominant homes and received the questionnaire in Spanish. With this data we are able to explore the ways in which political alienation varied across these groups with greater statistical power and precision than is possible in most traditional survey research.

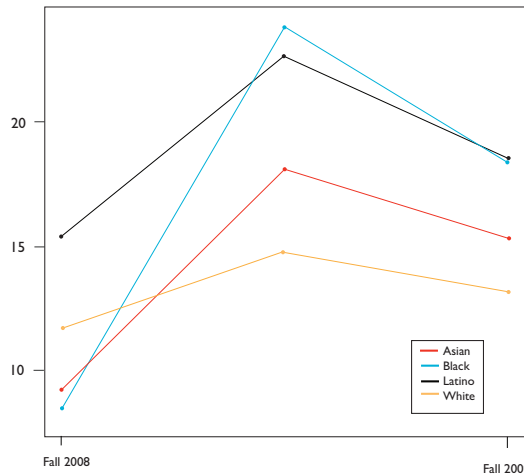
POLITICAL ALIENATION

In contrast to an individual’s interest in a political campaign or attentiveness to politics, which may covary with

¹Susan Saulny, “Obama-Inspired Black Voters Warm to Politics,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2008.

²Tasha Philpot, Daron R. Shaw, and Ernest McGowan, “Winning the Race: Black Voter Turnout in the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73:995–1022.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who “frequently” or “almost always” trust the government to do what is right.



contextual conditions, political alienation describes a person’s general orientation toward the state and characterizes a person who feels excluded from the political system. More specifically, a person who is politically alienated is distrustful of government and political institutions and feels powerless to change the system.³

The following results suggest that the Obama presidential campaign may have temporarily relieved some of the symbols that characterize political alienation, particularly among black and young Americans. However, the effects were fleeting, as most measures indicate that post-election enthusiasm receded as President Obama has been confronted with issues of governance. This suggests that heightened levels of mobilization and enthusiasm during

the 2008 campaign should not be read to mean that Obama’s candidacy and subsequent presidency has done little to increase overall levels of trust and efficacy. In some instances, the heightened expectations associated with the election of America’s first black president led to lower—and decreasing—levels of political efficacy, the belief that one can affect change. In sum, large segments of the country’s population feel excluded from the political system, and Obama’s candidacy and election have done little to ameliorate those concerns.

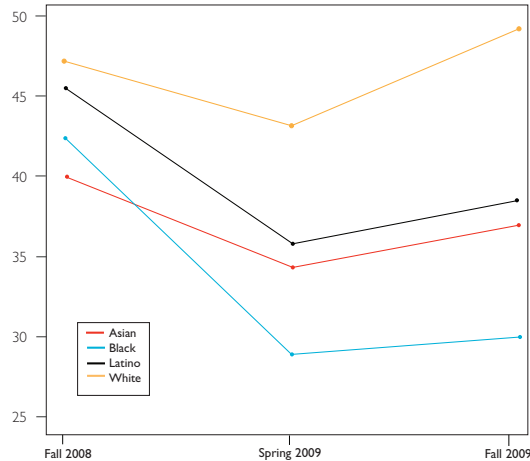
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

One key measure of political alienation is the amount of trust a person has in government. This survey asked respondents how often they trusted government to do what is right. Overall, levels of trust were significantly higher immediately following the election compared to preelection levels but receded to their preelection levels once the Obama administration had been in power for several months.

As figure 1 shows, this pattern holds across every racial group. The percentage of black respondents who believe they can trust government to do what is right “frequently” or “almost always” exhibited the most

³Lawrence Bobo and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., “Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment,” *American Political Science Review* 84:377–393; Ada W. Finifter, “Dimensions of Political Alienation,” *American Political Science Review* 64:389–410; Arthur H. Miller, “Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970,” *American Political Science Review* 68:951–72.

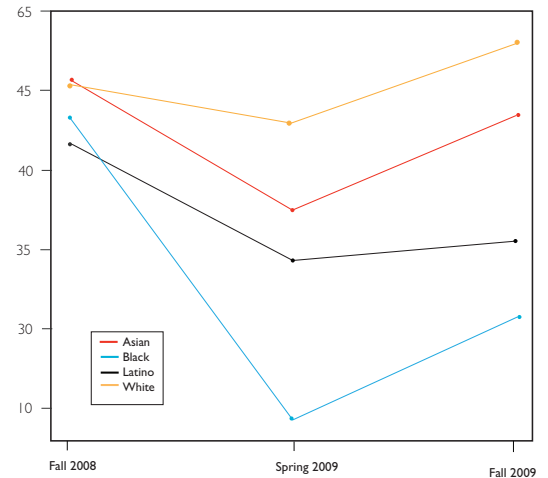
Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement “Leaders in government care very little about people like me.”



dramatic increase, increasing by almost threefold. Immediately after the election, black respondents expressed more government trust than white, Latino, and Asian respondents. One year after the election, however, Latino and white respondents expressed similar levels of trust as they did before the 2008 election, and black and Asian respondents expressed lower levels of trust, yet they still were more trusting of government than they were in the initial wave of the survey.

A second measure of trust in government addresses the extent to which respondents feel political leaders are attuned to their needs and concerns. Respondents reacted more positively to this question after the election, though one year later were less likely to agree that political leaders care about people like them. However, both post-election measures were statistically higher than the preelection measure at conventional

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement “Government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.”

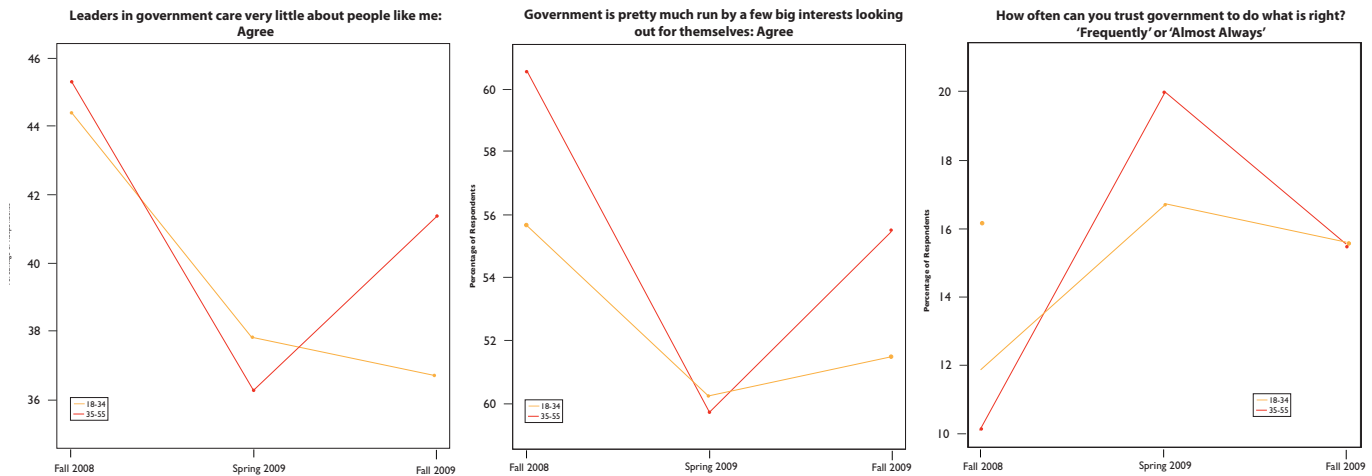


levels of statistical significance.

Figure 2 plots these relationships by race. Black, Latino and white respondents were all more trusting of political leaders immediately following the election, yet were less so one year after the election. Interestingly, white respondents were more distrustful of political leaders one year after the election than they were before the election, while black respondents’ level of trust declined only marginally during the period immediately following the election and one year later.

A third component of government trust concerns who citizens feel is in control of government. The survey asked respondents to what extent they believed government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, which implies that government is not responsive

Figure 4: Government trust, by age group.



to their concerns, or citizen concerns more generally. Among all survey respondents, agreement with this statement significant decreased immediately after the election, but then increased again one year later. Overall, there were no differences in the extent to which respondents believed government is dominated by a few large interests when comparing preelection figures with those recorded one year after the election.

Figure 3 displays the results by racial group. Levels of agreement with this statement decreased among all racial groups, most dramatically among black and Asian respondents. However, one year later, only blacks and Latinos expressed lower levels of agreement with the statement compared to the preelection levels, and there were no significant differences over these time periods for whites and Asians.

Many of these patterns hold by age

group as well (figure 4). The plot on the left shows an interesting contrast by age: people aged 18–34 were significantly more likely to believe that government was concerned about their interests after the election than before, while respondents aged 35–55 were more distrustful one year after the election. On the other hand, younger people continued to believe that government was more attuned to their interests, which suggests that the Obama presidency affected levels of government trust among younger people differently than it did among their older counterparts.

Members of both age cohorts were less likely to agree that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, as the center plot reveals. The decline is more dramatic among respondents aged 35–55, and in both cases the level of agreement with this statement increased one year after the election, but in neither case did it approach preelection levels.

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who believe that they make a difference by participating in politics.

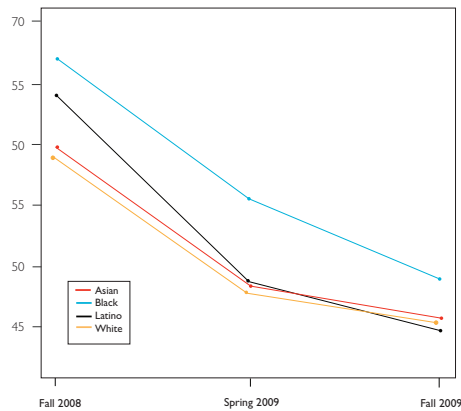
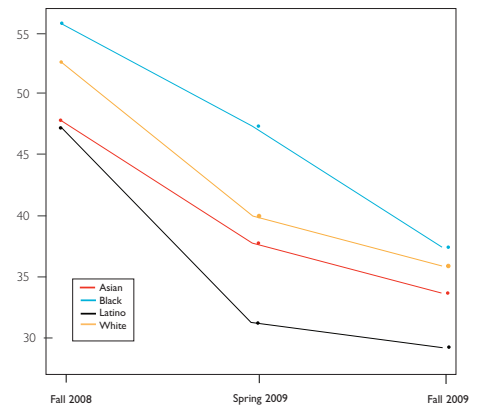


Figure 6. Percentage of respondents who believe they have the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics.



Finally, the rightmost plot shows that levels of general government trust moved in consistent directions. Respondents of all ages indicated more trust in government after the election than prior to the election, and while the figure receded a bit in the period one year after the election, general levels of trust in government were higher during the Obama administration than they were preelection among both age groups.

POLITICAL EFFICACY

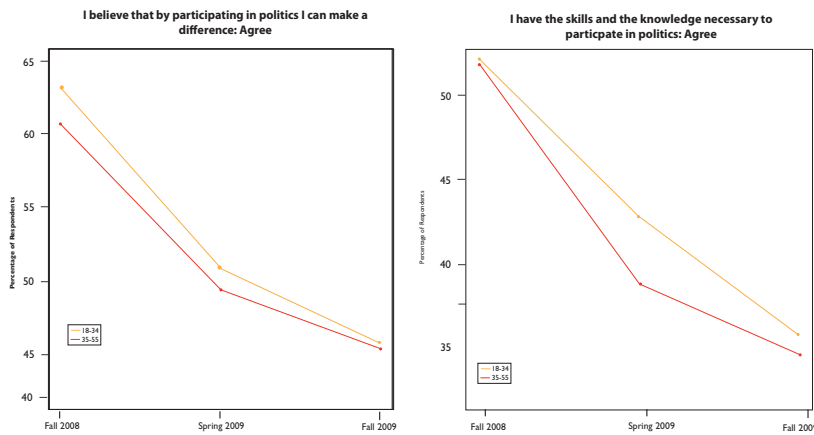
A person is said to be efficacious if she feels that she understands and can influence political affairs; efficacy is an important component of political alienation. Respondents were asked several questions about the extent to which they feel efficacious.

First, we asked respondents about the extent to which they believe that participation in politics makes a difference. Overall, respondents were significantly less likely to agree with

these statements after the election than before the election. Levels of agreement dropped further in the follow-up survey administered one year after the election. Figure 5 shows the results by racial group. The overall pattern is consistent across each group. Interestingly, black respondents expressed the highest level of agreement with this statement during each wave of the survey, but also experienced the largest amount of decline in agreement rates over the three waves of the survey. Similarly, Latino respondents expressed fairly high levels of efficacy but also experienced significant decreases, while changes in efficacy among Asians and whites were less dramatic.

We also asked respondents whether they believe they possess the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics. Overall, respondents were less likely to agree with this statement after the presidential campaign had been completed.

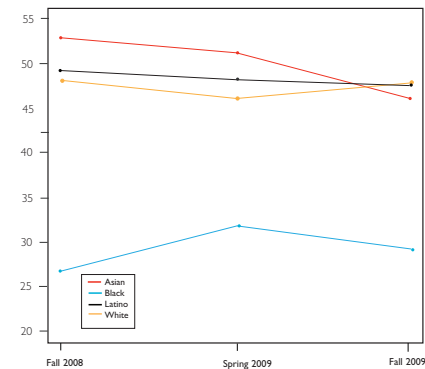
Figure 7. Political efficacy, by age group.



In particular, as figure 6 shows, most of the decrease in agreement among whites, Latinos and Asians occurred between the preelection survey and the survey administered immediately after the 2008 election. Decreases were only marginal among members of these racial groups in the follow-up survey administered one year later. However, levels of agreement among black respondents declined precipitously immediately following the election and again one year later (figure 7)

These findings suggest two possible explanations. First, the excitement generated by the campaign may have temporarily increased feelings of efficacy in the preelection period, such that the decrease after the election more accurately reflects the levels of efficacy ordinarily felt by the survey respondents outside of the context of the 2008 campaign. On the other hand, this could also suggest that the difficulties posed by governance faced by the Obama administration were most discouraging to the respondents who were most affected

Figure 8. Percentage of respondents who believe that everyone in the United States has an equal chance to succeed.



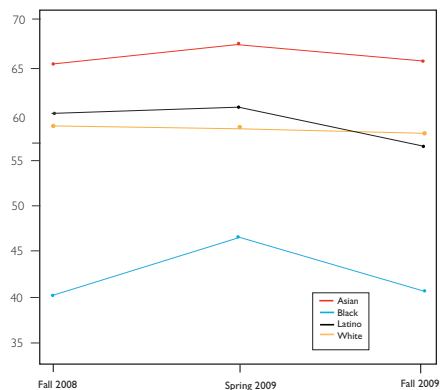
by the enthusiasm of the campaign.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

While the measures above address general levels of trust toward government, we also asked a number of questions that focused on specific aspects and institutions of government. These questions highlighted dimensions of attitudes toward government that were not discussed directly in the 2008 campaign. We found no significant changes in respondent attitudes toward these judicial, economic, and representative institutions.

First, we asked respondents to what extent they believed that everyone in the United States has an equal chance to succeed. Overall, there were no significant differences between responses elicited during any of survey waves. In particular, as figure 8 shows, while black respondents expressed the lowest levels of agreement with this question, the level of agreement did not change significantly over the course of the survey. The same holds true for white, Latino, and

Figure 12. Percentage of respondents who agree that in the United States, each person's vote is counted equally.



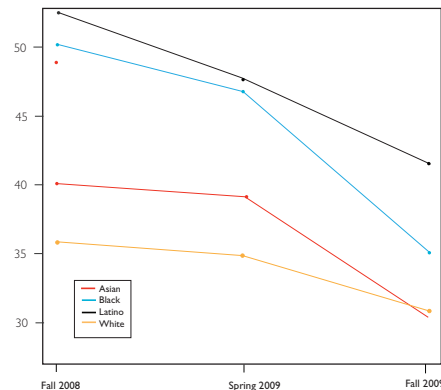
Asian respondents.

The same pattern emerges regarding trust in judicial institutions. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe the American legal system treats all groups equally (figure 9). Asian respondents expressed the highest levels of agreement, while black respondents expressed the lowest levels. However, these attitudes also did not exhibit any significant changes over the course of this time period.

Views toward the U.S. economic system also did not change appreciably (figure 10). Respondents were asked whether they believed that everyone had a “fair chance” in the American economic system. Whites, Latinos, and Asians were slightly less likely to agree with this statement by the final wave of the survey, yet none of these changes were statistically significant

Figure 11 shows that support for the U.S. Constitution also did not change

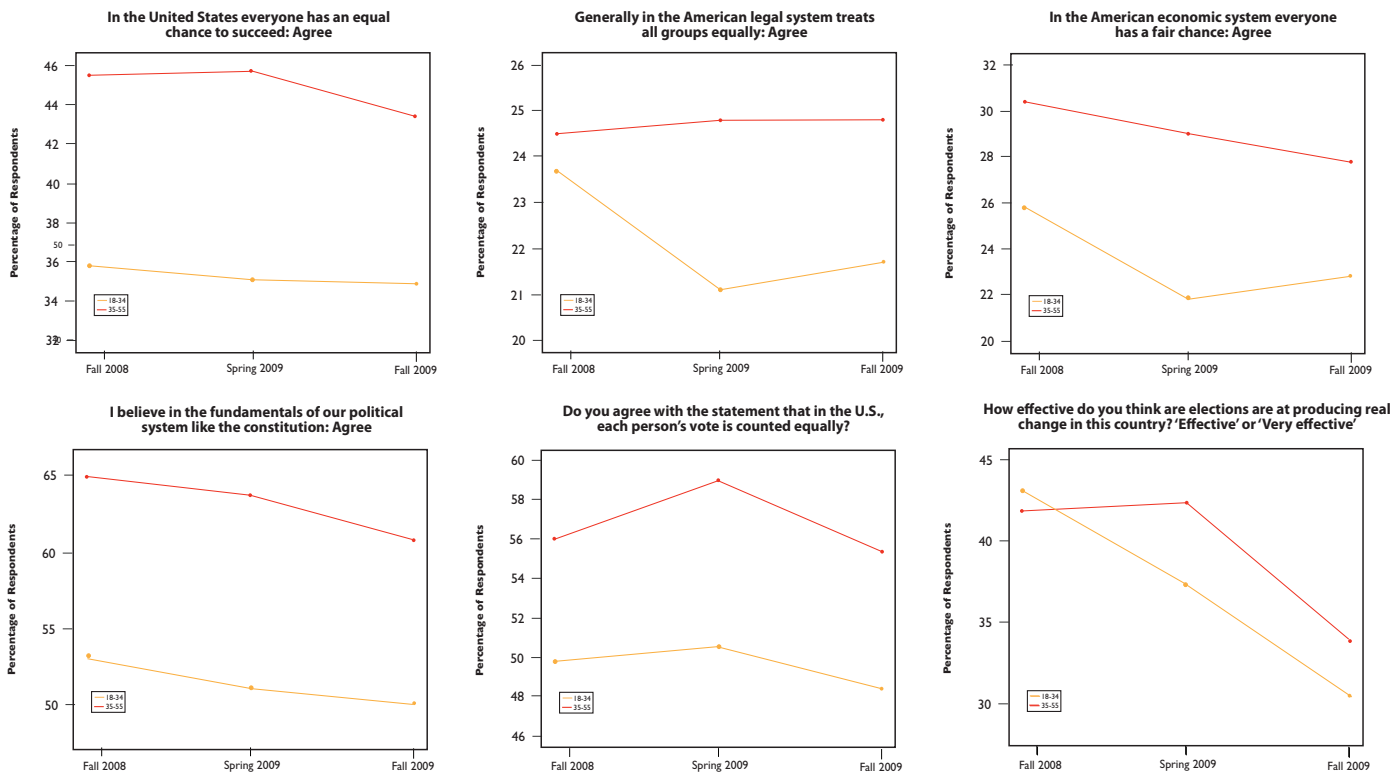
Figure 13. Percentage of respondents who think elections are “effective” or “very effective” at producing real change in the United States.



over this time period. Latino and Asian respondents were slightly less likely to agree that they support the document in the survey administered one year after the 2008 election, but this change was not statistically significant.

Finally, we asked respondents to what extent they believed elections were capable of producing real change in American politics. This question was especially timely given that the Obama campaign adopted the concept of change as one of its key rallying cries. After the election, respondents believed that elections were less effective than they believed before the election. One year after the election, respondents exhibited less confidence still in the effectiveness of elections to bring about change.

Figure 13 shows the results of this question by race. Note that for each racial group belief in the effectiveness of elections to produce political change declined slightly between the pre- and post-election periods before dropping



dramatically between the post-election period and the survey administered one year later. The decline is especially dramatic among Latino, black, and Asian respondents.

Many of the relationships also hold with regard to age group (figure 14) demonstrates. There were no significant differences by age group in the extent to which respondents agreed that everyone has an equal chance to succeed in the United States.

However, as the second plot on the top row shows, there were some minor differences by age with respect to beliefs about the legal system. Older

respondents had higher levels of trust in the legal system and also did not exhibit any changes over this time period. Younger respondents perceived the legal system as less fair in the preelection period, and this dropped by the post-election survey. However, these changes were not statistically significant at conventional levels.

The same holds true for beliefs about the fairness of the economic system. Respondents of both age groups felt slightly lower levels of agreement with the statement that the economic system gives everyone a fair chance after the election than in the preelection period, but this was not statistically significant. There also

were no differences in support for the Constitution or beliefs that every person's votes are counted equally.

However, as shown above, respondents of both age groups were more likely to agree that elections were capable of producing real change in politics before the election than in its aftermath. It decreased sharply immediately after the election, and decreased again one year later.

GOING FORWARD

Undeniably, the election of President Obama was an historic moment in U.S. history. The 2008 election captured the attention of and mobilized many citizens who typically do not participate

in politics at particularly high levels, especially racial and ethnic minorities and younger people. These new recruits to the political process represent a step forward in addressing inequities in whose voices are represented by government officials. However, the 2012 Obama campaign is unlikely to benefit to the same extent from the high levels of interest that were generated by his historic candidacy in 2008. To counteract this, the Obama administration should focus its efforts on ameliorating the

low levels of trust in governmental institutions and efficacy that characterize many of the voters his campaign was so successful in mobilizing two years ago.

The results shown above are clear and consistent: young people and racial and ethnic minorities were greatly encouraged by the results of the 2008 election. However, Obama's election by itself is not sufficient to alleviate the persistent inequities in government responsiveness, particularly as they pertain to these groups.

In the more immediate future, Democratic candidates face a potentially difficult election season if they cannot maintain the coalition they built successfully in 2008. In particular, they may need to demonstrate their commitment to policies geared toward remedying social and economic inequalities and show that the rhetoric of "hope" and "change" was not empty. Community organizations may be able to play a crucial role by continuing to implement the mobilization strategies used in 2008. Such efforts may be even more important in 2010, and down the road in 2012, in light of developments like the Tea Party and the nearly unprecedented levels of successful mobilization in 2008.