

“What Will an Obama Presidency Mean for Black Economics?”

The 2008 presidential election is over a year away; however, it is not too early to see trends and to speculate about the outcome. Let's assume for a moment that Barack Obama will win the election. Should Black Americans expect a significant improvement in economic outcomes if Obama wins?

Because, for the most part in America, Blacks and Whites don't share close and intimate living relationships, and because there are so many sources of stereotype reinforcement, it is understandable why racism and discrimination persist. However, if a Black American is elected president (the highest political office in the land), then shouldn't such an event cause a change in perceptions about Black Americans? Shouldn't an Obama presidency cause White Americans to see through stereotypes and accept Black Americans as equals? If realized, wouldn't the latter situation produce improved economic outcomes for Black Americans?

While the foregoing questions represent a logical thought experiment, they serve as a prime example of what economists call “the fallacy of composition.” Let's examine the questions and discover the fallacies.

It is true that racism and discrimination are based on, and are nurtured by, stereotypes. Therefore, the apparent destruction of a stereotype should kick the legs out from under racism and discrimination.

The first fallacy in the argument, however, is that Barack Obama is not really viewed as a Black American—especially by White Americans. He claims Blackness, he has a Black American spouse, and he has lived in, and worked closely with, Black communities. Nevertheless, from the very outset, and even today, when the media discusses Obama, it never fails to mention that he is the product of an African and a White American. In this case, he is not even mulatto (a mix of Black and White Americans). In the 1960s, certain Black leaders brought to light the fact that White Americans willingly accept people of color from other parts of the world, but, because of our history, they find it very difficult to fully accept Black Americans. Therefore, Black American stereotypes that enable racism will remain untouched by an Obama Presidency.

Revelation of the first fallacy precludes the need to explore the remaining fallacy. However, for completeness, we proceed.

Is it possible for an Obama presidency to stimulate White Americans' recognition of Black Americans as equal? Why no! Why not? Because, while the media may praise Obama and even facilitate his election, the media will simultaneously continue its endless portrayal of Black Americans, especially Black males, in images and letters as a people who are incapable of handling their affairs (viz. recent stories about subprime loans and other fraudulent financial transactions), and as violent, thuggish gangs who maim and kill their own (viz. recent stories about gang activity in Philadelphia, Trenton, and West Palm Beach). In addition, the media will continue to illuminate, probe, and elongate concerns about Blacks in “high places” until legal officials have no choice but to pull them down (viz. reports about the former mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and the quarterback of a professional football team).

While crime is abhorrent and should be rooted out wherever it exists, there is no denying that Black Americans are cited in the media for criminal activity orders of magnitude times more than they are cited for positive (non-entertainment) contributions to American life.

For example, it is an anathema that the media presents pictorials of Black Americans as childlike and ignorant victims of fraud, but seldom do the media provide pictorials of the CEOs of the corporations that promulgate the fraud. Similarly, the media often describes in great detail the acts of Black gangs, but seldom, if ever, do the media go behind the scene and describe in detail how White owners and producers of music studios coerce Black rappers into developing extremely violent and vulgar “Gangsta Rap” music and videos, which serve as powerful shapers of Black youth behavior. Finally, the media looks for every opportunity to pull down Black politicians on corruption charges, but seldom do we hear about the leadership of companies that provide incentives for these politicians to go astray. No doubt about it; wrong is just wrong. However, it would be just if the statement “equal treatment under the law” was translated into “equal treatment by the media” and enforced.

It should now be clear that an Obama presidency won’t change circumstances very much, if at all, for Black Americans. Because White perceptions of Black won’t change as a result of his presidency, racism and discrimination will persist, and there is no reason to expect that economic conditions will change. Consequently, as part of developing a long-term strategy, Black Americans should seriously consider whether a vote for Obama is in their best interest. At a minimum, if the decision is to vote for Obama, then Blacks should be clear about the outcome. As the deciding vote, they may produce an Obama win, but they should expect no significant change in their economic outcomes.

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