Introduction

Words are important, words matter, and the implication that they don't, I think, diminishes how important it is to speak to the American people directly about making America as good as its promise.

–Barack Obama

On June 14, 1997, a balmy spring day in La Jolla, California, President William Clinton rose from his chair to offer a motivational commencement address to the graduating class of the University of California, San Diego. The class looked like a mosaic of America's races and ethnicities, and the setting provided the perfect backdrop for Clinton to introduce his new race initiative. In the comforting and informal rhetoric that only Clinton could espouse, he laid out his vision:

> I want to lead the American people in a great and unprecedented conversation about race. In community efforts from Lima, Ohio, to Billings, Montana, in remarkable experiments in cross-racial communications like the uniquely named ERACISM, I have seen what Americans can do if they let down their guards and reach out their hands.… Honest dialogue will not be easy at first. We'll all have to get past defensiveness and fear and political correctness and other barriers to honesty. Emotions may be rubbed raw, but we must begin. (Clinton 1997, 881)

And with these words, Clinton started a new discourse that he called "One America in the 21st Century: The President's Initiative on Race." The *Civil Rights Monitor*, a quarterly publication that reports on civil rights issues, lauded the initiative as an opportunity for the president to articulate his vision of a unified America, educate the nation about the facts surrounding race, encourage political leaders to bridge the racial divide, and develop solutions to address racial disparities across multiple

issue areas. But the most important thing Clinton proposed, the initiative's overarching goal, said the *Monitor*, was the call for a constructive dialogue. Unlike any president before him, Clinton recognized that solutions to inequities in education, health, and economic well-being would have to include difficult conversations about race – not just at a policy level but in communities as well. As a major component of the initiative, Clinton established an advisory committee consisting of prominent educators, lawyers, politicians, and business executives. The seven-member advisory board was designed to counsel the president in his efforts to "promote a national dialogue on controversial issues surrounding race."

Never before had the Oval Office launched such a national dialogue. Never had the president asked the country to come to local town hall meetings or community gatherings – the public formats Clinton would use to facilitate discussions – and engage in an honest discourse on race.[1] In addition, while most presidents had been reactive on many of the major race initiatives or policies stemming from the Oval Office, Clinton wanted to signify the uniqueness of his initiative by launching this dialogue when there was not a pressing concern.[2] In the La Jolla speech, he exclaimed, "Now, when there is more cause for hope than fear, when we are not driven to it by some emergency or social cataclysm, now is the time we should learn together, talk together."[3]

Although Clinton's initiative was distinct in many regards, it was also reminiscent of the civil rights efforts of President Lyndon Johnson and the transcending speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And as they had done, Clinton urged the American public to draw on the egalitarian spirit that had prevailed in other moments when racial differences surfaced. Though well intentioned, however, the initiative was met with the fiercest criticism. Some saw it as an opportunistic ploy for Clinton to increase his approval ratings (Kim 2000, 2002). Others saw it as doomed to failure because a public forum was not the appropriate space to handle the complexities of race (Smith 1998).

But the criticism was driven by a deeper skepticism, and the voices of doubt were guided by this question: What good is it simply to talk

[1] Clinton used numerous town hall meetings throughout the country to elicit citizens' comments, thus taking full advantage of deliberative democracy.

[2] However, Minchin (2008) suggests that the more than 200 black churches that burned from January 1995 through September 1998 provide an incentive for the Clinton administration to address race relations.

[3] William Clinton, "Commencement Address at the University of California, San Diego in La Jolla, California," Pub. Papers, June 14, 1997.

about race? The media took turns jabbing at Clinton's initiative. Thomas Sowell wrote a column in the *Chicago Sun-Times* with a disparaging title, "Talk Is Cheap in National 'Dialogue' on Race." The *Boston Globe* ran a piece that dubbed Clinton's efforts "presidential Oprah," referencing the famous talk show host who had a talent for engaging in a soothing dialogue with predominantly women viewers. By the end of the president's initiative in the summer of 1998, the media had lampooned Clinton's appeal as a "failure," "blind to reality," and nothing more than "timid" talks.[4]

Indeed, the criticism was fierce but it may not have been warranted. Clinton's initiative did lead to change. The issue of race became a more salient topic, not just in the press but also among the public and in Congress. Gallup public opinion polls showed that in each quarter following the announcement of the initiative, the percentage of individuals who believed race was a problem in America ticked up, moving from nearly 0 percent right before Clinton offered his remarks to 3 percent by the end of the year. For African Americans, the percentage catapulted from 7 percent to 12 percent in the same time period. The last time the issue of race rose that high in the Gallup polls came after the Rodney King race riots in the early 1990s, during President George W. Bush's administration.

Congressional leaders, too, began talking more about race. During the 105th Congress, the number of statements on the House floor that referenced a racial minority group or discussed a minority issue increased by 30 percent from the previous congressional session.[5] Representatives also introduced nearly twice as many bills that addressed race disparities on the House floor during the 18-month period Clinton's race initiative lasted. Even cabinet members shifted their focus toward addressing racial

[4] Peter Baker and Michael Fletcher, "'Conversations about Race': Just Talk? White House Searching For a Way to Turn Rhetoric into Change," *Washington Post*, June 14,1998, sec. A; Clarence Page, "Keeping Count: Saving Clinton's Race Initiative," *Chicago Tribune*, June 17, 1998, 27; Howard Kurtz, "In Dallas, Meeting on Race is All-Black and Closed to Public," *Washington Post*, December 7,1997, AOl; Stephen Holmes, "Critics Say Clinton Panel About Race Lacks Focus," *New York Times*, October 12, 1997, 17; George Will, "Advisory Board on Race Relations Blind to Realities," *Houston Chronicle*, September 28, 1998, 3C; Steven Waldman, "Sweating to the Oldies," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 8, 1997, 35; Kenneth Walsh, "Hand Holding as Policy," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 23, 1997, 20; Christopher Caldwell, "The Disgrace Commission," *Weekly Standard*, December 8, 1997, 25; Carl T. Rowan, "Race Initiative Must Be More Than Just Talk," *Houston Chronicle*, July 4, 1998, 16A.

[5] *Congressional Record*. Daily ed. Available at: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/LegislativeData.php?&n=Record; Accessed 3/19/13.

disparities. Surgeon General and Assistant Secretary of Health David Satcher, an African American appointed during the race initiative, led the way by increasing awareness on health and health disparities through the minority media – appearing on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network shows like *BET Tonight* to discuss the AIDS epidemic in the black community and offering interviews with black magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony* to promote Clinton's race initiative.

Though some described the increased race-related dialogue as inconsequential and though that dialogue faded soon after the advisory report in the summer of 1998, Clinton's initiative nevertheless had reverberating effects both in government and in society.

Clinton's use of dialogue to address racial inequality poses some interesting questions for scholars who wrestle with the role that race should play in the political process. Most notably, how have politicians' remarks on race shaped public policies and society's attitudes? On the reverse side, what are the political and societal implications of a federal government that moves away from discussing race and attempts to introduce race-neutral policies to a changing American public that has begun to embrace a "colorblind" society?

This book attempts to answer these questions by delving into the influence of race-conscious dialogue in government. Rather than considering political discussions and rhetoric as symbolic and inconsequential forms of politics, the book conceptualizes them as forms of government action that can shape institutions and societal norms. The chapters that follow show that race-conscious speech changes the policy agenda by initiating political dialogue and producing both race-specific and class-based policies that remedy racial inequality. Not only do federal politicians' statements about racial and ethnic minority concerns lead to a greater number of public policies that address those concerns, but these discussions resonate within the minority community and change individual lifestyle behaviors in areas where the government has recently taken a larger role, such as health and health care. Unfortunately, most of the American public continues to disapprove of politicians' rhetoric that highlights race. Thus, addressing racial and ethnic inequality continues to be a tug of war between avoiding the backlash of the majority in this nation while advocating for minority interests. Even though this paradox looms over politicians' discussions of race, race-conscious political speech, viewed in its entirety, is the mechanism by which marginalized groups find a place in the democratic process. And such race-conscious discussions have ramifications both within and outside of government.

THE EERIE SILENCE OF RACE

A long-standing political debate has taken shape in America over the role that race-specific speech and policy should play in addressing racial inequalities. In one sphere, scholars advise that government programs and laws should be designed to target the specific inequalities that racial and ethnic minority groups experience. This approach implicitly suggests that politicians should speak about race and that, when they do, race-based policies should follow. In another sphere, scholars believe that government should take a colorblind approach and create policies that do not favor any specific racial group. A colorblind approach to policy has come to mean the gradual silence of speaking about racial inequality in government. Although strong proponents have emerged on both sides, the latter perspective has gained ground over time.

The major accomplishments of the 1960s civil rights movement laid the groundwork for upward mobility among racial and ethnic minorities. As a consequence, the 1970s and 1980s saw a growing black middle class, more of whose members had increased their ranks in executive positions in the business sector, enrolled in higher education, and moved into higher status communities.[6] As a verse in the theme song from the popular 1970s show *The Jeffersons* proclaimed, some members of minority groups were finally getting "a piece of the pie." However, this was not the case for all minorities. Inequality among the poorest African Americans continued to stagnate (Wilson 1978).

In William Julius Wilson's (1980, 23) provocative yet engaging work, *The Declining Significance of Race*, he forced scholars to reassess the role of race in inequality by arguing that the modern industrial period had made class a more significant issue than race. The deemphasis on race that was voiced through this perspective was later refined by Wilson to focus on public policy. In Wilson's later writings he stated that the Democratic Party needed to promote new policies that were race neutral to address inequality in America. He wrote that "race-neutral policies could … lead to programs that would especially benefit the more disadvantaged members of minority groups – without being minority

[6] Mukherjee (2011, 179) argues that "displays of African American affluence and conspicuous consumption, circulating with the performative repertoires of 'bling' hip-hop cultures, add force to claims about 'dusky Donald Trumps and brown-skinned Bill Gateses,' visible proof of unprecedented gains made by a new entrepreneurial vanguard within black popular culture."

policies" (Wilson 1990, 81). Later, Wilson would dub the idea that minorities could benefit from race-neutral policies the "hidden agenda."[7]

Even before this strategy took shape, scholars writing in the post–civil rights era noticed a growing silence in explicit discussions of race-related issues in the contemporary American political discourse (Prager 1987). This silence existed not only with regard to policy but also with regard to elections. The silence received life as a political strategy in a small paper that the Democratic Party commissioned Charles Hamilton to write in 1976. In this paper, Hamilton encouraged presidential candidates to minimize their discussions of race-specific programs, which could alienate white voters. Instead, he argued that politicians should address issues that affected blacks and whites equally, such as unemployment, because this type of "deracialized" rhetoric could broaden Democrats' support (Hamilton 1977).

Politicians have come to regard a deemphasis on race in political strategies as a sacrifice that must be made for the greater good of building political coalitions and improving broader conditions in America. This approach to race-neutral discourse became mainstream, and it appeared to guide President Barack Obama's first term in office. In 2012, for example, Derek T. Dingle, the editor-in-chief of *Black Enterprise* magazine sat down for an interview with President Obama and asked him to respond to criticism that his administration had not done enough to support black businesses. The president quickly offered a race-neutral response, saying, "I want all Americans to have opportunity. I'm not the president of black America. I'm the president of the United States of America, but the programs that we have put in place have been directed at those folks who are least able to get financing through conventional means, who have been in the past locked out of opportunities that were [supposed to be] available to everybody." Besides conveying the sanguine notion that Obama wanted to help all Americans, these words also embodied the implicit or tangential role that race plays in addressing race-related problems for liberal politicians.

The silence on race has even taken place among conservatives. For conservatives, limiting the discussion of race is an opportunity to embrace individualism and shun the divisive social identities that hinder greater integration and upward mobility. Channeling champions of racial

[7] Minority organizations have incorporated a dual agenda that not only addresses racial minority issues through civil rights but also addresses broader socio-economic issues (Hamilton and Hamilton 1992).

equality, conservatives proclaim that the absence of a racial dialogue erases the "color-line" coined by Fredrick Douglass and moves us toward a nation where individuals can experience the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., where people are judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

The retreat from race-specific policies, exemplified by the scaling back of affirmative action programs and the introduction of race-neutral policy, was undertaken by liberals in the 1990s and reinforced by conservative rhetoric (Steinberg 1995). Minorities' unprecedented gains coupled with a new liberal agenda led to calls for a "post-racial" or "colorblind" society. And while liberal and conservative paths have been different, their goals have pushed them in the same direction – toward an eerie silence on explicit racial discussions.

The discourse on race moves beyond political strategy to be an uneasy and difficult subject for both government officials and society in general. John Jackson (2008) eloquently captures this fear in *Racial Paranoia*, arguing that in sanitizing the public discourse of the aspects of racial discussions that can divide us, whether this be racist speech or a dialogue that looks to advantage one race over the other, we have become hesitant to talk about the racial problems that still persist.

The political latent silence on race in a colorblind society has strong implications for government discourse on race. It suggests that the minority experience and the inequalities that lie within this experience can be overshadowed by the utopian laconism of race-neutral policy that is fueled by a race-neutral dialogue. This leaves racial inequality vulnerable to our noble ambitions to move beyond a dialogue on race. Thus, the problems of inequality targeted by an earlier black generation, many of whom spoke explicitly about race, may be marginalized by a diminishing dialogue on race (Harris 2012).

In examining the race-conscious versus race-neutral debate, the academic literature has primarily eschewed the discourse taking place in government and focused on the end results of race-specific policies. But the policies that are actually produced only reveal a portion of the attention politicians devote to addressing race. The few works that have considered the rhetoric of politicians have used only isolated anecdotes or specific case studies. While these approaches provide a rich context for specific incidents, they fail to offer us a more holistic understanding of the discourse on race that has taken place in the chambers of the national government. Because of this limitation, the role of explicit discussion of race in hindering or facilitating racial equality remains a black box.

The discourse taking place in government does not end with policy creation. We should conceptualize it instead as part of the larger political process that includes policy implementation and policy evaluation. But even more, we should also account for the societal and cultural shifts that follow from such dialogue. If we fail to consider fully the ramifications of engaging in a political dialogue on race, we address only a fragment of how rhetoric feeds into the democratic process. We require a theoretical perspective that accounts for the larger political discourse in government and clarifies how that discourse interacts with different federal institutions as well as with the American public.

DISCURSIVE GOVERNANCE AND RACE: POLITICAL DISCOURSE AS A FORM OF GOVERNANCE

My theory of discursive governance expands on our understanding of political rhetoric. Politicians' words serve as the impetus for change on inequality in America. Thus, my revision to the race-conscious versus race-neutral debate enlarges our understanding of how the dialogue on race changes public policy and cultural norms. In doing so, I reinforce the link between the deliberative process of politicians and the American populus.

Deliberative democracy offers a base for my understanding. In deliberative democracy, politicians give reasons for their governmental decisions and offer responses to the reasons of citizens' concerns in turn (Gutmann and Thompson 2009, 3). This dialogue is not engaged in for the sake of argument, but rather it is purposeful deliberation that is aimed at producing a governmental policy or guiding governmental action. The political dialogue of politicians becomes the political agenda that government officials use to craft policies, implement initiatives, and evaluate federal programs. A political discourse that explicitly references the experiences of people of color and the disadvantaged state of racial and ethnic minority communities broadens the political agenda to capture the implication of policies. The discourse on race cannot be one-sided, where only a favorable dialogue on race exists for supporting governmental programs that explicitly advantage minority groups. The counter positions of a racial dialogue that are voiced through the contours of reverse racism and unfair handouts broaden the discourse to understand the limitations of race-based policies and programs. The dialogue on race is also laced with bigotry and racism that sometimes are not easy to accept, and it is often difficult to even believe that individuals still harbor these emotions.

Yet even racist speech, however repugnant, adds to the political discourse by exposing the bigotry that still lingers in institutional norms. When a dialogue on race becomes a part of the deliberative process, politicians' decisions and governmental actions are informed by the state of race relations in America. Thus, I begin this narrative with the pervasive influence that words have in shaping the government agenda.

The political dialogue on race, however, also permeates throughout society. Thus, to explore the important role of a race-conscious political rhetoric, I embrace the notion that political deliberation is a form of governance that is received and acted upon by the public, and consequently is mirrored in the public sphere. Perhaps President Roosevelt knew this best. His comforting words, which assuaged citizens' fears as he presented mundane topics such as banking in informal and personable conversations, indicate that Roosevelt knew the power of speaking plainly to the American people. The fireside chat became a place where he could shed the dissonance that emerged from his political critics and the doubts that lingered within the nation. Swayed by cogent argument and reason, citizens leaned on Roosevelt's discourse to shape their own perceptions of the failing banking system, the economic policies of the New Deal, and World War II.

Both Roosevelt's actions and Clinton's racial discourse exemplify my thoughts. The political discourse of government and the president's discussions in particular influence the entire policy-making process. When presidents speak about race, they set the agenda and force other branches of government to engage with this dialogue.[8] More important, the dialogue in government on race connects to the vibrant and direct discussion of inequities that exist in America along racial lines. But to say that inequality shifts with the ebb and flow of political rhetoric on race may be too simplistic. It is not the mere words that bring about change but rather the rippling effects of dialogue that occur in the larger public sphere that shape the minds of citizens.

If words have the power to influence attitudes and perceptions, then the absence of a race-conscious discussion must render the political process uninformed and uncertain about the state of racial equality

[8] Discursive governance does not have to precede policy formulation. It can follow the successful passage of bills or the implementation of law. Discursive governance can work in a separate sphere from policy formulation. But it can also intersect with policy formation. Because these spheres are separate, establishing a winning coalition by adopting a race-neutral policy approach does not mean that discursive governance may not occur during a later stage in the policy process, for example, during policy implementation.

in America. When left with race-neutral dialogue, citizens are forced to ask about the relevance of race-specific programs and policies that attempt to address an issue that is rarely discussed. The lack of a discussion on race produces an even more egregious consequence for political elites as it lulls the conscience of politicians to believe that racial inequality in America is no longer in need of redress or, even worse, is nonexistent.

DEFINING POLITICAL RHETORIC ON RACE

Like many scholars who explore race in sociology and communication (e.g., Bobo 1997; Coe and Schmidt 2012), I consider a broad definition of race that examines discussions of racial and ethnic minorities. In the post–civil rights era, the concerns and interests of underrepresented racial minorities have become linked. More important, politicians have come to use references to race and ethnicity interchangeably in the public discourse (Coe and Schmidt 2012). Political discussion on race may involve issues such as affirmative action, quotas, and minority set-asides, and it may take the form of uplifting dialogues or hate speech delivered in the form of racist rants. However, these discussions may also take "sanitized forms" to avoid explicit reference to race (Himelstein 1983).

Thus, the correct classification of a race-related discussion requires scholars to actually read through each document and consider both the meaning of the discussion and its context. When millions of documents have to be reviewed, as was the case of this book, this task becomes infeasible. Hence, I used computer algorithms to mimic how human coders would classify the documents, capturing the public's intuition of what they may perceive as a dialogue on race in American government. The statistical complexity used to measure these speeches is left to later chapters. For now, I will simply emphasize that the use of race throughout this book is not shaped by keywords that reference race but rather by the context of the discourse.

From a theoretical standpoint, I am interested in the entire discourse of politicians. Up to this point, I have referred to political discourse as though it is one unified speech. However, the political discourse put forth by politicians is multifaceted and widespread. Presidents, for example, can address the American people through college commencement speeches, press conferences, signing statements, State of the Union addresses, and even strategically rehearsed responses in presidential