

How White Victimhood Fuels Republican Politics

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On Nov. 4, 2008, Barack Obama, then [a senator from Illinois](#), was elected the first Black president of the United States. His election was seen as a hopeful moment in America and [ushered](#) in [lots](#) of [think pieces](#) and [reporting](#) that his presidency was the start of a new “post-racial” society. At long last — in the eyes of many, at least — there was hope that the racial wounds that have long divided Black and white Americans would heal.

That, of course, never happened. Even at the time, [certain white voters](#) refused to vote for Obama because of his race, and a [rise in hate crimes](#) followed his win. Moreover, in the lead up to Obama’s first election, some [polls showed that](#) only about one-third of white Americans (38 percent) thought Obama would help race relations, compared with 60 percent of Black Americans. Moreover, a plurality of white Americans thought (or, perhaps, hoped) that his candidacy would have no impact on race relations, essentially upholding the status quo. What’s more, some white voters during this period [started to become resentful](#) of a Black man ascending to the highest political office. And [that backlash](#), in part, spurred the election of former President Donald Trump eight years later.

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It is noteworthy that Democrats saw things quite differently than Republicans — indeed the clearest trend in the chart above is the polarization of views on this question along party lines. The percentage of Democrats who say there is at least “some” discrimination against whites has steadily decreased since the turn of the century, and this trend is consistent across both Roper and PRRI datasets. These trends are also consistent with new research that builds on Norton and Sommers’s initial work. In a [forthcoming paper](#) in the journal [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a team of researchers from Tufts, Harvard and the VA Bedford Healthcare System found that race and partisanship shape perceptions of racism as a zero-sum game. “Liberal White Americans saw racism as a zero-sum game they were winning by a lot, moderate White Americans saw it as a game they were winning by only a little,” the researchers wrote, “and conservative White Americans saw it as a game they were losing.”

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