



BY RONALD BROWNSTEIN

## Separate but Equal

On one side, Americans open to the nation's more diverse face. On the other, Americans dubious about change.



With a Kenyan father, childhood years in the developing world, and a mixed-race heritage, President Obama embodies the demographic changes reconfiguring the United States into a “world nation” of unprecedented diversity.

He also may be a Rorschach test for how Americans feel about those powerful forces.

Those who believe that these demographic changes are revitalizing the U.S. are much more favorable to Obama than those who find them troubling, according to the latest All-state/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor poll (see p. 24). That doesn't mean that opposition to Obama is primarily, or even largely, driven by racial resentment. But it does suggest that attitudes about the nation's changing racial composition now overlap and reinforce the more familiar ideological divides, such as differences over social issues and the role of government, that separate the two political parties' electoral coalitions.

The United States is experiencing some of its most tumultuous demographic changes ever. The Census Bureau recently reported that minorities now represent more than 36 percent of the nation's population, up from 31 percent in 2000. Minorities make up nearly half of Americans younger than 18 and could represent an absolute majority of them by decade's end.

The Heartland Monitor poll, which surveyed 1,000 adults (as well as oversamples of Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans) from May 18 to 22, asked respondents for their reaction to those changes. Not surprisingly,

Hispanics and Asian-Americans, the fastest-growing groups, were the most positive. About 60 percent of each group said that these trends would strengthen the U.S. by continuing “the American tradition of welcoming people of all backgrounds.”

But only 39 percent of whites and 45 percent of African-Americans agreed. Instead, 51 percent of blacks and 53 percent of whites said that the “trends are troubling,” “happening too quickly,” and fundamentally changing the nation's “character and values.”

Regardless of their attitude toward demographic changes, African-Americans remain overwhelmingly positive about Obama and his agenda. But among whites, perceptions about the country's transformation open a distinct fault line. Whites who view the changes positively are more optimistic about the economy, more positive on Obama, and more open to an activist role for government than those who find them troubling. Frequently, the differences are enormous.

Among whites enthusiastic about the changes, for instance, about seven in 10 expect the economy to improve over the next year. Just four in 10 of those troubled by the trends agreed. Whites uneasy with the transformation are almost twice as likely as those comfortable with it to say they have less opportunity than their parents did.

Attitudes toward government follow similar tracks. In responding to one question, a 51 percent majority of whites troubled by the changes endorsed the Reaganite sentiment that “gov-

ernment is not the solution to our economic problems; government is the problem.” Fewer than three in 10 whites comfortable with the trends agreed. And while three-fifths of the uneasy whites prefer a conservative agenda of tax cuts and deregulation to jump-start the economy, more than three-fifths of the welcoming whites backed a Democratic-leaning approach of public spending on infrastructure and scientific research.

The differences over Obama are equally stark. More than three-fifths of uneasy whites said they *disapprove* of Obama's job performance; nearly three-fifths of the receptive whites *approve*. A majority of the uneasy whites said that the president's program is reducing opportunity for people like them; only one-fourth of whites receptive to the changes agree.

In all these ways, attitudes about the propulsive racial transformation have intertwined with the broader set of beliefs that demarcate the two parties' coalitions. The groups most open to America's changing face, with the exception of African-Americans, are all components of the modern Democratic electorate. That includes not only Hispanics and Asian-Americans but also younger and college-educated whites, especially women. The groups most dubious of the changes are central to the contemporary Republican coalition, particularly working-class, rural, and older whites.

Many of those skeptical voters were reared in a world where a young white man could trade a high school diploma for a job on the assembly line and provide his family a comfortable life. Now, with those opportunities evaporating, many of them may view racial change, along with foreign competition and corporate disloyalty, as the most compelling explanation of “what went wrong,” notes Brent McGoldrick, a senior vice president at Financial Dynamics, the communications consulting firm that conducts the Heartland Monitor poll. Government, most of these embattled whites believe, has compounded their problems with policies that benefit the poor or the rich, always at their expense.

Particularly on issues relating to government's role and Obama's performance, the whites comfortable with racial change express attitudes much closer to the dominant perspectives among minorities. With the white community separating along those lines, our politics increasingly divides between a racially diverse Democratic coalition open to both demographic change and government activism, and a preponderantly white Republican coalition centered on voters uneasy about both. Obama didn't create that alignment. But it is hardening around him—and pointing toward a grueling 2012 race fought between separate but equal coalitions that are antithetical in their beliefs, priorities, and racial composition, yet are once again almost identical in size. ■