Introduction: My president was black. So what?

My president is black, my Lambo's blue
And I'll be goddamned if my rims ain't too
My mama ain't at home, and daddy's still in jail
Trying to make a plate, anybody seen the scale?

-"My President," Young Jeezy

The end of any presidential administration usually brings a slew of retrospectives and reflections on the outgoing president's accomplishments and prospective legacy. Those assessments took on an especially important role as Barack Obama ended his historic term as President of the United States. One could not go past an American newsstand in late 2016 and early 2017 without seeing a newspaper or magazine featuring some article discussing the significance of the Obama presidency. The foci of these articles varied. *Rolling Stone*, for instance, published a special collector's edition compiling all of the feature articles its staff had written about him. The back cover included three of the nine previous covers which featured President Obama's photograph (see Dickinson 2017, 7; *Rolling Stone* 2017). *Time*'s special edition commissioned articles covering President Obama's successes and failures on issues such as foreign policy, LGBT rights, and racial issues (*Time* 2017). *People* magazine featured a breezy interview with Barack and Michelle Obama recounting their fondest memories of their eight years in the White House (Westfall 2016).

Many articles examined the significance of President Obama as the first African American[1] president. The Obamas sat for an interview with *Essence* magazine in which they assessed the racial significance of their tenures as

1 Please note I will use the terms "black" and "African American" interchangeably throughout this book.

president and first lady (De Luca 2016). In *Time* magazine, Maya Rhodan wrote that, "For a generation of [black] Americans, the president's race mattered in the most meaningful way" (Rhodan 2017, 53).

In part because of his prominence as a National Book Award winner and MacArthur genius, Ta-Nehisi Coates' cover article for *The Atlantic* was one of the more prominent retrospectives. The title of his article sums it up: "My President Was Black" (Coates 2017, 47). In the article, Coates cited Jay-Z, who recorded a song titled "My President Is Black" in 2010, as the implicit inspiration for his title (Coates 2017, 62). As an Atlantan, though, when I first saw the magazine cover, I thought of Young Jeezy's 2008 song, also called "My President Is Black" (Jenkins and Jones 2008). The song expresses pride at the thought of having a black president—one line even calls for Obama to be memorialized on a $5,000 bill. However, the lyrics still situate Jeezy in his own neighborhood experience: his mother still has to work; his father is incarcerated; and according to those who annotate hip hop lyrics, the protagonist in the song sells drugs to provide for his family (see Jenkins and Jones 2008; *Genius.com* n.d.).

In many ways, Young Jeezy's lyrics, which juxtapose the pride in the prospect of having a black president with the gritty reality of a black life that might not change outwardly because of that presidency, beautifully capture the irony Coates expresses in his tribute to Obama. Coates, who had the benefit of interviewing and interacting with President Obama on numerous occasions, recounts those encounters and his musings about those meetings and the 2016 election in his piece. He makes it clear that he often disagreed tactically with President Obama and found him to be naive on racial issues. He lamented the possibility that a Trump Administration would not stem the tide of police violence against blacks. At the same time, Coates wanted desperately to believe in the post-racial America that Obama imagined possible. Perhaps more important, Coates found himself able to embrace Obama's symbolic importance even as he disagreed with him and even as he realized that Obama's presidency would be followed by the Trump Administration. Coates talks about a feeling—a feeling that transcended his disagreements with the president. A feeling that Obama:

> had been responsible for the only time in my life when I felt, as the first lady had once said, proud of my country … The feeling was that little black boy touching the president's hair. It was watching Obama on the campaign trail, always expecting the worse and amazed the worst never happened. It was how I felt seeing Barack and Michelle during the inauguration … rising up out of the limo, rising up from fear, smiling, waving, defying despair, defying history, defying gravity. (Coates 2017, 66)

Clearly, there is no denying the symbolic importance of the Obama presidency. Still, many have struggled with how to critique him. Some, like Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, were marginalized for their critiques and panned for being too personal in their attacks (Malveaux 2016, xxxvii). Others, like Coates, struggled to balance their pride with their ethical and professional obligation to provide necessary critique. Julianne Malveaux, the economist and former president of Bennett College, introduced the anthology of her Obama-era op-ed pieces by using the term "ambivalence" to describe her assessment of the Obama presidency (Malveaux 2016, xxv, xxvi). She confessed that while she campaigned for Barack Obama's 2004 Senate campaign, she thought that as president, Obama "missed too many opportunities to be of special help to the African American community" (Malveaux 2016, xliii).

This echoed academic critiques leveled by political scientists after Obama's first term in office. Michael Dawson, for instance, noted that persistent black–white inequality in areas such as unemployment, income, housing, and health should temper blacks' enthusiasm for the Obama presidency, especially if those problems did not abate (Dawson 2011, 17–18). Similarly, Frederick Harris contended that the election of Barack Obama was symbolically important but substantively lacking. He argued, "If recognition is achieved for black Americans but structural barriers remain intact and unchallenged, then recognition without a commitment to eradicating racial inequality may actually end up further perpetuating inequality, despite the gains made by some" (Harris 2012, 186).

One of the challenges of balancing praise and critique was the reaction in black America. Michael Eric Dyson perhaps said it best when he noted that:

> gales of black pride have swept aside awareness of his flaws, and when those flaws are conceded, gusts of black defiance play down their meaning and significance. Mr. Obama's most ardent black fans ignore how he often failed to speak about race or use his powers to convene commissions or issue executive orders to lessen black suffering; his nastiest black critics lambast him as an ineffectual leader who has done little to protect blacks from racial assault or lift them from economic misery. Neither the haters nor the hagiographers do the Obama legacy justice. (Dyson 2016a, 7)

When Dyson talks about "gales of black pride," he is no doubt referring to President Obama's stratospheric approval ratings among blacks. Figure I.1 shows Gallup's weekly tracking of presidential job approval over the course of the Obama presidency, broken down by race and ethnicity. While President Obama began his presidency with job approval ratings above 60 percent

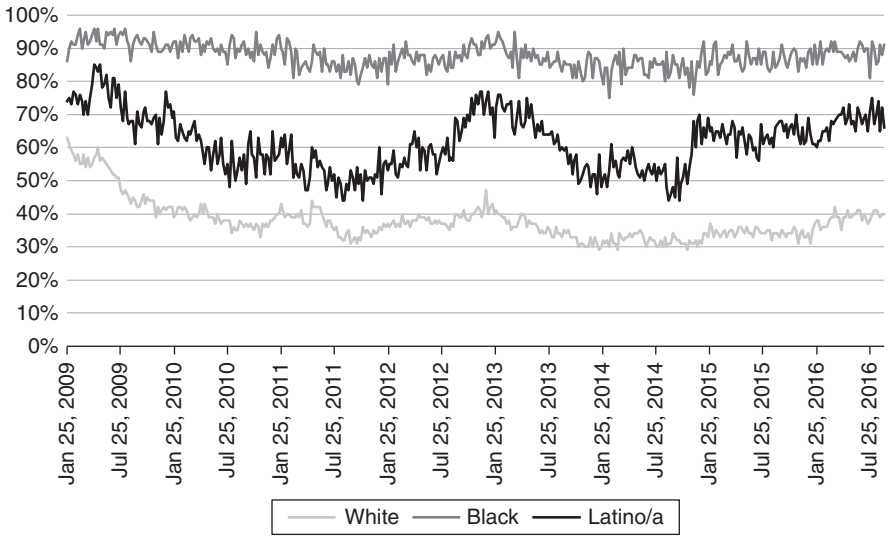

Figure I.1 Weekly presidential job approval ratings by race/ethnicity, Obama Administration
Source: Gallup (n.d.b).

among blacks, whites, and Latinos/as, his approval ratings quickly plummeted among whites. Though President Obama's ratings started to rebound in the final days of his presidency, he did not receive a job approval score of greater than 50 percent among whites after July 2009. Overall, he averaged a 38 percent approval rating among whites over the course of his presidency. President Obama's approval ratings also quickly fell among Latinos/as, though not as dramatically as they did among whites. His approval ratings rose and fell through the years among Latinos/as but mostly stayed above 50 percent despite the ebbs and flows. While Obama's approval rating among Latinos/as was lower than 50 percent for about 30 weeks during his presidency, it did rebound and generally stayed above 70 percent in the final three months of his term. On average, he enjoyed a 63 percent approval rating among Latinos/as.

Blacks, though, were a completely different story. President Obama enjoyed consistently high approval ratings among African American voters. Over the course of his term as president, Gallup found that Barack Obama's approval rating averaged nearly 88 percent among black voters. In only seven weeks of his presidency did Obama's approval rating fall below 80 percent among blacks—and even then, his approval rating was never lower than 75 percent (Gallup n.d.b).

When Malveaux reflected on her own assessment of the Obama presidency, she spoke of the need for dispassion (Malveaux 2016, xxvii). Now that

Obama is no longer president, I hope to contribute to that dispassionate conversation. In this book, I try to position my analysis somewhere between the haters and the hagiographers, to borrow from Dyson. My hope is to leverage the conclusion of the Obama Administration to start an open-minded examination of the attempts President Obama made to improve the lives of African Americans, which will allow me to make a preliminary assessment of whether or not those efforts worked.

As I write this, I recognize that the quandary of whether to commend or critique that Dyson, Malveaux, Coates, and others discuss is real. For many blacks, this ambivalence will likely not go away. The fact that it is real is worth examining empirically. How do blacks reconcile their pride in Obama's service to their frustration with the things that did not improve in black communities? How do we know for sure what Obama did and did not accomplish? Were our expectations reasonable?

I believe that the best approach to questions like these—especially in an era where evidence is contingent—is to be systematic in data collection and to allow the data to drive the analysis. I would be remiss to ignore the emotionalism—both positive and negative—that engulfs our discourse about the importance of the Obama presidency. However, as a scholar, my greatest contribution to this debate is to collect important new data that can shed empirical insights on Obama's successes and failures.

With this is mind, I submit this book as one the many empirical contributions to the study of the Obama presidency. Some have already entered this space with normative assessments of politics in the Obama era (see Glaude 2016), while others have undertaken quantitative and qualitative analyses of his rhetoric (see Dyson 2016b; Gillion 2016; Price 2016). Additional work has focused on public opinion (see Tesler 2016). These are all fine works, and it is a privilege to engage these scholars in this text. What I intend to contribute, however, is a more comparative tally of what Obama did in office for black Americans. I take seriously Julianne Malveaux's call to get past the emotion of the Obama era to actually count his accomplishments with respect to black uplift—both substantive and symbolic—and to place them in context with other presidents. This will help us see more clearly what he actually did for black people.

Chapter overview

With this in mind, I approach this question of what Obama accomplished for blacks in four steps, using a variety of methodological techniques. First, in Chapter 1, I introduce a normative theory of race and presidential

representation. Here, I synthesize the presidential power and deracialization literatures to make the claim that presidents are structurally constrained in their ability to address a host of issues of concern to blacks. As a result, they tend to address issues of race symbolically. Barack Obama, as the first black president and a black politician who rose to power by using deracialization, or a more race-neutral campaign strategy, will be particularly susceptible to resorting to more symbolic means of racial representation.

I then test this theory by examining both the racially substantive policies that have been implemented by the Obama Administration and by charting key indicators of black well-being relative to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. I organize this examination in parts. First, I examine substantive politics. In Chapter 2, I present a general overview of Obama's performance with respect to race and the state of racial inequality in America on a number of key indicators. Others, such as Michael Dawson, have undertaken similar projects. The benefit of my analysis is that while Dawson charts black–white inequalities to the dawn of the Obama era, I track key indicators throughout Obama's tenure in office. This allows me to gain a sense of how blacks fared socioeconomically, often across his entire term (Dawson 2011, ch. 4).

One of the other benefits of having a longer range of longitudinal data is that it allows the reader to get a sense of the temporal scope of black–nonblack inequality in the United States. Throughout the text, I will be making comparisons between key indicators and how blacks fared in the United States in different presidential administrations. Understanding how well blacks did from 2009 to 2016 is important, but having the contextual knowledge of how well they fared under the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush is particularly helpful. Comparative analyses were not always possible, but I incorporate them where I can.

I continue the comparative analysis by looking at presidential actions in Chapter 3. In Chapter 1, I suggest that presidents may be structurally constrained from initiating certain types of actions on behalf of blacks. However, they do have certain tools, such as executive orders, at their disposal through which they can set binding policy. To explore this further, I use a comparative content analysis of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama's executive orders to gain a sense of whether these presidents differed in the type and frequency of proactive steps they took to represent the interests of African Americans. I then explore these issues further by doing an analysis of racial actions taken at the Cabinet department level. Here, I use press release data from Departments of Labor, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education.

In Chapter 4, I start to incorporate an analysis of more symbolic politics. I start with the more substantive aspects of symbolic politics, looking at descriptive representation in presidential Cabinet, sub-Cabinet, and independent agency nominations. Presidential rhetoric can also serve substantive and symbolic purposes. In this chapter, I use a comparative analysis of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama's State of the Union Addresses to gain greater insight into the ways presidents make symbolic gestures toward African Americans and the extent to which they propose policies that are targeted toward black communities. I also examine the ways that presidents respond to questions about race in news conferences.

I shift to an analysis of pure symbolic politics in Chapter 5. Here, I look at arts, culture, and inspirational rhetoric. Who are the president and first lady inviting to the White House to entertain the nation and the world? What does this signal about their racial and cultural commitments? Later in the chapter, I look at the rhetoric of commencement addresses. In addition to examining the content of presidents' commencement speeches, I also incorporate a comparative analysis of first ladies' speeches to determine the ways that Michelle Obama contributed to the symbolic racial politics of her husband's presidency.

I end the empirical study with a look at black attitudes toward Barack Obama and aspirations regarding his presidency. In Chapter 6, I ask black citizens themselves to answer the question of whether symbolism is enough. Using qualitative and quantitative public opinion data, I ask blacks how satisfied they were with President Obama's performance on racial issues. I also examine the relationship between satisfaction with the president's racial performance and general job approval ratings and enthusiastic electoral support for President Obama in 2012.

By the end of the book, I hope to provide readers with important context with which to judge the Obama Administration. By explicitly comparing the performance of the Obama Administration to the Clinton and second Bush Administrations at critical junctures in this analysis, we can gain perspective on the limitations and possibilities of presidential power in being able to unilaterally address issues of racial inequality. Similarly, the comparative analysis of the presidents' symbolic behavior also provides some insight into the extent of President Obama's importance as a racial figurehead. Finally, by exploring public opinion data on reactions to the Obama Administration, we have the ability to understand black voters on their terms and to ascertain what their political desires and expectations were and to make distinctions—if necessary and appropriate—between black mass and elite opinion.

A brief note about what will not be covered

I should note at the outset of this book that there are a few worthy topics related to the Obama presidency that time and space will not allow me to cover. For instance, I will not cover foreign policy or civil liberties debates in this book. I look forward to future volumes which engage these and other important topics. Also, while I do not ignore the concerns of other minority groups, like Latinos/as and Asian Americans, this book focuses primarily on African Americans. Again, I expect that other colleagues will produce important scholarship on these questions. I also hope to contribute to those debates in future projects.