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OBAMA'S BALANCING ACT

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"The President-elect's well-known life history puts him in a unique position to ally blacks and Latinos in a way they haven't been able to effect themselves."

It was one of the many unknowns of the 2008 campaign: Would Latinos, an increasingly significant voting demographic, vote for a black man for President? Initially, the question was only hypothetical. A majority of Latinos supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries (as did many blacks), as well as many Democrats who figured her nomination was a foregone conclusion. But when Obama surged and Clinton bowed out of the race midyear, her supporters were forced to make new choices. The picture shifted. The Latino question suddenly became a burning one, fraught with the tension that had characterized so many discussions about black-brown relations since the last election cycle, especially in big cities such as Los Angeles. Tensions that had been covered regionally were recalibrated on a national scale, and it was often painful to see: Surveys and stories concluded that Latinos harbored some of the same antiblack feelings as whites; blacks felt unsupported by Latinos, adding to anxieties and resentment they had been feeling for years about immigration remaking their neighborhoods in more ways than one. The come-together diversity that Obama was preaching as salvation for an ailing America would be put to a serious and somewhat unexpected test.

The worry was all for naught. In November, Obama won a convincing 70 percent of the Latino vote. In those numbers were new and younger voters that Obama had worked so hard to cultivate, but it was still something of a surprise that Latinos went so solidly blue in battleground states like Nevada, Colorado and New Mexico. Those who thought Latino reticence might cost Obama the election and

open up new interethnic wounds breathed a sigh of relief.

Other circumstances helped. Immigration rights, a key Latino issue that had been controversial and high-profile in recent years, virtually disappeared during the presidential campaign, thanks to a rapidly tanking economy and a dysfunctional Republican party. Pretty much the only issues left standing by October were the economy and wedge issues such as abortion and gay marriage (another notable casualty of '08 was the issue that started the whole hope-and-change revolution in the first place, the Iraq War). The absence of immigration as a major talking point and potential wedge issue of its own certainly helped Democrats of all colors coalesce around Obama as he headed toward the finish line and victory. Helping the cause was Republican abandonment of immigration reform as it became clear that it was one of many issues dividing conservatives from moderates and fragmenting the once-cohesive GOP.

In the end, the cause of electing Obama prevailed. Yet the problems and the potential advantages that lie at the intersection of black and brown remain very much alive, though undiscussed. It's too early to know if Obama can or wants to step into that intersection, but it is safe to say that politics are stacked against it. Take the issue of employment, for example. Organized labor is a powerful Democratic constituency that has been a great friend to mostly Latino immigrant workers, as it should be. Yet black employment has eroded in places where immigrant employment has risen. We seem to be unable to talk about this scenar-

io without either demonizing immigrants or dismissing blacks as paranoid, but there is a bigger picture and a middle ground here that can be defined only by strong leadership. Obama has tread lightly on this so far, saying during one debate earlier this year that he doesn't believe in "scapegoating" immigrants for the ills of black inner cities. Neither do I. But the question now is, what *does* he believe in?

Whatever his plan turns out to be, Obama is most valuable in the meantime as a symbol. This is no small thing. The President-elect's well-known life history puts him in a unique position to ally blacks and Latinos in a way they haven't been able to effect themselves. Specifically, he personifies both race and immigration in an authentic way: a black man born in the United States and son of an immigrant father from Kenya, Obama has lived both as an American and as an outsider from another country. He has had to find both his American identity and his foreign one, then synthesize them in a way that made sense. The child of a single white mother, Obama first had to "discover" that he was a black man and subject to all the social barriers that entails. He later traveled to his native village in Kenya to discover for himself homeland roots that are so crucial to anybody who, like Obama Sr., came to America seeking a better life. Obama talked up this duality during the campaign, stressing both the family values and hard work associated with immigrants as well as the civil rights struggle and its legacy of social justice associated with blacks. It was a powerful counter to the heated campaign rhetoric about small-town "real Americans"—code language for whites. In the Republican courting of Joe and Jane Six-Pack (or Joe the Plumber), blacks and browns saw themselves, once again, relegated to the margins of the American myth.

But a common grievance of exclusion doesn't mean commonality across the board. Black grievances stem from an ongoing civil rights and equal rights movement thwarted by a conservative backlash that's been going on 40 years; Latino grievances also center around equal treatment and sometimes racism, yet they often proceed from the perspective of the immigrant rather than the native but estranged "other." Obama's best hope for bridging this complex gap is his focus on developing opportunities for the next generation. Let's face it, race and immigration, for all the space between them, frequently end up in the same hellish place with which young people are all too familiar: unsafe neighborhoods, gangs, failing schools. Addressing those things won't erase ethnic and historical differences, but it will help the differences matter less.

This is hardly a new idea. Martin Luther King's greatest unfinished business was a campaign for poor people; he realized that continued poverty would render civil rights gains meaningless, and though black poverty concerned him most immediately, poverty of any color was unacceptable. He warned that if we weren't vigilant, the gap between haves and have-nots—not simply between black and white, or black and anyone else—would be the death of America.

We're nearly at that point. Putting us back together—all of us—will be Obama's challenge. He above all American Presidents knows that he has a unique opportunity to address the needs of black and brown folk at the bottom of the ladder, needs that have entrenched too many of them in cycles of failure for too long. A former community activist, Obama has seen those needs up close; I heard him say during a campaign swing through L.A. two years ago that one of the things wrong with America is its staggering rate of incarceration—the first time I can recall a presidential candidate saying anything remotely critical about a criminal justice system that disproportionately punishes black and brown. The irony is that while Obama has made history as the first black President, he'll probably continue walking a racial tightrope and frame his policies in race-neutral language. He will likely target domestic programs to the poor and disenfranchised, not to any particular group (as King might have done, though not with political correctness in mind). While I prefer that Obama be specific, I wouldn't care what he called his policies, so long as they work. The most hopeful thing about him is that he has a real chance to act more independently than any President has acted in decades. Let's hope he makes the most of the moment.