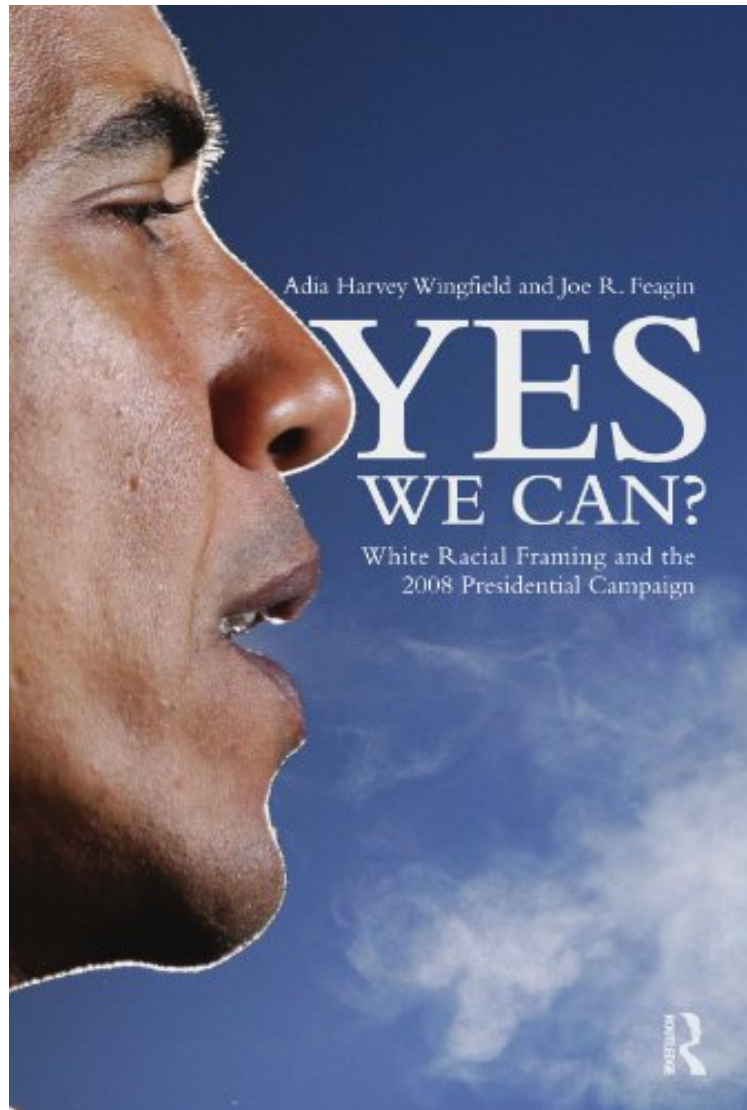


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Yes We Can?: White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign

Adia Harvey Wingfield, Joe Feagin
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Adia Harvey Wingfield, Joe Feagin : Yes We Can?: White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Yes We Can?: White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign:

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Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin offer a sociological perspective on the campaign and election of the U.S.'s first African American president, Barack Obama. They argue that the presidential campaign and election were striking but that "this rosy view of the 'end of racism' or a 'post-racial America' is out of touch with everyday realities of continuing racial hostility and discrimination in this society" (pg. 1). Systemic racism and the concept of a white racial frame are utilized throughout the book to analyze the racial component of the 2008 campaign. The white racial frame consists of hard and soft framings; the hard framing is overtly racist and sees whites as superior and the white framing is covertly racist and says that racism is receding and society is becoming "color-blind" (pg. 23). Wingfield and Feagin argue that soft racial framing allows whites to ignore ways that race shapes social, economic, and occupational aspects of their lives (pg. 24). The authors begin by demonstrating how racism is built into the framework of U.S. society through a history of sanctioned racial oppression and inequality. They effectively connect this systemic racism to today, providing evidence of the current inequalities between whites and minorities. Whites have more wealth, health, and higher incomes than blacks; a study found that white male elites justify this by saying that blacks are lazy, unintelligent, and dishonest (pg. 11). Historically, blacks were systemically excluded from politics. While more blacks participate in politics today, they are still less than two percent of U.S. elected officials (pg. 42). In chapter 2, Wingfield and Feagin turn their attention to the specific case of Barack Obama as a black politician. Media, heavily run by whites, insisted that Obama "transcended race" because he was visibly black but still had broad appeal to other races. The issue with this, however, is that Obama was painted as "too black" by some and "not black enough" by others. Throughout the book, the authors indicate that this was a constant struggle for Obama and remains so today. During the campaign he often conveyed his upbringing by his white mother and grandparents to show white voters that he had a "safe" racial status (pg. 36). Wingfield and Feagin say that Obama needed to work under a soft racial frame; he was acceptable to many whites as long as he minimized his racial status and reinforced the idea that racism is declining in significance. Under this frame, racial characteristics have become so insignificant in shaping life chances that for an "exceptional black American", his/her uniqueness so overcomes racial stigmas that being elected is not hard (pg. 47). Next, in chapter 3, the authors go into detail about the role that sexism played in political history as well as in the 2008 primary campaign. Insightfully, a parallel is made between the white female suffragists of the late 19th and early 20th century and those of today. When their efforts at promoting women's rights are overpowered by a promotion of black's rights, they revert to "old racial framing" (pg. 70). A great example provided is of Hilary Clinton supporters who became upset when she lost the democratic primaries, considering it sexist. They vowed to vote for McCain in protest of Obama but neglected to realize that this meant they would be supporting white males (i.e. those who historically put black suffrage ahead of women's). The authors go on to explain how as Clinton was subjected to sexism in 2008, primarily by the media, she attempted to discredit Obama. She linking him to both Islam and Louis Farrakhan, evoking negative stereotypes of Muslims and connecting Obama to someone whom many whites consider to be a black extremist (pgs. 63-64). Wingfield and Feagin also criticize Obama for his constant and overzealous denials of being Muslim, confirming Clinton's implication of something being wrong with Muslims. A criticism can be made of chapter 3; in a chapter about sexism and its relation to racism, no mention of Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin was made. Like Hilary Clinton, she was subjected to sexism and utilized a white racial framing to imply that Obama was not "one of us" (Horowitz, 2008). In chapter 4, the focus is on the difference between how Obama defined himself and how the media and others defined him. Obama defined himself as the "cool" black man, according to the authors, in order to define himself in "ways that resonate with general U.S. themes...someone within the white-normed mainstream, unquestionably patriotic, and with the capacity and strength to lead the nation" (pg. 81). Wingfield and Feagin assert that Obama needed to fit within the "white-normed mainstream" in order to win and thus frequently emphasized his white family background. While it is a fair statement to say this helped Obama to win white votes, the accusation that he methodically presented himself in such a way to gain votes portrays him as disingenuous. But, one of Obama's consistent strengths pointed out by the media was that he evoked sincerity throughout his campaign (Vatz, 2008). In chapter 4, the authors also describe how media and others defined Obama during the campaign. They portrayed him as being unpatriotic, different/dangerous, and unprepared to be president. The media heavily criticized Obama for not wearing a flag pin on his lapel and for not covering his heart during the National Anthem. Obama was also depicted as dangerous and essentially a threat to national security. A poignant example provided is the supposedly "satirical" cover of a 2008 Times magazine in which Obama and his wife are in the Oval Office wearing Muslim garb and standing next to a fireplace in which a U.S. flag burns. The media also criticized Obama's lack of experience. Wingfield and Feagin point out that despite this fact, he was still able to run a superior campaign to the seasoned McCain and Clinton (pg. 113) and this was not recognized by the white-run media. The authors also do a good job in describing how there is a history of blacks being represented as unpatriotic, dangerous, and unable to lead; thus, an old white racial framing was utilized against Obama in the 2008 campaign. In chapter 5, the authors discuss how Obama was forced to discuss racial issues when his relationship with his "radical" pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, was scrutinized by the media. They explain that Wright's comments were often taken out of context and used to make it seem as if Obama associated with extremists. Wingfield and Feagin go on to discuss Obama's well-received "A More Perfect Union" speech in which he said that the race issue shouldn't be ignored and that the U.S. did

not work equally well for all citizens (pgs. 137,153). However, they say that Obama took on a white racial framed voice by playing down current racism and scolding Dr. Wright for being out of line (even though his words were taken out of context). Next, they discuss the black counterframe which was historically necessary as blacks fought against the whites' justifications for their slavery. The authors point out that Obama is the only major party presidential candidate in history to publicly legitimize the black counterframe, but that he undermined his own message by later "relying on a soft white-racial framing to explain blacks' anger at institutional racism (pg. 155). In chapter 6, the focus is on how voters of color played into the primary election. The authors disparage the media for focusing on blacks and whites and only mentioning minorities when "pressured". And, even when media did mention minorities, they attributed their lack of support for Obama to be because of conflict between their ethnicity and blacks. Not only did this undermine minority's ability to choose a candidate based on political views, but it ignored the fact that the majority of Latinos and Asians initially supported Hillary Clinton but then eventually supported Obama during the general election. The authors explain that as a newcomer, voters of all colors did not know much about Obama so felt more comfortable voting for someone who had already been on the political scene for many years. The majority of blacks also initially supported Clinton because they doubted that Obama could gain enough support from white voters to win. Eventually, they switched soon after Obama proved his viability by winning the important Iowa primary. Wingfield and Feagin make a strong argument for the white racial framing of the media when pointing out that media ignored blacks' earlier support for Clinton, claiming they only supported Obama out of "racial solidarity" (pg. 165). While this was an interesting chapter, a main criticism of it is that it neglected to discuss Middle Easterners opinions of Obama. Given the extensive attention to Obama's connection (or lack thereof) to Islam throughout the campaign, it would have been interesting to analyze Muslim voters. In chapter 7, Wingfield and Feagin provide statistics related to the November 4th, 2008 election of Barack Obama. Most likely due to the excitement surrounding Obama's candidacy, it was the largest election turnout ever of an astounding 31.2 million people (pg.175). The authors, however, boldly state that if it was 1988, Obama wouldn't have won. He was able to win due to the growing size of the population of Americans of color, now 1/3 of the population (pg. 174). Statistics provided say that 95% of black youth (aged 18-29), 76% of Latino youth, and 54% of white youth voted for Obama. Other important proponents of Obama included Jewish Americans, white Catholics, and Arabs. Wingfield and Feagin then discuss why some whites operating under a racial framing were able to vote for Obama; they saw him as either an "exception to his race" or "sort of white" (pgs. 180,182). Ironically though, he is "sort of white"; an excellent quote by Chris Hitchens is provided: "We do not have our first black president. He is not black. He is as black as he is white" (pg. 183). At times Wingfield and Feagin, themselves, forget to acknowledge this and see Obama as if he is fully black. For example, on pg. 340 they say "Like all African Americans who deal with the omnipresent white-dominated world that is the U.S., Obama has found himself caught between a clear personal understanding of the racial hostility faced by African Americans and his need to please white Americans to be elected". This perpetuates the divide between who is black and who is white, despite the fact that Obama is biracial. This quote also assumes that all blacks have an understanding of the hostility faced by African Americans, when it is possible that Obama does not due to the circumstances of his background. The remainder of chapter 7 discusses supporters of McCain and how despite the problems of the past 8 years associated with the Republican party, many whites still voted for McCain. Wingfield and Feagin imply that the reason for this is racism against Obama (pg. 188). And, even though the Democratic party is considered an alternative anti-racist approach to the "white nationalist" Republican party, it has not recently worked on the behalf of anti-discrimination or inequality issues (pg. 197). In Chapter 8, Wingfield and Feagin address the question "Is America a post-racial society after Obama's election?". While they acknowledge the astounding accomplishment of Obama moving from an unknown Illinois official to president in 5 years, they recognize that many whites still use an old white racial frame (pg. 201). Positive reactions came from all over the world, from Tiger Woods to Hillary Clinton to Mwai Kibaki, leader of Kenya. The authors note the difference between whites and blacks exuberance though; whites celebrated Obama because "he is color-less and doesn't think from a black perspective" and as a "president out of a movie", while blacks expressed how it affected them personally (pg. 209). While this is a notable difference, the authors seem to be criticizing the fact that whites did not celebrate from a personal perspective. Wingfield and Feagin try to further their point by mentioning a CNN poll which found that 80% of blacks agreed that Obama's election was a "dream come true" while only 28% of whites felt that way (pg. 211). It is understandable for whites to not react with such jubilation because they do not have to deal with the daily racial issues that blacks do. The authors slightly acknowledge this point on pg. 212 which is commendable. Next, the focus shifts to reactions by conservative whites and extremists. Conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh expressed racism through the use of phrases like "Barack the Magic Negro" (pg. 212) and white nationalists expressed fears that blacks would now "take over the country" and whites should prepare for a "new civil war" (pg. 216). And, despite the idea that Obama's election meant society was becoming "colorblind", the authors note that the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 200+ racist incidents in the first 2 weeks after Obama's election, and more threats against him than any other candidate (pg. 213). Wingfield and Feagin conclude by saying that the U.S. is not post-racial and may actually become more polarized in the future. Interestingly, they point out that the belief in a post-racial society may actually cause racism to be

minimized and important discussion to be stifled. They believe change is possible but it will continue to be difficult in a society led by those who, intentionally or not, see with a white racial framing. A noticeable flaw in the conclusion of the book is that there are no solutions or ideas offered for how to bring about change. Reading the book, one can recognize all the valid points Wingfield and Feagin make concerning modern racism in America. It is disappointing that they did not follow those points with ways in which readers can alter their own potential biases. The text seems to be aimed at anyone interested in seeing the 2008 election through a sociological perspective, and for the purpose of reminding people that Obama's idealistic slogan "Yes We Can" must be depicted through a more accurate historical context.

This book offers one of the first sociological analyses of Barack Obama's historic 2008 campaign for the presidency of the United States. Elaborating on the concept of the white racial frame, Harvey Wingfield and Feagin assess the ways racial framing was deployed by principal characters in the 2008 election. This book counters many commonsense assumptions about race, politics, and society, particularly the idea that Obama's election ushered in a post-racial era. Readers will find this book uniquely valuable because it relies on sound sociological analysis to assess numerous events and aspects of this historic campaign.