

*The Outsiders Within:  
Obama, Romney, and the Tradition of Defying Tradition*

There has been a good deal of surprise about the personal background of recent candidates for president. It was big news when an African American, Barack Obama, won the election in 2008, and when a Mormon, Mitt Romney gained the Republican nomination in 2012, only to be defeated by the outsider already serving in office. These developments have been a point of pride for those particular groups, and almost universally hailed as indications of a new turn in American history: the age of diversity had arrived. However, some surprising things had already been happening for years to make these surprises possible.

*Big Steps Away from Prejudice and Persecution*

Considering the longer arc of American history, there are certainly many reasons to recognize this new turn. During hundreds of years of slavery, African American were subject to inhumane treatment rivaled only by the displacement of Native Americans by European American expansion; both groups have been the object of prejudice so intense that they could not even live alongside other Americans, much less enjoy many personal freedoms or opportunities. As persistent cases of stereotyping show, the US is not fully an egalitarian society, but the presence of an African American in the White House is at least a symbolic step in the direction of racial tolerance, and this development has potential to add to the wearing down of longstanding prejudice.

By contrast, most Mormons hailed from the heart of European American life, but they also suffered persecution. After Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, popularly known as Mormons, in 1830, he and his followers were forced to move repeatedly because so many predominantly Christian Americans distrusted this alternative reading of the Christian heritage, and especially because of the Mormon practice of polygamy. Members of the new church chose to separate themselves from persecution by developing their own society of Deseret, which would become the state of Utah in 1896. Even as Mormons have gained much greater acceptance a century later, Utah Senator and committed Mormon Orrin Hatch wears a mezuzah, with Hebrew prayers, to show solidarity with Jews, and as a reminder of parallel persecutions that Mormons suffered.

The achievements of one African American and one Mormon on the presidential campaign trail, especially in their ability to win votes from outside their groups, do indeed signal important steps in the direction of greater American tolerance of minority groups, even as significant distrust and prejudice endure. However, even these significant steps are hardly completely new, since members of minority groups have repeatedly found ways to appeal to mainstream Americans, often in the face of enormous challenges.

*Paths for Outsiders to Gain Acceptance by the Mainstream*

There have been three main paths for outsider groups to become assimilated and accepted by the mainstream. The first was simply assimilation, with members of the

minority group adopting the ways of the mainstream. Another path has been for those outside the mainstream to appeal to all the other Americans who also feel like outsiders; in a land with diverse subcultures, there have been many communities of outsiders. In addition, this nation with a keen focus on new beginnings has repeated inclinations to support challenges to authority, and outsiders readily tap that impulse.

Assimilation is the best-known way for newcomers and minorities to gain acceptance by the mainstream. Popular examples abound: most immigrants readily adopt English, even as they have sometimes been pushed by the widespread popularity of English-only rules and customs. Also, many immigrants changed their names to more English-friendly spellings and sounds. And most prominently, the Statue of Liberty stands tall in the American imagination, representing both openness to newcomers and expectations of conformity to the American “melting pot.” The practices of assimilation, however, are best suited to European arrivals, who with some changes in name and language, could readily join the existing mainstream of Northern European Americans.

In the last few generations, assimilation has lost much of its luster. Recent newcomers among European Americans, and even succeeding generations of more assimilated “European ethnics,” have increasingly retained elements of their distinct background; especially among Irish-, Italian-, and Jewish-Americans, the hyphen in their Americanness is a value-added cultural plus.

These celebrations of European ethnicity have emerged alongside an even larger movement for Civil Rights within the non-European American population. This revolution for recognition of equal protection before the law and for challenging cultural prejudice has offered significant paths into the mainstream for Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans. The unmeltable European ethnics and the rights revolution among non-European Americans of the last half century have transformed American culture; the mainstream now not only tolerates, but also accepts and even celebrates, diverse subcultures.

The contemporary ethos welcoming diversity has had an impact at least as strong for the acceptance of religious and gender differences; with John Huntsman, there was not one, but two Mormons contending for the Republican nomination in 2012, and Hillary Clinton came close to becoming the first woman to win the Democratic nomination. There is now a wide perception, unprecedented in American history and rare in world history, that there is no need to conform to any mainstream norms, but instead there is an assumption for embrace of one’s own group distinctiveness. The US of the early twenty-first century is a sea of diversity by race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, which operates alongside the increased openness to difference in sexuality and physical ability. These trends should not be mistaken for universal acceptance of every subgroup or the absence of prejudice; however, the center of gravity in public interactions has shifted toward diversity.

The recent era of acceptance of cultural difference has not brought along much acceptance of class differences. In fact, the last few decades have witnessed increasing disparities of wealth and economic stagnation for the working class. In fact, an economic

way to measure the increased tolerance of cultural diversity is that it has emerged as significant members of previously outside groups have risen in social class. So cultural diversity often coincides with economic conformity. While there are certainly pockets of privilege among the traditional elites of Northern European descent, the middle class and the wealthy of the US are now a veritable UN of cultural difference.

It is this atmosphere of multiple groups with many of their members gaining economic mobility, but with little impulse for cultural conformity, that helps to explain the success of Obama and Romney, as just two particularly prominent members of former outside groups. In their public appeals, they did not present themselves as assimilated Americans. In a land where most people feel outside the mainstream, these candidates generally did not lose political “points” for being members of outside groups, and any of those losses could be offset by their appeal as representatives of outsiders in general. Their public presence could speak a message to other outsider, I made it, and you can too.

*In the Haven of the New, Defiance of Traditional Authority?*

The particular postures of the two leading 2012 presidential candidates point to the third path that outsiders have taken to gain acceptance in the American mainstream. As with countless leaders who have captured the American imagination, Obama and Romney found ways to frame their appeal as challenges to the mainstream. Despite—or even because of—the displacement of natives, who were of course much older residents in the “New World,” citizens of the territory that would become the US defined their land as a haven of the new. Without gentry in commanding positions, common citizens could choose their own paths of life and engage in enterprising without being told what to do; at first, these opportunities were restricted to citizens white and male, but for those, the new ethos brought a dramatic change. The culture of the new brought robust acceptance of the free market, with its perpetual destruction of traditional ways and creation of new social relations. This posture of opportunity and constant growth also encouraged defiant challenges to main streams of power and privilege.

The celebration of newness in America, established a legacy of challenge to all things associated with the old, including traditions, formalities, authority structures, and accepted ways of doing things. So ironically, the American tradition grew as a challenge to tradition. With this history of new beginnings and commitment to overturning particular privileges, each generation would define the authority to be challenged in its own way—and woe to the person, group, or policy that smacked of such special authority.

In the early republic, fie on all things British; for example, the Anglican Church in America redefined itself as the Episcopalians, with less formal, more American styles of worship. In the next few decades, frontiersmen, most prominently Andrew Jackson, defied east coast elites; this impulse even penetrated medical practices, with the overturning of licensing laws monitored by professional elites. The Civil War can be understood on these terms, with the North fearing the rise of the Slaveocracy of Southern politicians with outsized influence, and the South fearing the imposition of the national government dominated by the more populous North.

From the industrial era to our own time, much of politics has been dominated by a contest over which groups bear the taint of special privilege perceived to be actually controlling the mainstreams of power: progressives define corporate businesspeople as the “malefactors of great wealth,” in the words of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907, to justify government regulations of corporations; by contrast, conservatives placed that stain on government itself, which Ronald Reagan hoped to “get off our backs [and] out of our pockets,” in his efforts to reduce such regulations, starting with his election in 1980. There is a perennial political contest to link contemporary ideology to this heritage of overturning privilege, with each side choosing its bad guy: liberals choose business, and conservatives place government in that role.

In American politics, newness appeals, ranging from the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt to Obama’s claim for Change You Can Believe In. The key to success has been the ability of politicians to connect their new idea to the tradition of challenging tradition. Who is in the mainstream now, at the center of power, with the most control over our lives?

Barack Obama was able to persuade a majority of Americans during the last two presidential elections both that government can actually support the average citizen rather than just being a weight on enterprise and opportunity, and also that his identity as an African American could actually symbolize the possibilities that await every American outsider. His years in office have sorely tested those platforms: Republicans have tarred his domestic policies, especially the Affordable Care Act, as examples of government overreach, raising the specter of special privileges, with bureaucracies playing the role of aristocratic arrogance. And despite Obama’s symbolic representation of post-racial diversity, long-simmering resentments of poor treatment of African Americans have boiled over; in effect, recent protesters ask, how deep can that embrace of diversity go—or will the mainstream only welcome racial outsiders in high-status positions? Conservatives counter that African Americans and other minority groups benefit from special protections by government rules for affirmative action. In the bitter political atmosphere of the early twenty-first century, politician pitch poison—the poison of the other side protecting special privilege.

Now that Obama has broken the glass ceiling for more outsiders to aspire to high office, just as John Kennedy did for a broader swath of European Americans, more outsiders will surely enter the competitive fray. Democrats in 2012 followed in their tradition of challenging the privileges of wealth; and Republican candidates readily embraced their own versions of the American outsiders within: Newt Gingrich blasted against government regulation, Rick Perry presented himself as a Texas-sized outsider, and Herman Cain defied majority African American support of Democrats to run in the other party.

The tradition of challenging tradition has a long reach. So don’t be surprised if some political leaders, who clearly look like insiders in status and privilege, seek to gain your

vote by appealing as outsiders, like nineteenth-century politicians who vied for reputations as poor guys growing up in log cabins. Today, outsiders are in, and in the US of A, they always have been.