



**HARVARD Kennedy School**

**THE SAGUARO SEMINAR**

*Civic Engagement in America*

**STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 WED 25 MARCH 2009:**

### **Deepening tolerance makes British Obama ‘possible’ says Putnam**

The UK has the necessary preconditions for the emergence of a black prime minister according to a joint study by Harvard University and The University of Manchester.

The project, to be published in book later this year co-authored by writer Tom Clark, is led by Harvard’s Professor Robert Putnam, the author of the best-selling *Bowling Alone* which charted the collapse of community life in America.

Professor Putnam is also Visiting Professor at The University of Manchester.

It casts new light on controversial comments by head of equalities watchdog Trevor Phillips last November, who doubted that the political machinery of the UK would allow a British Obama to breakthrough.

The “deepening tide of tolerance” emerges in survey data covering over 50 years – it tracks attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic towards mixed race marriage, working for a black boss and black and ethnic minority participation in politics.

The findings show that racial prejudice in Britain and America has been declining during that period – chiefly thanks to the greater tolerance of younger generations.

They are released in the run up to the second G-20 leaders’ summit on financial markets and the world economy – hosted by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and attended by President Obama himself.

“Despite the continuing racial divides in America, we have seen how a slow and deepening tide of tolerance has made possible the election of a black President,” said Professor Putnam.

“At the same time, we have seen how a generation of black politicians in America – that goes well beyond Barack Obama – has emerged, and is starting to seize the opportunities this change presents.

“It is fair to say that the minimal representation of non-whites in the House of Commons is surely a significant bar to the arrival of a British Obama.

“But is it fundamental? The most obvious question for Britons is whether the Obama phenomenon could happen in the UK.”

Despite some caveats – especially the small though growing black British political class - the answer, according to the researchers is a resounding “yes”.

“The good news is that in terms of the underlying attitudes of the majority, Britain is in the same place as the United States,” said Professor Ed Fieldhouse Executive Director of The University of Manchester’s Institute for Social Change at the School of Social Sciences and a co-author.

“Whether it is willingness to work for a black boss or to welcome a non-white person into the family, majority British opinion – just like majority American opinion – is gradually getting more tolerant.

“Change is taking a similar form on both sides of the Atlantic: exactly as in the US, the generation of Britons uncomfortable with non-whites in positions of power or intimacy is gradually dying off, and being replaced by its more tolerant offspring,” added Professor Putnam, who was named by the Guardian in 2005 as one of the world’s top 100 intellectuals.

"It is fair to add, however, that the smaller minority population in the UK, as well as the much shallower pool of black politicians and the more centralized political recruitment paths, still tends to work against black representation in Britain."

According to the researchers, President Obama was elected in the wake of a sustained rise in the number of black elected officials that can be traced back over several decades.

And in more recent years, there has been an especially sharp rise in number of African American politicians serving non black areas. So increasing numbers of white Americans are now used to being represented by black people.

In the UK, by contrast, there are no records of numbers of non-white councillors until comparatively recently. But the signs are that their total number has roughly doubled from the very low level of the 80s before stagnating more recently.

The UK is thus still without a black political class on anything like the American scale. But its recent failure to grow have less to do with racial prejudice than the fading fortunes of Labour. Non-whites are six times better represented among that party’s councillors than among than the Conservatives, and the pattern in all recent local elections has been for Labour to lose seats.

Other points to be brought out by the book include:

- Despite all the benefits of diversity, there are sometimes strains on community life on both sides of the Atlantic, but more so for whites than for ethnic minorities. Forensic analysis of census and polling data shows how blunt-edged intervention by politicians can seriously worsen the strains.
- Diversity seems to trigger more discomfort in the US than Britain. This may be because the salience of race- as opposed to class - is more marked in American thinking.
- Material disadvantages of African Americans is concentrated through a ghettoisation of their community. However, this spatial concentration has given them a power base from which they enjoy political representation on a scale unmatched in Britain.
- While black-white racial disparities appear to be greater in the US than in Britain, probably because of the long legacy of slavery, America seems to be doing somewhat better than Britain in integrating new non-white immigrants, probably because of America’s greater experience as “a nation of immigrants.”

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

Robert Putnam is Peter & Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Visiting Professor at The University of Manchester. In 2000, he received worldwide acclaim for his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, about the decrease in civic engagement in America and the benefits of "social capital" or social networks to both individuals and communities.

Tom Clark is Leader Writer for the Guardian.

The work has been the subject of heated discussion among politicians and commentators — including Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, George Bush, Barack Obama and Bertie Ahern. For more information on Professor Putnam's research on civic engagement, visit the website of the Saguaro Seminar which he runs at [www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro)

### Graphs available include:

- Growth at the grassroots: black elected officials in the US and minority ethnic councillors in England.
- The growing proportion of African American state legislators who represent non-minority districts.
- Attitudes to mixed race marriages.

The study draws on collaborative research by a distinguished team from Harvard and Manchester Universities, carried out under the auspices of SCHMI – Social Change: A Harvard - Manchester Initiative. <http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/socialchange/research/social-change/>

The researchers are conducting a series of US – UK comparative studies on topics such as immigration, social inequality, religion and the changing workplace. They are investigating what drives social change, how it relates to the wellbeing and the implications for policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The comparative academic papers, which provided much of the raw material for Putnam's book are being made available at a new website – [www.AgeofObamaBook.com](http://www.AgeofObamaBook.com) – which goes live today.

Robert Putnam, Tom Clark and Ed Fieldhouse are available for interviews.

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