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## An Opening: Advocating for Equity in a Polarized America

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Olatunde Johnson

American society is facing a daunting array of political and social challenges. The ascendance of Trump reflects deep political fissures that seem to have calcified over the last four years. Blatant racist appeals have become part of ordinary politics and our core democratic foundations have been shaken by the emergence of an ethno-nationalist populist ethic that is skeptical of government and evidence-based expertise. The killings by police of unarmed black people, and the convulsive protests in response, made plain the persistence of racism. The pandemic has further ravaged our society: exposing pre-existing race- and class-based inequalities, and—by destabilizing health, income, housing, and neighborhoods—threatening to exacerbate those inequalities. As we recover from the pandemic amid government budget cuts and unemployment, the political possibilities risk being constrained by a narrative of scarcity.

The magnitude of these challenges creates an opportunity. This may seem counterintuitive. But the sheer scale of the disruptions of the last several years pushes us to reexamine the fundamental infrastructure of American society.

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Out of sheer necessity, government responded to the pandemic by providing unemployment insurance and basic income payments, extending sick and family leave, halting evictions and utility shutoffs, and extending broadband access to help students and workers access remote jobs and schooling.

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These interventions were far from sufficient and are not yet entrenched; we see a patchwork of federal, state and local protections, and most are temporary. And yet together these changes provide an opening for reconstituting our collective notion of the social goods that are essential for an inclusive and sustainable society. Since the pandemic, some jurisdictions have moved

to make sick leave permanent. Non-unionized workers are organizing in the “gig” sector. Campaigns for addressing school inequality and housing affordability have new intensity.

The pandemic and protests of the summer also provide an opportunity for rethinking the goals and strategies of racial justice advocacy. The impact of the pandemic and the persistence of police killings challenge the project of racial liberalism undergirding traditional civil rights advocacy: the idea of vindicating formal rights through courts and achieving progress through incremental policy change. In response, a new wave of racial and social justice organizations urges an abolitionist vision, one that depends not merely on institutional reform, but on institutional transformation. These movements place the dignity and full realization of black lives at their center, using organizing to expand the base of support and to build allies to transform politics and governance.

*(Please turn to page 2)*

### **PRRAC's 30th anniversary!**

In celebration of PRRAC's founding thirty years ago, and our country's important political turning point in 2020, we've invited members of PRRAC's Board of Directors and Social Science Advisory Board to share their reflections on the present moment and their hopes for the future. (See page 2 for the table of contents.)

PRRAC’s founding thirty years ago occurred also during a reckoning with the limits of civil rights strategies, albeit one that was less dramatic. The prior two decades had seen school desegregation, finance equalization and other remedies for racial inequities under attack in federal courts. More broadly, social scientists and policy-makers were questioning whether addressing bias would be enough to undo the structural dimensions of race embedded in our institutions. PRRAC was born as a project of civil rights and anti-poverty advocates to address the intersections of race and class, and to bring social science to bear on policy and legal advocacy. This mission has continued urgency today as we continue to grapple with the human and political dimensions of inequality in American society, even as the changed legal, cultural, and advocacy environment pushes PRRAC and other racial justice organizations to continually re-evaluate our strategies for dismantling the structures of inequality, and to learn from and collaborate with long-standing and emerging community-based organizations and social movements.

At its core, PRRAC’s work seeks to interrupt state production of racial and economic inequality. This work will continue to be important in the coming years as federal, state, and local governments take on the project of post-pandemic recovery. PRRAC and its allies will need to make visible how public policies, programs, tax, and funding decisions risk widening racial and economic inequality, and how instead they might be used to advance inclusion. This is a technocratic project, to be sure; but it is also fundamentally a democratic project. This project entails surfacing the hidden inequities of the “submerged state” that are obscured by free market, individualist, and color-blind narratives. In practical terms, this will require applying an equity lens to the administrative rules and programs that inevitably shape the distribution of housing, education, health care, environmental protection and other social goods. This

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work has broader resonance due to growing public consciousness about the historic role of federal policy and law in embedding racial segregation and wealth inequality. Still, PRRAC and others will need to communicate this work beyond the traditional experts, in a manner that engages a broader set of groups and participants. This is a moment to collapse the usual divide between those “inside the beltway” and the rest of us: engaging state and local groups in federal advocacy, and building community-based organizations and subnational participants into the design of innovative federal programs.

These are perilous and destabilizing times. There is no set or proven path forward. More reason to push ourselves to think and create boldly and imaginatively. Happy 30th Birthday PRRAC! Now back to work.■

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