

No One Should Take Black Voters for Granted

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Abstract

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Full Text

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The African-American electorate has been undergoing a quiet, long-term transformation, moving from the left toward the center on several social and cultural issues, while remaining decisively liberal, even radical, on economic issues, according to a series of studies by prominent African-American scholars.

“There has been a shift in the attitudes of **black** masses about the extent to which systematic discrimination and prejudice are the primary reasons **blacks** continue to lag behind whites,” Candis Watts Smith, a political scientist at Penn State, wrote in a paper published in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 2014, “Shifting From Structural to Individual Attributions of **Black** Disadvantage: Age, Period and Cohort Effects on **Black** Explanations of Racial Disparities.”

Smith argues that older **black** Americans with deeply ingrained memories of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s have been joined by a younger generation, with the result that

African Americans’ attention has increasingly shifted from structural reasons of **black** disadvantage (e.g., systematic discrimination in the job or housing markets) to individual-based explanations (e.g., lack of individual motivation; oppositional attitudes to school and learning) of these disparities, especially in the post – civil rights era.

In her book, “What’s Going On? Political Incorporation and the Transformation of **Black** Public Opinion,” Katherine Tate, a political scientist at Brown, wrote that starting in the 1980s,

public opinion revealed a distinctive shift toward political moderation. The **black** opinion shift, I argue, is based on the transformation of African-American politics, away from radical challenges to the political status quo toward inclusive, bipartisan electoral politics.

Contemporary polling provides evidence of moderation among **black** Democrats compared with the views of white Democrats. The poll data suggests a reversal of traditional roles. More conservative and more centrist Democratic whites were once the tempering force within party ranks. Now, on some of the most controversial issues currently under debate, African-Americans — who make up an estimated 25 percent of Democratic primary **voters** — have emerged as a force for more moderate stands as white Democrats have moved sharply left.

Public Opinion Research, one of two firms that conduct surveys for The Wall Street Journal and NBC News, provided The Times with data describing the views of white and **black** Democratic primary **voters**

According to WSJ/NBC polling, the percentage of white **voters** describing themselves as very liberal or liberal is roughly twice as large as the percentage of **black voters** who do so. Conversely, the percentage of African-Americans describing themselves as moderate or conservative is almost twice as large as the percentage of white Democratic primary **voters** who describe themselves that way.

In the case of abortion, the WSJ/NBC surveys show that 97 percent of white primary **voters** agree that the procedure should be “totally legal” compared with two thirds of **black** primary **voters**. A vanishingly small number of white Democratic primary **voters** — 3 percent — said abortion should be illegal, compared with a third of **black** Democrats.

A CBS News poll of Democrats in states holding early primaries that was conducted between Aug. 28 and Sept. 4 reinforced these findings.

While less committed to many of the broad social and cultural issues important to white liberals, **black** Democrats remain more committed than their white counterparts to progressive stands on economic issues of the type that characterized the New Deal coalition of the last century that also established the Great Society programs of the 1960s like Medicare and Medicaid.

Asked to rate the importance to them of jobs and wages, 84 percent of **black** Democrats said both are “very important,” 20 points more than the 64 percent of white Democrats who said so.

Black Democrats showed more caution than their white counterparts when it came to their views of several major changes in public policy that Democratic presidential candidates have proposed.

Asked by CBS “Would you favor or oppose the U.S. creating a national, government-administered ‘Medicare for All’ program, available to all individuals?” 59 percent of white Democrats said they support it, compared with 47 percent of **black** Democrats.

CBS posed a broad question testing whether Democratic primary **voters** want a moderate or more radical approach: Should the message in 2020 be that the party and its candidates will try “to return the country to the way it was before Donald Trump took office” or “to advance a more progressive agenda than the country had under Barack Obama”?

On this question, white Democrats preferred to advance a more progressive agenda 64-36, while **black** Democrats leaned toward a return to a pre-Trump era, 52-48.

An earlier but more detailed CBS survey of Democratic primary **voters** (with 41 questions as opposed to 29), conducted in March, found similar splits between white and **black** Democrats.

Asked to rank how important it was to hear candidates' views on "protecting immigrants and their families," 59 percent of white Democrats said that they "must hear" them, compared with 47 percent of **black** Democrats.

Asked if they "must hear" from candidates about their policies on creating jobs, 39 percent of whites agreed compared with 68 percent of African-Americans. Conversely, 76 percent of white Democrats and 48 percent of **black** Democrats said they must hear candidates' proposals to combat climate change.

One of the largest divisions was over whether they must hear candidates' proposals to lower taxes: 25 percent for whites, 55 percent for African-Americans. Another big gap was on the question of keeping the country safe: 41 percent of white Democrats said it was "extremely important" while a much higher percent of **black** Democrats, 69 percent, ranked it that high.

Tasha Philpot, a political scientist at the University of Texas, emailed in response to my inquiry. "In my own work, I've found a growing number of self-identified **black** conservatives over the last 5 decades."

She stressed, however, that among African-Americans of all ideological leanings, "levels of group consciousness remain high as does Democratic Party identification." African-Americans, she argued, "hold two beliefs simultaneously – the belief that **blacks** should take responsibility for their own success but also that there still are systemic barriers to doing so."

In her 2017 book "Conservative but Not Republican: The Paradox of Party Identification and Ideology among African Americans," Philpot reports that "when group consciousness is high, **blacks** regardless of ideology will identify with the Democratic Party," adding that "**blacks** use a different set of criteria when placed on the liberal-conservative continuum than" whites do.

The result? "**Black** conservatives behave more like **black** liberals than they do white conservatives," according to Philpot. "In 2012, for instance, 96 percent of **black** liberals and 78 percent of **black** conservatives identified with the Democratic Party."

Philpot's book cites exit poll data from 2004 (her overall point remains relevant) showing strong support among **blacks** and whites in a number of red states for referendums that sought to ban same-sex marriage, but with quite different voting patterns.

In Georgia, for example, 75 percent of whites and 78 percent of **blacks** voted to prohibit same-sex marriage, but 88 percent of whites in Georgia voted for George W. Bush compared with 15 percent of **blacks**. In Michigan, there was a 1-point difference between white and **black** support for the ban, 58 and 57 percent, but a 59-point difference between white and **black** support for Bush, 71 to 12 percent.

Philpot's most provocative and significant argument is that **blacks** and whites define conservatism in substantially different ways, a subject my colleague Jamelle Bouie wrote about in his newsletter last week.

For African-Americans, as opposed to whites, identifying as a conservative does not mean holding laissez-faire or free market economic views, according to Philpot. She points out that the crucial role of an activist government in ending slavery and outlawing discrimination mutes advocacy of minimal government among African-Americans.

The same pattern holds for support of the military: it significantly increases conservative self-identification among whites but not among African-Americans.

Instead, the three key dimensions contributing to **black** self-identification as conservative are religiosity, opposition to social welfare and, to a lesser extent, moral conservatism on social and cultural issues. All three had “a statistically significant effect on **blacks**’ ideological self-identification,” Philpot wrote.

The minority of **blacks** who were conservative on social welfare, Philpot wrote, “were against government handouts, and were particularly skeptical about the United States’ welfare state.”

According to Philpot, in surveys asking for descriptions of what it is to be morally conservative or liberal,

Whites were nearly three times as likely as **blacks** to describe the moral dimension in terms of religious leaders, organizations or denominations. **Blacks**, on the other hand, were more likely to describe this dimension in terms of knowing the difference between right and wrong, traditional values, and the expected behaviors that accompany each side of the moral divide.

Alongside an increase in the number of self-identified **black** conservatives, Lawrence Bobo, a professor of sociology at Harvard, noted a parallel development in an email:

There has been a decline among **blacks** since the 1990s in the perception that discrimination is a cause of racial economic disparities and a rise in the percentage of **blacks** faulting cultural shortcomings for these disparities.

Bobo said there were multiple potential explanations for the shift, but he remains convinced that “the evidence to explain the trend is less clear than the trend itself.” According to Bobo, these factors include “changes among somewhat younger African-Americans,” the likelihood that “**blacks** receive fewer leadership signals calling for understanding group inequality in structural, discrimination based terms” and the possibility that “**blacks** may be encountering less, or at least more subtle and inconsistent discrimination than in years past.”

Still, Bobo added, “African-Americans remain far more likely than whites to see racial discrimination operating in most domains of life and as a general source of racial inequality.”

In a paper presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, “Disentangling Race and Individualism,” Ashley Jardina, a political scientist at Duke University and the author of “White Identity Politics” and LaFleur Stephens-Dougan, an expert on racial attitudes in the political science department at Princeton, argue that past research has created a false dichotomy in seeking an “explanation for inequality”

such that if one endorses societal and institutional factors such as slavery and discrimination as an explanation for inequality, then one cannot also believe in the value of hard work and self-reliance.

In contrast to that approach, Jardina and Stephens-Dougan writes,

we treat individualism as a multidimensional concept, such that one can believe in hard work, self-reliance, and the existence of an open opportunity structure, while also endorsing the role of societal and institutional factors such as racism and discrimination, as explanations for the persistence of racial inequality in the United States.

For many Americans, the two authors continue, and “especially for African-Americans, these beliefs exist in tandem” which, in turn, “helps to explain why **blacks** appear individualistic on some measures, but egalitarian on other measures in some surveys.”

In recent years, there has been far less attention paid to the complexities of African-American ideology and partisanship than to the changing voting patterns of whites.

The result has been an unchallenged belief among white liberals that as they continue their sharply leftward movement of recent years, they will be able to rely on **black** Democrats for continuing political support. But before Democrats get to the general election, they have to negotiate their way through the primaries, which pose their own set of risks.

Another colleague, David Leonhardt, noted in his Monday column, “Democrats, Stop Helping Trump,” that many of the Democratic contestants have failed to recognize the liabilities of some of the policies they have been pushing: “The mistake that Democratic candidates have made is thinking that just because they should activate their progressive id on some issues, they should do so on all issues.”

Leonhardt cited two specific concerns.

First, decriminalizing border crossings, despite the finding in an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll that “67 percent of registered **voters** called decriminalization ‘a bad idea’.”

Second, “a proposal to eliminate private health insurance and require people to have Medicare,” a plan about which, Leonhardt pointed out, “most Americans say no thanks.”

Black Democrats, as the surveys cited above show, are much more skeptical of these two policies. If the party and its nominee adopt these particular policies, **black voters** are not going to shift en masse to Trump, but their wariness could signal that there is a risk of lower turnout — not only among African-American **voters** but among the less ideological members of the Democratic coalition.

The reality is that without exceptionally high African-American turnout, the Democratic Party is unlikely to win any presidential election. From 2012 to 2016, African-American turnout fell 7 percentage points, plummeting from 66.6 to 59.6 percent according to the Census, a fatal blow to Hillary Clinton’s bid.

At the same time, the contemporary multiracial, multiethnic Democratic Party needs more than vigorous **black** mobilization; it also needs high turnout from constituencies with conflicting agendas — radical and progressive millennials, the “creative class,” suburban women, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Muslims and those working and middle class whites who still count themselves Democrats.

The danger for the Democratic Party is that each time it ramps up one sector of its coalition, it risks depressing turnout in another.

Democrats require every device, every tool, every stratagem — and even that may not be enough, as Trump and his Republican Party whip up fear and demonize gays, lesbians, feminists, immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East, and people of color generally.

To deal with all this, Democrats will need an overarching message broad enough to bring together its entire coalition in a political uprising against Trump's presidency at the same time that it will need to rely on the tools of narrowcasting: hyperpersonalization of campaign messages, segmented appeals to dedicated niches, slipping **voters** into discrete "bubbles." They will need a firm grasp of America's disparate, conflicted and warring center-left alliance. Without an ingenious campaign, even widespread hatred of Trump will not be sufficient to dislodge him from the White House.

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