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THE POLICY AGENDA

A New Path for Black Urban Voters?

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For decades, a large majority of black Americans have aligned with the Democratic Party, but the modern-day Democratic Party's leftward shift may cause a reevaluation of that relationship. The welfare of black people has not been made better from their support of the Democratic Party. Failing school systems, communities rampant with crime, and a steadily increasing cost of living are all issues many black communities must contend with due partly to policies pushed and promoted by the Democratic Party. Democrats have come to expect black votes, and Republicans have all but given up, diminishing the power of the black electorate.

To reclaim influence, black voters must show their willingness to do something different. They are posed with a choice: end the marriage with the Democratic Party and vote for candidates who truly represent their interests or withhold their vote until the parties begin to compete for them.

From Solidly Republican to Overwhelmingly Democrat

From the Civil War through the early 20th century, black Americans who voted did so largely for Republicans. Given that Republicans were the party of Abraham Lincoln and the Democrats were based among mostly rural segregationists in the South, it made sense that black voters, thousands of whom were former slaves, voted with the party that paved the way for their participation in political, economic, and social life. During the Reconstruction era, an estimated 2,000 African American men, mostly Republican, held public office on every level from local government to the US Senate.¹

John Lynch, an African American Republican representing Mississippi in the House of Representatives, said in 1930,

The colored voters cannot help but feel that in voting the Democratic ticket in national elections they will be voting to give their indorsement and approval to every wrong of which they were victims, every right of which they are deprived, and every injustice of which they suffer.²

These patterns persisted in the wake of the Great Migration, which saw six million black Americans leave the South for the North, mainly settling in big cities. Initially, black Americans in Chicago, the second-largest urban black population at the time, elected Republicans, including Rep. Oscar Stanton De Priest in 1928, 1930, and 1932. De Priest was also Chicago's first black alderman, or councilman.³

By the 1930s, 60 percent of voters in the majority-black Second and Third Wards backed Chicago Mayor William Hale Thompson, also known as "Big Bill." Thompson and the Chicago political machine courted black voters by promoting black politicians and offering black Chicagoans patronage jobs. Thompson's outreach to black voters was so notable that he became known as "Little Lincoln," and in the white neighborhoods, City Hall under his administration was referred to as "Uncle Tom's Cabin."⁴

The transition began in 1932 and 1936, during President Franklin Roosevelt's election and reelection, when he received 71 percent of the black vote. That ushered in the beginning of a political realignment with black voters, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.⁵ But despite the overwhelming support for Roosevelt, the realignment took time. Well into the 1940s, party identification among black voters was evenly split.⁶

By 1948, 77 percent of black voters not only voted for Harry Truman but also identified themselves as Democrats. Many point to Truman's efforts earlier in the year desegregating the armed services and issuing an executive order prohibiting racial bias in federal employment⁷ as reasons for the shift. Less than two decades later, the 1965 Voting Rights Act signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson further solidified the black voting population's alignment with the Democratic Party.

Today, nine in 10 black voters vote Democratic, and that dependability has signaled to the party and its politicians that addressing issues concerning black communities is not as crucial to election as meeting those

brought up by other constituencies. The calculus that many Democratic politicians make is: If black voters are going to be there regardless, why spend political capital on them?

New Vulnerabilities

Making matters worse, the black Democratic base is not growing, according to Mark Jones, a fellow with Rice University's Baker Institute. "The African American population, as a share of the electorate, is neither declining, like the Anglo population, nor is it increasing, like the Hispanic population, so it's pretty much constant," he said. "So, as a result from the Democratic Party's perspective, with every passing year the weight of the African American population within the Democratic majority coalition shrinks a little bit."⁸

The current progressive shift has taken place because the party is no longer courting black voters, who culturally have been more conservative, or attempting to meet their needs. After all, many of the cities with the smallest black populations—Minneapolis, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle—have also long been among the whitest cities.⁹

"If Democrats believe black voters are a mainstay, Republicans have resigned themselves to believe that they are a lost cause," Jones said. "What black voters have shown over the past decade is even when Democrats are at odds with them on a variety of policy issues, which could be on religion, cultural, LGBT, abortion issues," black voters will still support the party. "You have a very faith-based African American population who essentially ignores that dissonance between their religious values and beliefs and those of the Democratic elite because that's their only option."

Outside of symbolic outreach, there is little attempt to court these would-be disaffected voters. Republicans instead focus on courting the burgeoning Hispanic population and trying to appeal to new Anglo middle-class voters. They often take the view that by focusing on black issues, they may get a small bump in black support but also may risk alienating other populations.

This dynamic has created an environment where no major political party is actively courting black voters or attempting to address their needs,

thereby reducing their political power. In much of the country, progressive ideology flourishes in wealthy urban areas and college towns. But in the big cities these ideas—including strongly progressive views on abortion, policing, and schools—now confront the conservative sensibility and standard of living of black voters, which eventually could produce a change in political behavior.

The Leftist Lurch and Black Reaction

As progressive groups have taken ideological control over the Democratic Party in recent years, the party may have inadvertently left behind the concerns of its core constituency—black voters. “I’m seeing black folks become more critical of the Democratic Party and their policies than ever,” said Houston City Council Member Tiffany Thomas.¹⁰

Thomas represents District F, covering the communities of Alief, Westchase, and the historic Piney Point Village, among others, and chairs the City Council’s Housing and Community Development Committee. Thomas, who also serves as program coordinator and assistant professor of community development at Prairie View A&M University, represents a district of 250,000 constituents containing one of the most diverse populations in the city.

Thomas said part of the problem with the Democratic Party is that African Americans need to be more involved in policy development. “Our black fraternities and sororities oftentimes are pushing voter registration,” she noted.

I was always challenging them. We have to follow the whole spectrum; it’s not just about registering voters. It’s about getting them to the polls but then watching the policy as it’s crafted, fully participating in what that policy means.

This is particularly crucial as progressives generally endorse policy that represents a move *away* from things black Americans have long sought—and often sacrificed—to pursue the American dream. Racial quotas and symbolic gestures like removing Confederate statues or putting more

black people on corporate boards may seem attractive to some, particularly college-educated black Americans, but these actions have little potential to improve the conditions experienced by most urban black people.

Long gone are the days of policies that enhance human dignity and push for educational and employment advancement. The modern-day left has embraced policies of complacency like expanding, permanently, the social safety net through guaranteed basic income, which has now infiltrated more than 30 major cities and counties across the country.¹¹

Starting in Stockton, California, under the highly celebrated former Mayor Michael Tubbs, local governments have been launching these programs, which provide low-income families or individuals a monthly stipend ranging from \$500 to \$1,500. The programs often have no work requirement or reporting requirements, other than self-reporting, and are otherwise no strings attached.

Yet Tubbs was defeated by Kevin Lincoln—a black Republican, veteran of the Marine Corps, and executive pastor of a local church who ran on addressing issues like homelessness and public safety while pushing back on ideas like an expanded social safety net.¹² This reflects the values of many black Americans who have long embraced the value of work, whether in government or, more recently, across the broad private sector.

“The average black voter is not feeling the progressiveness,” said Tomaro Bell,¹³ a black Democrat and longtime Houston activist in Houston’s Third Ward. “Because most of them had to work very hard, they don’t believe in a lot of the free money. They know that an attitude of ingratitude and entitlement does not work.” She added that she does not believe that many black voters, especially older ones, remain enamored with the Democratic Party as much as they once were.

There has long been a desire for stable work that helped black Americans improve their socioeconomic status; their only ask was for opportunity, not the handouts being promised by many modern-day progressives. The party that once proclaimed there was dignity in all work has shifted to policies that promote handouts.

“One of the pull factors was a good government job had stable pay, higher pay, and benefits,” said Frederick Gooding Jr.,¹⁴ professor of African American studies at Texas Christian University. Indeed, part of the appeal that black Chicago voters saw in “Big Bill” Thompson was his promise of

patronage jobs inconceivable in the Jim Crow South, like a black assistant corporation counsel or legal officer.

The hostility toward education-choice programs among most Democrats also works against the interests of the populations Democrats purport to serve. In a poll, 89 percent of black Democratic primary voters supported expanding “access to more choices and options within the public school system, including magnet schools, career academies and public charter schools.”¹⁵ Another poll found that 78 percent of black Americans were in favor of education savings accounts, which allow the money typically funneled to school districts to be spent on any education-related expense for their child.¹⁶

In most places, these families are forced to send their children to the campus their ZIP code zones them to regardless of whether that campus is failing. They do not often have additional resources for private or charter schools that other families might.

Houston Independent School District, a \$2 billion bureaucracy,¹⁷ has staunchly opposed school-choice efforts by the Texas legislature. Not unusually, the board is fractured. The former chief operating officer was recently arrested by the FBI for bribery, and this collective mismanagement resulted in low-income, mostly black kids being stuck in failing campuses.

One lawmaker, state Rep. Harold Dutton, a black Democrat from Houston, moved to tackle the issue by introducing and passing legislation that would allow the state to take over the school district and replace the board members with members appointed by the state. Not surprisingly, his own party ostracized him for it.

Dutton is no newbie. He was born in 1945 and elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1984. A lifelong Democrat and native of Houston’s Fifth Ward, Dutton served as general counsel of both the House Democratic Caucus and the Texas Legislative Black Caucus. He sponsored Texas’s first program to assist women- and minority-owned businesses and is by all accounts a leading member of the Democratic Party in Texas, but more importantly, his views are far more aligned with that of the average black voter than those of the progressive elite are.¹⁸

Dutton told a Houston newspaper, “The Democratic Party always was the bigger tent, but sometimes I think it’s becoming more and more like the party we complain about, because they want everybody to think on the

same page.”¹⁹ Despite his lifelong support and membership of the Democratic Party, Dutton’s refusal to fall in line led the Harris County Democratic Party to censure him.

A Key Issue Is Public Safety

No issue better highlights the divide between the think-tank policy of the enclave Democrats and the real-world repercussions for their core constituency than the “defund the police” narrative.

Reforming the police came out of a seemingly earnest desire to fix race relations between black communities and police, but the message was co-opted for the more radical notion of “defunding” the police and emptying the prisons. “A lot of the narrative was hijacked. If you were on the ground in these neighborhoods, that’s not what they were asking for,” Houston’s Thomas suggested. “It’s not that black people don’t want the police in their neighborhoods. They just don’t want to die, they don’t want to be in an altercation, they don’t want anything to escalate. That’s all the request is.”

The message Thomas relayed has been consistent within the black community for decades: a better relationship, not an end to the relationship. A Gallup poll shortly after the murder of George Floyd found that 81 percent of black people opposed reducing police in their neighborhoods; 61 percent wanted the same amount of police, while 20 percent wanted more.²⁰

When considering that black communities endure the slowest response times and suffer the worst crime, this response makes sense. Many wealthy communities can contract with private security, off-duty police officers, or sheriff’s deputies, but many other communities that the “defund the police” movement is supposed to help do not have those additional resources and need the public-safety services their tax dollars pay for.

Notably, black mayors of big cities such as Eric Johnson in Dallas, Lori Lightfoot in Chicago, and Sylvester Turner in Houston actively opposed defunding the police despite vocal outcries from many in the progressive wing of their party. In contrast, white progressive mayors were more inclined to support the policy. Those who pushed back received overall

public support in their opposition to it because, again, the constituencies they hail from do not want to defund or abolish their police.

In 2021, Minneapolis's black neighborhoods turned out heavily to reject a proposition that would have abolished the city's police department and "reimagined" it as something completely different.²¹ If ever there was a test for the appetite of the "defund the police" movement, this was it, and it failed.

Where Do Black Voters Go from Here?

When viewed collectively, it's apparent that the modern-day progressive platform is hostile to the needs of black Americans and the communities they live in. But that doesn't mean Democrats will lose them to Republicans.

"If Anglos or Hispanics disagree with the more progressive positions of Democrats, they find a welcoming home in the Republican Party," suggested Jones.

Whereas for most black voters, that's just a bridge too far. Because of past and present sentiment and rhetoric within the Republican Party, they just do not see that as a viable option even if they are closer to the Republican Party on issues.

Given these conditions, black urban Americans have few options, but there is clearly a need to create some. "Malcolm X has this speech called 'The Ballot or the Bullet,'" noted Tiffany. "Black people should not be committed to any party but to the agenda, and what are the policies? And that's how we have our currency."

There are some hopeful signs. In many cities, black voters have shown their willingness to form coalitions on issues that matter to them, even if it is with people with whom they would otherwise disagree. In 2015, the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) was on the ballot in Houston. The ordinance permitted people to use the restroom of their choice. The item pitted social conservatives against progressive Democrats, but siding with social conservatives were black and Hispanic pastors of churches around the city.

“Most people didn’t know the party became so progressive until 2015, when we had the HERO ordinance,” observed Bell.

People were really surprised at the conservatism of the black church; they were really surprised. The right really thought that the black voters were going to lean toward voting for it, but that is not what happened at all. Not only that, but they were the ones who were given credit for killing it.

Black and Hispanic churches were a driving force in turning out opposition to the item, so much so that it led to then-Mayor Annise Parker subpoenaing pastoral communications to claim that the churches were electioneering at the pulpit. Whatever one thinks of the HERO measure, black voters showed they were willing to buck the progressive agenda, although they still voted for the Democratic mayoral candidate even against a moderate Republican.

Black voters’ other options for long-term, sustaining reform on the local level cannot take place until they are willing to either vote for something different or withhold their vote until better options for them are presented.

Hispanic voters are in some senses showing the way. They have started to show willingness to buck the Democratic establishment when the party policies don’t align with the needs of their constituencies. Hispanic voters, especially in Texas as of late, have shown how much political power they hold, a notion echoed by Jones. “Democrats are finding that Latinos have much less reticence voting for Republicans if they feel that the Democratic Party is just too far away from them on too many policies.” Voting based on policy rather than party, in turn, leads to better political outcomes for Hispanic people.

During the Donald Trump years, Hispanic voters, especially those at the border, enjoyed a sense of security both economically and in public safety. As such, they turned out heavily to vote Republican in the 2020 election, turning some counties red that have not been so in decades.

They are making it known their vote cannot be taken for granted, and they are willing and ready to engage with whoever is going to address their needs. This is the direction African Americans need to follow.

A New Day in Urban Black Politics?

The good news: Black voters have started to actively oppose far-left progressive candidates and embrace moderate and, in some instances, conservative candidates for office. These candidates toe a unique line; they might, for instance, support police reform but oppose defunding, support the need of a social safety net for those in need but see the upsides of a free-market economy rich with opportunity, or support bail reform but actively fight the increases in crime spurred by a progressive agenda.

The elections of Johnson in Dallas, Eric Adams in New York City, Byron Brown in Buffalo, and Lincoln in Stockton reflect this trend. Johnson, in particular, regularly goes against the Democratic grain in Dallas, supporting more funding for police and more recently calling out racism within the Democratic Party. He recently passed a sweeping local government ethics reform, is one of the few mayors of a major city who can successfully claim year-to-date decreases in homicides and violent crimes, and has a 2022 agenda that includes decreasing property taxes.²²

New York City's Adams was elected over two more-progressive competitors. A 22-year New York Police Department (NYPD) veteran, he ran on a campaign of addressing crime and public safety and did not hesitate to criticize the "defund the police" movement, instead talking about police reform. He also publicly supported NYPD's "stop and frisk" policy, and after his election, his stance on reinstating NYPD's plainclothes street units led to the cofounder of Black Lives Matter of Greater New York to say there would be "riots" and "bloodshed" if he followed through with it.²³ Adams most recently drew the ire of many for saying he will reverse Bill de Blasio's plan to do away with solitary confinement at Rikers Island.²⁴

And in Buffalo, India Walton, a democratic socialist who ran in the Democratic primary for the city's mayoral election, won the primary against four-term incumbent Brown. Brown then launched a write-in campaign featuring a pragmatic approach for the general election. He came back to beat Walton, whose platform contained policies like launching a public bank and having "community grocery stores."²⁵

These changes can be viewed independently, but when looked at collectively, they signal the desire for a new, more pragmatic approach from leaders of all stripes when courting black voters.

The other way for black voters to maximize their political strength is to not vote. Thomas said,

I tell my students in my community development politics course that sometimes not voting is political. It's not apathy; sometimes it's a distinct choice that I'm not in this game. I think there is something to be said for those who don't participate in that cycle consciously because they don't see their issues.

While there is always a push for more voter engagement, not voting can be a political function as well, said Thomas. You are consciously acknowledging that neither of the two parties or candidates are addressing issues that matter to you and, as such, you will not participate.

For the foreseeable future, at least in urban areas, Democrats are likely to remain dominant, but where black voters may emerge as the crucial force against an overly leftist agenda and push a more conservative-minded approach could be in a city such as Austin or Seattle, mirroring Houston or Dallas. An agenda that focuses on public safety, education, upward mobility and opportunity, and affordability matters more to them than the enclave amenities many progressives want to prioritize—like universal basic income, bike lanes, and high-speed rail.

Yet to gain political leverage, black Americans must embrace a cultural shift that sees voting as a means to increase their political capital. Black voters need to recognize that their votes need to come at a premium and that by opening options, they can create a bidding war that will only end in their favor.

For black voters to have a significant impact, they will have to be fed up enough of being taken advantage of and motivated enough to do something about it. It seems like the motivation is there, but are they fed up enough?

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