

## Issue Brief: African Americans & Public Opinion in the United States

### Key Words (4-6)

African Americans or Blacks, Public opinion, Social, Economic, Whites, Liberal, Conservative

### Description (2 Sentences)

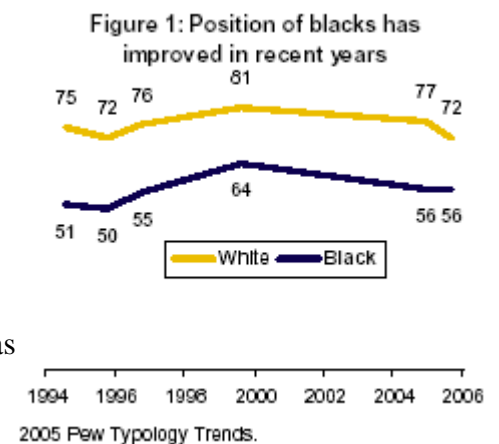
This brief will focus on the public opinion of African Americans in two ways: briefly examining American society perception of African Americans and describing African Americans views about certain economic and social issues. In addition, this brief will touch upon the relations between the two and how this has shaped African Americans opinions for the future.

### Key Points (4-6)

- Public Opinion is not only demonstrated by behavior and social actions, but can be shown through surveys and public opinion polling.
- Most of the general public views African Americans as negative.
- The majority of African Americans are liberal on economic issues but conservative on social issues.
- Whites are twice more likely than blacks to see progress in the lives of African Americans.

### Brief (500-700 words)

In the United States, African Americans make up 12.9 percent of the total population as shown in the most recent US Census data.<sup>1</sup> While the African American population is increasing, there seems to be a shared opinion among African Americans that economic and social issues are still the same, noting that there has been less progress in the Black community. However, Whites share a different opinion about black progress as more than the majority of whites believe that the position of Blacks in American society has improved.

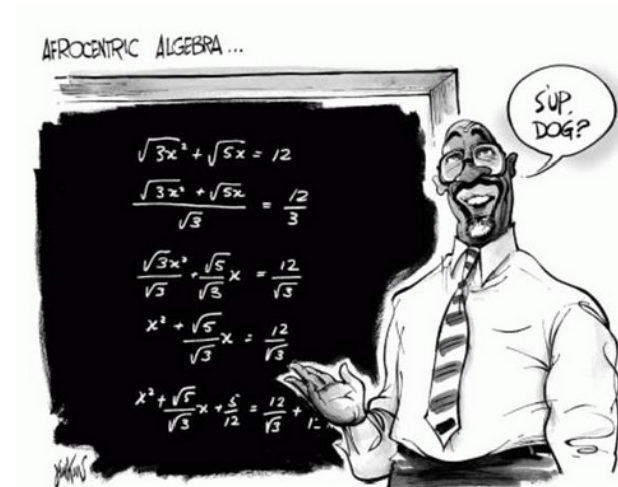


The difference in attitudes concerning the progress of African Americans has to deal with certain economic and social issues that shape public opinion. There are two ways to examine public opinion and African-Americans in the United States. The first way is to look at public opinion towards African Americans which displays the way African Americans are perceived by the general public. The second way includes the way African Americans feel about issues

<sup>1</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

pertinent to society. Both ways of viewing African Americans and public opinion is important because it demonstrates public opinion affects on both certain racial groups and certain issues.

Public opinion towards African Americans refers to the historical and current perception of African Americans viewed by American society. Public opinion can be based on behaviors and observations in American society, but the most common demonstration is the use of public opinion polls and surveys. National Opinion Research Center surveys found that in many cases, African Americans are viewed more negatively than other racial groups. This of course may be due to the historical perception of African Americans as genetically and socially inferior. In several instances, African Americans were placed at the bottom of the intelligence spectrum compared to Whites, Jews, and Southern Whites. Over the years, the percentages of these attitudes towards African Americans have shifted in favor of greater acceptance of inherent-equality, but racial stereotyping still exists. Today, large minorities of whites perceive blacks to be “undisciplined” or “violent.”<sup>2</sup> This is an important view because it reflects the way whites continue to perceive African Americans.



White’s public opinion towards African Americans not only pertains to social issues but also economic issues as well. One out of every three whites believes that “poor people” have it easy since they can depend on governmental benefits without working for nothing in return. Since African Americans constitute a large number of poverty, it is safe to infer that white’s attitudes towards the poor constitute their views about African Americans. This may be

one of the main reasons why more than the majority of whites believe that African Americans are much better compared to five years ago because of governmental benefits and an increase in the acceptance of Blacks as inherently equal.

However, only fifty-six percent of Blacks agreed that the position of Blacks in American society has improved in recent years. Reasons for this majority of opinion shared by African Americans may be due to both economic and social issues. The American Community survey<sup>3</sup> showed that twenty six percent of Blacks are living below the poverty level compared to only nine percent of whites. This poverty level directly correlates with the median income of Black households which is two thirds of the median income of white households. This economic gap between blacks and whites demonstrate the reasons why African Americans believe that the

<sup>2</sup> Hurwitz, Jon, Mark Peffley. Perception and Prejudice: Race and Politics in the United States. Yale University 1998.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/acs-04.pdf>

government should do more to guarantee food and shelter to those in needs- a more liberal approach.<sup>4</sup>

Though African Americans are more liberal concerning economic issues, they are more conservative concerning social issues. A conducted survey questioned whether or not religion was a very important part of life. Eighty- nine percent of blacks agreed compared to only seventy three percent of whites. In this case, it is not surprising that the majority of African Americans believe that homosexuality, pornography, and books hosting dangerous ideas should be discouraged and banned by society.

#### **But Blacks Are *More* Conservative on Many Social Issues**

<i>Percent who agree:</i>	<u>White Black</u>	
	%	%
It's necessary to believe in God to be moral*	48	72
Religion is a very important part of my life*	73	89
Homosexuality should be discouraged by society*	42	55
Government should do more to protect morality*	40	50
Schools should ban books with dangerous ideas*	44	51
Pornography is mostly harmless entertainment**	44	49
Women should return to their traditional roles**	23	29
I have old-fashioned values about family and marriage**	81	76

\* *Pew 2005 Political Typology* \*\**Pew 2003 Values Update Survey*

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The Pew Research Center, 2005: <http://people-press.org/commentary/?analysisid=121>

Economic and social issues continue to shape African American public opinion. In looking towards the future, there seems to be hope for the progress of African Americans. Fewer than half of all blacks say that they think life will be better for blacks in the future compared to the majority of the whites who believe this.<sup>5</sup> However, in a 1996 National Black Election study, when asked whether or not African Americans will ever achieve full social and economic equality in America, fifty one percent of African Americans said no.<sup>6</sup> It seems that African Americans are more critical about their progress. Public opinion towards African Americans and African American public opinion are directly correlated. If people continue to view African Americans negatively, then they will not support programs that are for the benefit of African Americans. Perhaps African Americans will start examining progress when public opinion towards African Americans shifts from negative to a more positive light.

<sup>4</sup> <http://people-press.org/commentary/?analysisid=121>

<sup>5</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/634/black-public-opinion>

<sup>6</sup> Price, Melanye T. *Dreaming Blackness: Black Nationalism and African American Public Opinion*. New York University Press, 2009.

## Works Cited

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## Websites (3-5)

*The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press:*

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/634/black-public-opinion>

<http://people-press.org/commentary/?analysisid=121>

*US Census Bureau: The American Community- Blacks: 2004:*

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/acs-04.pdf>

*NORC at the University of Chicago:* <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/projects/ByClient/>

*The Cartoon:* <http://www.racialicious.com/2008/06/18/proposed-afrocentric-school-in-canada-hit-with-stereotyping-and-skepticism/>

**Note:** *The following brief and information is based from surveys from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century.*