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Issue Brief: African-American/Black Voting Behavior in the United States

Key Words

African American(s), Black(s), Census, Vote/Voting, Minority/Minorities, Pattern(s)/Behavior

Description

This issue brief will describe the historical and current voting patterns of African Americans in the United States. This brief will compare and contrast African American voting patterns with other minority and majority groups as such information is pertinent in understanding overall voting behavior.

Key Points

- It was not until the 1965 Voting Rights Act, that all African Americans were given the right to vote
- Historically, African Americans, as a majority, have voted for members of the Democratic Party
- The 2008 Presidential Election drew a record number of African Americans to the polls
- The current construct used by the U.S. Census to gather data limits the African American demographic and opinion polling, this continues to work in the favor of the majority (Europeans-Americans/Whites)

Issue Brief

While African-Americans comprise roughly fourteen percent of the U.S. population, their prominent role throughout history as well as their current role, makes their demographic incredibly important. Persecution, discrimination, and near impossible upward mobility, brought forth by European-Americans, have made Black voting statistics and behavior a sensitive and heavily discussed topic. Their votes have been the deciding factors in major presidential victories (e.g. F.D.R. and Harry Truman), and have helped shape today's America.

After finally, equally, being awarded the right to vote, African-Americans became an immediate force in voting and American politics. By the end of 1965 and the Voting Rights Act, the United States had over 250,000 new Black registered voters, forcing politicians to consider a new constituency when formulating their policies.¹



¹ Global Information Network:

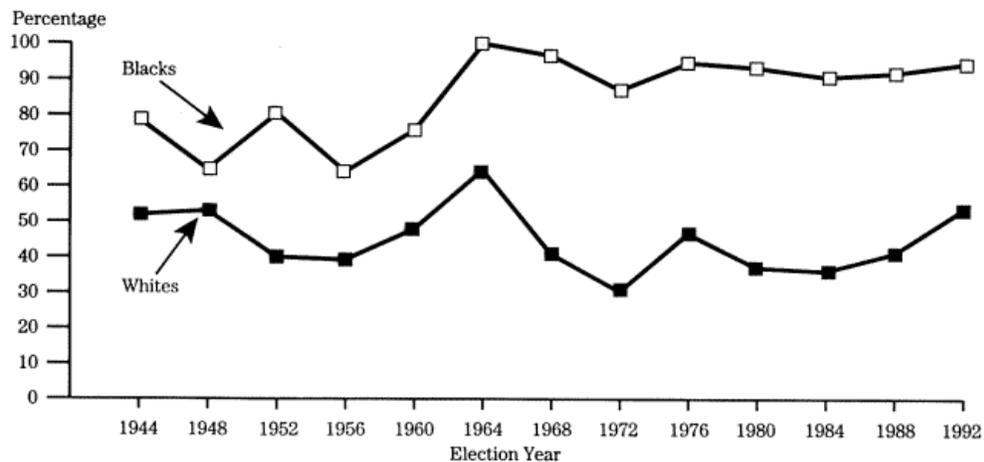
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=856283991&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&>

² New African American Voters: <http://www.proquestk12.com/downloads/Newvoters.jpg>

Due to European-American self-interest, Blacks were pushed to the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum; it is because of this that these two issues (social standing and economic stability) became the primary reasons behind African-American voting behavior.

Even prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African-Americans had voted predominately Democrat. The party’s platform helped a number of African Americans attend college, establish businesses, own houses, and attain employment, making it the obvious choice when choosing between the two parties. James Taranto, *Wall Street Journal* columnist writes, referring to African-Americans, “They vote overwhelmingly Democratic”, and goes on to write that most “nonblacks tend to vote Republican.”³ This chart reflects African American voting trends, from 1944-1992:

Figure 5-1 Major Party Voters Who Voted Democratic for President, by Race, 1944-1992 (in percentages)



Number of:	1944	1948	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Blacks	(52)	(17)	(51)	(50)	(75) ^a	(94)	(87)	(138)	(133) ^a	(105)	(129)	(122)	(188) ^a
Whites	(1,564)	(364)	(1,127)	(1,213)	(1,340) ^a	(1,014)	(816)	(1,430)	(1,459) ^a	(765)	(1,220)	(1,041)	(1,134) ^a

^a These numbers are weighted.

Source: Abramson et al.

⁴ A recent example of this voting behavior was in the recent Presidential Election of 2008. An

³ James Taranto, “Political Segregation”, Wall Street Journal: <http://www.opinionjournal.com/best/?id=110005191>

⁴ Democratic Party Voting Trends: <http://members.cox.net/fweil/VoteRace.gif>

historical number of African-American voters cast their ballots, reflecting their “overwhelming” support for the Democrat Party.

This is the first time a racial/ethnic minority had ever been the major party candidate, and had ever won the Presidency; an accomplishment that was helped fueled by high African-American voter turnout. It was President Obama’s African-American descent and his tie to the Democratic Party that drew Black voters to the polls. Though one can argue the same may not have occurred if he had been on the Republican ticket. An example of this can be seen by the lack of support from the African-American community for African-American Republican National Committee Chairman, Michael Steele. Though he is of African-American descent, his party’s interests are far removed from the interests, as a whole, of the African-American community. While current data reflects the opinions of African-Americans as one ethnic/racial group, it does not necessarily take into account, double, or multiple minorities.

A large debate has been occurring recently about the gay community and equal rights, with regards to marriage, serving in the military, etc... President Obama has been lobbying The House of Representatives and The Senate to repeal the “Defense of Marriage Act”, but a great deal of opposition stands in the way, especially from the African-American community.⁵ While the Black community has strong ties to the Democratic Party, it is, overall, staunchly conservative on the issue of Gay Rights. How then can honest data be formulated with the U.S. Census’ current construct? If a Gay-African-American, were to give his/her opinion on specific issues, it would reflect that simply of African-American opinion. The same could be said for the conservative, or straight, African-American. The way race/ethnicity is broken down into five

⁵ “Obstacles ahead for Obama’s gay rights goals”:
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/11/obama.gay.rights.reax/>

categories today, limits the amount of important information needed for gathering honest data. This is important because governmental policies reflect the wants and needs, established by votes, of their constituents; without having sufficient data, effective policies cannot be formulated.

African-American voting behavior is crucial in understanding American Politics. After the 2008 election, speculation has occurred about whether or not we will continue to see such high voter turnout among the Black community. While political analysts believe the African-American community will continue to vote for the Democratic Party, severe pressure is being placed on the current Ethno/Racial polling methods (“Ethnoracial Pentagon”); this may eventually draw softer party lines, which could change the demographic party ties completely.

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