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# The Impact of the Black Vote

By Eddie N. Williams  
and Milton D. Morris

The Black vote was not a decisive factor in the outcome of the 1980 presidential elections. Black support for Ronald Reagan was not crucial to his victory and in view of his large victory margin, no level or configuration of Black voting could have denied him the presidency. Nevertheless, Black political activity in 1980 was better organized and more purposeful than it had ever been in connection with a presidential election.

The year's activities began with a national conference in Richmond, Va., in February [ '80] to draft a Black political agenda, and culminated in a December 11th Blair House meeting between the Black Leadership Forum and President-elect Reagan. Black political participation, as well as overall national political events in 1980, might very well portend important new directions for Blacks in their efforts to be genuinely influential participants in the political arena.

The Conference (National Conference on a Black Agenda for the 1980s) had three major accomplishments. First, it focused the attention of the Black population and particularly of Black leaders on several major issues of special concern. Second, in spite of inevitable differences among participants on several specific questions, the conference achieved an unprecedented degree of consensus on the broad issues with which Blacks should be concerned in the decade of the 1980s. Third, it produced a single document embracing these concerns which could help to guide Black political participation in 1980 as well as in the decade ahead.

The candidate selection or nominating process is a vital stage in the selection of a President not only because one candidate is chosen from among the several aspirants within each party, but also because the tone and direction of each party's position on major issues is shaped at this stage. Blacks have become increasingly active in the candidate selection process and in 1980 they were important participants in this process in

both parties, although much more so in the Democratic than in the Republican Party.

Election day surveys conducted by the Joint Center for Political Studies reveal that the turnout rate for Black voters in the 1980 presidential election was very close to that of 1976; that Blacks again gave overwhelming support to President Carter, and that they exhibited much less uneasiness with this support than the news media and even some Black leaders had anticipated.

Data on registration and voting gathered by the Joint Center from about 800 randomly selected precincts with 90 percent or more of the population Black, showed that 61.3 percent of the registered voters went to the polls. Turnout by registered Black voters was highest in the Northeast (67 percent) and lowest in the South (60 percent).

The turnout rate for Blacks in 1980 is especially encouraging when the style and content of the presidential election are considered. There was relatively little in either the style or issue content of the election to generate strong interest in voting among Blacks. Perhaps reflecting the changed character of race in American politics, few explicitly racial issues were raised during the campaign.

The Joint Center's study of Black voting in the 1980 presidential election shows that as in 1976, President Carter won the overwhelming majority of the Black vote. Data from the sample of Black precincts indicate that about 90 percent of the vote went to President Carter, 7 percent to Governor Reagan and about 2 percent to Congressman John Anderson.

In spite of some misgivings, Blacks chose overwhelmingly to continue their support for President Carter and the Democratic Party in the 1980 presidential elections. In doing so, they stood virtually alone. Postmortems of the election indicate that every other segment of the electorate that had been strongly identified with the Democratic Party in



ILLUSTRATION BY SHELLY RUSSEL

the past, shifted toward the Republican Party. This was true of Mexican-American, Jewish and labor groups. The outcome of the election is understandably disappointing to Blacks and it poses several profound and perplexing questions about Black political participation in the years ahead.

One potential benefit of the outcome of the election is that it may have freed Black voters to think more independently, creatively, and pragmatically about the pattern of their political participation in the future. The Republican Party, led by Reagan, is in a good position to reach out to Blacks, to demonstrate the party's capacity to respond to their interests, and to incorporate them to a significant degree into the structure of the party.

The election results also provide an unprecedented opportunity for Blacks to play a leading part in restructuring the Democratic Party as it seeks to recover from the serious defeat of November.

Another potential benefit of the outcome of the 1980 election is that it challenges Blacks to a new and perhaps more sophisticated style of politics. Undoubtedly, a Reagan Administration will seek different approaches to some of the chronic national problems that Blacks have sought to address for the past several decades. Blacks will need to formulate some of their specific objectives and modify some of the strategies they have advocated in seeking to protect their interests.

Still another likely benefit for Blacks might derive from the need to reemphasize self-help. The tendency to focus on the government for solutions to many of the pressing problems Blacks face, sometimes overshadows the clear and urgent need for a more vigorous effort by Blacks to achieve social and economic advancement for themselves in spite of continuing obstacles to their advancement. There are many areas in which government can only be a partner—and for

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Blacks a reluctant partner—in development.

To emphasize the likely benefits of a Reagan presidency is not to ignore or underestimate the actual and potential problems it poses for Blacks and other disadvantaged minorities. Many commentators have hastened to interpret the outcome of the election as representing a fundamental ideological shift by the electorate, one conferring a mandate for sweeping retrenchment and retreat from much of the social progress of recent years. However, the available data on the attitudes and perceptions of the electorate provide no conclusive evidence for such an interpretation. On the contrary, those data suggest that the electorate sought mainly a change in leadership and improvement in the country's economy, military strength, and international standing. An assumption by the Administration that it is mandated to implement sweeping conservative reforms could indeed be devastating for Blacks, other minorities, and all the poor and disadvantaged in the society.

The history of racial discrimination in this society and efforts to combat it indicate that the federal government has been vital to the survival of Blacks. Furthermore, while they are not the only, or even the principal beneficiaries of the major social programs of the past two decades geared to assist the low-income and the otherwise disadvantaged, a large proportion of the Black population is especially dependent on them and thus highly vulnerable to any major cutbacks. Anything but the most cautious moves toward reforming social programs, or further sharing resources and power with state and local governments, could be extremely detrimental to Blacks and require them to struggle relentlessly for their survival. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty for all Americans, it is considerably more so for Black Americans as they approach the new Administration. □

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## The Status of Black Leadership

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By Charles V. Hamilton

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Historically and currently, Black leadership in this country has had to submit to at least one crucial test of legitimacy. It has had to withstand almost constant attacks from those who would question both its judgments and its motives. And in the process, it has been strengthened and made viable. Historically, for the most part, it has not been an *elected* leadership, in the sense of a represented constituency choosing it at the polls—that has only occurred substantially in the last decade or so—but its claim to speak for a designated group has not been taken for granted, inasmuch as it has not always (some might suggest, ever) been simply taken at its word.

If vast numbers of people continue to pay dues and otherwise support the organization, it is reasonable to conclude that the leadership and its programs and processes are consented to in large measure. This might not be entirely satisfactory to one who requires a more direct periodic electoral mechanism for sanctioning leaders. But neither does it justify the conclusion that “there is no institutional mechanism” to assess a claim of leadership.

Without question, there is a clear ideological preference on the part of most (certainly not all) Black leaders for what can be characterized as a “liberal” approach to public policy. Even where this liberalism is not associated with the Democratic Party or with a political party more liberal (or socialist) in orientation, it usually comes down on the