

Al Sharpton, the 2004 Presidential Election, and Black Politics

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When the Reverend Al Sharpton formally launched his bid to secure the Democratic Party's 2004 presidential nomination, the black Pentecostal minister from New York was already a familiar figure. He first attracted widespread attention when – in 1987 – he spearheaded efforts to secure legal redress for Tawana Brawley, a black teenager who claimed that she had been raped by a white gang. Four years later, he was accused of encouraging riots in Crown Heights. There were claims of anti-Semitism. Although he had admirers, Sharpton's appearance and evident vanity encouraged derision, particularly among whites.

However, despite the early controversies, and although he continued to lead protests against police actions and US military bombing trials on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, Sharpton moderated his image as the 1990s progressed. In 1992 and 1994, he joined the Democratic Senatorial primary contests and, in the latter race, secured 80 per cent of the black vote and 25 per cent of the total vote. In 1997, he was a candidate for New York City mayor. The search for a degree of respectability yielded political dividends and by the end of the 1990s, he was widely regarded as an influential power broker. Those seeking to run on the Democratic ticket and some Republicans sought his backing. In 2000, meetings were held with Hillary Clinton as well as presidential contenders, Bill Bradley and Al Gore. Sharpton himself talked increasingly of peaceful protest rather than confrontation. Indeed, he was hailed by Coretta Scott King as

“a leader who has protested injustice with a passionate unrelenting commitment to nonviolent action in the spirit and tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”¹

Sharpton and the Jackson Campaigns

Initially, Sharpton’s presidential campaign seemed to talk in terms that recalled Jesse Jackson’s bids to secure the Democratic presidential nomination in both 1984 and 1988. Although Jackson lost out to former Vice-President Walter Mondale and Governor Michael Dukakis respectively, his 1988 bid not only galvanized the black vote and increased voter registration levels, but also captured significant levels of backing in states where there were relatively few African American voters.² In all, Jackson attracted 3.5 and seven million votes in 1984 and 1988 respectively. Furthermore, at the end of the 1988 primary season, Jackson’s national convention speech – which was widely regarded as electrifying – was a left populist rallying cry for a broadly-based “rainbow coalition” that might secure an arms freeze, radical reform based upon an extension of government provision, and a more egalitarian nation.

For his part, Sharpton also spoke of building a broad coalition. He told supporters that his campaign would be “anti-war, anti-death penalty, anti-tax cut across the board.”³ It would “reach out to disaffected voters, including Latinos, blacks, gays and lesbians, and young people.”⁴ The campaign was also committed to increasing voter registration, securing the voting rights of citizens living in Washington, DC – who lack full representation in Congress – and ensuring that “women’s rights are not stolen from them by the Republican Right.” In particular, there was a commitment to “universal health care for the nation” and equal educational opportunities. Both would – Sharpton’s platform asserted – be guaranteed through amendments to the US Constitution.⁵

1. CBS.com, *60 Minutes – The Power Broker*, 19 April 2000.
www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/04/17/60M/main185252.shtml.

2. Manning Marable, *Race, Rebellion and Reform: The Second Black Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) 216.

3. Associated Press, “Al Sharpton Joins the Race for President,” *ABCNews.com*, 21 January 2004.

4. *The New York Times*, 14 February 2004.

5. Al Sharpton- President: www.sharpton2004.org/.

Few observers suggested that Sharpton had a serious prospect of winning the nomination. Nonetheless, there were hopes that his campaign could tilt the center of political gravity within the Democratic Party away from Clintonesque centrism. For his part, Clarence Page of *The Chicago Tribune* compared Sharpton with Ralph Nader, the 2000 Green candidate: "We still have a role in our society for the gadfly or agitator ... They still have a role in giving voice to the voiceless."⁶ The time was also right, it was said, to raise populist issues and address the economic gulf between working Americans and the wealthy. *The New York Times* reported that Sharpton planned to go beyond the campaign platform and structure the campaign around Enron and its ties with the Bush administration. At the least, it was said, the Sharpton campaign would add to the number of registered voters and establish Sharpton himself as the US's principal civil rights leader. As *The Chicago Tribune* suggested in an otherwise hostile commentary:

Rev Al Sharpton [can] no longer be dismissed as merely a loudmouth New York pariah. Today, his home state politicians seek his endorsement ... With no chance of winning the nomination, a well-executed Sharpton campaign could secure his place in the civil rights pantheon and the national Democratic Party.⁷

However, in the months that followed, Sharpton's campaign did little to fulfil this early promise. While there were forecasts that he might win the South Carolina (where blacks comprised 47 per cent of the voters) and Washington, DC primaries, and later suggestions in *The Black Commentator* that he had shifted the terms of the pre-nomination debate by compelling the other contenders to emphasize the value that they placed upon African American voters, his campaign failed to make a significant impact. He only attracted 20 per cent of the vote in the District of Columbia, 10 per cent in South Carolina, and 8 per cent in New York. Furthermore, the result in many other states was less than 5 per cent and often listed as 0 per cent. Instead, Senator John Kerry won much of the black vote. Indeed, Kerry gained higher levels of support among African Americans and other non-white groupings than whites. Bereft of support among blacks, Sharpton had no prospect whatsoever of constructing a broader coalition.

6. Quoted in Seth Gitell, "Al Sharpton for President?" 22 July 2004, *The Phoenix.com*, www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/top/features/documents/02179035.htm.

7. Ellen Warren, "Al Sharpton: Reinventing Himself," *The Chicago Tribune* 20 November 2003.

	John Edwards	John Kerry	Al Sharpton
White Men (43%)	52%	58%	2%
White Women (46%)	52%	64%	1%
Non-White Men (5%)	32%	47%	20%
Non-White Women (6%)	41%	54%	14%

Table 1: Percentage of the South Carolina Democratic primary electorate supporting Senator John Edwards, Senator John Kerry and Al Sharpton (2004)⁸

Despite the proportionality of the system by which the Democrats allocate national convention delegates following the primaries and caucuses, Sharpton had amassed – by mid-March – just 27 delegates compared with the 2,162 who were pledged to the front-runner, Senator John Kerry. At this point, while remaining in the contest, Sharpton endorsed Kerry. As he told the Associated Press, it was “futile” to continue the campaign.

The contrast between the Sharpton and Jackson campaigns could hardly be more pronounced. In 1984, Jackson secured 72 per cent of the black vote while 92 per cent of black voters supported him in 1988. Although much of the energy and enthusiasm that Jackson marshaled was later dissipated, Jackson established himself as an important political figure and the rise in black voter registration as a consequence of his campaigning contributed to a significant increase in the number of elected black officials. Two figures closely associated with the Jackson campaigns – Alexis Herman and Ron Brown – were later offered cabinet posts in the Clinton administration.⁹

Reasons

Why did the Sharpton campaign fail so dramatically? Why was it unable to recapture the élan and energy of the Jackson campaigns? A partial answer lies in the changing character of the primary process. The period during which the primaries and caucuses are held has been increasingly

8. Source: adapted from CNN.com, *America Votes 2004: The Primaries* www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/primaries/pages/epolls/SC.

9. DeWayne Wickham, “Sharpton’s Campaign Disappoints,” *USA Today*, 2 March 2004, www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/wickham/2004-03-02-wickham_x.htm

compressed. To be successful in a “front-loaded” system, candidates must have the resources to campaign in a number of different states at the same time. Relative outsiders can no longer look for a win in states such as Iowa and New Hampshire and then – on the basis of momentum that they have created – attract the funding required to campaign in other states during the following months.

Al Sharpton’s low initial ratings were also a factor. Despite the shift in the character of Sharpton’s image during the 1990s, white opinion remained overwhelmingly hostile and black attitudes towards him were mixed. According to a survey conducted in 2000, 37 per cent of African Americans saw him in positive terms (compared with just 10 per cent among the general population) but 29 per cent regarded him unfavorably.¹⁰

A third explanation lies in the broader political context. Faced by a Republican hold on both chambers of Congress and the White House, there was a desperation to win. It was this that also damned former Vermont Governor Howard Dean’s bid for the presidency. Ron Walters of the University of Maryland has alluded to this in his comments on the Sharpton campaign: “If there wasn’t this tremendous sense of urgency ... he would have been given more consideration. There is little flexibility in this atmosphere.”¹¹

Thirdly, the campaign lacked a mobilizing network. Sharpton was very much associated with New York and – despite the claims made for the National Action Network (NAN) – his links with other parts of the country were often tenuous. In short, there were few grassroots activists. In 1984 and 1988, many black elected officials were ambivalent towards Jackson. However, his campaigns were able to draw upon the barely veiled efforts of the black clergy. In 2004, few ministers offered a platform to Sharpton or encouraged voter registration on his behalf.

Fourthly, the character of the Sharpton campaign compounded the other difficulties. It was marked – all observers agreed – by significant organizational difficulties. Appointments were not kept and meetings failed to take place. Frequently he failed to appear at scheduled events. There were also financial problems. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) fined

10. David A. Bositis, *National Opinion Poll – Politics* (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2000) 18.

11. Carla Thompson, “Sharpton’s Tactics Responsible for Black Voters’ Snub,” 18 February 2004, www.blackamericaweb.com/site.aspx/bawnews/sharptontactics.

Sharpton \$5,500 in February for filing late disclosure reports. In May, in a unanimous FEC ruling, he was asked to repay \$100,000 after claims that he had exceeded a \$50,000 limit that candidates may spend on their own campaigns. Furthermore, Sharpton's loyalty to the Democrats was also in doubt. At least one Republican Party operative was involved in the Sharpton campaign. From the right's point of view, the campaign offered an opportunity to fuel tensions among Democrats and attach an extremist label to the Democrats. As New York's *Village Voice* reported, a Republican activist who had played a critical role in hindering the Florida recounts in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election, organized Sharpton's application for matching funds from the Federal Election Commission and also appointed some staff members to the campaign.¹²

However, a much more profound and far-reaching explanation has also been put forward. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Mark Bowden has argued that the failure of the Sharpton campaign to make significant headway reflects a fundamental shift in the character of black politics over the past two decades. From this perspective, Sharpton's repudiation by black voters suggests that there is a process of absorption into the American mainstream. African American politics, it is said, have matured and moved beyond anachronistic appeals based upon race. Whereas black voters were once marshaled behind calls for racial justice and redistributive policies, this form of political exceptionalism is now on the wane. From this perspective, Sharpton's failure is a step along the road to "modernization" and "normalized" two-party politics. Increasingly, black attitudes are – like white opinion – shaped by mainstream political issues such as terrorism, the Iraq war and economy. Similarly, African American voters are – like white voters – pulled between the ideas associated with conservatism and moderate liberalism. In short: "civil-rights progress has desimplified black politics. African American voters no longer come in one flavour."¹³

Bowden suggests that the shift has four principal components. He points, firstly, to the decline of the "Negro spokesman." In past years, African Americans and whites looked towards an acknowledged leader or a small group of leaders at both local and national level. Figures such as

12. Wayne Barrett with special reporting by Adam Hutton and Christine Lagorio, "Sleeping with the GOP: A Bush Covert Operative Takes over Al Sharpton's Campaign," 5 February 2004, <http://villagevoice.com/issues/0405/barrett.php>.

13. Mark Bowden, "Pompadour with a Monkey Wrench," *The Atlantic* 294.1 (July-August 2004): 95.

Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King and, in some respects, Jesse Jackson played this role. It is – he argues – a sign of political maturity that although he has failed to grasp this, there is no longer a role for Sharpton to assume. Secondly, a “strong black middle class” has emerged. Thirdly, on the basis of this, there has been an overall decline in levels of identification with the Democratic Party among African Americans. Although African Americans remain the party’s most loyal constituency, there was, Bowden records, a fall in the proportion of those identifying themselves as Democrats from 74 per cent in 2000 to 63 per cent in 2002. His figures are drawn from a poll conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (JCPES).¹⁴ Fourthly, Bowden suggests, there is now much greater political diversity among those African Americans who have secured positions of influence. The rise of figures such as Clarence Thomas, who made common cause with Antonin Scalia so as to form a “hard right” faction on the US Supreme Court bench, and the prominence of other blacks – most notably National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell – in the Bush administration are testimony to this. Lastly, African Americans “are way past the point where they think they will further their agenda just by voting for someone black.”¹⁵

Partisanship

Bowden’s conclusions are, however, tinged with a degree of wishful thinking. Although the JCPES study recorded a fall in black partisan identification between 2000 and 2002, other surveys covering the period draw radically different conclusions. The University of Michigan’s National Election Studies (NES) found that if all forms of black Democratic partisanship – from “leaners” to those most strongly committed – are considered, there was a rise in partisan identification from 83 per cent to 85 per cent during these years.¹⁶

14. David A. Bositis, *2002 National Opinion Poll: Politics* (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2002) 5.

15. Mat Johnson, quoted in Bowden 95.

16. National Election Studies (2004) *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior -Party Identification 3-Point Scale 1952-2002* (2004), www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/2ndtable/t2a_2_1.htm.

However, even if the notion of a decline between 2000 and 2002 was to be accepted, it would be a mistake to draw firm conclusions from this or talk of a discernible long-term fall in levels of identification with the Democratic Party. All polling surveys record short-term changes and shifts. These may be trendless fluctuations or a consequence of polling error. However, there is some evidence that they are associated with the overall political climate. There was a marked rise in black Democratic partisanship in the early 1990s as the Republican right campaigned against the Clinton White House and subsequently won control over both the House of Representatives and the Senate and again during the impeachment drama of the late 1990s. During both periods, African American opinion rallied to Clinton. Furthermore, if the NES polling figures are used, black Democratic partisanship remained at a high level between 2000 and 2002. Allegations that black voters had been disenfranchised in Florida and perceptions of the Bush administration may well have fuelled Democratic loyalties that were sustained despite the impact of the September 11 attacks.

	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Whites	39	47	45	42	47	45	44	42
Blacks	80	79	77	81	78	84	83	85

Table 2: Percentages of strong Democratic identifiers – by race (1988-2002)¹⁷

Opinion

The claim that black attachment to the Democratic Party is breaking down and that African Americans are increasingly open to two-party competition is not original. Indeed, it has been put forward in different forms since the civil rights years of the 1950s and 1960s. The late Lee Atwater, who served as Republican Party Chairman under President George H. W. Bush, spoke of the Party winning a 20 per cent share of the black vote. There were outreach activities throughout the 1990s and

17. Source: adapted from National Election Studies, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior – Party Identification 3-Point Scale 1952-2002*, 2004, www.umich.edu/~nes/nescguide/2ndtable/t2a_2_1.htm.

repeated talk of a breakthrough. Yet, in 2000, George W. Bush attracted just 8 per cent of the black vote, the lowest figure since Senator Barry Goldwater stood as the Party's presidential candidate in 1964.

Why is black opinion so resistant to Republican overtures? In part, it is because the party's efforts have been limited in character. Indeed, some observers suggest that they have been directed more towards reassuring moderate white opinion. However, there are also other reasons. Firstly, many blacks and whites have strikingly different attitudes to the role of government, particularly the federal government in Washington, DC. For many African Americans, the federal government played a critical role, albeit in a hesitant and uneven way, in the civil rights revolution. The Supreme Court, Congress, and – most notably – President Lyndon Johnson imposed reform upon southern officials who had pledged themselves to “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” In contrast, for many whites, the federal government instead became increasingly synonymous with a burgeoning bureaucracy, tax increases, and excessive regulation. In 2000, 41 per cent of whites told pollsters that the federal government was “too powerful.” Only 19 per cent of African Americans agreed.¹⁸

Secondly, while there are many shared concerns, there are also differences between blacks and whites in terms of policy preferences. Issues associated with the Democrats such as unemployment, poverty, and education often have a higher priority for African Americans than whites. Furthermore, although much depends upon the way in which polling questions are posed and the issue has fluctuated in terms of its relative salience, many blacks and whites see affirmative action in different ways. While some familiar Republican figures – most notably Secretary of State Colin Powell – have endorsed affirmative action in, at least, a limited form, and the Bush administration maintain a degree of skillfully crafted ambiguity in – for example – the *amicus curiae* brief it submitted when the University of Michigan's admission policies were considered by the US Supreme Court in 2003, the Republicans are – as a party – popularly associated with opposition to such programs. Affirmative action is, however, backed by most African Americans.

18. National Election Studies (2004), *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior – Power of the Federal Government*, www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/2ndtable/t4a_1_2.htm.

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
Non-Hispanic Whites	44	49	7
Blacks	70	21	9

Table 3: Attitudes towards affirmative action – by race (2003)¹⁹

At the same time, there is still a belief that the Republican Party harbors old prejudices. These suspicions were intensified when – in December 2002 – Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott told those gathered at a birthday party for Strom Thurmond, who sought the presidency in 1948 on a “Dixiecrat” segregationist platform, that he wished that Thurmond had won.²⁰

Thirdly, despite Mark Bowden’s stress on the rise of a “strong black middle class” and the boom of the late 1990s, many African Americans remain economically vulnerable. Large numbers are confined to the secondary labor market. Jobs are characteristically poorly-paid, insecure, governed by arbitrary procedures and norms, and offer few opportunities for advancement. Disproportionate numbers of African Americans lag behind in terms of both education and income. Furthermore, there is a significant degree of dependence upon public sector employment and provision. The higher echelons of the private corporation are still largely white in character.

There is, fourthly, still a deep sense of separation in the black communities. The degree of separation – and the contrast between blacks and other racial and ethnic groupings was highlighted in a Zogby poll conducted between December 1999 and February 2000 – looked at different ethnic and racial groupings. It suggested that African Americans – and to a lesser extent other groups – were still spatially and socially separated. Arguably, this leads to feelings of detachment from the political establishment represented – in its more visible and self-confident form – by the Republicans.

19. Question text: “Do you generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for racial minorities?” Source: adapted from *USA Today*, “Gallup Poll Results,” 23 June 2003, www.usatoday.com/news/polls/tables/live/0623.htm.

20. Edward Ashbee, “The Lott Resignation, ‘Blogging,’ and American Conservatism,” *The Political Quarterly* 74.3 (July-September 2003): 361-70.

	African	Hispanic	Asian	Arab	Jewish	Italian
Do not have close friendships with other ethnic groups	18.5	21.0	14.0	7.5	9.5	2.5
Neighborhood is predominantly composed of the same ethnic group	33.5	21.0	8.5	5.5	13.0	5.0

Table 4: Ethnic and racial groupings – selected characteristics (1999-2000)²¹

Separation is tied to notions of group allegiance and a commitment to “descriptive representation.” Surveys suggest that there are significantly higher levels of backing for a member of Congress by African American constituents if she or he is black. According to Katherine Tate’s 2003 study, 60 per cent backed their legislator’s performance when she or he was a black Democrat compared with just 36 per cent for a white Democrat.²² The failure of the Republicans to recruit and stand significant numbers of black candidates creates a further bond between African Americans and the Democrats.

We Are All Multiculturalists Now

There has been a recognition of black “exceptionalism” on the conservative right as well as the left. In 1963, Nathan Glazer – a celebrated commentator and a founding father of neoconservatism – published *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* with Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Glazer and Moynihan argued that each ethnic and racial group had found – or would find – its own route to success, group pluralism, and integration. The civil rights revolution would allow blacks to follow the course set by the Irish, Poles and other immigrant groupings. However, as the decades progressed, Glazer’s reservations have taken an increasingly rigorous and – from his perspective – pessimistic form.

21. Source: adapted from James J. Zogby, *What Ethnic Americans Really Think* (Zogby International, 2001), Tables 25, 26, 27, 44 and 45.

22. Huey L. Perry, “Race, the State, and Research Scholarship on Race and Politics,” *The Journal of Politics* 66.3 (August 2004): 960.

In his 1998 book, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*, Glazer argues that whereas Latinos and Asian-Americans may well become less economically, culturally and politically distinct, the prospects for the integration of African Americans into the American mainstream are much less certain:

The two nations for our America are the black and the white, and increasingly, as Hispanics and Asians become less different from whites from the point of view of residence, income, occupation, and political attitudes, the two nations become the black and the others ... Only twenty years ago we could still believe that African Americans would become, in their ways of life, their degree of success, their connection to society, simply Americans of darker skin ... But our progress in moving toward that goal, while evident in some respects, show some serious backsliding, and more than that, a hard institutionalization of differences.²³

Shifts and changes

Nonetheless, although the “modernization” thesis is an overstatement, it would be a mistake to assert that black politics have remained static over the past two decades. There has been a shift and this provides a further – perhaps decisive – reason for the failure of the Sharpton campaign. In particular, polling reports have suggested that black attitudes are losing the radical edge that provided a basis for Jackson 1984 and 1988 campaigns.

If attitudes towards discrimination are considered, there has been a marked fall in the proportion of African Americans asserting that the failure of blacks to match whites in terms of socio-economic status was due to discrimination.

	1986	1990	1994	1998	2000
Blacks	74.4	83.6	80.8	62.8	64.8
Whites	40.3	36.7	36.0	31.9	33.4

Table 5: Importance of discrimination, 1986-2000 – percentage of who responded that SES differences were “due to discrimination” – by race (1986-2000)²⁴

23. Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 149.

24. Question text: “On the average (Blacks/African Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are ... mainly due to discrimination?” Source: adapted from

Alongside this, although disproportionate numbers of blacks still see the federal government in far more positive terms than whites and there have been short-term fluctuations, most notably reactions to the Nixon administration, Vietnam and Watergate, there has been a significant rise in the proportion of African Americans who – like many whites – see the federal government as over-powerful.

	1964	1966	1970	1972	1984	1992	2000
Blacks	5	13	14	31	18	25	19
Whites	33	42	33	42	35	44	41

Table 6: Power of the federal government 1964-2000 – percentage who responded “government too powerful” – by race (1964-2000)²⁵

Similarly, fewer African Americans look towards government provision. Instead, there is – by implication – more of an emphasis on self-reliance and individual effort.

	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Blacks	54	50	44	41	30
Whites	25	18	22	20	21

Table 7: Federal government provision of jobs and a standard of living – percentage who responded “government to see to jobs and a standard of living” (1-3 on a seven point scale) – by race (1984-2000)²⁶

In part, all of this is part of a broader process. The center of political gravity has swung rightwards across much of the globe since the 1980s. However, although there is still a perceptual gulf between blacks and

The National Opinion Research Center, *General Social Survey Codebook – RACDIF1* (2004), <http://webapp.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/>.

25. Question text: “What is your feeling, do you think the government is getting too powerful or do you think the government is not getting too strong?” Source: adapted from adapted from National Election Studies, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior – Power of the Federal Government* (2004), www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/2ndtable/t4a_1_2.htm.

26. Question text: “Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living ... Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his/ their own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?” (7-point scale shown to respondent). Source: adapted from National Election Studies, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior* (2004), www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/2ndtable/t4a_4b_1.htm.

whites, black opinion has shifted at a faster pace than that of whites. In part, this may be attributable to the close character of Bill Clinton's relationship with African Americans. Despite his disavowal of radicalism – or even Democratic traditionalism – and his backing for measures such as welfare reform, Clinton's backing from black voters reached record levels, particularly during the closing months of his administration. However, the commercial redevelopment of black neighborhoods such as Harlem and their absorption into the broader urban economy may also have played a part by undermining calls for radical economic change. At the same time, the failure of activists to build sustained forms of organization from either the Jackson campaigns or initiatives such as the 1995 Million Man March also contributed to the shift.

While African Americans will continue to remain wedded to the Democratic Party and Republican outreach efforts will almost certainly prove fruitless, there is now much less of a basis for campaigns – such as that mounted by Al Sharpton – that rest upon calls for expanded government provision and a redistribution of income and wealth. Sharpton's address to the Democrats' July 2004 national convention was hailed as a gripping and largely spontaneous performance in an otherwise orchestrated week. However, despite the plaudits, Sharpton's words remained just rhetoric and his hyperbole served as a reminder of his detachment from the contemporary American political process.