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## Black Conservatism in My Life: The Trends of the Last Twenty Years

Andrew Wilson Reed

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Black Conservatism in My Life:  
The Trends of the Last Twenty Years

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

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## **Abstract**

This purpose of this thesis is to answer the following questions: Has the African American community become more ideologically conservative in my lifetime (i.e. the last twenty years)? If so, has this resulted in a change in voting patterns? Has this conservatism altered their political preferences? Are black conservatism and white conservatism compatible or do black conservatives and white conservatives still differ on core issues? I will attempt to answer these questions by analyzing data from the 1984, 1988, and 1996 National Black Election Studies as well as using National Election Survey collected between from 1972 and 1998. Much of the data has already been compiled in the book *From Protest to Politics* by Katherine Tate and is used in my analysis.

## **Introduction**

The 1980s brought with it a Conservative shift in the American electorate manifested in the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan (Watson 1998). Since with that election, 5 of the last 7 presidential inaugural addresses have been presented by Republicans. The Republican Party has also gained enough seats in both the House and Senate to constitute a majority in Congress for the first time in over fifty years. Some writers have argued that America as a whole has shifted to the right during the last generation (Michlethwait 2004). Other writers have argued that such a conservative trend is non-existent (Schwab 1988), or lacks sufficient evidence (Smith 1990). What is at question in this paper is whether or not this supposed trend of conservatism within the overall population of the United States has “trickled down” from the traditional white protestant population to the black community and the implications it may have on voting patterns.

With the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and his exerted effort to have a diverse cabinet, the visibility of black conservatives has increased as of late. President Bush’s initial cabinet members included Colin Powell as Secretary of State and Roderick Paige as Secretary of Education. Other high profile positions were filled by African Americans, including Condoleezza Rice’s appointment as National Security Advisor. When President Bush was reelected to a second term, Colin Powell stepped down and was replaced by Dr. Rice, and Alphonso Jackson was named Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

In addition to being appointed to high positions in government, black Republicans are also winning more elections to statewide offices. In 1994 J.C. Watts of Oklahoma and Gary Franks of Connecticut were elected out of 24 black Republicans who ran nationally (Reiland 1996). In other landmark victories, Jennette Bradley was elected Lieutenant Governor of Ohio in 2002 as was Michael Steele in Maryland (Internet CNN.com).

Even though the number of visible black conservatives has increased over the last decade, these public figures are yet to enjoy vast support among the black community. Many African Americans have called them traitors or “right wing racists” and have welcomed them to office with little more than apprehensive skepticism. These conservatives have also been accused of being self-hating egotistical “nigger haters” who would compromise the well being of an entire race to uphold their place with other conservatives (Watson 1998). Among the most unloved black conservatives is Clarence Thomas whom Spike Lee deemed a “handkerchief head, a chicken and biscuit-eating Uncle Tom” (Thornton 1991). Despite comments such as these, many scholars have provided evidence that suggests that the black electorate is indeed becoming more conservative. However, as will be seen later, this has not led to a trend towards voting Republican.

### **Historical Background**

Up until the mid 1950s many prominent blacks were associated with the Republican Party. Among these were baseball legend Jackie Robinson, author Zora Neale Hurston, and The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (Watson 1998). The main

reason for this affiliation was because the Republican Party was viewed as the party responsible for the abolition of slavery. When the Republican Party was founded in the 1850s, it was known as the “Antislavery Party”, and the first president elected as a Republican, Abraham Lincoln, was the signer of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The relationship that existed between the black community and the Republican Party ended in the middle of the twentieth century and has struggled to gain traction ever since. The 1948 presidential election saw Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey embrace the struggle of African Americans and made Civil Rights part of the Democratic platform. The resulting actions that took place during party conventions, including Strom Thurmond leaving the Democratic Party and forming the Dixiecrats, made the Democratic Party the unofficial party of African Americans. During the 1960s, Jackie Robinson became aware that Barry Goldwater associated himself with several far right groups, including the John Birch Society. This information led him to switch his party identification and he supported Hubert Humphrey for president that year. Martin Luther King also switched his party affiliation in the 1960s after he wrote letters to Richard Nixon and John Kennedy while in jail. When Kennedy responded by initiating his release from prison, both Dr. King and his father became Democrats.

Since that time, the Republican party has had to work slowly to fix the image many blacks had that it was the Party of wealthy white men who did not want to see the advancement of blacks in America. This effort continues today and conservative politicians have to be very careful what they say and do or else risk being labeled as a racist by the NAACP or other organization or media outlet. In December of 2002, Republican Trent Lott found this out the hard way. At Strom Thurmond’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday

celebration Lott said that America would have been better off if they had elected Thurmond for president in 1948 (Halbfinger 2002). This enraged many Americans, both black and white because of the connotations of that statement. Thurmond was a noted segregationist and opponent of the civil rights movement and some interpreted the statement as him saying that America would have been better off with an accomplished racist in office. Whether or not Lott meant the comment in such a way or it was a misunderstanding is not the point; he should have known the context in which he was speaking and the thin ice upon which his party stands. George Bush was forced to publicly condemn the statement made by Lott, who subsequently lost his position as Senate Majority Leader later that year. Situations like this are all too familiar with Republicans who have no choice but to bear the burden of an anti-black past for some time to come.

### **Defining Conservatism**

Before further discussion, a definition of the term “conservative” is in order. The traditional use of ideological labels was confined to the “liberal/conservative continuum” on an economic scale. However, the last generation has brought forth issues such as abortion, gay rights, legalization of drugs, stem cell research, and the use of the word “God”; none of which can easily be placed upon the traditional ideological continuum. (Conover Feldman 1981) As a result of this, many researchers propose that the definitions of these two terms be divided into two separate categories: social and economic.

Lewis A. Randolph goes a step further and divides conservatism into three



distinct sects: Anti-statist, organic, and neoconservative. (Randolph 1995). The anti-statist is the most historical of the sects and is best represented by centrist Republicans. These conservatives believe that emphasis should be placed on the individual and not the government. Anti-statists are ardent capitalists who abhor socialism in all of its forms, including welfare. Randolph adds that this group of conservatives opposes the use of quotas, but does support “set-asides and minority hiring preferences to promote diversity” (Randolph 1995).

The Jerry Falwells and Jesse Helms’ of the Republican Party best represent organic conservatives. This group is more concerned with social values and the religiousness of conservatism. Often referred to as the “religious right” or “Christian Right” organic conservatives are typically against affirmative action, gay marriage, welfare, abortion, stem cell research, and gun control.

The third group of conservatives identified by Randolph has emerged only recently and already play a major role in American policy both foreign and domestic. Neoconservatives are the descendents of the followers of Roosevelt’s Great Society and the black power movement. These conservatives believe in family values, school vouchers, and subscribe to the “teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime” motto rather than “give a man a fish and he’ll eat today” philosophy.

African Americans have traditionally been conservative when it comes to social issues. The black community is often seen as being active in their local churches and of having extreme loyalty to family and friends. In addition, several national polls have recently found that 60 to 65 percent of African-Americans oppose legalizing gay marriage (Allison 2005). However, there are also economic issues to which many blacks hold conservative views. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic

Studies, 57 percent of blacks back school vouchers, and even more, 74 percent, who have children (Confehr 2002). The Center also found that about half support private investment accounts for Social Security, as President Bush has proposed.

Some scholars believe that if the conditions are right, that the black electorate would vote Republican more often. Edward Ashbee argues that as African Americans acquire money and join the middle class, they will begin to view the Republican Party more favorably. (Ashbee 1999) Studies have shown that higher income individuals and those who view the economy as contributing to their financial security tend to be more conservative and support a limited government (Welch and Foster 1987).

## **Method & Hypotheses**

Using the data collected from these surveys I plan to test three hypotheses. First I will address the original question of African American ideology and show that over the past 20 years that there has, indeed, been a conservative trend. Data will be drawn from a 7-point scale that has been used in the National Election Study since 1972. The respondents are asked to evaluate their personal ideological stance on a scale of 1 (liberal) to 7 (conservative). To better analyze the trends of this survey question, those who responded that they were extremely conservative were added to those who responded that they were slightly conservative. The same process was done with the liberal side of the equation. Also used is a three-point scale from the NBES 1984 and 1996 in which the choices are “liberal”, “moderate”, and “conservative”.

Secondly, I expect to find that although blacks have become more conservative, this has not resulted in a change in voting patterns over the last twenty years. Information to support this hypothesis will be drawn from the NES studies from 1972 to 1996. The respondents are asked which party they identify with more, and then are asked which presidential candidate they voted for in the previous election.

The third hypothesis tested is that the beliefs of black conservatives and white conservatives are different in multiple respects. Although the three categories of conservatism offered by Randolph were meant to me applied to blacks, they seem applicable to whites as well. I expect to find that black conservatism is based more upon the organic branch of conservatism and that Caucasian conservatism is based more in the anti-statist arena. This will be done by comparing the answers given by white

conservatives in the 1996 NES study with answers given by conservative blacks in the 1996 NBES.

Five questions are analyzed in this study to address the third hypothesis. The first question is “Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination?”. It is expected that conservatives will not favor such laws and that those with a liberal ideology will. The next question studied is “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for those convicted of murder?”. It is expected here that conservatives will favor the death penalty while liberals will not. The third question is “Should federal spending on food stamps be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?”. Conservatives would tend to favor a decrease in the amount of federal spending while liberals would favor increasing the spending. The fourth question concerns government aid to blacks. The question, again using a seven point scale, asks whether the government should “make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks” [1] or “the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves” [7]. The last question studied is “Because of past discrimination, minorities should be given special consideration when decisions are made about hiring applicants for jobs" and the respondents are asked whether or not they agree. Most conservatives do not agree with the notion of affirmative action and therefore would likely disagree.

The general consensus of Americans is that those who identify with the Republican Party and are self-identified conservatives will likely oppose welfare and universal healthcare, support the death penalty for serious crimes, and oppose gay-

marriage and abortion. The question raised here is “Do black self-identified Republicans share these beliefs or are these feelings strictly limited to white conservatives?”

This portion of the paper will draw information from the National Elections Study conducted in 1996 as well as the National Black Election Studies in 1984, 1988, and 1996. The 1984 and 1986 NBES was a survey of 1150 African Americans over the age of 18 who were interviewed before the 1984 presidential elections. Of the original 1150, 872 were reinterviewed upon the conclusion of that election. The 1988 NBES consisted of 473 of the original 1984 NBES participants, 418 of which were reinterviewed following the election.

## Results

### Ideology

After analyzing the NES study between 1972 and 1998, it appears that the African American community has progressively become more conservative in the last twenty years. A consistent rise in the number of blacks identifying themselves as conservative is seen when observing the data (Figure 1). In the first year examined, 14% of respondents claimed to identify with conservative ideology compared to 54% who claimed to identify with a liberal ideology. In the last year examined, 1998, the number identifying themselves as conservatives more than doubled to 34%. During this same period, the number of respondents claiming to be liberal declined 14 points to 40%.

The increase seen in the NES is not seen in the NBES of 1984 and 1996. The data shows that there is no change, if not a slight decline, in the number of blacks identifying themselves as conservative (Figure 2). It is difficult to use the NBES studies for trend analysis for several reasons. The main reason is that there are only two years examined, and either one of the surveys could be flawed due to change or margin of error. Also, the NES study uses a seven-point scale to measure ideology, whereas the NBES studies use only a three-point scale. Because of the difference in the format of the two surveys, it would not be wise to compare the two at face value. Despite the differences, both surveys show that between one-fourth and one-third of blacks nationwide claim to have a conservative ideology.

There are multiple reasons one might reasonably expect for the African American community to have become more conservative over the last 20 years. As was discussed

**Figure 1**  
**Ideology of African Americans**  
**National Election Study**  
**1972-1998**

<i>Year</i>	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
<i>Liberal</i>	54%	60%	55%	44%	40%	31%	33%	37%	33%	33%	39%	25%	36%	40%
<i>Moderate</i>	31%	22%	34%	41%	30%	37%	41%	37%	34%	40%	38%	51%	31%	26%
<i>Conservative</i>	14%	18%	12%	15%	30%	32%	26%	27%	33%	27%	24%	24%	33%	34%
<i>Number</i>	118	85	119	113	83	74	127	202	154	140	187	122	124	134

Figure 2  
Ideology of African Americans  
National Black Election Study  
1996

	<i>1984</i>	<i>1996</i>
<i>Liberal</i>	33%	38%
<i>Moderate</i>	38%	39%
<i>Conservative</i>	24%	23%
<i>Number</i>	753	996



earlier, Edward Ashbee has commented that as African Americans become more prosperous and join the middle class, they will be more inclined to view the Republican platform favorably. William J. Wilson, a black sociologist, asserts that as race relations change within the black community, the issue of civil rights no longer holds the most weight among blacks. Because they are not as race conscious or motivated by civil rights, the black community loses its political cohesiveness and “Middle class blacks are now more politically conservative than working-class and poor blacks” (Wilson 1981)

Another reason may be the self-fulfilling prophecy of visibility. The last twenty years have seen a three to one ratio of Republican to Democratic Presidents, all of which have made efforts to diversify their cabinets, transition teams, and other forms of public personnel. Ronald Reagan appointed many African Americans to campaign positions and administrative positions such as Clarence Pendleton Jr. to chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. President George H.W. Bush appointed Louis Sullivan as the head of the US Department of Health and Human Services, Colin Powell as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Condoleezza Rice as Director, and later Senior Director, of Soviet and East European Affairs in the National Security Council, and a Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. The current administration has made Condoleezza the most powerful African American Woman in the United States first as National Security Advisor and now as Secretary of State. George W. Bush has also appointed four African American Deputy Secretaries to his administration. This high visibility of black conservatives in the news gave examples of successful conservatism where there was a void previously.

A third explanation that is often touted by conservatives themselves is that blacks have “realized” that the liberal ideals of the Democratic Party are not working. Ignoring the increase of the black middle class, these pundits claim that a century of loyalty to the Democratic Party has ended in increased poverty levels and violence in overpopulated urban areas. These problems have resulted in the black community focusing more on conservative issues of family, values, and individual responsibility rather than liberal issues of government aid and intervention.

### **Partisanship and Voting Behavior**

Partisanship and ideology are considered very important to the study of voting patterns and behavior. It is generally accepted among political scientists that ideology and partisanship are good predictors of party identification, and therefore of the voting patterns of the electorate. If this is the case, and there is a genuine increase in conservatism among the African American community, then one would expect to find a coinciding increase in the number of blacks voting for Republican candidates as well.

The data shows that this is clearly not the case (Figure 4). Even though the NES shows that black ideology has become twice as conservative as it was in 1976, the number of blacks voting Republican has not increased whatsoever. In 1976 13% of blacks cast their vote for Gerald Ford, the highest percentage seen in the course of the NES series. Since that election, black support of Republican candidates in NES studies has been no greater than 9%.

The most pronounced discrepancy occurred during the 1996 re-election of Bill Clinton. In that election, the Democratic candidate received an astounding 96% of the

black vote, a 5-point increase from his already impressive 1992 election. What makes this overwhelming support a bit mysterious is that during that years' NES study, a full third of blacks identified themselves as conservative. According to previous research, black support for Republican candidates is lower than would be expected, considering their ideological identification.

Bill Clinton was an exceptional case, however. He was revered by the black community and deemed "The first black president" by Toni Morrison in 1998. "Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas", Morrison wrote in the *New Yorker* (Morrison 1998). Though Clinton's case may be extreme, it may also be the rule as the support black America has given towards the Democratic Party has shown no signs of slowing. Black identification with the Democratic Party continued in the last election as exit polls show that George Bush received 11% of the black a two percent increase from his 2000 showing (Internet CNN.com).

Black identification with the Democratic Party reached its peak in the 1964 election largely because of race issues regarding Barry Goldwater. However, in her work *From Protest to Politics* Katherine Tate documents that blacks as a group are no longer as race conscious as they once were. If this is the case, then why do Democrats continually receive ninety percent of the black vote? Nancy Weiss claims that blacks left the Republican Party for economic reasons and not for racial ones, and that they vote Democratic for economic gain (Weiss 1983).

Empirical studies of the mid 80s were unable to find reasons why most blacks are Democrats, and were unable to locate any telling differences between black Democrats and Republicans (Cavanagh 1985; Lewis and Schneider 1983). The research showed that white party identification was based largely along economic lines as poor whites were likely to be Democrat and wealthy whites were likely to be Republican. However, this was not the case with blacks as all income levels were equally as likely to be Democrats. They also found that age and reason play little to no role in party identification for blacks.

Lewis and Schneider claim that a mixture of race, ideology, and class is the reason for black identification with the Democratic Party. They found that lower-class blacks are drawn to the Democratic Party for economic reasons, and middle and upper-class blacks are drawn to the party for racial reasons. Not feeling the economic stress of their lower-class counterparts, wealthy blacks are able to concentrate on civil rights and are more liberal in their racial views.

Tate goes on to do her own research as to what factors are responsible for black support of the Democratic Party. She used the NBES of 1984, and specifically a question asking the respondents which party they belonged to, and then the strength of that affiliation. The results were then cross-tabulated with other variables such as age, gender, and urbanicity and recorded. The analysis found that ideology and class identification had little to no impact on black party identification. Tate found that poor and working-class blacks were “no more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than self-identified conservatives and middle-class and upper-middle-class blacks.” (Tate 1994) Tate concludes that strong race identification is the main component in black party choice.

Caucasian trends in ideology have more of a direct effect on presidential preferences. For example, in 1994 when Newt Gingrich orchestrated the Republican takeover of Congress, Caucasian ideology was reported as 48% conservative and 19% liberal (Figure 3). These numbers coincided with a 51% to 25% Republican edge in partisan preferences of whites in 1994 (Figure 4). In 1996 when Bill Clinton won re-election fairly easily over Republican Bob Dole, 47% of Caucasians voted Democratic, compared to a 46% figure of being ideologically liberal.

Because it has been documented that blacks have become more conservative in the last twenty years and yet have continued to vote overwhelmingly Democratic, one would only assume that black conservatives and White conservatives, while agreeing on issues at times, must be different in many respects. This leads to my third hypothesis which is that black conservatism is based upon more of an organic version of conservatism whereas white conservatism is based more upon an anti-statist perspective

### **Black Organics vs White Anti-statits**

The issues of government aid to blacks, welfare, affirmative action, gay rights, and the death penalty are addressed in this section. The first three I hope will display the organic nature of black conservatism while the fourth and fifth issues will address the anti-statist nature of white conservatism.

### **Government Aid to Blacks**

The first question asks whether the respondent feels that the government should “make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks” or “the

**Figure 3**  
**Ideology of Caucasians**  
**National Election Study**  
**1972-1998**

<i>Year</i>	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
<i>Liberal</i>	23%	23%	25%	25%	24%	22%	25%	22%	22%	24%	27%	19%	25%	34%
<i>Moderate</i>	38%	39%	36%	36%	31%	35%	33%	37%	31%	36%	31%	33%	30%	26%
<i>Conservative</i>	39%	38%	42%	39%	46%	43%	42%	41%	47%	40%	40%	48%	46%	40%
<i>Number</i>	1411	1045	1356	1525	908	815	1392	1399	1224	1136	1572	1211	1167	1047

**Figure 4**  
**Presidential Choice of African Americans**  
**National Election Study**  
**1972-1996**

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996
<b>Democrat</b>	86%	94%	93%	89%	90%	91%	96%
<b>Republican</b>	13%	5%	7%	9%	8%	5%	1%
<b>Other</b>	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	4%	3%
<b>Number</b>	139	106	106	131	125	189	108

government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves”. The respondent is to rate their feelings on a seven-point scale with one being complete pro-government action and seven being no government action.

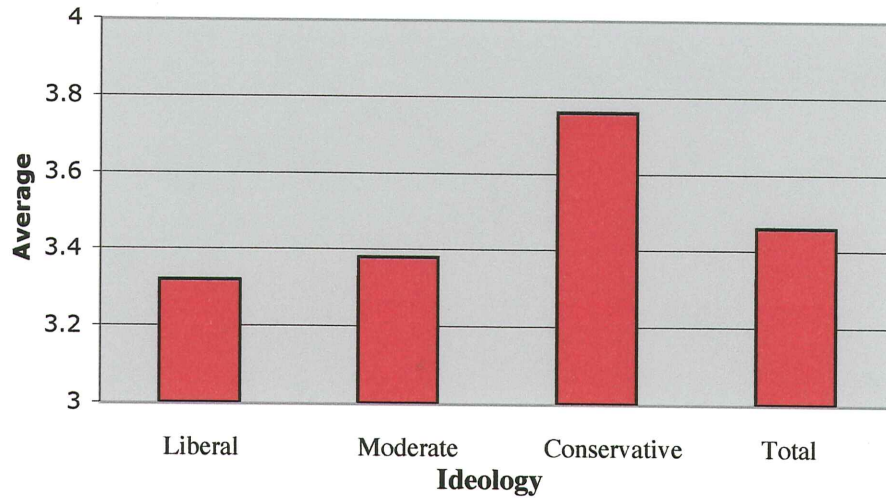
The typical response by anti-statist conservatives would be favoring less government involvement and thus would have a higher overall score. The stance taken by many black conservatives is that blacks should be dependant, not on government aid, but upon their own works to support themselves and their family. The results show a small, but significant difference between black conservatives and liberals (Figure 5).

As is expected, those who claim to be conservative score the highest on average. However, with a mean of 3.76 on the 7-point scale, black conservatives score lower than what might be expected. The results of the National Election Study of the same year, 1996 (Figure 6). Whites overall scored much higher than blacks, which displays a want for less government help for blacks. Even the whites who claim to harbor liberal ideologies scored higher than blacks who claim to harbor a conservative ideology. Also of note is the “moderate” category of the two graphs. Those who claim to be black moderates are score only 0.06 higher than those who claim to be liberal. On the NES graph, white moderates score much closer to the conservative side of the scale.

This shows what was already known by many that not only are black and white conservatism different at their respective cores, but also blacks and whites in general disagree on the issues of government aid. This could likely be explained by the disproportionate number of blacks who receive or are dependant upon the help of the government financially. Those in the white community see government aid to blacks as being their financing an unemployed African American who could otherwise be working.

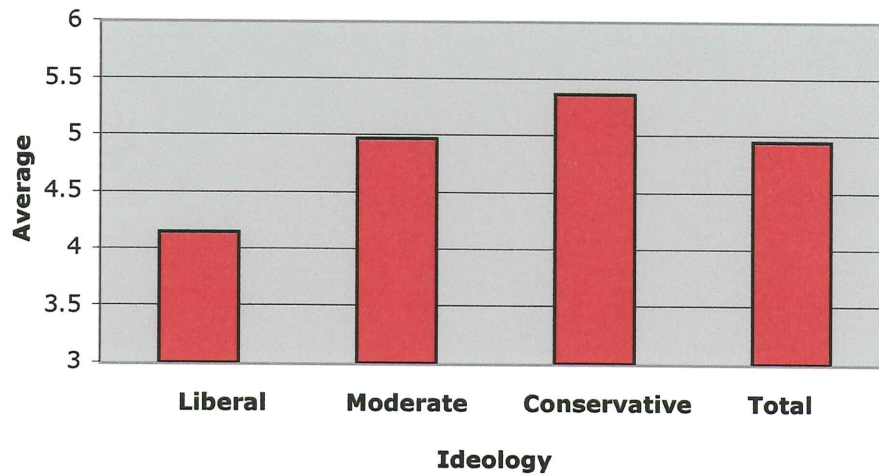


**Figure 5**  
**African American Feelings**  
**Concerning Government Aid**



NBES 1996

**Figure 6**  
**Caucasian Feelings Concerning**  
**Government Aid**



NES 1996

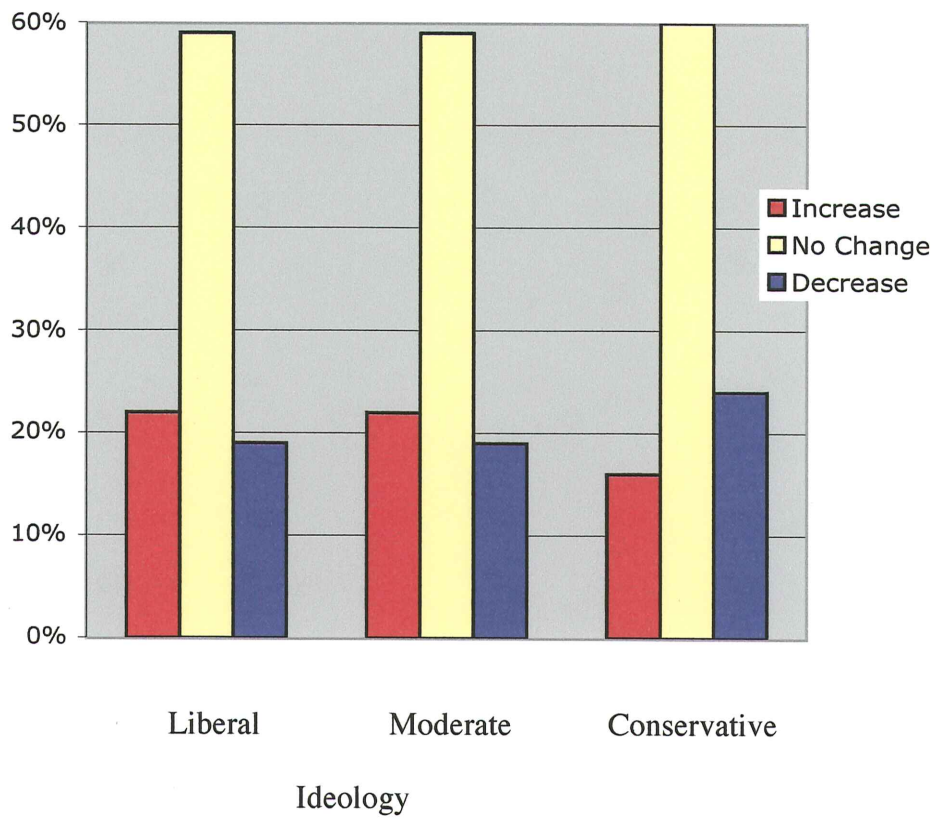
This being said, the fact that liberal whites scored more conservative than conservative blacks warrants further research.

Returning to the hypothesis, if black conservatism and white conservatism were compatible, one would expect the numbers to reflect that. Instead what is seen is white conservatives score over a point and a half higher than do black conservatives on this issue on average. Even though a main tenet of black conservatism is self-sufficiency, those who answered the survey as black conservatives did not manage even a 3.5 (half) out of the seven-point scale.

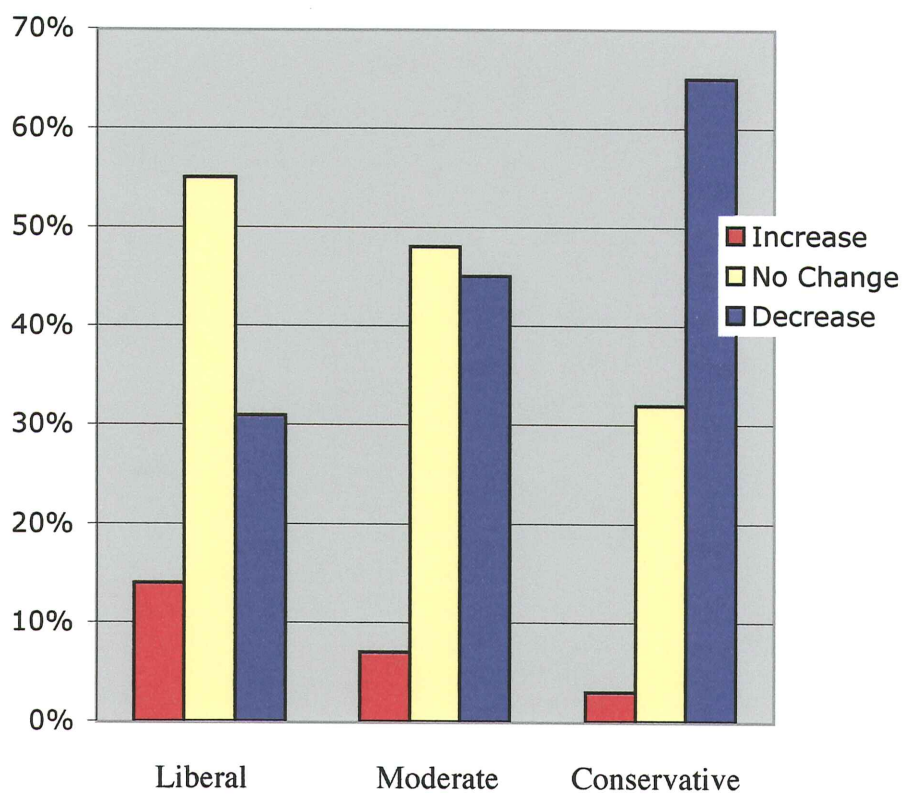
### **Welfare / Food Stamps**

Again, this issue ties to the black conservative doctrine of reliance on one's self and not the government. The question asked is "Should federal spending on food stamps be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?" One would expect that black conservatives would feel that the black community should rely on their own abilities to provide for their families and to encourage things that would want to decrease federal spending on food stamps. Initially it may seem as if the three ideologies are interchangeable. Fifty-nine percent of the liberal and moderate groups believe that no changes should be made in the food stamp policies (Figure 7). One would expect the conservative blacks to want more of a decrease in food stamp spending. The fact is that they do, but by the narrowest of margins. Not even one-fourth of the black conservative respondents felt that spending should be decreased and nearly 1 out of 6 of these conservatives feel that spending should actually be increased.

Figure 7  
African American Feelings Concerning  
Food Stamp Spending  
NBES 1996



**Figure 8**  
**Caucasian Feelings Concerning**  
**Food Stamp Spending**



Ideology  
NBES 1996

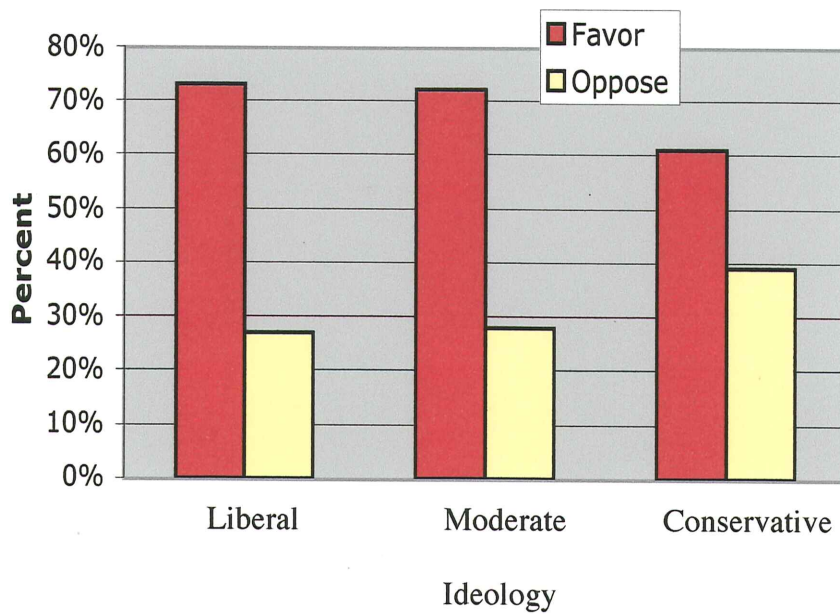
When compared to the answers given in the NES study by Caucasians, the results are similar to the previous question concerning government aid. Again there is a much more pronounced difference, regardless of ideology, between whites and blacks (Figure 8). Where in the NBES the three ideologies are interchangeable, the NES study yields three very distinct results. The pattern seen in the previous issue repeats as whites are still more conservative on this issue than conservative blacks. Again, this can be explained by the feeling many whites have about food stamps and welfare in general that their money is being given to blacks as an act of income redistribution.

### **Homosexual Discrimination Laws**

The last three topics are social in nature. The question asked here is whether or not the person surveyed favors or opposes laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination. It would be expected that those who claim to be conservative would be more likely than liberals to oppose such legislation. This belief is verified (Figure 9). Of those who claim to be liberal, only about one-fourth oppose the legislation while almost 40% of conservatives would oppose the legislation. What seems most surprising is that the number of black conservatives who would favor laws protecting homosexuals against discrimination is above 60%. This data would lead one to believe that whites are more conservative when it comes to issues of homosexuality.

This result was surprising, as my hypothesis would predict that blacks, not whites, were more conservative on the issue of homosexuality. In Katherine Tate's *From Protest to Politics*, she cites a General Social Survey conducted between the years 1974 and

**Figure 9**  
**African American Feelings**  
**Concerning Laws Protecting Homosexuals**



NBES 1996

1988, which addresses this issue. This survey contradicts what the NBES and NES studies show. The General Social Survey shows a maximum of 88% of blacks stating homosexuality is always wrong in 1984, compared to a maximum of 75% for whites in 1987 and 1988 (Figure 10). On average, blacks believe homosexuality is always wrong 9.6% more than whites, 80.8% / 72.2%.

This survey should be greeted with some skepticism because it was conducted in the 70s and 80s and is quite possibly long outdated. Public opinion concerning homosexuality has changed a great deal during the last twenty years and has become noticeably more liberal and accepting. According to [pewforum.com](http://pewforum.com), the number of Americans that think homosexual relations is always wrong has dropped down all the way to 51%, with 32% saying it is not wrong at all.

As was seen with the economic issues, the differences between liberals, moderates, and conservatives are much more pronounced in the NES of Caucasians (Figure 11). The results of the NES study are also more in line with traditional definitions of liberalism and conservatism in America. Of the conservatives respondents, over half would oppose a law protecting homosexuals against job discrimination. As would be expected, this percentage drops almost twenty points between conservative to moderate, and moderate to liberal, with the liberal response being that only 13% would oppose such legislation. The differences between black and white conservatism are fairly large. There is almost a 15% difference between the amount of black conservatives who oppose the legislation (39%) and white conservatives who feel the same way (53%).

**Figure 10**

**Percentages of Blacks and Whites  
Who Hold Conservative  
Social Policy Views**

**Homosexuality is “Always Wrong”**

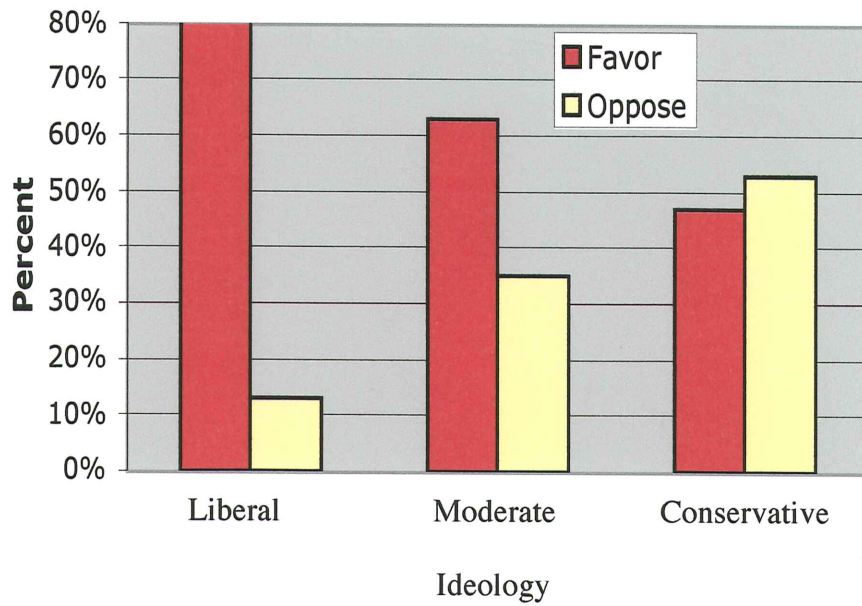
<b>Year</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>1974</b>	<b>1976</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1987</b>	<b>1988</b>
<b>% White</b>	71	70	70	71	73	72	71	74	75	75 <sup>3</sup>
<b>% Black</b>	83	75	75	77	79	82	88	84	85	90
<b>Difference</b>	-12	-5	-5	-6	-6	-10	-17	-10	-10	-15

*Source:* General Social Surveys, 1972-1988

As seen in Katherine Tate's *From Protest to Politics*. 1993



**Figure 11**  
**Caucasian Feelings Concerning**  
**Laws Protecting Homosexuals**



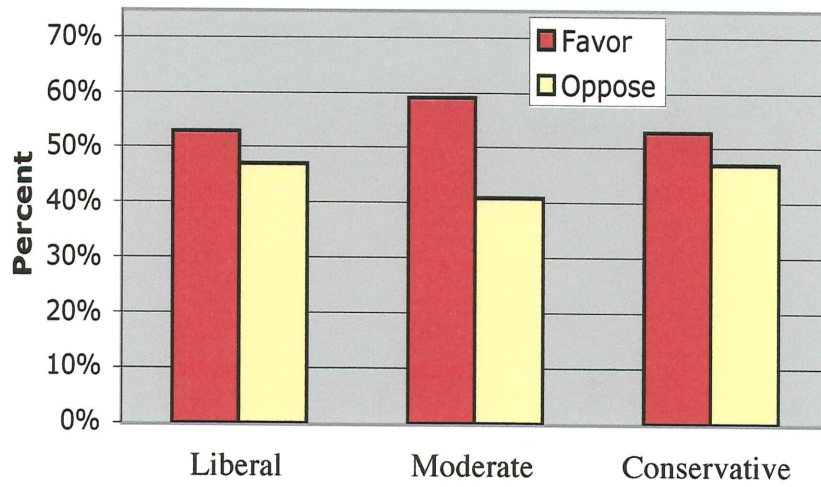
NES 1996

There may be an explanation for the double-digit difference between white and black conservatives on this issue and between the NBES and the General Social Survey. Of course, there is also the distinct possibility that I have spent the better part of my college career with a misperception of the African American community's feelings towards homosexuality. The one part of this question that lends itself to questioning is the use of the word "discrimination". Even though black youth did not have to endure the struggles of the Civil Rights movement of the mid 60s, their parents, schools, and the literature they have encountered, have placed within them a sort of sympathy for those who are being "discriminated" against. The wording of the question of laws "protecting homosexuals against job discrimination" may have struck a chord with some of the black respondents, even if they are conservative, that resulted in their as a whole favoring the law more than whites. Because of this possible variable, it may be that blacks views concerning homosexuality are more inline with the results seen in the NBES and General Social Surveys. More research is needed here.

### **Death Penalty for Murder**

For this issue the respondents were asked "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. If black conservatives answer as conservative literature would suggest, they would favor the death penalty for such people. As was seen with the issue of federal spending on food stamps, there is almost no difference between the three ideologies on this issue (Figure 12). In fact, those who claim to be liberal have

**Figure 12**  
**African American Feelings**  
**Concerning Death Penalty for Murder**



NES 1996

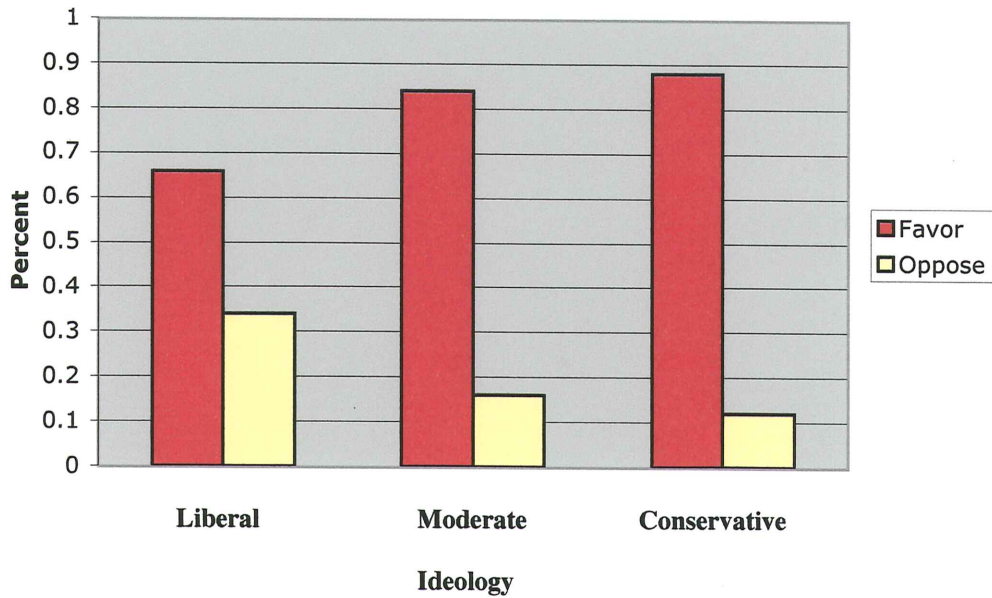
the exact favor/oppose percentages as those who claim to be conservative do at 53% - 47%.

When the views of blacks are compared to the views of whites, it resembles what we saw concerning the questions of homosexual discrimination and food stamp spending. Black conservatives again score as being more “liberal” than white liberals. Fifty-three percent of black conservatives favor the death penalty while 66% of white liberals do (Figure 13). The differences between white and black conservatism on this issue is very large. There is over a 40-percentage point difference between the two races on this issue. The issue of capital punishment has been a sensitive one with many African Americans. Issues of law and order have traditionally divided blacks and whites and is likely the reason for the huge difference between the two races, ideology aside. The majority of blacks remain opposed to the use of capital punishment in spite of the fact that they are more likely to be the victims of crime. This is no doubt a result of the disproportionate number of blacks on death row for their crimes. Conservative politicians used issues of violence and crime to form a solid campaign to which blacks have not been supportive of. Richard Nixon was very successful in 1968 with his Southern Strategy in using crime against his presidential opponent, resulting in 301 electoral college votes and a Republican victory.

### **Affirmative Action**

The fifth issue analyzed is affirmative action, and is not included in the NES. respondents were asked “Because of past discrimination, minorities should be given special consideration when decisions are made about hiring applicants for jobs – do you

**Figure 13**  
**Caucasian Feelings Concerning**  
**Death Penalty for Murder**



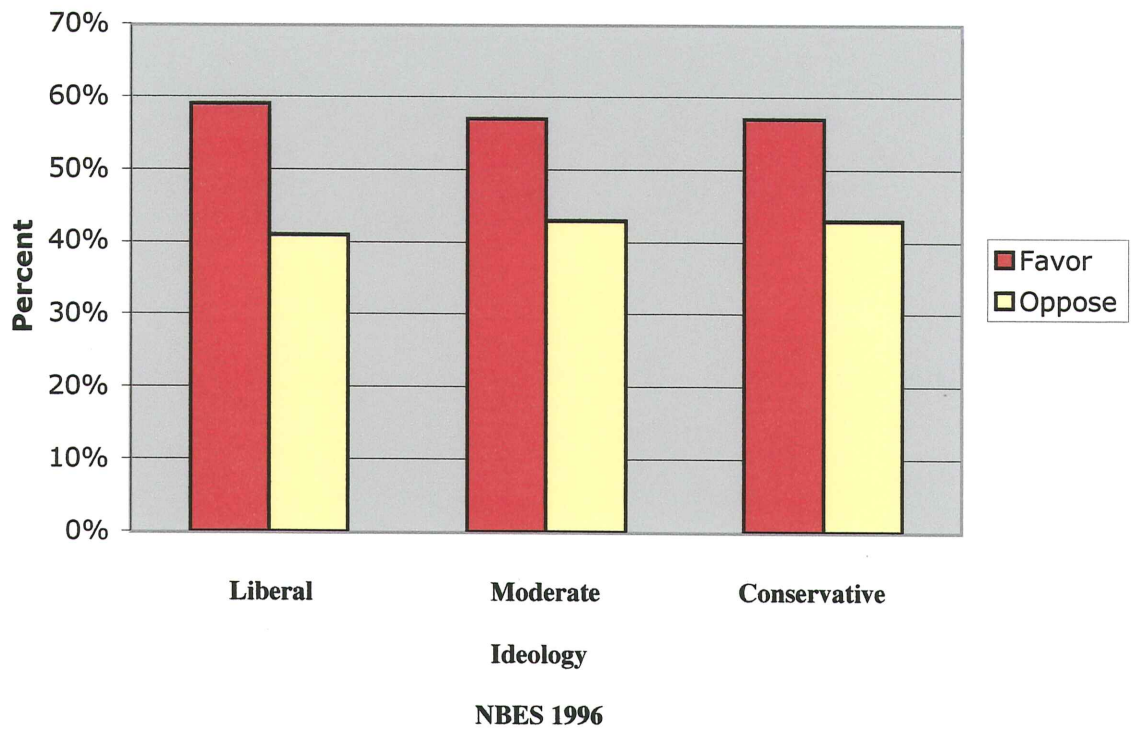
NES 1996

strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?” The conservative position on this is that affirmative action is nothing more than a clever wording for reverse discrimination. Conservative politicians have used this issue with great success in political campaigns. In 1990 Jesse Helms of North Carolina aired a television ad that depicted a white man who badly needed a job losing out to a lesser qualified African American simply because he was black. Jesse Helms at the time was an incumbent and would have likely won re-election anyway, but the ad no doubt aroused his conservative white base and created a wider gap between he and his opposition.

Black conservatives on the radio, such as Clarence Buggs, or intellectuals on the national scale like Clarence Thomas have publicly stated that affirmative action is not helpful because it encourages blacks to accept the idea that they cannot compete on their own due to an inferior nature. The results of the NBES do not reinforce the existence of such feelings among black conservatives. It can be concluded that, again, ideology plays no significant role in whether or not a black individual supports or opposes affirmative action. Between the liberal and conservative categories there is only a two percent difference, and between moderates and conservatives, no observable difference (Figure 14).

Overall, the numbers for blacks concerning affirmative action are more conservative than might be expected. Over the past 30 years there has been a very noticeable conservative shift in the black electorate concerning affirmative action. This shift also be seen by looking at black views concerning a guaranteed jobs programs. Although different from affirmative action, the comparison can be made, and the conservative shift is apparent. In 1972, seven percent of blacks opposed the idea of a

**Figure 14**  
**African American Feelings**  
**Concerning Affirmative Action**



guaranteed jobs program. By the year 1988, this number had quadrupled to twenty-eight percent. This data coincides with the overall conservative shift in ideology as seen in Figure 1.

This question is not addressed in the NES studies, but it is widely documented that the majority of whites oppose the use of Affirmative Action to right previous wrongs and help the black community compete on a level playing field. (Sigelman and Welsch, 1991) It can be inferred that the same trend of great disparity black conservatives and white conservatives, and possibly of white liberals harboring more conservative views than conservative blacks on this issue.



## Conclusion

The main hypothesis in this paper was that there has been a conservative trend in the African American electorate over the span of the last twenty years. This was evident after looking at the NBES surveys that show that as many as one-third of blacks are now conservative. Since the early 70s, civil rights became less of a priority among blacks and helped encourage the move towards conservatism. Although there has been a noticeable shift in the number of blacks who describe themselves as being conservative ideologically, they are still outnumbered by a large margin by those who label themselves as liberals or left-leaning moderates.

The second hypothesis was that this shift in ideology has not been matched by a change in voting for the conservative Republican Party. This hypothesis was also proved true. In no presidential election has the Republican candidate received more than 10%-13% of the black vote during this time, and the Republicans show no sign of gaining a larger share of the black vote in elections to come. The gap in election choice and ideology one that has existed for some time in with African Americans despite the efforts of white conservatives to break the trend.

The third hypothesis stated that black conservatism is vastly different from white conservatism. This was shown with little doubt by examining contemporary social and economic issues facing the electorate. Conservatism is usually thought of as anti-government and pro-individual, to which the data shows black conservatives do not identify with as white conservatives do. Even though nearly one-third of blacks claim to be conservative, “only 10 percent of the black community may be true economic

conservatives. Only 10 percent in 1984 desired cuts in the food stamps programs, and fewer than 5 percent advocated a reduction in government spending on Medicare and on jobs training programs” according to Katherine Tate (Tate 1994). Social issues are where black conservatives take more of a non-liberal stance on issues, though it is often still more liberal than whites.

My hypothesis stating that white conservatism is based in an anti-statist belief system seems to have been correct; at least when compared to black conservatism. As Tate put it “It is possible that... conservatism could develop within the black community, but not on the issues, such as the role of government, that have commonly divided liberals and conservatives.” (Tate 1994) The anti-statist position is that government should play a smaller role in public life. White anti-statist thought was seen in objections to food stamp funding and to governmental aid to blacks. Black conservatives did not share this form of conservative thought, as they in both cases held much more liberal views than white conservatives.

My hypothesis that black conservatism is based more in organic conservatism was not proven conclusively here. Even in cases where black conservatism would be expected to be on par with white conservatism, it was not supported with the given data. When examining the topic of homosexual discrimination, black conservatives scored opposite of what I expected. I expected black conservatives to overwhelmingly disapprove of homosexuality and laws protecting homosexuals, but the data shows almost two-thirds would support legislation protecting homosexuals from discrimination. The topic of capital punishment was no better, as black conservatives held the same views as

did black liberals. Surprisingly, black conservatives were found to be more liberal than white liberals on this issue.

The last topic of study, affirmative action, was the only social topic of the three that showed somewhat of a conservative trend. Although overall there is no significant difference between black liberals and conservatives concerning affirmative action, there is a documented conservative trend on the issue of a guaranteed jobs program. In the 70s and 80s, the number of blacks who opposed such a program quadrupled, showing an increase in this issue of organic conservatism.

Much of the difference viewed between black conservatives and white conservatives is due to cultural factors. However, a sizeable portion of the difference could be attributed to a lack of knowledge. When, in the 1984 NBES, blacks were asked “What sorts of things do you have in mind when you say that someone’s views are liberal [or conservative]?” about one-third of the respondents were unable to correctly identify these terms. This lack of definition was the case even for those who previously in the survey identified themselves as being conservative. To make matters more interesting, blacks who identified themselves as conservative were more likely than blacks who identified themselves as liberal to answer “I don’t know” in response to this question. Katherine Tate concludes that “liberalism and conservatism, as concepts, possibly mean very little to the blacks who failed to define these terms” (Tate 1994). This conclusion is not meant to claim that Blacks as a whole are intelligent and thus are unable to properly define conservatism. One would assume that if this same question were posited in the NES studies, it would yield approximately the same results and find a sizeable portion of the white electorate also unable to properly define ideological labels.

It is also possible that the difference seen between black and white conservatives here is do to a lack of black conservatives in general. Despite the fact that the NES studies from 1972 to 1998 show an increase in black conservatism, the NBES studies of 1984 and 1996 show no such trend. Though it is unwise to draw conclusions from a dataset of two surveys so far apart, the NBES does raise questions as to the validity of the NES survey data.

However, if there has indeed been a conservative shift in the black electorate in the past twenty years, this bodes well for the Republican Party. If the Republicans can attain twenty percent of the black vote in elections, conservative strategists believe that they will be able to have a stranglehold on the national presidential and congressional elections (Bolce 1992). Considering in the recent election George W. Bush received only half that goal, the Republican Party would dominate with much of an increase in black support. The Republicans have no doubt realized this and should step up their efforts to win over black voters and erase the negative stereotypes of their party. The Democrats no doubt have seen the same data, and must continue to keep the black electorate solidly in their camp, lest the results of the 2004 election become commonplace rather than historic.

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