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THE NEW BLACK CONSERVATIVE: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

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There is [a] class of [black] people who make a business of keeping the troubles, the wrongs, and the hardships of the Negro race before the public. Some of these people do not want the Negro to lose his grievances, because they do not want to lose their jobs. Booker T. Washington¹

In recent years there has been growing speculation regarding an increase in the number of African Americans identifying themselves as conservatives. Much of this speculation has been heightened by the increase in the number of African American elites who identify themselves as conservatives. This list includes icons like Clarence Thomas, J.C. Watts, Alan Keyes and Ward Connerly, to name a few. Despite the increase in the number of African American elites who identify themselves as conservatives, there has been a dearth of systematic analyses to determine if this phenomenon has trickled down to the masses.

The new breed of African American conservatives tends to reject government programs designed to benefit African Americans, while endorsing self-help types of programs. Some of its members cite Booker T. Washington's emphasis on economic progress and centrality of character as their guiding philosophies. Rueter (1997) contends that, "Black conservatives favor free markets, individual responsibility, cultural conservatism, and a 'color-blind' approach to public policy" (85).

Dawson (1994) presents a puzzle addressing the notion that although African Americans have become economically diverse in recent years, they still remain politically unified (e.g., members of the Democratic party). The author's explanation is that African Americans possess a "linked fate" with the black community. That is, African Americans believe that what happens to African Americans as a group has a potential bearing on their personal lives. This linkage is directly related to the historical struggle of African Americans in the United States. Hence, given the history of economic subordination and political disenfranchisement faced by African Americans, combined with the massive resistance to changing these conditions by such conservatives as Southern Democrats, and Clarence Thomas, one of the questions posed by Dillard (2001), is why would an African American self-identify him/herself

¹ As cited in Thornbrough (1969: 57).

as a conservative?

Rueter (1997) contends that “the views of black conservatives are out of touch with the views of mainstream black America” (90). As a result of being outside of the “mainstream,” African American conservatives have received intense criticism by members of the black community. According to Spike Lee, Malcolm X would call Clarence Thomas “a handkerchief head, a chicken- and biscuit-eating Uncle Tom” (*U.S. News and World Report* 1991, 16). Additionally, black conservatives have been given such labels as “Uncle Toms,” “house-Negroes,” and “sell-outs.”

One potential answer to the above question is rooted in the above epigraph. To be sure, African American conservatives have provided support for traditional conservative issues like welfare reform and abortion (i.e., pro-life positions); however, it appears that some of this conservatism may be a function of resentment toward other African Americans.

Indeed, in an exchange with black conservative, Shelby Steele, Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), a noted poet-playwright and leader of the Black Power movement in the 1960s, states:

Steele... tells us, like David Rockefeller, that “the only way we will see advancement of black people... is for us to focus on developing ourselves as individuals and embracing opportunity.” ... Of course it has long been the whine of house Negroes that they are individuals, not to be confused with common field niggers. It is the cry of the most reactionary sector of the bourgeoisie, that they, indeed, ain’t with the rest of us woogies. All black and poor and stinking like that!

Additionally, Barker, Jones and Tate (1999) argue that the African American conservative position “dovetails quite nicely with the longstanding white supremacist notion that the unequal position of blacks is due neither to racism nor to systemic economic conditions but to the inappropriate behavior of blacks themselves” (99). In this vein, Clarence Thomas states, “[It] is just as insane for blacks to expect relief from the federal government for years of discrimination as it is to expect a mugger to nurse his victims back to health. Ultimately, the burden of your being mugged falls on you” (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 1991). John Hope Franklin, the father of African American history rebuts such statements as Thomas’s by writing,

Self-help is admirable so long as it encourages initiative and achievement in a society that gives all its members an opportunity to de-

velop in the manner best suited to their talents. It must not be confused with or used as a substitute for society's obligation to deal equitably with all its members and to assume the responsibility for promoting their well-being. This involves equal educational, economic and political opportunity regardless of age, gender or race. Judge Thomas, in failing in his utterances and policies to subscribe to this basic principle, has placed himself in the unseemly position of denying to others the very opportunities and the kind of assistance from public and private quarters that have placed him where he is today (National Association for the Advancement of Color People 1991).

The research at hand, examines whether models that have traditionally been applied to detect white racism, can be useful in understanding this new breed of African American conservatives.

Rhetoric or Reality?

Much of the recent attention directed toward understanding the African American conservative has focused on the rhetoric of such writers as Shelby Steele and John McWhorter. The operative word here is writers. Shelby Steele is an English professor and McWhorter is a Linguistics professor. These works prove to be nothing more than essays that speak of the writers' personal (biased) experiences. Said differently, the authors fail to conduct systematic analyses that help to improve our understanding of the African American conservative.

Despite the recent media attention accorded the notion of a "new Black conservative," there has been limited systematic research examining this phenomenon. Tate (1993) reports that middle- to high- income African Americans are less likely to support social welfare policy when compared to blacks in the lower class. Welch and Foster (1987) find that African Americans with higher incomes are less supportive of affirmative action. Bolce and Gray (1979) report that lower class African Americans are more likely to favor affirmative action programs than higher class African Americans. These authors indicate, however, that the class differences depend upon the type of program being evaluated. In other words, they report that higher educated African Americans are more likely to reject quotas than African Americans with a high school degree or less. African Americans who graduate from college are no more likely, however, to oppose preferential treatment than African Americans who have not attended college. Dawson (1994) provides evidence to show that an increase in income increases the likelihood of an African American opposing affirmative action policies. Dawson (1994) contends that, this may point to the notion that middle class blacks feel that such programs may "stigmatize their accomplishments" (194).

Simpson (1998) provides anecdotal evidence supporting the notion that young black conservatives tend to reject claims of racism as a reason for African American failure, while opting to turn to self-reliance and community-based programs as a solution to African American problems.

Black Resentment?

Previous research examining attitudes toward African Americans and racial policies has relied heavily on white racial attitudes. The research at hand, builds upon the extant literature by examining African American attitudes toward African Americans.

Symbolic racism (same as racial resentment), a concept originally articulated by Sears and Kinder (1971), posits that white racial attitudes are no longer shaped by “biological racism,” the notion that blacks are an inherently inferior race to whites. These authors note that individuals who possess symbolic racial attitudes believe “that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline” (Kinder and Sears 1981, 416). According to Sears (1988), symbolic racism is comprised of an antiblack affect and traditional American moral values. One of the principal architects of the symbolic racism concept, Kinder (see Kinder and Sanders 1996, Appendix A), has reconsidered his decision to use symbolic racism to describe these attitudes and has opted (along with Sanders) to use “racial resentment” as a description for such attitudes.

The following questions are adopted by Kinder and Sanders (1996, 106-107) to operationalize racial resentment:

Blacks should work harder. (1) Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors. (2) Most blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried (1986 NES). (3) It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Denial of continuing racial discrimination. (4) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class (1986 and 1992 NES). Respondents who disagree with this item are considered to be resentful toward African Americans.

Undeserved advantage. (5) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve (1986 and 1992 NES). (6) Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a black person than from a white person (1986 NES). Respondents who disagree with these items are considered to be resentful toward

African Americans.

The literature examining white racial attitudes toward African Americans has grown in recent years. Similar to the literature examining African American conservatives, there is a dearth of systematic analyses that have placed focus on African American attitudes toward African Americans. Early work examining African American attitudes suggest that the differences are a function of class. McClean (1984) notes that slaves who were in the “median occupational strata” saw other slaves as being lazy. According to McClean (1984, 149),

[b]y successfully climbing this ladder, one might hypothesize that the captive was able to believe in the Protestant capitalist work ethic that hard work allowed one to succeed, and that those captives who were not “promoted” were lazy because of their “black blood.”

Frazier (1957) argues that the “Black Bourgeoisie” (i.e., the black middle class) engage themselves in self-hate practices. According to the author, such blacks are condescending when it relates to Africans and African culture. The author states that such blacks are offended when their physical traits are compared to people of African descent. In short, these blacks tend to reject their African heritage. Cross (1991) argues that some blacks may engage in “self-hatred” practices, “in which the person feels distant from Black people and has internalized negative stereotypes of Blacks...” (169).

A New Black Conservative?

Welch and Foster (1987) contend that the notion of a new black conservative is nothing new. According to these authors,

[m]uch of the current discussion about the possibility of a conservative black middle class lacks historical perspective. It seems to assume that a conservative black middle class would be an entirely new phenomenon (Welch and Foster 1987, 447).

Indeed, McCleen (1984) provides historical examples of black conservatism dating back to the period of slavery. He states that the origin of this conservative phenomenon deserves more attention than the simple notion of house slave and field slave. More specifically, he points to those blacks employed as house servants, drivers, preachers, coachmen and nannys as being of the “median occupational strata” (149). Those slaves who managed to move into this strata resented the other slaves because they perceived them to be lazy, and blamed them for their inability to improve their

living conditions.

Similar to the conservatives of today, the conservatives of yesterday served as dissenters to what was generally accepted in the black community. Indeed, there were blacks who assisted whites in the capture of black runaway slaves. In a similar vein, some free blacks, such as Charles Tinsley, volunteered their services to the Confederate Army (Brewer 1969).

Given the history of African American conservatives, it should not be surprising that despite being connected by what Dawson labels as “linked fate,” *all* African Americans are not monolithic in their thinking. Bolce and Gray (1979) attribute this lack of homogeneity to the socio-economic differences that exist within the black community. Similar to whites, these authors argue that African Americans differ in age, education, income and a number of other social and economic characteristics. Bolce and Gray (1979) also point to the differences in ideology. In other words, similar to whites, these authors argue that African Americans hold a variety of opinions.

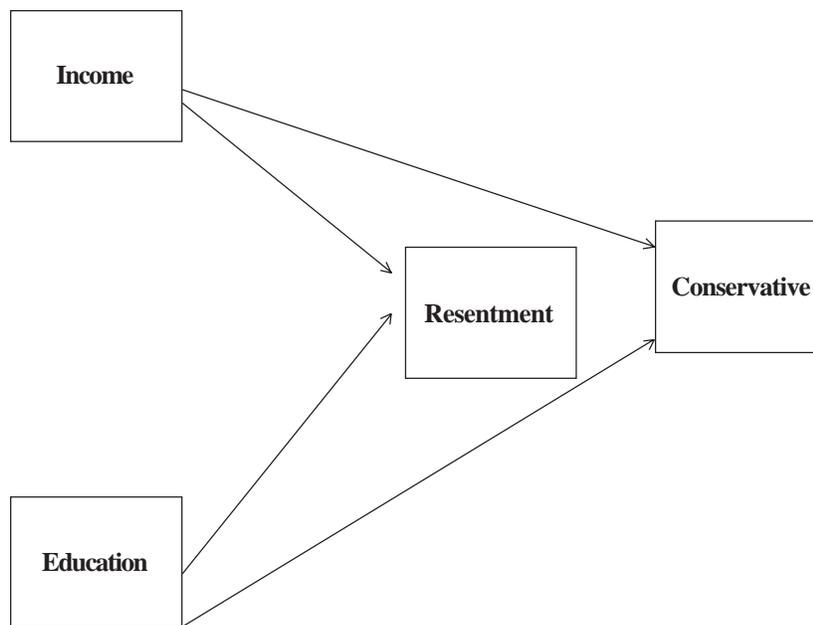
Traditionally, because of their dependency on the government for protection and employment, African Americans have been very supportive of the government’s role in their success. Hence, African Americans have traditionally aligned themselves with liberals. The use of questions to tap ideological self-placement have not gone unchallenged. According to Nie, Verba and Petrocick (1976, 27), “Citizens are not guided in their political views by an overarching political ideology – conservatism, liberalism, socialism, or any ideology that would provide an interrelated set of answers to various issue stances.” This appears to be the case with regard to the findings presented by Smith and Seltzer (1993). They find that although African Americans ranked fairly high on the 100-point ideology scale (45.5), this score did not reflect African Americans’ position in the area of economic policy. For example, the authors report that African Americans averaged 20.2 on the social spending scale and 28.9 on a scale assessing support for government programs designed to help African Americans and the poor (Smith and Seltzer 1993, 38-39). Despite the inconsistencies, I think that it is important to understand why an African American would identify ideologically as a conservative.

What variables explain the self-identifying African American conservative? Can the same explanations for white support for racially conservative candidates or white opposition to racial policies contribute to our understanding of the black conservative? In an effort to address these questions, the following proposition is advanced.

Proposition #1: An increase in resentful attitudes toward African Americans will increase the probability of African Americans identifying as conservatives.

Traditional theories suggest that an increase in affluence leads one to become more conservative. Here, I argue that income will have, both an indirect and direct influence on conservative identification. The indirect relationship is captured in Figure 1. I posit that an increase in income will increase the likelihood of African Americans resenting other African Americans.

Figure 1.



It is well known that an increase in levels of education will increase the likelihood of someone being liberal. In the area of black politics, however, education has often served as a measure of class (see e.g., Dawson 1994; Welch and Foster 1987). Hence, in this paper it is argued that an increase in one's education level will increase the likelihood of that person identifying as a conservative. Similar to the income variable, figure 1 illustrates that education is expected to also have an indirect impact on conservative self-identification amongst African Americans.

Religion should play a role, given that the South is considered the bible belt and the pillar of the Religious Right. Streb (2000) argues that the growth of the Religious Right with the Republican Party of the past two decades may have a significant

impact with regard to attracting similarly inclined African American voters. In an effort to correctly specify the model explaining African American conservatives, religion should be included as a control variable.

Smith and Seltzer (1992) report that Southerners are more economically conservative than are non-Southerners. These authors find this phenomenon to be most prevalent in rural Southern areas. Based on these findings, it is posited that African Americans who reside in the South or in rural areas will identify as conservatives. Additionally, an interaction can be employed to test the relationship between African Americans residing in rural areas located in the South and the likelihood that they will identify as conservatives. Additional control variables should also include, age and whether the interviewer was an African American. The concerns in this paper are empirical in nature and can be formally tested with a variety of statistical techniques (e.g., logistic regression).

Conclusion

The propositions advanced in this paper, if found to be true, have serious implications. Models that have traditionally been used to examine white racial attitudes, prove to be useful in our understanding of African American conservatives. This suggests that, in their efforts to ameliorate previous conditions of servitude faced by African Americans, traditional civil rights leaders will have to confront, not only the “new racism” exemplified by whites, but also the “resentment” expressed by African Americans. Lastly, it appears that traditional civil rights activists will have to do a better job of educating the young with respect to the history of the economic subordination and political disenfranchisement faced by African Americans in this country. Without such education, it appears that programs designed to enhance the political, social and economic conditions of African Americans will not receive the necessary support from the community in order to succeed.

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