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The Opinions of African-American College Students about U.S. Politics and 
Political Culture in the Early 21st Century: A Survey in One HBCU

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Abstract: Declining voter participation coupled with the close, contested presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 have focused heightened attention on the political attitudes and behavior of electoral sub-groups. This paper describes and analyzes those of young African American voters attending a Southern, urban, public, HBCU in 2006.

Key Words African American studies
Political views, political participation, and political affiliation
Religion and culture

Introduction and Review of the Literature

As an immigrant nation, politics in the United States historically has reflected the ethnic diversity of the population. Many ethnic and national groups have tended, at least temporarily, to identify and support one particular political party that they perceived as supportive of their interest; this could be called “The Tammany Hall Syndrome”, after the Democratic Party organization in New York City that was so effective in building a support base among generations of immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Kraut, 1982; Archdeacon, 1983; Allswang, 1986)

Because of their unique historical experience with slavery and the Jim Crow system of neo-slavery that followed, African Americans especially have been prone to maintain long-term, enduring political commitments. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, in the era of the Civil War, those who could supported the Republican Party—
the party most committed to abolitionism and emancipation, the party of Frederick Douglass and Lincoln—that promoted their citizenship and voting rights. (Quarles, 1969; Cox, 1994; Franklin, 1994) Later, during the Great Depression and World War 2 in the 1930s and ‘40s, African Americans who had migrated from the South to northern industrial areas shifted *en masse* and became part of the Democratic Party’s New Deal coalition, even as Blacks who remained in the South were Jim Crowed by White southern Democrats. (Northrup, 1971; Weiss, 1983; Litwack, 1998) When the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s pushed the Democratic Party to take the lead in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, most new African American voters in the South likewise affiliated with this party. (Lawson, 1985; Tate, 1993; Feldman, 2004) The modern political bond between Blacks and the Democratic Party thus was solidified by becoming, for the first time, a national alliance.

The national alliance between African Americans and the Democratic Party has been affected by dramatic changes in the political landscape of the United States during the last half century. A few examples of this suggest the extent and consequences of these developments.

The “Southern Strategy” that the Republican Party formalized during the Nixon administrations (1968-1976)—really a pro-White strategy with an anti-Black, racist subtext—lured many southern Whites out of the Democratic Party and eventually converted the region into a Republican stronghold. (Carter, 1995; Carter, 1996; Sokol, 2006) This left Black southern Democrats a political as well as an ethnic minority—in effect, a double minority.

The loyalty of many Democrats to the party also suffered as it evolved beyond showing concern for oppressed African Americans to include support for other aggrieved
groups by becoming associated with the women’s liberation movement and the gay rights movement. Nationally, more socially conservative White Democrats left the party and contributed to the rise of the pro-Republican “Religious/Christian Right”. (Lienesch, 1993; Hodgson, 1996; Martin, 1996) Many African Americans, who also considered themselves devoted religious traditionalists, likewise were given pause by the Democrat’s support for other groups despite the fact that, like themselves, members of these groups shared a historical legacy of systematic discrimination. (Blanchard, 1994; Adam, 1995; D’Emilio, 1998) A significant percentage of the students polled in this survey, for example, indicated that they thought abortion (33.6%) and homosexuality (45.6%) were either “a religious sin” or “an immoral act”.

The passage of time likewise has affected the solidarity that once existed between African Americans and the Democratic Party. Most of the students polled in this survey are members of a post-Civil Rights generation. The vast majority of them (83.0%) indicated that they were less than 24 years old. Quite probably none of them were even alive in the 1960s—and many of their parents were not either. While the Black freedom struggle and the role that the Democratic Party played in it are part of their community’s collective memory, and are recalled in a positive but vague way on ceremonial occasions, the halcyon liberation politics of yesteryear are nevertheless distant history to African American teenagers and twenty-something’s of today. Their attitudes about the past are probably similar if not identical to others of their time, place, and generation. Among all young Americans now, history appears to have a rather short shelf life.

Finally, the style of politics in the United States has changed since the 1960s. Important political issues remain to be adequately addressed, but they are less visible than in earlier times. Perhaps for this reason, the politics of the post-Civil Rights era is less
focused, less public and dramatic, and less collective. Burning issues perceived to be of utmost importance forge solidarity and raise political consciousness; in their absence, political culture becomes diffused, unorganized, atomized, individualized. Since the diminution of the freedom struggle in the 1960s, no comparable political phenomenon has succeeded politically in galvanizing the nation or its young adults. Activist organizations and their dwindling cadre have lamented this and have had to survive on slim pickings in recent decades.

**Method**

This survey was conducted at a Historically Black University (HBCU) in **October 2006**. It involved 342 African American students pursuing a variety of majors and career ambitions while attending an open-admission, urban, public university with a student population of just over eleven thousand. All were enrolled in one of two undergraduate courses in the university’s core curriculum (the second half of the U.S. History Survey Course and “Business and Professional Communication”). The survey was designed to probe and measure the attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of young adults towards politics who were in the beginning stage of their university career and their political life. The quantitative student data has been qualitatively analyzed, enabling the authors to interpret percentages without using statistical tests of significance.

The questionnaire to which these students responded comprised fifty-two questions, including eight demographic identifiers. These questions attempted to explore the students’ attitudes and behaviors about the broad subject of politics and public policy. They included probing questions about students’ voting behavior, their party affiliation and involvement in party activity, their opinions about the trustworthiness and efficacy of
politicians and government, and their position on specific public policy issues such as foreign policy, religion, public health, the environment, abortion, and homosexuality. The questionnaire was designed to include a blend of general and specific questions that allowed students to express their own political opinions and to permit them to evaluate public officials, political parties, different levels and branches of government, and public policy.

**Discussion of Research Findings**

Demographically, the student participants in this study were limited to African Americans and consisted of females (61.6%), males (37.4%), and a minute number (0.9%) who did not gender identify. About two-thirds were eighteen to twenty-one years of age (68.0%) and in their first two years of college (63.4%). They described themselves as religious people (95.9%) who attended church (95.6%). Most characterized themselves as political moderates (53.2%) or independents (33.3%). As working-class students attending college in one of the nation’s largest cities, their annual income varied considerably, from less than $15,000 (10.5%) to over $40,000 (25.1%).

Most of the student respondents to this survey rely on the media for their news and information, the majority of them from television (62.9%) and the Internet (15.5%). Yet they generally do not place much trust in the media on which they rely, nearly all of which is corporately sponsored and for-profit. Over fifty percent indicated that they trust the media only “a little” or “none” on economic issues, political issues, and social issues. (Allen and Bielby, 1979a, 1979b; Martindale, 1986)

The suspicion students have toward the media is to an extent mirrored by their wariness toward the political system. Over half of them (51.8%) indicated that
politicians are “generally not honest with people”. Probing, follow-up questions on specific issues of political trust revealed impressive levels of mistrust. For example, only about a third (38.3%) of the student respondents had confidence that political candidates running for office would keep their campaign promises if elected; the figure was marginally lower (34.2%) for presidential candidates. A whopping 55.6% had either no trust or “little” trust in the current administration, and their mistrust of the Republican controlled U.S. Congress (52.3%) and the U.S. Supreme Court (43.3%) were nearly as high. What explains the lack of confidence that these mostly young African American students have in both the media and the political system? History might have powerfully conditioned their perception. For most of the last four hundred years, African Americans in the United States lived in a condition of slavery or the Jim Crow system of neo-slavery. During this time, Euro-Americans dominated the media and political system. Both the White media as well as White politicians cultivated an image of the United States characterized by freedom, democracy, and opportunity. These themes became a mantra throughout the U.S. and were largely accepted by Whites as forming the core of the nation’s political identity. However, these descriptors obviously did not reflect the lived reality of enslaved or oppressed Black Americans, who thus had ample cause to develop a mistrust of the media and politicians who promoted them. (Williamson, 1984; Martindale, 1986); Packard, 2002; Berlin, 2003; Brundage, 2005; Davis, 2006)

More recently, most of these students have come to young adulthood during a time when the integrity of the nation’s political system has been widely questioned and the media’s coverage of politics has been regarded as unreliable. For example, the last two presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 were close and controversial. Both involved alleged impropriety and dishonesty; the former had to be adjudicated by the U.S.
Supreme Court, and doubts still linger about the impartiality of the Court itself. (Ackerman, 2002; Ford and Bleifuss, 2006) Following these elections, contemporary events attached to the nation’s recent invasion and war in Iraq stimulated additional concern about the veracity of the political system and the news media. One such event was the assertion by the administration in power that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), all dutifully reported by an initially uncritical press. That this important assertion (along with others) has since been proven erroneous has further diminished popular trust in the U.S. political system and media. (Corn and Isikoff, 2006; Rich, 2006)

The cumulative history or the lived experience of African Americans in the United States from the slavery era to the present thus might have shaped their skeptical perception of the nation’s White-dominated political system and media. Distant events as well as more recent and even contemporary events could have combined to cause today’s young African American students to question the media and political system of their own country.

With respect to party affiliation and involvement, voter registration, and attitudes toward specific political issues, several considerations probably affected the responses of students. For example, most of the respondents were in their teens or early twenties (82.7%), at the beginning of their political life, and too young to have established a long record of political affiliation, much less activism. Secondly, all of the respondents were African American and raised in a community with a strong, long-standing allegiance to the Democratic Party. However, until the public protest against the Iraq war, liberal politics associated with the Democratic Party were quiescent and not likely to peak the interest or enthusiasm of young, inexperienced voters. Finally, most respondents have
lived their entire, adult political lives during an era dominated by Republicans at the national level and in their home state. This, too, may have affected the political behavior and attitudes of Afro-Texans. In any event, the responses of young African American students in this survey indicate the possibility that the future role of Blacks in politics, while rooted in the past, will not simply be a mirror of the past.

With respect to party affiliation and involvement, not surprisingly over ten times as many students (71.6% v. 6.7%) identified with the Democratic Party than with the Republican Party. What is intriguing is that a sixth of them (16.1%) identified with no political party, not even an Independent one. Of those who identified with the two major parties, about twice as many described themselves as moderates than as ultras. While the Democratic Party was more active than the Republicans in trying to recruit students, a surprising 74.3% of students said they had never been asked to join any political party. Probably as a result of this, barely over ten percent (11.4%) of students indicated that they were active in the party of their choice while 87.7% were not. These responses suggest that while the Democratic Party enjoys a substantial advantage with young, minority college students, its strength is not hegemonic or characterized by significant emotional rapport or contact with them.

Despite their limited involvement in party politics, the survey revealed that the respondents believed in the importance of registering to vote and voting. Over two-thirds (71.1%) of the students surveyed had registered to vote and nearly three-quarters (73.7%) of those who had not indicated that they planned to do so in the future. Nearly eighty-percent (79.2%) anticipated that they would cast their votes for the Democratic Party in the 2008. An equal number of them (79.5%) agreed that voting in presidential elections was a civic responsibility, in part because most of them (57.9%) felt that
elections helped to determine subsequent public policy. Given their lack on contact or involvement with political parties, voting appears to be the extent of political involvement for most of these students.

A long sequence of questions interrogated students about domestic political issues. These questions probed students’ opinions about the responsibility of government, their evaluation of the performance of government, and their position on a host of specific political issues.

A strong majority of students indicated that government has a heavy responsibility in important public sectors. For example, over three-quarters (78.7%) believed that environmental issues were the responsibility of government. More than eight out of ten (86.2%) felt that it was appropriate for government “to provide adequate health care to those who do not have it and can not afford it”. Yet, as they indicated on earlier questions regarding the performance of government, students were not generous in their evaluation of the ability demonstrated by government to meet its responsibilities. A plurality or a majority of students expressed dissatisfaction on all five questions that asked them to rate government performance: 54.7% said that the national administration in power generally had performed ineffectively in improving “the conditions of most citizens”; 50.9% faulted it on its handling of jobs; 46.2% also criticized the U.S. Congress and 37.5% the U.S. Supreme Court on their handling of jobs; and 45.6% further criticized the Court for its rulings in cases involving minorities. Mostly Democratic students were critical of mostly Republican government.

Other questions probed students on economic issues as well as those involved in the so-called “culture wars”. A majority of students (54.7%) ranked economic issues as their number one concern, followed by war and terrorism (24.5%); other issues fell into single
digits. Students’ responses about issues involving gender, ethnicity, and religion yielded some interesting and even surprising results.

Two questions probed issues most directly concerned with women. Here it may be well to remember that 61.6% of the respondents surveyed were female. By almost the same exact percentage (62.6%), those polled indicated that it was time to elect a female as president of the United States. A majority (52.3%) of students also believed that abortion was a woman’s right, although a sizable minority (33.6%) thought it sinful or immoral while 13.5% didn’t know how to characterize it.

Concerning ethno-politics, although all of those surveyed self-identified as African American, surprisingly only 67.6% of the students thought it was time for voters to select a non-Caucasian as president. This perhaps indicates that they doubted that Caucasian voters would support a Black candidate to occupy the White House or that no nationally known African American politician had a strong appeal to young adults. (This survey was conducted months before U.S. Senator Barack Obama was widely known or had announced for the presidency.)

Contrary to the popular belief that religion is a guiding force in the politics of Black America, students expressed significant disagreement about the proper role of religion in politics. (Lincoln, 1990; Harris, 1999; Newman, 2004; Harvey, 2005) A third of them (33.0%) did indicate its role should be a major one, but even more believed it should play only a minor role (29.5%) or none at all (23.1%). Oddly, 14.0% had no opinion on this controversial topic; possibly they were too conflicted to vote otherwise or were still, as young adults, in the process of making up their mind about this issue.

Regarding homosexuality, forty percent (40.1%) of those polled believed that sexual orientation resulted from personal choice rather than biological causation (4.4%), and
over forty five percent (45.6%) regarded it as a religious sin or an immoral act. Religion clearly trumped science on this issue. Not surprisingly, over half of those polled (52.6%) believed that the political culture of the United States was such that politicians focused on such issues as religion, abortion, and homosexuality to gain votes at election time.

The concluding series of questions on the survey probed students’ opinions and positions on foreign affairs and international relations. On an earlier question, students had ranked this topic as near the top of their concerns, second only to economic issues. This is probably because they grew to young adulthood at a time when dramatic international events occurred such as the attacks in the U.S. on 9/11 and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. These events provoked controversy and dominated the media in recent years. However, notwithstanding the avalanche of information available about global affairs, often the students’ answers to the survey questions on international affairs indicated uncertainty or lack of knowledge. Perhaps the huge volume of information about foreign affairs actually swamped their ability to understand it. Also, most people have a greater interest and clearer understanding of events pertaining to their own community or nation than about distant places. In any event, many more students than usual responded to questions about foreign affairs and international relations by indicating a “no opinion” or “don’t know” answer, even on basic, fundamental issues. Thus, for example, 23.1% had no opinion about whether the United States should promote democracy abroad; 36.3% didn’t know if the U.S. or the United Nations should take the lead in enforcing international law; 41.5% had no opinion about whether the U.S. would be justified in launching pre-emptive attacks on other nations; and a majority (56.7%) didn’t know how the nation should deal with another country that posed a threat to the security of the United States. Over fifty percent of
those polled (52.6%) had no option whatsoever about globalization. Basic, fundamental issues are sometimes, however, also the most complex and difficult.

In international affairs, students continued to demonstrate their low rate of confidence in the ability of the U.S. government to function effectively. A majority of respondents had no trust or only minimal trust in either the current executive branch (55.5%) or the U.S. Congress (56.1%) to operate effectively in the global arena. Forty percent (40.7%) even disagreed with the proposition that promoting democracy abroad should be a goal of U.S. foreign policy. Over a third (36.5%) did not favor the U.S. initiating a war. By over a four-to-one margin (33.7% v. 7.4%), students favored multilateral rather than unilateral U.S. action, even against a nation that posed a direct threat to U.S. security. They indicated that they preferred the United Nations rather than the United States take the lead in resolving international problems, and over two-thirds of them (68.1%) faulted the U.N. for not doing enough. As for Iraq, three-fourths favored withdrawal—50.9% immediately and 15.8% within 6 months. In the meantime, a majority (53.8%) rejected the notion that the war justified intrusive government security measures that violated the privacy and rights of citizens. In sum, the students’ lack of confidence in the current political leadership of the nation, combined with their own uncertain knowledge of global affairs, inclines them toward favoring a restrictive, limited, and perhaps even isolationist foreign policy for the United States at this time.

**Conclusions & Recommendations**

This study of a limited number of African American undergraduate students at one Historically Black University indicates that most of them believe in the importance of voting and do so. For historical reasons, most of them are partial to the Democratic Party, although perhaps less so than were their parents and grand parents. However,
relatively few are active in politics beyond voting in elections, partly because they have not been encouraged or recruited by either of the major political parties. The apparent lack of interest by both parties in young, minority voters at the beginning of their political careers is a possible dilemma for these voters. It could be that the Democratic Party takes their support for granted while the Republican Party has learned to survive and prosper without them. Being marginalized by both political parties would put these voters in a lose/lose political position that would be detrimental to them as well as limiting the demographic reach of the nation’s political culture.

Throughout the study, students expressed very limited confidence in the policies of the current and previous Republican administrations that were in power as these students grew to young adulthood. Specifically, students faulted shortcomings in the Republican Party’s domestic economic policies. This led them to identify economic issues as their No. 1 political concern. On other domestic political issues, these African American and mostly female students favored an increased role for Blacks and women in politics, including at the highest level. However, despite the fact that a plurality of them believed that religion should play either a minor role in politics or no role at all, their view of homosexuals was moralistic, negative, and homophobic. In the field of foreign policy, their mistrustful attitude toward Republican leadership and their lack of knowledge about global affairs inclined them towards a limited, cautious, and somewhat isolationist foreign policy for the United States; in Iraq, a majority of them favored quick withdrawal.

Research limitations: As previously acknowledged, this study provides an exploration of the political behavior and attitudes of African American students at only a single university. To assess the findings of this limited study, more and larger studies at multiple institutional locations will be necessary and are recommended. In the meantime,
it is hoped that this study is at least suggestive and that it will serve to stimulate a further exploration of grassroots political culture in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the tension between tradition and stability will continue to vie with the forces of change and uncertainty in history’s enduring existential drama.

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