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**Destroying the Myth of the Monolith: A Historical Observation of  
the Black Conservative from Then to Now**

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Destroying the Myth of the Monolith: A Historical Observation of the Black  
Conservative from Then to Now

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although it is not often reflected at the ballot box, Black America has a wide variety of political thought processes mostly rooted in socially conservative backgrounds. There has been a false, and frankly disrespectful, narrative that all Black Americans affirm to the same political ideology, vote in similar patterns, and align with the same political party. The uprising of Black Americans, specifically within the young electorate, who hold political conservative thought processes is the inspiration of this thesis. Starting with the 1780s and progressing through the 2020s, this thesis will observe the historical shifts and expansion of Black conservatism in America.

***Keywords: Black conservative, electorate, political ideology, linked fate, Black utility heuristic, and political sophistication***

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to every Black American that does not fit into the “status quo” of certain political ideologies and political preferences in our community. Also, to those same Americans that may not feel seen or heard or respected due to their views on legal, legislative, and social issues, this is for you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ANES	American National Election Studies
BLEXIT	Black Exit from the Democratic Party
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

## **CHAPTER I: HISTORY OF BLACK CONSERVATIVES**

“The most hated political person in America is a Black conservative” (Malone 2020). Why did Larry Elder, a notable Black conservative, make this claim during a documentary about Black conservatism? It has been theorized that Black Americans who identify as political conservatives often feel ostracized by those in the Black community. There are accounts of Black people who identify as a liberal or a Democrat categorizing Black conservatives as “Uncle Tom” or “Coons” or “House Niggas.” These criticisms are not new for Black conservatives since political figures and respected Black conservatives, such as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Sowell, and Walter E. Williams, faced similar backlash for their political viewpoints. If rebelling against the status of quo of the Black community—that is adopting a liberal ideology—is so contentious, why do it? What is the historical motivation for being a Black American who holds a conservative political ideology?

Black conservatism must be comprehended through the lens of conservatism in America because it is not an isolated movement in the Black community. Conservatism in America is divided in three camps: neoconservative, anti-statists, and organic (Lewis 2005). Black conservatives tend to support anti-statists, because they represent the moderate or “establishment” wing of the Republican Party, and neoconservatives, because they are against the expansion of government and support traditional family values as well as self-help programs (Lewis 2005). Those are the specific camps that Black conservatives have historically prescribed to, but how can Black conservatism be defined? An important disclaimer when defining Black conservatism is that it will not be reflective of all Black conservatives and it may hold true for Black Americans who do

not identify with this political ideology. Researcher, Angela Lewis, defines Black conservatism as the argument “that the American system is set up to treat everyone equally and that everyone has an equal opportunity for success, that it does not matter what efforts are made to discriminate, they are futile because this is America” (Lewis 2005, 5). This aligns with their basic tenets of respect for Western civilization and its institutions as well as support for the “Protestant Work Ethic” (Lewis 2005). The Protestant Work Ethic is best described through the Lockean principles of less government oversight; preservation of life, liberty, and property; and the pursuit of happiness that are combined with intra-racial resentment, which ultimately forms the “bootstrap” mentality argument that is often used as a method of ridding Black people of government reliance by “pulling up one’s bootstraps” and making opportunities for themselves through hard work. These concepts relate to the viewpoints expressed by historical and contemporary Black conservatives. Christopher Alan Bracey, an expert in the field of U.S. race relations, gave apt descriptions of some of the most important Black conservatives in U.S. history; and while there are many to choose from, Reverend Jupiter Hammon and Booker T. Washington will be the main focus.

### **Reverend Jupiter Hammon and Christian Evangelism**

In 1760, former slave, Jupiter Hammon, became the first published African American writer when he addressed the full scope of sociopolitical questions that African Americans faced through four poems, two essays, and one sermon. He is often considered to be the founding father of Black conservatism since his work is connected to some the earliest expressions of Black conservative thought. The basis of Hammon’s conservative ideology was his vehement religious convictions seen through his stance on slavery. In

his 1787 speech, “An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York,” Hammon advises slaves to obey their masters and focus on seeking out salvation from God and living a proper life when he said, “To think very little of bondage in this life; for thinking can do no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it on his own time and way; but think of your bondage to sin and Satan, and do not rest until you are delivered from it” (Bracey 2008, 5). His religious connections to the system of slavery in America caused Reverend Hammon to become the earliest known advocate for the African American Protestant Work Ethic; thus, assigning responsibility to free Blacks to lead by example by upholding moral standards and dispelling preconceived notions about the natural inferiority of Blacks by remaining industrious (Bracey 2008). Reverend Hammon not only established his conservatism through his Christian views on slavery, but he also provided a counternarrative to the condition of the slave. Through his writings, Hammon highlighted that slaves were not fundamentally questioning their humanity and understood that they obtained the same range of emotions, thoughts, and aspirations as other humans enjoyed (Bracey 2008). While there are various differences between Reverend Hammon’s conservatism and today’s Black conservatism, one similarity is the preference for an organic and moralistic program for the improvement of Black people through cooperation with Whites rather than confrontation. The most interesting counternarrative to the development of political thought of African slaves is their intellectual capacity since the origins of this intellectual movement—Black conservatism—is linked to religious writings of a slave like Reverend Jupiter Hammon.

## **Booker T. Washington and Black Conservative Thought of Post-Reconstruction**

A significant shift in Black conservatism occurred during post-reconstruction. Race relations expert, Christopher Alan Bracey, suggests that this shift occurred during the Emancipation period because it created a burst of Black political thought from all areas on the ideological spectrum (Bracey 2008). Black history has taught us that Black conservatism had its roots in the North, but a new form of Black conservatism—entrenched in the South—emerged with Booker T. Washington as its leader. Washington’s skepticism of legal and political rights was similar to other Black southerners after 1877, when there was a realization of the mutability and limitations of the liberal agenda of the North; meaning, there was a widening gap between the idealism of the North and the reality of the South, especially with the deterioration of newly acquired rights and the surge of racial violence and terror toward Black people (Bracey 2008). The search for Black advancement continued, but instead of slow and steady cooperation with Whites, Booker T. Washington’s strategy was centered around less reliance on Whites. Washington cited economic advancement as the surer, and less reversible, route for Black progress within southern Black institutions promoting the concept of collective racial enterprise (Bracey 2008). Political power, through this newly found southern Black conservatism, was a byproduct of economic power, moral authority, and character. Washington remarked that, “the masses of Negroes were given the ballot without effort on their part and they soon lost it. The masses of Negroes are gradually [re]gaining the ballot *through their own efforts*, and are likely to keep it when so gained,” also acknowledging, “there are other ways of getting into politics than by holding public office” (Bracey 2008, 20). Booker T. Washington envisioned a Black

uprising from the bottom, up through conservative principles that challenged the northern liberal agenda by obtaining Black self-sufficiency without White interference.

While there are many historical Black conservatives, Reverend Jupiter Hammon and Booker T. Washington's forms of conservatism point to important periods of the Black conservative movement in relation to sociopolitical shifts in America. To truly encapsulate the scope of Black conservative thought, the transition to liberal ideological reliance in the Black community during the 1960s must be understood.

## CHAPTER II: SHIFT TO LIBERAL IDEOLOGY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

“Black lives have never, ever, ever mattered to the Democratic Party. Black votes always have (VICE Minority Reports 2019a).” This statement made by Candace Owens, a leader in the rising counterpublic of young Black conservatives, as seen in a documentary done by VICE Minority Reports is not a new idea among many Black Americans. One of the most influential voting blocs in the history of American politics is the Black community, and the way to their hearts is addressing and acting on their grievances. An examination of the liberal policies during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations allows one to see that the true motivation for voting and civil rights acts, and for other race-based legislation, was not rooted in wanting to help the Black community. The policies of the 1960s are relevant to the current stronghold that the liberal ideology has on the Black electorate. Dr. Allen Matusow, a professor that specializes in U.S. history, gave an in-depth look at the politics and race relations of 1960s in his book *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*.

The initial civil rights strategy of President Kennedy was derived from the arithmetic of his victory, not from the promises made on the campaign trail. President Kennedy needed Black and White southerners to win, and once he secured both sects it was time to maintain a delicate balance to keep those disparate constituencies in his electoral base. Matusow (1984b, 62) suggests that the official line of the Kennedy administration was: “Why emphasize civil rights legislation when the president could accomplish just as much by issuing executive orders?” It must be remembered that executive orders can be easily overturned by the next president, and they are not as



concrete as legislative action. Despite distributing this line to several members of the NAACP, including the executive director Roy Wilkins, President Kennedy did not move the needle much on civil rights executive orders. After summing up the main agenda for Blacks—finding them jobs and getting them the vote—during an off the record meeting in March 1961, John F. Kennedy issued his only civil rights order that year: the creation of the President’s Committee on Equal Employment (Matusow 1984b). This was not the only time the Kennedy administration misled leaders in the Black community about their intentions on sweeping executive orders. The civil rights lobby became aggrieved by Kennedy’s reluctance to issue an executive order that barred discrimination in housing programs that were federally aided. Despite touting his eagerness to end housing discrimination if President Eisenhower did not end it himself with “a stroke of a presidential pen,” President Kennedy kept finding reasons to procrastinate once in office (Matusow 1984b, 95). In spite of John F. Kennedy’s continued reluctance and skepticism to take real action toward civil rights, and his ability to charm and flatter the Black community without truly hearing their grievances—such as when he invited top leaders of the NAACP to listen intently to their brief appeal for “an enduring law,” and then proceeded to give everyone a White House tour to distract the delegates from noticing his unequivocal rejection of their appeal (Matusow 1984b, 64)—the Black community still celebrated his willingness to listen, even if he did not properly act.

It has been argued that Black Americans were official ushered into the Democratic Party, and political liberal ideology, when President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. Despite this being the greatest liberal achievement of the decade, critics disparaged the law because it left vast areas of subtle discrimination

untouched or because it did not attack de facto segregation or because it was not relevant to Black poverty (Matusow 1984b). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made great gains in the Black community for President Johnson and every Democrat that supported the legislation, but as soon as the act began to jeopardize their political standing, they left that part of their legislative agenda behind. When the 1966 congressional elections came around, the trend toward racial conservatism was clear when liberal politicians, like Lyndon B. Johnson realized their close identification with the causes of Black Americans was a political liability (Matusow 1984a). It was once recorded that Lyndon B. Johnson told his staff that civil rights leaders would have to wear sneakers to keep up with him; however, during the twilight of his presidency, he ingratiated himself with the police and retreated from the liberal hope of racial justice (Matusow 1984a). At the beginning of this chapter, I referenced Candace Owens' suggestion that Black votes are the only thing that has mattered to the Democratic Party. This is not a new concept when observing the political motivations of the 1960s. President Kennedy disregarded civil rights as a political annoyance until his constituency up North took up the cause. President Johnson treated civil rights as a moral imperative until his hopeful constituency, the North, abruptly lost interest (Matusow 1984a). Decades after one of the greatest contributions to civil rights, why is a large amount of the Black community still beholden to liberal politicians?

In America political ideologies are often, and incorrectly, roped in with party identification. While conservatism advances a limited role for government when discussing topics such as government intervention in the political and social and economic realms, liberalism is typically associated with supporting government

intervention in all these arenas (Mangum 2007). During his research in 1994, Dr. Michael Dawson, a researcher in the field of African American political behavior and identity, discovered that the liberal ideology is positively related to Black identification within the Democratic Party; thus, the expectation is that Black liberals are likely to state their party identification as Democrat while Black conservatives identify as Republicans (Dawson 1994). For Black people, identifying with the Democratic Party is logical because the party's messaging is consistent with their standing in the economy, in society, and in politics; however, the preference among Blacks toward the Democratic Party, and therefore a liberal ideology, is based on concept that as a race of people they usually gain when Democrats are in power. This is where Dr. Dawson's theory of the Black utility heuristic is introduced. According to Dawson (1994, 45), "the Black heuristic is used by many Blacks because it is more efficient for them to determine what is good for them personally, and more efficient to use the group (or race) status as a surrogate for individual utility." To answer the question posed at the end of the previous paragraph, Black people are more so beholden to the party that upholds liberal principles because said principles are thought to benefit their race as a whole. Expounding on this theory, Dr. Maruice Mangum, the chair of the Political Science Department at Jackson State University, tested the Black utility heuristic and hypothesized that a positive relationship will form between the influence of Black group interests (race or group consciousness) and identification with the Democratic Party by arguing that allegiance from Blacks to a political party is dependent upon the perceptions of the parties' response level to the interests of the Black community (Mangum 2007). His research led to two important findings. First, Blacks are prone to select a political party based on their own

socioeconomic and demographic status. Second, Blacks use group interest (the Black utility heuristic) as a structure for their party identification (Mangum 2007). The Black utility heuristic is not the only theory that explains the Black allegiance to liberal policies within the Democratic Party. Linked fate theory, which has a similar standing to the Black utility heuristic, is commonly used when attempting to understand the Black presence in the Democratic Party.

Black Americans' consistent liberalism and loyalty to the Democratic Party maintains progressive politics and sustains advocacy organizations. Researchers in the Department of Government at Harvard University discovered that political homogeneity in the Black community is a result of the strong perception that one's own chances in life are heavily dependent on the status and fortunes of Black Americans as a whole causing Blacks who are well-off to not become more conservative in the realms of society, the economy, and politics (Gay, Hochschild and White 2016). This is the concept of linked fate which is often associated with liberal activities or political views. In a 2016 study, linked fate was comparatively and simultaneously examined across social categories, racial groups, and ethnic groups to understand Black linked fate and the findings concur that racial linked fate of Black Americans is neither particularly strong in an absolute sense nor distinguished from views of other groups (Gay, Hochschild and White 2016). It does, however, provide evidence that this theory is related to the Black electorate's reliance on liberal policies.

In the 1960s, Black loyalty toward liberalism and the Democratic Party was formed in response to John F. Kennedy administration's courting of the Black community (when convenient for the president) and Lyndon B. Johnson's administration

historic signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which they touted until it became a political liability forcing them to embrace law enforcement). The loyalty has remained through theories such the Black utility heuristic and linked fate that causes Black people to vote based on the idea that what benefits the entire race also benefits individuals within the race and that one person's fate in society and/or the economy can be reflective of another person's fate who identifies with the same race.

## **CHAPTER III: BLACK POLITICAL THOUGHT, PHENOMENA, & SOPHISTICATION**

“Most Black people don’t think alike, but most Black people vote alike (Philpot 2017b, 1).” When Representative J.C. Watts made this observation, he was correct in noting that there this is a level of heterogeneity in the political thinking of Black Americans. Despite theoretical evidence that Black Americans are prone to identify with a liberal ideology—thus, voting Democratic—especially after the policies of 1960s, there are Black conservatives today that reject groupthink theories when voting.

The religiosity and conservative positioning on moral issues of African Americans suggest that the Black community should be more receptive to the Republican Party. The common political environment is one that cleanly splits voters along ideological lines which creates a certain difficulty when attempting to pigeonhole Black Christians since they are both politically liberal and socially conservative (Clemetson 2004). For instance, Blacks who are supportive of equal benefits for gays as a matter of economic justice are also opposed to gay marriage. In his research, Dawson (2001) described six ideologies—radical egalitarianism, disillusioned liberalism, Black Marxism, Black nationalism, Black feminism, and Black conservatism—that are reflective of the trends in Black political thought. The multitude of ideological strains within the Black community is direct evidence of polyethnic political development which is not often seen due to our limited two party system. Even with a plethora of ideologies embedded in the African American community, Black conservatism is still considered to be far out in the margins of Black political thought. Lewis (2013) dismisses this claim by arguing for a new definition for Black conservatism that is centered around anti-

government attitudes as well as religiosity and traditional family values. With that definition in mind, what is the behavioral pattern of a Black conservative?

It has been hypothesized that Black conservatives behave more like Black liberals than they do their White counterparts. Statistics from the American National Election Studies provides evidence that the behavioral patterns of Black conservatives are more in line with Black liberals than one might think. Using the backdrop of the 2012 presidential election, for instance, it was found that roughly 96 percent of Black liberals along with about 78 percent of Black conservatives identified with the Democratic Party, which is in contrast to the 81 percent of White liberals that selected their party identification as Democrat with only 13 percent of while conservatives checking that box as well (ANES 2012) Voting records during the 2012 election are also indicative of political behaviors. Close to 89 percent of Black conservatives reported voting for President Obama, in comparison to only 14 percent of their White counterparts (ANES 2012). In recent years, arguments that party identification is no longer reflective of nor driven by policy positions has grown. Tasha Philpot (2017b), a government professor at the University of Texas at Austin, pointed to two phenomena that describes the correlation between Black ideology and Black party identification: (1) the development of a unique conceptualization of the liberal-conservative continuum and (2) the conditionality of Blacks' ideology on group consciousness. The multidimensionality of political ideologies as well as one's perception of policy domains being a determinant of their ideological self-identification causes all Americans, especially Black Americans, to sometimes swing back and forth on the ideological pendulum. Combining this with the fact that regardless of political ideology, racial considerations are weighed heavily on the political thinking

of African Americans causes the concept that Black policy positions are not often reflective of Black party identification to be better understood.

There is a disconnect not just between party identification and political ideology, but also between Black Republicans and Black conservatives which can be explained through the political sophistication, or lack thereof, among the Black electorate.

Researcher, Philip Converse (1964), asserted that those who possess higher levels of political sophistication—meaning, high levels of political interest, political knowledge, and education levels—are more likely to form a thought process that is more along ideological lines. Without this level of political sophistication, some Blacks' have been mistakenly labeling themselves as conservative even when their policy preferences say otherwise. Lower levels of political knowledge in the Black community could attest for the idiosyncratic relationship between their party identification and ideological self-identification; however, the conceptualization of liberalism and conservatism by Blacks along with distinct policy dimensions explain the distinctive nature of this relationship (Philpot 2017c). For example, a Black female from Alabama said, "I work with the welfare system so to see it suck us up and break families up, once again it's about the population not just an individual group of people and so for that reason I think that I see that as liberalism...I think conservative means...have the belief of the Bible, it kind of guides you" (Philpot 2017c, 21). Political differences, whether established through political sophistication or conceptualization, are not just between a race's ideology and party identification, but also between the ideologies in one race.

What differentiates a Black liberal from a Black conservative? Researchers, Seth Asumah and Valencia Perkins (2000, 56), have proposed that: "Individualism,



materialism, and limited government all serve as major tenets for American political ideology. Most conservatives wholeheartedly believe in these principle, and Black conservatives are no exception.” Just as their White counterparts, Black conservatives are advocates for a self-reliance strategy as a route for overcoming adversities and denouncing intervention from the government. Research has shown that Black conservatives’ belief of deficiencies within the individual account for Blacks’ unequal standing in American society while Black liberals are prone to believe that institutional and systemic racism is the reasoning for racial differences (Smith 2002; Harris-Lacewell 2004). Attitudes towards race relations and discrimination is what makes a liberal or conservative who happens to be African American become a Black liberal or Black conservative.

## **CHAPTER IV: THE RHETORICAL APPROACH AND POLICY CRITIQUE OF BLACK CONSERVATIVES**

“The woke-ies give the White liberals this space to tell a Black person how to be Black and how you’re supposed to experience your Blackness” (VICE Minority Reports 2019b). When Rob Smith, the founder of a Black conservative media hub called The Douglass Society, made this statement while sitting on a panel for VICE Minority Reports he was referring to the victimhood narrative that Black conservatives have accused liberals and Democrats of using when they court the Black community. The rhetoric in the recent movement of the young, Black conservative electorate is similar to what has been used for years by Black conservatives: brainwashing by liberals, Black victimhood and Black self-help. To strengthen their rhetorical approach, Black conservatives back their claims with evidence of how liberal policies, in their opinion, are failing the Black community. To fully grasp the language used by prominent Black conservatives, in an attempt to appeal to the younger generation of Black Americans, first-hand accounts from VICE, a media and magazine company that focuses on lifestyle, arts, culture, and news/politics, and Jubilee’s Middle Ground Sessions, where people on different sides of a controversial topics attempt to find middle ground, will be examined, along with an investigation of a collection of sources that will provide context on how rhetoric is combine with policy evidence to further the Black conservative movement.

### **Rhetorical Approach**

During an episode of Minority Reports, conducted through the VICE platform, called “Black Conservatives Debate Black Liberals,” the current rhetoric in Black conservative movement was clearly displayed in claims made by conservatives. When

George Johnson, a liberal man, made the comment, “Politics has always been run by capitalism which is the system that has always suppressed minorities—African Americans were the first capital in this country (VICE Minority Reports 2019b),” it invoked an emotional response from the Black conservatives in the room who denounced the underlying victimhood status as liberal propaganda. With the support of his fellow Black conservatives, Rob Smith responded with the following: “When we look at capitalism as something that has oppressed minorities or is oppressing minorities, we remove from ourselves the capacity to use capitalism in order to build our communities in order to move ourselves forward (VICE Minority Reports 2019b).” Not only does this rhetoric touch on victimhood status, but it also applies to the self-help notion that has been popular in the conservative movement. In tandem with the commonly used victimhood narrative, Black conservatives have latched onto a new type of rhetoric: the closeted racism of liberal ideologues. Christopher Wright, a Black conservative, led with this rhetoric when he made the following statement: “I didn’t see true racism in this country until I became a conservative, because I’ve seen true hate speech come from people...I saw true hate come from the left. It was White people calling me “Uncle Tom” and White people telling me I’m not Black enough which is racist—We need to stop playing victim and start playing victor (VICE Minority Reports 2019).” The overall argument that Black conservatives are using is that liberal policies force Black people into a victim state, however, these are not the only talking points for Black conservatives. On an episode of Jubilee’s Middle Ground, titled “Is It Time to Get Over Slavery? Black Liberals vs Black Conservatives,” a significant amount of the rhetoric among the Black conservatives was the promotion of the idea that being an American is more important, or

holds more value over, being a Black American. To add to the victimhood narrative, the self-help notion, and the closeted racism of liberals, Black conservatives want race and identity to be two separate entities. Anthony, a Black conservative in this episode of *Middle Ground*, argued that “being Black should not influence a political view because what’s good for Black folks is good for everyone else” (Jubilee Middle Ground 2020). For Black conservatives, Black is just a race, not an overarching identity.

### **Policy Critique Combined with Rhetoric**

“Much of Black America’s plight is *caused* by the Big Government programs intended to help them (Human Events 2011, 13).” The main policy critique that matches the overall rhetoric used by Black conservatives is toward government programs that started with Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society and continued into the Obama Administration. The government programs up for debate by Black conservatives consists of affirmative action along with welfare and housing programs. For these conservatives, big government initiatives, creates an endless, and dangerous, cycle of Black dependency on the federal government.

When President Johnson said, “the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights is not just freedom but opportunity [and] not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result” (Riley 2014b, 2), he was launching a war on racial inequality and poverty which he was set on winning by pushing numbers-based racial remedies and redistributing wealth. Black conservatives have conceded that the intentions behind big government programs are noble, but they also point out that said programs have impeded the self-development that is necessary for group advancement when they go from paper to practice. There is a consistent attack on laws geared toward

the economy and equality such as: “Minimum-wage laws might lift earnings for people who are already employed, but they also have a long history of pricing Blacks out of the labor force,” and, “Affirmative action in higher education was intended to address past discrimination, but the result is fewer Black college graduates—particularly in the fields of math and science—than we’d have in the absence of racial preferences” (Riley 2014b, 3). The comprehensive viewpoint among Black conservatives is that the post-1960 liberalism makes it virtuous to be tolerant of Black weakness while acknowledging the historic evil of White racism by thinking of Blacks as “helpless others.” By providing preferential treatment, according to Black conservative Shelby Steele (1998), the strengths of Black Americans get ignored when the weakness are massaged, understood, accepted, and felt for which creates the infamous gap between Blacks and Whites on performance measures.

The bulk of policy critiques from Black conservatives is toward the actions, or lack thereof, of the Obama administration. There is a consensus that race consciousness helps cohere the political left, and Black liberalism’s main agenda is to keep out national conversations centered around race. With this in mind, one would think that President Obama’s administration focused on pushing Black Americans forward when it comes to their socioeconomic standing; however, Black conservatives contend that Blacks were worse off during President Obama’s eight years in office. Some of the undisputable facts that conservative commentator Jason L. Riley (2014a) focuses on are the following: (1) White employment was 8 percent in September 2011 compared to a Black unemployment rate of 16 percent; more specifically, for Black men it was 18 percent and for Black teens it topped 44 percent, (2) in 2011, Black homeownership rates had dropped to a point

where the Black-White gap reach its widest point since 1960 according to the Census Bureau, and (3) the Black-White unemployment gap widened during Obama's first term since unemployment was 12.7 percent for Blacks and 7.1 percent when he took office in January 2009 versus 14.3 percent for Blacks and 7 percent for Whites on Election Day in 2012. Through the lens of a Black conservative, the vast amount of energy and money poured into the Black community by liberal programs caused socioeconomic indicators to get worse as the years go on. A conservative newspaper, *Human Events*, judged President Obama's performance in 2011 based on income and home ownership and illegitimacy, or out-of-wedlock birth, rates. The Census Bureau's report of 2011 showed that the average per capita income of Black Americans is only \$18,000 per year in comparison to \$30,000 for White Americans, along with the home ownership rating for Blacks being 20 percent lower. There were also claims that Black illegitimacy rates hovering above 72 percent, more than tripling what it was at the beginning of the Great Society era (*Human Events* 2011). If Black conservatives are so critical of the policies stemming from President Johnson and the lack of action from President Obama, what is their solution to socioeconomic positioning of Black Americans? For them, the answer is not relative to policy changes, but rather the elimination of policies that, in their view, prevent Black Americans from finding their own answers. When examining liberal policies that were meant to elevate Black Americans, Black conservatives lean on the advice given by Frederick Douglass when he spoke at a Boston gathering of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society:

Everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, 'What should we do with the Negro?' I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has

already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall....And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! (Riley 2014b, 4-5)

## **CHAPTER V: BLACK CONSERVATIVES TODAY & THE EMERGING COUNTERPUBLIC OF YOUNG BLACK CONSERVATIVES**

“One of the great attractions of “conservatism” for Blacks today is the freedom it offers from yet another White mandate—not White supremacy but White redemption” (Steele 1998, 5). While African American conservatives have always existed, there has been a recent emergence of a counterpublic of young Black adults who are actively speaking against the liberal political ideology and the Democratic party. Black conservatives are considered a counterpublic because they were formed through a mutual recognition of exclusion from the wider public of Black liberals or those that support liberal political candidates and policies. The Young Black Leadership Summit of 2018, sponsored by Turning Point USA, was the first major gathering for this counterpublic. In tandem with the summit, young Black conservatives have established their safe haven in the organization, founded by Candace Owens and Brandon Tatum as well as the media hub, named The Douglass Society, founded by Rob Smith. All platforms allow for this counterpublic to have access information, specific to their demographic and ideology, from multiple platforms and outlets on one website.

### **What’s Next? Reaching the Young Black Electorate**

The first annual Young Black Leadership Summit was held in 2018 which hosted just over 300 young Black conservative activists, and the number of attendees increased by more than 100 for their second annual summit. The summit that occurred in 2019 received the most attention not only because of the high attendance, but also because of



President Trump’s remarks to the summit attendees in the East Room of the White House. Every one of the seventeen featured speakers, including former President Trump, pastors, a Breitbart News editor, and many more, pushed a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” narrative while discussion panels touched on the main conservative values such as gun rights, the Bible, and free markets. Charlie Kirk, the founder and executive director of Turning Point USA, said on the organization’s official website that the Young Black Leadership Summit is “the herculean effort of the century. How can you get Black America to think differently ideologically” (Dawson 2019)? This was not just an event to allow Black Americans who affirm to the same political ideology, but to encourage these young conservatives to organize as a united group and go to their communities as leaders to “help change the norm for Black voters” (Dawson 2019). Meaning the summit acted as an annual call to organize, mobilize, and expand the counterpublic into an actual movement.

Candace Owens—a popular Black conservative who went from being Turning Point USA’s director of communications to co-founder of BLEXIT to talk show/podcast host—picked up on the call to expand the counterpublic when she and Brandon Tatum—a conservative communications specialist—founded the BLEXIT foundation, that was birthed as a response to the growing number of African Americans affirming to a conservative political ideology. It can be described as a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of urban and minority communities by encouraging youth to seek and take advantage of opportunities in 21st Century America. While BLEXIT claims to be a nonpartisan foundation, the meaning of the name is “the Black exit from the Democratic party;” thereby, the Black exit from liberal ideology. Since its inception in 2018,

BLEXIT has established 41 state chapters, 14,000 volunteer members, and 5 million views on their videos. Figure 1 depicts just how far their reach is with their active memberships nationwide.

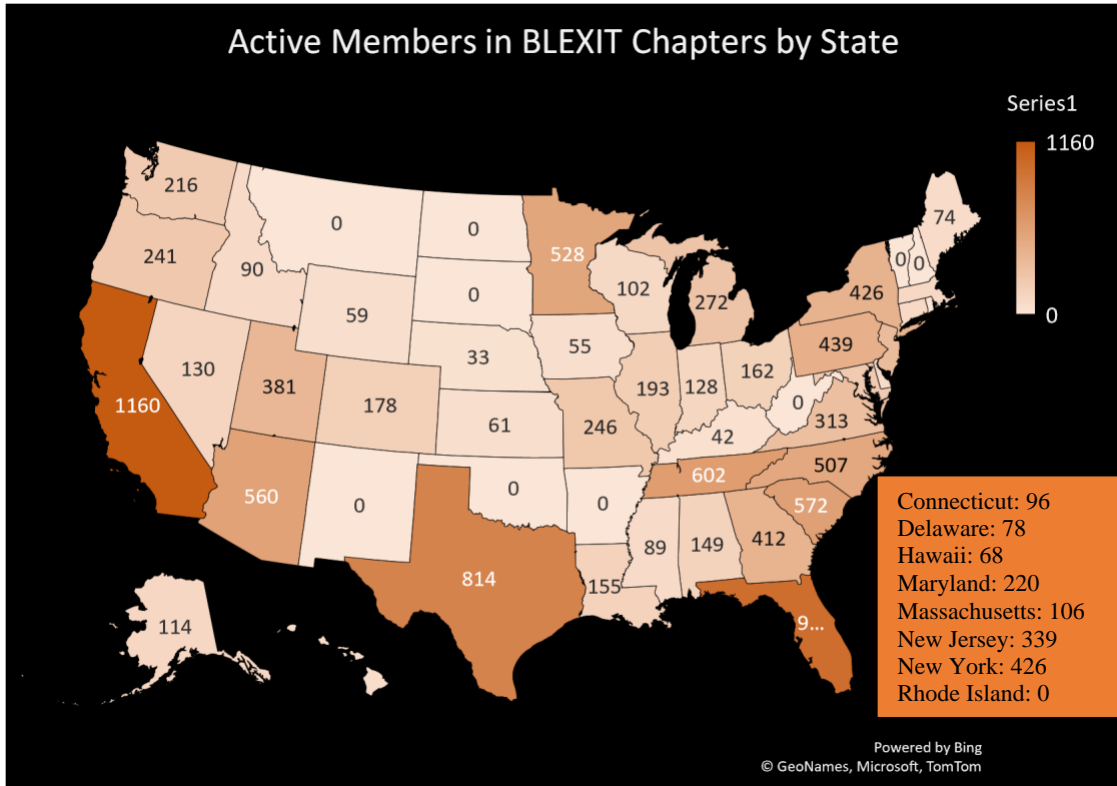


Figure 1. Active Members in BLEXIT Chapters

BLEXIT is using the same principle talking points, or issue points, that many Black conservatives use to lure potential followers but with much more specific language such as: (1) advocating for school choice and alternative educational opportunities for low-income and minority children, (2) promoting criminal justice reform and developing educational programs to help communities avoid incarceration, (3) supporting entrepreneurship and free enterprise to escape government dependence and poverty, (4) developing history programs to inspire minority children to succeed and have productive lives, and (5) presenting the BLEXIT message through visual art and live experiences

(Owens and Tatum 2018). The following that BLEXIT has gained through their official active members, state chapters, and volunteers is a testament to how far of a reach the Black conservative movement has with the young electorate. This is proof that their messaging is reaching the ear of the young, Black electorate and gaining ground in the Black community. The Black community has traditionally been socially conservative and playing on that social conservatism through multiple rhetorical strategies is allowing a breath of fresh air into the Black conservative movement through the young adults of the African American community that are identifying as conservatives. This is, indeed, an interesting time for political candidates across the political ideological spectrum to appeal to the African American community. It does not stop with the BLEXIT Foundation. Rob Smith, a Black conservative that has been mentioned several times throughout this thesis, formed The Douglass Society. He felt that there was no pipeline for young Black conservatives to get involved in the media space (Smith n.d.). The grassroots, hands-on effort by the BLEXIT is being balanced by an online hub in The Douglass Society, which has now become *the* hub for Black conservative thought online.

### **What's Next? Furthering Research**

With this increased effort, through two platforms, to reach the young Black electorate, what further research could be done to better understand this emerging counterpublic? At the start of this research, I began distributing surveys approved by my institution's Institutional Review Board to all fifty flagship universities in the United States of America. The content of the survey was based on the racial resentment scale that was developed by researchers Donald Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders in the 1980s on behalf of the American National Election Study. The scale examines three pillars: belief

in the idea that African Americans have not conformed to the Protestant work ethic, anti-Black effect, and denial of ongoing discrimination against African Americans (Kam and Burge 2018). For Kinder and Sander's scale, they were testing to see if racial resentment, from White Americans toward Black Americans, could be a determinant of a conservative political ideology. In 2005, Stanley Feldman and Leonie Huddy expanded the scale but still tested for White racial resentment. The standard racial resentment scale asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following list of four statements (Cramer 2020):

1. Irish, Italian, and Jewish ethnicities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
2. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
3. Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
4. It's really a matter of some people just not trying hard enough: if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as Whites.

The expanded version added the two following statements (Feldman and Huddy 2005):

1. Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a Black person than from a White person.
2. Most Blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried.

Unlike the four researchers listed above, I planned to use the answers from Black (either fully Black or mixed race) students, both undergraduate and graduate, to see if intra-racial resentment could be a determinant of a conservative political ideology in the young

Black electorate. Unfortunately, after receiving 931 responses, I was forced to cease distribution of my survey and to not include my research in my thesis because I did not include the consent statement in my survey. When expanding this topic during my graduate studies, I would like to redistribute the survey with the consent statement attached to see my research through the final process.

### **What's Next? Expanding Black Conservatism**

After an October 2022 interview with Tucker Carlson, Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) formally declared his conservative stance on issues surrounding abortion, cancel culture, Black Lives Matter, race relations, Hillary Clinton, and former President Trump. The interview was prompted by Ye creating a controversial “White Lives Matter” shirt through his Yeezy clothing brand, which he wore with Candace Owens at Paris Fashion Week 2022. This caused a reaction by the host of Fox News’s The Five, including a significant signoff by former Governor Nikki Haley in which she said the following:

Here is a minority male that is expressing conservative views. What I don’t want is him being highlighted as an exception to the rule. There are a lot of minorities out there—African Americans, Hispanics, Indians—who think like he does, and Republicans have to understand [that] we have to expand the tent. [...] I hope that we go and start really recruiting the rest of them...Minorities have been treated poorly by the Democrats for a long time. This is the Republicans time to really cee the opportunity to have the discussion with them on why we focus on lifting everyone, not just a certain segment of the population. (FOX News 2022)

The Black conservative movement is expanding, especially with leaders like Candace Owens reaching out to mainstream artists such as Ye to attract their loyal fanbase. It is expanding in such a way that prominent Republicans, like former Governor Haley, are officially calling on Republicans to reach out to Black conservatives, who are identifying

with the Democratic Party, to bring them in as a major voting bloc for the 2024 election cycle. This concerted effort, through the BLEXIT Foundation, The Douglass Society, and the official call on Republicans, will undoubtedly lead to an interesting shift in the political ideology with which Black Americans align themselves.

Never has the Black vote been so actively sought after by both political parties, especially the young Black vote. Expanding Black conservatism goes far beyond BLEXIT and The Douglass Society. If this counterpublic wants to become more than an opposition to the dominant ideology—Black liberals—they must have established leader/s who will create organization rather than a diaspora of thoughts and ideas. Leadership roles of political liberalism in the Black community is visible in the Black Church, with community activism, and with social movement leaders. Each version of leadership has a strong grasp on their section of Black liberalism: the Black Church provides a trusted figure in the reverend/pastor/bishop along with a safe space, community activism allows Black people to get involved in community enhancement when they feel like decades of racial policies have failed their neighborhoods, and social movement leaders create the rally cries that are relevant to the wants and needs of the Black community at a certain time. Black conservatives must take note of these factors if they want to expand their ideology and be considered a serious force in the next election cycle.

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