

On the Party Switch of the African-American Voter

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Abstract

In the following essay, I will attempt to trace the reasons surrounding the party switch of the African-American voter from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party. I will examine the major figures involved in the political machinery from the “roaring twenties” upto the unequivocated acceptance of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. Throughout I will point towards factors like race relations, and socio-economic conditions during each time period.

1 The Golden Years

Much like the limited choice of American political parties today, the internally colonised African Americans of the pre-depression era had very little political choice for civil equality between the Democratic and Republican parties, of which neither side, either due to their racism or out of fear of the loss of white votes, wanted to touch the powder-keg known as race relations. The race relations in the South during this time were a complex melange of emotionally charged rumours and attitudes. The North was not the better off with respect to the Black man.

The African-American voter was relegated as an unimportant constituent; They turned out in strikingly low numbers and when they did, voting Republican was the habit. The Republican party, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, concentrated on regaining the Southern white vote; as a result, they started a lilly-white attitude in campaigning. Republicans wanted as little to do with the African-American voter as possible, so as not to be considered a party of the disenfranchised minority. Further, to the Republican party, the low African-American voter turnout was indicative that he was not a major player in politics. This convinced the Republican party “that they must rid themselves of the Negroes.”[1, p. 54]

As a result, the African-American voter was split between independent candidates and the Republican party. Although disenfranchised from local Republican participation, the African-American voters were still for the National Republican Party led by Theodore Roosevelt. However, some of the African-American press threw support for the independent candidates in hopes to send a message to the G.O.P. that the African-American vote did, indeed, count!

1.1 Loss of Faith

There were many incidents, which occurred to cause the African-American voter to start to question his political affiliation. Two major incidents which occurred involved African-American Troops and the outcome of the Brownsville and Houston, Texas encounter between African-American troops and local citizens.

Because of the symbolism of power involved with military position, many Southern whites were resentful of African Americans in the armed forces. As a result there was a significant amount of tension between the local white population and African-American military regiments.

1.1.1 Houston, Texas Race Riot

One such example was on 23rd August 1917 at Fort Logan in Houston, Texas, where the brutality of civilian police towards the African-American soldiers, was strikingly displayed.

Twelve white civilians and two African-Americans were killed in a race riot in Houston, Texas involving the local African-American troops. While white city officials blamed the soldiers for the development of the race riots,

Martha Grueing, from the NAACP, investigated the situation and came up with a different answer. She argued that habitual brutality of white police on African-American residents, and the disarmament of the military police by local law enforcement officials coupled with lax discipline at the camp, which permitted promiscuous drinking, and external visits, were the causal factors for the riot.[6, p. 260]

When the dust settled, seventy-four men total were court marshalled. Thirteen were hanged without appeal, under a law which only applied to active troops. Forty-one soldiers were given life imprisonment, four long prison terms, sixteen death sentences. However, all of the white officials of the camp were released without further action.[6, p. 261]

1.1.2 Brownsville, Texas Incident

A similar situation occurred in Brownsville, where Theodore Roosevelt dishonourably dismissed the entire battalion. The night of 13 August 1906 unidentified individuals shot a citizen to death and wounded another. Testimony from civilian whites coupled with other circumstantial evidence was convincing enough for Roosevelt. Further, Roosevelt waited on dismissing the Battalion until after the votes were counted - safely pocketing the African-American vote.[1, p. 56]

The NAACP protested all of these court marshal hearings and met with the secretary of the Department of War. President Wilson agreed to review the case; after which only ten death sentences were reverted to life imprisonment. The NAACP persisted the legal battle to have those men freed; in 1921 President Harding, presented with a 50,000 signature petition, only released several prisoners and reduced the life sentences to long terms. In 1924, Coolidge was confronted and did nothing. While Franklin Roosevelt, in 1938, released the remaining prisoners.[6, p. 262]

The Wilson Administration also instantiated Crowism in the Federal Government. He acquiesced to the Postmaster General's and Secretary of the Treasury's policies of segregation of the public areas: restrooms, water fountains, &c. Wilson's second mistake was the acceptance of the private viewing of *Birth of a Nation*. This was enough to show many prominent African-American leaders that President Wilson was not for doing one thing to help them.[1, p. 67]

2 The Democratic Foothold

The lilly-white attitudes by the Republican party, the denial of the African-American admittance to state and national conventions allowed credence to the term “a white-man’s party.”[1, p. 92] As pressure increased for this view through 1922, the party realised that it lost some major local elections. In seeing how important the African-American voter was, it then allowed them back in, beginning 1922.

2.1 Power of the Vote

The African-American Vote was very important in New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and Indiana.[1, p. 95] There was one thing evident throughout: that although there was a major influence to be played by the African-American vote, there would still be no advancement for the African-American citizen. There were party policies put forth by the Republicans like anti-lynch laws and a commission for investigation of socioeconomic conditions of Blacks. This was all for naught; when Calvin Coolidge ascended to the presidency in 1923, he was apathetic to the needs of his African-American constituents. Yet, he did not promote the lilly-white Republican attitudes.

By 1928 many publications throughout the country were calling for the African-American vote to go towards the Democratic Candidate Al Smith. In a way, they could identify with Smith: he was a Roman-Catholic, and a Northerner (Governor of New York). He was as much an outsider, from the African-American voter’s perspective, as they were. Around the corner was Franklin Roosevelt; for although he had demonstrated that he was for the eradication of Rural poverty, and was closely connected, both physically and emotionally, with the South’s rural hardships through his Warm Springs, Georgia farm, the Democratic National Party leaders were looking towards big business in the Northeast for a foothold.

2.2 Progressive Vs. Free-Market Democrats

Roosevelt at this time was at a strong position to fight for the rights of the impoverished South. He had bought a piece of farmland there, and consequently became familiar with the various agricultural difficulties facing the impoverished southern farmers. As time progressed,

“Roosevelt reasoned that, above all, he must operate his farm in such a way as to demonstrate to his Warm Springs neighbours how they could break the economic chains tying them to unprofitable cotton raising.”[2, p. 9]

The basic percept behind his form of *leutepolitiken*¹ was for a Progressive Democratic party. Roosevelt believed that in order for the Democratic party to be a majority, it needed to discard the “urban-rural schism.”[2, p. 19]

It was no surprise that as soon as Al Smith was nominated, and his campaign underway, Roosevelt was excluded from Smith’s inner circle of party advisors. John J. Raskob, a Catholic with close ties to General Motors, the du Ponts and in 1915, the treasurer of DuPont[3], was appointed by Smith as campaign manager. Being interested in big business, against his main southern constituents, Catholic, and anti-prohibition, caused him to lose the allegiance of 7 Southern States in the Hoover landslide of 1928. While New York ironically voted for a Democratic Roosevelt, they voted Republican for president. “Unfortunately for Negroes, no matter which candidate won on November 6th 1928, possibility for advancement was nill.”[1, p. 103] And sure enough, after Hoover was safely ensconced in the White House, the Republican lilly-whitism re-emerged.

The alienation of the African-American voter during that particular campaign had continued as usual. For the first time in fifty years, the Republican party rose accusations of the Democratic candidate for presidency as a “party for the Negro.” Accusations were being thrown about; both sides now were on the defensive; but neither came out directly for the promotion of African-American citizens. For example, Senator Carter Glass defended Smith in a two hour radio address because of an accusation by Protestant Bishop James Cannon Jr.; the charges were blatant discrimination by the Catholic Church and Smith’s association with the anti-prohibition movement. Cannon used the deplorable conditions in the Harlem dance halls as ammunition against Smith. A Democratic Senator from Lynchburg suggested that Cannon ought to first look in the direction of some Republican controlled cities, such as Hoover’s own San Francisco, for these deplorable condition.[1, p. 101]

The serendipitous outcome of Smith’s campaigning in the traditionally industrial and Republican Northern states revived the Democratic party in

¹A term I have addressed in a previous essay. Simply put, *leutepolitiken* means people politics; it refers to a political figure who is able to fight for his constituents versus his pocketbook.

those areas. Roosevelt, a confident Northerner who had the Southern supporters (which were against Smith), had the pieces laid out for his campaign for presidency in 1932. All that was needed was something to denigrate that which the Republicans held dear, the free-market economy. That time came; the baby of America's Protestant work ethic died in a manner ironically akin to sudden infant death syndrome.

3 Progressive Move Towards Recovery

By 1931, Roosevelt, though mere governor of the state of New York, was being antagonised by Democratic party leaders. Progressive Democrats of the Southern states were against the party leadership and solidly behind Governor Roosevelt. Raskob et al. wrote a letter to the Democratic congressmen asking to support the Republican views, in effect, alienating the Southern, Western and Northern poor Democratic constituents. Even the conservative Democratic contingent were stoutly behind Roosevelt, as Raskob had done enough damage.

3.1 Exodus

Point in fact is that the Hoover Administration was ineffective at stemming the tide of depression or even provide relief. With that strike against him, from the dishevelled of both races, he further alienated the African-American voter by attempting to appoint Circuit Court Judge John Parker of North Carolina to the supreme court. Parker was of the mind that African-Americans in politics were detrimental to both races. However, with aid from the AFL-CIO and NAACP, lobbyists were brought into the scene and Congress voted against him.[1, p. 109]

Hoover appointee, Secretary of War, Patrick J. Hurley, was involved in an incident that did not sit well with the African-American voters. Hurley mismanaged a proposed trip to France by the American Gold Star Mothers. The trip was organised to meet the demand of American mothers whose sons were killed during World War I. First off, there were segregated accommodations for African-American mothers in New York City; while the white mothers were treated to first rate hotel rooms and accommodations, the African-American mothers were forced into boarding homes in New York's poorer neighbourhoods. The situation was similar aboard the cruise ship to

France. Of the 450 African-Americans scheduled to depart from New York City, only 58 made the trip.[1, p. 110]

3.2 Lesser of Two Evils

While the African-American voters were not particularly fond of Roosevelt, they voted Democratic out of pure disapproval of the Hoover Administration. While Roosevelt did not have the best race relations record, it was better than any of Wilson, Coolidge, Taft, or Hoover. Roosevelt, as governor of New York, had not appointed any African-Americans to prominent state positions; as part of his platform he had not explicitly mentioned any race relations issues.

However, in all, there were only 20,000 votes cast by African-American voters, a minor sum. Further, it was clear that the voter returns in the major cities, with an overwhelming number of African-American voters, indicated Hoover received the majority of the vote. While in Chicago, for example, 59 percent of the white population voted for him, while 23 percent of the African-American population voted for him. There was a general feeling among African-American voters that the “best of them voted Republican.”[1, p. 111]

3.3 New Deal, New Loyalties

While the New Deal was not specifically designed to help the African-American voter, its effects cascaded.[4, p. 27] Roosevelt, unsure what this New Deal was going to be, moved carefully and slowly during the first hundred days of his administration. While the legislation was designed to help the dishevelled across the nation, for the most part, it settled towards the African-Americans. This was because primarily, they consisted of a disproportionately larger constituent of the poor population.[2, p. 72]

Roosevelt was faced with a dilemma; he was being pushed and pulled from the Northern African-American Democrats, who wished to expand federal protection to the Southern African Americans and the Southern conservatives, who wished to preserve the status quo. While he did not particularly concern himself with the affairs of civil rights in the South, he knew that if he bowed to pressure from his Northern constituents, the Southern conservatives in congress would stonewall every New Deal proposal he would offer. The recovery of the nation was more important than any anti-lynching bill.

Instead, Roosevelt kept away from giving excuses for the Southern Conservatives to exclaim a violation of states rights by imposing the Federal government onto the Southern states in such a way that would disturb race relations. He appointed Blacks to position of power in the Federal Government: Robert L. Vann, editor of the Pittsburgh Courier, as Special Advisor to the Attorney General; Robert Weaver as Special Advisor on the Economic Status of African-Americans; John Langford, Civil Engineer in the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration. He also appointed Harold Ickes, former President of the Chicago Chapter of the NAACP, as the Secretary of the Interior. Under Roosevelt, there had been over fifty African Americans appointed to federal positions; while under the combined administrations of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, only seven African-Americans were appointed *any* federal positions.[1, p. 115]

In Roosevelt's home away from home, Warm Springs, he started the "Eleanor Roosevelt Vocational School for Coloured Youth." [2, p. 82] While Mrs. Roosevelt championed for the rights of African Americans, Roosevelt used her to test the waters - to see if the country was ready for federal legislation against lynchings. She was very kind to African Americans and treated them with equanimity. For example, she had allowed herself to take pictures with African-American R.O.T.C. members; something which the previous administration was sure never to be caught in a situation fraternising with African-Americans. She invited Hampton Institute Singers to perform at the White House and visited African-American patients at the U.S. Veterans Hospital in Hampton, Virginia.

As a result, the African-American constituents increasingly started to jump the Republican ship towards the Democratic party. In Harlem, New York City, two African-American democrats won seats in the state legislature under the Democratic ticket. While in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, several African-American state Assembly members running under the Democratic ticket were elected. And for the first time in the country's history, a Chicago African-American politician, Arthur W. Mitchell was elected to U.S. Congress under the Democratic ticket, defeating African-American Republican incumbent Oscar DePriest.[1, p. 114]

By the 1936 elections, the African-American voter had made his switch from the Republican to the Democratic ticket; his vote was extremely vied by both parties. Guerilla public relation tactics ensued: full page advertisements in African-American publications wooed the African-American voter for one party or the other. Not surprisingly, Roosevelt swept the nation for the first

time in history with the African-American majority favouring a Democratic candidate.

4 Conclusion

I would like to conclude this essay with some final thoughts on the politics of the African-American vote during this period, citing its implications on the future state of race (read class) politics. In retrospect, it is quite easy to point the finger at those individuals in either party who proliferated white supremacist attitudes and castigate them; one might even inclined to say that the Republican party erred greatly by not embracing the African-American vote.

My reply to these individuals quite simply is a power struggle. Each would say, or not say, whatever necessary in order to win over the majority vote (among all races). Time and again the literature referred to in this essay noted that *publicly* the candidates for presidency did not explicitly state that they were for or against white supremacy. In fact, the African-American press pointed to actions taken by the presidency as “proof” of their being for or against the African-American voter. For if any of the candidates would come straight out against white supremacy (or for it) then it would leave the ball in the court of his opponent. His opponent may have picked up the ball and pocketed it; by not addressing the issues of the game directly, he would have won the majority of the vote.

It reminds one of the issue related to the game “All You Can Win.” In this game, several teams are pitted against each other with the selection of two options, a and b . If any one of the teams choose a then they will be deducted a significant amount of points, while all the other teams get points added on. However, if they all choose b then they will get twice of what would ever be possible. Hence, it would be better if all the teams trusted each other and selected b . Of course, the skepticism comes in when they do not trust each other; if all but one of the teams choose b then all three lose, and the team that chose a comes out a winner.

The teams unity can be analogous to the country’s unity, with various factions representing the individual teams. If they all trusted each other and did what, in our eyes now, seems the morally correct thing for everyone, then the country would have been better off sooner. If both parties would have trusted each other, such that they would both come out against white

supremacy, then the entire country would have been seventy years ahead of its time.

Franklin Roosevelt expressed this concern with respects to his public support of an anti-lynching bill. If he would have come out solidly behind an anti-lynching bill, then all of Congress (including his own party members of Congress) would have stone-walled every bill afterwards, regardless of its impact on white supremacy. His primary goal was getting the United States back on its feet economically, which meant dealing with congress to push programs like the W.P.A.

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