

**African American Elitism:  
A Liberal and Quantitative Perspective**  
by  
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**Abstract**

According to Edmund Burke the British philosopher generally regarded as the father of conservatism, this principle is all about preserving the status quo or, at least, the avoidance of radical or unstructured changes. This agrees with the saying that "if it aint broke don't fix it," implying that an unnecessary change must be avoided. Yet very few can question the universal veracity of the assertion that the more satiated members of any society tend to be more conservative than other members of that society. In fact, the most comfortable members would prefer no changes at all because of the fear that uncontrolled changes might have an adverse affect on them.

Members of the Black community are very familiar with the censure that successful Blacks in America simply move to the mainline, start acting like the haves and forget the folks they left behind in the inner city. The need to establish or reject the efficacy of this denunciation provides the impetus for this study. This article attempts to validate or nullify the truth of this criticism, by investigating the hypothesis that high income always leads to greater conservatism among African-Americans, just as in White Americans. The study discovers that although middle class Blacks tend to move out of the inner city areas, they remain very sympathetic to many liberal values or issues they believe would be uplifting to their less privileged people, quite unlike their White counterparts. This study curiously exposes the fact that upper class Blacks are more liberal than upper class Whites and lower class Blacks. This means that lower class Blacks are ideologically more agreeable to upper class Whites than with upper class Blacks.

This author concludes that this attitude stems from the fact that most Blacks attain middle class status through higher education rather than through inherited wealth. Hence they do not feel as secure in their new status as do their White counterparts. Besides, higher education experience compels members of the Black middle class to be more liberal just like educated Whites. It is the less educated members of the middle class Whites who more strictly conform to the hypothesis.

As for the Black underclass which exhibits unusually greater conservatism than their more educated and richer Blacks, this author believes that this is partly due to ignorance and partly due to feelings of insecurity forced by the fear of losing even the little they have in the instability that would result from radical or unstructured change. In short, they lack the skills and confidence to confront any unstable future. Hence they stick with their present circumstances albeit absurd or unsound, at best.

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**Introduction:**

The conventional wisdom is that any group's socio-economic status affects its ideological dispositions. In other words, it is assumed that higher income generally tends to lead to more conservative views. In America, for instance, some scholars suggest similar trends. They argue that there is a discernible trend indicating that, as new immigrants get more and more integrated into the American mainstream, as shown by rising income, they tend to become more conservative.

According to Wilson and DiIulio (1995), "At one time Jewish voters were almost as solidly Democratic but that has changed. Democrats have lost their once strong hold on Catholics, southerners, and union members."<sup>1</sup> Naturally, one would assume that this tendency is equally true for African-Americans. However, a heuristic survey of the literature reveals a curious lack of studies on whether or not income levels have any impact on the ideological dispositions among African-Americans. Instead, what is most prevalent is the statistics on how Blacks vote mostly Democratic. For instance, Wilson and DiIulio, (1995) opine that Blacks are the most loyal voters in the Democratic coalition. Black voters have given two-thirds of their votes or more to the Democratic Party since 1952, and an impressive four-fifths since 1964.<sup>2</sup> In a similar commentary on the impact of race and ethnicity on party identification, other scholars O'Connor and Sabato (1995:489), argue that: "Blacks are the most dramatically different population subgroup in party terms. The 80% plus advantage they offer the Democrats dwarf the edge given to either

party by any other segment of the electorate.... Perhaps as a reflection of the massive party chasm separating Blacks and Whites, the two races differ greatly on many policy issues, with Blacks overwhelmingly on the liberal side, and Whites closer to the conservative pole."<sup>3</sup>

According to Patterson, there is a general assumption that race is a significant source of opinion differences, and so are personal income levels. For example, African-Americans are more supportive of government-run social programs and less distrustful of government than Whites, although they tend to be more suspicious of law enforcement agents than Whites when it comes to the criminal justice system. Blacks are also more in favor of affirmation action, such as busing to achieve racial integration in schools and other measures designed to promote racial equality.<sup>4</sup> The question therefore is, if both factors, race and income, seem to have opposite effects on political opinions and behaviors, how does their combined effect affect the political views of the African-American elites?

Meanwhile, the African-American has been described as the consummate Democrat. Voting records show that more than any other group in America, the African-American has consistently voted Democratic since the Civil Rights Act of 1965. In other words, the percentage of Black votes for the Democratic Party, has been consistently high to the extent that any pollster can predict it with great accuracy.

Given the massive support the Democratic Party enjoys among Black Americans, there is the temptation to assume that the African-American voter, irrespective of socio-economic status, votes for the Democratic Party. My goal is to answer the question: Don't middle class values lead to ideological conservatism among African-Americans, as is often the case among White Americans?

From the foregoing, several reasons can be advanced in support of unique African-American political and economic behaviors. The question, however, is whether these factors are important enough to nullify, in this particular group, what is otherwise a general tendency, namely that rising income leads to conservatism. This is the question this research intends to address.

Either class distinction is really insignificant in African- American politics or there is an important academic omission among the research community. It is more likely that the latter is true. A serious research gap seems to exist in this area, and this needs to be filled.

Therefore, this study attempts to correlate income as an independent variable, race as an intervening variable with the dependent variable conservatism, as is evident in political views and party identification. Again, the hypothesis is that rising income does lead to conservatism even among African-American elites and by elites. Elites are assumed to be people with income of \$25,000 and above.

As a limited exercise in social science methodology, this project is relying solely on existing secondary data. A deeper research in this area is both possible and desirable, since this represents a very preliminary study. This is basically a manipulation or computation of existing data on the variables that are relevant to my hypothesis: "That rising income leads to conservatism."

The paper is divided into four sections. The first is the introduction. The second explains the methodology; while the third describes the observations; and finally the conclusion which attempts to put the findings in proper perspective, by articulating the author's own views on the results of the data analysis.

### **Methodology:**

This research will investigate the impact of the level of income, education, and race on conservative and liberal behaviors among African-Americans in the United States. So this exercise is a multivariate analysis of the impact of independent variables: income, education and race on dependent variables: political views - "polviews," and party identification--"partyid"--as measures of conservatism. For the purpose of this study, the study will control for race through cross-tabulations and multiple regressions of the variables: income with "polviews," income with "partyid," to see how, and if, rising income has the same impacts on political views and party identifications among Blacks as among White Americans. Education will also be introduced as a variable to see how it affects the relationships between income and political views of the

two groups. Race is re-coded (Black as 0, White as <sup>1</sup>, else= sysmis). Income is re-coded (0 through 11=1)--people earning under \$25,000.00; (12=2)--people earning \$25,000.00 and over; (else= sysmis); and polviews is computed as polview2, and then polview2 is re-coded as follows: (1 through 3=1)--all shades of liberalism; (4=2)--all moderates; (5 through 7=3)--all shades of conservatism; (else= sysmis).

The operations are repeated using party identification, "partyid" as the dependent variable, in place of political views, "polviews". For convenience, "partyid" is computed as "partyid2", and re-coded as follows: (1 through 3=1)--Democrats; (4=2)--Independents;(5 through 7=3)--Republicans; (else= sysmis).

In the analysis of party identification (partyid), a rough assumption is made that being a Democrat would be considered the same as being liberal, whereas identifying with the Republican Party will be considered being conservative.

**Observations:**

In a cross-tabulation of income by polview2, and controlling for race, the data show that of the 161 Black respondents that consider themselves conservative, 55 or 34.2% earn income of over; \$25,000.00, whereas 106 or 65.8% have income under \$25,000.00. Among Whites, the situation is quite the opposite. The data show that of the 1,593 that consider themselves conservatives, 976 or 61.3% have income over \$25,000.00; whereas, only 617 or 38.7% earn income of under \$25,000.00.

On the liberal side, of the 218 Black respondents that consider themselves liberal, 89 or 41% earn income of over \$25,000.00, while 129 or 59% earn under \$25,000.00. In the White population, out of the 1,166 respondents that call themselves liberals, 657 or 56.3% have income over \$25,000.00, while 509 or 43.7% earn under \$25,000.00. In the correlation of polviews with income and education, the following results are observed: For all the 5239 cases,

<b>correlations:</b>	<b>POLVIEW2</b>
<b>EDUC</b>	-.0511
<b>INCOME</b>	.0382
 <b>For the 4460 White cases in the data:</b>	
<b>correlations:</b>	<b>POLVIEW2</b>
<b>EDUC</b>	-.0414
<b>INCOME</b>	.0425
 <b>For the 578 Black cases in the data:</b>	
<b>correlations:</b>	<b>POLVIEW2</b>
<b>EDUC</b>	-.1628
<b>INCOME</b>	-.0608

Furthermore the multiple regressions show the following results for the two groups:

a. Among Whites:

**Dependent Variable polview2 variables entered:**

1. Educ: resp edu.
2. Income: family income.

**Multiple R** .07326  
**R Square** .00537  
**Adjusted R Square** .00492  
**Standard Error** .77797

Variable:	B	SE B	Beta	T	Sig T
<b>Educ</b>	-.17224	-.004312	-.063567	-3.995	.0001
<b>income</b>	.0101457	.025072	.064392	4.047	.0001

b. Among Blacks:

**Multiple R** .16731  
**R Square** .02799  
**Adjusted R Square** .02291  
**Standard Error** .79089

Variable:	B	SE B	Beta	T	Sig T
<b>Educ</b>	-.047210	.012682	-.167263	-3.723	.000
<b>Income</b>	-.101964	.069274	-.061004	-1.472	.1416

Source: Norusis, M. J. 1990. SPSS/PC 4.0 Base Manual for IBM PC/XT/AT and PC/2 Englewood: NJ Prentice-Hall.

For Blacks, the statistics show a negative correlation for both higher income and higher education, meaning the opposite direction from the hypothesis. In other words, among Blacks, higher income leads to greater liberalism, and so does higher education. But among Whites, the hypothesis holds that conservatism

increases with rising income. However, education is observed as a universal liberalizer for both Blacks and Whites. So, whereas Blacks tends to get more liberal with higher income, Whites tend to get more conservative with higher income. The data show that more educated and higher income Blacks are more liberal than their less affluent and less educated counterparts.

Similarly, using party identification, "partyid" as the dependent variable, a correlation of "partyid" with income shows negative values among Blacks and the very opposite result among Whites. When the education variable is introduced, the result shows a positive correlation for both groups. This can only confirm that no matter the original tendency, higher education generally leads to greater liberalism than the lack thereof.

The sample has 4,054 Whites that indicate party preferences. Of this figure, 2,130 or 52.5% identify with the Republican Party. And of this number, 1327 or 62% earn income over \$25,000.00. This strongly implies that richer Whites identify more with the Republican party. With respect to Blacks, of the 372 in the sample, only 75 of them or 20% identify with the Republican Party. Interestingly, only 25 out of 75 Black Republicans, earn income in excess \$25,000.00. This means that among those Blacks who identify as Republicans, those who are poor are more than twice as many as rich ones.

When partyid and income are correlated, there is a negative correlation: income partyid -.0080 among Blacks; meaning that higher income does not lead to conservatism among this group. On the other hand, among Whites, the same operation shows a positive correlation: Income partyid2 .0915\*\*

For Blacks, the regression of variables: income, education with partyid shows negative values with education and less positive correlation with income than is the case among Whites.

**The multiple regression shows the following for Blacks:**

<b>Multiple R</b>	.02892
<b>R Square</b>	.00084
<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	-.00462
<b>Standard Error</b>	.80523

**Dependent variable: Partyid2**

<b>Variable:</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig T</b>
<b>Educ</b>	-.008744	.015867	-.031475	-.551	.5819
<b>income</b>	.017252	.097815	.010073	.176	.8601
<b>(constant)</b>	1.627545	.187780	8.667	.0000	

**Whereas among Whites, the same regression indicates all positive values:**

<b>Multiple R</b>	.10120
<b>R Square</b>	.01024
<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	.00975
<b>Standard Error</b>	.91117

<b>Variable:</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig T</b>
<b>Educ</b>	.014102	.005371	.043826	2.626	.0087
<b>Income</b>	.142962	.030888	.077251	4.628	.0000
<b>(constant)</b>	1.769337	.071871		24.618	.0000

Source: Norusis, M .J. 1990. SPSS/PC 4.0 Base Manual for IBM PC/XT/AT and PC/2 Englewood: NJ Prentice-Hall.

With the introduction of education, the regression of partyid and education and income show all positive correlation among Whites. But among Blacks, there is virtually no change as the group remains mainly liberal, that is, voting mostly Democratic.

The implication is that education and rising income seem to have no significant impact on Blacks' party identification. In other words they remain Democratic--a tendency that is even stronger among Blacks earning over \$25,000. This seems consistent with the discovery made on political views.

Though the data on Blacks is relatively small, it is nonetheless discernible that unlike what is the case among Whites, Black elites are more liberal than their poorer counterparts.

It is pertinent to seriously caution that in the data for this research, the sample for Blacks is rather small compared to Whites--582 and 4448 respectively. Nonetheless, there is definitely a trend or a clear tendency in the data, allowing certain conclusions.

**Evaluation and Conclusion:**

The hypothesis that rising income tends to make people more conservative is true only for Whites. Blacks seem to show the opposite tendency. The evidence rather shows that poor Blacks are more conservative than rich ones which is quite unique one might say.

Nevertheless, various reasons have been advanced to buttress the claim that the African-American is unique. Some believe that Blacks are by nature liberal. Others argue that Blacks who have made it to the suburbs cannot afford to forget their origin. They have to remain mindful of the folks they left behind in the "ghettoes."

Perhaps, it is against this backdrop, that it seems logical to many that the Democratic Party is the natural home for African Americans. As a matter of fact, opinions abound that the Democratic Party can afford to take this support for granted, since Blacks have no alternative but to vote for the Democratic Party. The observations from the data analysis seem to bear out this claim.

Furthermore, recent political events and issues tend to support the findings of this study. For example, in what seem like testimonies to the no-alternative thesis, certain big- name Republicans have acknowledged a failure on the part of the GOP. For instance, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD),

Jack Kemp, urged the "Republican Party to actively seek Black votes." Elwood Watson strongly suggests that: "the Republicans must moderate their image to attract Black voters." Another Republican asks: "Is the GOP serious about Black votes?" (National Minority Politics)

Why are these indictments of and injunctions to, the GOP, regarding Black electoral support necessary? First, it is almost common knowledge that by the kind of policies it often advocates, the perception is that the Republican Party has allowed itself to be seen as a party that only caters to the interests of the very privileged in society. Since most Black are poor, it appears that, by association, the Republican Party is anti-Blacks. No wonder some Republicans genuinely feel that the party needs to change its image and attitudes towards Blacks.

Secondly, minorities have often relied upon the federal government in periods of victimization by local authorities. It often took federal interventions to rescue minorities, notably Blacks from more parochial state governments. For instance, we must recall the various legal battles and other forms of federal interventions that caused the gradual and progressive nationalization of the Bill of Rights. No doubt, benign federal interventions have often been necessary for common sense to prevail in local politics. So when parties almost mindlessly advocate for a return of power to the localities, without considering what caused federal involvement in the first place, such attitudes are often construed as being anti-minorities or against the underprivileged. Once again, Blacks are the most permanent and most visible minority, and the party vigorously advocating the indiscriminate return of power to local authorities is mainly the Republican Party.

Thirdly, the recently proposed repudiations of past policies such as those on Affirmative Action seem to be largely championed by the Republican Party; whereas, the Democratic Party appears to be the defender of the underdogs, at least, rhetorically. All these may have contributed to the apparently unrelenting African American support for the Democratic Party.

Invariably, to the question posed earlier, whether certain mitigating circumstances are important enough for Blacks to nullify what is otherwise a general tendency: that rising income leads to conservatism, the answer is, yes!

It is particularly interesting that the study shows middle class Blacks to be more liberal than poorer Blacks. Could this be as a result of paranoia, on the one hand, and ignorance on the other? It is true that knowledge breeds perplexity and activism, which ignorance does not know.

Thus, educated Blacks, who logically dominate the Black middle class, often feel a sense of mission to speak on behalf of their less informed folks. It is therefore arguable that poor Blacks are more conservative than the elites, not by choice, but as a result of ignorance.

Again, there is no question that most Blacks that become middle class do so almost exclusively through education. Unlike Whites, very few Blacks inherit wealth enough to consolidate middle or upper class values. It may well be that what we are seeing is the impact of education (the universal liberalizer) on middle income Blacks. After all, education does have the same impact on Whites. But since there are many more Whites that can acquire wealth without necessarily having a substantial education, this might be why the hypothesis remains true for that group. It is common knowledge that inherited aristocracy is often more conservative than social mobility gained through education.

In sum, a number of factors contribute to making Black and Whites view politics and the world very differently. Blacks have always been on the defensive, from the dawn of their history in the United States. In most areas of life, from the criminal justice system to the welfare system, they are only gradually receiving equal treatment. Some may argue that their situation, though changing, is far from normal. But until that happens, the Black middle class cannot possess the luxury to recoil into middle class comfort, since they are not even sure of the stability of their present life and status.

Arguably, only when the African-American elites attain a state of tranquility within will they stop having a sense of paranoia or hysteria about White society; and when White society begins to treat Blacks as they

expect to be treated; and when the Black elites no longer feel obliged to crusade for their less fortunate folks, perhaps then their behaviors will begin to conform with the norms of the middle class. As of now, their sense of racial victimization and its concomitant defensive behaviors remain the only viable alternatives for the African-America elites. Hence, they act more liberal than they would have otherwise. This paper cannot be complete without at least a cursory reference to candidate Barak Obama, the first African American nominee of a major party for the presidency of the United States. Senator John McCain, his Republican rival, has accused him of having the most liberal voting record in the United States Senate. Senator Obama denies this charge, arguing that his seemingly liberal record is mostly due to his unrelenting opposition to President Bush's Iraq War policies. Nevertheless, it is not surprising to this writer that Senator Obama would be inclined to promote policies that would benefit Blacks and minorities in America. Like most Blacks, Obama is socially conservative but economically liberal. With so many Blacks in poverty, their children in underperforming schools, their health care in crisis due to lack of health insurance, it is not surprising that Obama would like to address the perennial problems that bedevil Blacks in America. Hence he would be called Liberal by the more conservative and more affluent segment of the American society which is largely Republican. Besides, it is not surprising that Obama is a Democrat, and Party Identification is a good indicator of one's ideological disposition. Consequently, Obama like most members of the Black elite, is both democrat and liberal. Illustrating this dominant disposition of Black elites helping their own, Senator Obama (2006) says: "For black Americans, such separation from the poor is never an option, and not just because of the color of our skin-and the conclusions the larger society draws from our color-makes all of us only as free, only as respected, as the least of us." This statement is the essence of why black middle class is predominantly liberal.

#### **Works Cited**

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<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Karen O'connor and Larry Sabato, American Government: Roots and Reforms (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p.489.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas E Patterson, We the People: A Concise Introduction to American Politics, (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1995), p.190.

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