

CHAPTER ONE

From Many to Few

In one of my first conversations during this research, Walter expressed excitement that someone was seriously studying African American Republicans. Walter and I initially connected because of his involvement with a local libertarian group, but he had a long history of involvement with both African American community groups and Republican political organizations. After our first meeting, he insisted on taking me out to a fancy lunch at the restaurant in a private club. As we chatted over impressive club sandwiches and enjoyed an even more impressive view, he told me that he loved the idea that someone was taking him and other black Republicans seriously. Still, participation in my research was bittersweet. He hoped the project would counter negative portrayals of African American Republicans, but the idea that they were worth studying *because of* their race and politics struck him as a problem. He couldn't help but feel that my project was, on some level, confirmation of his outsider status in the public imagination. He asked flatly, "Why is it that nobody talks about black Democrats?"

Walter's question is a penetrating one. It calls attention to the way we automatically associate Democratic partisanship with African Americans and regard any aberrations with raised eyebrows. In his own way, Walter hints at a central issue of this research: What has to happen to make a combination of identity and politics noteworthy? Of course we talk about black Democrats. But where there are debates about what role blacks should play in Democratic leadership, no one spends much time remarking on the strangeness of a black person supporting the Democratic Party. Black voters are a prominent and reliable part of the Democratic coalition. So, in Walter's parlance, no one talks about black Democrats because the Democratic Party is seen as the natural place to fulfill the political interests associated with black racial identity. I suspect that Walter recognized this, and his question was posed to push me to examine the expectations that surround black racial identity and political behavior. We talk about black Republicans because they are not what we expect. They don't fit in with our ideas about how racial identity and partisanship should go together. But this has not always been the case.

The surprise that meets contemporary African American Republicans would surely confuse an observer of nineteenth-century politics, because the current lack of support for the Republican Party among black voters marks a striking realignment. At the party's origins, African Americans were a central component of the GOP's electoral coalition. Yet today it feels like a noteworthy achievement when a Republican can manage to secure double-digit support from black voters in a presidential election. A number of forces—within the black community and within the Republican Party—aligned to fundamentally reorient black partisanship in the United States. Certainly, some of the shift in black partisanship flows from changes in what

black voters want in a political party. However, the political parties have altered the landscape within which black voters make their decisions. In other words, changes in black partisanship have been heavily influenced by changes in the consideration set—the choices available to those black voters. This chapter traces the history between black voters and the Republican Party and outlines the shifts in the composition of the GOP and its policy positions that have made it an unlikely home for African American interests.

Over time, the political parties have fundamentally altered their relations to race-related issues and black voters. Where the Republican Party was once perceived as the “natural” home for black interests, the Democratic Party is now perceived as the political party most likely to help African Americans. As a consequence, the actions of GOP leaders have large implications for the way that we view African American Republicans. There are, perhaps, even larger implications for how African American Republicans themselves connect their blackness to their partisanship. The shift in status of the African American Republican—the move from standard to unexpected political actor—highlights how perceptions are a function of the wider political context.

The African American Republican activists I spoke with were quick to remind me that the current state of relations between blacks and the Republican Party represents a stark departure from the GOP’s historical origins. For those outside of the party who question their politics, they present Republican history as proof that Republican politics can be compatible with black identity. For those within the party, history is used by today’s black Republicans to make claims on material and symbolic resources by recalling a time when blacks were a key constituency and the party was committed to having blacks as full-fledged participants

in charting the direction of the GOP. Empirically, knowledge of the realignment of black voters away from the Republican Party is important because today's African American Republicans draw on this history when making claims to legitimacy, both within and outside the party.

The evolution of black voters' relationship to the Republican Party also sheds light on broader questions about the expressions of black political behavior more generally. African Americans' partisan choices, though often organized around "black interests" (however they are defined), can only be understood within the framework of broader changes in each political party's ideologies and electoral coalitions. A broad sweep of African American partisanship must, admittedly, only provide general trends. Yet, to understand the image, attitudes, and experiences of contemporary African American Republicans, it is important to situate them within the broader historical patterns.¹

Today African Americans' estrangement from the Republican Party feels long-standing and, often, intractable. Upon closer reflection, it becomes clear that the estrangement that makes contemporary African American Republicans so unique is largely a function of an electoral calculus that has shifted the party away from them. We soon see the utility of political scientist Hanes Walton's insistence that "black political behavior is best understood as the result of individual, community, systemic, and structural factors, which over the years have all acted together in a complex, changing fashion."²

REPUBLICAN ROOTS

Any discussion of black partisanship has to begin with slavery. As a group, African Americans held very little electoral power;

the overwhelming majority were enslaved and denied the vote. However, there were pockets of black enfranchisement. Most of these were located in the North, but there were other spaces in the country where enforcement of black disenfranchisement was lax and blacks participated in local elections.³ For free blacks in the North, political engagement focused on efforts to achieve legal equality, a theme present throughout the course of black political engagement in the United States.⁴ Consequently, free blacks evaluated their partisan choices through the lens of abolition. On this account, initial relations with the Republican Party were tentative.

Abolition was central to the origins of the Republican Party, founded in 1854. Many of the original Republicans were anti-slavery advocates and members of explicit abolitionist parties, and the leadership of the new party was eager to expand its potential coalition of voters. Given its abolitionist roots, Republican leaders thought that free blacks were likely to be an easy and immediate source of support additional support.⁵ Initial Republican appeals to the black electorate were grounded in opposition to slavery and played on frustration with the limited existing political options. Central to this strategy was positioning the new party as the best of the available options for blacks. Yet black opinion leaders and politicians were slow to return the Republican embrace.

The Republican Party presented a platform that called for preventing the expansion of slavery in new U.S. territories, while leaving the institution intact where it already existed. Frederick Douglass, arguably the most prominent black political figure of the time, found this hedged stance on slavery unacceptable. Writing in his widely read newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he argued that "the Black community couldn't accept the abolitionists' invitation

to join the Republican Party because, due to its position on slavery, it does not go far enough in the right direction.⁷⁶ Instead, the new party must, if it were to claim black men's allegiance, "take a higher position, make no concessions to the slave power, strike at slavery everywhere in the country."⁷⁷ Douglass was joined by other black political leaders in his skepticism about the party's partial commitment to abolition, but the Republican position on the slavery issue was much closer to that of free blacks than the Democratic alternative. Blacks offered tentative support for the Republican Party in the 1856 presidential election and more substantial support of Lincoln in 1860. Walton describes the pre-Civil War political environment and the constraints facing black voters:

Although there was some Black criticism and denunciation of the Republican party, Blacks formed Republican clubs and strongly supported the party in 1860. Black Republicanism before the Civil War was largely the result of a lack of effective alternatives in the existing political system.... The emergence of Black Republicanism was firmly rooted, in the final analysis, in the desire of Blacks to destroy the slavery institution, and a large factor was the lack of verbal commitment or actions toward this goal among other political parties.⁸

From the start of the Civil War through Reconstruction, black support for the Republican Party shifted in numbers and intensity. The war, and the enfranchisement that followed, created a sizable new voting constituency. Black support for the Republican Party solidified after Lincoln's assassination—it was seen, by blacks, as a tribute to Lincoln. More consequentially, Republicans were the only party to make any concession to black interests or to open their party leadership to black politicians. The Republican Party endorsed a range of symbolic and substantive positions designed to satisfy black voters, and four

black delegates were included in the 1868 Republican National Convention (a first for any party's convention). The Republican Party went on to vigorously support legislative acts and three constitutional amendments (the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth) that were interpreted as substantive instances of the Republican Party attending to black interests.

So the foundation of black support for the Republican Party lay in the humanitarian policies it supported through 1870. Support for pro-black policies was driven by political expediency and ideological commitment. While these policies certainly empowered the oppressed, they also worked to secure a solid voting bloc and to undermine Democratic opponents. Democratic intransigence, too, strengthened black support for Republicans. When contemporary African American Republicans talk about the GOP's positive history with black voters, this is the period they most often reference. Democrats are cast as the party of racism, firmly rooted in the Ku Klux Klan and other domestic terrorist groups intent on disenfranchising black voters after the Civil War. By contrast, the "Party of Lincoln" narrative presents Republicans as the party rooted in black civil rights. This account, to be sure, ignores the half-hearted nature of even early Republican support for abolition *and* the fact that any mutually beneficial relationship between blacks and the party during the Civil War and Reconstruction was short-lived.

Much of Republicans' ability to engage in pro-black legislating was contingent on their national dominance and the relative weakness of the postwar Democratic Party.⁹ After a failed secession, white southerners were politically weak, and the absence of political competition freed Republicans to address concerns of black voters. Once the political environment became competitive again, the relationship between black voters and the Republican

Party became strained. By then, blacks represented just one component of an unstable electoral coalition.

By 1870 the southern Republican coalition consisted of three groups: Scalawags, Carpetbaggers, and Black and Tans, a group consisting of black Republicans and their allies. It was a fragile coalition, with key elements committed to anti-black positions. Ultimately, the coalition fractured as key elements of the party played to anti-black sentiment in an effort to remain competitive in southern states.¹⁰ However, with voting restrictions on southern white men lifted, Democrats—drawing on support from white southern politicians—reclaimed control over political and governing institutions at the state level. Black and Tan Republicans faced a particularly difficult political context after Reconstruction. Blacks were systematically terrorized and removed from the voter rolls. This left the Black and Tans without a voting constituency and, as the Democratic Party regained strength in the South, the Republican Party was marginalized on the local and state levels.

Though the post-Reconstruction political environment was not amenable to issues of racial justice, different factions within the party hurled charges of racism and made claims to black support. These had little bearing on elections. The reinfranchisement of southern white men coupled with the disenfranchisement of black men meant that Republicans were practically powerless in local and state politics. The various factions of the party vied for control over Republican state conventions, lobbying to be the southern representatives for the national presidential nominating convention. Because southern Republicans were most able to exert their influence in presidential nominating politics, the party's factions needed to marshal support. In this context, all the factions of the Republican Party wanted at least the appearance of black support.

V.O. Key argues that, at this point, southern Republicans focused their efforts on exerting influence at the national level.¹¹ Recognizing they had no realistic hope of securing state offices, national party players took advantage of the situation and played the splintered southern Republican Party's factions against each other. With black voters disenfranchised, they gained little, if anything, from the bargaining, vote buying, and alliance building prompted by the nominating conventions. Some black politicians were able to leverage personal political and material gains, given that all the southern factions desired the symbolic representation of all possible political constituencies.¹² However, by the election of Herbert Hoover in 1928, even the minor spoils of patronage were unavailable to Black and Tan Republicans and, by extension, to the black Republican leaders who made up a sizable portion of that faction's constituency: "Lily-whiteism not only depleted what few followers the Republicans had in the Black community; it also made it difficult for younger Blacks to join. The result is that in nearly every southern state today, there are very few Blacks in the Republican party."¹³

Despite its start as a relatively pro-black party in the South, disenfranchisement after Reconstruction all but eliminated the black voter from participation in Republican politics. The machinations of Republican presidential politics further marginalized black political leaders. As Walton notes of the Republican Party's origins, "In the beginning it had Black support in the South, then deliberately subordinated those supporters and finally eliminated them."¹⁴ Where blacks could vote, they still supported the Republican Party in national elections. Republicans could be cynical and manipulative on racial issues, and, often, black voters saw very little material benefit flowing from their support of Republican candidates. Indeed, outside of some

small spoils of political patronage and the occasional position as a party functionary, blacks—particularly southern blacks—saw very few benefits from their post-Reconstruction support.¹⁵ Yet, given the available options, the Republican Party was more amenable to black interests than the Democratic Party for most of the time between the Civil War and the early 1900s. With the New Deal, black leaders and voters saw potential allies in the Democrats, and their allegiance to the Party of Lincoln began to erode.

A STEADY SHIFT

By the early 1900s, black participation in the party had been marginalized as Republicans were focused on trying to secure white votes in the South. Their efforts bore little fruit: the Democratic Party had a stranglehold on southern politics, and Republican outreach to whites resulted in few positive results. Instead, the party sacrificed its black voting base and any southern sway, while retaining national-level power. Deep loyalty to the legacy of Lincoln and a lack of partisan alternatives led black voters and political leaders to align themselves with the GOP well into the twentieth century. By the 1920s, both of these factors would lose force in black political behavior.

While Democrats and Republicans in the South engaged in competitive race-baiting, northern Democrats tentatively reached out to African American voters. Shifting demographic trends and the need to build winning electoral coalitions, rather than any particularly progressive stance on race-related issues, were the big drivers of northern Democrats' interest in black votes.¹⁶ As millions of blacks began migrating from the South, their presence altered the political dynamics of eastern and

midwestern cities.¹⁷ While they were not yet a particularly potent political constituency, African Americans' relative loyalty to the Republican Party threatened to embolden Republican politicians in northern Democratic strongholds.

Simultaneously, the deep economic crisis of the Great Depression upset the political status quo across the country. As Michael Fauntroy notes:

The Depression disproportionately damaged African Americans. Black unemployment, already higher than any other group in the country, became, in many cities, two- to fourfold their black population proportions. Nearly one-third of black Baltimoreans were unemployed in March 1931, almost twice the black proportion of the city's population. According to the Urban League, by 1931, one-third of southern urban blacks were jobless; a year later, that figure grew to more than one-half.¹⁸

Nancy Weiss describes the situation for African Americans during the depression in similar terms. Although the general picture of black employment, with blacks concentrated in semiskilled, laboring, and servant jobs, had always been somewhat bleak,

What was new in the early 1930's was the crushing impact of the Depression on this already depressed economic structure. Blacks in the rural South bore the heaviest burden.... In the cities, those blacks who managed to hold on to their jobs suffered a crippling decline in wages.... Wages aside, employment of any sort for blacks in the cities was increasingly hard to come by. Fierce competition from whites meant that even the most menial jobs were no longer reserved for Negroes.... [Unemployment] was the most prominent index of black misery, but it had broader implications: overcrowded housing, the erosion of savings, the loss of homes and household possessions, the disruption of family life.¹⁹

Economic suffering made black voters amenable to Democratic outreach efforts.²⁰ At the state and local levels, African Ameri-

cans were incorporated into the northern Democratic machines. Through a mix of patronage politics and limited participation in party leadership, Democrats were able to secure black support in eastern and midwestern urban centers. This incorporation would set the stage for the later rise of black leadership of urban centers, but full incorporation into the Democratic coalition was elusive.

Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic leadership were not particularly interested in race issues and, at times, worked aggressively to distance themselves from black constituencies. The national party was sensitive to alienating southern Democrats by being perceived as racially progressive. Roosevelt refused to meet with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Democrats offered only the most cursory attention to racial equality in their national platforms. Even the programs of the New Deal, critical to drawing blacks away from the Republican Party, suffered from the Democrats' lax attitude toward racial equality. At the start of the Roosevelt administration, "most of the programs demonstrated the limits to New Deal assistance for blacks rather than its reach."²¹ There were wide racial disparities across a range of programs, and blacks saw little benefit from programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the National Recovery Administration, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The local management of New Deal programs ensured that the institutional denial of black equality in the South would be reflected in the administration of program benefits. While there were exceptions, the administration of New Deal programs was inflected with the same discriminatory attitudes and practices that were prevalent throughout the United States.²²

So why was the Democratic Party—or any establishment party—appealing to blacks in the New Deal era? First, because average blacks had little expectation of or hope for true change on racial issues; and second, because economics, rather than race, drove most black electoral behavior (perhaps most electoral behavior at all) during the Great Depression. Although black leaders in the 1930s were vocal in calling for racial equality, the threshold of racial animation was so low that even the most cursory of attention by the Democratic Party would pass muster. Furthermore, the “rising tide of all boats” brought about by New Deal programs was particularly good for blacks. Even though the administration of the programs was guided by racial inequality, something was better than nothing during the Depression. And the Democratic Party at least gave a little something. The Depression provided a context in which African American politics was oriented toward shoring up a fragile economic position.

While race and class are most certainly linked, in the context of New Deal politics the increased salience of economic uncertainty provided an opening for the Democratic Party to make inroads among black voters without having to make large concessions on issues of racial equality. Although Republicans were still competitive among black voters, the New Deal would signal the start of the serious erosion of black support for the Republican Party. That erosion would not culminate until after the civil rights era.

The shift in African American partisanship continued with each successive presidential election. In 1948, under Harry Truman’s cautious expansion of Roosevelt’s limited civil rights agenda, the majority of blacks identified as Democrats. Truman set up the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (CCR), calling

for equal voting rights and employment opportunity for African Americans. Though the CCR had a limited impact, the move signaled at least a rhetorical commitment to black equality and marked “the first time since Reconstruction that an official federal government organ made such a statement.”²³ Truman also desegregated the armed forces with Executive Order 9981. These small policy concessions to the cause of civil rights furthered the Democratic encroachment into the black electorate and continued to build on gains made by the New Deal policies, providing a viable partisan alternative to black voters without going so far as to alienate southern Democrats.

The two major parties curried favor with black voters through limited and often symbolic gestures, neither wanting to risk being viewed as “too progressive” on black issues. Furthermore, international policy dominated the national agenda as the country entered World War II. Blacks were increasingly leaning Democratic, mainly drawn in by economic policies, and this was reflected in presidential voting between 1936 and 1956.²⁴

Republicans did make some efforts to attract African American voters by offering tentative appeals grounded in the language of equality and civil rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was passed with support from Republican President Dwight Eisenhower. Initial versions of the act would have established equal voting rights for African Americans, and some versions sought to create a Justice Department section to monitor voting-rights violations. It was eventually watered down in an effort by Democrats to prevent schisms within their party over issues of race. Still, black voters continued to migrate to the Democratic Party.

As black political protests gained steam in the 1950s and with the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the Republican

Party's neutral attitude toward racial issues turned hostile. As an electoral strategy, it would pay dividends, but it would also trigger a fundamental reorienting of black partisanship and virtually eliminate African American support for the Republican Party.

CIVIL RIGHTS—ERA POLITICS

Throughout U.S. history, much of black political organizing was fomented outside the traditional realm of political activities like voting and party organizing. So while the protest politics of the civil rights movement often drew popular attention, the sort of politics that animated the movement had been a feature of black political behavior since the end of slavery.²⁵ However, the protests of the civil rights movement were crucial for setting up the contemporary relationship between African Americans and the major political parties. Particularly, both parties responded to the rise and success of the civil rights movement in ways that shaped black partisanship for at least half a century.

By 1960, the civil rights movement was in full swing, and African Americans had been engaged in marching, protesting, and other acts of civil disobedience to agitate for more racially progressive policies in housing, education, and voting.²⁶ In response, both parties moved hesitantly toward civil rights for blacks, but northern Democrats were faster to recognize the potential of the black electorate growing in urban centers in the North. President Kennedy made symbolic gestures to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as the Democrats painted themselves as the more progressive party. Indeed, blacks were more and more a part of the northern Democratic machine and, since 1948, southern Democrats had proved themselves a volatile part of the Democratic coalition.

White northerners' public opinion was shifting in favor of civil rights, and international pressure mounted for the United States to address issues of racial equality.²⁷ After Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and Democrats' assertion of dominance over the political landscape, the stage was set for a big legislative move on civil rights. As Paul Frymer describes,

Kennedy's death, the civil rights movement's ability to galvanize public opinion and place pressure on the national government, and fears of foreign policy officials that the communist and potentially communist world was watching helped provide the necessary incentives for the Democratic-controlled government to finally pass a number of significant pieces of legislation in the mid-1960's. Most prominent among these were the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and the Fair Housing Act in 1968.²⁸

This legislation passed with bipartisan support,²⁹ but the Republican embrace of civil rights would be short lived.

Their retreat was hastened by the incorporation into the Republican Party of southern Democrats who opposed civil rights. Indeed, Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate in 1964, ran almost solely on an anti-Civil Rights Act platform. The campaign strategy used civil rights as a wedge to make inroads into the traditionally Democratic and anti-black stronghold of the South. While the strategy did not pay dividends in 1964, Republicans saw gains in southern districts at the congressional level. More importantly, the Goldwater campaign laid the foundation for more successful outreach efforts by sparking a conservative revival in the party.³⁰ It cemented African Americans' departure, as the Goldwater campaign symbolically linked the Democratic Party to African American political interests, completing the partisan reversal that began with the New Deal. Over 90 percent of black voters cast votes for Johnson.

Later, Richard Nixon successfully leveraged this “Southern Strategy”—that is, “Republicans’ efforts to win conservative white support by distancing themselves from progressive and moderate position on racial issues of importance to African Americans”—in the 1968 election.³¹ Against the backdrop of urban unrest, white voters in the North and the South were hesitant about the implementation of civil rights policy (bipartisan as it had once been), and Nixon capitalized on that reticence.

African Americans within the Republican Party did not sit idly by while their party adopted such an aggressive stance against civil rights. Indeed, they did quite the opposite, mounting a vociferous and organized resistance to the anti-black sentiment they felt was coming to dominate the GOP. At the nominating convention for Goldwater, black Republicans denounced the nominee and his supporters. African Americans within the party organized in hopes of making racial equality a concern within the party. These efforts often put them at odds with their white counterparts in party leadership, but they demonstrate that, even when animosity toward racial equality was the official party position, African American Republicans worked to align their commitments to both partisan and racial identities. As historian Leah Wright Rigueur notes, “With the exception of a select few, the party’s black members had watched the rise of Goldwater Republicans with anger and dismay. African American loyalists were disheartened by the party’s apparent inability to support civil rights, a position that reinforced Black Republicans’ already marginal position within the GOP.”³²

African Americans were also still willing to support Republican candidates at the state and local levels. Liberal and moderate elements within the Republican Party were able to garner black support in a number of elections. When Republican candidates

made appeals for their votes, African Americans signaled that they would support Republican candidates under certain conditions. In New York, the majority of African Americans supported Republicans in New York City's 1965 mayoral election and in the 1966 governor's race. In 1967, Edward Brooke was elected as a U.S. senator in Massachusetts—the first black Republican senator since Reconstruction. Brooke skillfully balanced Republican partisanship with policy positions that resonated with black voters.³³ This often put him at odds with GOP leadership. As the Republican Party continued to thin its ranks of liberals and moderates, and as racially conservative southern Democrats shifted their partisan allegiance, the influence of African American Republicans like Brooke would wane.³⁴ And African American voters cemented their general understanding of the GOP as inhospitable to their interests.³⁵

THE “NEW” BLACK CONSERVATIVES

Although the GOP never made inroads into the black electorate after the 1964 Goldwater campaign, the rightward shift in the political mood did not leave all African Americans outside the sphere of Republican political influence. In fact, the late 1970s saw the emergence of a small, but influential, network of African American conservative scholars, pundits, and political operatives. Previous strands of political conservatism in black communities had been seen as “organic,” growing out of grassroots organizing. By contrast, this wave of black conservatives was perceived as “inorganic,” because most of its ideological and material support was provided by white patrons. Influential conservative politicians and think tanks began buttressing the efforts of black political conservatives. Bracey writes:

Black neoconservatives received little or no backing from the black community, a fact corroborated by the labels “outcast” and “dissenter” that black conservatives affixed upon themselves. Black neoconservatives found themselves in a position not unlike that of George Schuyler late in his career—a voice for black empowerment without an organic, black community base from which to operate. Although black neoconservatives had declared an urgent need to break with the reigning black civil rights leadership, it was quite clear that no black neoconservative enjoyed a mandate from the people to make that call. Indeed, one might argue that whoever made that call must be devoid of any authentic contact with [the] African American community, as there was little reason to think that mass black support for liberal Democratic policy and the civil rights leadership was open to debate.³⁶

Even while black voters continued to overwhelmingly reject the increasing political conservatism of the Republican Party, a cadre of key African American intellectuals who embraced conservative ideology emerged. The 1980 Black Alternatives Conference, informally called the Fairmont Conference after the San Francisco hotel where it was held, served as a “coming out” party for these new black conservatives. It gathered leading black conservative thinkers under the auspices of finding “new ideas and approaches to black and other minority problems.”³⁷ The conference also gave Ronald Reagan a space within which to find leading black conservatives to join his administration. In many ways, the Fairmont Conference’s star players and ideas would become the public face of African American Republicans for the next thirty years. For most of those in attendance, the embrace of the Republican Party and its ideological and policy positions was grounded in a commitment to free-market principles and “traditional” social values.

A central theme of the conference had been the need for African Americans to move beyond understanding their political

interests as grounded in their racial status. This theme would play well with white conservatives, but it failed to resonate with blacks in any meaningful way. And while it was not uncommon for African American conservative thinkers in the 1980s to frame their conservative beliefs as a pathway for black advancement, these pols staked their reputation on repudiating identity politics, claiming they were a perversion of the goals of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.³⁸

Outside this minority of minority politicians, African Americans consistently rejected the ideological offerings of white political conservatives and their African American colleagues. Black conservative thinkers were (and remain) charged with “simply insert[ing] themselves into a predominantly white discourse on race, a move for which they have been duly compensated by various forms of patronage; they are nothing more than the black face of the white Right.”³⁹

When the center of Republican politics shifted to the right in the late twentieth century, racial conservatism was a central driver. Fauntroy defines racial conservatism as “an ideological philosophy held by whites that seeks to shape the racial status quo to their benefit and resist any changes in the social, political, and economic status quo that benefit minorities.”⁴⁰ We can see it embodied in the post-1964 “Southern Strategy,” which played on the dissatisfaction of southern white voters. But Republicans have long argued that the shift was ideologically, not racially, driven. The GOP centered its messaging behind fewer constraints on business, lower taxes, and decreased intervention by the federal government—the latter frequently falling under the banner of “states’ rights.” African Americans, for the most part, rejected these hedges and saw the Republican Party as more racist.⁴¹

Republican electoral strategies in the 1980s only further increased tensions. Much of the rhetoric around states' rights, low taxes, welfare reform, and tough-on-crime measures was racially coded, if not explicitly directed.⁴² Still, GOP politicians engaged in efforts to secure black votes. Partly, they hoped to break apart a solid and reliable Democratic constituency; even small inroads into that base could pose huge electoral problems for Democratic presidential candidates. Republicans also saw an alignment with the socially conservative beliefs of many African Americans and thought that genuine, good-faith efforts could secure more of their votes.

It is important to note that some Republican candidates were more palatable than others. At the state and local levels, Republican outreach efforts saw some success. A strategy designed by the African American political consulting firm Wright-McNeill saw some positive results in state and local elections in 1980, for instance.⁴³ Those numbers never translated to presidential elections, but Republican presidents like George H.W. Bush garnered high job-approval ratings among African Americans.⁴⁴ Bush's numbers led some Republican strategists to suggest that, in a reelection run, he might get as much as 20 percent of the African American vote, even though his campaign had been responsible for the infamous "Willie Horton ad"—accused of playing on the worst of racial "predator" stereotypes—deployed to attack his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, in 1988.⁴⁵

The "compassionate conservatism" of George W. Bush represents a more recent attempt to bring racial minorities under the GOP's "big tent." President Bush appointed several high-profile African American cabinet officials but never received a significant portion of the black vote.⁴⁶ Today, the discourse around race and conservative politics has become highly charged. The

election of Democrat Barack Obama as the nation's first African American president and the Republican Party's uneasy embrace of the Tea Party and its racially questionable rhetoric have combined to further alienate African Americans from the Republican Party. No matter how many black spokesmen and commentators the Republican Party can muster, the strong pulls from the political right, tugging the party ever further away from its once centrist rhetoric, leave few African Americans convinced that they are constituents, rather than merely votes, for conservatives.

Historically, the relationship between the Republican Party and African Americans has included moments of productive support and instances of sustained acrimony.⁴⁷ The movement of African Americans from Republican partisanship into stalwarts of the Democratic coalition shows the malleability of the links between race and partisanship. Though partisanship is often understood to function at the individual decision-making level, the experience of African American partisanship is uniquely tied to the collective experience of blacks and the organizational responses of the major political parties to their demands for recognition, equality, and opportunity. Partisan choice, though enacted at the individual level, is mediated through meso-level organizational processes grounded in particular historical contexts. The strong empirical association between black social status and Democratic partisanship is a function of the processes of distancing and embracing that both parties have engaged in to secure electoral majorities, not any inherent link between Democratic Party ideals and African American interests. The shifts in Republican policy positions, particularly on race issues, worked to alienate black voters and send them into the Democratic

camp. Once African American support was solidified within the Democratic Party, Republican leadership was able to make electoral inroads by counterposing the GOP to the (perceived) blackening of the Democratic Party and thus produced a context in which black support for the GOP became unlikely. Frymer has described the situation for black voters as one of “electoral capture,” where Democrats can do little to advance black interests because Republicans are doing even less to garner their votes.⁴⁸ However, as the idea of a unified set of “black interests” has come under attack—both within and outside of black communities—the Republican Party has deployed a series of strategic, if sometimes symbolic, outreach efforts to generate a conservative thinking class and thrust African American Republicans into the spotlight as markers of GOP diversity.

This chapter opened with a question from one of my interviewees: Why don’t people talk about black Democrats? The commonplace does not generate a lot of attention, so when 96 percent of black voters go for the Democratic candidate, it won’t make headlines. The unexpected politics of African American Republicans, however, makes for good news. The historical record suggests that one of the reasons for the novelty ascribed to black conservatives is the strategic choices in the history of the Republican Party that have positioned it as antithetical to anything that could be conceivably framed as “pro-black.” Correspondingly, this perception taints anyone engaged in Republican politics. For much of their history in U.S. politics, African American political interests have been dominated by efforts to gain political and economic equality. While neither party has a particularly stellar history of addressing those concerns, the past few decades have seen the Republican Party moving explicitly away from them.⁴⁹

For a party that originated with abolition as a central plank of its platform, the whiteness of today's Republican Party is quite the achievement. And the move from being embracing to hostile to black interests is rightly understood as an achievement. It is the result of a series of considered choices by GOP leadership throughout time. These choices have placed contemporary African American Republicans in an unenviable position. To make the case for their own partisanship, African American Republicans often rely on history, and any argument that wants to position blacks as supported by the GOP and central to its success requires delving into the history of the party. Yet such mining of history does little to convince anyone doubtful of African American Republicans. The unexpected nature of their politics often means that they themselves are subject to debate: Are they Republican enough if they're black? And are they black enough if they're Republican? It's little wonder that my respondents, far from championing their party's race-neutral rhetoric, instead had ready answers for how they could be both black and Republican—like Walter, they'd had to answer those questions often.