

Seeking a Prophet

How Religion Mediates the Relationship between Black America and the U.S. Presidents

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Therefore because you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins--you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph... let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

-Amos 5:11-15, 24

Introduction

The relationship between African Americans and the American presidency is tense and complex. Many of the nation's founding fathers were slaveholders. Thomas Jefferson held his own children in bondage while drafting a radical social contract declaring the self-evident nature of Creator-endowed human equality. The new nation not only refused citizenship to enslaved black men and women, it also denied them their full humanity. The nation's first presidents worked to establish an innovative, flexible, and arguably radical democratic republic while simultaneously codifying enslaved blacks as a fraction human¹ and relegating them to intergenerational chattel bondage. This system of American slavery was justified through religious reasoning in addition to economic and political expediency.

While brutalized by the American state, enslaved blacks retained agency in the face bondage. Contemporary histories of American slavery have increasingly turned away from cataloguing the horrors of Southern slavery and have focused more attention on the ways that enslaved persons carved out spaces of humanity, dignity, and social order.² The development of unique forms of religious belief and practice was among the most important ways that black men and women resisted the social death of slavery.³ Emphasizing this point, religion scholar Gayraud Wilmore writes: "Blacks have used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them by racist white churches, but

as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle, to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare.”⁴ In this way, enslaved blacks developed religious lives that sustained them throughout slavery and allowed them spaces of resistance and humanity in a system that sought to reduce them to chattel.

At the close of the Civil War, enslaved blacks entered the American polity; they carried their unique religious traditions with them into citizenship and these religious traditions continue to mediate the relationship between black America and the American presidency. This chapter attempts to trace some elements of the interrelationship between black religiosity and black public opinion toward American presidents.

The African American church developed as a separate institutional structure as early as Reconstruction. Blacks living as freedmen in the North and newly emancipated African Americans in the South constructed the church as a central institution in black life.⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya refer to the black church as the womb of the community, giving life major social, economic, and cultural institutions.⁶ Decades of research have investigated the connection between the black church as a central political and social institution and its role in black political thought and action. This research stresses the organizational resources that accrue to black churchgoers, such as the networks, skills, mobilization, and contact opportunities that are nurtured in the church.⁷ This work also maps the psychological resources that contribute to the political actions of black church congregants, such as self-esteem and internal efficacy.⁸

The black church also offers African Americans unique religious ideas and organic theologies that distinguish black religiosity.⁹ These theologies of the black church are rooted in specific understandings of biblical texts that grow out of black experiences of bondage and oppression. The black church is not only an organizational space that gives rise to unique racial and

cultural formations, but also an interpreter of the black experience in America that gives rise to unique theological formulations. Biblical studies professor Vincent Wimbush argues that African Americans have a distinct approach to reading and interpreting biblical texts. “African Americans used the Bible to make self-assertive claims against a racist America that claimed to be a biblical nation. African Americans were clamoring for realization of the principles of inclusion, equality, and kinship that they understood the Bible to mandate. Beginning in the nineteenth century and extending into the twentieth, African American consistently and systematically attempted to make use of the Bible to force ‘biblical’ America to honor biblical principles.”¹⁰ Guided by this hermeneutical key, African American religiosity chooses to emphasize particular elements of the Bible, “the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, and those about the wondrous works, compassion, and resurrection of Jesus...and the prophecies, especially the prophetic denunciations of social injustice and the visions of social justice.”¹¹

African American commitment to and emphasis on Old Testament prophets is important for understanding black public opinion relative to the presidents. I propose that the ideal of the prophet of social justice and equality is the standard against which black America judges American presidents. The Old Testament prophets break from the tribalism of the preceding biblical texts and condemn the injustice and corruption of the rulers of Israel and Judah. They warn that if injustice continues the nation will face political collapse and defeat by foreign enemies. Guided by their specific religious traditions, black Americans judge the president by this standard, asking whether he is willing to voice condemnation of the injustice and inequality that blacks face in American society.

Black America and the American Presidency

Constitutionally, the American presidency is a relatively weak office. Article II of the US Constitution grants the president the position of commander-in-chief of the armed forces and

allows him, with the consent of Congress, to appoint cabinet members and other executive officials. The president is also responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs, although his treaties and appointments must be approved by the Senate and his expenditures by the House of Representatives. These enumerated responsibilities and capacities are relatively modest compared to executive positions in other world governments and are minimal compared to the extensive powers given to other branches of the U.S. government. But while the office is constitutionally weak, American presidents have often wielded enormous power in governing. This power comes through the capacity of each of the individual presidents to influence or persuade multiple domestic and foreign publics.¹²

The formal powers of the constitution are not the real basis of presidential power. Instead, the capacity to persuade and wield influence has been the measure of American presidential power, and at times that power has seemed almost boundless. Presidential scholar Michael Nelson argues that strength is the standard for both scholarly and popular evaluations of a president. An “implicit exaltation of presidential strength”¹³ underlies our notion of what makes a high quality president. American presidents hold a constitutionally ill-defined office where persuasion, strength and charisma are central to success.

As a figure of strength, persuasion and charisma the president has come to embody the American state. Presidents are often credited and blamed for many policies and national conditions that are actually the result of forces that are only marginally within their control. For example, the state of the national economy is a powerful predictor of presidential electoral outcomes, even though presidents control very few of the factors that contribute to economic health.¹⁴ Presidents are also the marker for national time. Americans measure the history of the country, in part, by the men occupying the presidency. For example, one might speak of the Roosevelt era or the Reagan

years. In contrast, we never speak about the era of the 95th Congress. For many ordinary Americans the president *is* the embodiment of American politics.

This is true for African Americans as well. There are important parallels between the relationship of blacks to the presidents and their relationship to the state more broadly. In the years before the Civil War black America was defined by southern slavery. Although not all blacks were slaves, the reality of southern slavery proscribed and helped define what it meant to be black in America. In the middle of the nineteenth century the nation was finally forced to confront slavery in the crucible of the Civil War. African Americans found in Abraham Lincoln an American president who acted on racial injustice. Lincoln was drawn into the Civil War because of complex historical forces. His decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation was prompted as much by war strategy as by abolitionist sentiment. Even knowing that Lincoln was often acting more for the Union than for racial equality, black America developed a sincere adoration of him. Historian Merrill Peterson recounts that black affection for Lincoln began as unyielding gratitude and sense of interconnection. In the eyes of enslaved blacks Lincoln was a man like them, “His birth like ours was obscure; he was of lowly origins and has toiled from poverty-they had toiled up from slavery.”¹⁵

For more than seventy years following emancipation, African American remained loyal voters to the “party of Lincoln.” This loyalty was sustained even though the party abandoned its positions and politics for blacks soon after Reconstruction. Still, black Americans remained tied to the party of the first American president for whom they felt deep warmth and attachment. Lincoln was the first president that black America could understand in moral terms. Therefore, while the relationship between blacks and Lincoln has been ambivalent and difficult at times, he remains an important icon in black political thought. Lincoln has been the subject of and backdrop for important historical moments in black America. In 1939 Marian Anderson sang before seventy-five thousand Americans in an integrated crowd on the steps on the Lincoln Memorial. In 1957 the

NAACP celebrated the third anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision at the Lincoln Memorial. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, "I Have a Dream" from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Historian Scott Sandage explains, "Black protesters refined a politics of memory at the Lincoln Memorial. Within the sacred, national space of the memorial, activists perfected a complex ritual of mass politics, one that exploited the ambiguities of cherished American clause to circumvent opposition, unify coalitions, and legitimated black voices in national politics...Blacks strategically appropriated Lincoln's memory and monument as political weapons, in the process layering and changing the public meanings of the hero and his shrine."¹⁶

Contemporary African Americans view Lincoln with a critical and often ambivalent eye, acknowledging the real contributions he made to the end of slavery, but also criticizing the personal racism that was never fully conquered in his public policies.¹⁷ But even with these criticisms, Lincoln remains the president that black people "loved best and longest."¹⁸ In many ways Lincoln, though only reluctantly and partially, finally fulfilled the role of an Old Testament prophet. In the black imagination he is remembered as standing with Douglass as a prophet of the black jeremiad. Just as Amos warned Israel that its injustice to men of other nations threatened its status as the elect of Yahweh, so too did Lincoln show America that the evil of slavery could break the union in half and end the great democratic experiment of the new world. No other president has ever so entirely commanded the trust and respect of African Americans for so long.

Segregation and Communal Faith

Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, black America plunged into the nadir.¹⁹ The prophet president was assassinated and African Americans were abandoned by the federal government in the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877. Presidential politics ushered in a new phase

of the relationship between blacks and the presidency. The razor-thin 1876 election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden generated a congressional deadlock. Congress eventually retreated behind closed doors, where Southern Democrats conceded the presidency to Hayes in exchange for the end of Union occupation of the defeated Confederacy. This compromise cleared the path for Southern states to institute Jim Crow. Freed from the oversight of the federal government, the South used the rhetoric of states rights to strip black men of their right to vote, to segregate public accommodations, to provide inferior education to black citizens, and to allow and promote the terrorist rule of lynch-mob violence. Subjected to the vicious retrenchment of states' rights, blacks returned to a deep collective estrangement from the American presidency. In this context lynching came to symbolize the position of blacks in America. In the 100 years following the end of the civil war more than five thousand African Americans were lynched and not a single president denounced the atrocities. Once again presidential silence characterized black America's relationship to the country.²⁰

In this difficult period, black religion continued to mediate the relationship between blacks and the American state. From the late nineteenth century to the contemporary period black America solidified its relationship to the state as communal rather than individual. In this regard, black politics drew heavily from the organizational, cultural, and theological elements of black religiosity. Political scientist Michael Dawson explains, "The communalism of African American public life shared its roots with the communalism of African-American religious thought. One of the critical differences between black and white Protestantism is the African American belief in self-realization of individuality within community. In opposition to the American liberal tradition, African Americans have adopted the worldview that individual freedom can be realized only within the context of collective freedom, that individual salvation can occur only within the framework of collective salvation."²¹

As racial segregation, economic exploitation and political oppression descended on these new citizens, the church emerged as a center of social and organizational life as well as an interpreter of world affairs and national events. Separate congregations emerged in both the South and in northern cities populated by migrating black workers. In these churches African Americans developed distinct biblical understandings that mandated collective approaches to religion and to politics. These religious understandings continued to underscore exodus narratives, prophetic traditions and readings of the gospels that suggested God related to his people as nations called to special missions. Rather than emphasizing the relationship between God and individual believers, these religious interpretations focused on God in relationship to his people as a collective. Black presidential politics reflect this same sense of collective identity rather than individual interests. “Political responsibility to the African-American community was considered a higher good than the individual’s right to act on his or her own preference if those preferences were considered potentially harmful to the black community.”²²

This communal orientation to presidential politics is most visible in black partisanship. African American partisanship is characterized by near unanimous support of a single party, regardless of divisions of income, education, gender and region. From Reconstruction until the mid 1930s the African American vote was solidly Republican. Blacks were both tied to the party of the great emancipator and wary of the vicious segregationists of the southern Democratic party. African American disaffection with the Republican party was widespread, but their votes remained loyal because Democrats were so blatantly hostile. Because millions of black Americans were disenfranchised in the South and discouraged from voting in the urban centers of the North and Midwest, both parties were able to disassociate themselves from blacks with little electoral cost.²³

It was the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt that marked a radical shift in the allegiance of the black electorate. In the early 1930s African American communities were among the hardest hit

in the Great Depression, but because they lacked political power, blacks received far less than their fair share of New Deal program relief. Roosevelt, recognizing the potential growing influence of black voters in hard hit urban centers began to shift New Deal policies. By 1935 African Americans had begun to benefit from the jobs of the Works Project Administration (WPA) and in 1936 Roosevelt and the Democrats actively sought the black vote. In an unprecedented and massive shift of partisan allegiance, Roosevelt secured 76 percent of the black vote in the 1936 election.²⁴ Since 1936 the black vote has further consolidated and more than 85 percent of African Americans have supported the Democratic candidate for the presidency since mid-century.

The shift in black partisanship was precipitated by real economic and political motivations, but there was also a role for black cultural religion in this shift. To locate this role we must look to Eleanor Roosevelt. It was Mrs. Roosevelt, rather than FDR, who played a crucial role in bringing blacks into the New Deal. The First Lady often appeared in African American churches and church-sponsored schools and day care centers. She displayed a comfort, ease, and naturalness in interracial settings that resulted in historian Rayford Logan asserting, “Negroes almost worshipped Eleanor Roosevelt.”²⁵ It was Eleanor Roosevelt who functioned as the prophetic voice within FDR’s administration. “Free from official responsibilities, and thus able to be more unswervingly moral than Franklin, Eleanor could argue for an action on the grounds that it was right.”²⁶ Economic and political considerations were the engine driving the shift in black partisanship, but the First Lady cemented the relationship between the New Deal and black America. Even with overwhelming economic interests at stake, the communal and moral elements of black presidential politics still required someone in the administration who could tap African Americans’ understanding of the prophetic. Eleanor Roosevelt fulfilled this role when FDR could not or would not. She became the moral icon that helped motivate the massive shift in black partisanship.

Contemporary Black Attitudes toward the Presidents

The contemporary shape of black opinion toward the American presidents is consistent with this history. Among the most important contemporary trends marking African American public opinion is a persistent gulf in attitudes between blacks and whites.²⁷ An important aspect of the racial gap is the significant animosity of blacks toward the Republican presidents of the past two decades contrasted with their deep affection for and electoral support of President Clinton. This section will trace the attitudes of black America toward the political parties and their presidents and will suggest that support of Democratic presidents in the modern era is mediated by religiously guided expectations for evaluating presidential leadership.

African Americans continue to be strong Democratic partisans. In every election since 1980, less than a quarter of black respondents reveal a partisan preference that is not at least somewhat attached to the Democratic party. See table 1.1.

Table 1.1 African American Partisanship

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Strong Democrat	45	33	40	42	44	46
Weak/Leaning Democrat	36	46	43	37	37	38
Independent	7	11	6	13	11	10
Weak/Leaning Republican	5	7	10	6	7	3
Strong Republican	3	3	2	2	1	3

Cells are percent of African Americans reporting partisan affiliation in each survey.
Source: 1980-2000 American National Election Studies

This partisanship has an enormous influence on assessments of the presidents. Black people gave better than 85 percent of the vote to the Democratic contender in each presidential election since 1980. When asked to report their vote choice in surveys immediately following the election, African Americans report even greater support to the Democratic candidate, even if that candidate had lost the general election.²⁸ See table 1.2.

African American animosity toward Presidents Reagan and Bush, who were well liked by most whites, was a salient feature of black public opinion throughout the eighties.²⁹ Black respondents to national surveys in the eighties reported very cool affect toward presidents Reagan and Bush. When asked to rate their warmth toward Reagan on a scale from 0 to 100, black respondents averaged a rating of 38 points toward Reagan in 1984. Michael Dawson’s 1994 text on contemporary black politics finds that, “having consistently bypassed and denounced the recognized leadership of the black community, [Reagan] was viewed as extraordinarily hostile to black aspirations.”³⁰ In a 1984 volume on blacks in America, Pinkney argues that, “the Reagan administration has given increased impetus to the conservative movement in the United States, ranging from such neofacist groups as the Ku Klux Klan to the Moral majority.”³¹ While initially somewhat more warmly received than Reagan, Bush ultimately fared poorly within black public opinion. In 1992 Bush averaged a feeling thermometer score of only 40 points among African Americans.

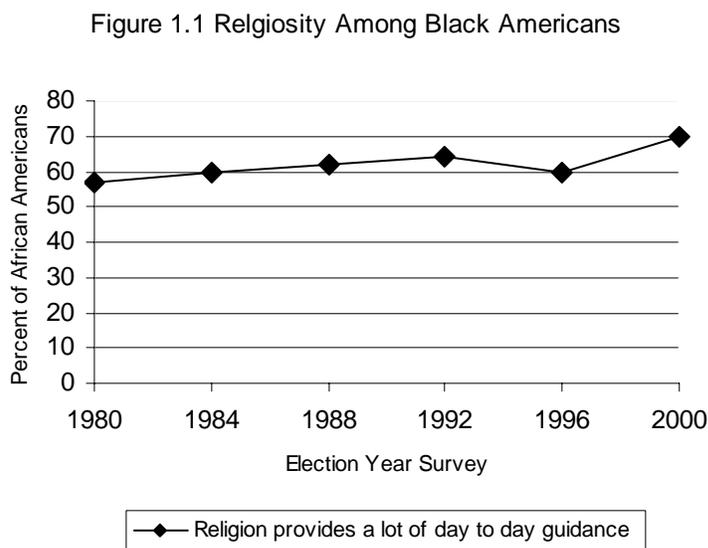
**Table 1.2 Reported Vote Choice and Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings
Among African Americans**

<i>Survey Year Candidates</i>	<i>Percent of black voters who report voting for candidate</i>	<i>Average warmth score among black respondents</i>
1980		
Carter	93	78
Reagan	7	43
1984		
Mondale	89	77
Reagan	9	38
1988		
Dukakis	90	69
Bush	8	46
1992		
Clinton	91	70
Bush	5	40
1996		
Clinton	97	81
Dole	3	44
2000		
Gore	91	71
Bush	7	48

Source: 1980-2000 American National Election Studies

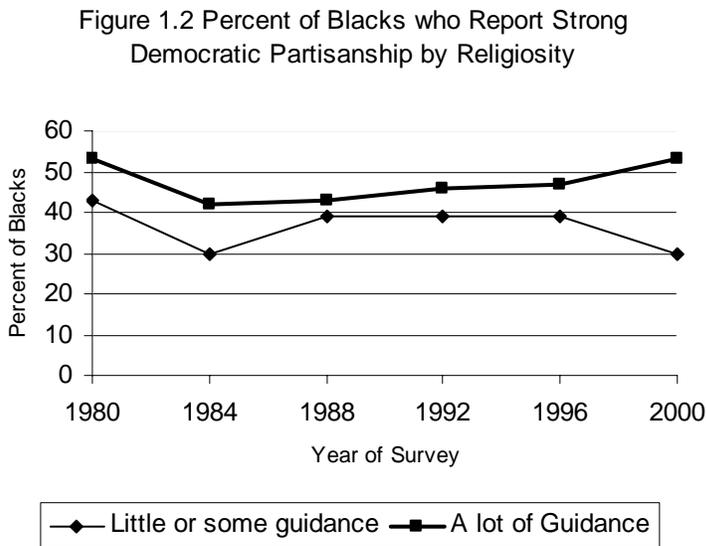
Black attitudes toward Clinton were quite different. In 1992 black respondents averaged a 70 feeling thermometer rating toward Clinton. By 1996 the average warmth climbed to 81 points. The 1996 rating is the first time in national black public opinion studies that the mean feeling thermometer score for the sitting president (81) eclipsed the average feeling thermometer score for Jesse Jackson (70). In 2000 black respondents reported average warmth toward Gore of 71 points. African Americans in the eighties existed in a political environment dominated by despised presidential figures.³² In the nineties, under Clinton, the political landscape changed for African Americans in this regard.

Religion remains an important part of black American life in the contemporary era and continues to be a mediating factor in black opinions toward the U.S. Presidents. During the eighties and nineties African Americans expressed very high levels of religiosity. In the six American National Election Studies (NES) from 1980-2000 well over 75 percent of African Americans reported that religion provides at least some guidance in their day to day living. And in each of these surveys a clear majority reported that religion provided “a lot” of guidance in their daily lives. See figure 1.1.



Source: 1980-2000 American National Election Studies

This reliance on religion as a source of daily guidance has implications for black American political attitudes. As they lean on their religious beliefs African Americans use religiosity as a lens for judging the political parties and the presidents. In each election year NES survey from 1980 to 2000 African American respondents who report that religion provides a lot of daily guidance are more strongly attached to the Democratic party than those who claim that religion is a more moderate daily influence. Across the past two decades, those who rely most heavily on religious interpretations of daily life are also most strongly attached to the Democratic party. (See figure 1.2.)



Source: 1980-2000 American National Election Studies

This also means that the most religious black Americans rate Democratic presidential candidates and Democratic presidents more favorably and Republican candidates and Presidents more harshly. In the contemporary era religion continues to provide black people an important lens for viewing the American presidents. To understand the mechanisms that underlie this relationship between religion, blacks, and the American presidency in the contemporary era we must explore more complex models.

Predicting Presidential Assessments

One way to test how black religiosity is related to attitudes toward American presidents is to posit a simple causal model and test it with available survey data. Data from national random surveys of adult African American populations allow a first-cut glimpse at how religiosity influences black attitudes toward the presidents. Table 1.3 reports results from two models estimated using an ordinary least squares regression. The models suggest how religiosity influenced black attitudes toward President Ronald Reagan in 1984 and toward President Bill Clinton in 1994. The dependent variable in both models is constructed from the responses to two questions: (1) do you approve of how the president is handling his job? and (2) how warmly do you feel toward the president? Responses to these two questions are added together for a scale that represents total feelings toward the president. This is not a perfect measure, but it suggests an overall assessment of the president by combining opinions about job performance with overall affect toward the man.

The model simply hypothesizes that these assessments of the president are a function of (1) individual characteristics, such as gender age, education, income; (2) partisan identification; (3) racial identification and (4) religiosity. The model for attitudes toward President Reagan is estimated using data from the 1984 National Black Election Study³³ and the model for attitudes toward President Clinton is estimated using data from the 1994 National Black Politics Study.³⁴

Sex is a dichotomous variable with female coded as 1. Age is coded in natural years ranging from 18 to 88. Education is measured as the highest grade completed, with high school diploma as the modal response category. Income is annual household income measured in nine income categories.

Partisan identification is measured as a five category variable with lower values indicating strong Republican identification and higher values indicating strong Democratic identification. Previous research shows that partisan identification is the single most important explanatory variable

in presidential evaluations. This measure of partisanship is included in the model to control for the powerful effect of partisanship so that the estimation can uncover the independent effects of black religiosity.

The model also includes a measure of racial identification. Previous research shows that individuals who perceive their own fate as linked to the fate of the race are systematically different in their political attitudes than those who do not have a sense of racial-link fate.³⁵ Survey respondents were asked if “what happens to black people affects what happens in my own life.” This measure of black linked fate is coded on a unit range where higher values indicate stronger connection with the fate of the race.

The variables of most interest for this analysis are the religion measures. Both the 1984 model of attitudes toward Reagan and the 1994 model of attitudes toward Clinton include a measure of the religious guidance. Respondents are asked how much religion provides guidance in day-to-day living. Higher values indicate the respondent perceives religion as more important in daily life.

The estimated models then include measures of the respondent’s connection with politics in the church. In the 1984 model the only measure available in the data is a question asking if the respondent believes that the church should be involved in politics. Higher values indicate a stronger belief that the church belongs in politics. The 1994 data provide a more nuanced measure. There are two measures of political involvement with the church included in the 1994 model. Using the measures available in the 1994 National Black Politics Study, it is possible to model participation in politicized churches.

Nearly half of respondents report engagement with some form of church-based political discussion. Thirty-four percent reported talking to people about political matters at church. Fifty percent heard a clergy member talk about the need for people to become involved in politics. Thirty-eight percent heard a political leader speak at church and twenty-three percent heard a church

official suggest voting for or against certain candidates. Respondents were somewhat less likely to be engaged in political activity at church than in church-based political discussion, but nearly a quarter reported some involvement with church-based political action. Twenty-three percent helped in a voter registration drive; twenty-five percent gave people a ride to the polls on election day; twenty-four percent gave money to a political candidate; twenty seven percent attended a candidate fund raiser; twenty three percent handed out campaign materials; and forty two percent signed a petition supporting a candidate as a part of their regular religious duties in the past two years. For the majority of African Americans, church is not a site of political conversation or action; but a substantial portion of blacks do encounter political ideas and opportunities for involvement in their religious lives. These measures are combined into additive scales of church-based political discussion and church-based political action, and are included to account for earlier findings about the centrality of politicized black churches.

Table 1.3 Models of Attitudes toward Presidents Reagan and Clinton

Variable	1984 Attitudes toward Reagan <i>n=1004</i> <i>r2=.07</i>		1994 Attitudes toward Clinton <i>n=1150</i> <i>r2=.11</i>	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Daily Religious Guidance	-1.83*	.75	4.12*	2.05
Church should be political	.48	1.6	--	--
Church Political Action	--	--	7.02**	2.87
Church Political Discussion	--	--	10.31**	3.73
Partisanship	-25.33*	3.55	13.95**	2.75
Black Linked Fate	-1.11	.48	-5.1**	1.9
Female	-7.55**	1.7	.08	1.58
Age	.02	.05	.29**	.04
Education	.15	.64	-.19	.24
Income	-.05	.28	.18	.332
Constant	60.9	5.95	40.37	5.2

Source: 1984 National Black Election Study and 1994 National Black Politics Study
Coefficients are derived from ordinary least squares regression performed in STATA
*denotes significance at $p < .05$ ** denotes significance at $p < .01$

The results reported in table 1.3 show a clear link between religiosity and attitudes toward the presidents among black respondents. In both 1984 and 1994 partisan identification is the most

powerful variable. Strong Democrats have much more favorable evaluations of Clinton in 1994 and far more unfavorable ratings of Reagan in 1984. But even after accounting for the powerful effect of partisanship, religiosity continues to have a statistically significant impact on black attitudes toward the presidents. Black people who take significant daily guidance from religion perceive Reagan much more harshly in 1984 and Clinton far more favorably in 1994. Further, in 1994, those African Americans who are involved in either political discussions or political action in their churches have much higher evaluations of President Clinton.

Data like these are only suggestive. They show a clear and independent role for religiosity in influencing black presidential attitudes, but they cannot explain the reasons why religion helps solidify the relationship between black Americans and contemporary Democratic presidents. The section below will take up case studies of two modern Democratic presidents: Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton. Understanding the similarities and differences in how these men were seen by black America sheds additional light on the question of how religion mediates this complicated relationship. In this draft of this essay, only the section on Clinton follows.

LBJ, the forgotten prophet and Bill Clinton, the first black president?

In 1998 Nobel Prize winning, African American author Toni Morrison suggested in a *New Yorker* article about Bill Clinton that, “white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President.” Morrison’s description of Clinton as black was prompted by his experience of personal, public humiliation at the hands of his political foes. When Morrison labeled Clinton black, she was not making a claim about his genetic heritage, but instead drawing parallels between his public debacle and the historic treatment of black public figures. She was also commenting on his experience with and use of cultural markers that often stand for the denigrated elements of black life in America.

“Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.”³⁶

Although Morrison drew a firestorm of responses from African American observers angered by the assertion that these “negative” traits constituted blackness, Morrison had correctly tapped into an important and unique connection between Clinton and African American people. One of the most fascinating elements of the black president label was that Clinton himself relished it. Clinton acknowledged his “honorary blackness” in a 1999 speech at the Congressional Black Caucus’ annual dinner and frequently thereafter. His choice to locate his personal office in Harlem at the close of his Presidency confirmed the deep connection he had cultivated with black Americans. Morrison’s critics notwithstanding, on the whole African Americans perceived Bill Clinton as a great president and as a friend to the race. Clinton’s willingness to pay attention to racial issues and his “comfort with black people” were among the most frequently cited reasons that blacks assessed him positively.³⁷ Both the intensity and character of Clinton’s popularity among African Americans is unique among modern presidents.

Journalist DeWayne Wickham compiled a fascinating array of interviews with African American leaders and lay persons chronicling the unique relationship between Bill Clinton and black America. Wickham’s respondents offer a wide array of anecdotes and reasons why Clinton enjoys a privileged status among blacks. Popular syndicated radio host Tom Joyner recalls Clinton being the only man in a room full of African Americans who knew the words to every verse of the black national anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” White House correspondent Bill Douglas was amazed at Clinton’s comfort and knowledge while attending a soul food dinner at his home. “He knew how to eat them. He had corn bread on the side. He dipped a little cornbread into the hot sauce and he was just gnawing on those chitlins. He served himself. I just looked at him in amazement.”³⁸ Norma Johnson, a retired woman from Indiana reasons, “the part of him I do like is

the respect that I think he gives black people.”³⁹ Former Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell reports of Clinton that, “the combination of how he grew up, where he grew up, the people he grew up around, but also the fact that he was young enough to really appreciate the African American quest for equality, helped him to connect with us in a way that is rare.”⁴⁰ New York television reporter April Woodward went so far as to state, “he must have been breast-fed by a black woman because he’s so comfortable around us.”⁴¹ Civil Rights Activist Joseph Lowery pointed to Clinton’s record of appointments, but also argued that, “the real thing is that the boy blew saxophone. He wasn’t no Chew Barry or Sonny Hodges, but the fact that he just blew a saxophone made white folks hate him...the saxophone is about as black an instrument as you can get.”⁴²

The interviews throughout Wickham’s text enunciate common themes of shared cultural understanding and genuine personal connection that Clinton exuded to both black leaders and masses. Respondents were critical of some of Clinton’s actions and policies, most notably his hasty retreat from Lani Guinier and Jocelyn Elders, and his passage of welfare reform and crime legislation, but they also argue that he was more closely aligned with black policy interests than any president in two decades. Black Americans repeatedly cited Clinton’s experience as an underdog, publicly embattled by his enemies, as one of the reasons he could relate to the African American experience. Overall, they express significant personal respect and admiration for Clinton as someone with fondness for African Americans.

Looking to the Future

For nearly two and half centuries religion has mediated the relationship between African Americans and the American presidency. It structures beliefs about what makes a good president and expectations for presidents vis-à-vis black people. In 2005 two conferences of black religious leaders hinted about possible future directions of the relationship between black America, religion,

and the American presidency. On January 24, 2005, the four black Baptist conventions joined for a momentous meeting that brought these historically antagonistic groups together for a week in Nashville, Tennessee. Together they agreed on an extensive platform reflecting an active and progressive social and political agenda. Their plan called for an end to the Iraq war and to the current tax cuts, an extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, opposition to the confirmation of Alberto Gonzales as attorney general, a broad call to end the prison-industrial complex, a commitment to public education, health care, a national living wage, and development activities in Africa and the Caribbean.

A few days later, more than a hundred black clergy met in Los Angeles, California, to craft a “Black Contract with America on Moral Values.” Calling themselves the High Impact Leadership Coalition, these black ministers developed a platform centered on the conservative political agenda of the Republican Party. This group made the issue of gay marriage central, and called for the protection of marriage and family, home and business ownership, and education and prison reform.

Both groups derived their political agendas from interpretations of biblical texts. The Baptist conventions focused on a theology steeped in social justice. The High Impact Leadership Coalition, on the other hand, met at the Reverend Fred Price's Crenshaw Christian Center. Price and his 16,000-member church are solidly within the tradition of the prosperity gospel that preaches a clear message of affluence and personal responsibility.

These two meetings of black churches reflect political possibilities. When the black church offers a theology rooted in a social gospel tradition, emphasizing the alleviation of poverty, the advancement of racial and gender equality, and the promotion of peace as moral values, it leads to a progressive political agenda among African Americans. When black churches advance a pervasively individualistic conception of the gospel that breaks the link between moral reasoning and structural inequality, it leads to a conservative political agenda focused exclusively on private morality.

There has never been a single black church or a monolithic black politics. African American religious traditions have always blended concern with social justice and demand for personal righteousness. Black political attitudes have often combined political progressivism with personal conservatism. But in the current political context of highly partisan politics, African Americans may find it difficult to combine these multiple traditions. The agendas of these two summits suggest that we may be at a crossroads both in black religious thought and black political practice.

This chapter has maintained that black assessments of the presidents are rooted in a unique black religiosity that emphasizes the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the liberation elements of the New Testament. This form of Christian thought constructs God's relationship to black people communally and contains an explicit critique of inequality and oppression. Presidents are judged, in part, by their willingness to fulfill the role of prophet for social justice.

However, current trends in black religiosity suggest that a new religiosity is gaining prominence among African Americans. Prosperity gospel is a fast-growing theology among black Americans. Preachers like Creflo Dollar and TD Jakes have congregations, viewers, and readers numbering in the tens of thousands. The prosperity gospel advances a pervasively individualistic conception of religion. The prosperity gospel asserts God's desire to help his people be financially free and secure. It teaches that God helps individuals who follow certain formulas in their personal and spiritual lives. Christ is an investment strategy and a personal life coach whose power can be accessed by believers to improve their finances, protect their families, strengthen their faith, and achieve personal authenticity. There is some evidence that their individual and instrumental message dampens political activism among African Americans. To the extent the prosperity gospel promotes an individualized, dispositional understanding of the world, it may also change the ways that black people assess future presidents.

If black political communalism is rooted in black religious communalism then a shift in black folk theology to a more individualized religious practice may change the basis on which American presidents are judged. Black American may stop seeking a prophet and seek only a purveyor of individual prosperity.

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1 Three Fifths compromise of 1787 was enacted by delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The plan was offered by James Madison for determining a state's representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. The issue of how to count slaves split the delegates into two orders. The northerners regarded slaves as property who should receive no representation. Southerners demanded that blacks be counted equally with whites. The compromise reflected the strength of the pro-slavery forces at the convention. The "Three-fifths Compromise" allowed a state to count three fifths of each black person in determining political representation in the House.

2 Some sources on the issue of slave resistance include: Berlin, Ira et al. 1998. *Remembering slavery: African Americans talk about their personal experiences of slavery and freedom*. New York: The New Press; Washington, D.C.. Burton, Richard D. E. 1997. *Afro-Creole: power, opposition, and play in the Caribbean*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. Butler, Kim D.. *Freedoms given, freedoms won: Afro-Brazilians in post-abolition, Sao Paulo and Salvador*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979. *Black Slavery in the Americas: An Interdisciplinary Bibliography, 1865-1980*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982.

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9 Some have argued that the black church does not have a distinct theology or did not have one until the mid-1960s. Cone, James H. and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds. 1993. *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-1979*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. In the introduction Cone and Wilmore argue that "when blacks separated themselves from White denominations and organized their own churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they did not perceive their actions as being motivated by theological differences. They accepted without alteration the church doctrines and politics of the White denominations from which they separated." (pp. 89) In some ways this assertion is an overstatement, one that does not credit the distinct worship styles and religious emphases that distinguished slave religion from the Christianity of white Americans, but it does reflect the lack of a fully articulated academic theological perspective to guide black Christian worship. I am making a claim to a more organic form of theology built around commonly held understandings of religious texts that circulate in black churches.

10 Wimbush, Vincent. 2003. *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis. pp. 40-41.

11 *ibid*, pp 24.

12 Neustadt, Richard. 1991. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Free Press: New York.

13 Nelson, Michael. 1995 Evaluating the Presidency from Michael Nelson (editor) *The Presidency and the Political System 4th edition*, Congressional Quarterly: Washington, DC. pp 9.

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15 Peterson, Merrill D.1994. *Lincoln in American Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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19 Historians classify the post-Reconstruction era, especially following *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the nadir of American race relations. By deferring to states' rights throughout post-Reconstruction, the Federal government and Supreme Court allowed the persistent and deliberate destruction of black civil rights momentarily gained in the Reconstruction amendments. The prospect of permanent confinement to a second-class status made post-Reconstruction America the "nadir" moment for blacks.

²⁰ President Franklin D. Roosevelt did denounce lynching following an incident of a white person being murdered by mob violence. He did not draw specific parallels to the black experience of lynching. For more on this see Weiss, Nancy. 1983. *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

21 Dawson, Michael. 1994. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 99-100.

22 *Ibid*, pp 99.

23 Walton, Hanes 1972. *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis*. Free Press: New York.

24 Weiss, Nancy. 1983. *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

25 *Ibid*, pp 122.

26 *Ibid*, pp 129.

27 Perhaps the most comprehensive study of change in U.S. racial attitudes, Schumann, Steeth, and Bobo's *Racial Attitudes in America* (1985, 1997) uncovers a significant and persistent gap in contemporary attitudes of white and black Americans. They find "large differences in the perspectives of blacks and whites about the causes of black disadvantage. Blacks emphasize continuing discrimination; whites stress low motivation on the part of blacks. This disagreement in perceptions of causality sets the stage for many other differences." (Schuman, Steeth, Bobo, and Krysan 1997, 275).

28 There is always some difference in self report data in post-election surveys and the actual counts from voting localities. However, surveys of white Americans typically create a bandwagon effect where survey respondents over-report having voted for the election winner. The fact that African Americans over-report support for the Democratic candidate, even when that candidate fails to win the election is indicative of the strength of the attachment to the party and its candidates.

29 For more on this trend and its relevance for contemporary black politics see the following sources: Barker, Lucius. 1989. Jesse Jackson's candidacy in political-social perspective: A contextual analysis. In *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American Politics*. Lucius Barker and Ronald Walters, ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press Dawson, Michael. 1994. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Dawson, Michael; Brown, Ronald; Cohen, Cathy. 1990.

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- 30 Dawson, Michael. 1994. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 117.
- 31 Pinkney, Alphonso. 1984. *The Myth of Black Progress*. Cambridge University Press: New York. pp. 178.
- 32 There was one important factor that complicated presidential politics for black American in the 1980s. Although the presidency was held by Republicans whom African Americans largely reviled, 1984 and 1988 ushered in the Democratic primary bids of Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr. Jackson's presidential bids had an important influence on black involvement in presidential politics by increasing voter registration and turnout among blacks and by affecting the attitudes that blacks held toward the Democratic party. For full treatment of these issues see the following sources. *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American Politics*. Lucius Barker and Ronald Walters, ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. Tate, Katherine. 1994. *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American Elections*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
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- 33 The National Black Election Study survey focuses on the attitudes and political preferences of the Black electorate during the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections. Questions regarding party identification, political interest, and preferences and choices for president were asked. In addition, respondents were asked about their feelings concerning Jesse Jackson's campaigns for the presidency in 1984 and 1988 and the effect his campaigns had on the elections. Information on race and gender issues, economic matters, quality of life, government spending, political participation, and religion and church politics is also included. Demographic information on respondents includes sex, age, education, marital status, income, and occupation and industry. Principal Investigator James Jackson.
- 34 The data from the NBPS come from a probability sample of all African American households, yielding 1206 respondents who are African Americans eighteen years or older. The survey was conducted between November 20, 1993 and February 20, 1994, with a response rate of sixty-five percent. The survey was administered through the University of Chicago with principal investigators Ronald Brown of Wayne State University and Michael Dawson of the University of Chicago.
- 35 Shingles, Richard. 1981. Black Consciousness and Political Participation: The Missing Link. *The American Political Science Review*. Volume 75, Number 1. Dawson, Michael. 1994. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Tate, Katherine. 1994. *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American Elections*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
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- 38 Wickham, DeWayne. 2002. *Bill Clinton and Black America*. Ballantine Books: New York., pp. 80.
- 39 Ibid, pp. 35.
- 40 Ibid, pp 58.
- 41 Ibid, pp 64.
- 42 Ibid, pp 26.